Wicked approaches to intractable problems: Using evidence and lateral thinking to navigate complex transformative change

While you may not have heard of wicked problems, if you are a senior manager you will certainly have faced a few, or have some facing you right now. We will not attempt to explain the theory of wicked problems beyond giving some references to the origins of the concept, [1], [2] and say 'google it,' but some key attributes of wicked problems are:

- They don't have clear boundaries as they are often parts of larger problems.
- Their solutions are never right or wrong just better or worse than alternatives.
- They don't lend themselves to linear service design techniques and can only truly be evaluated as a whole design rather than the sum of separate parts.

If you have attempted service transformation you will recognise that it typically ticks all three of these boxes and that is why it can be so difficult to implement this kind of change and deliver the anticipated benefits from it.

Wicked tools

In order to crack these kinds of 'wicked' problems it is necessary to start thinking in a less linear and more lateral, holistic and connected way and learn to cope with uncertainty. It often means being able to use multiple layers of imperfect evidence to arrive at reliable conclusions. This workshop aims to provide some new tools to help support the business case for change, target change, plan change and realise benefits from it and will include:

Mapping the money, customers and contact

The simplest way of deciding where to target change and to build the foundations of a business case can be to map spending and contact volumes to services and channels. Typically this involves gathering existing information from within your organisation and combining it to create 'heat maps' that cut across services and channels. These kinds of maps can offer rapid insights into where services offer worthwhile savings and quick wins on quality and can reduce a very long list of options into a manageable portfolio. **The tools we explore will aim to identify opportunities and raise questions that guide you to a manageable portfolio of work that will deliver your desired outcomes.**
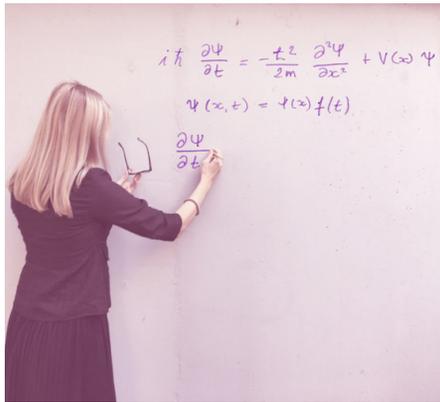
Understanding your service users – mapping demographics

There is no point in building a service proposition that customers can't or won't use and demographic profiling and creating customer 'personas' are well established ways to do this. However, they can be too expensive in time and effort to apply widely. The workshop will explore how a layered and targeted approach can answer key strategic questions without trying to 'boil the ocean'.

Geography – Understanding places and spaces

While the future of service delivery is clearly digital; there continues to be a need to offer face to face contact points where organisations can interact with customers. In doing this it is important to understand where the people most likely to need this are. It is also necessary to understand what presence partners and potential partners have in an area in order to optimise shared asset use.

The workshop will look at some sets of open data, proprietary data and internal customer data that can be used to map areas to support investment cases and service design.

The emphasis of the workshop will be the application and practical use of these approaches rather than the detailed technical aspects. There will also be a strong emphasis on the use of this kind of evidence to tell stories and create narratives to support transformative change.

We believe in conversations

We are always happy to discuss these issues, and can point you to many free sources of advice and information, and help you to develop your thinking with no charge and no obligation. If you wish to commission work, we are available through G-CLOUD, the ESPO professional services framework, and many other pre-qualified and compliant procurement routes.

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[1] *Wicked Problems in Design Thinking*. Richard Buchanan. Design Issues, Vol. 8, No. 2, (Spring, 1992), pp. 5-21
[2] *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*. HORST W. J. RITTEL and MELVIN M. WEBBER. Policy Sciences 4 (1973), 155-169