The Principles for Digital Development: Applying both “Design with the User” and “Design for Scale”

by Zack Brisson, Principal & Co-founder of Reboot

The Principles for Digital Development, which Reboot is proud to endorse, are not static “lessons learned.” They should be living guidelines, continually refined through community discussion, because they’re so complex. Unexpected nuances and conflicts pop up in practice, not only between the Principles and the prerogatives of multiple stakeholders, but even between the Principles themselves. As DigitalPrinciples.org puts it:

[The Principles] do not answer difficult questions that arise from tensions between individual Principles, such as how to balance the move toward open data with growing privacy and security concerns.

While we see these tensions at Reboot, we know it is always possible to find a “sweet spot.” And the process of finding that sweet spot is not a hurdle; it can be a fruitful step in design and development.

Our recent work developing My Voice, for which we won a Core 77 Design Award, shows how the somewhat-competitive prerogatives between “Design with the User,” “Understand the Ecosystem,” and “Design for Scale” can push development projects to more effective solutions.

My Voice: Incremental and Iterative Results

My Voice is an SMS-based citizen feedback platform that enables citizen-driven improvement of public services. We developed and validated the platform through two pilots (in line with the Principles’ call for “incremental and iterative approaches”).

The first pilot, in partnership with the World Bank and a local agricultural organization, gathered feedback on a national program aimed at increasing farmers’ skills and incomes. Building on that experience, in 2014 we developed and implemented a module for citizens to monitor (and improve) government health clinics in rural areas.

The results were exciting: During a nine-week pilot across 11 primary care clinics, My Voice enabled unprecedented constructive dialogue between patients, service providers, and public health officials. By the end of implementation, more than 80 percent of all patient visits were registered in the My Voice database. Further, service providers at the participating health clinics were responding to patient feedback with practical improvements (such as keeping facilities open on weekends).

These promising pilots were a result of using the Principles for Digital Development. To “Design with the User,” for example, we employed a six-month immersive research and design process, including in-depth
When the “Scale” is Bigger than the “Ecosystem”
Our deep level of immersion raises an interesting question about another of the Principles for Digital Development: When a service is designed for and with a specific set of users and ecosystem, how broadly can it scale? At what “scale” do the users and ecosystem change?

To “Design for Scale,” you must define the ideal “scale” for a particular project, and be clear from the beginning about how a design will adapt to different contexts. Technological choices are only part of this challenge.

With My Voice, we created a solution through a two-part design: 1) A technology platform, which gathers citizen feedback and formats it specifically for provider and policymakers; and 2) A programmatic model, to integrate citizen feedback into service providers’ management and improvement processes.

We saw the need for these two integrated, mutually reinforcing parts from early in the user-centered process. When talking with patients at health care clinics, for example, we found that even the word “feedback” was unfamiliar; people had low expectations that their input would be wanted or used. The technology platform on its own would not have inspired participation if the programmatic model did not exist to ensure that My Voice would stimulate meaningful response.

Looking beyond the pilot stage, we saw that this two-part approach would also be useful in “Designing for Scale.” The open-source technology platform can be easily transposed; the programmatic model helps provide a framework for adapting the tool to processes and constraints in different sectors. That process requires understanding a new ecosystem and further user research and testing. In this way, institutionalizing the Principles for Digital Development requires a continuous loop—we are never “finished” with one of the Principles, even as a project reaches its envisioned “scale.”

Envisioning My Voice At Scale
For any institution or company that delivers public goods, My Voice can be an affordable means of collecting valuable data on the quality of services. Bringing the platform to a larger scale is not a one-step process, however. As we discuss the potential for new My Voice implementations with partners, including in future health care focused projects in Nigeria, we are continuing to work in alignment with the Principles for Digital Development. This means that we will first work with implementation partners to provide iterative “test cases,” ensuring that as we grow My Voice, we continue to refine it within the constraints of actual contexts and based on live user feedback.

Ensuring we have amply demonstrated the value of the service is also necessary to ensuring that it can win the full support of government, donor, or other stakeholders who may be invested in its wider implementation.

Success in any development project requires navigating multiple prerogatives. It is often simpler to find the
“sweet spot” between two Principles than it is to reconcile tensions between the Principles and the priorities of multiple other stakeholders. “Design for Scale,” for example, often aligns well with donor methodologies and budgets, while “Design with the User” can be a more difficult ask. On the flip side, donors may reap benefits from touting an “innovative” pilot without being held accountable for delivering on the expectations. While there are tensions to be answered between users, ecosystem, and scale, these three Principles must all be followed for any individual one to work.

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