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Equity-centred design for government services

Seizing the opportunity to get transformation right

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Introduction

As part of the effort to redesign its social assistance programs, the Ontario provincial government recently consulted directly with some of the people who actually use the programs to understand the experience from the outside in.

"I just want to say that it put a smile on my face to have any branch of my government actually ask me how they can do a better job of providing me with a service," one of the participants said. "I'm much more used to the government telling me what I want. Thanks for listening to us."

That's what equity-centred design should sound and feel like.
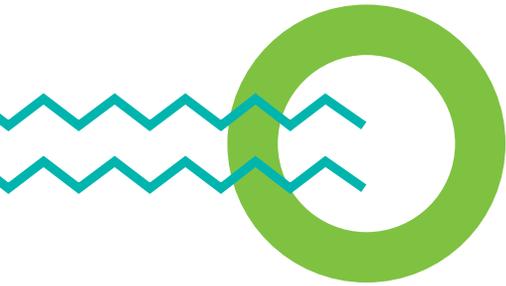
Governments at all levels across Canada are spending significant amounts of time and money to modernize their systems.

They're seeking to improve service delivery and, ultimately, to design and deploy services that meet people's needs in a modern way. At the same time, there are loud and clear calls for systemic change at a societal level. At the intersection of these two forces of change, modernization initiatives represent an opportunity to not only hit reset on outdated and inefficient processes, but also to redesign systems so they serve more needs and in better ways.

Governments can redesign the future in an inclusive way by inviting historically underserved and marginalized communities to the table from the start—as co-designers of our collective future. This is an approach and ethos that designs *from* the margins and *with* the margins, where there is the most complexity. It also often has the benefit of addressing a host of needs in a straightforward way that would not have otherwise been brought to the table.

For example, curb cuts were initially designed to enable easier access between the street and sidewalk for people in wheelchairs, but they also benefit those with limited mobility and anyone pushing or pulling anything with wheels, from baby strollers to grocery carts.[1] And closed captioning, originally designed for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, is helpful in a range of contexts, from helping those with cognitive or behavioural conditions to making it easier for people to watch television in a public place like a bar or an airport or simply pay closer attention to the dialogue. As of 2022, Netflix reports that 40% of its global users regularly use closed captioning.[2]

Designing with those at the margins leads to better outcomes for all. So, how can decision-makers seize the opportunity to incorporate this approach into their modernization efforts, today?

They can do so through a game-changing process we explored in a recent Deloitte report: equity-centred design (ECD).
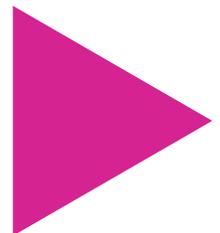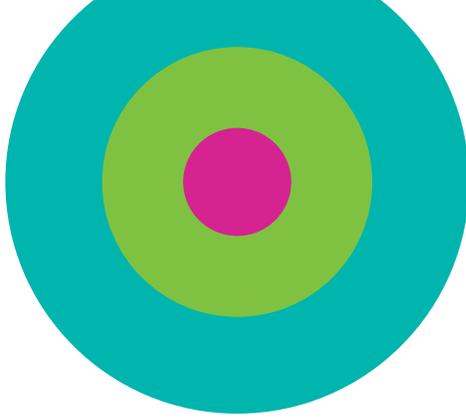
Equity-centred design contrasts with human-centred design in the selection of—and engagement with—its design target. The lived experiences of those you are problem-solving for—and how you do so—are intentionally considered in constructing the design process. It seeks to limit assumptions by increasing representation across the design process and by considering systems of oppression that have caused many populations to be historically overlooked. The collaborative design process invites community members to the table to actively participate from the start.

"ECD processes are constantly evolving as we continue to learn with and from those around us, but the purpose remains constant: to allow for an approach in which traditionally marginalized voices lead the conversation to drive more inclusive and innovative results."

—All for one, not one for all: The power of equity-centered design Deloitte Digital report

How can governments tap into the opportunities ECD presents?

Equity-centred design is about bringing context into any modernization initiative. From day one, you're asking questions about yourself, institutional orthodoxies, history, relationships, and situation-specific needs. Context is complex, nuanced, and often rouses discomfort—and that's the point. You can't do ECD in government without acknowledging that bias is built into the very DNA of government systems. In a recent mandate letter to the Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau echoed this imperative to confront bias: "We must continue to address the profound systemic inequities and disparities that remain present in the core fabric of our society, including our core institutions."[3]

In government institutions, biases and orthodoxies are often shaped over hundreds of years and undetected by those who benefit from them, making them particularly pervasive. This makes the intentional work of identifying them a prerequisite to framing a problem. Because orthodoxies and inequities live within many systems, any redesign process must begin by asking: Why is it done this way? Are there examples of how this is done differently? What do we assume are the main needs of the key stakeholders and why? Investigating orthodoxies puts you in the right starting position to situate the current state and its relationship to the past, and to imagine different possibilities as you look to the future.

ECD also requires leaders, designers, researchers, and builders to engage in continuous self-reflection. Your positionalities—your social identities, resources, and experiences—influence how you view a situation and how other key stakeholders might perceive you. The goal isn't to stop once you identify tensions, but rather to reflect on how your lived experience and positionalities shape how you make decisions and how you engage with others. This practice furthers the questioning mindset to intentionally welcome in friction and intersections. It also makes explicit that human relationships and interactions carry as much weight in the equity-centred design process as the outcomes.

There has never been a more critical time to shift our thinking on how projects are approached. We will all have to live with the consequences of key decisions being made now for decades, so we better get it right. Now is the time to build in equity and inclusion as core guiding principles and to (re)design systems with them in mind.

If you're involved in designing or redesigning a government service, you can start to put ECD into practice with these three tenets:

1 Contextualizing the problem

2 Co-designing the solution(s)

3 Redefining impact

Embedding these into your modernization initiatives will enable decision-making that leads to a more inclusive, equitable future for all. What follows is a series of questions for you to consider and real-life examples in Canada where Deloitte collaborated with government and non-profit organizations to put these tenets into practice. These examples are not perfect or complete—and that's the point: they are intended to demonstrate different ways you can move from good intentions to action no matter where you are on your journey.

1

Contextualizing the problem

Consider what data and insights you're using to understand and define the problem. Equity-centred design means taking a thoughtful approach to critically evaluating your data sources and reflecting on who needs to be engaged in the research and how.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Do you know where the data has come from to inform this problem?

- Have you engaged with marginalized and underserved populations to understand the situation from their lived experiences?

- What samples, methods, and situational dynamics might have contributed to how the problem has been perceived so far?

- What are the strengths and limitations of the data that's been used to understand the problem so far?

- What's the most equitable way to engage with stakeholders to ensure safety, trust, and respect?

Real-life example

Deloitte collaborated with Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth to explore the journeys of young people moving into and out of the experience of homelessness and identify concrete ways for organizations to make a difference in these critical transitions.

Given the complexity of the challenge, the team adapted their methods to ensure that the research process as well as the outcomes were truly centred on the stories and lived experiences of the young people at hand. We collaborated with Dr. Vikki Reynolds—an activist, instructor, clinical supervisor, and consultant—who developed the resiliency-based model, which builds in moments where participants can reframe their stories, often thought of as deficits, with instances where they enacted control and autonomy. We also led a co-design session where the research plan was tested and challenged by frontline staff, caseworkers, academic researchers, and people with lived experiences of homelessness and housing precarity. The research was jointly conducted with a researcher and peer-researcher from Eva's who had direct experience with the community. The process involved continuously reflecting and iterating on the approach to ensure that the safety of the young people and researchers was at the heart of the work.

The outcome was a new research method and a public toolkit outlining a process for other organizations to adopt in their efforts to design with equity.

2

Co-designing the solution(s)

Co-design is an approach that actively engages all stakeholders (employees, community partners, end users, etc.) throughout the entire process—from problem identification through design, testing, launch, and integration—to ensure that what gets designed actually meets the needs of the people it intends to serve. ECD is about making sure the right conditions are established for marginalized and underserved stakeholders to participate and contribute. Think about who is involved in determining what gets designed and how it is deployed or used. In co-design, the process taken to understand and engage is just as important as the solutions it enables.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- How will you ensure that marginalized and underserved communities are engaged in the problem-solving process, from co-defining a set of possible solutions to providing feedback on prototypes?

- Have you considered the broader ecosystem of stakeholders who might affect or be affected by your design choices?

- Have you discussed the possible consequences, both intended and unintended, of various design choices?

- Have you planned to compensate participants for their time and expertise in ways that make sense for their circumstances and preferences?

Real-life example

As part of a recent modernization project, Deloitte worked with the Government of Canada to better understand the lived experiences of seniors in Canada trying to access their old age security benefits.

Within a user base that's already commonly underrepresented in research and design processes, the team recognized it would need to engage vulnerable and historically underserved users within this select population. Engaging with these users required sensitivity around the environment and interactions of the research activities. It was recognized early on that in order to maintain a level of trust and safety for both the interviewees and the interviewers, the recruitment, hosting, and communication of activities should be conducted through local community representatives.

The result was a new model for equitable design research grounded in a government, non-government, and private partnership. Through co-design activities, the perspectives of the individuals who are entitled to benefits, and the community support workers as members of their circle of care (individuals responsible to act on behalf of the individual), added to the understanding of the gaps and challenges in existing government services. These data points were incorporated into detailed design artifacts that will inform the improvement of current systems, as well as the design of future solutions.

3

Redefining impact

Just as ECD is based on intentionally including multiple perspectives of a situation from the beginning, so too must the measures of success and impact be triangulated. The goal is not only to facilitate outcomes that serve more people, but also to enable engagement that fosters new forms of accountability, reciprocal relationships, and community-building.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

• Have you engaged people from marginalized and underserved communities to define what "good" looks and feels like in their lives and then embedded that into how program success will be defined and measured?

• Have you considered quantitative and qualitative measures of success that can track adoption and uptake as well as experience and capacity-building?

• Have you developed new/deeper relationships with marginalized and underserved communities?

• Have you built in mechanisms to hold your team accountable for behaving in ways that are consistent with your intention to embed equity into your transformation approach?

Real-life example

The Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services outlined a vision to achieve a sustainable, modern social assistance program that gives recipients a path to jobs, greater independence, and overall improved outcomes. As part of the engagement, the project team developed a series of inclusion principles that the success of its co-design activities would be measured against. The team members asked themselves:

• Did we have representation from a diversity of voices and lived experiences?

• Did we structure our research to create safety for participants so they could share authentically?

• Did we ensure that we engaged with users throughout the project and not only in one-off sessions at the beginning?

• Did we embed accessibility considerations into our design process?

Measuring success based on staying true to these principles grounded the work in ECD. One tangible way that adhering to these principles changed the work for the better was by shifting the research approach from one where an outside third party interviewed assistance recipients to one that made use of existing client working groups—spaces where trust and credibility had already been established. This ensured not only that the project team had representation from a diversity of voices and lived experiences, but also that it was structuring the research to create safety for participants to fully share throughout the design process.

Conclusion

There is a significant opportunity here for governments to combine the words and sentiments of systemic change with modernization efforts, including those that are currently underway. Equity-centred design is the way to capitalize on this opportunity to truly meet the diverse needs of Canadians. It will require a move beyond pledges and commitments and toward real behavioural change. The goal is not to strive for perfection, but to enable something better. That starts with making an intentional choice to include people and contexts historically left out of design—to put them at the centre—and to imagine and build the tools, processes, and relationships that will make a more equitable future possible.

Endnotes

1. Angela Blackwell, "The Curb-Cut Effect," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2017.

2. Devin Coldewey, "Netflix continues accessibility push with badges for audio and subtitle descriptions," *TechCrunch*, May 19, 2022.

3. Office of the Prime Minister, "Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion Mandate Letter," December 16, 2021.

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