

Self-assessment by Julia Alberga

SUBMITTED ON 21 APR 2023



A summary about me:

I am Julia Alberga and working as an UX consultant and researcher in Amsterdam, where I founded Alberga Consultancy in 2017 and Radical Research in 2021. Before I started my own company, I worked as a service designer and researcher at the Rabobank for three years, gaining knowledge on inhouse service design and how to implement improved processes over time. I not only deepened my education on UX and service design, but also understood why stakeholders management and co-creation with the user and the team is so important in order to really make a change. After being the service design lead for the business sector of the Rabobank and doing major usability research on the newly developed homepage in 2015 I noticed that Rabobank needed a new method to involve all team members in the development of service design, so they would understand the importance of human centered design. I therefore initiated the Design Sprint within our UX team and facilitated a few within the business sector team. I immediately saw the potential of this method and the difference it made to accelerate with your team member and, more importantly, to look through the eyes of the user. During the last Design Sprint that I facilitated at the Rabobank, some tears were even shed, when they looked at the customer journey and realised how uncertain their users felt during this process and how they forgot to check in with them over time. I was hooked on facilitating and on co-creating immediately and realised I wanted to make a greater impact, by using my experience within different work fields. I therefore started freelancing in 2017, carrying out over 40 Design Sprints to this date, to help companies understand their customers and creating a service that revolves around them. Gradually over the years, the focus shifted to working mainly within the public sector, since I saw all the missed opportunities as a citizen myself, going through several life events. But also as a service design professional I was triggered during the projects I already did for several governmental parties. And so, I made it a personal mission to improve public services in such a way that the processes evolve around the citizens and not the other way around. Since 2018 I have therefore only worked for clients such as the Sociale Verzekeringsbank, Gemeente Den Haag, Het Rode Kruis, Ministry van Defensie, Justitiële informatiedienst, de Politie and the United Nations.. In 2021 I expanded with founding Radical Research and an additional freelance team to carry out more research, since the core of my work was to understand the needs of the user. Therefore, gaining insights in the behaviour of these users is the basis of everything we do and intertwined with all of our projects. In our own UX lab at the Herengracht in Amsterdam, we can host focus groups, do interviews and simulations and are able to test with prototypes to get feedback on newly developed features. With research as our main expertise, we are now able to cater the entire service design cycle, from field research to customer journey mapping, brainstorm sessions, Design Sprints, prototyping (with one of our partners) and gaining feedback from users. This was of great importance to me, since we now can really make an impact on the total service, carrying it out from a to z, in co-creation with the client and involving the customer. Last year this has led to a permanent partnership with two of our clients, Radancy and Justitiële Informatiedienst, being their research and design partner at their service developments. Besides doing tailored research and service design projects we also give workshops and trainings on those subjects, helping clients to adopt the human centered design mindset, by giving them facilitating and co-creation tools. With doing that we hope that companies, especially those within the public sector, are being inspired and motivated to take it to embed this in their way of working, continuing the change that we created during our projects.

I currently work as a/at:

I currently work at Alberga Consultancy and Radical Research, both as a founder and UX consultant, service designer, design thinking trainer



and researcher.

<https://www.albergaconsultancy.nl/>

<https://www.researchradical.com/>

My LinkedIn profile:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/julia-alberga-4a432660/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/alberga-consultancy/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/radical-research/>

My social media channels:

<https://www.instagram.com/albergaconsultancy/>

My educational background:

I started my education at Delft University of Technology at the faculty Industrial Design Engineering in 2007. I graduated in 2014, with a master degree in Design for Interaction, which is focused on designing the interaction between user and service/product. I therefore got a good grip on the user's perspective and the entire context of a service, which gave me a solid foundation on the service design field. During my studies I did a large research project in Brazil, focused on investigating material possibilities for breast implants for women who have had a mastectomy. Besides that I did a minor for 9 months at the Technical University of Lisbon in 2010, to learn from a different culture and look from another service design perspective.

When I finished my studies I began working for Rabobank as part of the service design and the research team. This was kind of a unique possibility to explore and develop both my research and service design skills and combine the two of them. Over the years I learned more and more about service design through the people I have met, like colleagues at the Rabobank, clients that I've worked with and partners I joined forces with. Also, I make sure to develop my ongoing experience by reading interesting new books on service design (which are listed in the section below) and applying for relevant workshops and conferences such as the SDN Global Conference or LXDCON. Last year I also went to Aarhus, Denmark to take part in the Facilitating Learning Spaces workshop of Kaos Pilots, in order to refine my facilitating skills and knowledge. In addition I started as a parttime teacher at my former faculty Industrial Design Engineering in 2019, where I occasionally teach the course of Business, Culture and Technology.

The following theories are the key components of my approach to service design:

I strongly believe in human centered design, since the service should always adapt to the user and not the other way around. I therefore say that; 'the user is always right', but also that 'users aren't designers'. Which underlines the importance of using a design framework such as the Double Diamond, when navigating through an innovation process.

Although the human centered design approach implicates that you should learn from your user in order to improve your services, it doesn't mean that you should do exactly what your user tells you to. The Double Diamond model shows that after the analyse phase, you should interpret the insights before you dive into the brainstorm phase. Defining the insights and drawing conclusions is a very important step that organisations often tend to forget. In order to involve both the user and the client and to make a clear distinction between collecting insights by research and defining those insights I highly believe in co-creation during the overall design process. In the research phase this means that I make use of generative research tools a lot, such as context mapping or diary studies in combination with in-depth interviews. These so-called participatory research methods are a great way to elicit the users' latent needs on a deeper level and to learn from their behaviour instead of their words. During the defining phase I also use co-creation to bring in the clients' perspective and interpret them together with the client. This is a great way to really grasp the essence of the users' needs and to involve the client in the overall process. It makes it so much easier in a later stage to implement the outcomes, since the client and user are both part of the overall design process, giving feedback and adding improvements in an iterative way.

Besides that, I strongly believe in explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it, when carrying out a design process. Not everyone has the same role, but in order to involve your client like stated above, you need to at least explain the basics of design theories. When people are aware of a specific moment in the design process and the corresponding pitfalls and mindset, it is much easier to explain what the next steps should be and how to overcome certain delays or setbacks.



These are the most relevant resources I base my work on and I recommend them as a body of knowledge in service design:

This is Service Design Thinking - M. Stickdorn:

I have used this book over and over again for the past years and what I like about it so much is that it gives both theoretical knowledge on service design and its phases, but also provides tools that you can use yourself. The tools are all showcased by explaining the execution in an actual case. In this way you get a step by step description accompanied by actual insights and examples in the work field.

Systemic Design (Design Journeys Through Complex Systems) - Peter Jones & Kristel van Ael:

This is a book I recently discovered and isn't an easy read or hands-on approach, since the language is very extensive and detailed. But, once reading is carefully and highlighting certain aspects in the book, it is very useful for designers working in the public sector and with complex problems and systems. I myself find it hard to come up with concrete solutions or design approach for some of my clients, since it requires a tailor made process for each step and some tools just out of place or a bit too shallow for the design process. [What I like about this book and the theory behind it](#), is that it understand these complex systems and the challenges that you have to face during the implementation of new or adapted services. At the same time, the theory and the tools they explain are highly related to similar service design approaches, so as an experienced service designer you can see how you can incorporate this new approach into your daily work. It addresses seven different stages and the first and last one in particular are relatively new according to me. [During the first stage they really invest in framing the system first before analysing it](#). So instead of experimenting your way through the outcome, the boundaries and its challenges are carefully framed. The last stage is about planning and fostering the change. So not only coming up with a new (service) design solution, but also implementing it into your organisation. This last thing is something that is very hard to do and where a project often fails after carrying out a design process. So to now have more grip on this stage and to help the team as a facilitator/design consultant with this stage in a concrete matter is very helpful.

The Sprint Book - Jake Knapp:

This book was my holy grail once I started as a freelancer, mainly carrying out Design Sprints at first. I think it is a very good and hands-on book, explaining every detail and practical tips to run a Design Sprint yourself. When carrying out a Design Sprint or giving workshops on Design Sprints or Design Thinking I often give the participants a copy of this book, so they can practice with the tools that are described. Although I know the theory and the method on Design Sprints inside and out, I still go through some sections from time to time. In addition I also looked into the website and videos of AJ&Smart explaining the 4 day Design Sprint and working with some of the new tools such as the user test flow, as a hack for the early version of the storyboard for example.

Learning Arches by Kaos Pilots

Last year I went to Aarhus and did the Designing and Facilitating Learning Spaces course, where you learn how to design a programme for participants in a learning environment. What I thought was really nice about this course, was that it did not describe anything about the content of the course or workshop that you wanted to design, but really about the structure and how you could involve your participants in such a way that everyone can have a great learning experience. [This was really great](#), because I often struggle with my role as a designer and being a facilitator at the same time. I tend to focus more on the outcome and the content of certain workshops or sessions, while the experience of such interventions can contribute to what ultimately comes out and how people relate to it. The overall structure and theory was based on the Learning Arches, which is an approach designed by Kaos Pilots themselves. For me it is very nice to understand certain stages in the learning process now when performing workshops and sessions.

Generative Research by Elizabeth B Sanders.

I'm a huge fan of generative research, since it elicits latent needs of your user. Things that they cannot explain with words themselves. Or like Henry Ford would say; 'When asking people what they want, they would say; faster horses. And not; I want a car'. This is why it is so important to look carefully to the outcomes of your research and interpret them, but also to carry out research that not only shows what people say, but also what they do and how they feel about it. [Elizabeth B Sanders wrote](#), "When all 3 perspectives (what people do, what they say, and what they make) are explored simultaneously, one can more readily understand and establish empathy with the people who use products and information systems." When focusing on human centered design, it therefore is inevitable to use generative research tools, since it shows the users' knowledge, dreams and hopes, which are needed in order to come up with a service they would actually want and need.

I have X years of working experience in service design:



My working experience in service design includes involvement in:

- Service design consultancy
- Service design training

I have particular experience in the following service sectors:

Public domain, Education and Research.

I have conducted X service design projects that aim at creating improvements or innovations within organisations:

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These are the service design projects I have successfully delivered:

Persoonsbeeld op Maat for the Ministry of Justice

This project started in May 2022, carrying out an extensive research on exchanging information within the criminal justice chain. It focused on users within this chain that had to work with information about a specific criminal case, such as police men, federal executors and people working in prison. Not only did we discover that all the different systems are not working well together, we have also identified that the various organisations know little about each other's activities, as a result of which certain information is not provided in a timely manner or is incomplete. This year we will roll out the design phase, focusing on how to work together as one chain.

Persoonlijk plan Inburgering en Participatie for the Municipality of The Hague

This research and design project that started in April 2022 and finished in November 2022, focused on the integration process of migrants and refugees once they are placed in The Hague by the COA. We interviewed over 25 refugees and migrants and followed their experience by using generative tools such as a diary and a design booklet. One of the most important outcomes was the advice to have one casemanager from the start of the integration journey until the moment that the refugee is officially a Dutch citizen. Also, we came up with a step by step plan, that people can track themselves, in order to give them more autonomy and control over their integration process.

Team Development for the Sustainability Department of the United Nations

This project consisted of 4 workshop days, where the entire team from all over the world came together in Rome to work on a team approach for the next couple of months. After doing the 4 day workshop, they knew how to work remotely on complex issues in an efficient way, while still feeling part of a community.

Tools Platform for the Red Cross

The Tools platform is a platform for more than 1000 Dutch volunteers of the Red Cross foundations. Providing information and giving access to activities. We investigated the current Tools platform during a qualitative research and performing a Design Sprint right after to incorporate the outcomes in the design phase. After finishing this 6 months project, the platform was not only improved on usability issues, but the volunteers also had the ability to create their own dashboard and manage their activities.

Design Sessions for Kwadraad

During the spring of 2022 I carried out several design sessions with various teams of Kwadraad; a company that supplies caretakers in social work. These design sessions had two different goals; we wanted to co-create with all the employees of Kwadraad and see what was important for them when doing their work and which elements in their employee journey could be improved. At the same time these design sessions itself were also a way to involve the employees and already giving them the feeling of autonomy and improving their journey. These design sessions have led to a yearly high potential class for employees that want to learn certain skills and want to co-create on new services within the organisation.

I have provided service design training sessions and/or other educational experiences for X years:

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My philosophy as a trainer is:

When carrying out a training or learning experience I firmly believe that you should implement your knowledge directly and experiment with it,



in order to see certain tools in action. Therefore I'd always say that you should learn by doing. And so, this is what I do during the learning experiences that I create for my participants. The structure I usually use is that I first give an assignment to the participants and have people carry it out immediately. Then we analyse the exercise as a group and discuss what people encountered during that specific assignment. After that I go deeper into the theory behind that particular phase or the tool that was used in order to address certain details and pitfalls. They can possibly practice the same assignment again, but this time they will probably see the difference with the first experience and know what to do better. In addition, I interweave a specific case study throughout the entire learning experience, so that they really have something to work with from start and so they will deliver something tangible at the end. When the group allows it; I even try to use a case from within the organisation, so the connection to their own work is really high and they immediately can see the potential of using the learned tools and/or methods.

These are the service design training sessions and/or other educational experiences I've facilitated within the last year:

Design Thinking for EVG

Over the last couple of years I teach a two day course 5 times a year to a group of 8 to 15 new EVG (En Van Gool) trainees. The course is part of a Digital Introduction Programme, which is a challenge that runs over an entire month. They get courses in stakeholder management, prototyping, research, personal growth etc. The Design Thinking course is the first course of this programme and forms the most fundamental structure for the entire case. All the other trainers during the rest of the programme refer to the Double Diamond method that is explained during this first course.

Design Thinking for SKLLS (VU assignment)

I already did a lot of workshops and trainings for SKLLS over the last couple of years, providing Design Thinking or design related information to trainees or employees. Last year I did a three day course for the digital trainees of the VU, explaining the basics of Design Thinking by helping the group work on a design challenge within their trainee projects. The group consisted of 10 trainees.

Facilitation Academy

Last year I carried out the second Academy that I hosted myself at the Unbound Amsterdam. This year it was focused on learning facilitating skills and how to facilitate creative sessions with your team or client. It was a three day course, where the 7 participants also slept at the Unbound Amsterdam, and could submerge themselves into the theory and knowledge of facilitating. By the end of the course they had to facilitate a small creative sessions themselves for some actual participants that I invited at the Unbound as well.

I mostly provide my training offerings in the following language(s):

Dutch and English

I mostly provide my training offerings in the following countries/cities:

The Netherlands

I cover the following topics during my training offerings:

- History of service design
- Definition of service design
- User research/deep customer insights
- Designing and conducting co-creation workshops
- Creativity and ideation processes
- Facilitation skills for service design
- Prototyping of services
- Building in-house service design capabilities

My training participants typically have the following level of experience:

- Fundamental (basic knowledge)



These are my favourite cases I use to inform participants about the impact and value of service design:

The MRI Scanner for Philips

When explaining the importance of choosing the right problem in order to get the right solution I often refer to the MRI scanner for children. I think it is a great example of what a difference it can make when you pick a problem from the users' perspective and elaborate on that. The problem with the classic MRI Scanner was that children had to lay down very still for a long time in the scanner, while it made a lot of noise. Kids often cried or tried to get out, which led to a high margin of errors for the scans, which are very costly. When focusing on the stakeholder; the hospitals in this case, you would probably create a design question like 'How can we make sure that children will remain still?' Or 'How can we make sure that the scans are carried out in a faster way?'. These design questions are not bad per se, but it is all deriving from the hospitals' perspective, wanting to diminish the high error rate. When focusing on the children's perspective you would come up with a design question like 'How can we make the MRI scan a fun and playful experience?' You would then come up with a solution that is really focused on the user, providing a total experience from the moment the kids get their invitation for the scan up until the moment they get out of the scanner. In the case where I refer to companies like Philips created a themed MRI scanner, where they engage the kids throughout the entire experience. The space theme for example invites you to dress up as an astronaut and to lie down very still when being in the space shuttle. The kids were all completely involved in the story and as a result all the scans could be successfully carried out. I think this is a great example of focusing on the user throughout and what a difference it can make if you pick a certain focus point.

<https://newcastleclinic.co.uk/10-inspiring-examples-child-friendly-mri-scanners/>

Joint account for the Rabobank

Another case I believe to be very helpful when explaining the essence and importance of customer journeys as a tool to work with during your service design process, is the project I carried out for the Rabobank when opening a joint account with your partner. A lot of teams often have some basic knowledge on what a customer journey is, but what is actually important when creating a customer journey and, more importantly, why you do it is not a commonplace for everyone. Therefore I break down the entire customer journey starting from the customer life line till the actual user flow. I explain that a certain life event, like moving in together can create needs and wishes such as 'I want to be able to pay together'. This is the actual customer journey; stating a specific need, which includes both the user flow that takes place at the Rabobank; the actual purchase of the joint account and the context around it. This means maybe a conversation with friends about their experiences or comparing an account at the Rabobank with other banks. I think this break down (which I accompany with a clear picture of the several layers), shows in a very quick way how the customer journey works and, if you carry it out correctly, what insights it can give you as a designer or a design team aspiring for an improved service.

VanMoof packaging

When I want to point out the relevance of using inspiration from other design solution of a different sector or domain I refer to the packaging of the VanMoof bike. I think it is a very simple and yet great example of seeking for inspiration elsewhere instead of trying to find a new innovative solution. In this example VanMoof was looking for a new way to transport their bikes and deliver it, without damaging the e-bikes. They noticed that the e-bikes were often delivered with tampered packaging and broken components, so they started brainstorming to look for improvements. At first they focused on the product itself; trying to create stronger packaging with other materials. But then they looked into options where they could change the behaviour of the people transporting the e-bikes. How could they create awareness towards them in order to be more careful? The team found inspiration within the audiovisual domain and printed a giant image of a television on their packaging; a universal icon for fragile content. The high error rates went down immediately with a very simple and cheap solution, underlining the importance of looking for inspiration elsewhere and not having to seek for the new 'paperclip' every time you go into a design process.

<https://www.vanmoof.com/blog/en/tv-bike-box>

The Mom Test - Rob Fitzpatrick

The theory behind this research approach is very simple and sufficient. And a great example to use during a training when you want to address the importance of getting real and honest feedback on your (new) service or product. It really speaks to everyone's imagination and doesn't use any difficult language. I have used the theory and video quite often in order to tell people that research is not just a checkmark to get your users' approval, but a very important step towards knowledge on your service and how to improve it.

These are the service design methods and tools that I use during my sessions:

The Double Diamond

I use the Double Diamond, as stated before, a lot to explain the overall stages of the service design process. All the different phases are



represented in this framework and it also shows the progression of a divergent phase to a converging phase, where you have to make certain choices. According to me, this framework has everything, because you can refer to the attitude that is needed in that particular moment or explain why the team is having trouble with coming up with solutions. In addition; it also shows that you need to iterate after the first cycle in order to improve your outcomes and continuously investigate and work on your service.

Service blueprint

The service blueprint to me is a strong tool to combine the users' perspective and the underlying process of the service. Especially with complex systems and problems, it is very interesting to see which steps in the process are conflicting with the journey of the customer. When carrying out a service blueprint together with your client they can finally understand why some interventions or well-intended subsolutions simply don't work, simply because they are not delivered at the right moment for example. It often creates a lot of aha-moments and the realisation that the team can no longer hide behind the process as it is now. After doing a service blueprint, the brainstorm phase often becomes very interesting and innovative.

Roleplaying

I'm a huge fan of doing roleplaying throughout several stages of the design process. I let people roleplay the current journey in order to empathise with the user, but I also let them roleplay the new solution or storyboard for the user, in order to explain its relevance and the feeling behind it. This works way better than just summarising what is written and gives the user the feeling that they are understood and gives the team the opportunity to actually 'live' your customer journey.

Storyboarding

For service design solutions I often use the storyboard tool to describe not only the new service, but also how the user should interact with it. It gives the option to show the entire service and the problem that is solved with this new solution. I explain it as the 'future customer journey in a comic shape', where you not only have the option to use words, but also images and facial expressions to address certain emotions or reactions.

Focusgroups

What I love about focus groups is that you can bring in several users at once and learn from them at the same time. Not only is this a very quick way to gain insights from more than one user, the interaction between these users is also a great source for new insights. They can build on each others' experiences and it gives you the chance to co-create and come up with several new design solutions.

After successfully attending my training sessions, participants will typically be able to:

- facilitate creative sessions
- create a service design blueprint of their process
- create a concept
- understand the essence of the double diamond
- be an advocate/ambassador for design thinking within a large organisation

I apply the following evaluation tools to make sure the participants have understood the content of my sessions and gained the expected competencies and skills:

- asking participants to facilitate a mini workshop themselves
- asking participants interview users themselves using their own prototype
- asking participants to pitch their own work
- asking participants to do an iteration on the outcomes
- having people writing down their experiences and expectation during the entire course/project and referring to it by the end of the project,
- evaluating these experiences together.

But the main thing to really see if people have understood the content of the sessions that I facilitate is to observe them when they go. Learn by doing and adjusting when necessary is the most important way to evaluate during the sessions and to make sure they will gain the expected competencies and skills.



I systematically evaluate and improve my offerings based on feedback. These are examples of feedback that have led to improvements:

I always provide evaluation tools by the end of each session e.g. a feedback form, so people can address their opinion and to make sure I can improve my session. I highly believe in the 'practice what you preach' theory, so I think it is rather important that I improve my services for my users (the client) as well in an iterative way. Making sure it is always relevant and interesting. ²⁷One thing I changed after recent feedback is to include more examples of my own work as a service designer, since people mentioned that this really speaks to their imagination and makes it easier to understand specific theory that is explained. In addition; I also make more time and space for an open discussion rather than having a packed day with a lot of tools, since people were experiencing a feeling of being rushed throughout some of my sessions.

I have participated in the following service design-related activities in order to stay up to date, share my experiences with peers and receive their supervision within the last 12 months:

- SDN Global Conference
- Kaos

I actively support the local or national service design community through:

I don't actively support the community yet, but I'm working on 2 to 4 trainings/workshops for the SDN Academy that will be launched soon. The first one is about service design in the public sector and will evolve around several case studies throughout the SDN Case Study Library. The other one will be a 2 day live event focusing on facilitating skills when hosting creative sessions. The other two are yet to be determined but will probably have something to do with generative research tools and co-creation with your client.

I have participated as a speaker in the following events:

I did a talk on service design in the public sector for The Human Network at Thursday the 13th of October 2022. The event is called IO10 and focused on technology within the IT sector. <https://io10.nl/>

I have published the following books/articles on service design and related fields:

Digicampus article on design ethics within the public sector:

<https://digicampus.tech/experimenteren-binnen-de-grenzen-van-onze-democratie/>

Article for the Fieldlab of VNG on the relevance on creating one digital government:

<https://werkenaaneenoverheid.pleio.nl/blog/view/50e73480-319b-4cf3-bd6e-ff39ae5cbc35/design-thinking-tijdens-het-fieldlab-wat-hoe-en-waarom>

Radio show Gooi in Business on seeing the citizen as a customer that you can delight with your services as well:

<https://nhgooi.nl/gemist/fragment/1164234/nh-gooi-business-julia-alberga-legt-brug-tussen-burger-overheid>

EVG start article on my perspective on learning trainees to think as designers:

<https://evgstart.nl/julia-alberga-leert-de-talenten-om-te-denken-als-een-ontwerper/>

My own podcast show 'Designing Democracy' where I invite several relevant guest on design in the public sector:

<https://open.spotify.com/show/7vfaSgOgPnqDLmjxzU53Qk?si=95adb6a8af514a19>

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