BUILDING BUSINESSES FOR GIRL IMPACT

Integrating human-centred design
INTRODUCTION

Human-centred design (HCD) was at the heart of our curriculum and one of our unique selling points. As we worked with ventures across various countries, contexts, stages and sectors to create solutions that would improve the lives of adolescent girls, HCD provided a flexible framework as well as a common language and way of operating. We supported our businesses to apply HCD to better understand their consumers and other critical stakeholders (including girls), in order to design better products and services for girls and solve business challenges.

We also applied HCD in designing our accelerator. Our teams travelled to East Africa and South Asia to gain an intimate understanding of the market contexts and the challenges that entrepreneurs were facing on the ground. Using that knowledge, we created a universally applicable curriculum that would engage businesses as partners on an HCD journey. The common language of design enabled us to work in diverse contexts. The curriculum focused on enabling businesses to design, validate, refine and test new products or service concepts that would contribute to their growth and impact, as well as to SPRING learning.

As an adaptive programme, we had freedom to experiment to get the model
right and, in the spirit of HCD, we continued to go back, iterate and improve the programme between each of our cohorts. Through trial and error, we got better at supporting businesses in applying HCD to innovate for business growth and girl impact. The process was full of challenges, and it was resource- and time-intensive for our team as well as for our businesses. But our results demonstrate that it was worthwhile.

We hope the following insights, as well as those shared in our companion piece Scaling social business through design thinking (which highlights solutions SPRING businesses adopted to overcome barriers to scaling the business models), will be useful to other accelerators or programmes aiming to apply HCD to create and scale impactful solutions, especially for girls or other often-excluded groups.

What is human-centred design?

Human-centred design (HCD) is based on the idea that a deep understanding of people can allow products and services to be better designed to meet their needs and desires. What began as a private sector innovation process has now spread to the public sector and beyond. In contrast to market research, HCD research involves deep research with a small number of users. The process involves listening in order to gain an empathetic understanding of people. There are many different approaches to HCD, but it always involves a certain sequence of steps. At SPRING, our process involved five phases:

1. Research: observe users and ask them questions
2. Storytelling and synthesis: categorise what you hear and see
3. Write design challenges: identify the barriers you’d like to work on. At SPRING, we called these the ‘How might we….?’
4. Brainstorm solutions or new ideas
5. Prototype solutions: build prototypes to test in market

The process is iterative, so once you get to the prototyping solutions stage, you start again at the beginning by observing users and asking questions.

At Bootcamp 1, we started with step 3 by asking participants to dissect different elements of their business, write design challenges, brainstorm solutions and design prototypes. Then we sent participants home to research with users and brought them back for a second bootcamp for storytelling and synthesis, refinement of design challenges and, afterwards, launching prototypes in market.
OUR APPROACH: LEARNING BY DOING

We introduced the HCD methodology and process through intensive, practical workshops at the first bootcamp. Participants applied HCD initially to develop their own business prototypes, refined with input from the accelerator team. By the end of the first bootcamp, prototypes existed only on paper. To bring them to life, we supported businesses to conduct human-centred research in market over a four-month period. We provided businesses with a local research moderator, trained by fuseproject, to develop a bespoke research plan, conduct research sessions with users and stakeholders, and summarise actionable findings in a report. Fuseproject provided technical oversight while the moderators ensured that the process was followed systematically. Research sessions involved various HCD methods, such as card sorting, user observation, focus groups or other activities, but always with the aim of drawing out the respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs and behaviours. While most of our research budget went towards this technical support, in some cases SPRING also provided small amounts of grant funding for businesses to build early-stage prototypes, such as a new product basket.

The synthesis step took place through storytelling sessions at the second bootcamp. This led to ‘prototyping in context’, where businesses launched and tested their further refined prototypes in market. For this, businesses received variable amounts of grant support from SPRING. This funding allowed businesses to test their innovations in real life, taking risks that they might not otherwise have been able to take. In several cases, it enabled businesses to establish proof of concept and leverage further external investment to scale their prototypes.

1 A SPRING prototype was a low-risk, real-world experiment, allowing entrepreneurs to test, refine and validate new products or service concepts that could benefit adolescent girls, in response to a specific business/growth challenge.

2 Our approach to HCD research changed significantly over time. In SPRING’s first cohort, not all businesses received support for user research (which was focused primarily on research with girls). We quickly recognised that this was a mistake – we were teaching a process without following it. From the second cohort on, all businesses received roughly the same package of research support, which included research with girls as well as other users and stakeholders. The process described in this report refers to Cohorts 2, 3 and 4.

3 Research plans were comprehensive documents that outlined various types of users, research session design, user profiles, research hypotheses and questions, and were accompanied by highly scripted discussion guides.

4 Making funding allocation decisions based on need and demonstrated traction in research allowed us to provide resources to the prototypes which showed the most promise. For more about our learning on this, see our Accelerator Design sub-report.
KEY INSIGHTS

The value of SPRING’s HCD-based curriculum was in the facilitation of the process, as much as the content.

There is no shortage of free online resources on human-centred design, and some participants came into SPRING with prior HCD experience. When asked what made SPRING’s HCD approach different, participants said that it was more structured, more comprehensive and more practical (with opportunities to conduct research and rapid prototyping).

“We have been using HCD since inception and have worked with some of the leading design firms in the world, but we had not undergone a more comprehensive and systematic curriculum around HCD until SPRING... We are really glad we went through the programme and were forced to take apart and put back together the different elements of our business. It gave us more clarity, shed light on some blind spots, and helped us arrive at new questions...”

SPRING participant, Cohort 4

Building local HCD capacity required intensive training and coordination.

While fuseproject brought unrivalled HCD expertise to bootcamp, it was difficult to find local agencies (especially in the initial years of SPRING) and individual researchers with the right skill mix to support the research process outside of bootcamp. Highly skilled research moderators were critical to yielding deep insights from research. Although HCD experience was not crucial, we needed moderators who were highly empathetic, skilled in group facilitation, understood the local context and culture, and spoke English. In addition to exceptional moderators, the other factor contributing to the quality of research was the team from fuse was hands-down the highlight of SPRING. More actors should learn from their ability to listen to entrepreneurs and provide valuable feedback. This was really the game changer for us with the whole experience.”

SPRING participant, Cohort 3

fuseproject’s world-class design expertise added tremendous value to SPRING businesses. But despite the efficiencies of serving multiple businesses during condensed time blocks at discounted daily rates, the cost of such input was significant and would likely be prohibitive for most SMEs and accelerators in emerging markets.

Furthermore, participants in every cohort named engagement with fuseproject business strategists and designers, who led delivery of the curriculum, as one of the most valued aspects of the programme.

5 Feedback was captured by SPRING’s evaluation partner, Coffey International Development Ltd., through surveys and structured interviews with participants after each bootcamp and at the end of each cohort, and shared with the SPRING team in summarised reports.
(and satisfaction of our participants) was effective coordination between SPRING, the moderators and the businesses. A deficiency in either of these two factors being deficient could result in delays in research activities or failure to capture valuable insights. We addressed these challenges by providing clear scope and roles for all who were involved, investing in moderator training, and acting quickly to replace moderators who underdelivered.

Building HCD capability was resource-intensive and implementing hands-on research was complicated, but both were worthwhile. The majority of our businesses came away with actionable insights that allowed them to either move forward on prototypes with greater clarity and confidence, or discard non-viable ideas. Further, moderators developed skills in human-centred research, and businesses gained capacity and tools to test their hypotheses with users and stakeholders on an ongoing basis. Building lasting HCD capacity of our businesses and moderators in these markets was itself an important result of SPRING.

Ingraining HCD into a business: AcceleratED

AcceleratED is an EdTech business in Ethiopia that provides teacher training, educational content and support via data analytics to improve learning outcomes. Through SPRING, the company developed a prototype called TeachEasy, a personalised teacher coaching service that helps teachers improve their pedagogy skills by promoting active learning techniques in the classroom. Through better classrooms and more motivated teachers, the company aims to improve learning outcomes for students from grades K–12, including girls.

Insights from HCD research helped the business better understand its target users (teachers). As a result, it changed its core business offering from a product-based solution to a service-based one – a major shift. Previously, AcceleratED had been focusing on providing an offline repository of multimedia content. But after learning about teachers’ motivations and challenges, the company came to realise the importance of motivating engagement and effective service, developing a service that clients not only need, but want and love.

The company also ingrained HCD into its operations. Following each bootcamp, the SPRING participant and CEO, Ravi Shankar, ran HCD trainings with the rest of the team, and has since run weekly HCD brainstorming sessions on ‘what is working’ and ‘for whom’ to inform rapid prototyping.

Now AcceleratED is using HCD to focus on other stakeholders in its business: schools. It is trying to understand the school value chain better, not only by mapping functions within each school but also by identifying value creation potential within schools.*

* This case study was adapted from Coffey International Development Ltd’s Business Performance Evaluation.
Rapid prototyping helped businesses fail fast and pivot quickly, resulting in more sustainable solutions

HCD helped to both validate and disprove assumptions businesses held about their users. Generally, businesses with higher-fidelity research stimuli\(^6\) got the most valuable insights. Whatever the findings, Bootcamp 2 provided an opportunity for participants to digest and reflect on what they had learned with moderators, country managers, designers and business advisors, then iterate on their prototype design. For a number of businesses, this led to major pivots. When critical assumptions about users and their needs turned out to be wrong, this suggested the prototypes as designed would fail in market. The ability to change direction completely, mid-way through the programme, proved invaluable (albeit sometimes difficult) for the businesses.

But research did not have to result in radical pivots to be helpful. Most businesses came away with insights that helped refine or shape customer acquisition strategies, branding, distribution channels and/or product features.

From reaching girls as sales agents to consumers and influencers: Khalti

Khalti is a digital wallet platform run by Sparrow Pay, a leading SMS value-added services company in Nepal. Khalti used SPRING research support to test the concept of engaging girls as sales agents for its digital wallet with a small-scale prototype. The business recruited and trained 26 girls aged 17–19 on how to use the mobile wallet, manage money, practise online safety and sign up retailers to the service. Once the girls had performed the role for several weeks, they met with research moderators and reflected on their experience through structured interviews.

Khalti was surprised to learn that, while the girls enjoyed using the wallet, they did not enjoy working as sales agents, invalidating Khalti’s hypothesis that girls would be attracted to flexible, commission-based sales work. This finding saved the business time and resources, as it soon pivoted its model to target girls as active customers and influencers instead. Now Khalti is expanding its focus on the Digital Wallets for Girls campaign, targeting girls and young women aged 15–30 with the aim of enabling them to become trusted access points for digital financial literacy within their families and the wider community. To date, 2,057 girls have begun the Smart Chhori module. Many of these girls now intend to train their mothers in how to use the Khalti digital wallet.

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\(^6\) Research stimuli, such as product and packaging samples, app wireframes or an actual user experience, such as a simulation of a classroom activity, were used to make concepts more tangible to session participants, in order to elicit more concrete feedback.
Listening to users may put you back at square one: Pan Ka Lay

Pan Ka Lay was one of SPRING’s few idea-stage businesses at the start of the cohort. Its mission was to normalise menstruation in Myanmar and empower girls and women to manage theirs safely and confidently. The business planned to do this by selling reusable sanitary pads, accompanied by an educational campaign to combat prevalent misinformation and stigma. Through HCD research, Pan Ka Lay discovered that: 1) the price-point for its pads was far too high for target customers, and 2) even in rural areas, girls already had access to disposable sanitary pads, which they preferred to reusables. Pan Ka Lay went on to test other menstrual management solutions with different target groups before pivoting away from the idea of selling products in mainstream markets. It decided to focus its prototype instead on an educational campaign (which research confirmed was needed and wanted) and on B2B sales of reusable pads to relief organisations working in refugee camps. Pan Ka Lay’s educational campaign, ‘So What?!’, has reached over 716,000 unique viewers in Myanmar via Facebook videos, including nearly 150,000 adolescent girls.

Prototype iteration – listening to users to build better solutions: Kasha

Kasha is a female-focused e-commerce business offering menstrual care items, contraceptives and other health and personal care products. Despite a demonstrated need for the service in Rwanda, where the business was founded, Kasha was not seeing customer growth or sales to match. In exploring customer needs at bootcamp, Kasha hypothesised that the disappointing number of visits, conversions and returns was due to a combination of the narrow focus on sexual health-related products and a lack of familiarity with making purchases online.

With SPRING’s support, Kasha ran a series of focus groups with girls and mothers of girls to test site usability and an expanded product mix. This research confirmed that many consumers were unfamiliar with – and untrusting of – e-commerce. Customers needed to interact with the products, the brand and trusted salespeople to feel confident and secure in their purchases.

Kasha addressed these challenges by introducing a new service design, integrating sales agents and promotional events into their model. They partnered with secondary schools and colleges in Kigali to hold informational sessions for girls aged 14–19 on menstrual health and other topics while introducing their products and service. The result was an offline channel to complement e-commerce, providing consumers with a more familiar, accessible shopping experience to get them comfortable with the Kasha brand, its products and online shopping. Since launching the Kasha Agent distribution model and expanding its product mix, Kasha has seen impressive customer growth in both online and offline sales, including significant headway with younger women and girls and low-income customers.

“...The research was phenomenally helpful, it validated our assumptions and the insights were extremely valuable.”
Amanda Arch, Co-Founder and COO, Kasha

For the full case study on Kasha, see Scaling social business through design thinking
Iterate until you get it right: Village Energy

Village Energy, a solar energy company in Uganda, iterated on their business model several times after joining SPRING’s first cohort. At the start of bootcamp, in 2015, they focused mainly on solar panel repair and spare parts. They had not used HCD and were not systematically collecting customer feedback. But they have now incorporated HCD thoroughly in the way they do business, regularly consulting users before taking business decisions, such as selecting shop locations or bringing new products or services to market.

Through SPRING, Village Energy recognised that the market for solar panels might be too small to sustain a business offering repairs and spare parts only, and thus the company moved to a broader model that also included distribution of solar products. Village Energy’s prototype engaged 24 girls (aged 16–20) as micro-entrepreneurs of solar phone charging outlets in rural communities. But this didn’t work as planned; Village Energy found that its micro-entrepreneurs needed more support and training than they could realistically provide. The company discontinued the micro-entrepreneur programme, and prioritised instead the search for a scalable model for the overall business. Ultimately, it shifted from focusing on repairs and sales of smaller-ticket items to custom installations of solar solutions for businesses, schools and other institutions. Persistent iteration has paid off – the company’s revenues have grown exponentially with their new model.*

“SPRING was critical to the development of our current model...The human-design approach we implemented [during SPRING] has stayed with us throughout the last three years...We feel like we have finally found the model that we can stick with and scale.”

Jay Patel, COO, Village Energy

* This case study was adapted from the SPRING Cohort 1 Programme Performance Evaluation (Coffey International Development Ltd, 2016).
Ongoing use of HCD contributes to businesses’ broader success in market

Beyond a process for innovation, SPRING’s HCD approach helped build capacity among participating businesses to meet the needs of their users and solve business challenges. As part of annual data reporting, we asked businesses about the status of their SPRING prototypes and their use of HCD beyond the cohort. Usually, prototypes that were still in market one or two years post-SPRING had continued to evolve based on user feedback. Most businesses had embraced HCD, were applying it in other areas of their business, and felt that this had contributed to business growth and success. Some shared that their SPRING HCD experience had fundamentally changed the way they thought about and conducted their business.

To share learning and prototype plans with their teams, several participants held workshops, and/or displayed their worksheets from bootcamp in the office for all to see. But some businesses found it difficult to share HCD with the rest of their teams, especially when the SPRING participant was not the CEO/business leader or in a position to influence broader change in the business. From Cohort 3 onward, we invited businesses to send more than one participant to bootcamp, which appears to have helped them absorb and internalise HCD.

“SPRING helped us apply human-centred design not just to our product development but to our business as a whole, leading to breakthrough opportunities for sustainable growth and impact for adolescent girls. Documenting everything on the worksheets and board means we’ve come back to our company with clear and easily communicable insights and next steps.”
Nisha Ligon, Managing Director, Ubongo

“SPRING completely changed the lens through which we saw our business, and human-centred design helped redefine who we were, and how we position ourselves. HCD is not a one-off thing but a continuous loop – you do something, it works out well, and you go back to see how you can improve it. Everything begins with a customer.”
SPRING participant, Cohort 1
Designing with the end user in mind is not new – it’s fundamental. But applying HCD in a structured, disciplined way to innovate for the benefit of a specific user group requires some practice. fuseproject’s methodology brought the highest standards of design discipline to the programme, and our businesses benefited from the hands-on support they received to apply these new skills and techniques. By using HCD to develop and test prototypes that could benefit adolescent girls, businesses mastered a process that helped to strengthen their business overall.

The human-centred design ‘ecosystem’ in the countries we were working in is still nascent, requiring investment into training local research partners. While HCD does not have to be a resource-intensive process (all you need is a pencil, paper, people and an open mind), teaching and developing the requisite skills is resource intensive. It is more than just ticking boxes, attending bootcamps or executing a research plan. It is learning how to listen and empathise, draw insights and try new ideas. We were implementing on a tight time frame and had to force-fit a fluid, iterative process into a neatly defined schedule with key delivery milestones: bootcamps, research, prototype development and launch. However, most of our businesses continued to modify, add to or subtract elements from their prototypes for the entirety of the accelerator and beyond, which indicates they have embraced the true spirit of HCD: that it’s open-ended, never fully finished and continually improving based on feedback.