

Case Study 2: The Blackwood Foundation

Organisation overview

The Blackwood Foundation is a medium-sized charity established in 2009 by its parent company, Blackwood; a company that promotes independent living and provides support for people with a disability or support needs. The foundation employs two members of staff – the managing director and his assistant although it has access to various experts in Blackwood. The charity aims to be ‘a catalyst for innovation, development and improvement’.

It currently provides two services: one connects people with disabilities or a support needs with designers; the second connects people with an interest in independent living so that they can share problems, ideas and recommendations.

Beneficiary involvement in service design

In 2010 the Blackwood Foundation conducted 11 consultation workshops with people interested in independent living across Scotland. Activities that asked participants to identify designs that they most liked and those that frustrated them helped encourage everybody to take part and have their say.



Figure 1: Examples of workshop activities

The workshops found that many participants have a strong potential to play co-creating roles; many knew what they wanted and had already designed/modified products or built environments to suit their needs. The workshops also found that there were limited opportunities for users to input in the design process, despite an interest and willingness of users to do so. A third finding of the workshop was that participants were not aware of existing products and services to support their

independent living. These findings led the Blackwood Foundation to develop two services: one service to connect users with each other; and another to connect users with designers.

1. Connecting users with each other

The Foundation developed [bespoken](#), a social media site that ‘brings together anyone with an interest in independent living’. The site offers a forum (Figure 2) that allows people to exchange ideas, tips, problems and recommendations more effectively. It also showcases good designs so that members are aware of existing solutions in the marketplace as well as recent design and technological developments.

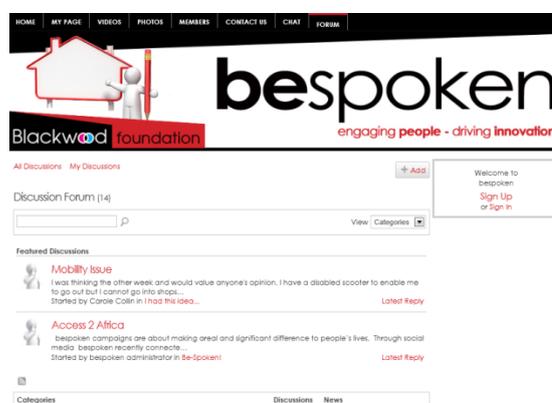


Figure 2: bespoken online forum

As the Foundation does not have an in-house designer, trained designers are brought in on a consultancy basis. The bespoken website, for example, was created by an external web designer.

2. Connecting users with designers

The second service is connecting users with designers through a university engagement scheme. The Blackwood Foundation conducted the pilot work for this new service with the School of Engineering and Design at Brunel University. The Foundation bespoken forum members to come up with problems and/or new design opportunities for a student to work on and set a design challenge for a final-year design student by asking them to co-create a design (see the outcome in Figure 2). The idea was to encourage a trained designer to co-design a product with real users.

Finding that several **bespoke** members are interested in wildlife observation, but are unable to take up this activity due to their physical limitations, the Urban Wildlife Probe (see Figure 3), a device designed to unobtrusively detect and record the presence of urban wildlife, was created as a means to improve their quality of life.



Figure 3: Urban Wildlife Probe

A new idea of offering an engagement service to commercial companies has emerged from the experience of connecting users with a trained designer during the design challenge. The Foundation is in discussion with several suppliers and developers about this idea, for example linking the developer of a hearing aid device with their target audience:

'We can help [companies] connect to specific groups of end users, for example, you develop a hearing aid device and you need 20 people aged 30-50 for your product development, we have a mechanism to support you.'

Challenges in the co-design process

Creating consultation and engagement techniques that best fit with users' communication abilities and preferences is crucial. The consultation process used diaries of users the meaning of which the director of the Foundation, who led the consultation, suggested may get lost in translation and therefore undermine the value of the consultation process.

Trained designers do not necessarily have the skills or knowledge to utilise users' knowledge and creative capabilities effectively. The design student who won the challenge to create the Urban Wildlife Probe (see Figure 3) perceived users as an adviser rather than a co-creator and did not get users fully involved in

the process. He reflected that the outcome would have been better if users were more involved rather than being consulted via the **bespoken** website (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: The design consultation via the **bespoken's** discussion forum

Overcoming challenges

In terms of **consultation with users**, it is unrealistic to expect all users to play co-creating roles. It is therefore important to plan user engagement activities in such a way that people with different levels of creativity and different communication abilities can contribute.

It is important to encourage trained designers to fully utilise users' insight and creative skills. Sanders and Stappers observed that, in order to successfully embrace co-design practices, one must believe that *'all people are creative'*, which is not a commonly accepted belief and could explain why some might find it difficult to let go of control and let users make key design decisions. To overcome some of these challenges around the **co-design process**, the director of the Foundation said that in the next design challenge, he would like encourage users to co-produce design solution(s) with designers by:

- Asking members of **bespoken's** forum to create a list of problems and opportunities for design.
- Next, students from a number of leading design schools will select the idea that they like from the list and inform **Bespoken's** members of their choices.
- **Bespoken's** members will be asked to form small groups to support individual designers on the areas of their interest.