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The Digital Agency Paradox: Teaching Clients to Do What We Do

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There was a time companies only engaged us – the digital agencies of the world – to create something. Seeing the value in what we deliver, clients now want more from us. They want strategic guidance, employee training and mentoring. Clients want us to educate them – but why? Are clients looking to take the work in-house? If so, what is our implied responsibility to our clients and our shareholders? Do we teach our clients to do what we do?



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The Conundrum

We fear that if we teach our clients how to do what we do, they won’t need us anymore. Conversely, if we don’t cater to our clients’ needs, are we a good service partner? That question is amplified for any digital agency claiming to care about user or customer experience. Wouldn’t it be hypocritical not to give our clients the service and experience they seek?

The Reality

For clients looking to take work in-house, the rationale is typically stated as “This will save us money and make us smarter.” In reality, clients seeking to bring agency work in-house discover how difficult it is to do so successfully – even when shown the way – and come to appreciate our value even more.

Structural and Cultural Roadblocks

Large companies often have strong technical teams, and some also have strong design teams. But, unlike many agencies and production companies, these companies often have a wall between their design team and technical team creating separate groups, residing in separate buildings and operating with separate budgets.

Agencies have learned that it’s exceedingly difficult to create exceptional digital experiences and campaigns when a barrier exists between design and development. There’s a great deal of overlap between the two disciplines, with a significant amount of design occurring within development. The high level of design/development collaboration required is one of the primary reasons why bringing our services in-house — and getting great results — is so much harder than it seems.

Creating digital experiences is not the core competency of most large enterprises. The organizational culture and processes in place at many of these companies



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may be at odds with the beliefs that underlie human-centered design. Often, the customer comes into the creation of a digital experience at the end, rather than the beginning of the process and simply plays a validation role.

Essentially, clients seeking to bring great digital experiences to life without agency help, must break down existing silos and reengineer their organizational structure, culture and processes.

Finding and Keeping Talent

When thinking about the best creative directors, designers, strategists and developers, the common trait is that they all have a strong desire to take on new challenges. This may prove more challenging in a client environment than at an agency. To replicate agency success in-house, recruiting and retaining great talent is yet another challenge facing clients who want to build a team of agency-types in-house.

The Way Forward

At EffectiveUI, our commitment to education gained momentum in 2010 when O'Reilly Media commissioned us to author a book (*Effective UI*) about what it takes to bring great digital experiences to life. Today we're going all-in when it comes to teaching our clients how to do what we do. We are now engaged as creators as well as educators, strategists and embedded experts. Drawing from our experience, I can provide some suggestions for agency peers.

Educational Services

Consider offering a series of workshops to help nascent in-house UX/CX teams become more fully integrated within their larger organization. Focus different sessions around the classic pain points these teams face, for example:

- Low amount of organizational knowledge and buy-in of UX



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- Many team members inexperienced with selling the value of UX
- Weaving UX methods and values into organizational structure, culture and processes.

Strategic Services

In addition to presenting insightful and actionable reports, consider using these engagements to teach clients how to identify opportunities and solve problems through human-centered design. With so many companies today simply creating mobile versions of their desktop applications, there's a great opportunity to show them an alternate, outside-in approach to going mobile that begins with uncovering the user needs.

Embedded Services

Listen for opportunities to embed talent that rises above 'staff augmentation', as in-house client teams are often looking for additional guidance and mentorship from their agency partner. Somewhere at this very moment, there's an IT executive on the client-side looking for an outside expert to ensure that their in-house interaction designer, who lacks mobile experience, is following best practices in designing a sales enablement app.

You may be wondering, does pursuing a commitment to educating clients mean that digital agencies will do a lot more teaching and a lot less creating in the future? It is doubtful. What it really means is that agencies will do a lot more teaching and a lot more creating. After all, when we educate clients on the intricacies of what we do, they end up understanding the value of our services even more.

