

Generating innovation: Listening, involving and co- producing with 'unusual suspects'

Emma Clarence 18 May 2012

Anthropology: perhaps not the first profession you think of when considering how to address youth unemployment. However, as the experience of Copenhagen Jobcenter in Denmark demonstrates, looking to the 'unusual suspects' to help can bring about innovative shifts in the way in which services are delivered, with a positive impact on the support young people receive to enter the job market or move into other activities, such as education.

Denmark, long held up as a model for its "flexicurity" approach, which blends a highly flexible labour market with the security of welfare and activation policies to help people (back) into the labour market, has watched once-low youth unemployment rates increase quickly as a result of the crisis, more than doubling between 2007 and 2012. Denmark's focus is on supporting young people during the economic crisis by looking to the future needs of its economy and a forecast decline in low-skill jobs, and seeking to ensure that young people are well educated

and well skilled.

To that end the country has put in a range of measures to support young people, including educational and internship programmes. However, they found that getting young people into Jobcenters to hear about the programmes and support available to them was proving difficult. In the capital, Copenhagen, the Jobcenter found that young people were missing appointments and disengaging from services, even though that meant that they were then sanctioned for non-compliance. Not only was this an issue for the young people who missed out on the assistance and resources available to help them, but also wasted the valuable time of the Jobcenter staff as well. However, rather than seeing young people as "the problem," Copenhagen Jobcenter set out to discover what issues were holding them back and how these concerns could be addressed.

Antropologerne, a firm of anthropologists with long experience in rethinking and redesigning public services, were brought in to work closely with a selected group of young people to discover their perceptions of the service provided by the Jobcenter. Working with young people both in the Jobcenter and at home, some key issues were identified involving the way the Jobcenter was viewed by young people, including: a confusing overall system; frequently overwhelming bureaucracy and language; and a perception that the Jobcenter itself was unfriendly. The messages were clear: there was a disconnect between

what young people found when they sought assistance and what the Jobcenter was trying to do.

Having identified the issues, Antropologerne then worked with youth and Jobcenter staff to develop new tools and approaches that would overcome the issues that had deterred potential participants from using the service. From that collaboration came new ways of engaging with young people: the introduction of hosts to greet young people as they entered the Jobcenter, informational leaflets and posters explaining the available services and a "travel guide" through the system. The changes, though they may appear small, achieved major results. The co-production of material with young people meant that wordy, often confusing service information was transformed into accessible, more visual "maps" that effectively guided people through the process. A once off-putting Jobcenter was changed into a far more welcoming, and more effective, one.

What the Copenhagen example highlights is the need to think about where new ideas will come from, and ensure that such ideas can be generated and heard.

Bringing in external actors to examine how people interact with a service can provide fresh new viewpoints and ideas. Unconstrained by old approaches and ways of working, such 'unusual suspects' can make a powerful contribution to identifying the problems and challenges that may exist. They can post seemingly naïve, but

ultimately potent questions that open up the space for new ideas and ways of working. They can also act as neutral brokers, creating the space for people to discuss what they believe are important issues and bottlenecks in an open, constructive way.

Such external perspectives can play an important role in innovation, but they should not come at the expense of other voices or be seen as all that is needed for innovation. Listening to the voices of clients, customers, users and staff is also important. By understanding people's perceptions of, and interactions with, a service they use, potential areas for improvement and change can be identified. Walking in someone else's moccasins may be a cliché, but it remains a powerful one when seeking to create and support innovation.

Listening to people and understanding their experiences are crucial if the innovation process is to bring about more effective, more appropriate service design that actually enables the services to do what they are meant to do. However, listening to the voices of the people who use these services isn't always without difficulty. A lack of trust with organisations and institutions and concern at the potential consequences of speaking up may hinder open, unrestrained dialogue. This can particularly apply to disaffected young people. At the same time, personnel within organisations may already have preconceptions about the services, and the people who use them, making problem identification all the more difficult.

Staff have experiential knowledge which is important in the process of innovation. Creating an environment which welcomes and values staff perspectives and ideas is central to supporting innovation. Whilst a message welcoming innovative ideas should come from the top, it is valuable to see innovation as a horizontal activity with each perspective valued and considered as part of the desire to improve the services offered. Indeed, building innovation into what people do at work, such as by offering incentives or rewards, sends a very clear signal that innovation is central to their work and valued as such, rather than as an add-on. In the case of Copenhagen Jobcenter the improvements were made through some small initial changes that led to wider changes, including a new strategy and staff teams reorganised in order to sustain the positive results. Innovation led to more innovation and greater effectiveness.

As Jens Sibbersen from Copenhagen Jobcenter explained, "This work shows that innovation has to start by listening to customers and that relatively small adjustments can achieve major results."

Ensuring that people are given the encouragement to think innovatively must be accompanied with the acknowledgement that many ideas may be generated and many will be thrown away. Not every idea that is implemented will be a success. However, without those ideas and without some less-successful attempts, innovation is simply not possible. The inculcation of a

“fear of failure” within an organisation stifles creative thought and will ultimately lead to failure, with services no longer meeting the needs of the people who use them. Furthermore, discouraged, disengaged staff can become frustrated at their working environment. Putting in place an ecosystem which recognises the inherent messiness of ‘doing innovation’ is therefore a key accompaniment to embedding it in the culture of the workplace.

The role of co-production as an additional part of the innovation process should not be overlooked. Co-production means working with all stakeholders to develop how services are designed and delivered; it requires reciprocity between those stakeholders and the need to span the boundaries of management and decision-making. Such an approach requires trust, both within the organisation and between the organisation and the people who use the services it provides. Building such trust may take time and the involvement of external specialists acting as neutral brokers. Co-production may initially blur boundaries uncomfortably and challenge traditional hierarchical relationships, but can bring positive outcomes in the redesign and provision of services. The Copenhagen Jobcenter demonstrated this, with young people co-producing material for other young people and contributing to making the Jobcenter much more effective in its work with these clients.

Giving people the space and encouragement to generate new ideas and overcoming an organisational ‘fear of

failure' that too often stifles innovation are important steps to addressing contemporary challenges, such as youth unemployment. There are no quick fixes, but by putting in place an ecosystem which values and supports service improvement through innovation and co-production involving diverse actors, new approaches and new ways of working will be generated.

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