

# How To Think About And Improve Service Design

*Karthik Suresh*

## *ABSTRACT*

This paper looks at the concept of service archetypes and a methodology for studying, understanding and improving the delivery of services.

### **1. Introduction**

For most of recorded history we've been doing service work — whether it's labouring in fields or serving in the military or practising at the priesthood. Manufacturing is a relatively recent activity but the archetypes — the ways of thinking — it has fostered such as specialisation, mass production and standardisation have had an effect on the way we think about everything else.

Over the years this has led to an assumption that larger is better, people are cogs in a big machine and all you need are the right incentives and pay structure and productivity will automatically improve, closely followed by delighted customers.

We're learning that this doesn't work, not in services anyway. The efforts we make to standardise service work seem to result in unhappy customers and unhappy staff. Software companies that provide what look like services are busy trying to turn them into products — and finding that when you create something that is supposed to work for everybody it doesn't and so you need to spend time working on manipulating people into using your systems instead — trying to make them more addictive rather than more useful.

So, what can you do to actually deliver a better service and how would you go about structuring your organisation to make that happen?

### **2. Activity Archetypes**

An archetype is a pattern of behaviour, a kind of model that represents how things often work. Understanding the archetype you're using when looking at a situation is often a first step to examining the basic assumptions you are working with.

#### **2.1. The manufacturing archetype.**

The basic idea in manufacturing is that you bring together a number of parts and create a whole. Ideally, the whole you create is the same everything and your task becomes one of creating as many as needed as quickly and cheaply as possible.

The manufacturing system allows for some variation. When you buy a car, for example, you can choose the colour and some of the options but you can't usually change the big stuff — the chassis, the length, the width usually need to stay the same.

Organisations that focus on economies of scale find it hard to cope with changes. They're geared up to make the same thing many times and small runs or one-offs confuse and upset them.

That's what's happening in the publishing industry right now as the established order that's used to printing in volume is being upset by the revolution in print on demand where a book is only printed after a customer has placed an order.

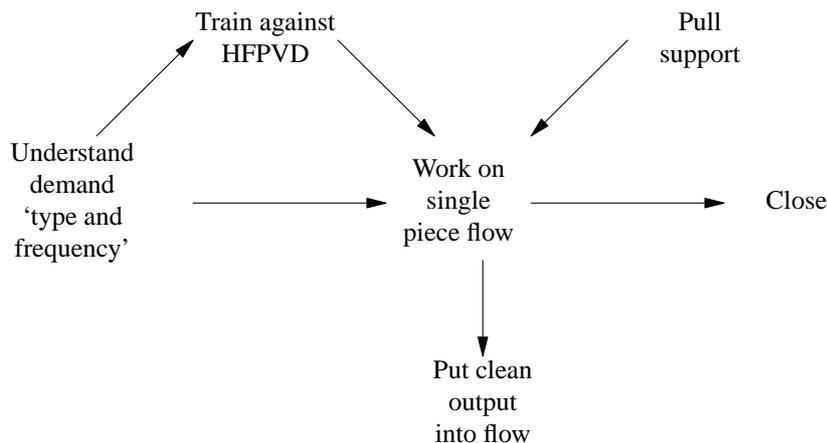
The book the customer gets, however, is usually exactly the same as one another customer gets — you don't expect to have a different table of contents or page ordering from your friend when you order the same book. There is little variety. What you want is the thing you want and you want the quality to be good and that's that.

## 2.2. The service archetype

The fundamental difference between manufacturing and services is that where in manufacturing you get a product with some customisation, in services you get customisation with some product elements. Take the last time you had a haircut, for example. Many years ago if you were a man you perhaps asked for a short back and sides. These days it's unlikely that anyone in the salon will have exactly the same hairstyle as you.

The hairdresser's job (notice that no one is called a barber anymore) is to give you a haircut that works for you, one that suits your features, the shape of your head and fits the image that you have of yourself. The essence of the job is to cope with the variety of customer demand, using the basic skills needed to cut hair, supported by the knowledge and ability to make it an experience — which includes the banter.

The figure below is an adaptation of the service archetype developed by John Seddon<sup>1</sup>.



This model focuses on what needs to be done in an organisation that makes customers happy — a service organisation.

In this type of organisation we have to deal with customer demand. Typically there are two types of demand: value demand and failure demand. Value demand is what the customer wants or needs doing, like getting a haircut or having their boiler fixed. Failure demand is what happens when the customer doesn't get what they want, like having the appointment cancelled or having the fixed boiler fail again a few days later.

In most service situations what the customer wants is to get served right now. They want to get whatever they need as soon as possible and ideally what you or your staff will do is get them served the first time they get in touch. This means that you need to know what to do and that's best done by making sure you train for what customers need doing most often. That means training against high frequency predictable value demand (HFPVD).

If you've got the training right then you'll close the job on the first go. If you don't know what to do you need to be able to pull expertise from where it is when you need it. Finally, if you've done what you need to do but now need something else to happen then you need to put a 'clean' output into the flow so that the next person can do what they need with what you give them and trust that it's right.

What's interesting about this approach is that it goes back to taking a craft approach to service. An approach that is based around one person doing everything they can and working with others when the combination is more powerful than them working individually. This is a very different approach to standardising work so that different people do small, isolated and individually irrelevant pieces that don't build their skills or build up to creating value for the customer. The difference is that with technology you're able to use computers and machines to deliver a service you just couldn't do if you did everything by hand.

### 3. So how do you implement an improved service?

The last section on service archetypes tells you **what** you need to do to improve a service but doesn't tell you **how**. That's actually quite important because once you tell people how to do something there is an irresistible urge to turn it into a formula, a hack, a shortcut. When you know what to do you have knowledge. When you start trying to codify how to do it, when you try and create a method you end up often spending more time trying to control or force the people in a situation into what you think they should do rather than taking the time to understand them and involve them in the process.

Real improvement starts with the people in the situation, by recognising that most people come to work wanting to do a good job and work with purpose. You may find that actually everyone hates each other and that the atmosphere is toxic with politics and unresolved issues and in that case you may have no option but to change the people. Most of the time, however, you can work with people and the only way to make an improvement is to come to an accommodation that they can accept and work with.

Improving a service is also not something you do once and walk away. You need to learn how to look at things fresh every day and improve things wherever you can. Clearly the more control you have over what you do the more likely it is that you'll be able to do that. At the same time you need to make sure you can work nicely with others, because you need to send them 'clean' output that they can use to get their job done. The best improvements are going to come from the ideas and suggestions of the people doing the work and so what managers need to do is focus on training people on what the best ways are that have been discovered so far and be open to listening, testing and sharing improvements that have been made since then. The job of managers is to make it easier to do better work in the place where real work happens — the place where customers experience what your company has to offer.

### 4. Conclusion

When we think of the word system we automatically jump to the ideas of mass production, the idea that we can standardise something, scale it and make it much better. It takes effort to stop ourselves, to pause and think that maybe there is a better way. A way built around the idea of service as a way to make someone else happy the first time they ask you to do something.

In this view of the world everything is focused around delivering value to the customer, value in the way that they see and say what value is to them. We need to do the things that are needed to create value, perhaps just one thing or a stream of things that create value. We need to work on constantly improving the flow of information and deliverables through that stream but we should also do nothing unless there is a customer for what we're doing, whether an internal or external one. The customer must pull value and we should do things that create the value being pulled rather than create things because we hope there will be a need one day.

Encompassing all this is a big "Why" — why do we do all this and spend so much time thinking and working on how we are doing things? The simple answer there is because we are pursuing perfection, working constantly to get better at what we're doing for the simple reason that any alternative course of action, whether accepting how we do things now or doing things badly because we don't care, is just not worth doing.

#### About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects. Please feel free to connect on LinkedIn or read more at [www.karthik-suresh.com](http://www.karthik-suresh.com)

#### References

1. John Seddon, Brendan O'Donovan, and Keivan Zokaei, "Rethinking lean service," [www.leancompetency.org](http://www.leancompetency.org).