

Touchpoint

THE JOURNAL OF SERVICE DESIGN



Designing Citizen-Centred Public Services

Social Innovation in Local Government: Sustaining Success

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Introducing Dialogues

A technique for delivering better government services



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This article is about a new technique in design projects for citizen-centred government services: the 'dialogue'. We will introduce dialogues to the service design community and share our lessons learned in using this technique. We also want to explore how dialogues create a shared understanding and commitment among designers and internal stakeholders.

Our article acknowledges the challenges many professionals in government services are facing and it details how the use of dialogues can be a successful response for design, technology and the client institution itself. Furthermore, we will explore how dialogues sit alongside other more familiar service design methods and tools, and how they are especially well-suited to the design of government services. To clarify our use of the term, we see 'dialogues' as a discrete set of interactions between a service provider and a service consumer, much in the way that 'dialogue' describes the conversational exchange specified in a screenplay or script. This is different to 'dialog', the user interface term.

1. SHOWCASE UWV

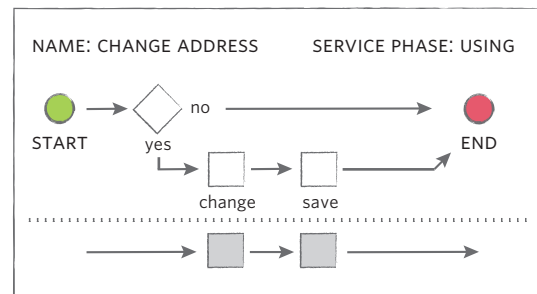
Through the government's Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen (UWV) department, you can apply for unemployment benefits that provide

financial support while you seek a new job. The UWV is tasked with creating transparency in the labour market and bridging the gap between available jobs and jobseekers through (online) tools. Your unemployment money depends on using these tools properly. If you fail to demonstrate your jobseeking activity, the agency can curtail or revoke your right to the benefit. Reductions in staff, offices and budgets have led the UWV to move towards a service model that is increasingly digital. Citizens, however, have been vocal in their complaints about service quality. Despite good intentions, the UWV can frustrate jobseekers who must depend on it in hard times. The transition of complex public services to digital channels and touchpoints has resulted in a confusing landscape of legacy portals. Furthermore, both jobseekers and job providers complain regularly about the UWV's digital touchpoints having poor usability, usefulness and value. And, moreover, the

DIALOGUE PROFILE

NAME: CHANGE ADDRESS	SERVICE PHASE: USING
DESCRIPTION:	
<p>A person is moving to another house at a different postal address. Therefore, his/her address needs to be updated. The person submits the new postal address to the system.</p>	

DIALOGUE DIAGRAM



Dialogue profile and diagram

users of its services – a cross-section of the entire Dutch population, whose interactions with the UWV are often triggered by unpleasant life events or circumstances – still expect the same level of service from governmental digital touchpoints as they're getting elsewhere. These growing pains don't just belong to the UWV: they are a typical challenge for most government agencies trying to redesign their services for digital infrastructures. Moving 20th-century bureaucracy to 21st-century infrastructure is a grand challenge. Over the last three years, we worked with various departments at the UWV to introduce service design as a way to design better online services. And, although we are very positive about what service design brings about, we were also tested in our patience, perseverance and practical inventiveness to implement service design into the inner workings of the organisation. In our experience, using dialogues as a technique for design, communication and decision-making made all the difference. And their value as a design tool – which we will now discuss – complements their value from a 'business' point of view as well: In a world of ever-increasing touchpoints, dialogue-based design delivers a consistent experience.

2. WHAT ARE DIALOGUES?

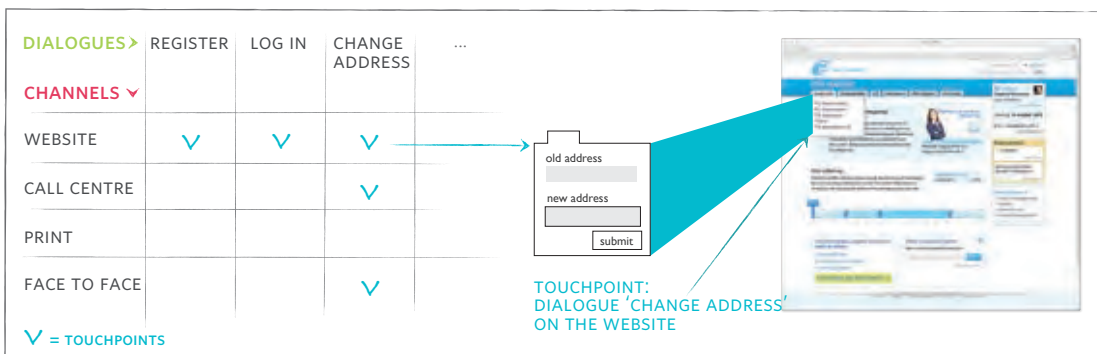
The origin of dialogues in service design is grounded in our design and development work in enterprise environments. We discovered that in order to orchestrate touchpoints in services, a specific layer of abstraction was necessary. Development teams in particular were already familiar with reusable patterns, templates and code snippets: dialogues share a certain level of abstraction with these elements. When breaking down events, we identified in the phases of citizen journeys, the most

elementary units we found were dialogues. So we started to structure dialogues and put them into use.

The structure of dialogues

For the purpose of service design projects, dialogues have a structure, expressed in a diagram. The three recurring parts of a dialogue are its beginning (the necessary or helpful preconditions to be able to start and complete a dialogue), its flow (a sequence of actions and decisions made by participants, as the dialogue progresses) and its ending.

Within a dialogue, actions elicit reactions or responses from participants, which are called steps. Therefore, a dialogue is a logical sequence of steps taken, in this case, by a government service provider and a citizen. A dialogue has a profile that contains its identifier (a name phrased as a verb+noun pair, such as 'Change Address'), the service phase it belongs to, and a description (formulated in natural language and part of the narrative structure of the service, such as 'A person is moving to another house at a different postal address. Therefore, his/her address needs to be updated. The person submits the new postal address to the system.'). In addition, dialogues have a diagram depicting the flow of actions and decisions made by participants. For communication and specification purposes, a dialogue diagram visualises all steps, as well as user and system decisions, insofar as these decisions impact the perspective, experience, and behaviour of the user. Any government service can be broken down into a sequence of dialogues, logically structured into phases a citizen goes through. For example: 'Orienting', 'Registering', and 'Using'. Dialogues are therefore useful abstractions, used in understanding a service as being made of its



Dialogues can be supported on multiple channels. For the instantiation of a dialogue on a specific touchpoint, a visualisation or prototype can be shown

component parts so that they may be better understood and designed. Initially, dialogues created during service design are just high level, serving the purpose of identification, description and orchestration. Over time, dialogues are further detailed, specified and enriched towards implementation. Like use cases in software engineering, dialogues have clear starting and ending points, and therefore have pre- and post-conditions. Pre-conditions outline requirements that must be met before the dialogue is started. For example, a newborn baby needs a name before a dialogue to register its birth can be initiated. Similarly, post-conditions describe the circumstances once the dialogue has been completed. For example, the situation of having received a registration confirmation.

The flow of a dialogue is the progression through actions and decision points by the participants. In designing with dialogues, actions are named, using a controlled vocabulary that improves consistency and communication among designers, developers and other stakeholders. In dialogues for person-to-system interactions, there are two kinds of actions: user actions and system actions. User actions are labeled with terms such as 'Select', 'Enter' or 'Submit'. System actions are named with verbs like 'Calculate', 'Delete' or 'Retrieve'. Each action in a dialogue is carried out by either the system or the user. More general actions that are not channel- or touchpoint-specific can belong to either participant, such as 'Read', 'Write' or 'Wait'. Decisions are an important part of dialogues. They are the outcome of rules applied at certain points within the dialogue. In the context of government services, identifying decision rules for the system comes from decisions made by the agency itself, whereas rules from

citizens are derived from user research, insights and testing. Both for actions and decisions, their granularity is decided by a multidisciplinary design team through shared understanding and consensus. The combination of steps and decisions taken by the system and the citizen are their behaviors, and they make up the dialogue as a whole.

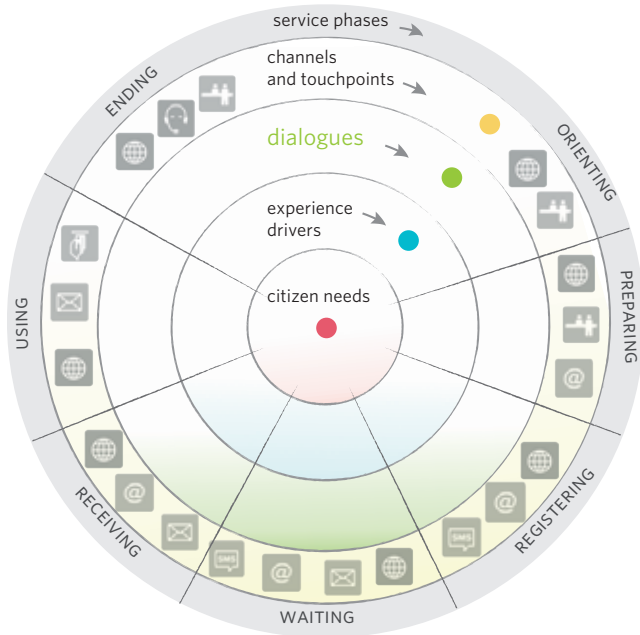
Dialogues, channels and touchpoints

How are dialogues connected to channels and touchpoints? Actually, they're not: they are channel- and touchpoint-agnostic. They are, however, fundamental building blocks of the service.

In our process, we consider a channel as a medium of information, communication, and interaction. Channels, therefore, have unique characteristics, setting the design constraints and defining the design space of that channel. Dialogues are not directly connected to channels, but linked to them by means of the touchpoints in which they occur.

Examples of channels are print, a public website, a call centre and 'face-to-face'. Designing dialogues for print implies making use of the medium's portability, familiarity and availability. Designing dialogues for digital media uses characteristics such as connectivity, mobility and computation. Designing for face-to-face interactions harnesses their physicality, ambiance and accessibility.

In principle, one channel is not necessarily better than another. To determine which channel is the best in which to deliver dialogues, factors such as cost, feasibility and intended experience are analysed. Touchpoints emerge at the intersection of dialogues and channels. For us, a touchpoint is an embodiment of a dialogue



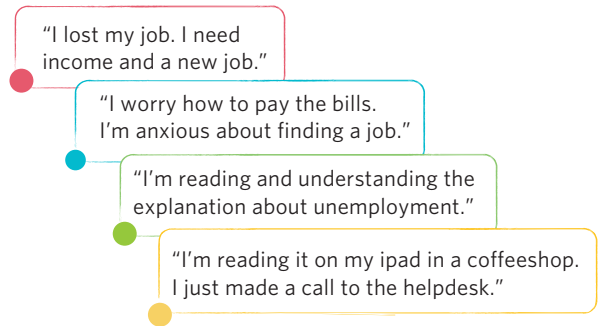
being accessed through a specific channel. From the channels mentioned previously, examples of touchpoints are a paper form for requesting unemployment benefits, a native mobile app to submit an updated address or a service counter for checking in. Furthermore, a dialogue can only be completed on one touchpoint. Conversely, channels can facilitate one or more dialogues. For example, a service counter in a town hall can be used for multiple services, in the same way that a public website can be used for requesting a driver's license or for making an appointment with a civil servant. Modelling dialogues as discrete units will make it easier to orchestrate touchpoints across channels, and sets the stage for consistent experiences across web, mobile and other touchpoints in the future.

3. HOW DO WE USE DIALOGUES?

So how, where and when are dialogues used and what makes them powerful? Let's look at our design process and see how they fit in and what role they play.

First step

A first step in designing a service is to establish the 'service essentials' – the key properties to which the service should adhere. An example is 'Be transparent and inclusive'. These essentials apply to all citizens. Furthermore, they are mandated at the European, national and departmental level and are formulated for



Step 3: The service ecosystem

specific projects. Besides ones dictated from the outside, essentials can be sourced from research into citizens' needs as well as (international) benchmarks and best practices. During design, service essentials function as heuristic principles and guidelines to decide which services, dialogues and touchpoints a government agency must deliver. Furthermore, service essentials support a shared understanding and commitment among all stakeholders. Service essentials are a tool to help designers to define the 'irreducible core' of a service.

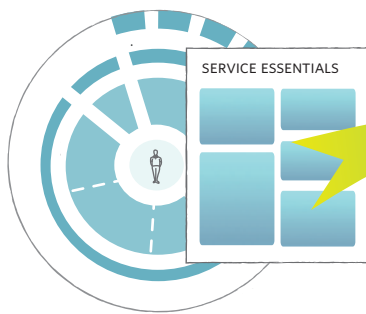
Second step

The second step is to establish a deep understanding of users through research, and to capture these in citizen personas, a widely-used tool amongst service design practitioners. During research, these personas are used for encapsulating all relevant research data and for identifying all dialogues in the service. During design, they are used as a reference to identify which ones constitute the irreducible core of the service.

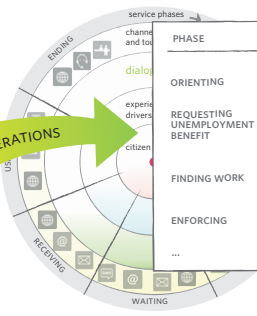
Third step

The third step is to describe the service in a 'service ecosystem.' Based on work carried out with internal stakeholders and citizens, the multidisciplinary design team creates the citizen journeys and identifies their component phases. This step allows designers to see which dialogues are supported by which touchpoints. An ecosystem depicts either state of a service: its current state or a future state. For the current state, dialogues are identifiable in the dialogue lane of the ecosystem, which shows their associations to phases and touchpoints.

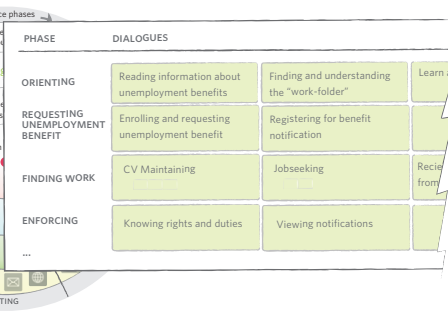
CURRENT ECOSYSTEM



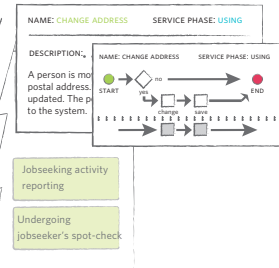
FUTURE ECOSYSTEM (LEVEL OF DETAIL 1)



FUTURE DIALOGUE OVERVIEW (LEVEL OF DETAIL 2)



DIALOGUE PROFILE (LEVEL OF DETAIL 3)



Step 5:

From the current to a future state of the service

Fourth step

With all the dialogues identified, the design team makes a distinction between primary and secondary dialogues. Some dialogues are indispensable and define the core of the service, whereas others enrich the service in various ways, but are not necessary per se. This identification activity is critical in defining the scope of the service, and – to use a motto of the UK government service design approach – “Government should only do what only government can do.”¹

Designers can also identify dialogues that occur across multiple services. An example of such a dialogue is ‘Submit jobseeking activities’. The precise way in which it is instantiated depends on the specific service, the service phase, and the touchpoints involved. Designers and stakeholders use dialogues as externalised models of the services involved, building shared understanding, commitment and a common language. Stakeholders such as legislators, system architects and civil servants use dialogues to assess the impact on their domains, responsibilities and practices. With dialogues, stakeholders understand what must change in order to deliver the best services for citizens. Multidisciplinary teamwork is critical for successfully completing this step. This often means having at least one board-level manager

who is a ‘digital believer’ and knowledgeable on citizen experience.

Fifth step

In the fifth step, the set of identified dialogues needs to be developed and shown at three levels of detail: (1) All new dialogues in the phases of the ecosystem, (2) All dialogues in a dialogue overview and (3) Dialogue diagrams for individual dialogues.

The first two visualisations are directed at top-level management so that they can understand the decisions to be made in implementing the service. The third visualisation is suited for system architects to understand the infrastructural requirements that they are going to be responsible for. Once all levels of detail are communicated throughout the organisation, one or two rounds of thorough review and organisation-wide agreement on the dialogues are necessary.

Sixth step

Once there is consensus on the core of the service and its dialogues, it must then be decided which touchpoints on which channels will be supported through dialogues.

Once touchpoints and dialogues have been decided upon and specified, the prototyping process can start.

4. BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

In our design projects with government agencies, we increasingly find that working with dialogues is relevant, valuable and useful. People react to them well, and engage with them easily. Dialogues are beneficial because they are channel- and touchpoint-independent and agnostic. They can be discussed without having to refer to specific characteristics of a touchpoint. Secondly, the

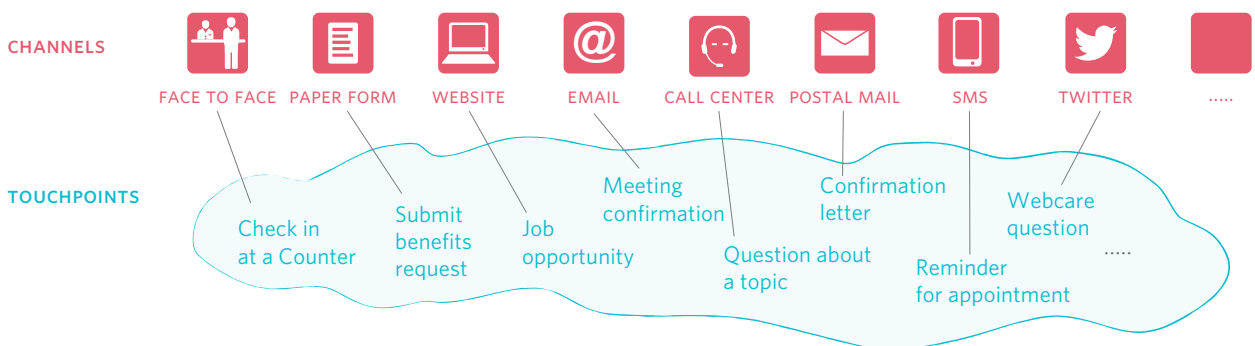
re-usability of dialogues is high. For example, dialogues such as ‘Identify citizen’, ‘Pay bill’ or ‘Find answer’ can be implemented in touchpoints across multiple channels. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, using dialogues requires all involved parties to be citizen-centred. It forces many to change their perspective.

While most service designers might be unfamiliar with dialogues, they simply require a subtly different mindset. It is quite common to think about services in terms of the physical and digital touchpoints involved. Unfortunately, thinking only in terms of the features, functions and capabilities of those touchpoints has several disadvantages: the commonalities of services and touchpoints are identified very late, too late or just not at all. The touchpoints become the focal points, instead of the citizens, their needs and drivers. Furthermore, emerging technologies create the necessity to rethink existing touchpoint concepts completely, whereas the underlying dialogues manifest themselves just as a new kind of touchpoint. And besides this changed mindset, a specific design skill is developed when working with dialogues: designers become proficient at working at differing levels of abstraction or granularity. Identifying and describing the commonalities and differences of services and dialogues is like identifying the universals and

particulars in philosophy. Identifying common characteristics, behaviours or facets as distinctive is a major design challenge. Designers learn abstraction not only through practice, but also through applying heuristic principles. Principles based upon understanding citizen needs and drivers, the domain, the differences between mental models of citizens and system models, and all technical constraints.

Designers experienced in writing use cases already have a good foundation for working with dialogues. However, we do see challenges for technology and government organisations. People responsible for systems and infrastructure as well as legislation need a deep understanding of the dialogues they are supporting, and they must be introduced to this technique. This remains as a big hurdle in our projects. But we are convinced that using dialogues provides an adequate response to all of them. ●

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/designprinciples#second>



Step 6: The relationships between channels and touchpoints

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