

Good decision making

A short video on why good decision making is vital to making a success of your digital approach.



About SensibleTech and me

I'm Dave and I have been doing digital and IT in local public services for a looooong time now.

I work as an interim and as a freelance consultant, mostly with councils but occasionally with charities and suppliers too. Localise is my company!

I have developed an open, free quality model for local government digital design, data and technology, which forms the framework for pretty much everything I talk about.



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What do I mean by decision making?

- The way organisations decide what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and who will do it
- My specific interest is in the digital (design, data and technology) space but this probably works across all sorts of activities
- It can involve:
 - Simple requests
 - Substantial change programmes
 - Prioritising and re-prioritising work
 - Dealing with emergencies
- A good decision making approach needs proper service design – not just a new form (hat tip – Steph Gray)!



What is the issue with decision making?

Most of the time, decision making (particularly around digital) doesn't work.

- People don't understand how to ask for things, or how to get them approved
- There are onerous forms, things take too long to decide, and then get prioritised away into the distant future
- There's a lack of understanding of exactly what is being worked on, and why it is being done instead of 100s of other things
- People in digital are making prioritisation decisions that ought to be made way higher up the food chain
- People do their best to avoid it and do their own thing, which usually doesn't work either.



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In short, it often produces poor decisions, poorly implemented; which result in poor digital work, and poor outcomes for people.



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What does good decision making look like?

- It's proportionate
- It's open and transparent
- It involves the right people
- It's based on commonly accepted principles
- It helps to achieve strategic goals
- It's future-proofed
- It produces the right results and outcomes



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Proportionate governance

The golden rule for governance and decision making: **make it less work to follow than to avoid!**

Don't make people fill in huge business cases unless they really have to. Start by asking the least amount of information needed to get to the next stage, and build up as necessary.

Equally important though is not to let things slip through the net – thinking they are simple, 'BAU' requests, for example – only to find out they are complicated, annoying and depressing.



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Who makes the decisions?

It's really important that the right people are making decisions at the right level.

Often people find themselves making decisions about things that really ought to be made much higher up the organisation, and involving lots more voices.

It's easy for a service manager to think their request is the most important thing in the world – but would their boss' boss agree?

Set up as few groups as possible in your approach, and think really hard about their remit, membership and influence.



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Prioritising

Probably the most important individual component of decision making is prioritising. This is really hard, because:

- You have waaaaaay more work than you do capacity
- Everyone wants everything NOW!
- Other stuff keeps cropping up

First accept you will never get this to be perfect. Frankly, anything other than a total disaster is pretty good going.

Don't rely on calculating spreadsheets. Talk to people, reason with them, get people with conflicting needs in the same room. Get the most senior people you can involved and making the decisions.



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Documenting and communicating

Key to making all of this work is taking an open, transparent approach to communicating what has been decided. This is so important!

- Write down decisions made, who made them and why
- Publish that somewhere so everyone can see it. Send it directly to people that really need to see it whether they like it or not
- Communicate changes in prioritisation to people affected, so they know that corporate emergency #32 is taking precedence over service improvement #12
- Keep the programme of work up to date and visible across the organisation

Designing your decision making approach

- First thing: try not to think of it just as a process – it's more than that
- Work on it as a proper bit of user centred service design:
 - What are the user needs for all those involved? How best to ensure they are met?
 - What information is needed when? How can this be kept to a minimum?
 - What other entirely new activities might be needed around the core process to ensure the approach works?
 - Make sure you apply good content and interaction design
 - Test your assumptions and iterate
- This might all sound obvious, but too often this is treated as just designing a process map and a form... which is probably why it never works!



Things to avoid

- Spreadsheets to 'calculate' whether something should be good or not. No matter what numbers these things produce, **they always get overridden by human factors**
- Having different groups of people to make different decisions at different points in the approach **which have the same people in them each time**
- Getting in **a muddle about discoveries** – if a request feels like it needs a proper discovery treatment, talk to the requester and recalibrate it as a request for the discovery, separate from doing the actual request



A sample lightweight approach to adapt

- The following is based on a model I drafted up for a council last year
- It is based on simplicity and openness
- Am sure it can be adapted to work in other circumstances
- There's no doubt it can be improved upon!



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The approach (1)

1. All requests come in through the same route, asking very basic info (who are you? what do you want to achieve?). No exceptions – including the digital people themselves!
2. A small group of digital people quickly triage requests into the genuinely simple and everything more complicated than that
3. The simples are called tasks and get dropped into the appropriate work queue
4. The more complicateds are projects, and need more information gathering, in proportion to the nature of the work involved. All involved disciplines in digital and beyond should be consulted

The approach (2)

5. These project summaries should then be reviewed by a more senior, strategic group of people from across the organisation who will decide on the priority of the work within the existing programme / roadmap / backlog
6. Those people who's projects will now take longer as a result are informed and the updated programme made available for anyone to see
7. The whole programme is reviewed, with new entries highlighted, on a regular basis by the senior leadership team to ensure that the current corporate priorities are being reflected in it



Summing up

- Decision making is **really important**, so it's best to put work into making it as good as possible!
- Remember the golden rule for governance and decision making: make it **less work to follow than to avoid!**
- That means being **proportionate** and **user-centric**
- Prioritisation of work is **not** the responsibility of a single person or team
- Make everything **open and transparent** so people know what is going on and how to change things if they need to - and what the consequences will be
- Eat your agile dog food - don't design a perfect approach, **start small and iterate!**



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