



POV

# Making Remote Design Thinking a Reality

The COVID-19 pandemic has pressurized enterprises into adopting novel technologies and tweaking existing services to help their employees work remotely in a smart and efficient manner. Collaboration services like Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Trello to name a few, have become more of a necessity for remote working. But there are some areas where these applications and services don't seem to fit in with the kind of work that one does.

Take for instance Design Thinking, a revolutionary approach to solving problems in a human-centred way of facilitating people to use creative activities and tools that foster collaboration. This 'collaboration' is best experienced in a Design Thinking workshop, where people ideate in one space, allowing them to put their heads together and come up with innovative solutions that solve the problem. However, in times like this, 'social distancing' has left a huge roadblock in the way of such creative solutioning.

So, the question is how do we adapt a concept that is highly iterative and collaborative at its core, to a process that gets carried out remotely, while expecting the same level of quality? It takes a lot of research and tinkering to get something to work the way you expect it to, but it can be done.

## A Case in Point

Earlier this year, we were assigned a project that aimed to understand and improve our employees' work experience. These findings would be used to construct a brand-new employee value proposition statement that would be made the foundation for all future employee experience initiatives. The project was helmed by top company management and involved people leading large engagement areas. The plan was to use the Design Thinking methodology to create the value proposition statement by bringing together the core team, consisting of 16 of these leaders and members from top management, into a co-solutioning Design Thinking workshop.

## To Set the Ball Rolling

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To begin the project, we created and sent a survey to 54% of our sample group of employees, asking them to rate the company against a set of pre-determined parameters. Like with every design project, we had to conduct empathy interviews to better understand the employees' experiences. So, we allowed employees to nominate themselves through the survey for the interviews.

As the pandemic prevented us from conducting face-to-face interviews with the 33% self-nominated employees, the core team conducted most of these interviews through video conferencing services. We created an empathy map template that allowed the core team to document their observations from these interviews. The statistical data analysis from the surveys and the observations from these empathy maps were used for further analysis.

## Necessary Spadework

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As employees were instructed to work from home due to the pandemic, we knew that we had to run a virtual workshop. Considering that the outcome of the workshop was an employee value proposition statement, we planned to conduct a 5-hour virtual Design Thinking workshop. Knowing that this would be our first virtual workshop, we focused on our spadework as we needed to stick to the schedule while keeping our participants engaged throughout the workshop.

To make the observations from the empathy interviews and the results from our survey easy to digest for the participants, we categorised the analysed data into personas against the parameters in the survey and created pre-reads of this data, so that they could be shared with the participants at the appropriate time during the workshop. We utilized the breaks between exercises to send out the subsequent set of pre-reads and instructions for the exercises.

Next, we researched and tested several online tools that would help us run the workshop in this medium, until we finally settled for a tool called Uxpressia for its simplicity. We created examples within the tool to help participants quickly understand what they were required to do.

It was important that we shared a WebEx link as it allowed us to conduct the virtual workshop and live stream the tools in action. The lead facilitator from the core team was appointed to moderate the exercises and keep the participants engaged through the workshop. Two more members were tasked with addressing statistical

data queries and noting down key points discussed by the participants that could be used later in the ideation phase.

We created a value proposition template that explained how the statements should be composed. Using this template, we created a couple of examples to assist the participants.

We placed participants into groups beforehand, so that they could quickly assemble for the group ideation session. These groups were assigned their own WebEx line or 'breakout bridge' that they would use later in the workshop.

Considering the possibility that we may have more than one value proposition statement at the end of the workshop, we settled on an easy-to-use online tool called Easypolls that allowed participants to vote for their favourite statement.

## **The Workshop Phase**

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The workshop began, with the lead facilitator welcoming all the participants and explaining how the session would be carried out, followed by a quick brief on the tool (Uxpressia) that would be used in the workshop.

Then the facilitator emailed the pre-read of the first persona to all the participants, instructing them to synthesise their insights from the data and upload them onto the tool as per the examples provided in the tool. Once uploaded within the given timeframe, participants took turns explaining their insights.

We followed this same procedure and sent the pre-reads of the other two personas before beginning their respective exercises. This allowed the participants to focus entirely on one persona at a time.

Once the exercises were done, we sent the participants the value proposition template and instructed them to create a value proposition statement by themselves by referring to the insights they synthesised from the previous exercises.

Once done, the participants were divided into their groups and instructed to use their designated 'breakout bridge' to convene and combine their statements into a single, sensible, and overarching employee value proposition statement.

At the end of this exercise, the groups returned to the workshop and showcased the 5 value proposition statements that were created between them. Participants then voted (Easypolls) for their favourite value statement.

Lastly, we created a final presentation by collating all the data from our survey and empathy interviews, along with data pulled straight from the tools used in the workshop and sent it to the top management for their final assessment.

## Making 'Virtual' a 'Reality'

This design project was a great opportunity for us to demonstrate how a Design Thinking workshop can be done through remote collaboration.

**Here are a few pointers that one must keep in mind before running a remote Design Thinking workshop:**

- **Trim away the excess**

The issue of travelling, coordinating with participants to co-locate at one venue were one of the many headaches we overcame. This allowed the team to focus on other important areas of the pre-planning phase.

- **A punctual taskmaster**

Creating a timetable motivates design teams to stick to it. It's more effective if the timetable is shared before the workshop begins so that people can understand the sequence of events. Having a taskmaster (in our case, the lead facilitator) who adheres to the timetable and constantly alerts the participants when they are running behind schedule is crucial to maintain the workshop at a steady pace.

- **Spam for important information ONLY**

It is important to keep your emails containing data sets and instructions as concise as possible. Also remember to keep the next instructional email ready.

## ■ **Embrace the digital way of life**

As compared to our earlier age-old method of digitizing post-it notes after a traditional co-locating workshop, the tool made it so much easier to copy data and export it into the desired format for the final presentation. This also saved us the time of locating Post-its that were misplaced or deciphering those written in a “doctor’s handwriting.”

## ■ **Don’t pass on the PAS (Platforms and Services)**

While there are many collaborative tools, like the tool we used in our workshop, it is important to research and test out tools to see how easy they are to understand and to explore their capabilities.

### **References:**

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