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DESIGN RESEARCH IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Opportunities and implications
Notes on Doctoral Research in Design 2020



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Human-centered Design Practice

Human Resource Design. Steering human-centred innovation within private organizations

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Abstract

The research investigates collaborative practices that make use of design tools and methods within private organizations. In recent decades, much attention has been put into exploring the effectiveness of service design and design thinking in increasing the degree of innovation of solutions delivered to the market by companies. Less focus has, instead, been placed on understanding how the design process both influences and is influenced by the way people involved interact, behave, learn and grow.

All these aspects concern what I identified as the ‘context’ of a collaborative design practice. This study proposes a framework defining a dedicated course of action based on design features that can be adopted by private organizations aiming to take the first step towards an internal transformation. The framework provides guidance especially for projects related to organizational change, which mainly appeal to Human Resource Management departments.

Collaborative design practices within organizations

The purpose of the study was, initially, to investigate how private organizations apply design thinking (DT). This first body of research was ignited by my perception, as a design researcher and practitioner in the field, of a lack of focus, and of the misinterpretation concerning the utility and value of design thinking within corporate practices, including interaction with the service design (SD) domain. As scholars report, “in research, discourses of SD and DT have different roots. In practice, they are often introduced simul-

taneously and follow the same purpose: humanizing products, services, and processes.” (Augsten *et al.*, 2018).

A general lack of clarity has been considered by many authors, especially in the design sector, as a threat to the professionalism of the design practice (Muratovski, 2015) because, when applied without consolidated understanding and experience, DT could become an ineffective set of tools that, after the ‘initial excitement’, suffers construct collapse (Hirsch and Levin, 1999).

Indeed, in practice, these notions are used with very similar connotations, and often present blurry meanings.

Therefore, throughout the study, I have defined a set of features that characterize relevant practices for the research, regardless of how they were labelled by the company.

The so-called ‘collaborative design practices’ could include both practices labelled as SD or DT, as long as they present the following features:

- they make use of methods and tools that refer to the design discipline;
- they imply collaboration among different stakeholders;
- they involve the guidance of a trained designer or a facilitator who makes use of design artifices.

In recent decades, collaborative design practices have caught the attention of stakeholders in various areas of private organizations. R&D, and Marketing and Innovation departments have understood the value of adopting them to innovate products and services for quite some time, but more recently also other business functions have started requesting design interventions.

One of these is Human Resources (HR), which is increasingly considering design solutions to develop innovative services to meet the emerging needs of a new typology of workers.

Major changes in contemporary society, such as demographic transformations, the diffusion of a wide range of new technologies in all aspects of work, and the development of a new meaning of work in younger generations (Bersin by Deloitte, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2018), have led to the development of new workers’ behaviours in their relations with the employer and interaction with peers. Hence, with this demand for design, companies try to direct their innovative capacity towards internal users and clients, rather than tackle external challenges.

The emerging needs of employees in organizations are related to the evolution (*ibidem*) of the work environment and of economic and working processes that inevitably entail a transformation within the organizations.

The concept of Human Resource Design

While discussions on DT and SD are focusing on the transformative power of design as an ‘implicit agent of change’, the contribution given by this study aims to investigate the possibility of introducing design elements as explicit agents of change. With this approach, design would address its potential towards the internal context of the organization, in a framework where tools, methods and artefacts are functional to improve inner processes and practices, instead of the reverse. According to this concept, the focus of design would shift from the periphery to the core of the organization in order to change norms, values and assumptions, and to shape a culture willing to adopt design solutions (Manzini, 2016; Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018).

Within the scene of explicit interventions for internal change, we can consider design practices ‘at the service’ of Human Resource Management, referring to the activity of designing services to manage functional processes within the Human Resource department’s scope. Those processes, which are associated with very specific responsibilities within the HR function, are siloed and considered also by suppliers as separate markets. They include tools to increase productivity and collaboration, ranging from engagement and feedback services to performance management or well-being solutions (Bersin by Deloitte, 2017).

Within these borders, we can discuss Service Design for Human Resources (SD for HR). For instance, if we consider redesigning the process followed by a company to recruit new talents, the experience of new candidates, the physical and digital touchpoints that characterize it, and their mutual interactions, we are under the scope of service design for HR.

In this regard, HR can be considered just another field of application of service design that, in its implementation, does not imply any significant innovation, besides specificities of the subject area.

It is, instead, revolutionary when design encounters the domain of organizational change and, therefore, implies a series of substantial differences with the abovementioned definition, shaping what I have defined as Human Resource Design (HRD).

Those differences can be found at least in three dimensions of an organization, which I have identified as: (i) the ‘place’ of design within the organization (Junginger, 2009; Schmiedgen *et al.*, 2015); (ii) the designer-client relationship (Yu and Sangiorgi, 2017); and, (iii) the level of ‘humanization’ (Augsten *et al.*, 2018).

In this regard, SD for HR and HRD are not to be seen as alternatives but rather as different intensities of integration of design with HR Management.

In general, we can say that lower levels of integration of design in the organizations qualify the realm of SD for HR. By contrast, higher levels qualify HRD.

The ‘place’ in the organization

According to the classification given by Junginger (2009),¹ design can be found at various levels of depth in the organizational structure:

- **Periphery:** design is considered an add-on resource that can be booked on demand for a specific need and then dismissed;
- **Somewhere:** design is part of a specific organizational function, such as marketing, UX or R&D departments;
- **Core:** design has a central position in the organization and, therefore, has access to its leadership and strategy levels; it questions the organization’s vision and purpose, resources, structures and procedures, and integrates products and services “into a coherent whole” (Junginger, 2009);
- **Intrinsic:** design is an established practice and mindset; it can be considered as part of the corporate culture.

Within this dimension, Human Resource Design refers to ‘core’ or ‘intrinsic’ penetration into the organization.

The designer-client relationship

The second dimension is to be found in the designer-client relationship. The typologies of relationships could be (Yu and Sangiorgi, 2017):

- **Delivering:** the client plays the passive role of the commissioner, providing a brief and then receiving the designers’ output; the client does not intervene in developing the solution;
- **Partnering:** the client co-designs with the designers; during collaborative sessions, clients are engaged with designers in the project, providing them their organizational perspective;
- **Facilitating:** this relationship is about transferring design capabilities in order to enable learners to apply design methods to their own con-

¹ Found in the essay *Design in the Organisation: Parts and Wholes*, and later reclaimed in the report issued by the Hasso-Plattner-Institute *Parts Without a Whole?: The Current State of Design Thinking Practice in Organisations* (Schmiedgen et al., 2015)

text. Designers become coaches who train employees to change their routines.

Considering these three configurations, ‘partnering’ and ‘facilitating’ are the ones that could connote a Human Resource Design intervention.

The level of ‘humanization’ of the organization

The third important dimension to consider is the level of ‘humanization’ of an organization. This concept was proposed by Augsten *et al.* at the *ServDes – Service Design and Innovation Conference* in June 2018. The authors built upon the extension of the human-centred principle of design, addressing it towards the creation of a more humanistic organizational environment rather than the mere delivery of more desirable products/services for the end users.

When talking about Service Design for HR, we refer to the areas of application of the Human Resource Management department – recruiting, onboarding, learning, performance management and more. These areas present a transversal goal, which is often managed by one specific team within HR, precisely employee well-being.²

Well-being covers the overall way people work in and experience the organization and beyond, tapping into a more holistic approach to the employee experience, which is in this conceptualization reframed and elevated to what has been called ‘human experience’ (Bersin by Deloitte, 2019). When design enters this domain, it aims to shape the ‘how’ more than the ‘what’ of organizational practices. In fact, HRD implies a course of action that focuses on new ways of working together and on ‘how’ employees might behave. Instead, for HR, SD focuses on defining ‘what’ might be designed to meet any need related to the employee’s journey and, therefore, new services.

Research questions and methodology

The hypothesis formulated is that design and, specifically, service design could contribute to structure a new course of action aimed at addressing the

² Well-being is one of the norms of a human-centred organization identified by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 27500:2016), which also includes: “capitalizing on individual differences as a strength in the organization; making usability and accessibility part of the organizational strategy; ensuring health, safety, and well-being; valuing personnel and creating meaningful work; being open and trustworthy; acting in a socially responsible way; and adopting a total systems approach within the organisation” (ibidem).

demand made by private organizations to intervene on employee dynamics within contexts of internal change.

I shaped the above hypothesis with an experimental framework that was tested through a participatory action research.

Hence, the research questions that guided me towards the characterization of the framework are a series of consequential ones that start with a main and overarching inquiry and unfold with more specific sub-questions:

- How can service design **support** and **enhance** effective collaborative practices aimed at organizational **change** within private organizations?
- How should these collaborative design practices be **articulated** and **conducted**?
- To what extent is the **role of the service designer** meaningful and relevant collaborative design practices within private organizations? Within this context, what are the necessary **skills** and **attributes** of this professional figure?

The study has been strongly oriented towards practice, meaning that I always adopted an inductive approach mainly acting as a ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schon, 1984). In this sense, the methodology used could be considered as ‘research through design’ (Findeli, 1998), where participating in projects was the main component, thus adopting a practice-based approach (Saikaly, 2004).

The research could be divided into three main phases: (i) a preliminary study carried out through a series of interviews and observational studies; (ii) an in-depth analysis including a second series of longer interviews; and a (iii) participatory action research within two organizational contexts in the private sector and one design training institute.

Participatory action research

The participatory action research intended to test some interventions introduced during projects developed by teams following the design thinking³ process. Each project was analyzed with the same structure adopted for observational studies, which builds upon the categories used in the book *Massive Codesign* (Meroni *et al.*, 2018). I made some additions that are specific for this research.

³ When I refer to the design thinking process, I hint at the Double Diamond framework (Design Council, 2014) because the representation of alternative divergent and convergent phases is the one that most conforms to my way of ‘designerly’ approaching a project.

The categories include:

- **Company and consultancy name, if any:** the company or the industry sector in which the company is operating and the consultancy agency that was in charge of developing the project;
- **Title:** title of the session;
- **Date and duration:** date and duration in terms of days;
- **Goal:** this category aims at defining if the workshop was mainly focused on reaching consensus and creating commitment on kinds of ‘pre-worked’ solutions or on generating entirely new ideas;
- **Participants:** the variety of participants in terms of relations with the organization –internal or external–, hierarchical status and business functions;
- **Style of guidance:** defines if the facilitator adopts either a ‘facilitating’ or ‘steering’ style of guidance;
- **Extended Double Diamond position:** all projects can be positioned at different stages of the ‘extended Double Diamond’ –a new extended version of the original Double Diamond defined during the preliminary research– depending on the project’s starting point and goal;
- **Tasks and tools:** the process followed during the project with a detailed explanation of specific tasks and the tools used to facilitate them;
- **Extended DD – Tuckman stage correlation:** discussion and correlation of specific tasks with the extended Double Diamond and the Tuckman stages of group development; each task is identified with the name of the extended Double Diamond stage, the specification if it is a convergent or divergent phase and, finally, the Tuckman stage that is the most appropriate for defining the group’s status at that point (Tuckman, 1965); analysis of the impact of tasks and specific tools introduced on the interaction of participants;
- **Final output:** an overview of the services envisioned during workshops.

The following is a summary of projects (tab. 1) that make up the participatory action research through which the framework was developed and tested.

Tab. 1 – Summary of projects.

Project no.	1	2	3a	3b
Company and consultancy name (if any)	Automotive company and Skillab	Hasso Plattner Institute	OTB Group and ccelera/ Amploom (part 1)	OTB Group and ccelera/ Amploom (part 2)
Goal	Generate action plans on existing ideas + training	Training: Simulation of a project to be carried out by a team within a fictitious organization.	Reframing of five HR processes: recruiting, onboarding, learning, performance management, talent management.	Redesign of the 'recruiting' process – generating new solutions.
Participants	Internal – Top management – Different business functions → low/medium variety	External – Mixed hierarchical levels – Same business function (HR consultants) → medium/high variety	Internal – Middle management – Different business functions → middle/high variety	Internal – Middle management and operational staff – Different business functions → middle/high variety
Style of guidance	Steering (designers) + facilitating (teambuilding coach).	Steering (designers)	Steering (designers)	Steering (designers)
Extended Double Diamond position	4th diamond – implementation space	2nd and 3rd diamond – problem and solution spaces	1st and 2nd diamond – strategy and problem spaces	3rd diamond – solution space
Tools developed and tested	Stakeholder map	Employee persona + change ideation	Employee persona + stakeholder map	Employee journey + change ideation + employee journey

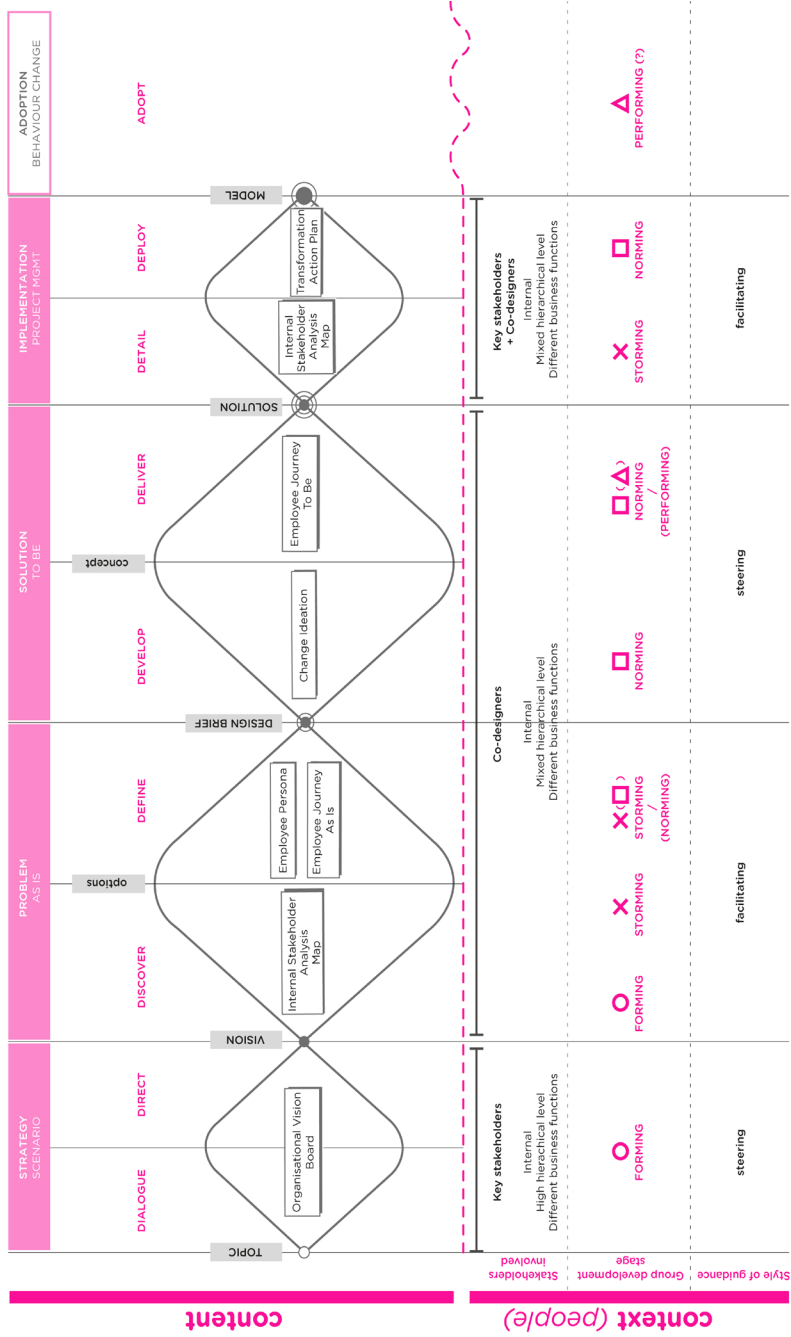


Fig. 1 – Proposal for a Human Resource Design Framework

Proposal for a Human Resource Design framework

The analysis conducted and lessons learnt from the participatory action research allow to hypothesize an interventional framework for a professional that can be qualified as ‘human resource designer’ when addressing an HRD project. The framework can be adopted by consultancies working in the HR field that want to address experiential and contextual factors of projects through design elements (fig. 1, previous page).

1st diamond: Strategy

The first macro-phase of an HRD project is about defining, with the client, the strategical scenario to be pursued.

Micro-phases: *dialogue and direct*

These phases imply a divergent moment followed by a convergent one. The approach in the divergent phase is ‘dialogic’ (Sennett, 2012), where different opinions are welcome in order to expand possibilities. Then, all the contributions are analyzed to define an agreed common vision. This study takes a rather dialectic approach for the group to converge (ibidem).

Tasks and tools

Organizational Vision: the goal of this phase is for the group to come out with an agreed and shared vision on a specific topic. The vision should be framed as an inspiring statement that describes where the company aspires to be upon achieving its mission. It should envision a scenario that depicts not just what the company wants to achieve for itself but the impact it will have on the community – the internal employee population. This task is inspired by scenario-building and future studies techniques.

Participants: *key stakeholders – internal – high hierarchical level – different business functions*

This phase has a strategic purpose; hence, it involves the key stakeholders who commissioned the project, the sponsors (Aricò, 2018) and other actors who hold strategic roles in the company, typically in a high level of hierarchy – top or, eventually, middle management – and representing the main business functions.

Extended DD – Tuckman stage: *forming*

Since this phase occurs at the beginning of the project, people are excited to undertake a new path and, at the same time, they still feel distant from the effort required for change; therefore, they feel in a ‘safe’ condition to express their idea without the perception of taking an inalterable decision. The mood was relaxed and harmonious; hence, we can define the status as ‘forming’.

Style of guidance: *steering*

The HR designer is crucial in the ‘direct’ phase. He needs to adopt a ‘steering’ style of guidance that can persuade and lead the group towards a direction he deems to be the most promising. In this case, the designer’s leading role also counterbalances the status of ‘forming’ that often dampens the group’s creative potential.

2nd diamond: Problem

The second macro-phase aims at investigating the ‘as is’ situation and the specific problem to be tackled. This phase ends with the definition of the design brief and its core specifications.

Micro phases: *discover and define*

‘Discover’ is a divergent phase in which participants take into consideration the overall set of options to investigate the context to be analyzed.

The ‘define’ phase leads the group to converge around the most relevant options for the project, and to the definition of the design brief.

Tasks and tools

> *discover*

Internal Stakeholder Analysis: the organizational component that is central for human resource design are people. Therefore, it is crucial to start the analysis of the current situation by mapping the internal stakeholders and their importance in terms of power and project-related impact.

> *define*

Employee Persona: once the Internal Stakeholder Analysis Map is completed, it offers a valuable framework for the group to decide which personas are more representative in order to deepen the analysis of the problem. The persona is a fictional character, whose profile gathers up the features of an existing social group. The *Employee Persona* has some additional organizational context-specific features, namely:

- Level: the hierarchical position in the organizational chart;
- Department: the business function where the employee works;
- Drivers: a set of drivers that help to analyze employee motivation.

Employee Journey As Is: the aim is to describe the journey of the persona depicted in correlation with the colleagues he or she interacts most often. The final goal is to draw out the persona’s pain points.

The journey, which is represented by a large horizontal board, comprises five parallel sections that trace: (i) the user’s experience; (ii) a set of lines tracking the actions of the other people and correspondence with the actions

of the main persona; (iii) the persona's emotions; (iii) the touchpoints and, finally, (v) the pain points.

Participants: *co-designers – internal – mixed hierarchical level – different business functions*

Participants in this phase are at the operational level of the organization, possibly mixed with some middle managers and, occasionally, with a few representatives of the top management. They should be chosen by HR with the support of the HR designer to create a good balance of content expertise and context adaptability.

Extended DD – Tuckman stage: *(forming) and storming*

If it is the first time that participants meet, they will go through a preliminary forming stage that can be facilitated with a warm-up activity, but as soon as they start analyzing the current situation on the topic, they will probably come out with different and conflicting perspectives.

Style of guidance: *facilitating*

In this phase, it is important for the HR designer to ensure that everyone is contributing and bringing his/her point of view to the table with the aim of creating the most realistic and complete picture of the current situation. The goal is to facilitate the emergence of information from participants without taking any stance. Indeed, participants are 'experts' in the specific topic, and they are the ones who best know the current situation.

3rd diamond: Solution

This diamond is aimed at generating solutions and at envisioning new concepts for the future: the 'to be'.

Micro phase: *develop and deliver*

The 'develop' phase aims at generating solutions following the design brief identified. It is a divergent phase with the goal of generating a large number of possible solutions to be later selected.

The 'deliver' phase is dedicated to converging and selecting the most promising ideas.

Tasks and tools

> *develop*

Change Ideation: in order to facilitate the generation of solutions, teams can use the *Change Ideation Toolkit*, which comprises:

- Change Brainstorming Deck: a guiding layout that represents the rational process leading from 'pain points' to possible solutions; it comprises: (i) spaces to summarize previously identified 'pain points'; (ii)

an icon of the *Behavioural Insights Cards* pack, and (iii) spaces dedicated to formulate solutions for each pain point;

- Behavioural Insights Cards: a pack of cards portraying a selection of behavioural economic principles, which can be leveraged to ideate solutions. Each card represents a principle through an evocative image and a brief description. In addition, it provides a ‘collaborative tip’, which is a suggestion to overcome the specific behavioural bias and enhance collaborative behaviours.

> *deliver*

Employee Journey To Be: this format represents the evolution of the Employee Journey As Is, and aims at mapping the journey when the solutions brainstormed in the previous task are in place.

Participants: *co-designers – internal – mixed hierarchical level – different business functions*

Participants in this phase are the same who were involved in analysing the ‘as is’ situation.

Extended DD – Tuckman stage: *norming*

The group’s mood at this point should be stabilized into ‘norming’. Most of the tensions should be absorbed during the previous phase, and efforts are channelled into envisioning desirable solutions.

Style of guidance: *steering*

At this point the role of the HR designer is crucial to lead the group towards innovative solutions and come out with proposals as well. The designer can count on envisioned abilities, while he or she can rely on his/her experience as innovator, stimulating the group with best practices from other fields, acting as a ‘proponent with content’ (Selloni, 2017).

4th diamond: Implementation

This diamond is aimed at developing strategies for the implementation of solutions. It is a very analytical phase inspired by business administration and project management techniques.

Micro phase: *detail and deploy*

As with the other diamonds, this phase too sees an alternation of divergent and convergent tasks to first conduct a detailed investigation of the specific context in which the solution has to take place and, secondly, to plan the action plan for implementation.

Tasks and tools

> detail

Internal Stakeholder Analysis: this activity deals with the development or specification of the first similar analysis performed during the ‘discover’ phase. The task starts by taking back the previously defined *Stakeholder Analysis Map* and updating or modifying it according to the new scenario depicted by the *Employee Journey To Be*.

The goal is to adapt the map to suit the new scenario, enriching it with potential new actors.

> deploy

Transformation Action Plan: this activity aims at developing a roadmap of implementation focused on people who will be involved in each task, and the role they will have in it.

The template requires a section to be filled in for each milestone of the project and related task. For each task, the group shall specify the following roles when performing it: the leader, the main project team, the decision makers and the sponsors.

Participants: *key stakeholders + co-designers – internal – mixed hierarchical level – different business functions*

In this diamond, key stakeholders and co-designers converge to work on the final steps of the design for the HRD project. It is advisable to involve a subgroup of the total number of co-designers participating in the previous phases, typically the ambassadors, who will act as witnesses of the work done until this point and represent the bridge between the diamonds.

Extended DD – Tuckman stage: *(forming), storming and norming*

As regards the first Stakeholder Analysis activity, conflicts can arise due to discussions about stakeholder positions on the map. During the subsequent stage of the Action Plan, conflicts should have already been solved and conflictual opinions should have come to a shared picture; therefore, the group is ‘normed’.

Style of guidance: *facilitating*

At this point the HR designer comes back to acquire the attitude of an ‘active listener’, rather than a ‘provoker’. He or she needs to be aware of and be ready to manage possible conflicts, and in this phase it is particularly important for the group to reach a resolution because it is already at an advanced phase of design for the project.

Further phase: Adoption

This further phase has to do with enacting the action plan that has been drawn up. Since HRD projects have to do with change in the way people interact, this phase will imply enacting a behavioural design intervention.

If it still managed by the HRD, then the relationship with the client will have to be ‘facilitating’ (Yu and Sangiorgi, 2017), a relationship in which the designer acts as a coach who enables the client to enact the change, transferring capabilities with a consultancy, which closely resembles training.

In this regard, it must still be clarified whether the facilitator of this phase can be recommended as designer educated in behavioural science, a combination of designer and professional coach with a background in social science or another professional profile (Auricchio *et al.*, 2018).

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