Design Thinking Transformation

Situation

After many years as an HCM market leader, the SAP SuccessFactors product suite was in need of a modern, accessible, and more cohesive user experience. The comprehensive product suite including recruiting, onboarding, performance management, learning, payroll, time, and compensation had been assembled through acquisitions with tech debt building over time. Users encountered varying experiences across modules, impacting usability and adoption rates. The organization recognized the need for a fundamental transformation to align the user experience with consumer-grade standards that modern users expected.. As a Senior UX Program Manager, I established a UX Program Management function for the first time at SuccessFactors. This was needed to drive the Design Thinking Transformation so the product organization could execute the strategy of reimagining user experience across the entire product suite. I developed and led all operational functions including establishing processes, tools, guidelines, documentation, training, support, and KPIs.

Key challenges included:
- Fragmented user interfaces across different modules
- Inconsistent design patterns throughout the suite
- Legacy complexities from acquisitions and prior development
- Siloed approach to product development
- Gap between user expectations and current experience

Tasks

The organization needed to:
- Implement a comprehensive design thinking framework across the UX organization
- Create a unified, modern user experience across all product modules
- Establish direct channels for customer feedback and engagement
- Develop new processes for cross-functional collaboration
- Transform the product suite to reflect human-centric design principles
- Build a sustainable framework for continuous improvement
- Foster a culture of innovation and user-centered design

Actions

Strategic Planning and Customer Engagement
- Established a design advisors group comprising over 200 executives and IT managers

- Organized customer workshops, including a major kickoff event in New York City
- Implemented regular feedback channels for continuous customer insight
- Created frameworks for translating customer feedback into actionable improvements

Design Thinking Implementation

- Trained designers, researchers, writers, and strategists in design thinking methodologies
- Developed a flexible product development lifecycle framework
- Introduced rapid prototyping and iterative refinement processes
- Established empathy-driven design practices across teams

Cross-Functional Integration

- Integrated product managers and engineers into the design thinking process
- Created multiple communication channels for maintaining alignment
- Conducted large team meetings and regional presentations
- Distributed regular email newsletters
- Provided one-on-one coaching sessions

Tools and Process Optimization

- Deployed MURAL for collaborative design thinking workshops
- Designed and built a Smartsheet implementation, later transitioning to JIRA for improved visibility
- Implemented Aha! for strategic roadmap planning
- Created integrated workflows across UX, product, and engineering teams

Results

The design thinking transformation delivered substantial improvements across multiple areas:

Product Experience

- Successfully transformed the product to enable a market transformation from HCM to HXM (Human Experience Management)
- Achieved consistency in design patterns across the product suite
- Improved accessibility and usability throughout all modules
- Created a new homepage delivering personalized, relevant content
- Modernized key product areas including goals and performance management

Organizational Impact

- Established a culture of continuous customer and user engagement
- Improved cross-functional collaboration and alignment
- Created sustainable frameworks for ongoing innovation

- Built strong customer relationships through regular engagement
- Developed more efficient feedback and implementation cycles

Strategic Outcomes

- Positioned the platform for long-term growth and innovation
- Increased customer satisfaction through improved user experience
- Created a foundation for continuous refinement and improvement
- Aligned product development with authentic user needs
- Enhanced the platform's competitive position in the market

Conclusion

The design thinking transformation at SAP SuccessFactors demonstrates how a systematic approach to user-centered design can revolutionize a complex product suite. By establishing robust customer engagement channels, implementing comprehensive design thinking methodologies, and fostering cross-functional collaboration, the organization successfully addressed long-standing challenges of fragmentation and inconsistency. The transformation not only improved the immediate user experience but also established a sustainable foundation for ongoing innovation and improvement.

This case study illustrates that successful product transformation requires a holistic approach that combines user empathy, strategic vision, and operational excellence. The lessons learned continue to inform product development and innovation strategies at SAP SuccessFactors, ensuring the platform remains aligned with evolving user needs and expectations.