

Transforming Student Services in Higher Education

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Abstract

At Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), there are many disparate actors, systems and processes involved in service delivery and too often employees work in silos with little or no understanding of the personal impact of the student journey. Traditionally in large organisations, the focus is often on the technology implementation while ignoring the importance of people and processes.

As part of CIT's plan to transform and streamline services for students in a higher education institution, a pilot project was initiated to re-design some key business processes within the student lifecycle. The design of services is well-documented; however there is a lack of research in regard to an inside-out service design approach used to transform the student experience in higher education. CIT have discovered that focusing on the on-stage and back-stage functions of the employee experience is just as important as the student experience in order to deliver great services.

KEYWORDS: transform, higher education, student services

Introduction

CIT is a publicly funded higher education provider. It is the largest of Ireland's network of thirteen Institutes of Technology and currently has in the region of 15,000 registered students with approximately 2,000 new entries year on year. CIT's education, research and training provision spans a wide variety of disciplines, from business and humanities through engineering and science to music, drama, art & design.

In 2011, Senior Management at CIT requested a review of current IT systems and a proposal for integration of the same. The problems that existed included issues with data quality &

timely availability, lack of online student self-service, isolated enterprise applications, disconnect between academic business process and the IT solutions needed to support them.

RECAP, Review and Enhancement of CIT's Admissions Processes, was a project initiated in February 2013, and used a service design approach to review a section of the student lifecycle from offer accepted to in class, ready for learning, and proposed short, medium and long-term changes, the short-term were implemented for September 2013. The analysis initially focused on new part-time students but changes were implemented, where possible, for all student cohorts.

Service design as an approach, where the end-user is the main focus and co-producer of the service, is a relatively new concept to the higher education sector. In the current climate, it is not so much about the product, but how the user interfaces with it that matters. CIT have piloted service design techniques to review the student experience in a higher education institution.

During this recent pilot project, it was realised that the culture and people transformation that needs to be considered when implementing service renovations, is no small task and should not be under-estimated. Employees at the front-line of a service can often be buried under the paper shuffling of a process without having any understanding of how their processes interact with other processes throughout an organisation.

RECAP – Review & Enhancement of CIT's Admissions Processes

The RECAP project planned to make some of the services delivered by CIT's Admissions Office more useful, usable, efficient and student-centred. The project was focused on reviewing the student lifecycle from *offer accepted* to *in class, ready for learning* and making improvements where required.

A Project Governance Group was setup to provide top-down support to the project, made up of key members of the senior management team. A project team was created which included front-line and back-office staff, and two student interns were employed for the summer period to work on design and communications. CIT actively sought input from all key stakeholders, including front-line employees and students, as designers and co-producers of the service experience from the end-users' point of view.

An inside-out design approach was used in this project in contrast to a typical approach of using an external consultancy. This could be seen as one of the most important aspects of the project as this is not a once-off project but a new approach to embed design thinking in a higher education institute for the first time in Ireland, as a series of iterative change projects. The employees themselves must become designers if design thinking is to be the future at CIT.

New tools were introduced to stakeholders and were well received and understood. Initial interaction at workshops was slow but improved later during the customer journey mapping and ideation workshops when users became more collaborative and focused on the common goal of a positive student experience. Our innovative approach to break down barriers was, to engage these stakeholders to draw up a service design blueprint, viewed entirely from the end-user perspective. The use of service design techniques—in particular, service

blueprinting — can support this service view and aid in innovating and transforming the student experience within higher education (Bitner et al., 2012). The *touchpoints* were analysed and using swim-lanes, all front and back stage operations were identified and the interoperability of the nature of the service was laid out, perhaps for the first time, in its entirety.

The *Discover and Define* phases of the project identified problems, opportunities and user needs, gathered evidence, brainstormed and conducted interviews with key stakeholders. Mystery shopping was used to assess the existing service as well as observation techniques and student diaries.

For the *Develop and Deliver* phase of the project, an Action Plan was produced, with 17 short and 10 medium to long-term actions. Owners were assigned to each action. Some examples of service improvement included a new campus map, improved signage, extended opening hours for key student services such as the Admissions and Fees offices, start-of-term induction for Heads of Department, a briefing session for department secretaries and a new induction process for part-time students. Student personas were created to help employees *walk through* the new service delivery. How-to videos, which received up to 10,000 hits, were created for all stages of the process and included in a QuickStart Guide for new students.

Culture @ CIT and the Employee Experience

Cultural transformation is a non-linear process and that culture will only change after people's actions are altered, after benefits have been observed for some period of time and after people have seen the connection with the change (Kotter, 1996). It was recognised that some CIT employees did not understand the purpose of the RECAP pilot project and simply did not understand the meaning of the term *process* and their involvement in this process. It is important for employees to understand why the change is happening but also to understand what that change will mean for them. If they understand that the change will ultimately improve the student experience but also impact their day-to-day jobs in a positive way, then they are more likely to embrace the change. Spending time to understand a culture can open up new innovation opportunities (Brown, 2009).

Process streamlines workflow so a team can be more effective. When clear and defined processes are in place everyone feels better and more confident in their work. The analogy of a *cog in a wheel* can be used to describe a person or thing, playing a small part in a large organisation or process. Service design has assisted CIT, from frontline employees to senior management, to understand that all the cogs in a service should be working in harmony and not in isolation as individual cogs. As providers of a service, employees at CIT need to understand their cog and all the other cogs that are part of one cohesive process, and the impact this has on the *customer* who should see a seamless series of touchpoints.

In her blog post, Gleneicki (2013) asks if employees are forgotten in the heat of customer experience design efforts, stating that what we fail to acknowledge is that the people behind the delivery of that customer experience must come first. Employee ownership and a sense of pride in their work will directly relate to the customer experience. If we fix the people and culture issues first, then customer experience will follow. In a similar post Gleneicki (2012) talks about the *right culture* and defines culture as a set of values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors shared by a group of people. It's *how we do things around here*. Culture should allow employees to be creative and come up with new ideas, it should

almost be part of their day-to-day job and it will empower them to do their jobs better, which in turn leads to a better customer experience.

According to Smith & McKeen (2003), culture is extremely hard to change and exerts its influence in different ways. Although employees and students were involved in a number of workshops to co-create service improvements for students, there was still a missing piece of the jigsaw; the employee journey needs to be mapped to understand the on-stage experience and how this directly relates to *customer* experience.

After reflecting on the pilot project, it was agreed to host a workshop with key front-line employees to brainstorm and ideate around the entire Admissions process and the current bottlenecks that are experienced by employees, on-stage and back-stage. As the organisation evolves, as new people come and go, as the experience improves, and as the culture shifts, the map will continue to evolve. The employee journey map facilitates a culture transformation (Kramp, 2012).

Conclusion

At CIT, each stage of the student lifecycle, from prospect to alumni, is treated as distinct separate interactions and the flow of the student and their experience through the lifecycle has not been considered from a service point of view until now. Each business unit works to provide a service to a student at that particular point in time without considering the overall *customer* experience. Many students are directed from one *helpdesk* to another and wander around campus in a confused state. Further research will endeavour to review the entire student lifecycle in segments, using a service design approach. It will attempt to change the student experience by delivering services that are more customer-focused. It will analyse the current *as-is* process, highlight the problems areas and inefficiencies and design a new *to-be* process, all the time focusing on the student experience. While the student is referred to as the customer, academic and administrative employees are also customers of these services and the next phase of the project will set out to provide a more streamlined and simplified experience for all. The focus will be on removing complexity and uncertainty from existing processes and procedures and using empathy to understand the experience of all involved.

CIT are currently working to formalise and define a Student Lifecycle to be used as a building block for refining internal processes and allowing us to continually make the services we deliver more student-centric.

RECAP was a six month pilot project at CIT which has proved that service design as an approach can help us to improve how we do business with regard to the services we provide to our *customers*. As a follow-on from the RECAP project, the next phase of the student lifecycle transformation will look at existing culture and *how we do things around here* at CIT. A parallel project will analyse the applicant stage of the lifecycle, with the focus on automating the application process for all prospective students and making their initial interaction with CIT a positive one.

It is important to mention that an inside-out design thinking approach needs to be embedded in the organisation but this will take some time. Confidence will come from small successes like the RECAP project.

The people and culture aspect of the initiative will require further research and effort. Service design iteratively moves from designing intangible experiences to designing the tangible

elements that enable the desired experiences to occur in a coherent way (Sangiorgi, 2009). During the RECAP project, the focus was on the student experience, while maybe not placing enough emphasis on the employee experience and the importance of those providing key services. An employee journey map needs to be developed over time and if the on-stage employee experiences can be improved iteratively then a better *customer* experience can be guaranteed in the future. Employees are the lynchpin of great customer experiences. Employees who are motivated, empowered and enabled with the information, tools and technology they need to deliver on the brand promise can make or break the customer experience (Hostyn, 2013).

The higher education sector needs to consider the deficit in an overall approach to the actual student lifecycle and the supporting of same. The current complexity of the processes is painful for all involved, in particular, front-line employees and students, and there is a lack of cross-functional communication. There is a need to understand the service before introducing products into the service. CIT needs new ideas and a fresh approach where previous attempts to re-design processes have failed.

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