



Innovative thinking on how to run public services

How do you encourage civil servants to take a long, hard look at what they do so as to improve public services for citizens? And how do you kick-start new thinking to address society's plague of problems? For a start, you need to discover users' thoughts about basic design problems in the services they use, according to Danish political scientist Christian Bason.

18 March 2013 – By BRIGID GRAUMAN

'We're at the centre of a perfect storm,' says Bason, who runs Denmark's MindLab, a government unit that encourages bureaucracies to innovate. Western societies, he explains, are assailed by problems ranging from ageing and its healthcare costs to globalisation, changing mobility patterns and the impact of new technologies.

'Then there's the financial crisis,' he adds. 'We don't have the money to solve our problems, we can't expand our budgets and we don't know that government will have money in any foreseeable future. So we need to find smart ways to tackle these challenges.'

MindLab was set up 10 years ago to foster innovation in those parts of the Danish public sector where old methods and tools for instigating change were not working. 'Our mission is to introduce more collaborative and creative ways of conducting the business of government, and to revolutionise that culture,' says Bason.

Its achievements so far are modest but crucial: they include streamlining online tax forms so that more people use them; bringing injured workers back to work rather than leaving them demoralised and on welfare, by creating a more proactive and humane citizen service centre; reducing red tape for companies; and designing a social network for skilled foreign professionals, such as engineers, to make it easier for them to settle in Denmark.

Global spread of 'design thinking'

This oiling of the wheels of democracy is done through 'design thinking', which starts by considering the needs and wishes of public service users.

MindLabbers, as they are called, first conduct preliminary anthropological research. 'We go along with a person looking for a job, we take notes, we see how they use the IT, we observe the interaction between that person and the system, and we interview them about the experience,' says Bason.

Armed with this knowledge, and with edited audio and video recordings, they go to the ministerial decision makers, managers, staff and frontline workers and analyse what their reporting says about creating the outcomes these people want from their public services. 'What we're basically doing is giving bureaucrats and decision makers a first-hand experience of what it is like to be citizens or businesses using their regulations,' says Bason. The results unfold in three stages: new insights challenge the old mindsets, then new ideas are put forward for better ways of doing things, and finally these new ideas are implemented.

Vital mindset change

Although the changes may sometimes seem minimal given the scale of the challenges, MindLab and other similar outfits across the world are about radically changing governments' attitudes and approaches, both at national and local levels. 'It's about making governments apply a more effective way of policy making by being much more collaborative,' says Bason.

One such initiative is the NewNordicSchool, a project initiated by the Danish Ministry of Education, which aims to improve the schooling system by listening to ideas at grassroots level. 'Instead of wanting to control everything and act as the ultimate authority,' says Bason, 'ministries should be helping those at a local level to achieve what they want, to create networks and accelerate change.'

This is nothing other than a cultural revolution that involves governments accepting that private firms and local public service workers, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens themselves, have the knowledge and expertise to support them in the decisions they make. Not all civil servants are comfortable with loosening the reins, but Bason is pragmatic. 'They'll just have to leave their jobs if they can't take the mind shift.'

'This is very different from the old command-and-control system,' says Bason, 'but it's a vastly more effective model than the old bureaucratic logic. This form of co-production is the way forward in times of austerity. It may take a generation before we see it as the right way to run government, but it's the only way to go.'

Bason says many governments are adopting similar practices. 'There is a massive interest and commitment to this type of approach.' Singapore's Government has set up a 'design thinking unit' in the Prime Minister's office, Australia has an action plan for all the country's public services, and the US, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, France and the Netherlands are also doing interesting work. MindLab itself is co-funded by three Danish ministries – Employment, Taxation, and Business and Growth – and works with a number of others.

More info

[MindLab](#)

[Under its Innovation Union initiative, the EU has committed to research public sector and social innovation](#)

[European Design Innovation Initiative, launched by the European Commission in 2011, to raise awareness of design in innovation](#)

[The New NordicSchool](#)