



EIGHT KEY STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN DESIGN

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Abstract

Design professionals work often in multi-stakeholder environments. This research aims to understand how design practitioners deal with challenges resulting from stakeholder involvement in design activities. In this exploratory study, ten interviews were conducted with design practitioners from design agencies in the Netherlands. Eight key strategies were identified that are considered for successful stakeholder involvement. The findings can help the field of DTM to develop methods and tools that fit better with the needs of design professionals.

Keywords: design methodology, design practice, stakeholder involvement, design activities

1. Introduction

Due to the rise of the transformation economy, integrative product offerings like product-service systems and trends like open innovation, the number of stakeholder groups involved in design projects is continuously rising. Successful execution of such projects is heavily reliant on whether or not these stakeholders are able to collaborate and align their aims and activities (Mitchell et al., 1997). Design practitioners are seen as the active enablers of stakeholder collaboration (Meroni, 2008). Hence, because of the growing number of stakeholder groups being involved, challenges such as divergent goals or value conflicts arise more often (Waligo et al., 2013) and the design industry and the design practitioner's job are equally affected.

Many design methods and tools have been developed with the goal to support design practitioners in addressing these challenges. Yet, their uptake in practice is limited. Scholars like Tomiyama et al. (2009), Wallace (2011), Jägtap et al. (2014) and Daalhuizen (2014) see a poor understanding of the practitioner's actual needs in the development of new methods as one of the main causes for their limited transfer into practice.

This paper presents a semi-structured interview study aiming to explore the specific needs of design practitioners in facilitating collaboration in a multi-stakeholder environment. The purpose of this interview study is to investigate how designers in practice deal with the complexity of stakeholder involvement, derive insights into what might be 'good practice' and find the challenges practitioners struggle with. The presented insights provide a potential starting point for the development of new, relevant methods and tools supporting design practice more efficiently.

2. Stakeholder involvement

In the literature, the terms 'stakeholder involvement', 'stakeholder participation' (Pretty, 1995) 'stakeholder engagement' (Sequeira and Warner, 2007; Le Riche and Hoy, 2014) and 'stakeholder management' (Freeman and McVea, 2001) are typically used interchangeably. The goal of stakeholder involvement for designers is to create a 'common understanding' and reduce the 'cognitive distance'

during solution exploration (Badke-Schaub et al., 2011). Waligo et al. define stakeholder involvement as 'how stakeholders become active or inactive in developmental initiatives' (Waligo et al., 2013, p. 2). They stress the magnitude of which a business strategy's success is dependent on activating stakeholder cooperation. Similarly, Pretty (1995) argues for a transformation from the 'passive' and 'consultative' types of participation in projects into the 'interactive' type of participation as more valuable for a company. Such a shift will create trust, agreement, positive long-term effect on people, better results and a more effective project.

The overarching topic of stakeholder management is seen as managing the stakeholders throughout the whole process of collaboration. This includes *identification* (identifying specific stakeholders and the relative significance of these), *selection* (selecting the relevant stakeholders to work with), *involvement*, *alignment* (making sure stakeholder's values, interests and goals are in line) and *after-care* (informing and keeping relationships with stakeholders after a project has finished (Singh, 2002; Ackermann and Eden, 2011; Waligo et al., 2013). Stakeholder involvement and the identification and selection of stakeholder groups are closely related. Several stakeholder identification and selection models have been described in the managerial literature (e.g. Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997; Vos and Achterkamp, 2006; Mainardes et al., 2012). These models mostly focus on the active/passive participation, the influence on decision making and how outcomes are influenced by stakeholder groups. Yet, due to the increasing importance of co-creation and two-way communication, the need to select stakeholders who are able to seamlessly collaborate with one other rose (Kazadi et al., 2016). Technical competencies, such as expertise in one area, often are no longer enough to become a contributing stakeholder. Motivations, social capabilities and goals of the different stakeholders have an effect on the involvement of a new stakeholder into a project (Kazadi et al. 2016). McKinsey (2013) identified a strong correlation between the in-depth profiling of stakeholders and success at engaging with them. Here strategic designers can have a vital contribution (Calabretta and Gemser, 2015) as they act as active enablers of this stakeholder collaboration (Meroni, 2008).

Badke-Schaub et al. (2011) mention multiple challenges in design practice concerning stakeholder involvement. They state that designers experience stakeholder involvement as a non-routine situation, where extra support might be needed. According to them, designers repeatedly reported on situations whilst working and communicating with multiple stakeholders (with different backgrounds and goals) to cause problems in the design project due to the large cognitive distance between their mental models. This is to say, they understood the design problem in very different ways or had divergent perceptions of what is truly required to successfully finalise the task at hand.

In order to address this demand this research aims to obtain a deeper understanding of how design professionals involve different stakeholder groups successfully in practice and what their needs and challenges might be. Based on these insights, good practice as well as possible barriers and enablers for involving stakeholders are identified. Through this, it is aspired to contribute to the discourse in the research community on what specifically will be required going forward, in order to develop new and relevant methods and tools that can support design professionals in managing stakeholder involvement.

3. Study design

The main question that this research aims to answer is: *How do designers in practice deal with the complexity of stakeholder groups involvement in design activities?*

Relevant sub-questions are:

- Which approaches do design agencies use to identify and choose stakeholder groups? To what extent do design professionals influence this?
- What kind of approaches, methods and tools do design professionals use for stakeholder groups involvement in design activities?

In the current research with "stakeholder groups" is referred to: Parties outside the design agency (e.g. partner companies of the design agency, end-users of the project outcome, clients, non-profit organizations, governmental departments) that are actively involved in the design activities to achieve an outcome that is desired for either the external parties, end-user and/or the design agency.

3.1. Research methodology

The methodological approach used in the presented paper follows the steps of ‘conventional content analysis’ (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This approach is often used when limited prior research is available, as it is the case here. Since the research questions deal with the complex topic of stakeholder involvement and request design professionals to anticipate future trends, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. To structure the interview, an interview guide was generated covering the following topic and respective sub-topic areas:

1. Company business (e.g., main services, employees, company structure)
2. Personal details (e.g., experience, job responsibilities, education background)
3. Project example (e.g., duration, roles, stakeholder groups involved, stakeholder selection, organisation of design activities)
4. Future (e.g., changes over years, stakeholder involvement in future in 5 years, preparation for this future)

To obtain rich data and detailed answers, the interview started with closed knowledge related questions about the agency and moved to personal experience and opinion related questions. After this, the interview would dive into a specific previous project that involved multiple stakeholder groups. Discussing the past made it easier for the interviewee to elaborate on activities and experiences. This built a bridge to the last, more difficult, topic of future needs.

A pilot interview was performed with a design practitioner to make sure that all questions could be answered appropriately and make changes wherever necessary. A total of ten interviews were executed over a period of five weeks. Nine out of ten interviews were conducted in person, one was conducted through Skype. Interviews lasted between 55 and 90 minutes with an average of 75 minutes. All participants were working mainly in the Netherlands with Dutch as their native language; therefore, the interviews were conducted in Dutch. All interviews were audio recorded and conducted by the same two interviewers of whom one would ask questions and the other would take notes and ask additional questions whenever considered necessary. In addition, paper and pen were provided which some interviewees used to sketch stakeholders and activities. Finally, pictures were taken of physical artefacts in the offices that could influence the stakeholder involvement (e.g. workshop rooms).

3.2. Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and separately coded inductively (see Patton, 2002) by both researchers. Codes were created as they emerged from the data and gradually refined. Next, all codes were discussed between the researchers until alignment was reached, leading to a final list of codes. They were clustered into four main topic areas: ‘stakeholder involvement’, ‘stakeholder identification’, ‘stakeholder selection’ and ‘future of stakeholder involvement’. As the sample size of this exploratory research is limited, no generalised statements can be made on the findings. This method is also limited to building a concept or model and not a theory (Lindkvist, 1981).

3.3. Interview sampling

In the current sample design agencies have been chosen as they work with many different stakeholders on project basis. This makes their perspective relevant and insightful to research. All participants were employees at either small (<30), medium (50-500) or large (>500) design agencies. Six agencies had offices in multiple countries, the remaining four agencies had offices in the Netherlands only. The design agencies served clients in industries such as mobility, healthcare, insurance, governmental, financial, fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) and telecom. Four companies focused on service design, three on digital solutions, one on strategy and branding, one on digital services and one on internal innovation. The design professionals had an average of 13 years of experience with a minimum of 5 years and a maximum of 25 years. Seven interviewees hold a Master (n=4) or Bachelor (n=3) degrees in industrial design. One participant has a Master degree in computer science, one participant holds a Bachelor degree in digital media and one in architecture. Six of the interviewees fulfilled the role of either (co-)founder or partner of the agency. Two of the interviewees fulfilled a more managerial role. One of the participants is in charge of establishing an internal innovation mind-set. See Table 1 for an overview.

Table 1. Overview of participants information

#	Age	Years of experience	Role	Educational background	Company size	#of country localisations	Market area
1	40-50	20	Co-founder	BSc. Product design	<30	1	Service design
2	30-35	10	Co-founder	MSc. Industrial design	<30	1	Service design
3	30-35	9	Senior service designer	MSc. Industrial design	50-500	7	Service design
4	40-50	25	Founder	BSc. Industrial design	<30	4	Digital solutions
5	30-35	13	Managing consultant	BSc. Architecture	>500	6	Digital services
6	50-60	20	Co-founder	BSc. Industrial design	<30	1	Service design
7	40-50	10	Innovator	MSc. Industrial design	>500	150	Internal innovation
8	30-35	12	Co-founder	BSc. Digital media	50-500	1	Digital solutions
9	30-35	5	Strategist	MSc. Industrial design	<30	1	Strategy and branding
10	40-50	6	Partner	MSc. Computer Science	50-500	1	Digital solutions

The duration of the discussed design projects was between 2 months and 4 years. Most of the design professionals mentioned that projects lasted between 3-4 months. The deliverable of the projects varied between digital platforms, new service propositions, branding strategy, user insights and internal innovation. In all of the projects different departments of the clients' company were involved. Next to this, six projects involved partner companies and in seven projects end users were involved in the project. Two projects involved additional experts to provide inspiration or expertise.

4. Findings

In this research, we focus on the identification, selection and involvement of stakeholders. Eight key strategies for stakeholder involvement in design activities and challenges have been identified.

4.1. Identification and selection of stakeholders

Identification of participating stakeholders is typically carried out by the client or via the client. For the selection of end-users and additional experts during co-creation sessions either the company, design professional, or a recruitment agency was in charge. Four participants stated that new stakeholders were identified through the client's network. These were both internal stakeholders as well as partner companies. Participants mentioned that new stakeholders were discovered through interviews with already involved stakeholders, by exploring the environment for likely stakeholders (e.g. for end-users) or by organising big kick-off events where many potential stakeholders would join (e.g. people or departments who could add value later in the process to achieve the desired results in a project). One of the participants described stakeholder mapping as a more subconscious act, while others stated to find value in making it an explicit act early in the process. It was mentioned repeatedly though that not all stakeholders *can* be known upfront and identifying additional stakeholders is a continuous process throughout the project.

The **selection** of stakeholder groups was similarly described to be performed either by the client or in collaboration with the client. Most projects were executed by a core project team of stakeholders with further stakeholder groups joining as per on-demand basis. The core team usually consists of one or a

few members from the design agency and one or a few client representatives. Whenever interviewees were part of the selection of stakeholders, one or more of the following aspects were taken in mind (from most recurring to least recurring answer):

- What internal company support and impact can this stakeholder bring? (3)
- What knowledge can this stakeholder bring? (3)
- What is the role of the stakeholder? (2)
- When will the stakeholder be necessary in the process? (2)
- Is this stakeholder needed to implement the final concept? (2)
- Does the stakeholder have the right innovation mind-set? (1)

Tools that were used to support the selection of stakeholders were stakeholder mapping with sticky notes and matrices with criteria (decision power vs knowledge). Subsequently, interviewees usually start a dialogue with identified stakeholders pertaining to whether or not to involve them in a project.

The interviewees experienced multiple challenges when not being involved in the selection process. For instance, not the most capable people would be chosen or that selected people were missing intrinsic motivation to advocate the project to their companies. Although one participant mentioned that more stakeholders will create more internal support, multiple interviewees stated that involving too many stakeholders generates a lot of unwanted 'noise' in the project, leading to slower decision making and execution. Interviewees also expressed that ambiguity about allocated roles can make decisions more difficult. Conversely, having the right stakeholders with the right decision power at the right moment in the process was unanimously described to lead to a more effective process.

4.2. Types and roles in stakeholder involvement

Two main types of involvement were expressed in the interviews. On the one hand, continuous involvement during the whole project, on the other hand, involvement of stakeholders on a more 'on-demand' basis, for example for a specific workshop or similar activities. In the proposed key strategies below, the differences in approaches, methods and tools for both these scenarios are described.

It was apparent from the data that four of the design agencies strive for a 'partner' relationship with the stakeholders to move away from having only an executing role. Some strive for an 'ambassador' relationship with one of the employees on the client's side being responsible for creating internal support. Within a project there could be different relationships with different stakeholder groups, one not excluding the other. Overall, three distinct relationship types became apparent:

- *Partner relationship*: a relationship in which the stakeholder groups become a part of the design process, understand it and actively participate in it together with the design agency.
- *Ambassador relationship*: one or more stakeholder groups spread the current project at a (client's) company internally in order to find more support for the project, create more impact and involve desired stakeholder groups (e.g. with more decision power or knowledge) when required.
- *Indirect involvement*: stakeholder groups are not actively needed at certain moments in the project but *could* be needed in the future or *were* needed in the past. This type of involvement is used for stakeholders who want to be part of the project but do not actively add value (i.e. taking a role where they like to be informed rather than actively participate).

4.3. Complexity and use of tools and methods

Interestingly, most of the design companies did not experience a tremendous rise of complexity in stakeholder involvement, in spite of more stakeholders being involved in general. One design agency, however, that went through a change from focusing on products to digital services and strategy consulting, clearly experienced stakeholder involvement to have become significantly more complex. This was also due to a change towards more agile design processes.

The research shows that one of the most often performed activities are workshops, during which a variety of methods and tools is used (see Figure 1). These involved existing, self-made or just post-it methods and tools. Remarkably, the customer journey canvas and service blueprint are used as means of communication to the stakeholders.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT								
Key strategies for stakeholder involvement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Manage expectations	Create an understanding of the design process	Create a sense of urgency	Create a high energy level	Create trust in the design professional	Translate insights for stakeholder contact	Create a rhythm in stakeholder contact	Make stakeholders feel valued
Methods, tools and approaches								
During the whole design process	Scrum Training days Value proposition canvas Service design Blueprint Issue tracker Co-creating proposals	Scrum Customer journey Service design kick-off Training days Service design Blueprint Shortening story Creative sessions	Persona's Video Creative sessions Prioritizing exercises	Inspiring presentation Creative session How might we questions	Personal 1:1 contact with stakeholder Paper/digital prototyping Creative sessions Presentation with previous work	Prioritizing sessions Creative sessions Customer journey Training days Video Persona's Flipping the case	Personal 1:1 contact with client (e.g. Whatsapp) Centralizing contact Scrum Creative sessions On-site project workspace Physical project awareness (4.0m cust. journey)	Prioritizing sessions Training days Creative sessions Interviews in clients context
	During the design activity itself	Prioritizing sessions Presentation (what is going to happen and who is needed) Customer journey Association exercises	Prioritizing sessions Just post-its Mind-maps	Just post-its Setting the stage workshop	Flipping the case Association exercises Stuffed animals Timers Remove distractions Icebreakers Right space Healthy food	Just post-its Association exercises How might we questions Mind-maps	Simplifying insights during a workshop Simplify design exercises	Empathize with scenario (E.g. Elevator) Braindumps Just post-its

Figure 1. Methods and tools that design professionals use to enable the key strategies for successful stakeholder involvement

4.4. Eight key strategies for stakeholder involvement in design activities

Eight key strategies (KS) were derived from the interviewees' experiences to lead to successful stakeholder involvement. They are presented in Figure 2 and explained in the following.

KS1: Managing expectations

Managing expectations of stakeholder groups is widely used by the design agencies to foster a successful stakeholder involvement, both in workshops as well as during the whole project overall. Managing the expectations refers to clearly informing stakeholder groups upfront about why and when they are needed in the design process and creating a (visual) representation (e.g. service blueprint) to create a mutual understanding between all involved parties pertaining to the planned activities. Additionally, creating a shared goal and vision can create a better partnership and positively influence stakeholder involvement in the long-run. The interviewed design agencies apply this strategy for the purpose of working more efficiently and with a positive attitude, whilst keeping the shared goal in mind.

KS2: Create an understanding of the design process

Design professionals seem to improve the involvement of stakeholders by creating an understanding of the design process among them. The design process and empathy for end users are often new for the different stakeholder groups. Therefore, it is important to explain why certain steps and decisions are made. This is achieved by simplifying the design process or taking the stakeholders along the prototype testing (e.g. visualising the process or customer journey workshops). Thereby uncertainties about the future process and collaboration are reduced, which allows to involve them more seamlessly in the further design process.

KS3: Create a sense of urgency

Several participants stated that creating a sense of urgency works in favour of stakeholder involvement. This can be realised by making stakeholder groups actively participate in the design process instead of

passively listening, e.g. creating stakeholder maps and customer journeys as a *joint* effort rather than individually by a few people at a time. Another way is organising a so called 'setting-the-stage' workshop with the project initiators from the client's side, in which the urgency and stakes of the project can be more clearly communicated to all other stakeholders.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT								
Key strategies for stakeholder involvement	KS1 1,3,4,5,6,7,9,10 Manage expectations	KS2 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 Create an understanding of the design process	KS3 6,8 Create a sense of urgency	KS4 1,2,3,4,6,7,9 Create a high energy level	KS5 2,3,4,8,9,10 Create trust in the design professional	KS6 1,2,3,6,7,9 Translate insights for stakeholder contact	KS7 1,4,5,8,9,10 Create a rhythm in stakeholder contact	KS8 1,3,5,6,7,8 Make stakeholders feel valued
How these strategies are executed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly discuss expectations Make clear agreements through conversations, co-creation proposal, expectation management Issue tracker Workshops as Service design jam Align with the vision/goal of the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creative exercises Taking new stakeholders through the performed process Simplifying process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - language - methods - problem Visualize to simplify 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshop "setting the stage" Stimulate active participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate between presenting and active exercises Show enthusiasm and optimism Inspire Remove distractions Good start: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction workshop - Ice-breakers - Party/Event Create workshop spaces Create sense of ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show expertise Through conversations Shared mission Listen Adjust process to wishes 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain the impact of their working the outcome Interview in their context Show respect for their knowledge Establish equality Listen to the stakeholders Give attention Be curious
	1,3,4,9 Design own tools	1,3,7 Stimulate intrinsic motivation	6,8 Stimulate intrinsic motivation	1,3,4,5,6,7,9 Show client the value of the designer	2,3,4,8 Show client the value of the designer	1,2,3,5,7,9,10 Engage personally	1,4,5,8,9,10 Engage personally	1,3,5,8,10 Centralize contact

Figure 2. Key strategies for successful stakeholder involvement. Numbers represent the respective interviewees

KS4: Create a high level of excitement

The excitement level is directly related to the involvement of the stakeholder groups and a majority of interviewees stated they would consciously try to influence these levels during a workshop or a whole project. The interviewees mention that a good energy is created by intrinsic motivated people that take a lead in active involvement. Also, the start of a project/workshop day is important for the involvement later on (e.g. clear instructions, ice breaker exercises, toys or parties). To keep this level high a change in the level of interactions (presenting vs active exercises) and taking away distractions (mobile phones) is advised. To do so, they would try to spread enthusiastic and optimistic energy. Foremost, this starts with having an enthusiastic mind-set themselves. Other mechanisms include a change of location, inspiring speakers, et cetera. Also avoiding sugar highs was mentioned as a means to keep a positive spirit by some of the interviewees. Creative workshops/sessions were indicated to usually engage stakeholder groups particularly quickly, leading to effective involvement.

KS5: Create trust in the design professional

Several participants clearly stressed that the earlier a good level of trust is established between the agency and all relevant stakeholder groups, the better, and the more effective the stakeholder involvement. Interviewees mention the reason for this to help calm down the client, as deliverables and processes are often undefined. Trust is achieved by explicitly showing previous experience, seeking for a 1:1 personal relationship and expressing a shared mission between the stakeholders and the agency.

KS6: Translate insights for stakeholder groups

The data shows that participants determine a communication strategy and translate insights into a language that fits the stakeholder groups, to reach a right level of understanding and a desired involvement. To find out what 'language' is preferred, design professionals engage in personal contact

with the stakeholders through a variety of channels. Raw data, such as workshop results, are often converged into main insights and sometimes translated into a short presentation with numbers and visuals. Four agencies even design their own tools specifically set out to fit the personal language or to communicate complex insights in a less time consuming and real-time manner (e.g. videos insights).

KS7: Create a high frequency in stakeholder contacts

Establishing successful stakeholder involvement has also been achieved by consciously creating a high frequency in the amount of project related contact between the different stakeholder groups, particularly when groups are physically detached (e.g. even by sharing insights through WhatsApp groups). This strategy is successfully applied by several agencies to maintain an active involvement of stakeholders when no face-to-face meetings are taking place. Simple strategies like creating a board game to establish regular feedback moments were described to ensure a continuation of stakeholder collaboration after the design agency would leave.

KS8: Make stakeholders feel valued

Participants frequently mentioned that stakeholders really appreciate it when their input is noticeably valued. This leads to them taking ownership of the project, becoming proud of the results and becoming an internal ambassador for the outcome (as described above). Eventually, this improves the overall stakeholder involvement. Practitioners implement this strategy by letting the stakeholder groups get to the end results themselves (e.g. simplified customer journey maps), taking the time to listen, adopting an attitude of curiosity and appreciation (e.g. interview in natural context of stakeholder) and creating a sense of equality between stakeholder groups.

4.5. Challenges in stakeholder involvement in design activities

Besides elements that influence stakeholder involvement positively, there are also challenges that designers experience as a negative influence. This includes budget, time limit, target constraints from the client side, negative emotions of the stakeholder groups and the task of continuously involving stakeholders, even when they are not physically present, as the main challenges. Additionally, the structure at the stakeholder's organisation, difficult and time-consuming stakeholder tools, the clash between internal design teams and the high amount of energy that is needed for the involvement were mentioned by a few design practitioners. Next to this, the perception that a project receives within the client's organisation is mentioned as something that can have a negative influence on the willingness of a stakeholder to become involved.

5. Discussion

As the literature review already suggested, there is a gap in the transfer of methods and tools between academia and design practice (Wallace, 2011). Interviewees confirmed that many tools from academia are seen as too time consuming or difficult for (non-)designers to understand, which is in line with earlier research (Wallace, 2011; Eisenbart and Kleinsmann, 2017). Although literature strongly recommends co-creation with end-users to ensure outcomes to match target users' needs, the participants in this research unanimously reported end-users to be mainly involved for testing, validation or early exploration of needs. The stakeholder groups that were mainly mentioned during the study concerned internal client departments or partner companies.

5.1. Comparing the key strategies to existing literature

The presented research did not necessarily establish entirely new strategies for successful stakeholder involvement. Key elements have been previously mentioned, for instance, by Sanders and Stappers (2012) or Richardson (2010) in relation to successful design project execution in general. The importance of managing expectations specifically is discussed also by Gericke and Maier (2011) pertaining to ensuring acceptance of design outcomes. Similarly, making stakeholders feel valued has been discussed repeatedly as valuable to ensure a positive mind-set and atmosphere for communication

between various types of designers, but also non-designers, for instance during co-creation sessions (see e.g. Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010). Finally, the mentioned alignment in understanding the process to be used, design vision and overall goal of a project at hand is coherent with the recommendations by Badke-Schaub et al. (2011) discussed earlier. However, as far as the researchers know, the specific link between stakeholder involvement specifically and the proposed eight strategies has not been made thus far. This also holds true for most of the mentioned methods, tools and approaches mentioned in this study. The obtained insights shed new light on a relevant challenge in design and an overview of the aspects that may positively influence stakeholder involvement.

Both literature and design practice suggest a rising relevance of stakeholder involvement, although most of the design practitioners did not necessarily experience it to have become decisively more complex in the recent past. Interviewees mentioned intense stakeholder management to have always been a substantial part of their career. In fact, they seem to try to be pro-active in this matter by stimulating frequent interactions themselves. In the realm of co-creation, scholars like Calabretta and Gemser (2015) and Ramaswamy et al. (2010) have called for frequent interactions as an imperative element for design success. The presented research uncovered that it is also relevant for stakeholder involvement over the entire duration of a project and highlighted simple strategies on how to attain it. Going beyond frequent exchange of expertise, regular moments of involvement are also a powerful means to stir and maintain high levels of intrinsic motivation with the relevant stakeholders (similarly suggested by Kazadi et al. 2013).

5.2. Implications

5.2.1. *Different types of stakeholder involvement*

The study showed that stakeholder involvement takes different forms in design practice, varying between, short-time involvement (for instance, during a one-day workshop) to long-term involvement in design activities throughout the whole (design) project. Additionally, the data reflected the desire to involve two types of indirect stakeholder: stakeholders that do not have an active role in the design process but should be informed about it on a regular basis (e.g. they might be needed at specific points later in the process) and strategic stakeholders who are not directly related to the project, but can be of value to the design agency and the impact of the project. How to adapt the mechanisms used to tender for each type of stakeholder specifically might be the topic of future research.

5.2.2. *Human traits for stakeholder involvement*

Human traits seem to rise in relevance for good stakeholder involvement in design practice. Intrinsically motivated, positively minded people are perceived by the interviewees as better stakeholders, which is not surprising. Feelings such as trust in the designer, uncertainty of clients, the creation of excitement and sense of urgency act on a psychological level. In line with Kristensson et al. (2008), who mention intrinsic motivation as a strategy for involving customers in co-creation, future research should look into developing methods and tools that help stimulate these beneficial human traits for design practitioners to use in order to manage stakeholders effectively.

5.2.3. *Focus on process*

A couple of insights from the research might impact the development of new methods and tools on a more abstract level. Interviewees showed the tendency to use tools not for creating better outcomes as such, but rather to improve the process (e.g. making people talk to each other, creating empathy and gaining insights). Since design professionals are becoming facilitators, they try to find a shared language (compare Sanders and Stappers, 2012), or even learn the language of their stakeholders, in order to level with and connect with the increasingly cross-disciplinary stakeholder groups. For these reasons, this paper proposes that future research should look into method and tool development in a cross-disciplinary setting. Incorporating knowledge from psychology and sociology, even more than it is already happening, might increase the usability and applicability of new support for design professionals and therefore be a step closer to closing the gap between academia and practice.

5.2.4. For design practitioners

The interviewees suggest that involvement of design professionals in the identification and selection of stakeholders, leads to a positive involvement later in the project. Design professionals seem to know quite well what properties a stakeholder should have to make both the involvement and project more successful. The eight proposed key strategies could be used as a guideline for design professionals and agencies to check what strategies are already in place and what aspects could still be implemented. Moreover, they might be useful as basic educational material for novice designers. It can provide information of how to consciously start involving stakeholders in design activities, particularly for novices who are still gathering experience in how to do so successfully.

5.3. Limitations

The limited sample size and exploratory nature of this research makes it impossible to make generalised comments about participants outside the sample. Also, the participating design professionals executed mainly service/digital design projects. In future research it might therefore be relevant to investigate specific design processes (e.g. product-service design) or industries (e.g. energy sector) that are known for their many involved stakeholders. Due to the freedom of a semi-structured interview not all questions were addressed with all interviewees. Several insightful comments made by interviewees could therefore not be compared across the sample. The researchers acknowledge that the key strategy identification is an unexplored area, some assumptions have been made to maintain clarity. Each of the key insights should therefore be revisited through extra research, to substantiate the findings.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents a semi-structured interview study with design practitioners from the Netherlands, exploring strategies for successful involvement of different types of stakeholder in design processes. In the recent past, companies have been faced with a steady increase of different stakeholder groups to become involved in their design projects. Design practitioners are in an ideal position to take the role of an integrator dealing with stakeholders along the process. In fact, interviewees in the presented study seemed eager to actively involve more and more relevant stakeholder groups in their design processes, in order to leverage on diverse expertise in generating outcomes. Although most of the design practitioners that participated in the study did not necessarily perceived stakeholder involvement consciously as becoming more complex, new challenges were reported to arise in this landscape. According to the interviewed design practitioners, the support from design methods and tools in this area is still quite limited. This paper sheds light on eight key strategies that the interviewees currently use in their design activities to positively impact stakeholder involvement: manage expectations, create an understanding of the design process, create a sense of urgency, create a high energy level, create trust in the design professional, translate insights for stakeholder contact, create a rhythm in stakeholder contact and make stakeholders feel valued.

Identification and selection of stakeholders seem to have an impact on the further involvement of the stakeholders and design practitioners strive to have a bigger say in this. Three different archetypical types of stakeholder relationship were found in this research, i.e. *partner*, *ambassador* and *indirect involvement*, of which the partner relationship is strived for the most by the interviewees. Therein, stakeholders function more as an extended part of the design team and become constructively involved in the project.

Due to design methods not only being used by design practitioners, but also by the other stakeholders involved in the project, and the different uses of methods (e.g. not for the outcome but for process), the reasons behind using the method are rather varied in the researched context. Additionally, human traits seem to be increasingly important for successful stakeholder involvement. Therefore, this paper proposes a joint efforts in the creation of tools and methods that do not only support design practitioners, but also the other stakeholders involved, for a successful stakeholder collaboration. A cross-disciplinary creation of design methodologies might support this and be a step closer in closing the gap between academia and practice, resolving the challenges in the new emerging landscape.

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