Using Design Thinking in Your Organizational Change Efforts

A process in which a large company or organization changes its working methods or aims; for example, in order to develop and deal with new situations or markets

Definition of Organizational Change
Cambridge Dictionary

Let’s focus on the “changes its working methods” part of the organizational change definition above. In today’s increasingly complex, fast-paced and technology-driven workplace, it has become incredibly challenging for individuals to easily adapt to changes in their work environment.

And yet, expectations are high that new corporate initiatives will be quickly adopted and followed. Whether it is implementing a new Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) system, establishing and delivering a new curriculum of processes and leading practices to elevate base competencies, or adopting a new healthcare program, many organizational change efforts fail.

Consider the process of most change initiatives. A senior manager or management consultant defines a problem that must be solved. For example, a large corporation needs to better define a global work process with clear definitions, language and expectations. The senior manager or management consultant creates a solution—perhaps a new training program focused on better communicating the global work process. The training program solution is then presented to the person in charge of deciding whether or not to approve the solution.

Without ongoing iterative interaction with the decision-making executive, as well as the people who will need to be engaged in using the new global work process, the organizational change effort isn’t likely to be successfully adopted. Up and down the organizational chain, there is often internal resistance—individuals who are invested in avoiding change.

This is where design thinking can help. As explained in a previous article, design thinking is based on the truly understanding the user—their unmet needs and wants and their emotions—and then using iterative, rapid prototyping to create a user experience that meets those needs.

In the case of internal organizational change, the relentless focus on the end user—the executive who makes the go or no go decision and the individuals who will ultimately use the new process—is at the very core of applying design thinking to the way people work.

Let’s go back to the executive who needs to sign off on the budget for the organizational change effort. Say, the management consultant or senior manager in charge of the initiative frequently and consistently meets with the decision maker as well as those who engage in the work process. In those meetings, the consultant or senior manager checks in at each step along the way—asking for feedback and iterating the process to incorporate the feedback. As the problem is defined and solution proposed, this person should be sure that the executive and end user understand the challenge in the same way.

At the same time, the senior manager or consultant will better understand the needs of the user and increase the chance of successful stakeholder buy-in, alignment and thus adoption. To effectively change working methods and adapt to new situations and markets, adopt a user-centric organizational change approach.

More Reading

How to Design Enterprise Systems with the End User in Mind

When designing and implementing systems it's easy to forget that real live people are going to use them. Use design thinking to drive adoption in each phase of an implementation to create processes and tools you’d want to use yourself.

Design Thinking Basics: Five Simple Steps

Design thinking is a trendy concept that is now moving mainstream. Companies from Pfizer and Airbnb to Jet Blue and Hyatt have used design thinking to uncover and meet user needs through five simple steps: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test.
How to Increase Innovation Success: Focus on the End User

We need to change our paradigm about how we implement major capabilities like information systems, work process improvements or metrics. If it doesn’t delight our people, it’s not effective.

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