

Risks and mitigation strategies for designathons

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“I have not failed 10,000 times; I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work”

-Thomas Edison



Potential risks of designathons

- Inappropriate scale and magnitude
- Lack of instructions and guide
- Exclusion of priority groups or key stakeholders
- Poor within-group facilitation and imbalanced participation
- Links and connectiveness between subtopics (project-dependent)
- Judging, fairness and prizes
- Limited aftermath activities/dissemination and lack of continuity

Inappropriate scale and magnitude

Problems

- Too large/ambitious - implementation heavy and potential waste of resource
- Require a fair amount commitment from participants & fatigue
- Too small - lack of outputs generation or unsolved problem(s)

Solutions

- Set realistic goals
 - Advice from experienced organizers
 - Split into topics/tasks and evaluate resources/people needed to solve these tasks
- Set up timeline
 - e.g., 72h

Lack of instructions and guide

Problems

- Unclear problem identification or tasks
- Lack of comprehension of the focus and purpose
- Lack of momentum and preparation
- Insufficient engagement and inputs from individuals

Solutions

- Meet prior to the in-person event (before the designathon)
- Practical guide
 - Provision of sufficient background and essential materials for 'pre-read' (visual aids)
 - Rules and instructions
 - Expectations and roles
 - Early grouping and preparation

Overlooking priority groups or key stakeholders

Problems

- Lack of representation of key groups
- Missing important gaps and needs of end users
- Limited acceptability, feasibility, and appropriateness
- Limited dissemination, adoption and impact

Solutions

- Steering committee
- Stakeholder mapping
 - End users
 - Important social contacts of end users (family, friends, partners etc – cautious about unintended secondary stigma)
 - Stakeholders in policies, production, delivery and adoption
- Reach and engagement of stakeholders
 - Background and interests
 - Professional and personal networks
 - Accommodating but also secure commitment
 - Hybrid online and in-person format

Poor within-group facilitation and imbalanced participation

Problems

- Dominant and silent participants
- Insufficient group interactions and dynamics
- Conflicting views/perceptions
- Lack of achievements or 'over-achievements' (too many but low quality)

Solutions

- Chair for the whole process and Subgroup Leads
 - Oversee direction, structure, milestones/tasks, and time management
 - Neutral and facilitating role rather than dominant contributors

Links and connectiveness between subtopics (project-dependent)

Problems

- Lack of relevance and disconnected between sub-topics/tasks
- Overlap/similarities between sub-topics/tasks
- Waste of time and efforts

Solutions

- Steering/organizing committee
 - Overall purpose and split of tasks
 - Tasks assignment and grouping
- Senior/experienced facilitators/mentors for all groups

Judging, fairness and prizes

Problems

- Biased judging based on personal views/backgrounds
- Lack of transparency
- Conflict of interests

Solutions

- Judging rubric
- 3 or more independent judges
- Expert and crowd judges
- Recuse judges from scoring outputs subject to potential conflict of interests (previous collaboration/competition relationship with a specific group)
- Recognition of not only finalists but also contributions from all teams
- Avoid terms like 'winners' and set up engagement prizes
- Share and de-briefing session(s)

Limited aftermath activities/dissemination and lack of continuity

Problems

- Lack of evaluation
- Limited value for money and impact

Solutions

- Integrate designathons into consensus processes (policy, guidelines etc)
- Plan of evaluation (eg, analysis of designathon outputs, trials etc)
- Dissemination strategies
 - ✓ Open and free access
 - ✓ Influencers and their networks
 - ✓ Professional/personal networks

Thank you



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