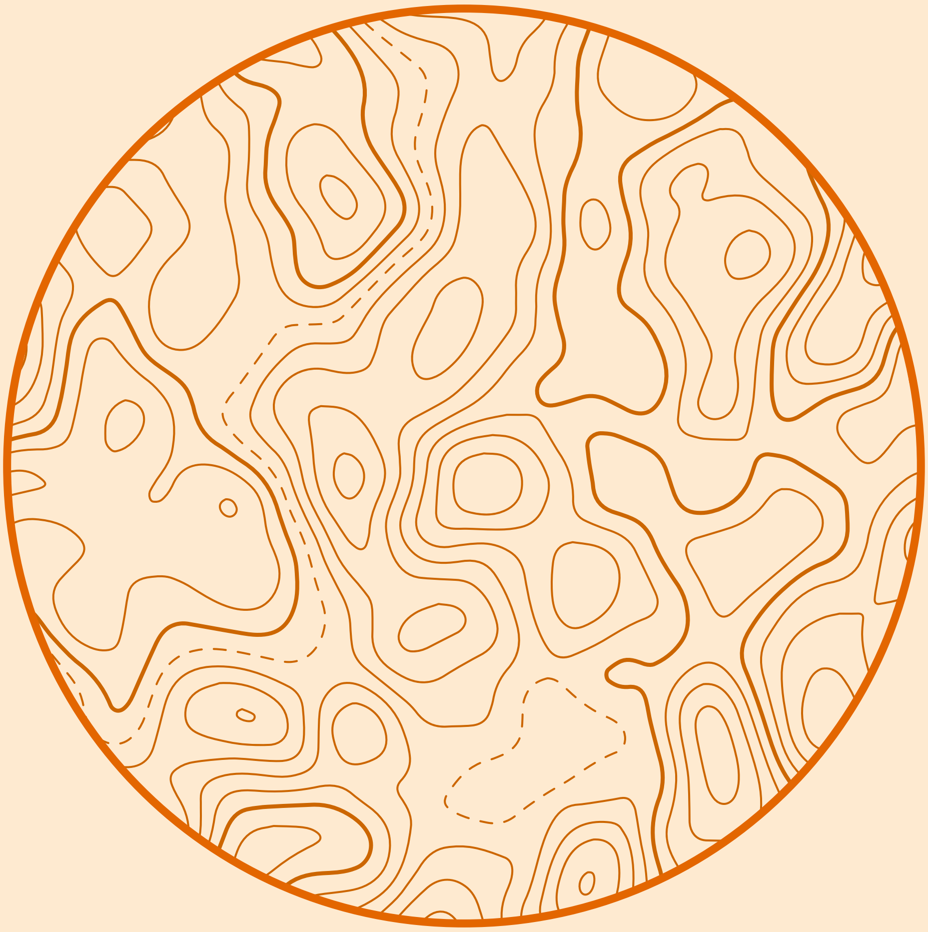
12 Conversations on Project Management for Positive Impact



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01.
Marta San Román
Communications
Specialist
at Greenpeace

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE WORK OF GREENPEACE?

Greenpeace is a project-oriented international organisation that, first of all, defines itself as environmental and pacifist; so its objective is to protect bio-diversity, and stop climate change, or at least, to mitigate its consequences. One of its signs of identity is that it's an organisation that uses non-violent direct action, so it's also a direct action organisation – and another interesting thing is that we're a fully independent body, both in terms of economics and politics, meaning that we don't accept any donations from governments or businesses. We're entirely sustained by the support from different members from all around the world, and this is essential for the kind of work that Greenpeace does.

Another key characteristic of Greenpeace is that it's a very visual-oriented, content-oriented organisation. From the get-go, Greenpeace was formed by a group of journalists, and had video cameras at hand. It's an organisation that places a big emphasis on communicating everything that it does and sees, because it understands that, in order to seek change and denounce abuse, in order to affect legislation and change mindsets, communication is essential.

(...) What Greenpeace wants, most of all, is to achieve change – and that is only accomplished by attacking the root of the problem. Some organisations may set up goals in terms of planting new trees, but we'd be more concerned with achieving some legal framework that forbids the trees that already exist from being chopped down. It's a question of depth – we don't strive to put band-aids on top of current problems, we want to provoke change, to impact the way in which we think of and act on the environment. We work to change laws.

"WHAT GREENPEACE WANTS, MOST OF ALL, IS TO ACHIEVE CHANGE –

– AND THAT IS ONLY ACCOMPLISHED BY ATTACKING THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM"

HOW DOES GREENPEACE DECIDE WHICH PROJECTS AND GOALS TO FOCUS ON?

There's some big global lines of action, which are stopping or mitigating climate change, and keeping rising temperatures under a 1,5º global increase. That would be our main goals, and there are a number of projects that are linked to those goal – as well as bio-diversity change, which is another big objective. And then after that, there come a number of smaller goals, in terms of how important we may perceive them to be in the environmental context, and then those are divided into smaller projects and goals for the national and regional offices.

Let me give you an example: the "treaty for the oceans", for example, is a global framework under which a number of international projects are built, from different national offices. But then you may have a project which is specific to the offices of a certain country, like asking its government to commit to a number of goals and promises when approaching a climate summit.

So we're always working within different project levels and scopes – we try to listen to the public discourse and analyse what is being talked about, what are the priorities right now, etc.

(...) We try to mix the current, external reality of what is being discussed with whatever themes we may think should be brought to the conversation, because there are some projects or battlegrounds that may not on the spotlight right now, but are still important to discuss.

(...) Once Greenpeace decides its main goals for the time being, you know, projects start being built around those goals, teams get formed, calendars get scheduled. And us people at the communications branch, we start thinking about -how- to talk about this, if we should write a report, set up some promotional actions, how to talk to the media, etc. The projects take shape as people start working on them.

HOW DOES GREENPEACE ADAPT ITS PROCESSES TO SUDDEN CRISES?

Well, one of our main pillars is adaptability. When you work as a climate public defender, denouncing attacks on the environment and such, you know that there are some situations which you may expect or foresee, and thus build projects around that – but something bigger may come along and swipe those off. Which is not to say that those projects may be abandoned, but maybe the can be moved down the line, or be kept on hold.

(...) We always make yearly plannings and set up a number of goals, but we understand that there are certain events that may change the whole conversation. You may be working hard in a number of projects, trying to attract public attention, and then some new theme or crisis may come to dominate the conversation. We have to be ready for that to happen, and adapt accordingly. (...) Decisions like that are being taken all the time at Greenpeace. It's something that we've all deeply interiorised, it's part of our DNA.

HOW DOES GREENPEACE MANAGE ITS FUNDS IN ORDER TO STAY SUSTAINABLE?

In Greenpeace, the marketing and fund-rising aspects, as well as customer management, are split from the purely communication aspects – so that, even if both branches cooperate constantly, business goals do not govern content goals. We in the communications team focus ourselves in promoting and distributing the global campaigns of Greenpeace, without a specific economical goal in terms of raising funds through those communications.

(...) In terms of funding, Greenpeace is an independent organisation, with no ties to any political groups or businesses of any sort, and it receives its funding exclusively from its members. That's something that we value a lot, and that's why we work with a lot of professional, expert people in this area, which is customer management and fidelization. The support of our members is invaluable to us, and so we keep them informed and up-to date on our diverse campaigns and initiatives and such.

HOW DOES GREENPEACE MANAGE ITS INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS?

Even while working internationally, and cooperating on so many fronts, Greenpeace has become really organised after all these years. Every project has its public record, which everybody in the organisation can check, project managers report constantly to the different directors and boards, weekly meetings are set up for each branch, which inform on current and upcoming goals and projects, etc.

Add to that a number of mail channels, chat spaces organised by projects and roles – it's pretty hard not to know what's happening (laughs).

ON THE OTHER HAND, HOW DOES GREENPEACE MANAGE ITS EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS?

I would say there are two approaches to this: one is the reactive aspect of it, which revolves around reacting to diverse situations, and different media asking us -specifically our climate experts-, for takes and perspectives on a number of current environmental conversations. And then there's the more proactive aspect of it, which has to do with writing reports, or press kits, setting up actions, doing PR, etc. We always have to keep these two aspects balanced, because it's a relationship that goes both ways.

(...) It's also important to have in mind that now, climate change is a global concept; but years ago, when Greenpeace started talking about it, nobody knew what that meant, people thought we were crazy. Greenpeace was sued for developing a number of "gloomy" climate simulations that are now being taken as rule by most scientists.

But that's what happens when you go against the will of certain big corporate and political powers. We have to keep trying to get our voices heard; we have a number of channels which we control, to a certain extent, but we also have to try and get a space in big broadcast media, national papers, etc. It's a constant fight. We monitor our actions constantly, to see what kind of reactions our messages may bring about, what may or may not have generated interest in the public, which are the best ways to treat certain topics, etc.

(...) Audiences differ enormously as well – you may have a particular target in mind for a more in-depth publication with economic and scientific data, and then simplify that message for a different, maybe broader audience. It's not the same, to talk about the extinction of polar bears, or to talk about European Sustainability Funds; the two may be equally important, but they cannot be communicated in a similar way.

02.
Kevin Donegan
Global Programme Manager at Greenpeace

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF GREENPEACE?

Greenpeace runs many different environmental campaigns, but I think that one of the key things that Greenpeace does, that other organizations do not do, is working with social pressure, and communities, to create change. That may be public policy change, or that might be changing the practices of a certain company.

Recently, Greenpeace has moved away from campaigns focused on affecting corporate practices; and that's for an interesting reason, which is that changing the practices of a given company often does not create the kind of systemic change that we truly need to solve the climate and biodiversity crisis. Sure, it's always better if a fishing company stops catching dolphins, say, but that doesn't really create the kind of broad societal change that we need.

(...) I think that organizations like Greenpeace can change the conversation, and point to injustices or issues that have been overlooked, or have not been addressed publicly, to then create public attention, to create interest, to create an environment where change can take place.

HOW DOES GREENPEACE CHOOSE WHICH PROJECTS AND GOALS TO FOCUS ON AND / OR PRIORITIZE?

There are two ways – one is that there are already certain global strategies in relation to our current climate crisis, and biodiversity, with individual objectives and projects that focus specifically in those areas. And second, we have a criteria for approving new global projects.

Within a usual project cycle there is first an idea proposal (a "concept note"), where the main goals and maybe the theory of change, of how change can be created, is expressed. And that gets then evaluated, according to the criteria that we have developed (which are focused around system change, people power and equity, diversity and inclusion, etc.), and if that's approved, there's further development during the design phase of the project. And then, finally, the project is implemented.

There are different kinds of prioritization: at a global level, for example, we have certain defined "battlegrounds", which means places where we think the fight for change is so important, that we need to focus our resources there, primarily.

The Brazilian amazon is, you know, a key area of biodiversity, for example. Western Europe, on the other hand, is mostly not what we would define as a "battleground", because things are already heading in the right direction here – although not as quickly as we need. That's one form of prioritization, in terms of geography.

Another one relates to strategy: for example, if a campaign is likely able to change the discourse around an issue, in order to change the public conversation, in order to create the change that we want. If a campaign is able to create the right way of public mobilization, working with local communities, working with allies to create public support, it's worth the effort.

Also, we take into account what Greenpeace is already good at -or effective at, rather-. We are and we've been very effective at creating non-violent direct action to create awareness towards a particular theme, say to the activities of a company, or bringing change in international policy. We choose to engage in campaigns that play towards our existing strengths as an organization, but we're also constantly refining that criteria.

HOW DO YOU ADAPT YOUR PROCESS TO POSSIBLE SUDDEN OR UNEXPECTED CLIMATE CRISES?

Responsiveness is, of course, an "attitude" that we focus on. That's a key part of our work as well. So yes, as said before, we have planned projects that get approved, but there's also moments where we have to respond to certain crises, and we have a part of our budget that's set aside for responsive work as well. If there were a big emergency, we could even divert funds from other projects – but normally we already have a "planned responsiveness" budget, if that makes sense.

Three years ago, for example, there came the massive bushfires in Australia that dominated the news cycles for months, and changed the conversation in Australia around climate policy, which we of course had not anticipated. But we were able to respond to that immediately thanks to our emergency budget – and so, that was another example of a responsive moment.

If we're not in a position where we can respond swiftly to problems like that, then we're not doing our job right.

"IF WE'RE NOT IN A POSITION WHERE WE CAN RESPOND SWIFTLY TO SUDDEN PROBLEMS OR CRISES –

– THEN WE'RE NOT DOING OUR JOB RIGHT"

WHAT METHODS OF EVALUATION HAVE YOU SET UP TO EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF YOUR PROJECTS?

Understanding the impact from different projects is also a key part of our work, and of course, at the project design and development phase, a "desired impact" is always defined: the project's objectives and goals, what do we want to achieve, etc. – and after that we use, like many organizations, an "impact evaluation framework" to understand if they were successful or not.

But measuring impact is really complex, and the kind of ways in which you can measure that impact really depends on the project. We could measure media exposure around a particular issue, like, measure the number of times a campaign or a certain issue has been mentioned in media; we could do all kinds of social media monitoring, checking if the conversation around a particular theme has changed; or we could also measure if public policy measures have been taken at all, or changed in any way.

But that's where it gets tricky, because -not only- Greenpeace is working on these issues: there are others who are running their own campaigns as well. So it's often difficult to say if any successful change has come about -particularly- because of the work that we as Greenpeace did.

However, we do have a sense. The people on the ground, who are working on the project, usually have a sense of whether the public conversation or policy has changed -because- of them.

HOW IS THE WORKFORCE OF GREENPEACE STRUCTURED?

There are 26 national or regional offices. We have some regional offices that are made up of multiple countries, like for example Southeast Asia, where we have offices in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia.

The national or regional offices generally develop and implement campaigns that follow our global strategy, which all offices have signed onto, and agreed to. Sometimes it may happen that there are what we call national-only campaigns, campaigns that only have a particular national relevance or a particular audience, that may not be part of the global strategy, but that's a minority of the overall work.

In terms of hierarchy, we're like a federation, in that Greenpeace International is a coordinating office -it has responsibilities for implementing the global strategy, but it also doesn't dictate to the national offices what to do, they're responsible for their own programmes-, and if everything's working well, we all agree on the goals and project typology, and work together to get there. But it's not a hierarchy in the traditional sense.

(...) In terms of worker typology, many offices have a quite large volunteer force of people who want to contribute their time and effort to different causes they believe in – but we mainly work with a body of paid staff, that have specific work roles and responsibilities, such as myself (...) and we also work with freelancers or consultants for specific projects, or short term work.

HOW DOES GREENPEACE FUND ITS OPERATIONS, AND HOW IS THAT FUNDING DISTRIBUTED?

All of the funding for Greenpeace is raised at the national level, so even Greenpeace International as a coordinating office is funded from the national offices that make up the global organization. The national offices fund the global office, in order to run the global strategy and coordination. There are certain restrictions, however, in terms of transferring fundings bewteen countries, because of financial restrictions.

But yes, the money is distributed around the organization, and often the "richer" offices like those from Europe are funding the work of the less-well-resourced offices. Europe and North America have a long history of raising funds from individual donors as well, like people making a monthly donation, for example; but that tradition is not global -either because people don't have the money, or because some cultures don't have that history of donating to certain causes on a monthly basis-.

There are often what we call "international projects" that require the collaboration between two or more offices – that happens very often, where a national team may identify an issue that is relevant for other offices as well. And there are also big international campaigns, where sometimes 10 or 20 different offices may work together: the "Save the Arctic" campaign, for example, involved multiple offices, because it was an issue that is evidently important for everybody.

WHAT INTERNAL METHODS OF COMMUNICATIONS DO YOU USE?

Our culture is open enough that – there's not what I would describe as a "classical" power hierarchy. That means that if I'm a lower level staff member, in terms of hierarchy/seniority, I can communicate with somebody that's much more senior, without much of a barrier.

That's one cultural and structural aspect, but in addition to that we have many communication tools that make it very easy to do that.

And of course, we have structures for decision making, we have teams across different divisions that are responsible with implementing different actions, we have global meetings where all of the national offices participate, where we approve global strategic plans; and of course, each of the national organizations has its own board of directors, that is responsible for the governance of the organization, and that has the responsibility to make sure that the organization implements its projects correctly.

03.
Mila Font
Regional Developer at Mèdecins Sans Frontières

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF MÈDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES?

MSF was born around 1971, about 50 years ago; and the main difference it had then, and still has now, when compared to other similar global aid organisations, is that we have always though of our work as a double mission: one aspect of it is attending to different humanitarian crises, sanitary crises, but another aspect of it is the testimony and the communication and the mediatisation of everything that we see happen wherever we work.

(...) This component of information, of global sensibilización, of shining a light on what's happening all around the world – it has always been a key part of our mission. It goes beyond marketing or branding concerns: it's our duty, it's how we define ourselves and our work.

HOW DOES MSF DECIDE WHICH PROJECTS TO FOCUS ON, AND WHICH GOALS TO FOLLOW?

It's important to have in mind that when we talk about projects, there's two different ways to understand our work. One is to think of what we define as "operations", which are the geographical places where we're working on the moment -which, for MSF Spain, for example, would be around 25 countries all over the world-. But then we could also talk about "sensibilization" projects, which are more media-oriented projects to bring attention to different topics, like insecure abortion practices.

(...) If we dive deeper into the operational, on-site medical aid projects, we as an organisation have different strategic orientations and plannings, global programs, that right now span from 2019 to 2023, where a number of different lines of work have been defined. But to make it short, we try to focus on geographical spaces where you may find a high level of violence, and armed conflict, and particularly, where we may see necessities that are not being tackled by anyone else.

We just finished defining our global plans for 2022, so, to give you an example, we usually analyse the current situation in those places where we operate -Yemen, Siria, Afghanistan, etc.-, and try to analyze and foresee how different scenarios may come about. All of those countries have a number of regular projects, like a hospital, a clinic, a vaccination site, etc., but something that defines us as well is the fact that we're listening -all the time-, we have this active antenna set-up to catch any kind of signal that may point us to turmoil taking place.

We stay in close communication with a number of local contacts, which we try to probe constantly to measure current climate, get information, work with the local health administrations, etc. So it's not only about getting projects on the ground, but also being on top of the current situation, and being prepared, logistically and operationally, to whatever may come to happen. That includes stock, workforce, communication channels, anything you may imagine.

HOW DOES MSF STAY FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE, AND HOW ARE ITS FUNDS MANAGED?

The most important aspect in this regard is that MSF is almost 100% financed by private funds, which include the donations of individual people, our members, and also some specific brands or businesses. A long time ago, MSF decided that when working on armed crises' battlegrounds, where we may find direct or indirect implication of different countries, we wouldn't use any kind of public funding.

That was a very early decision, but then around 2016, when the European Union decided to externalise its border responsibility to Turkey and other countries, MSF took another step in giving back all current financing it was receiving from the EU, as well as cancel any further financing. We also have a number of strategic collaborations with businesses, but there's a code of industries from which we have forbid any kind of funding. Say, the arms industry, pharmaceutical, gambling, etc. There's a number of criteria that any business has to pass before being able to even enter the conversation.

Coming again to our budgeting for emergencies, of course, it may come to happen that projects grow over budgets, or new crises may come to surface, that outgrow even our preparedness plans (...) In cases like that, we also have the option to kickstart and activate "fund-raising" campaigns, appealing to all our members, and other sources. In the case of big crises, we can't really estimate how much it may come to cost, so we always try to work in tandem with other aid organizations to achieve as much impact as possible.

With the case of some big crises, say the Japanese Tsunami of 2011, the societal response was so huge that we actually raised more money than we ended up using. So what we did was contact donors, and ask them if we could re-direct those funds to other scenarios that may be less globally known, but were in dire need of funding – and practically 99% of respondents agreed with our proposal. It's important to have in mind that there's many places in the world where we may be the only ones to operate, like the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Mali, etc., and those sites need the funds as much as any other battleground.

(...) MSF has a presence in many countries, but only 5 have the capability to set up operations elsewhere – even then, every country that may not be operational-ready is still looking for funding locally, and developing a number of low-profile projects, like political incidence or communication projects. And so, once funding is raised amongst all the countries we operate, we then centralise that funding into what is called our "Resource Sharing Agreement", and then that is split globally amongst those offices that do run projects on the ground.

We also have a separate section of our budget that is already defined as "emergency preparedness". And what that allows us to do is that, even when something happens in a particular geographical location where we don't have any presence, we can set up base quickly, evaluate needs, analyze what other organisations may be on-site, and what is the added value that MSF may or may not bring to the table, etc. And then, we can decide whether to jump on it, based mostly on the crisis' necessities, rather than factors like government support.

“IT’S IMPORTANT TO HAVE IN MIND THAT THERE ARE MANY PLACES IN THE WORLD WHERE –

– WE’RE THE ONLY ONES TO OPERATE”

WHAT IS THE INTERNAL ORGANISATION AND TYPOLOGY OF THE MSF WORKFORCE?

There’s an international central office in Geneva, but it works mostly as a representative and organisational body. Then there are the 5 operational countries, whose offices actually decide on and operate on different projects. You may find general managers there, operations directors, human resources managers, and other different roles that work and coordinate themselves on a number of global projects.

Some of our geographical projects involve the cooperation of different national offices, and in those cases, we may set up geographical separations (ie. north/south, east/west) or role differences, in order to coordinate ourselves better (you take charge of vaccinations, I take charge of epidemics, or displaced populations, etc).

Within the national branches, we at MSF Spain have a central office in Barcelona, for example, which is the one where projects are managed, but then have also a number of smaller offices all along the national territory, which serve as the public face of MSF, in terms of spokesmanship and communication, institutional representation, etc. Their main goal is to bring MSF closer to society and to its members.

In terms of typology, we don’t work much with volunteers, because the work that we do is one for which you need to be formed, you need to stay up to date and operate professionally. So it’s not enough with a month of two, other than some specific contexts, mostly in terms of communication, where we may welcome volunteer work.

But of course, if you compare the salary of somebody working in MSF to somebody working in a more traditional business, you can see the difference, and there’s where we can speak of volunteering (laughs). Of course, we’re paid appropriately to do the work the we do, but any additional raise that we may ask for is money that could be spent on medicine for the ill, or setting up projects where they’re starkly needed.

HOW DOES MSF MANAGE ITS EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS?

Our communications and fund-rising departments are split from each other, because for us, communication is a goal in itself – it’s not only relegated to fund-rising. That idea is at the center of everything that we do, and we’ve constantly focused on maintaining our members as up-to date as possible on everything that we do.

This may also take the shape of communicating with different media and journalists, in order to achieve public resonance. (...) Being portrayed positively by journalists working on-site goes well beyond any promotion we may try to achieve internally.

But other than that, we’ve tried everything to come closer to the public – we’ve set up large format expositions in big museums, we’ve developed a number of offline and offline projects, worked with VR, etc. We want to go beyond acknowledgment: we want to mobilise people, to try to reduce the distance between the general public and the different crises and realities that may be taking place at the other side of the world. And that’s really hard to do.

It’s not “pity” what we’re after – it’s anger and indignation, which are the crucial emotions that may actually push you to take action and change things.

04.
Lane Rasberry
Senior Editor at Wikipedia

"IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT CREDENTIALS YOU HAVE —

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE WORK OF WIKIPEDIA?

Wikipedia provides general reference information; that's really understating it, but what that means is that when other platforms or websites provide a search feature, Wikipedia is providing information for that – and it doesn't really matter what that platform is, we can talk about Google, Bing, or Amazon Alexa, or Facebook, any of these major platforms, and also all of the platforms that you don't think about, like university search systems, private search systems, etc.

The impact is really immeasurable, but if you want to put a counter on it, Wikipedia records 1 billion unique visitors every year, and it's been like that for many years. So we're talking about more than 10% of the world's population, seeking information and finding it through Wikipedia, every year.

It's a major part of human culture and life these days. And we could be talking about general information, academic information, civic information, and we translate this information to as many languages as we can, so it's not only people doing it for their own community: the act of sharing is inherent to what we're doing. We're trying to move information between cultures.

Nowadays, any expert organisation – there's UNESCO, the WHO, local museums and universities, there's so many organisations in the world sharing information, but they have a challenge. They're very good at producing information, but in modern society, something that has changed with the advent of the internet is that, in order to be successful, you're obligated to produce this information, but also to distribute it.

OR WHERE YOU ARE IN THE WORLD —

(...) Nowadays, everybody competes in the same media ecosystem, and where Wikipedia comes into this is, it doesn't really matter what kind of information people are searching for – if it's general reference, meaning not essays, not promotional content, some kind of neutral information that say, researchers and librarians would agree as being objective, then people are getting this information mostly, through Wikipedia.

The amount of attention that Wikipedia gets – it's the most requested published, accessed and consulted source of information on almost every topic, and it's outcompeting every other organisation in distributing that information.

WHAT IS THE ORGANISATION AND TYPOLOGY OF THE WIKIPEDIA & WIKIMEDIA WORKFORCE?

There's a before and after to this. (...) Wikipedia has been around for 20 years, and for the first 10 years, there was almost no money, so no paid employees. So for the first 5 years, there was 0 employees, and even then, Wikipedia was a "Top 10" global website, because of the voluntary force of editors and Wikipedia writers that were working on it with no pay (...) If we go forward a few years, there are now a few employees, and a little bit of money. And then we come to right now, where Wikipedia is not only still one of the most popular global websites, but the Wikimedia Foundation is one of the wealthiest NGOs in the world.

And this creates a certain amount of tension in the community. If you look at the management of the Wikimedia Foundation, one of the key elements is that, almost none of the success, the planning and the management of Wikipedia came from any paid staff or any leader's plan. It came from community organisation, and then the management and NGO and the leadership came much later. There are departments where people do different things, but there are no experts on Wikipedia at the Foundation.

— IF YOU'RE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE CONVERSATION

— YOUR VOICE IS EQUAL TO EVERYONE ELSE'S"

IN THAT CASE, HOW AND WHERE IS FUNDING DISTRIBUTED THEN BY THE WIKIMEDIA FOUNDATION?

Other than maintaining and upgrading the platform where Wikipedia is stored and functions, a lot of social and ethical issues are being managed by the Wikimedia Foundation, which they're not comfortable turning over to the community.

Suppose, for example – we know there's not many people editing in some languages of India or Africa, there's dozens of underserved languages. There's not right or wrong in this, but from the community perspective, the community would like money from donations to be spent in local community groups, but of course the challenge with it is that a rich American organisation dumping money into a lower income country, corruption and chaos ensue, of course.

So the Wikimedia Foundation, they're an American, a western organisation, and they only like sending money when someone is developing some sort of non-profit organisation in the western style. So you really need a western-minded, English speaking person for the Wikimedia operations everywhere in the world. The Wikipedia community wants local people to work in this, but the organization prefers that the "white people" run this for a while.

There's a certain tension there: everybody wants to go into underserved languages, everybody agrees on the fact that there are certain populations which we're not reaching, and everybody agrees that the resources should be spent in those lower income countries. It's mostly a question of what this should look like.

COMING BACK TO THE VOLUNTARY WIKIPEDIA COMMUNITY, HOW DOES IT ORGANISE ITSELF?

I can tell you that there's not an easy answer to this (laughs). I don't know how many papers have been written about how Wikipedia organises itself; some years ago there was a specific paper that tried to count the amount of papers written about Wikipedia and it counted 3.000. If I had to guess I'd say currently there' about 4000, and there are so many researchers that have tried to puzzled this together – there are about 15 books on Wikipedia.

(…) If I had to describe how things are actually managed, I'd go name a bunch of philosophies that guide how the Wikipedia community functions, like "anarchic governance": there are no leadership, we're very much against designated leaders or role positions. We have this idea of "equality": it doesn't matter what your credentials are or where you are in the world, if you're able to participate in the conversation, then your voice is equal to anyone else's.

We go through a lot of political theory, around how do you arrive at a consensus; we're always trying new ways to keep the conversation more civil, allow more people to speak up, get more diversity in the conversation, increase participation, etc.

There are a lot of voting enthusiasts, and decision-making enthusiasts, and all kinds of political science in playing this game of Wikipedia, and we've always enjoyed this. There are some people who edit Wikipedia and don't know why, -they're just having fun-, but for the people that have thought about why they're doing this, they want to make the world a better place by sharing information, by sharing resources.

We also have this philosophy of openness: everything in Wikipedia has to be free, and open, and no-copyright: we use free and open source software, and we talk about how copyright and media and the right to share media. Most of the big platforms, social media platforms, they look different depending on what country you're in, but Wikipedia looks the same in every country in the world, and this is very important for us.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT GOALS TO SEEK, AND HOW DO YOU EVALUATE IF THOSE ARE BEING MET?

We mainly work around establishing "priority articles", and there are different ways in which we judge which ones those are – so if someone says they're interested in music, or sports, or whatever, they pick a topic, and there's already conversations about what is the most important articles to develop there.

We have different ways of measuring this, like, which articles get the most traffic, or which ones are the most linked-to ones, etc. Sometimes there may be a very boring article, but we may feel it is fundamental to understand more popular topics. So we'll build those out, primarily.

There's a lot of different priorities, many goals and checklists, and along the years some of them have been checked off. There are so many metrics in Wikipedia, people are continually grading each other, and their communities, to make sure we're staying on course with this kind of things.

(…) Currently, there's not a single article in Wikipedia that we could consider complete; but theoretically, we could arrive there by putting more money and resources into it, translating it into every language, we could connect it with datasets, etc.

A lot of us believe that Wikipedia is going to be finished someday; it's not an endless project. It's theoretically possible to get all the information on a great many topics – there's always going to be the newest pop start, and new information coming out, of course. But like, I work in medicine, and we've talked about, is it possible to have complete Wikipedia articles on drugs? Can you say everything there is to say about a given drug?

We've not reached that point yet, but many of us believe that it may just be possible. We think that someday, with enough work, we could reach that point.

05.
John Salzinger
Founder of
MPOWERD

“IT’S EASIER TO GET TO THE END OF THE DAY – WHEN YOU’VE WORKED TO IMPROVE THE WORLD”

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF MPOWERD?

MPOWERD is a B.Corp, and a Benefit Corporation, so it mixes purpose and profit; and our business model is such that the more CPG (Consumer Packaged Goods) items we sell, to developed world markets and retailers, at a decent margin, the more we're able to reduce those prices for people that really need our technologies.

That could take the form of emerging markets, like Southeast Asia, Subsaharan Africa, Central and South America, the Caribbean; or it can be emergency preparedness operations through NGO deployment. We work with around 700 registered NGOs in the world, from the UN to Save the Children, who can thus respond to emergencies, or natural disasters, using our products.

And so for us, we can localize pricing so we're not destroying markets, by reducing margins – so basically, the developed world subsidies our sales into emerging markets, to localize pricing and stay sustainable. Our product offering is – the name of the company is MPOWERD, and it's an acronym for Micro Powered Design.

So “micro” is personal and portable, you own the product, it's yours, and you can take it with you wherever you go; “power” for us means clean power, solar and empowering, ergo the name; and “design” is well made, so it has to work really well.

But also, it should have some sort of transformative factor within the product that makes the product fun, that gives the end user, no matter where they use it, whether its Kenya or the United States, it gives them social capital, they feel good about it, they're excited about using the product, and the end result is that they use the product.

So that's how we operate, and we go everywhere from sending 100.000 units to Puerto Rico, when hurricane Maria hit, all the way to selling in the MoMA and Bloomingdale's. So that's us. In these ten years, -because this should be our ten year anniversary-, we've impacted 4 million lives, and we have averted 3 million tons of CO_2 through the use of our products.

Now, that does not include developed world sales, so if you or me bought one of our products, we wouldn't count that, becase there's other things that you could be using: other options, let's say, rather than ours, for the same effect. So we're not interested in measuring that.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE FOR MPOWERD TO BE A B.CORPORATION, AND HAS IT BEEN ANY DIFFERENT THAN MANAGING A REGULAR BUSINESS?

So I started with one reason, and I ended up with another, which is kind of counter intuitive to what most people think. First was that I had a progressive upbringing by my parents – my parents were educated, liberal, they thought we had to care about other people, and our planet and the people around me.

As I continued on with the company, it turned out that it felt more fulfilling than anything else I had done in my life, personally. But that translates to hiring people as well, it feels more fulfilling for your staff as well.

It feels more fulfilling to your vendors, and they give you better pricing. It feels more fulfilling to the NGOs with which we collaborate, for they now have a better product to work with, and to assist the people they serve through their projects.

It feels better for people in big retailers, like Walmart – we're in Walmart now, they love the product, and they love the mission even more, and they're human just like you an me, so when they go home, they feel good too.

So I'd say across the board, actually, being a B Corp. and working as a for-purpose organisation makes it more fulfilling, it's true; but counter-intuitively also makes it easier. You can get better rates.

I tug on heart strings, intentionally (laughs) because I tell people, “I'm going to show you, if you work with us, what this means for this person, you know, this little boy in Philadelphia, who was homeless, prior to being involved in one of our partnered projects, or how someone in Kenya who makes samosas can cook later into the night thanks to our products, and make more money for his family”. You know, these are real stories, and I could tell you more.

I mean, you can do a social impact company for morality, which I think you should -people should care about everyone, not just themselves-, but if you're looking at it another way, social impact is good for business as well.

And the end result, the real reason is that the consumers of today, globally, demand it on every level of business, from investors, to board, to consumers.

ARE THERE ANY COMPLICATIONS RELATED TO BECOMING A B.CORP?

Being a B.Corp is basically marketing; it doesn't have any teeth to it, once you get the certificate. So I would say that no, there are none – but being a Benefit Corporation, which we are as well, in the United States, means that you can be sued, literally, by stakeholders, for reasons of profit or growth, like any other company – or for impact, which is additional trouble.

Now what that does for me, is that it forces me to do impact. And it also justifies when I'm doing something for a lesser margin for this person, or this indigenous community in the United States, etc.

HOW HAS BEEN YOUR PROCESS OF FINDING AND MANAGING TALENT?

Very easy to find people who care and want purpose in life, let me tell you (laughs). I think we're at a time where idealism is not enough, and you need to be actionable. And people do question what you're doing.

If you're acting as if you're doing good, I think today you have to prove it. Which is great, there's a lot of activism and protesting and attempts at participatory democracy, at a time when the world needs it more than ever.

We did a survey some time ago, where 80% of the people in our company were here for the mission, and 20% were here for self-growth. (...) Some people in our team grew up in poverty, and ended up founding other companies before coming to us. But they came because of our mission.

They could be doing anything else, they're incredibly talented. It's been a full circle for them, so they understand those in need as much as I do, if not more. And at the end of the day, they're helping themselves, in a way. And on top of that, it's easier to work harder when you're doing impact – at the end of the day, it's easier for me to feel more fulfilled because I've done something for a bigger cause.

HOW DO YOU GO MARKET AND PROMOTE YOUR PRODUCTS?

It's been really easy, for us, because most of our content comes from people who are already using our products for themselves, to get out of tough situations. We're just telling the stories of those whose lives have improved through our products

So we get tons of content, we work with influencers, and get metrics and data from NGOs, which we can use as well. And you know, content being king as it is today, it's very easy for us to market authentically, and we've found great success doing that.

06.
Marcus Hurst
Partner, Architect
at 7group

SOUCE: UNSPLASH // DANIST SOH

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE WORK OF 7GROUP?

When 7group was formed, we primarily were providing consultancy for technical environmental services – so we would do specific services related to building design and construction, things like energy modelling, and materials consulting, and different things like that to help people put together a greener building project.

As the years went on, we developed a process we called integrative design; we didn't invent the concept, but we wrote a book on it in 2009. Our process was one of applying that integrative design, and the idea behind that is that you're now looking at the synergies between systems, and that's what's behind a lot of this technical analysis: you're looking at the synergies between the different systems of a building in order to optimise its overall performance, following the idea that the "whole is greater than the sum of its parts".

And you're also trying to, as you're evaluating those services, you're looking for opportunities to, I guess, kind of "simplify" the design, and seekign to produce a significantly greener building at a lower cost than conventional construction.

And then, as our thinking kind of evolved over the years, we started to focus more and more on the impacts of what we were doing over living systems. And so, over the last 10 to 12 years, we've been focused on this concept of "regenerative design."

The problem with integrative design is that it doesn't come with an inherent aim; so the aim could just be, "I want to make a cheaper building". It doesn't have any values, per se, attached to it – so that's what regenerative design does, it gives integrative design an aim, a direction, a set of values to apply to those projects.

WHEN CONSULTING FOR CLIENTS' PROJECTS, HOW DO YOU SET UP AND DECIDE PROJECT GOALS?

We spend a lot of time upfront on our projects trying to create alignment; and in many ways, we're trying to create alignment around aspirations. Ultimately, what's the purpose of the project, what's the project aspiring to, in terms of its performance? And that involves not only the normal metrics you'd use, say for budget, or quantity of space, or a necessity to be able to accommodate a number of people within it – but other, grander aspirations as well, like ecological or societal impact.

But there's a problem in setting goals like that where, for example, we can set an overall energy target that's like, some "kw/h/square meters" – and the problem we found when doing that is, none of the individual members of the team hold that, right? It's a goal for the team, not a goal for each individual member of the team, and so the goal gets lost along the actual development of the project.

So now, we also set goals for each individual member of the team, and the systems they're designing. And we develop all these goals on a -system- basis that then produces that overall energy performance goal.

Sometimes our goals are kind of a bit simpler, or maybe they're just kind of verbal. One of the goals we worked with recently, in one of our projects, was to design a rainwater management system without any pipes. With no pipes or curbs. And so, how can we get rid of the hard infrastructure, and incporate biological services, or ecological services, as a substitute for that? And what we found is, when you do that, it's often cheaper than the hard escape solutions.

People seem to have this primary belief that green buildings have to cost more; the problem is that -that- comes about when you don't change -anything- about how you go about designing the project, and you simply -lay- green things on top of what you're already doing. And that's why people come to those conclusions, because they don't change anything about what they're doing, they're just adding additional steps, and then they wonder why that costs more (laughs).

If you seek a different outcome, you have to change the process by which you arrive at that outcome.

SOUCE: UNSPLASH // PETER GVALO

WHICH WOULD BE THEN YOUR SUGGESTED PROJECT PROCESS OR METHODOLOGY?

What usually tends to happen in projects is that, initially, the team gets together, and has a design kickoff meeting, and everyone gets excited about working on this project, because now we -all- got a lot of environmental ideas, right? But then what happens is that everybody falls back into their usual process and matter of behaviour, and then they start applying these things in an additive way – again, they're sitting there, adding up, reinforcing these beliefs that "green costs more". But they're not changing what they're doing, they're following the same methodology they've always followed, and then of course, it -does- cost more, just what they imagined! (laughs)

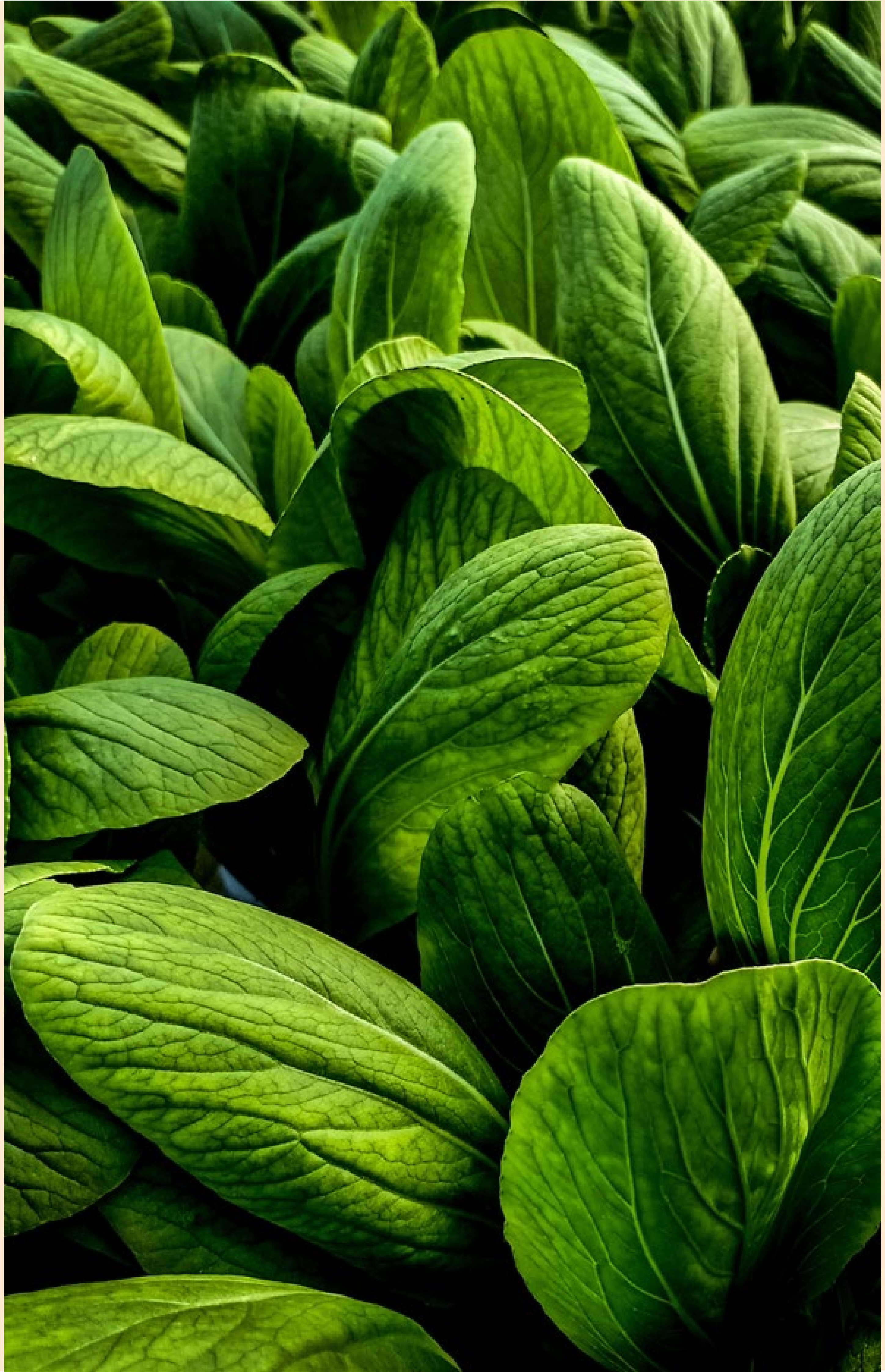
(...) The problem is that we still have a situation where designers try to design their systems in -isolation-, so the architect designs the building, and you know, daylighting in a commercial building is a really important strategy for reducing energy cost, because it's a passive strategy for bringing light into the building – but if the architect doesn't incorporate daylighting as one of the top items that is driving the development of their design, the project is not going to be well day-led! So the architect needs to design in a way that accommodates those aspirations, and takes them into account, from beginning to end.

But then, if the architect gives her design to the engineers, they basically say, "now give me heating, give me cooling, give me lightning, give me stormwater management", and it's all laid -on top- of the design, which may or may not optimise or even attempt to optimise the whole, we run into the same problem all over again. We have to analyse all those systems as we're trying to develop the plan -together-, not having each designer apply their specialty to everyone else's preconceived notion of what might be an "optimised design".

"IF YOU SEEK A DIFFERENT OUTCOME

~

YOU HAVE TO USE A DIFFERENT PROCESS"



SOUCE: UNSPLASH // TIA

HOW DO YOU ENSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF YOUR BUSINESS WHILE MAINTAINING IMPACT VALUES?

It comes down to working with our clients, and trying to maintain a balance. There's a broader interest now, amongst all people, in trying to do what's right by the environment – but we do still have a number of clients that aren't really interested in changing their processes. All they want to do is look at this thing at a surface level, in terms of environmental, legal certifications and such. And so we try to engage them in conversation, and talk to them about what it is we think we know, how they could improve their goals – with varying degrees of success, all the way up to clients that completely get this way of thinking and are trying hard to figure out how to apply it.

And I think the success of projects goes along that spectrum as well: the clients that don't want to change their processes that much get -some- improvements, and it's a little better than it otherwise would have been; and then we work with clients that -completely- get this, and are building some of the greenest buildings in the world. So, the key difference, I think, it's mindset. The conventional practice in design and construction comes with a particular mindset: it's all about delivering on time, and on budget, and doing it in a way that tries to align the minimum quality that the owner would accept with the project's scope.

(...) It's a significantly small segment of the market that understands what we're talking about, and want to make that into their vision. We don't have a ton of clients that I would say "get it", and whwe primarily support ourselves by doing work for those that don't quite get it, but are "interested" in it enough to engage us and kind of "put up with us" trying to elevate their thinking (laughs), while they're going about trying to stay within incremental changes.

(...) But even then, we structure a lot of our work around the metrics that dominate the current paradigm, and we show clients clear improvements on those metrics – and still many of them are not willing to make the necessary changes! And so, it's a constant process.

Our regular work supports a lot of the non-profit projects that we're engaged in as well, and supports our efforts to develop other projects, or in a bigger scale, to develop a market for this kind of thinking, outside from the clients that are only pursuing required certifications, and that kind of stuff.

07.
Sarah O'Terra
Senior Marketing Head at Harvey

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF HARVEY?

Harvey is a strategic marketing agency, and we exist to help conscious businesses grow. We were founded by Rebecca and Simon Smallchua – they're partners in business and in life, which is lovely, and we're a super small team based in Melbourne and Sydney in Australia.

We're a really lean marketing team: there's five of us, and we refer to our skills collectively as being a "Jack, or a Jane of all trades", which means that we see ourselves as generalists, across a number of different things: we do brand and strategy design and implementation, customer research, digital and marketing, e-commerce, web development, SEM, content creation, social media, emails and CRM, like a smattering of all things online (laughs).

HAS IT BEEN HARD TO FIND CLIENTS WHO MAY ALIGN WITH YOUR VALUES?

Fortunately, we've not actually had to do much active outbound marketing as a company; the majority of our business comes to us through referrals from past clients or through our network. Although we run other people's social media or campaigns, we don't actually have much of a presence for ourselves (laughs), it's mostly about our individual networks and who Becky and Simon knew initially, to set us up.

People come to us, largely, through who we know or who we have worked with previously; because we do impact work and focus on impact, we know other people on impact, and they know people that have businesses in impact or want to be in impact. The business that are coming to us, 90% of the time they're in impact already, or looking to be in impact and improve their current strategy.

Harvey is been in operation for about three years, and we have grown year on year financially, and our team is scaling – we're not huge by any means, but it has gone from Beck and Simon, to being now around 6 people, and it's now offering the opportunity to fund other impact ventures that we're interested in.

Our economic growth is stable and increasing over time, because it works a niche, but it also creates a magnet effect where we get way more inquiries than we can manage; we have to turn some opportunities away every day, because we all feel that our work is only as good as our last project.

So once someone knows what we've delivered for our last client, they want it: it's value-aligned but also results-aligned, so we have the values that they're looking for, but also the skills and the team to do it.

DO YOU HAVE ANY CRITERIA THEN TO SELECT OR BALANCE WHAT CLIENTS TO WORK FOR?

The way that we measure inbound inquiries is through the SDG, the UN sustainability goals: we made a big spreadsheet of them, where each of them is listed out, and then they're weighted in a particular scale to give each company a particular score, on how much that business delivers on any or all of the SDGs. And so they get a score on that -it's an internal document that reflects our best efforts to "quantify" impact-.

That's the framework in which we measure inbound clients: and so our goal is that we won't work with anyone who is -destructive- against any of the SDG's, or negatively detracts from any of the SDGs.

For example, we wouldn't work with petrochemical industries, gambling, or fast fashion, anything fossil fuels-related, or any consumer goods not using sustainable materials, bringing about lots of waste, or anything like that.

In any case, we have never had inquiries from people like that, because I think they see our website and realize we're not the right fit (laughs). Then, we have a scoring systems, for those that get through that criteria, which builds into a three tiers of clients: a "good" tier, which gets our standard agency rate; a "great" tier, where clients get a 30% discount on our services; and an "amazing" tear of two or three clients, which get a 50% discount. Our goal is to get a majority of clients in that middle "great" tier, and then split the rest between the other two, so they can balance each other.

WAS IT HARD TO BECOME A B CORP, ARE THERE ANY SPECIAL HURDLES TO OVERCOME?

The process of becoming a B Corp – you have to be in business for a year before you can apply to be a B Corp, and the process for smaller companies can take 6 to 9 months. I think it's a little bit longer now, but for big companies it can take much longer; they have to audit everything, at a larger scale, so it's more complex.

Harvey became a B.Corp so we could audit our ethics as a company. We chose to do this: we wanted to make sure that we were delivering impact across all aspects of our business, from waste management at a personal and business level, to who our electricity providers were.

All those things were already considered in how we set up Harvey, they were baked in from the start, so it's been a lot more straightforward compared to when companies want to shift into that later down the line.

"WHEN WE GO DOWN TO CUSTOMER RESEARCH, WE FIND THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS –

– STILL ARE QUALITY, PERFORMANCE, AND SUPPPORT".

HOW DO YOU SET UP BRAND GOALS AND COMMUNICATION FOR YOUR CLIENTS?

Ultimately, when speaking about clients with impact businesses, the important thing to keep in mind is that impact business is -still- business. It needs to have a good idea, or a good product; values can only get you so far if your product sucks, or is faulty, or whatever. Brand still matters much more than people think, and so the goals for impact businesses are similar to non-impact businesses – although the way in which we go about communicating our impact brands' point of difference is somewhat different to traditional brands, of course.

(...) For example, we have worked with brands who are cruelty free, vegan, halal, carbon neutral -you name it-, and of course, a lot of people say that all of those aspects, as well as ethics, are super important for them. But then, when we go down to do customer research, the most important factors still are quality, and performance, and customer support.

The fact that a product or brand may be "carbon neutral", or whatever, that is most certainly a bonus, and it's a nice thing to have; but it's often not the core reason why people buy these products. With a lot of our clients, it still comes down to product quality, and customer service, and website usability. The values behind it can give longevity to the brand, but for most, it's not the core deciding reason to choose a certain brand over others if it does not have a certain level of quality.

(...) When a brand only sends a message of "greenness and sustainability", that can actually be very draining for the customer. It doesn't resonate as much as people -often- think it will, because I think it's kind of expected of many brands and products now.

08.
Jan–Cristoph Zoels
Founder of Experientia

"WE ARE MOVING INTO SYSTEMIC DESIGN – – SOLUTIONS, RATHER THAN INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES"

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE WORK OF EXPERIENTIA?

Experientia is a research-based experience design company based in Turin, Italy and Basel, and we also have offices in Singapur.

I founded Experientia 17 years ago, and we have developed a variety of user research-oriented design projects for clients such as Deutsche Telecom, Intel, Samsung, Vodafone, etc.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO FOCUS YOUR SERVICES AROUND USER-RESEARCH WHEN FOUNDING EXPERIENTIA?

Design has drastically changed in the last 20-30 years, from an authorship oriented-approach, where individuals got trained and focused on problem solving approaches, which they could bring into an individual product or client, to addressing much more complex problems, where there are no easy answers, and no more individual solutions. And we need a range of different qualitative and quantitative research tools now in order to address them more properly, so there's where user research comes into play.

Also, following that evolution from a detail-focused to a more speculative-focused approach, to solving more advanced problems, and the current strong organisational focus on platforms and systems, designers are now helping companies address organisational and more strategic positions. We are now moving into the challenge of more systemic design solutions, rather than individual problems.

Richard Buchanan actually articulated it nicely, in that design has moved through "four orders of design": the first is "symbols", focused on visual design and communication, then second is around "product", traditionally understood as the industrial design space, the third is "interaction" design, or "service" design, and now we're moving into the fourth, which is focused on "systems" design, situated in a more strategic or speculative context.

HOW DO YOU TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION THE NEEDS OF MARGINALISED USERS?

It's important to have in mind that we as designers, we are not just solving problems – too often, design has uncovered more problems that it has solved (laughs), as with the problem of design for obsolescence, thinking for recyclability, etc., concerns that didn't existe before.

The idea of inclusive design, or universal design, is already 50-something years old, it goes back to the 60s and the 70s, and the ideas of participatory design. But it has really exploded in the last decade or two, where people have really specialised in it, and where inclusive universal design practices are now taught in every university across the world.

If we talk about marginalised design, before now, people at the edges were basically uncared for, they didn't have the ability to participate in the conversation, and thus little equity in society (...) now, I personally think that we should design more in terms of "asset-based", designing for unique "capabilities" instead of "pain points", but of course, we need to address the handicaps or problems that we as a society may have ignored when designing services.

You need to think about how your designs affects public space, and how they can actively or passively discriminate people, or create a number of exclusionary processes. You need to address this proactively.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS AROUND THE GROWTH OF SERVICE DESIGN, SPECIALLY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

In terms of the general perception, the design education probably hasn't moved fast enough; it's only recently on the last 25 years that service design has become a general idea (...) and regarding public services, in Experientia we have worked in some big public service projects looking at ageing, infrastructure, mobility, clear housing, and advising for example the government of Singapore to look at more inclusive approaches for the elderly. For private businesses, interest has grown exponentially, but in the public space, it's been growing very slowly.

Public service delivery has always been a responsibility of governments, and governments are always slower about using design resources, because design is difficult to describe, difficult to measure, it's hard to put some KPI or ROI metrics behind it, so politicians often see design as a generator of "extra marketing campaigns", but without much real impact. So we, as designers, we have to showcase the possibilities of design to show how you can do better, work more inclusively, create easier experiences and multi-platform solutions.

There are certain pioneers, like Finland, where service design was already used in a number of cutting-edge government actions around 2015; and now you find the same in Switzerland and Germany. This is happening all around; it's slow, but it's growing.

09.
Rob-Leslie Carter
Project Manager at ARUP

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF ARUP?

ARUP would describe itself as a multi-disciplinary consultancy, a project-driven organisation that delivers projects on behalf of its clients. Most of those projects are still in some form connected to the built environment – there are some organisational change and business change projects, but 99% of the stuff we do is connected with the built environment. So, traditionally, ARUP would be thought of as building designers or infrastructure designers, offering consulting, advisory, and strategy services.

(...) In practice, ARUP always tries to think of what the client is likely to need, in terms of services, say in the next 12 months, and analysing where the client is a little bit weak, where do they need a bit more help, where do we need to bring specialists in, or maybe where we need to look at their broader program management capabilities, or start talking about operational readiness; so we're trying to offer to the client a continuity of services, somehow.

Something that differentiates us is that we work with a big sea of technical experts, and we try to offer a more joined-up service, and offer a little bit more insight.

HOW DO YOU WORK WITH CLIENTS TO SET UP PROJECTS AND GOALS FOR A MORE POSITIVE IMPACT?

(...) About 5 or 10 years ago, clients were only concerned about passing the minimum environmental requirements, that's it – and typically, as a project management you'd be the one helping them achieve that requirement. These days, there's a little bit more to it, and one of the things we try to do is help our clients raise their ambitions a little bit.

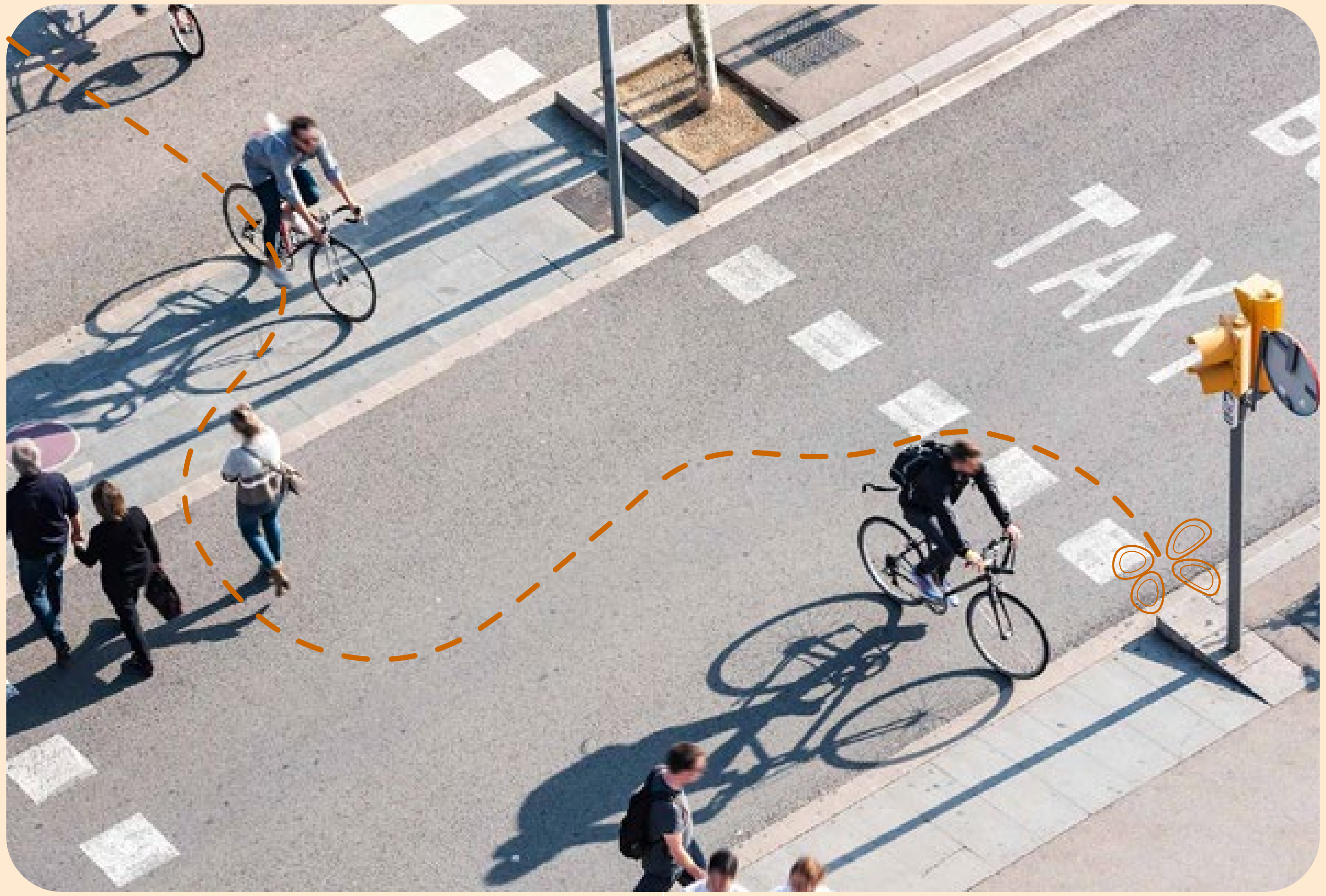
At ARUP, we've taken the decision that every design project that we do, we will always do a "whole life-cycle carbon assessment". That's one just step to change the conversation. (...) I as a project manager, I'm often in the room when clients are coming up with mission statements, project blueprints, or a team charter, all of those sort of early building activities, where actually, some of the brief is still open to some sort of interpretation, it's a little bit loose. And here of course we have a big opportunity to influence the team and try to put "sustainable development" or "net zero impact", or whatever it may be, right at the top of the agenda.

But when you're a client, and you're not an expert in these topics, you may lack a bit of -confidence- in terms of how much that may cost, or what that may look like. So that's a great opportunity to say, "let me bring in a client from this other job we just have been working on, to talk to you in a peer to peer way about how that went really well for them – or maybe I could get a colleague in who is a sustainability or economy expert, to demystify the whole thing to you", and now you know what "net zero" looks like. And rather than focusing on what the planning tells you is the "minimum" requirement, you can now think about a "circular" building strategy, or how a refurbishment might be a better idea than setting up a whole new building.

So really, we're encouraging the client to be a little bit braver in terms of these conversations. And it's really necessary to do so, because a lot of the decisions we're making now in terms of impacting the built space won't become reality for many years, so we need to start thinking right now about how we're asking designers to design, how we're thinking about projects and processes, how we're putting together contracts that specify what clients need to do, how we're measuring contractor performance, etc.

There are some other projects where it's not so straightforward, of course – let's say a project that's been running for 13 years. What can you do there? The major decisions around project impact have already been taken (...) so you've sort of got to ask yourself, can we still improve this? Is there an opportunity to demonstrate to the client that by, say, making this building wholly electric, by adding a huge solar array on top of the roof, the 30 year operating costs are going to be completely offset? Someones' gotta do that, someone's gotta have that conversation – we just need to keep poking, keep saying, "why not do it this way", and sort of, don't accept it when we get an answer like, "we can't afford it", or "it's not approved".

Part of it is just making people as aware as possible that this is not something that you can wait to deliver. If every single project that we're woking on was a "zero carbon" project, it would still take about a 20-year or 30-year span to reach completion. We need to be working on those now, because legislation is changing so fast, that governments and society do not care anymore about what were the requirements of 2 or 3 years ago, or whenever the project was initially signed.



"WHERE BEFORE WE ONLY TRIED TO PASS CERTAIN REQUIREMENTS – – NOW WE TRY TO ELEVATE THE ASPIRATIONS FROM ALL OF OUR CLIENTS"

HAS IT BEEN HARD TO CONVINCE CLIENTS TO THINK AND ACT IN TERMS OF POSITIVE IMPACT?

I think everyone wants to do the right thing, it's not like there's some people saying, “let's do this as environmentally taxing as possible” (laughs). The thing is that people have just done the same old thing in the past, over and over again, because they just think that having a standard building works, and a gas cooker works, an induction looks a bit strange, so why bother? But the thing that's changed, and it has made that shift easier, I think, is that now there is an expectation coming from the outside world: your kids, your clients' kid, the papers, the approval authorities.

So the environment is really good at the moment to sort of, have a conversation with the client in terms of projecting yourself as someone that's pushing the agenda rather than resisting the agenda. (...) People are even walking away from clients that do not follow this mindset. It's been this kind of bottom-up, swell of momentum, where people are just saying, “either you stand for this, or we can't work together”. I can feel it at ARUP already, we haven't done any work in say, airports, for example, unless it's part of some very clear decarbonisation strategy.

SO THE WORKFORCE HAS ADOPTED THIS POSITIVE IMPACT MINDSET AS WELL?

There's not enough good project management people around, and most of us share similar values in this regard: we don't want to work in any projects that do not advance, or at least respect, a sustainable agenda.

I feel most of our clients are well aligned with our perspective now, and it's a fairly easy conversation to have, but there's some projects that are a bit crap, but really important. A good example is residential retrofitting – so in the UK, we have 20 million houses, they're the worst insulated houses in Europe, and most of them just need a “bloke” to crawl around in a loft and put some insulation in.

That's one of the most impactful projects one could work for, but that is also a wicked problem, one of the biggest intervention programs you could possibly imagine, like – getting a supply chain that is able to do that quickly enough, so it's worth it, legislating it, working through cooperation, logistics, aligning financing with human behaviour, etc.

But those projects are the most important and most interesting ones, and the fact that they're all not solvable through technology or financing makes then a full-on project management situation. Because you have to think about the whole system, about how to create a situation there where all of the conditions we're surrounded by allow that change to actually take place.

That's going to be the biggest and scariest group of projects, and there's literally not enough human beings to work on those; so what's the point of working on a “bad” project, if there's a better one just over there that's more aligned with what we want to do?

10.
Joe Lozano
Head of Branding
& Julianne Trumer
VP of Research
at Mormedi

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF MORMEDI?

Joe: Well, what we do in Mormedi is to help companies in the generation or growth of their business by threading transforming narratives or contexts that can develop into responsible and sustainable experiences for the final customer.

And by "responsible and sustainable" experiences, we mean those which may have some kind of positive impact, whether it be on the company itself, through the improvement of metrics or ratios, or having a positive impact on the planet, or the final user.

We try to make our values speak for ourselves, in terms of empathy, ethics, sustainability, and we include these values in all of our projects. Let me give you an example – when I say sustainable design, I mean, imagine we had a project referred to visual signalling, say working on the design of an airport's visual system.

So in that case, we may ask ourselves: what about blind people, how do we make it work for them? This is a very basic example on the importance of including minority perspectives into all of our projects.

Julianne: I would add to that the fact that businesses are facing increasing pressure in complying with a number of new impact standards and SDGs goals, which are still under development, and thus under constant change. Most businesses do not yet know how to adapt to that, and many times they do so only on the surface, which complicates their future operations. This is where we come in.

We've really noticed a change in terms of the briefings that we receive, which before were only contextually curious about this, while now are increasingly concerned. All businesses will have to keep this changing paradigm in mind – even ourselves, since there may come a point in which clients may not want to work with an agency that does not comply with these requisites.

So in general, I would say that sustainability and impact standards are growing increasingly rigorous, and this requires a change in perspective.

DO CLIENTS USUALLY ALIGN WITH YOUR USER-FIRST MINDSET?

Julianne: I think it depends on the client, and how open they are to that. We have some clients that really understand our user-focused perspective, which makes it easier to work with them (...) but sometimes, when you try to get them thinking about more marginal groups, they may agree for political correctness, but may not put much value into that.

It depends on the sector as well – for example, some mobility and public transport projects in which we're involved are really concerned about disability options, in terms of metro, and short-distance trains, for example. In those cases, it's a really important part of the research & design process.

Joe: We have to keep in mind that in Spain, about 5 to 7% of the population suffers from some kind of disability. So, if we purely think of it in economical terms, it's as easy as telling the company, "you're losing 7% of the market, just by ignoring this space. You're actively losing money if you don't adapt your services to these peoples' necessities".

Working in mobility, we're of course interested in sustainable models, and environmental impact. It used to be this "marketing" thing, advertising yourself as a sustainable company, but things are getting tough – by 2030, enterprises will have to comply with a number of national goals, or face regulations, fines, etc. Banks have also declared that they will lend more expensive credit to non-sustainable businesses, so the conversation is starting to become real.

Not only that, we're also interested in sustainability in terms of digital contamination. It goes beyond reducing our paper usage, which is something quite basic. We're talking about energy consumption, greener kinds of hosting, minimising our digital carbon footprint, improving our overall impact on the environment, etc.

BEING ALSO A FORESIGHT COMPANY, HOW DO YOU MAKE SURE THAT RESEARCH REMAINS USEFUL ON FUTURE SCENARIOS?

Joe: There's not a single response to this – one aspect of it is that doing foresight research involves projecting a number of future scenarios in terms of a number of variables that we're already seeing take place, or which we think may develop into different contexts down the line. We could also set up a digital observatory to define which are the vectores of change, which are the current tendencies or undercurrents around a certain topic, in order to try and establish a future perspective.

But you have to have in mind that most of this – when designing an airplane, for example, you're working in something that will be finished ten years down the line. So you're always designing for the future, but you're doing it today. I'm sure Julianne will be able to help you in this, since she's been working with airlines for a number of years.

Julianne: Any business that works on such a scale, they usually move quite slowly (...) there's a spectrum that goes from working in the automobile industry, which is faster than the train industry, which is faster than airline design. We of course can't predict which will be the full context and expectations in 10 years, but we can focus on getting businesses up to speed with all the technology that's already available, and designing processes and systems that are adaptable to future developments as easily and frictionless as possible.

Joe: Working with many transportation companies, I can tell you that change is happening (...) most big car companies are investing big money in sustainable mobility, vehicle reconversion, etc. It's becoming increasingly visible now, where you can find electric scooters and bikes around most big cities. Even the aviation industry is thinking really hard in terms of how to make their business as ecological as possible, because it's going to become a necessity some years down the line. All of this is going slowly, but that does not mean that it's not being done.

11.
Merlijn Sluiter
Service Designer
at Koos

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF KOOS?

We as a design company might belong to the category of service design agencies, but we actually work a lot for NGOs and B Corps, and a lot of different impact businesses. At Koos we do both service design, and UX design, and within all our projects, we always try to bring about a positive impact on the world.

“ONCE YOU SHIFT YOUR CURRENT PERSPECTIVE TO A MORE —

And we made a whole model on how to achieve that, and evaluate that – we think that we as designers, we kind of usually represent the voice of customers and users in the process, and so it’s mostly improving the experiences of those end-users with different services, and next to that, we also try to also design or improve services that impact society and the planet in a positive way.

HOW DO YOU ENSURE THAT YOUR VALUES ALIGN WITH THE WORK THAT YOU DO FOR CLIENTS?

The first step is that we only work for certain companies, so there’s already a selection of which companies we potentially want to work with (...) we as a company, our objective is to be the number one global strategic agency 100% committed to positive change, so we only want to do projects that contribute to positive change. And so, when I say we don’t work for all companies, it means that we only work for projects that do actually have a positive impact through their business, that’s our main focus.

(...) We don’t want to do projects which have a negative impact. We don’t want to work with, say, petrochemical companies, for example, unless our goal is to make them more sustainable. But the thing is that, even then, and even if we try to represent the voice of the user, at the end, we work for companies that want to make money.

So we have to find a balance – the whole point of service design is that, if we improve the customer experience, the service will be better, and companies will sell more, and as a result, those companies will make more money, which will allow them to improve their service even further. It’s all tied together.

HOW COMMITTED IS YOUR WORKFORCE TO IMPACT VALUES?

We project the image that we believe on the importance of making a positive impact as a company, so that’s why usually people come to us: they are usually intrinsically motivated, and a bit idealistic. Some people are more business-minded, but nobody wants to “ruin” the environment (laughs).

We, us working at Koos, we want to improve the impacts of businesses on society, and the relationships between companies and their customers. (...) And on top of that, we are an inclusive company, diverse, accepting of everybody, which I think everybody in the team thinks is important to who we are as a company.

COULD YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT YOUR FRAMEWORK FOR IMPACT ANALYSIS?

We made a framework of how me measure positive impact – because it’s very hard to make impact measurable if you’re a design company. We only give advice, or present concepts, but it’s up to the company to actually implement it, and do something with it.

Yet we still wanted to try to measure our potential impact, to put a scale on it, nevertheless.

After every project that we do, we evaluate internally what impact we may have achieved in three main categories, which are the “end user”, the “client, and the “world”. And we all fill in a questionnaire, each one of us, on how much impact we evaluate we might have achieved on each of those three. And then we get a score in the end, so can compare that to other past and future projects. For us, that’s a kind of baseline to see where we are now, where we were in the past, and how we are evolving.

Also, with every project we do, about half a year later, we try to sit down with the clients again, and reflect on the project results, to try and see what they’ve actually, done and try and see if anything’s been implemented, etc. So instead of potential or perceived impact, in this case, we are measuring our -actual- impact.

HOW DO YOU BALANCE RESEARCH CONCERNS -MARGINAL GROUPS, CHANGING CONTEXTS, ETC.- WHEN GOING THROUGH RESEARCH?

In terms of marginal groups, we value inclusive design a lot, but it’s not always the focus of the project.

We’ve done some projects, however, where we try to make service design more inclusive or diverse, and that’s really the focus of the project – and of course, you don’t really to make a service or product for just one type of person, you always want it to be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.

— USER FIRST MINDSET, EVERYTHING ELSE BECOMES EASIER”

(...) In terms of changing contexts and future scenarios: of course, a product or a service is something that is in constant evolution, specially in the digital realm. When you’re designing an app, for example, the environment is always changing super fast, so researching with adaptability in mind is essential, in terms of how digital-savvy people are, and digital obsolescence, etc. So yes, in those cases the service should, optimally, be improved constantly.

But generally, when we do user research, we focus more on user -needs-, rather than perceptions. And we think that those needs don’t really change that much over time. It really depends on the sector or the kind of company, really. Sometimes the insights that come from our research are not that new or unexpected, it’s just that companies have never thought about them in this way, they’ve always thought about the business perspective, and not the user’s perspective: what the user wants.

And once you do that shift, the impact is immense. Once your thing is “user-friendly”, once that change in mindset is made, everything else becomes easier.

12.
Elena Zordan & Silvio Cioni
General Managers at Sketchin

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORK OF SKETCHIN?

Silvio: Sketchin is a design studio that now is increasing its scale in terms of projects – specially in the last year we moved from designing smaller digital products and small to big transformation projects, or innovation design, innovation projects. So we moved from small or medium scale to big scale projects and programs. Usually now, companies are engaging companies in more to one project at a time, and so we basically have often more than one design team that is working on them – you can have a big program with lots of different teams that are running in parallel.

In this new scenario, last year, we reorganised all of Sketchin and created this figure, this role that is the General Manager – and some of us were promoted from Executive Design Directors to this new role of General Manager. So we have moved to the dark side of the business (laughs) but originating from the design part.

We are more than 100 people, particularly in the design teams, in Lugano, Milan and Rome – we are mostly Italian, but the design studio was founded in Switzerland. (...) The idea is to serve as a support, an accelerator, an element of aggregation, a sort of guide if you will that can keep together the different aspects around projects, engaging with the design teams and the business partners.

Elena: We are aware that this is a big challenge, because in some ways, we are trying to do inside of Sketchin what we try to make happen inside clients: to bring about a design mindset which is mixed with a business perspective.

We want to influence clients in a positive way, to disrupt the way in which business is done, and this is tough process; because even working within a design studio, some dynamics are not easy to change.

YOUR STUDIO ADVERTISES ITSELF AS USER-FIRST, FOCUSING ON USER RESEARCH. WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT TO YOU?

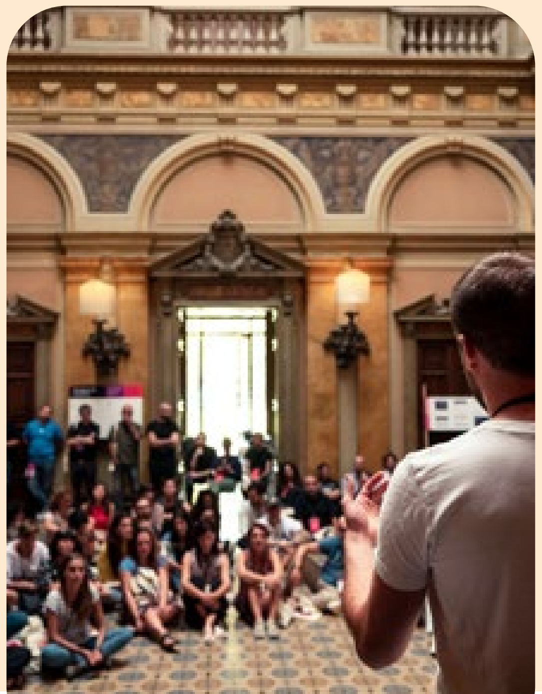
Elena: This is our historical perspective, to use user experience as an approach to lead all of our projects. We already are known as a design studio that uses a user-centred approach, but anyways, immediately, during the project proposal, we always explain to our clients that we will use these methods – it's very important for us to always put the final user at the center of our projects.

We always say that all our projects are driven by a human-first approach. The results of each project will of course depend on the needs of each client, but it's a big pillar of our organisation.

Silvio: Of course it's not always easy, and there are some clients that are not as aware as to why this kind of approach is important, but what helps us is of course our known position on this: it's our way of working.

When we create a proposal, we always emphasise this aspect: we start by mapping and understanding the user experience, and trying to figure out the perspectives of the real users at the end of the line, and what are their expectations for this kind of service. Every time we create a proposal, we start from this perspective.

This is our way of working and thinking, and also the way in which we understand business. You don't design without listening to the users first, or understanding what is the context that the users are involved in, because it would be pointless to do so.



ANOTHER PILLAR IN TERMS OF YOUR BRANDING IS FORESIGHT ANALYSIS. HOW DO YOU ADAPT THE CONCLUSIONS OF USER-RESEARCH TO FUTURE THINKING?

Silvio: First thing, I think it's important to understand that when you approach a project with a future-oriented approach, you don't do the same research activities as you do when you're designing the next product or service in 6 months. This is important because the research activities are different in terms of purpose and in terms of methods, compared to the regular user research that you perform for, say, creating a website for a client.

So, starting from this perspective, you can mix these two perspectives, in order to understand a longer perspective, and what could be some key elements in relation to potential scenarios, etc. – and then you try to understand how this jump to the future can help the company to design different things now. And so you're bringing future perspectives into the needs of the present.

I personally think it's kind of stupid to worry -too much- about future needs, or future expectations, because it's still very difficult to understand even current expectations, imagine how different that becomes when thinking about future scenarios! (laughs). It's impossible to understand the future expectations of users, so you work with methods to draw some possible, general perspectives, and then use that exercise to better inform the activity of design today.

Elena: In making research, people have a lot of difficulties in order to explain or make clear what they actually want, so what we do in research is to observe their experience, their pain points, their goals maybe, but we always try not to ask them -directly- what they want, because sometimes they don't know that themselves. You could be basing your expectations on just imagination, on wrong information, if you trust too much the descriptions of users, instead of looking at how they interact with the product.

“WE USE DESIGN AS A A TOOL, —

YOU HAVE ALSO RUN SERVICE DESIGN FOR THE PUBLIC SPHERE. ARE THERE HERE ANY DIFFERENCES WITH PRIVATE CLIENTS?

Silvio: There are differences, of course – usually when you work with a public administration, and you work in the field of service design, you have to be more aware about sensibilities in terms of “access”, and trying to understand how the digital touch-points are integrated in the larger physical ecosystems, in order to guarantee access to everyone, and so on. Usually the timings and probably, the “complexity” of the project is different.

I'm not saying that working for a public administration is more difficult than working for a company, but if you think about public services, you have to be aware that they are not in the hands of a single body who takes decisions: they're usually split, so the complexity is higher because you're not only thinking about business and design decisions, but understanding the relationship between different administrations to create this service. And also, the expectations of the public are very high.

And of course, the purposes are different – at the end, companies use service design to improve the experience of their customers, and try to have a more customer-friendly approach, in order to better serve their customers, and ultimately increase profit. If you look at public administrations, however, you don't find any customers, you find citizens, and that's a different conversation.

It's the same in terms of disciplines and approach and methodologies, but the mindset is not the same. We work in both domains, however, because those are different challenges, and it's really exciting to work on a public service that could have an impact on millions of users. The scale of impact is different.

Elena: Another thing is that private actors have a big urgency to find solutions, which can be stressful for us, yet can also allow us to focus in finding solutions.

But public actors have longer processes, so it's not that straightforward. That is also a main difference.

YOU MENTIONED THAT SKETCHIN IS GOING THROUGH CHANGE, IN TERMS OF PURPOSE. HOW HAS THAT CHANGE AFFECTED EMPLOYEES?

Elena: Sketchin, within its DNA, has also this idea of impermanence. Everything changes really really fast, starting from the mix that we use within the projects, to our offerings, to the services that we propose to the market, and also to the activities that we ask of our designers.

Our mindset and our approach to business – everything changes. So, they are in trouble right now (laughs) but we try to explain to them that this is the mindset to have if you want to work in Sketchin.

We have to train ourselves in this way, because it's also the mentality that we bring to clients. We want to help clients to stay in this mindset of evolution, and if we didn't have this kind of mentality ourselves, we couldn't offer that. It's our lifeblood.

Silvio: We approach projects with clients also with the idea that we can help teams inside the company to change their mindset and approach projects in a different way: we train people inside the companies, they work with us, using agile methodologies and so on. It's important to help them as well to approach their projects in a different way, in a more human-centred way, to crack what they, do so they can think in different context.

We are not a design studio that says, “okay, thank you for the brief, we will bring you the solution in two months time”. We create a team along with the clients, we have weekly reviews in order to analyze progress, we involve ourselves directly with the clients and the teams within the client, in all the phases of the design process.

Our way of working on projects is to train people in our mindset, to help companies to transform themselves and start projects of change that can help them transform into something different, to move into the user-first mindset, to take different decisions. We use design as a tool, an approach for company change.

— AN APPROACH FOR COMPANY CHANGE”

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