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Title: Let me do my job - Industrial Designer's Experiences of Client Collaboration

Year: 2013

Version: Final published version

Please cite the original version:

Leisti-Szymczak, Anni & Liikkanen, Lassi & Laakso, Miko & Summanen, Iris. 2013. Let me do my job - Industrial Designer's Experiences of Client Collaboration. Proceedings of the CO-CREATE 2013 - The Boundary-Crossing Conference on Co-Design in Innovation, Espoo, 16-19 June, 2013. P. 445-456. 978-952-60-5236-6 (printed).

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Let Me Do My Job – Industrial Designers' Experiences of Client Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In the reported study, we explore the relationship of industrial designers and their clients in the co-design process from the designer's perspective. We look into the conceptual design phases, in which the most critical decisions concerning the product are made. Our primary interest was in how designers perceive decision making as a part of the design process. In our empirical work, we performed artifact-based interviews with seven practicing, professional designers based in Finland. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the transcribed interviews in order to reveal the central themes in designers' perception towards design decisions. The analysis surfaced four themes: the backdrop of the industrial design process, the fundamentals of designer identity, and the defense reactions and coping in response to identity threats. We found that while designers perceive the client relationship essential, it often seemed more destructive than constructive for their creative process. Overall, our study suggests, that by improving the communication and collaboration in the client-designer relationship, the innovativeness of industrial design commissions could be improved.

KEYWORDS

Innovation process, Creative conflicts, Designer-client relations, Decision making, Social interaction, Conceptual design, Communication styles.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the designer's perspective on the collaboration of industrial designer and client in the context of outsourced industrial design work. The outcome of design is not solely dependent on the creative

abilities or expertise of the designer, but to a large extent on the collaboration between the designer and the client. Existing research suggests that the problems in creative industries in general rise from the conflicting values of art and business (Elsbach, 2009; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Holm, 2006). For example, Walker (1990) uses the metaphor of “two tribes at war” to describe the unsettled relationship between designers and managers stemming from differing goals, education and styles of thought. While these differing approaches or mindsets undoubtedly are the source of many conflicts, the reality is likely to be more complex, presumably even more so in the context of external design services. Although the relationship between the client and the designer has been identified as a crucial factor of success of design projects (cf. Eckert et al., 2010), it has been largely neglected in contemporary studies.

This study is explorative and qualitative and examines the experiences of industrial designers who collaborate with client to create new products or product concepts. Collaboration is seen as a mixture of diverse skills, temperaments, effort, and personalities aiming to realize a shared vision of something new and useful (Moran and John-Steiner, 2004). The goal of this study is to generate a rich view on designers’ experiences on this complex relationship. The data is comprised of semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven industrial designers working in four Finnish design agencies. This study approaches the subject from the perspective of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009). It focuses is on exploring how individuals engage in making sense of experiences and events, and what these experiences mean for the designers.

In this paper we present a preliminary analysis of the data. Our focus is in describing the problematic aspects of the co-design relationship as they are perceived by industrial designers. Even though the design cases we inspect as a part of the inquire reveal later success stories, we here highlight the demanding interpersonal relationship often emerging between the parties.

METHODS

Interviews

We conducted a qualitative interview study, aimed at understanding the world from an individual’s perspective (Kvale, 1996). The in-depth interviews were semi-structured. To make abstract language commonly used by domain experts tangible and help them to remember details of the story, the interviews were associated to designers’ reality through design artefacts picked from specific projects. Design artefacts have

communication functions, such as conscripting, coordinating, framing, persuading and recording (Hendry, 2004). In practice, some artefacts function as reminders, records of decisions (Whyte, Ewenstein, Hales and Tidd, 2007). These features embedded in design artefacts encourage using them as prompts in interviews (Ramduny-Ellis, Dix, Rayson, Onditi, Sommerville, and Ransom, 2005). Prior to interviews, two researchers assembled idea sketches and concept presentations produced by the designers for internal use and client presentations into a map (see Pic. 1). It presented the evolution of the design through different generative, review, and decision-making stages. Sketches were printed out in sufficient size and the material of the project was organized chronologically on large sheets of paper. This stimulus was used to structure the interview, as well as to establish a common understanding between the informant and the researchers. The material formed the outline of the interview and the interviewers guided and prompted the discussion by open questions such as *'Could you describe what happened next?', 'What did you think about that?', 'How did you feel about that?'* The objective was to discuss the events occurred during the project and the designers' feelings about them richly and in detail, with an emphasis on how the decisions regarding the design were made.



Picture 1
Illustrative example of a paper collage
of a project timeline used as an
artifact in the interviews

Participants

We interviewed seven industrial designers, who worked on four different projects in four Finnish design agencies. All participants were professionally trained industrial designers with several years of experience working from multiple clients. Except for one, all participants were male. All interviews were performed in Finnish, the native language of the interviewees, the excerpts presented here are our translations.

Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Finnish, and thus the excerpts presented in this paper have been translated into English. In order to protect the privacy and ensure confidentiality of information on the interviewees, the agencies

in which they work, and their clients, all possible references to other people, products, and fields of operations have been altered. However, careful attention has been paid to the relevancy of this information relative to this study. Therefore, some words have replaced with more general terms and these edited words and other remarks are put in brackets. The interviewees were given pseudonyms, which are consistently used throughout this paper.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

We utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009) in the data analysis. Its focus is on exploring how individuals engage in making sense of experiences and events, and what are the meanings of these experiences. In the spirit of phenomenology, this study takes a data-driven approach to this issue as it aims to approach the data without any preconceptions and theoretical models. IPA acknowledges that people perceive the world in different ways and the method aims to discover and understand the experiences and events from the subject's perspective. IPA allows the researcher to explore, flexibly and in detail, the area of concern and to discover themes, recurring patterns of meaning that identify and convey things that matter to the informants.

Applying the steps suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, pp. 80 - 107) and Storey (2007, pp. 51 - 65), transcripts were printed out, read and re-read carefully to create the first notes. This initial noting concentrated on detecting the key concepts and important issues. These notes varied from semantics to posing questions, and making observations about designers emotions. After the initial phase, more abstract ('higher-order') themes were formed, but the aim was to remain close to the initial transcription so that the themes were rooted in the original transcription. Phase by phase new themes were formed and finally, shared themes across the interviews were identified through searching patterns, similarities, and tensions.

IPA approaches individual as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being, acknowledging the connection between people's talk, their thinking, and emotional state. (Smith and Osborn, 2003.) IPA is as double-hermeneutic as the researcher strives to put oneself in the participant's place, to understand the participant's sense-making and then trying to interpret, make sense of the participant's sense making (Smith and Osborne, 2003).

In the following, we will present our findings from IPA along with some discussion and references to relevant background literature.

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed that designers' experiences were often characterized by dissatisfaction, frustration, defending, and contenting. We relate these negative experiences to foremost to the need of *maintaining professional identity*. Working with clients quite often appears to pose a threat to the designer's professional identity and identity threat and the struggle against the prevailing power structure reflect the designers' experiences. Clients may at times restrain designers from actualizing the *fundamental principles* of their profession, creating feelings of their expertise being undervalued and questioned. Threats to professional identity in turn result in identity maintenance behaviors. In the following, we consider these reactions under two broad themes: *defense reactions* and *coping*. We begin by describing the *backdrop of the industrial design process* as the designers see it and the *fundamentals of designer identity*.

Backdrop: Power Relations

There is a shared, inherent consensus in designer-client -relationship about the power relation. The designer (or the design agency) receives a design assignment from a client. In the last resort, the client is the decision maker, although the designer assumes much responsibility for "small" decisions. In order to proceed in the project there has to be an approval from the client. The relationship does not include equal, the designer is always at a disadvantage, and the client has the final say in this relationship.

Despite the common understanding, designer accounts of the power relations aren't this simple; designer makes design proposals and the client decides, which ones to pursue. Designer consents to this relation, although, as it turns out, the consent is rather token. Designers challenge the client's dominant position and resist their disadvantaged position. There are signals that designers strive to attain and maintain autonomy by challenging the client. They consciously stretch the boundaries set by the client and the designer also has the control over his/her own work. Even after the client had made a decision to pursue certain idea or concept or certain idea had been rejected, there were some indications that these decisions or choices are not considered definitive and final by designers.

"although there, in the beginning the [idea] was rejected or it was considered that it is not that good of a feature, we still tried to offer it on the chance that it could nevertheless somehow be integrated into it" (Dave)

Fundamentals of Designer Identity

Professional identity is defined as a relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role (Schein, 1978). Schwartz (1994, 21) has defined values as "*desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, which serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity.*" The centrality of personal values for identity is shared by other scholars as well (e.g. Gecas 2000; Hitlin, 2003) and Rostan (1998) even claims that the identity of creative people is bound to their creative work.

Guiding principles of industrial designers' work are clearly emphasized in the data. These features and values (designer "ethics") form a significant part of designers' professional identity. The designers' aim is to create something that they consider *novel, distinctive, and coherent*. In addition to these attributions, the designers use such criteria as *appearance, usability, and functionality* in evaluating their work. The values surface explicitly when they are used as evaluation criteria for decision making and as goals for the design process. Designers strive for designs that are in accordance with one's own principles. These values form the ideal designer identity, striving for these values enables the designer to view oneself as good designer (Gecas, 2000). These values are reflected in the following excerpt of a design concept evaluation:

"they said that there had to be a [certain feature] in it, but then we, in our wisdom, started pondering if it could be replaced with something else, as that [idea/solution] is so much used and it doesn't look that good and [- -] it can also be difficult to use" (Dave)

Defense reactions

Defending Territory

Designers appear territorial. Designers are mainly willing to accept the constraints (such as timetable, budget, technical constraints etc.) set by the client, but they don't allow the client to invade the designer's territory and interfere the design activity itself. If this happens, designer may express even indignation. Territory includes designing related activity, such as sketching and prototyping and trespassing would mean presenting sketches or prototypes are nonnegotiable solutions or starting points for the designers. In designer's perspective, client is only allowed to comment and give feedback, not to design.

Peter was indignant as the client sent him sketches, which the client himself had drawn with a ballpoint pen. This trespassed the designer's territory:

"Yeah, there's actually, that he has sent some scanned ballpoint pen sketches that I would like something like this, which have been more or less useless, but I got some pointers what that guy likes and which strings to try to pull that we can proceed in mutual understanding" (Peter)

Another designer experienced a similar situation:

"they kind of pulled out under the table a prototype they had done saying that we thought that it could be something like this, and then it was like, yeah, you have thought this too, way to go/great"(Dave)

Defending Profession

Industrial designers can appear as a relatively new profession, at least for disciplines crowded with engineers. Designers appear to wrestle with the legitimacy of their profession and appear to be underdogs. Peter brought forward explicitly that there is still some misunderstanding of what industrial designing is about.

"because for some reason, for crying out loud, this was started by designing it from inside out so that there wasn't much you could do about it -- I think that highlights really well how people have strange conceptions about designer's role, now, this went along the traditional pattern that the client expects the designer to jump in right at the end and he decorates the surface, that's just like what happened here, unfortunately, it ended up a bit of like surface decoration" (Peter)

On several occasions, designers felt that their whole expertise was questioned or they felt that the client didn't trust the designer's judgment. Designer often appears to be in a position, in which they have to continuously convince the client of their expertise. From the designers perspective, , a good client doesn't question the necessity of designing:

"well, the [client] has already quite a long history in terms of designing and you can see that everybody there thinks that designing and usability is an important quality in a product, it is supported and resources are put into it and there's no such things what some companies might still do that does this even need to be designed" (Steve)

Coping

Under threat, people resort to coping strategies. Coping strategy can be defined as any activity that aims and succeeds to remove or ameliorate the threat to identity. (Breakwell, 1986.) Designers engage in coping strategies on two levels; intra-psychoic and interpersonal level. On intra-psychoic level designers resort to (re)attributing. Attributions have three functions:

making sense of the world and making the world predictable, preserving and enhancing self-esteem, and acceptance and avoiding confusion. (Hewstone, 1983). Attributions are understood as causes and reasons (Buss, 1978). People try to make sense of the outcomes, which follow from succeeding or failing to achieve their goals. We observed the use of *attribution* and *compliance* as intra-psychic methods, and *persuasion* as an interpersonal coping method.

Persuasion

If a decision to pursue a certain design idea has been made, but the designer is not satisfied with the decisions, designers can try social influence tactics to persuade the client. Commonly this happens through visual design artefacts and argumentation. Artefacts prompt conversations and steer the client's attention in the presentation of design options.

“Well, I think that this type of hand-sketched [image], that it is both on my and the client's opinion just an idea, a thought about the thing --- I thought that maybe it would help their decision making that they saw that you can make them similar although they are different concepts, when it comes to shape.” (Jenny)

Designers show persistence in offering ideas that may already have been rejected. Even after a clear decision not to pursue certain ideas or concepts, designer might try to change the client's mind. Sometimes this pays off:

“and, then, I think that we kind of managed to talk certain products into these final products, which hadn't necessarily ended up in the finalized concepts without our slight arm-twisting” (Tom)

Attribution

The points of decision making, meetings that were held to present the developed ideas and concepts were turning points. Often, when an idea or a whole concept, which the designer thought was full of potential, was rejected, designers strove to make sense of the client's decisions. Rejection was often attributed to the client's inability to read the sketch or to the sketch itself.

“But then I was irritated afterwards because I could have drawn that image in another way and sold it better, kind of. That idea would have been functional, for sure, but as it was presented this way that it looks temporary and that way that the structures are visible, maybe too visible or something, but so they got a feeling, no, we don't want this. But, then it was perhaps too late.” (Jenny)

Compliance

After all other strategies are have been explored, designer may resort to compliance. Compliance refers to acceptance, putting one's hands up and caving in to the client's power and transferring the responsibility

“so none of these was a kind of perfect solution and we kind of decided on that there is no perfect solution that there was always some type of restriction, which came along, and then it was actually the [client's] task to decide, which restriction was the least bad” (Steve)

“if this still doesn't feel right for them, then we'll go with that, and then that's their choice and so, at least I've offered [something else]” (Dave)

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of seven designer interview protocols resulted in identifying the concept of *maintaining professional identity*. We argue that it reflect the experiences of designers well in their relationship to provide creativity by demand. This offers insights into the designer-client relationship, and helps to understand the experiences of designers.

Maintaining designer identity consists of carrying out certain guiding values in one's work and striving for autonomy and control. In a designer-client -relationship, every project appears to be a small-scale power struggle. In these struggles, designer tries to seek ways to influence, persuade the client, and when all means at disposal are used, designer has to fall in with the client's will and cope with. In situations in which the client's decisions led to dissatisfaction on the designer's part, intra-psychic and interpersonal coping strategies were used.

The client's dominating position may restrain the designer from actualizing the 'designer ideals'. Second, designer may sometimes feel undervalued and not taken seriously. Designers maintain their professional identity by engaging in identity management behavior. They try to influence the client by persuading through argumentation and visual representations. Industrial designer is a rather new profession in interdisciplinary product development and it currently holds a rickety position (Holm, 2006). The identity protection and management behaviors discovered in this study serve to protect and defend designers and their profession as a whole.

It was further argued that the collaboration and the dominating position of the client involve a threat to a desirable designer identity. Identity is reflected in the core values. External events that inhibit expressing these values, invading to designer's territory, or the sense of being undervalued

may pose threat to designer identity. Designers react to these types of threats to maintain their professional identity.

From the designer's perspective, the *lack of understanding and respecting the expertise of designers* as whole is the main source of trouble. The continuous struggle of not being listened to, being a bit of an underdog striving to do one's best. Hill and Johnson (2003) have suggested that in advertising, the client gets what he "deserves", meaning that as the client is the one posing constraints, making decisions, interfering with the creative process (of a copywriter), the resulting advertising is as good as the client allows it to be; posing time limits, evaluating creative products (these factors have been found to influence creativity. This finding seems to apply to design as well.

These experiences of designers do not give support to the common notion that the problems between designers and clients simply rise out of competing values or interests. The matter is more complicated. These interviews reflect rather the experience of questioning designer's professional skills, expertise; the designers defending their professional identity and the necessity of their expertise. Moran and John-Steiner (2004) note that psychological freedom and sense of control are crucial prerequisites for successful collaboration. However, the designers' experiences are characterized by different negative experiences. We have argued that client threatens designer's professional identity, which in return diminishes the opportunity for constructive collaboration and co-creation in the design process.

Based on the different case descriptions, we observed three levels of co-creation: *coordination*, *collaboration*, and *co-design*. In *coordination* design agency has only design authority, client only steers the process. In *real collaboration* have more decision authority, provided by the client. However, in the best case, there is real mutual and *co-design* can take place, in which client also can take up design authority without threatening designers' identity.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study has strived for a better understanding of the designer-client relationship and the related issues. We have been very problem-focused, providing the opportunity to acknowledge and detect the possible points of conflict in advance and help to prepare for and overcome them. This might ultimately result in a more effective design process and satisfaction of both

parties – although it has been questioned whether the creative process can be triumphant if participants are on equal grounds, or are contract designers doomed for unhappiness (Lyon, 2012). Overall, our study gives a new perspective on client-ordered design projects and sheds new light on the relationship between professional designers and their clients, helping to develop tools for managing the early phases of co-design projects.

In future, we hope to see studies exploring the phenomenology of industrial design decisions also from the client side. Our in-depth study of designer insights could be greatly complemented by hearing the other side of the story. In order to *improve* the communications and collaboration between the client and the designer, information regarding the perspective of both parties is required. While it seems, that increasing the awareness of industrial designer's values and general goals among clients might improve the situation, it is not self-evident if that would suffice. Any intervention to improve the relationship should take into consideration the realities of both parties and likely requires both to change their practices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all participants and their organizations, Matti Hämäläinen and Kalevi Ekman for establishing contacts, and the Finnish Technology Industries Centennial Foundation for financial support for the research.

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