'The Business Journey': Finding collaborations through tangibility

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ABSTRACT

The establishment and strengthening of collaborations between current and future partners are often faced with the challenge of reaching a shared understanding between actors involved in particular contexts. In a fairly novel area explored by researchers and practitioners, tangibility has been suggested as a way of overtaking such a challenge. Actors with diverse perspectives and intentions are encouraged to discuss their businesses qualities through tangible objects. Following up on the means of engaging stakeholders and facilitating the process of reaching collaborations through tangibility, this paper presents a study case focused on the development of a tangible artefact called: '*The Business Journey'*. First, a short overview of tangible business modelling is given, followed by the description of the case context. '*The Business Journey'* is a discussion tool, which invites all stakeholders to introduce themselves and discuss possible opportunities of collaboration within different touchpoints. The artefact focuses on three main characteristics: *tangibility*, *possession* and *user involvement* – reached throughout a process that considers a number of design iterations.

Keywords

Participatory Innovation; Tangible Business Modelling.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been discussed by researchers that more reflective and deeper conversations are generated when using through the interaction between hands, body and mind. *'It engages the brain in a different way'.* Participants develop 'different kind of responses', which seem to be more creative and reflexive. [5]

Interactive methodologies support participants in the process of communicating their own ideas and perspectives as a way of

reaching a shared understanding. Such participatory methods suggest that collaboration and innovation emerge from – *often conflictual* – conversations [3] facilitated by objects and activities that require action. This way of understanding conversations has its grounds in the theory of the 'complex responsive process of relating', through which Stacey *et al.* [9] argues that human interaction, in a transformative process, leads to the emergence of novelty. It suggests that novelty can emerge from conversation between people. In addition, when body movements are involved in the process of creating, there is a change in the perception of the surroundings and the created idea, concept or object [5].

The use of tangible tools compared to traditional methods is more advantageous, according to Buur et al., because it: '*...allows participants without a business degree to understand and innovate a company's business through the use of tangible materials like toy bricks, bric-a-brac metal objects, foam pieces, even organic materials. Such materials are particularly suited to support mapping activities where participants together explore who are the stakeholders in the business venture, and how do/can they relate to one another in a value network.'* [1]

Another interesting aspect of using these models is that they *'keep people's hands busy, which often appears to take the pressure of verbal articulations. The use of objects and images provides an indirect mean to commence talking about topics, which may be difficult to approach head on. Providing material as 'things to think with' also seems to provoke more unexpected discussions.'*[4]

In an enlarged perspective, the concept of *'Tangible business modelling'* has been understood as a participatory modelling process. It represents a significant step towards shaping Participatory Innovation [2] methods. Such models aim to engage key stakeholders in action, encouraging them to co-create shared meanings and business opportunities. They move the business discussions from text and spread sheets into visual creative sessions using three-dimensional space [7].

Mitchell and Buur describe *'Tangible business models'* as tools to *'Facilitate thinking, create simplicity, express the vivacity of the business, make it easier to think big, provoke new connections and associations, support story telling, work across language barriers, and provide easy to recollect experiences.'*[7]

2. PROJECT CONTEXT

As a study case, this project deals with the development of a tangible artefact, named: '*The Business Journey*' focusing on an existing scenario that involves a series of stakeholders.

With the goal of designing the artefact, a project conducted by master students at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) was taken as a way to establish a close collaboration between SDU and the Interactive Institute Swedish ICT – Stockholm studio. The design process looked upon the context of an on-going project, held by the Interactive Institute, in which different stakeholders were to come together and create collaboration around the matter of sustainable events. Called '*Smart City*' the project was used as a real scenario to develop and test out the tangible tool.

Through strategic researches made few years before by the Interactive Institute – Karlstad studio, a sustainable consultancy have decided to focus their attention on the journey of the event-goers. Following this goal, a partner company has developed an app that enhances a sustainable experience for the "*before-during-after journey to events*". Currently the collaboration between external stakeholders is to be established and strengthened in an upcoming workshop to be hold in Gothenburg, in which the Tangible Business Model is to be used as an interaction mediator.

3. '*THE BUSINESS MODEL*'

The model consists of a board with twelve circular containers and a large circular lid on top (Figure 1 and 2). There are six toolsets with different elements (Figure 03), one for each participant or stakeholder. Another tangible tool, the Silver Set [1] was used as inspiration for the selection of the elements, which later were modified and adapted to this particular case. Based upon experiences with the Silver Set tool and the availability of the material, the elements were chosen as to include a variety of different functions and representations. This way, connectors (as magnets and chains) were put together with elements that represent randomness (as the dice) and that contain the elasticity function (as the hair band). Another feature considered in the design of the tool set was the mix between "technical tools" (found in mechanical workshops) and everyday objects as a way to lead to a number of combinations and sense making process from the participants.   The final selection of the elements includes: a screw, a washer, a chain, a ball, a diamond, a dice, a metal ring, a hair clip and a hair elastic.

Figure 1 and 2 – '*The Business Journey*' artefact: the board

The dynamic of the model is divided in 3 stages. Before the workshop starts, every stakeholder starts with a box containing a set of elements. Each stakeholder has the same elements but with different colour, i.e. silver, bronze, white, purple, gold and blue (Figure 03).

Figure 3 – '*The Business Journey*' artefact: the toolsets

The goal of the first stage is to let all the different stakeholders get to know each other. Each stakeholder is to choose some elements that represent and help to introduce their own business. The idea, at this point, is to start creating a sense of ownership of the tangible materials from an individual perspective and a shared meaning from a group viewpoint. This stage also helps the actors to identify and highlight their business strengths and get familiar with what the others' value as to be their most important business qualities.

The second stage is about building all together the journey of an event planning. The board, made of chalkboard, is divided in three sections: *Before*, *during* and *after*. Once the sections are determined, each stakeholder starts placing some iconic element inside each container. The participants are to write on a plastic tag what every container represents. The elements represent each person's contribution to a specific touch-point or phase within the journey. The participants could turn to the next container or place elements inside the same container to indicate collaboration with another stakeholder. This stage is finished when the stakeholders went all the way around the journey suggested by the board. Some

containers might be left empty if the stakeholders consider that it makes sense for their particular case.
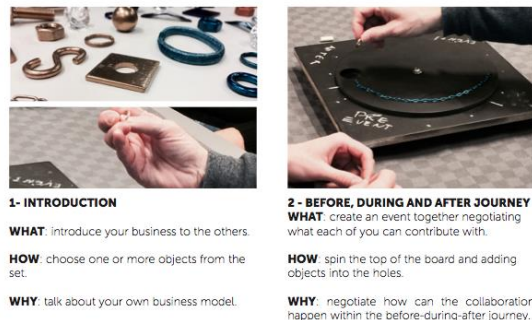

Figure 4 – '*The Business Journey*' artefact in action: stages 1 and 2

In the third stage, the lid is to be removed in order to reveal all the contributions created in the previous stage. In the end of the final stage each stakeholder gets an overview of what they have agreed on by looking at the different colours in each container. With this overview there is content to support a discussion regarding their future partnerships. (Figure 5)
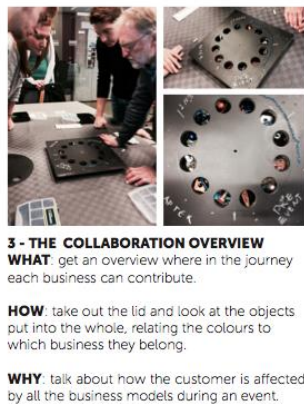

Figure 5 – '*The Business Journey*' artefact in action: stage 3

3.1 The development process

For creating this model, board games were used as inspiration. They were chosen due to the quality of being intuitive and to offer a clear and dynamic flow. During the design process, different sessions with professors and students were used as iterations to improve the model and reach a result to be applied in the upcoming workshop.

Besides conversation and explorative activities, an initial session with five types of board games was held in order to uncover the possible opportunities of each model for the mentioned case. After tests and group discussions with different participants, some games were left out even when its action flow and playfulness was interesting. Since the goal was not to create a game, the decision was based on the quality of insights the model could provide to the stakeholders and the discussions it could generate.

Based on the results of the first testing sessions, some improvements were conducted, mainly on the appearance of the prototype. Next, actors from different user groups were invited to the try and act it out within a more contextualised setting. There were two participants without any experience with "Tangible Business Models", one participant with a slight understanding about this approach and an expert. For this test it was introduced a case similar to the real situation and the variation in participants gave insights from different perspectives.

The analysis of those sessions revealed that the uniqueness of this model resides in the friendliness and easiness in which opportunities of new collaborations can be created between stakeholders that do not know each other. This is achieved mainly because the model creates a sense of ownership that provokes the stakeholders to take an active part during the discussions. By making turns and going all the way around the board, the stakeholders start building a relationship and finding opportunities on different areas; the second stage mostly works as a brainstorming situation that brings a broad spectrum of ideas. The areas in which the board is divided offer a framework for the stakeholders that ease the flow of ideas.

4. DISCUSSION

In this section the core competences of the '*The Business Journey*' are discussed to express its value above a traditional way of business modelling.

Tangibility brings a touching experience by empowering users to think with their hands [6]. This encourages them to use physical elements as subjects of discussions and helps to turn an abstract argument into a more concrete point. Besides, it might reduce the negative impacts of timidity in teamwork. In other words, the possibility of writing down an opinion without being pushed to speak (and, thereby, leaving a "comfort zone") is more likely to welcome everybody to contribute. [8]

Possession gives users a feeling of owning something, which motivates them to take part of the negotiation in a more active way. The toolsets in different colours give the participants the opportunity to describe their business in a metaphorical way. They have the ownership of a toolset that offers them a feeling of being equally important.

User involvement invites the stakeholders to think from a user perspective. By defining the different stages the stakeholders are encouraged to focus on the different steps of the journey that a user will go through. In the end, the surprising element of the lid opening gives the stakeholders an overview of the whole process and how the collaboration can be built in each moment of the journey. This then generates the opportunity to reflect on how to move forward with the partnership in different moments.

The comparison between '*The Business Journey*' and some traditional tools to discuss business – post-its, whiteboards and flip charts – raises relevant points of discussion. Advantages of the second can be argued in the easy and recognisable way of its use. All these tools do not need explanations since they invite the participants for the use right away. However, without saying that '*The Business Journey*' is the only solution that offers such attributes, this model adds the mentioned crucial values to a business modelling process: *tangibility, possession* and *user involvement*.

It is acknowledged though that, in practice a combination of the known traditional tools and '*The Business Journey*' can lead to even more valuable solutions and insights.

5. CONCLUSION

Based upon a study case, this paper introduced the design process and qualities of '*The Business Journey*', a discussion tool that supports different stakeholders to negotiate collaborations, co-creating business opportunities and new ways of partnership.

Central to this work is the understanding that the process of finding ways to collaborate emerge from on-going conversations between – *not necessarily business-oriented* – actors. By being encouraged to talk through tangible elements, which meanings were negotiated by themselves, the actors might encounter paths to move forward. As suggested by this paper, such conversations might get even further through the facilitation of "possession", "tangibility" and "user involvement". This perspective is, however, still to get deepen when explored into practice both in the mentioned Swedish *'Smart City'* project and in future similar cases.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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