

Discovery: the first phase in any agile development project

Many organisations, including much of the UK public sector, are adopting agile methods to transform and accelerate digital service delivery. Amrit Virdi, one of Civica's UX Designers, shares her insights into the discovery phase of agile delivery, gained from projects she's carried out at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Discovery is the critical first phase in agile service delivery. It's when you gain an understanding of the problem or issue that needs to be solved, before committing to building a service.

The first step is to define that problem or issue — what it is that the organisation wants to change or make happen. If you're presented with a pre-defined solution that you're expected to build, you'll need to reframe it as a problem to be solved. The better you define the problem, the better the resulting service will be (assuming development goes ahead).

During the discovery phase you'll learn about users, what they want to achieve, and what they're struggling with at the moment, and you'll identify opportunities to improve things.

You'll also need to ensure you understand any constraints around making changes to how the service is currently delivered or operated.

Taken together, the discovery outcomes will help you work out whether the proposed service development is viable. If it is, the project can then move to the next phase — alpha — for prototyping.

What techniques are used in discovery?

A number of techniques are useful in discovery for learning about users and their needs. As well as hearing about the needs that users identify for themselves, the discovery phase often uncovers issues that were previously unrecognised, or that users felt unable to raise.

In the discoveries I've conducted at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, I've used combinations of the following.

User interviews: Interviews with a range of users to establish their roles, how they interact with the current service or process, and their challenges. Interviews also uncover users' goals in relation to their own roles, tasks and use of the platform.

Contextual enquiries: Interviews with users in the context of their work — sitting with them while they perform real tasks using the current service or process. This involves asking questions to understand, for example, why they need certain functionality, or what usability issues they encounter.

UX mapping workshop: Bringing together users who interact with the service or process at different stages, to allow them to discuss and map out their tasks and challenges.

Heuristic evaluation and accessibility review: Review of the current system or process against recognised usability principles to identify opportunities for improvement; and an accessibility review of the existing service against WCAG 2.1 guidelines.

What are the outputs from discovery?

Based on the user findings during discovery, the organisation can expect to receive some or all of these outputs.

User personas: Functional personas characterising the key users of the service. These make it possible to picture users, their day-to-day tasks, and the challenges they face.

User journeys: Current (as-is) journeys identifying users' pain points and usability issues with the current service or process; and proposed (to-be) journeys that show how the user experience could be improved.

User needs and stories: Based on interviews with users and analysis of the existing service or process, user needs and stories are generally categorised by user type, area and theme.

Wireframes: Rapidly designed representations or prototypes that explore what a solution to the problem uncovered during discovery might look like.

Discovery report: Summary of all the insights gathered during discovery, and recommendations for future phases.

Business benefits and outcomes

Discovery helps to better define the vision and scope for the future development phases of a digital service, while reducing the risk of project overspend and overrun.

If you have multiple service developments in plan, discovery outputs will help you understand how to prioritise them according to factors such as user need and development cost.

On occasion, discovery will even reveal that not moving forward with a new service development is the best decision — for example, it may not be cost effective to do so; or the identified need may be met by an alternative solution.

To find out more about Civica's UX Designers and our discovery services, please do get in touch with:

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