

Public Design

Ph.D. project on how to lead innovation in government

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How can public managers successfully lead the design of innovative policies and services?

Drawing on diverse disciplines such as design thinking, public administration, innovation management and leadership, it is the ambition to build a new knowledge base about how to shape high performing, innovative public sector organisations.

The Ph.D. project is anchored at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) with adviser Robert Austin, a Harvard Business School professor, and is to be conducted in collaboration with a world class foreign university.

Key themes

The overall emphasis and interest of the Ph.D. will be in design thinking as a potentially new and effective approach to public sector innovation, while personal leadership styles and the administrative and organisational context will be viewed as both facilitating and constraining factors. This entails the following key research themes and associated questions of interest (listed in order of importance):

1. Design thinking: To what extent are the key principles of design thinking effective as an approach (or philosophy of) public sector innovation?
2. Innovation leadership: Which personal leadership characteristics and behaviours are critical to successfully driving innovation processes in government?
3. Public management and governance: How does the political, regulatory, organisational and cultural context of public sector organisations constrain and/or facilitate the public design process?

At the core of the Ph.D. is *design thinking*: the theory and practice of using design-led methods to create new solutions. Design thinking embodies much of the intellectual and heuristic outset for the process of co-creation and innovation. As the UK Design Council has claimed, "Design is the midwife of innovation" (Design Council 2009). Design might be defined as "the human capacity to shape and make our environments in ways that satisfy our needs and give meaning to our lives." (Heskett 1993). Verganti (2009) condenses this definition even further, saying that "Design is the creation of meaning".

If leading global businesses such as Apple, Philips, P&G and Nokia are benefiting from embedding design processes in their business strategy, can government departments and agencies benefit from design thinking, both in the 'macro design' of policy-making and the 'service design' of front-line delivery?

Tentatively, some of the central principles of design thinking might be described as: challenging context, experimentation, iteration, visualisation, user involvement and co-creation (Brown 2009; Sanders & Stappers 2008). Martin (2009) highlights design thinking as the ability to manage and move between the opposing disciplines of analysis, rigour and 'algorithmic' exploitation on the one hand, and synthesis, interpretation, 'mystery' and exploration on the other hand.

This Ph.D. will focus on how 'applied' design thinking might power public sector innovation, and what leadership skills are required to successfully orchestrate the design process. As Martin (2009) points out above, at the heart of design thinking is the ability to balance two cognitive styles: The analytical-logical mindset that characterises most professional bureaucracies, and the more interpretative, intuitive mindset that characterises the arts and creative professions. As Lester & Piore (2004) as well as Verganti (2009) have argued, intuition and the ability to interpret information to form new solutions is the 'missing dimension' of innovation. Likewise, in his work *Theory U*, C. Otto Scharmer (2007) describes how leading innovation requires a shift or movement through a U process, from modes of 'downloading' and 'discussion' to 'dialogue' and, finally, 'presensing', capturing the future as it emerges. Like Lester & Piore, who discovered that innovative business leaders employ a highly interpretative mode of thinking, Scharmer argues that the process of creation, for individuals as well as for groups and organisations, is much more about intuition and sensing, and less about cool logic. The model below juxtaposes the principles of analysis and of synthesis – the right-hand column an expression of a number of the key characteristics of design thinking:

Table x: Design thinking

Analysis (Splitting)	Synthesis (Putting together)
Rational Logical Deductive Solutions 'Thinking it through' Single discipline Elegance	Emotional Intuitive Inductive Paradigms, platforms Rapid prototyping (think through doing) Multiple disciplines, T-shape Impact, value, diffusion

Few public sector organisations explicitly allow for the elements in the right-hand column. However, for public leaders to innovate – to shift from 'managing the present' to 'creating the future' – they may have to reach a different balance between modes of analysis and synthesis. Introducing design thinking to the public sector is thus likely to be a challenge. Lawyers, economists and political scientists are expert analysts but rarely used to a more interpretive style. Emotion and intuition is hardly recognised as a basis for decision-making. The challenge (or dilemma) might be to capture seemingly opposite or contrasting types of knowledge, and to integrate both types in the final deliberations and solutions.

If the above holds at least some truth, design thinking is a competence and an approach that needs to be much better understood and practiced by public managers at all levels. As Thomas

Davenport (2009) argues in a recent Harvard Business Review article, there are numerous types of 'classic' perspectives that can form the basis of decision-making. In the article, he presents as many as seven approaches, ranging from analytics over neuroscience to behavioural economics and 'wisdom of crowds' (HBR November 2009). Behavioural economics is precisely what Chicago University Economists Thaler and Sunstein (2008) build their principle of *nudging* around. They argue that governments and firms must understand people's actions in depth to allow the design of smart 'choice architectures' that influence people's behaviour in subtle, but effective ways, and result in the desired outcomes.

Since application of the term 'design thinking' within the public sector is very recent, there is not yet much evidence of how the process works. For instance, there seems to be no consensus in the literature about when and how to most appropriately bring end-users (citizens, businesses) into the design process, or about whether user-centred innovation can be anything but incremental in nature (see Verganti 2009). Likewise, the optimal configuration of 'transdisciplinary' collaboration between various professions, as part of the design process, is not very well understood.

However, there is a rapidly growing body of convincing case examples of successfully applied design processes from public sector innovation labs and social innovators (such as la 27e Region in France, the Innovation Unit in the UK and MindLab in Denmark) and from service design firms (such as IDEO, ThinkPublic, Engine, LiveWork, Participle, Designit, 1508, Via Design and CPH Design). Additionally, there is increasingly a proven track record of design thinking adding real value to the government agencies (such as the UK National Health Service, the US Transportation Security Administration, and even the Danish Prison Service).

None the less, for now the utility of design thinking to government seems to rely on two sets of arguments: A fundamental *sense* that the principles of design thinking are relevant and necessary to the public sector development process; and anecdotal evidence, *stories*, about how the principles of design thinking have worked in practice in government. A key objective of this Ph.D. project will therefore be to build a sound research base for understanding the utility and potential of design thinking as a key approach to innovation within the public sector.

The role of the public sector context will, I expect, be significant. The key characteristics of public bureaucracy and modern governance is the context within which design thinking and innovation leadership must be embedded, if it is to have relevance and impact in government. As James Wilson (1989) has pointed out, "High-level government executives are pre-occupied with maintaining their agencies in a complex, conflict-ridden, and unpredictable political environment (...)". The innovation challenge to public managers is to deliberately orchestrate the process of innovation within an environment that is political, open to public scrutiny, bureaucratic, and highly professionalised. What might be the most appropriate metaphor to describe how the design process and the public organisation interact? As two opposite sets of waves that crash against each other? Or as two rivers that merge effectively, creating a stronger joint stream in the process? Key questions that may arise from the interplay between design-driven innovation and the public bureaucracy include:

- What is the art and practice of identifying strategic opportunities and challenges, creating new concepts and ideas through design thinking, and executing them in a public sector setting? (see Mulgan 2009 for consideration of public strategy and innovation)
- What are the particular possibilities and pitfalls raised by New Public Management approaches, which imply that policy and service solutions are often designed through a mix of traditional governance and more market-based models (see for instance Ejersbo & Greve 2005)?
- And finally, how to lead the design of new solutions in a context with multiple principals, all of whom have legitimate claims to some degree of insight and possibly influence over the decision-making process (Christensen et. al. 2006)?

Flowing from this consideration of the interaction between design thinking and the public sector context we must consider the nature of innovation leadership. From the practice of leading change (Kotter 1996) to 'leading the revolution' through bold innovation (Hamel 2000) to the sensing of the future 'as it emerges' (Scharmer 2007) and to leading design thinking (Verganti 2009, Martin 2009), there are numerous approaches to what it means to lead innovation.

It is the purpose of the Ph.D. to inductively identify the key leadership traits that seem to move the process forward vis-à-vis those which are less effective. In addition I would want to pinpoint the external resources and factors that empower public managers to lead effectively throughout the innovation process.

Timeline

The project starts July 1st 2010 and runs to mid-2013.

Bio

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Profile. Christian Bason, 37, is head of MindLab, an inter-governmental unit for citizen-centered innovation. Christian is passionate about transforming the public sector's ability to find smarter solutions in a time of unprecedented turbulence. He is an expert on innovation, public administration, leadership and strategy and the author of numerous columns, blogs and articles. He has delivered presentations for amongst others the United Nations, the European Commission, UK Cabinet Office, New Zealand Ministry of Research, Science & Technology, the Victoria Public Service, Stanford University, and design firm IDEO.

2007- : MindLab. MindLabs involves citizens and businesses in the development of new public policy and service through field work, design workshops, concept development, prototyping and experimentation. MindLabs staff is multidisciplinary with competencies in anthropology, political science, humanities and design, and currently conducts three Ph.D. projects. MindLab is part of the Danish Ministries of Economic and Business Affairs, Taxation and Employment.

1998-2007: Rambøll Management Consulting. Christian Bason was previously head of the public organisation & leadership practice of Rambøll Management Consulting, a European professional service firm. During his 10 years there, he led a number of studies, evaluations and analyses for a range of public, NGO and private organisations at local, regional, national and international level. As part of his consulting work he was stationed in New York City.

Publications. Christian Bason is the author of several books and is soon publishing *Leading Public Sector Innovation* (Policy Press, forthcoming 2010). He has also authored several works in Danish: *Put the Citizen into Play* (Gyldendal Business, 2009, co-author), *Innovating Welfare* (Borsens Forlag 2007), *New Faces of Work* (Borsens Forlag 2003, co-author), and *Efficiency Through Competition* (Ministry of Finance, 2000, co-author).

Education & board membership. Christian holds a Master's degree in Political Science from Aarhus University (Denmark), supplemented with executive education from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard Business School. He has taught as an assistant professor at the University of Copenhagen, where he has also been a censor in sociology. He has since 2009 been a member of the Advisory Board of the Lisbon Council, and the Advisory Board of the TempoS strategic research project on temporary design spaces.