

Field Study 2: The Blackwood Foundation

1. Data Collection Method: Semi-structured interviews with David Jarrold, Director of the Blackwood Foundation.

2. Profile: The Blackwood Foundation is a medium-sized charity (annual incomes between £10,000 – 245,000) that promotes independent living and provides support for people with a disability or support needs. The charity aims to be “a catalyst for innovation, development and improvement”. The work is mainly focused on design and technology.

The charity was established in 2009 by Blackwood, an organisation that specialises in providing housing and care services for people with a disability or support needs based in Scotland (www.mbha.org.uk). The Foundation was set up as a means to capture a big picture and identify key challenges of housing and care services in the future. Currently, it has only two members of staff – a Director and a Business and Partnerships Executive. This small team leads on all of the Foundations activities. However, the charity has access to various experts in Blackwood, e.g. human factor specialists.

At present, its main sources of income are financial support from the parent company and the lottery fund. However, the foundation aspires to be self-sustained in the near future.

3. Services: Currently, the foundation offers two main services. Firstly, it helps connect people with a disability or support needs with designers and the design process. Secondly, it helps connect people with an interest in independent living together so that they can share problems, ideas and recommendations freely. The details of both services will be explained in the following sections.

4. Service Development/Improvement: The current services are the direct results of a user engagement programme – see case study 1.

Case Study 1: User-led Service Development
The Foundation conducted 11 consultation

and engagement workshops¹ with approximately 100 people Scotland-wide in 2010 as a means to capture what people with a disability or support needs really want (Figure 1). The key findings are as follows:

1. Firstly, many workshop participants have strong potential to play co-creating roles. Using Sanders and Stappers² framework for classifying users based on level of expertise, passion and creativity, many participants are considered ‘creators’. They know what they want and already designed/modified products and/or built environments to suit their needs.

“...the (design) expertise is already there. The amount of fixes and solutions that people came up with are incredible. We have to find a way of capturing their knowledge and insight, and find the way to use it... They have ability to design or modify to achieve what they need. People do create their own solutions on a regular basis as well... or at least find their ways to adapt and live with what they have”

2. Nevertheless, there are very limited opportunities for these ‘creators’ to engage in the development process. There is need to utilise their knowledge and creative skills by giving them more opportunities to co-create new designs and technologies with trained designers.

“...there is a real passion from people to get involved with designers and technology developers... to share their expertise... to have an input into the design process... a number of times people told me that they bought something of the shelf that ‘almost’ worked... if this switch was just here or that panel was round

¹ For a full report of the workshops, please visit: <http://www.mbha.org.uk/media/resources/documents/Foundation/Design%20and%20Technology%20as%20an%20Aid%20to%20Living%20Independently%20FINAL.pdf>

² Sanders, E. B. N. and Stappers, P.J. (2009) Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *CoDesign*, 4(1), 5 – 18.

there... their involvements in design could have made the difference.”

3. It was observed that most people do not know about existing products/services to support their independent living. There is a need for a platform that allows people to exchange knowledge more effectively.



Figure 1: Pictures from the workshops

These principal findings led to the service development, which can be divided into two main stages. The first stage is the development of **bespoken**, a social media site that *“bring together anyone with an interest in independent living”*. The site offers a forum (Figure 2) that allows people to exchange ideas, tips, problems and recommendations more effectively. It also showcases good designs so that members are aware of existing solutions in the marketplace as well as recent design and technological developments.

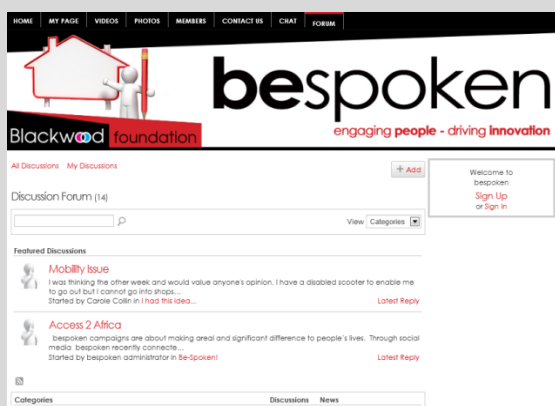


Figure 2: bespoken’s Forum

The second stage is connecting users with designers through a university engagement scheme. The Blackwood Foundation conducted the pilot work with School of Engineer and Design, Brunel University. The charity set a design challenge for a final-year

design student by asking forum members to come up with problems and/or new design opportunities for the chosen student to work on (see the outcome in Figure 3). The idea was to encourage a trained designer to co-design a product with real users.



Figure 3: Urban Wildlife Probe – a device designed to unobtrusively detect and record the presence of urban wildlife³

At the end of the project, a meeting was carried out with the student to discuss the overall experience and identify all potential problems/challenges that should be taken into consideration before launching a larger scale of design challenge in the future.

One new service idea has emerged from the experience of connecting users with a trained designer during the design challenge:

“We are looking at how we can put together an engagement service that we can offer to commercial companies. We can help them connect to specific groups of end users - say, for example, you develop a hearing aid device, and you need 20 people aged between 30 – 50 for your product development, we have a mechanism to support you... At Naidex (a leading event showcasing products and services for independent living in the UK), we talked to some suppliers and developers. What they were saying is that it is quite

³ For more information, please visit: http://portfolio.madeinbrunel.com/#2012/dimitrios-stamatis/urban-wildlife-probe/?&_suid=134169054831404738167790623771

difficult to engage with people because they develop different products and each product requires them to engage with people with different needs... currently there is no service that help them connect in this way with people”

5. Service Quality: Since the service developments are user-led, they are well-received by beneficiaries. Thus far, bespoken has 500 active members and has had 8,000 unique visitors. Currently, the Foundation does not have formal procedures or criteria for a work-related performance assessment although this is being developed.

However, the charity recently carried out the ‘Quality of Life’ survey in order to measure the level of user satisfaction of current housing and care services offered to people with a disability or support needs. In the short term, this information will feed into the developments at Blackwood. In the long term, this knowledge will help the charity improve their services for beneficiaries. The survey comprised user diaries and semi-structured interviews, and was conducted with support from an architect and a human factors expert at Blackwood. The data analysis is in progress. Both the user-led evaluation process and key results are likely to guide the development of the service quality assessment procedure at the Blackwood Foundation in the future.

6. Service Costs: Up till now, the highest investment has been the nationwide consultation and engagement workshops (around £20,000) and the development of bespoken (approximately £10,000). Most activities are considered cost-effective.

However, in order to grow and become self-sustainable, the post of Business and Partnerships Executive has recently been created. This post is responsible for creating content on bespoken (e.g. updating information about new designs and technologies) and for fundraising so that the charity will not have to rely on financial support from Blackwood.

7. User Involvement: The main activities of the charity are promoting co-design between people with a disability or support needs and trained designers. Thus, the foundation tries to involve beneficiaries in all key activities.

7.1. Key Activities: The main lesson that the charity learned from the consultation and engagement workshops is choosing activities that all kinds of people can contribute. Even though many people demonstrate a good level of design expertise, it is unrealistic to expect everyone play a co-creating role.

7.2. Tools and Techniques: Suitable probing activities, such as asking each participant to identify designs that delighted them and those that frustrated them or the best and the worst piece of technology, helped encourage everybody to take part and have their say. Carefully planned activities prevented opinionated participants from dominating the whole group. Currently, the Foundation does not use any particular co-design toolkits and/or guidelines. However, it considers using them in the future.



Figure 4: Examples of workshop activities

However, some users find it difficult to express themselves clearly. For example, when his team carried out the survey, some users needed help filling the diaries. He was concerned that some thoughts captured in the diaries might be the researchers’ interpretations of what users wanted.

7.3. Problems: The reflective interview conducted with the design student at the end of the pilot design challenge revealed that a trained designer does not know how to utilise users’ knowledge and creative capabilities effectively. The interview results show that

the designer perceived users as an adviser rather than a co-creator (see Figure 5). Thus, he did not get users fully involved in the process. He admitted that the outcome would have been better if users were more involved.



Figure 5: The design consultation via the bespoke's discussion forum

The Director noted that in the next design challenge, he would like encourage users to co-produce design solution(s) with designers.

- Firstly, members of **bespoken's** forum will be asked to come up with a list of problems and opportunities for design.
- Next, students from a number of leading design schools will select the idea that they like from the list and inform **bespoken's** members of their choices.
- **bespoken's** members will be asked to form small groups to support individual designers on the areas of their interest.

7.4. Advantages and Disadvantages: The main benefit of co-designing with users is saving money. Co-design could help developers get the right solutions faster and avoid potential failures. Since users no longer take existing products/services as given, they demonstrate strong interest in developing solutions themselves. Their insight and creativity should be properly utilised. The Director expressed his disappointment that several developers still produce assistive products without consulting any end users. However, the right expertise is required to get the best out of users. Fortunately, the

Foundation has access to experts and sufficient support from Blackwood.

8. Design Involvement: The charity does not have an in-house designer. Trained designers often play the roles of external consultants. A web designer was hired to create the **bespoken** site. Moreover, architects used by Blackwood lent support when needed. The experience has been positive and productive. The Foundation is keen to engage more trained designers, especially those with an interest in independent living and assistive technology.

Up till now, most activities have been led by the Director, who is not a trained designer. This shows that in order to apply co-design effectively in-house designers are not needed – providing that the charity is keen to engage with and has access to trained designers.

Main Lessons Learned

1. It is unrealistic to expect all users to play co-creating roles. Therefore, it is important to plan user engagement activities in the way that people with different levels of creativity could contribute without feeling being left out.
2. The digital platform could help people with a disability and support needs play an active role in the design process. However, users without Internet access might not be able to contribute.
3. It is important to encourage trained designers to fully utilise users' insight and creative skills. Sanders and Stappers observed that, in order to successfully embrace co-design practices, one must believe that "*all people are creative.*"² This is not a commonly accepted belief. That is why some designers or persons in charge might find it difficult to let go of control and let users make key design decisions.

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