What is the problem we're solving*

*implementing user centred design approaches to de-risk digital and technology investment

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UK celebrates 25 years of wasteful, 'underperforming' government IT projects

National Audit Office's scathing report blames fails on lack of experience

Tim Richardson

Fri 23 Jul 2021 // 09:15 UTC

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Government IT projects are poorly thought out, often fail to achieve what they're designed to do, and are a waste of taxpayers' money.

Or so the UK's National Audit Office (NAO) has said in a report that lays bare frailties and failures that are so commonplace that few tech pros are likely to be surprised.

The report said the UK has little chance of turning things around because public sector failures are so widespread and deep-rooted, with too few senior government officials armed with the experience and skills to run such schemes.

"Despite 25 years of government strategies and countless attempts to deliver digital business change successfully, our reports show a consistent pattern of underperformance," wrote the NAO in its report "The challenges in implementing digital change" [PDF].

https://www.theregister.com/2021/07/23/nao_govt_it_projects/


71
POST OFFICE
71
OVERSEAS MAILS
POST
PROPER SIX
A MILLION
AVOID DELAY
TELEPHONE

The 1920's


The 1960’s


The 1970’s


The 1980’s

Netscape: Welcome to Netscape

Back | Forward | Home | Reload | Images | Open | Print | Find | Stop

Netsite: http://home.netscape.com/

What's New? | What's Cool? | Handbook | Net Search | Net Directory | Newsgroups

The 1990's

SECURE COURIER

Netscape announces the first open, cross-platform "digital envelope" protocol, to be supported by Intuit, MasterCard, and others.

Most services in government were not designed for the internet

Most services in government were not designed ~~for the internet~~


“I spend most of my day typing and inputting plans, filing, etc.. all admin tasks.”

User centred design is as much a mindset as it is a set of tools and processes

It is grounded in research. An understanding of what users need (not what they want)

“Style never came into it.”

“We were driving toward the absolute essence. We were reducing the appearance to make the maximum sense at the minimum cost.”

Margaret Calvert and Jack Kinnear, 1961

1. Getting to the right problem
2. Building the right thing
3. Building the thing right

Getting to the right problem

The better you define the problem, the better the solution

Some challenges

- Tech fixes for ill-defined problems
- Teams and budgets focussed on own problems
- Different solutions for same core issue
- No overview of work delivered... or if it’s making anything better

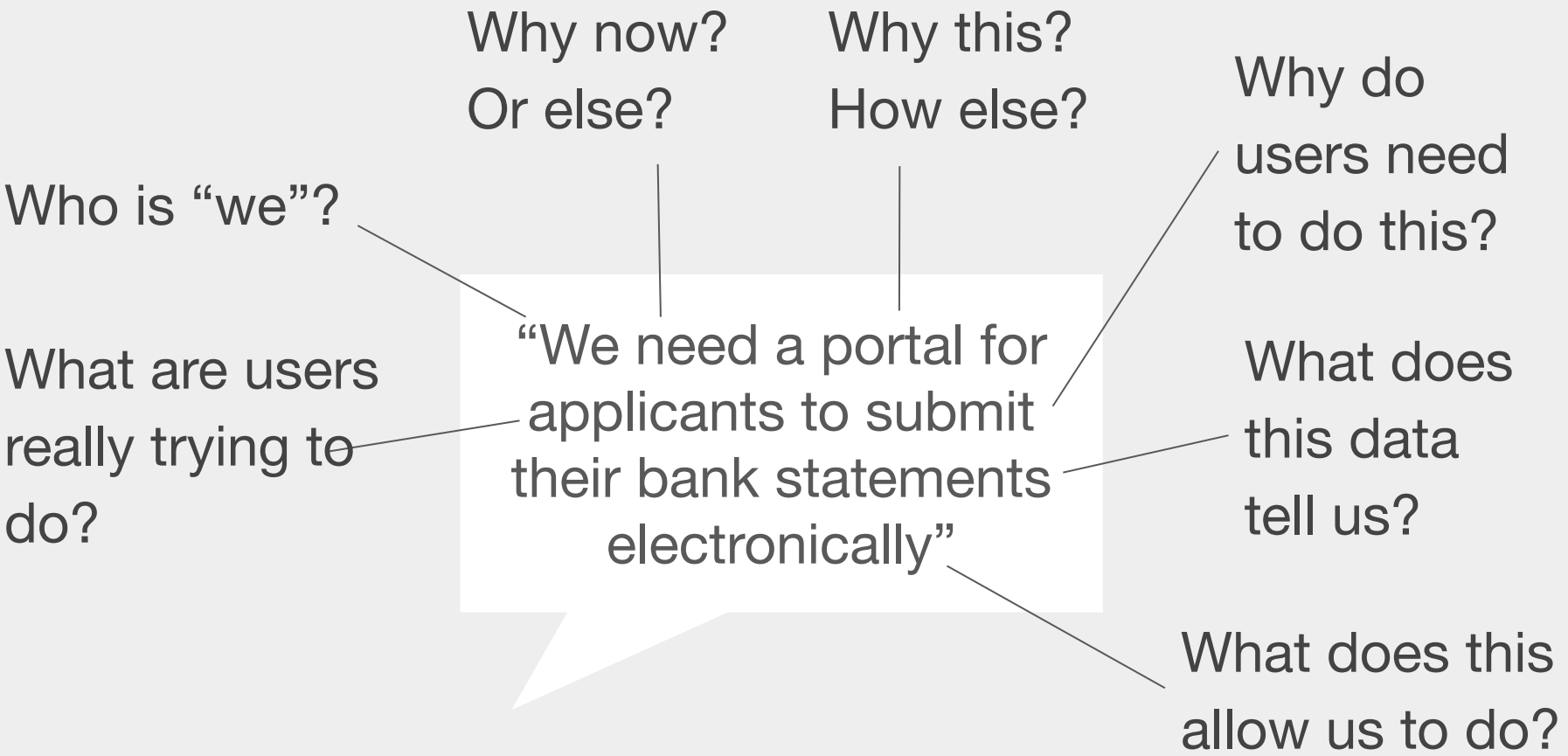
Problem or solution?

“Let’s scan documents to cut down on paperwork”

“We’ll let people self-serve”

“An online portal will modernise our process”

“We need a portal for applicants to submit their bank statements electronically”


Why now?
Or else?
Why this?
How else?
Why do users need to do this?
Who is “we”?
What are users really trying to do?
“We need a portal for applicants to submit their bank statements electronically”
What does this data tell us?
What does this allow us to do?

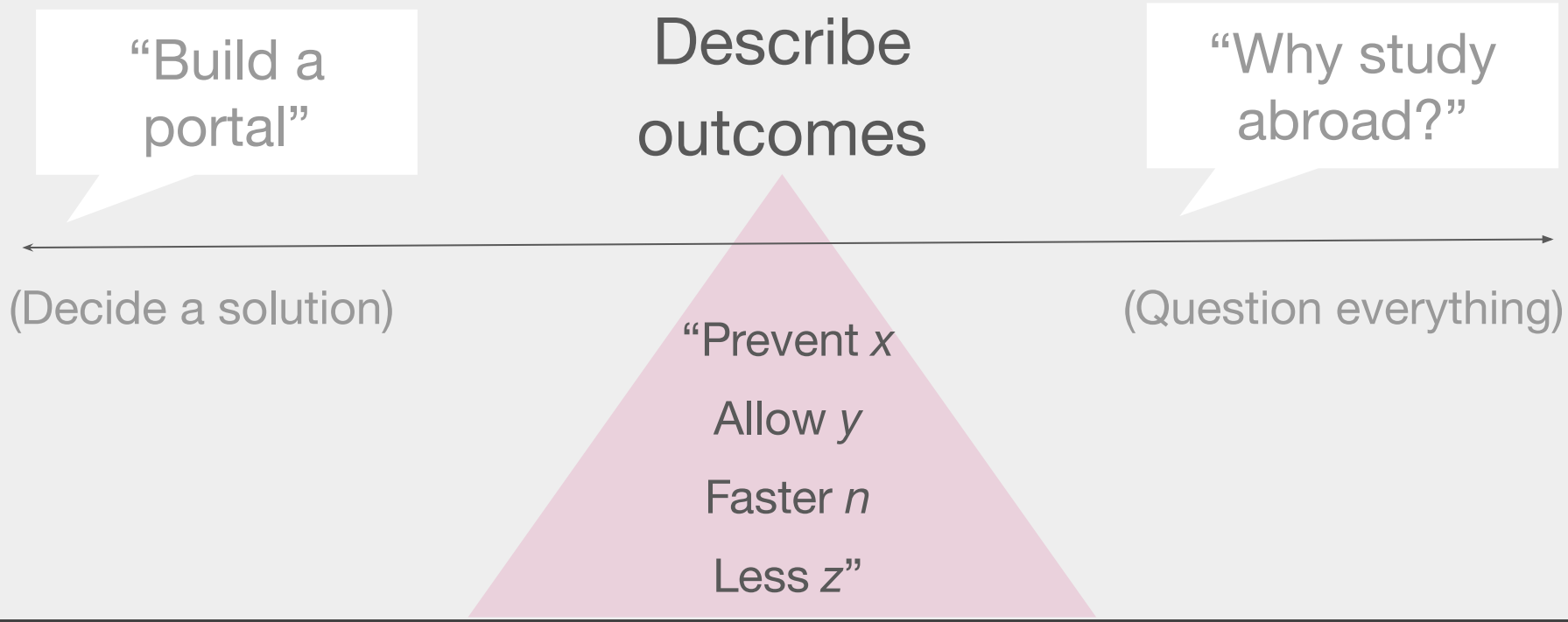
Rewrite the brief and reframe the problem

“Study in the UK”

not

“Class 3 visa application”

Give “better” a shape



Building the right thing

The problem

It’s easy to come up with ideas and solutions…

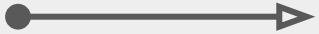
...that bear no resemblance to anything you’ve actually learned or are really trying to achieve.

What problems are we solving?

- Go back to first principles
- Ask the fundamental questions
- Go back to the original brief and ask why again
- Write down what actually needs to happen - not just what is happening now

Words matter

Unclear activity



What actually needs to happen?

Working a case

- Check suitability
- Check eligibility
- Check entitlement
- Make decision
- Notify of a decision
- Issue proof

What actually needs to happen

Check eligibility

Check entitlement

Make decision

Ways we could do these activities

Remove need for checks

Use what we know

Manual checks

Automate checks

Triage checks

Issue proof

There’s rarely one neat, single solution.

Building the thing right

@benunsworth

It’s easy to let the momentum of the project drive everything.

Where things go wrong

- Are we working towards outcomes, or measuring how well we're delivering "the plan"?
- Are we focussed on user needs or are we talking about requirements and features?

What is a user need?

- Things people need to do - functional needs
- Emotional needs - perhaps people feel stressed or anxious and they need reassurance

Design is not a panacea but a helpful process to safely test and build towards the transformation of services.

User centred design is messy

Design teams need buy in

It’s never the right time