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Publication date
2023

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
User Experience in Libraries: yearbook 2023

Standing alone together: your secret UX buddies might be hiding in other departments

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Implementing a UX programme can be a daunting task, especially when you are working alone. The best way to learn is by doing, but how do you get things done when the hierarchy is strong, you are starting at the bottom, and everyone is spread out over several locations throughout the city? Well, by not starting with the Library at all! I will share my journey of how I failed to get my library colleagues on board but found support in an unexpected corner of the organisation which helped turn my failure into a success.

Back in late 2018, I started working at one of the library desks at the University of Amsterdam. The University of Amsterdam is the largest in the Netherlands, with around 40,000 students and 6,000 staff, covering 6 faculties.

In the past decades, the Library as well as the University has experienced a massive shift in its organisation. Previously, the Library comprised of a hundred little departmental libraries and an information centre, reflecting the many different research departments, with each covering specific research areas and providing their own teaching programmes. Currently, the University has grown into one large institution with research and education at the forefront, supported by centralised services which include the Library.

In a continued effort to unify the different departments and encourage cross-departmental collaboration, the University started a programme called *Samen Doen* (Doing Together). Within this programme, employees from all sorts of service departments were asked to join cross-departmental workgroups to explore, experiment and advise on different themes and issues. As I had a little experience with usability, I was asked to join the VOCUS (Voice Of the Customer and User Experience) group, which focused on exploring how the University could incorporate the voice of our users and their experiences of our services. Through talking with our co-workers, the group quickly identified a disconnect between University

employees at the service departments and the students. Without any real plan, we interviewed over 40 students about their opinion of the service departments, learning that students weren't much aware of them. As we pondered on what we could do to bridge the gap between service employees and students, we somehow always failed to actually follow up on any of our ideas, as they either didn't have a clear focus or had already been picked up by other groups in the programme. And so the VOCUS group failed. However, some of us stuck together as we believed UX could be beneficial. With the grace of our managers (who allowed us the time), we created the Virtual (as it wasn't official) UX team and went off to experiment. And thus, our journey into UX had begun.

After doing a small UX research project and finishing a course on UX, I was asked to introduce the subject to our front office staff at the Library. Full of excitement, I overly prepared my presentation with many non-library examples. I confidently stepped into the room and rushed through my presentation with no regard for my audience. I had failed miserably. My colleagues, many of whom had no idea who I was and why they had to see my presentation, thanked me politely and returned to their desks. Although confused at the time, with hindsight I now realise I made several major mistakes:

- I was so overconfident that I hadn't considered the importance of introducing myself, getting to know my audience and stating the purpose of the presentation.
- I hadn't considered the culture and the history of our institution; many of my colleagues had worked at the Library for years and had become wary of the many major organisational changes that they had endured.
- Although I had packed my presentation with classic UX examples, I mainly discussed theory and showed extreme examples of wrongly placed doors and stairs and elephant paths (desire lines), thus completely failing to explain what UX meant for their day-to-day working lives. I didn't relate to their context and didn't use any examples that they could directly apply or replicate in their work.
- I even went so far with my overconfidence that I indirectly stated that all the hard work and changes they delivered over the years just weren't relevant anymore.
- And just to top it off, I failed to impress the head of the department, whose support I needed if I wanted to do more UX.

Naturally, after the presentation, I didn't dare to do any UX-related projects in the Library. Not all was lost though – there was still the Virtual UX team.

Continuing UX elsewhere

I may have failed my department, but since the Virtual UX team worked across different service departments there were still plenty of opportunities to learn, experiment and grow. With the team, we started offering our services to colleagues who were pursuing their Lean Green Belt (a methodology for process optimisation; part of the Lean Six Sigma method), resulting in several small projects for which we organised exploratory workshops, offered consultancy and did many interviews with staff and students.

In this setting, we not only learned a lot ourselves, but we also had something unique to offer. As we were not limited to any department and did not require any budget (except for tea and biscuits), we were able to offer an outsider's perspective with insider organisational knowledge. Struggles inside a specific department, hierarchical structure, culture clashes, and all the typical large organisational issues were things that we were aware of yet did not know enough detail about (as we were working outside our own departments) to be constrained by them. We would bring each other in to projects as experts in UX, which allowed project members to value us based on our efforts and outcome and not on our position or personal history within the organisation.

We used our connections to source projects and would offer their team members a link between their projects and their users. Often, they did not have the time and skill to do user research, so we offered our time and knowledge. This was a win-win situation as we gained more experience while improving the products and services of the University and also making our colleagues become more interested in using UX methods. Word quickly spread and soon we were offered projects that were beyond our skills. Instead of saying no, we offered to search for a UX specialist outside our organisation so that we could potentially help/shadow this person in order to grow our skillset.

We also quickly realised that sharing was crucial to get our colleagues on board and start using UX methods themselves instead of outsourcing them. We accomplished this by drinking coffee with like-minded people; we would clear our schedules, sit down and listen to where they were coming from and how we could offer help, as not everyone is moving at the same speed and that is okay. At the same

time, we grabbed every opportunity to share our knowledge and experiences, from lunch sessions and newsletters to national conferences and everything in between.

The dark side of growing quickly

All of this did have one downside: although as a team we were growing quickly, as individuals it was going too fast. We were highly critical of our work and needed to make strategic decisions if we wanted to have a long-term impact. We were searching for advice on how to proceed, preferably from others who had had similar experiences but were a few years ahead. We reached out to UX professionals in other semi-governmental and government institutions to ask if they were willing to share their journey with us. Luckily many did and this proved invaluable, as they were able to confirm our doubts and reassure us that they felt the same when they were at a similar stage of the UX journey, but it was all part of the process.

We quickly learned that doing UX, especially in an organisation that was still new to the concept, required a lot of emotional work from us. To not lose our minds, we started to create a safe space within our team, which we achieved by focusing not just on the UX journey but also on our own personal and professional journeys. We took the time to reflect after each project on what went well and what would we do differently in the future. We took the time to think and talk about our careers and what our hopes and dreams were.

This did require a lot of trust, which for a new team can be daunting, however we built this by talking about our struggles. Struggles with the organisation; struggles with departments; even struggles with ourselves. We would listen to each other and acknowledge that these struggles are hard, offering support where possible. This allowed us as individuals to identify our strengths and weaknesses, which resulted in a change of members as we grew, as some learned that they didn't feel this path was the one for them.

A shared language and vision have also helped bridge the gap between different departments. In the end, most struggles that we had resulted from different understandings of the same concepts as we each used them differently in our departments.

Taking a gamble

With renewed energy and validation that we were on the right path, we were ready for a high-impact project that would put UX on the map. In late 2019, the perfect

opportunity presented itself as a new University-wide project launched: *Project Onderwijs Logistiek* (Project Educational Logistics), a project focused on identifying and improving processes which are fundamental to following and teaching classes. We called in all our favours and used our network to get into as many of the sub-projects as we could. Once in, we promoted the hell out of UX methods, resulting in a top-down, in the middle and bottom-up UX approach as many of the sub-projects adopted the methodology. The project is nearing its end in 2022, and recently we were praised for our UX push as the project has been a huge success and has allowed a total overhaul of many of our services which are now designed with the users in mind.

Meanwhile at the Library...

Meanwhile, I still felt I was walking on eggshells back at the Library, but thankfully not everybody there had given up on UX. My manager worked incredibly hard to promote UX and some project leaders within my department allowed me to do very small-scale, quick UX research projects. I continued to casually share what I was doing outside the Library while avoiding any UX terminology, such as getting feedback on a new study space or testing the messages on our posters. This was helpful to carefully reintroduce UX and demonstrate its benefits.

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Word started to spread throughout the service

departments and more and more project teams wanted the help of the Virtual UX Team. Eventually, word reached the Library and, due to the success of previous projects, a shift happened that made everyone there more receptive to UX. UX started to make its way into our policy plans and different library departments felt confident to start experimenting with UX methods. Although we may have some way to go, I feel confident in saying that at our library we are implementing UX.

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Even though it has been quite a journey, there are six things which I think were crucial in making our UX efforts a success even after failure:

Space and time to experiment

Our managers gave us time and space to experiment as we saw fit. We had specific days dedicated to UX where we could meet and work on different projects.

Freedom to try

We had the freedom to try things out; there was no one demanding that we work in a certain way or provide concrete deliverables. We were free to try different methods and in a manner that we saw fit.

Working on creating good team relations

As UX can be quite an emotional process, having teammates who you can trust has been invaluable for our mental health.

Constant open communication

Be in a constant open back-and-forth conversation, not only with your teammates but also with your manager. They may not know or understand all the details of what you are doing, but they can be important in guiding you through the organisation. But they cannot help you if you are not informing them how things are going.

Security to fail

Each of us had the full trust of our managers that it was okay to fail. There were no consequences for our job security or future. Experiments can be scary and failing is a realistic outcome; knowing that if we failed we could continue in our jobs and try again was vital.

Above and beyond, teammates and managers who've got your back

I can't thank enough my teammates and manager who always had my back, and with whom we shared all the highs and lows. We always had each other's personal goals in mind, which I believe makes us a great team.

* * *

If you are at the start of your UX journey or are feeling doubtful about how to continue, you might just find help outside the library. Being able to experiment with UX in projects unrelated to the Library or to my department has been invaluable, not just to grow my skillset but also to demonstrate the usefulness and effectiveness of applying UX.

If you are a manager and you have a staff member(s) who is exploring UX, here are some helpful tips to encourage their growth:

- Use your network to advocate for your UX employees.
- Check in regularly on their wellbeing.
- Share your organisational knowledge, especially historical.
- Set up meetings with people who have the potential to become partners for implementing UX.
- Help to search out small but high-impact projects.
- Create spaces where your employees can experiment and fail.
- Create a safety net for when your employees fail.
- Help with reflections and be empathic.
- Advocate left, right and centre.

If you are a staff member and you are exploring what UX can do for your institution or just starting to tackle projects, here are some tips that I wished someone had told me:

- Make sure you reflect regularly and often on the projects you are working on.
- Be open with your struggles to other team members, you are not alone in this.
- Have backup during research activities – nothing beats having a buddy to help you out during an interview or workshop.
- Reach out to UX people in other organisations to learn about their journeys.

- Be compassionate towards your co-workers – they are your users when you are implementing UX.
- Keep an open conversation with your manager – they may not know everything about UX but they do know the organisation inside out.
- Take vacations – the projects and users will still be there when you are back with renewed energy.
- Step back when you get emotionally involved with your projects, it fogs the mind and judgment.
- Look for small projects to experiment with – they do not take a whole lot of time and are perfect to try out different methods and learn what works and what doesn't.