

Design Thinking Policy Innovation Initiative

March 2019

Abstract

The following case study examines the emergence of design thinking as an innovative strategy within the policy and governance space. [Section One](#) begins with a literature scan that defines design thinking as a transdisciplinary methodology and outlining how design thinking methods are applicable to the policy context. This includes a brief summary of the ways in which design thinking in policy is often contrasted with the traditional policy-making tools. Section One ends with a concise overview of the application of design thinking in international policy and governance settings as well as its recent appearance on the Canadian federal agenda. [Section Two](#) details an international best practice in design thinking: Denmark's MindLab. [Section Three](#) investigates the current public sector design thinking landscape in Ontario, Canada. [Section Four](#) examines next steps for design thinking and draws conclusion about its impact and the path forward.

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Literature Review

A transdisciplinary strategy, design thinking emerged when insights garnered from product-design processes were co-opted by the business management discipline [1]. Actors in a variety of management practices were interested in applying what they took to be the successful principles of product design to the arena of social service delivery. The design thinking process is an iterative approach, **codified around five key steps:**



Empathize: The designer seeks to fundamentally understand the conditions, goals and desires of whoever it is they are designing for [2]. Design thinking is often referred to as human-centred design based on this premise that problem definition and problem solving is stronger when empathizing and putting the end user first.



Define: The designer takes the insights gained from empathizing and applies them to problem definition [2]. Equipped with a nuanced understanding of the problem or service as articulated by the end-user, the designer is better situated to formulate a statement effectively capturing the issue. Problem definition may be done in partnership with the impacted population



Ideate: Having defined the challenge, the designer takes a creative and loose approach to idea generation. The designer focuses on finding many answers to the problem, without limiting perspectives by looking for the right answer [2]. The designer casts a wide net and considers a variety of solutions, especially ones that seem outside the box.



Prototype: After exploring a broad range of options, the designer identifies the option they feel is most likely to successfully address the problem at hand. The product, program or service is designed and launched on a small scale and distributed to the intended users [2]. Notably, this is not the end of the design thinking process.



Test: The designer observes how the prototype did or did not address the problem, and if it generated the intended results. The designer takes an iterative approach to prototyping and testing ideas modes are meant to be iterative [2]. The designer tests and refines their approach, engaging with end-users throughout to ensure that they are addressing the right issue. scale up and continue to tinker until they are satisfied with the result.

This five-step design thinking process has made its way into various policy-making contexts around the world over the past fifteen years. It is important to note that the design thinking trend is not the first-time policymakers have been preoccupied with questions of design generally. Vast literature has been written on the question of how policies should best be designed well before design thinking [1].

Design thinking is **a new tool** and **a fresh set of principles** policymakers can draw on. The main innovation of design thinking for policymakers is the use of a human-centered lens integrating empathy throughout the policy process. While public consultation is conducted in policy, design thinking puts engagement at the very beginning of the process. Traditionally, Problem Definition and Ideation are done well before anything is taken to the public. In this way, design thinking exists as a new and compelling process for the policymaker's toolkit.



DESIGN THINKING BYTE: DENMARK'S MINDLAB



The Danish government's **“Away with Red Tape” plan** was intended to address the processes surrounding government tasks that citizens found onerous—such as filing tax returns.



Denmark's MindLab:

The first design thinking based government innovation lab

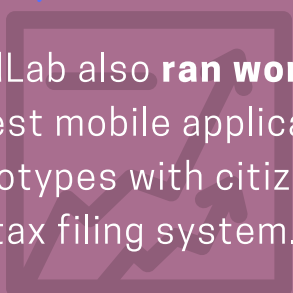


Ministry of Taxation and the Danish Tax and Customs Administration (**SKAT**)

METHODOLOGY

MindLab **interviewed citizens** to understand their problems with the existing tax system.

MindLab also **ran workshops** to test mobile application prototypes with citizens for the tax filing system.



Create a **mobile tax filing system** so that residents could file their returns on the go.

GOAL



INNOVATIVE APPROACH

Citizens tested prototypes, instead of by SKAT staff.



MindLab **refocused on the target audience** so prototype (re-)development was done without reinforcing internal SKAT assumptions

IMPACT

Mindlab's methods showed that **despite SKAT's starting assumptions**, citizens were not interested in filing their taxes using a mobile app.

Prototype testing revealed that **the ‘innovation’ did not appeal to the target audience.**

By using design thinking methods, MindLab identified that this system change **did not address the underlying problems for the users** and would not be well-received by the public: **saving the government time, effort and money.**

DESIGN THINKING BYTE: ONTARIO & YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



The Government of Ontario wanted to understand how Indigenous and racialized youth in Ontario **experience systemic racism**, as part of broader work to eliminate systemic racism in government policies, decisions and programs.



Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (**BII+E**): An independent innovation and entrepreneurship research institute



Government of Ontario **Anti-Racism Directorate** (ARD): taking an anti-racism lens to policy development

METHODOLOGY

BII+E and ARD developed **7 design principles** for the youth engagement session based on human-centered design and co-designing :

1) Safety



2) Diversity

3) Convergence



4) Action



5) Transparency

6) Playfulness

7) Empowerment



GOAL

Through a youth-engagement session, **co-develop a narrative** to use in a public awareness campaign about systemic racism in Ontario; and **build relationships with community partners** to garner support for related initiatives. Make sure participants feel **comfortable, safe and positive throughout the session**.



INNOVATIVE APPROACH

By working directly with youth and using a human centered empathy lens, BII+E and ARD worked to:

- Understand and identify privilege
- Co-define systemic racism through storytelling
- Build convergence and find commonality between different racialized groups

IMPACT

The youth-engagement **sessions were a success and led to several important insights and recommendations** for future ARD initiatives. Participants, BII+E and ARD **identified the design principles as crucial** to the success of the session.

Opportunities for improvement for future engagement sessions included:

- A **narrower age range** for participants
- Better accommodation of **varying degrees of literacy**
- Weighing the pros and cons of including **third-party facilitation**
- More extensive **consideration of travel demands** on participants

Next Steps: Denmark

Denmark's government is at a crossroads with respect to design thinking. In a surprise turn of events, after years of being lauded for its substantial impact on the public service and serving as a benchmark for design and innovation labs around the world since opening in 2002, **MindLab was shut down in 2015**. While it was replaced by the like-minded **Disruption Task Force**, the feeling among some of the individuals involved with MindLab is that the closure was motivated by shifting political priorities.



Despite its positive impact on Danish public policy, MindLab was shut down in 2018 after 16 years in operation. The new Disruption Task Force represents a possible shift in government priorities and highlights the ongoing reticence towards design thinking by some in the public sector.

This change makes Denmark a particularly interesting case. Despite design thinking being a longstanding successful policy tool widely embraced by the Danish government, **ongoing reluctance in the public sector** and beyond belies design thinking from becoming standard. Even the best design and innovation labs are subject to political pressures. In the case of MindLab, a shift in government focus to prioritizing digitization meant that MindLab, while also disruptive in its own sense, ultimately lost out to a task force more in line with a mandate to digitize.

The next steps for design thinking in the Danish public service context are fragmented. Advocates for design thinking should not forget the success and broad uptake that MindLab had under different political leadership. There may be future opportunities to resurrect the popular lab. The benefit of sixteen years of cross-Ministry work is that there are now design thinking champions across the Danish public service, each with an understanding of the tools of design thinking thanks to MindLab. Notably, 70% of the new Disruptive Task Force's team members are former MindLab employees, so there is some continuity, and an ongoing design thinking influence regardless of the current shift in focus.




Next Steps Ontario



The public service design thinking landscape is significantly less developed in the Ontario context than that of Denmark. Nevertheless, there is a proliferation of design-oriented policymaking in the province. In addition to partnerships between government and outside actors as outlined in the case of BIII+E and ARD, Ontario's internal **Policy Innovation Hub** is housed internally in the Government of Ontario's Cabinet Office. Created in 2016, the Hub is an internally-focused group intended to build the capacity for innovation within the Ontario Public Service.

Due to of the inward-facing nature of the Hub, there is a dearth of information as to the full scale of activities undertaken by the team. An interview with a member of the Policy Innovation Hub reveals that its activities are mostly centered around two main functions: **internal consultation** with other Ontario teams on a case by case basis, and **knowledge mobilization**.

Internal Consultation	<p>Allows the Hub to implement design thinking principles and activities, such as co-designing, journey mapping and prototyping.</p> 
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Knowledge Mobilization	<p>Workshops geared towards generating interest in and developing skills related to design thinking and other innovative approaches to policymaking.</p> 
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Key Policy Innovation Hub work has been with the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services on digital management and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services on a collaborative inquiry into adverse childhood experiences for children in care. Besides continuing to develop internal capacity, the Policy Innovation Hub should look to providing services for external partners if it wishes to compete with innovation hubs and design thinking teams in other jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important feature of design thinking is its **flexibility**. As the Literature Review suggests, the main innovation of design thinking as applied to the policy making context is not that it provides wholly new tools but that it enhances and redefines key parts of the existing policy process in an innovative way. **Public engagement is not new**, however placing it at the front end and throughout the policy process departs from the policy approach of most governments today. Likewise, the desire to prototype and test policy interventions before implementation is not a novel idea, but the **iterative design thinking methodology** codifies it as an especially useful part of the policy process.



The flexibility of design thinking as a policy tool is a novel approach in the typically risk-adverse public sector. This flexible tool can support public sector policy and program design by working with users themselves to identify and define the problem, and to design, implement and re-design solutions.

Applications of design thinking in the public service sphere highlight this flexibility, as in the cases of Denmark's MindLab and Ontario's youth engagement approach by BIII+E and ARD. The key takeaway of MindLab's work with Denmark's Ministry of Taxation is not that design thinking must improve policies and programs through innovation. Instead, the takeaway is that design thinking can help governments make sound decisions by providing additional and nuanced information, in this case a target audience's lack of desire to do their taxes on their mobile phones. Similarly, the BII+E and ARD collaboration's chief contribution is not strictly about possible policy or program outcomes, but about discovering a more successful ways of building relationships and a lasting dialogue between Indigenous and racialized youth and the ARD.

The next steps for both jurisdictions reveal that however buzzworthy the design thinking has been in recent memory it is **still a marginal tool** in the greater policymaking toolkit. Denmark's MindLab was closed in the face of the prioritization of a similar group focused on another innovation: digitization. Design thinking seems to be relatively well entrenched in the culture of Denmark's public service, although it remains to be seen what the impacts of MindLab closure are moving forward. In Ontario, the current story is more about the slow adoption of design thinking principles. MindLab was running for fourteen years before the Policy Innovation Hub was created, and the Hub's activities remain largely and intentionally internal to the Ontario Public Service. While that does not necessarily make it any less important than other innovation labs, the continued existence of the Hub will likely require that it reach beyond the walls of its clients within Ontario's Ministries towards broader public programs.

Works Cited

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