

# Utilising Shared Service Organisations for Dynamic Service Networks

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**Abstract:** Collaborative governance which repositions citizens as service co-ordinators - has become an increasingly visible methodology within public organisations. In this new model, service management is dependent upon a complex series of iterative interactions between multiple stakeholders, making the service network is notoriously difficult to manage. Shared Service Organisations (SSOs) - unit(s) within an enterprise that deliver specialized, value-added services across the organization to multiple internal users – are uniquely positioned to understand and manipulate the complex, non-linear, relational nature of collaborative networks and fully harness operant resources for long-term impactful service delivery. Despite significant potential for SSOs within collaborative governance, there is a surprising lack of insight best managerial practices and the effect on staff behaviour, and even more so on the potential of SSOs to manage these networks. This research presents a single in-depth case study with the Project Management Office of an Irish national economic development agency using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Methodology within a Design Thinking Framework. This allowed the researcher to see and interact with the challenges faced by participants and hone their understanding of influencing factors and contextual considerations. The research identified three key managerial implications. Firstly, explicit actions to establish and maintain a service mindset - which recognises and values operant resources - must be formally implemented into SSO operations. It is not sufficient to for managers to assume staff have a service orientated mindset, particularly when existing organisational processes reinforce old practices through quantifiable, process orientated outputs. Secondly, critical reflection must be formally integrated into management processes and must support the questioning of current operations in an open and frank atmosphere. Formalising time for critical reflection provides staff with opportunities and resources to question old practices and discuss and construct knowledge collaboratively. Thirdly, relational user engagement and communication practices within SSO service strategies must be deliberate and strategic. Due to the integrated nature of SSOs and the collaborative nature of their operations, clear operational and interaction guidelines empowers SSO staff fully harness their strategic role, question high level management and support critical strategic thinking.

**Keywords:** Collaborative governance, Shared service, User-centred design

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## 1. Introduction

Despite their potential for innovation and cost efficiency, collaborative governance – which repositions citizens are service co-creators – are notoriously difficult to organise. Establishing and maintaining alignment between participants within the service network is challenging due to the diversity of goals, values and interests (van der Voet and Bram, 2021; Kivleniece and Quelin, 2012). Shared Service Organisations (SSOs) - unit(s) within an enterprise that deliver specialized, value-added services across the organization to multiple internal users – are uniquely positioned to understand and manipulate the complex, non-linear, relational nature of this service network (Ruijter, Dingelstad, and Meijer, 2021). As such, they have significant influence on how services are structured, delivered and adopted. Drawing on service design theory and public management literature, we argue that SSOs can be utilised to drive effective service delivery in collaborative governance. We generate managerial practices and methodologies for proficient internal service delivery through an empirical case study of a public sector SSO. Firstly, we demonstrate that a user-centred approach is required to capture and utilise the knowledge and operant value generated within a multi-stakeholder service network. Embedded output-orientated mindsets within the SSO and the wider organisation must be actively challenged and altered to utilise the full SSO service value. Secondly, we illustrate the need for critical reflection to question assumptions and expediate knowledge exchanged within the SSO and the wider organisation. Additionally, user-centred tools provide powerful visualisations of the intangible activities, values and organisational perceptions to facilitate the questioning of organisational norms. Thirdly, our research identifies the need for deliberate and strategic integration of relational user engagement. Clear, unified communication of the value of the SSO to the organisational strategy is essential to ensure relevant and effective interactions within the service network.

As a result of collaborative governance practices, public sector services are being provided through increasingly complex heterogeneous service networks (Hiedemann et al., 2017; Alford and Yates, 2014). Within these networks service management is dependent upon a complex series of iterative interactions between multiple stakeholders (Radnor et al., 2014), in both the development and collaborative delivery of services. Consequently, service effectiveness is closely related to the quality of the network, rather than the

individual organisation or individual service performance (Hiedemann et al., 2017; Badinelli, et al., 2012; Enquist et al., 2011; Alford and Yates, 2014). Public sector SSOs, by their nature, work cross-departmentally, are experienced in navigating highly bureaucratic methods of working (Mustafa Kamal, 2012) and in addressing staff resistance to organisational change (Burns and Yeaton, 2008). This paper demonstrates the importance of SSOs organisational knowledge, learning and strategy influence. Section two examines the implications of collaborative governance on public sector operations and policies. Section three provides information on the public sector organisation studied, the research methodology and the data collection/analysis process. Section four captures the key research findings. Section five discusses the managerial implications for these findings.

## 2. Policy Context: Implications of Collaborative Governance for the Public Sector

Collaborative service development has become an increasingly visible methodology within public organisations. This is demonstrated by the proliferation of Living Labs (Gascó, 2017; Fuglsang et al., 2021; Komatsu et al., 2021; Whicher, 2017). This positions employees, not as passive recipients in a change initiative but active participants in the transition to and acceptance of new operational models (Augustsson et al., 2017; Koskela-Huotari et al. 2016). As a result, public sector staff involved in collaborative services should recognize themselves as service providers with *distinctive* service operations, management logic and managerial challenges (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). However, lack of staff involvement – or one could argue lack of *internal* collaboration - in public sector service initiatives has resulted in cases of passive, partial and/or tokenistic application of collaborative approaches (Camén et al., 2011; Sinclair, 2004). Staff can be resistant to collaborative services due to professional opposition, emotional attachments to existing arrangements, cognitive biases, internal politics, and inadequate or poorly distributed training (Khine et al., 2021; Joha and Janssen, 2011; Burns and Yeaton, 2008; Elston and MacCarthaigh, 2016). Despite the active role staff play in collaborative governance, there is a surprising lack of insight into user-centred managerial practices and their effect on staff behaviour (though see Andrews and Beynon, 2017; and Walker et al. 2007). Empirical research on this topic is lacking even more so (Blom-Hansen et al., 2015; Margetts, 2011). In this research, we explore a user-centred approach to collaborating with a public sector SSO to explore its current and future operations, and the resulting organisational change from staff applied learnings.

## 3. Irish National Economic Development Agency SSO

Ireland has eighteen State Agencies or public sector bodies that have a statutory obligation to perform specific tasks on behalf of the Government of Ireland. Each department employs a large number of civil servants or public sector staff who remain in their positions regardless of changes in the Government. Four of the State Agencies are national economic development agencies whose primary role is to support the long-term sustainable growth of the economic, social, cultural and environmental contributions of Ireland. State Agency activities include the implementation of national, regional, and local plans and policies as well as EU plans and policies on the island of Ireland. The empirical study for this article was carried out in the Project Management Office (PMO) of an Irish national economic development agency between 2019 and 2022. The parent organisation had previously applied a design thinking methodology for externally facing services and wished to apply a similar approach for internally facing services. The organisation cannot be identified due to industry sensitive information discussed throughout the workshops, and General Data Protection Requirements which could not be addressed within the timeframe of the project. Established in 2014, the PMO unit provides the organisation with support through the provision of project management services and administrative functions for the development and reporting on annual high-level plans. SSOs in public sector organisations are an increasingly common arrangement as they allow the standardisation, streamlining and consolidation of support services for economies of scale and to ensure organisational responsiveness (KPMG, 2019; De Medeiros Florentino et al., 2020). Following a review of the unit's strategy, the team identified an opportunity to further develop the breadth and scope of this typical SSO approach and expand their organisational value-add through strategy management activities. These activities could align the organisation support strategy, planning and development; enable strategy reviews; and communicate strategy.

### 3.1 Research Strategy and Methodology

This research is a case study using a qualitative research approach that produces descriptive data in the form of oral words from interviews, the observed behaviour of people, and written content produced through workshop design tools/activities. The purpose of this case study is to understand real-life phenomena in-depth (Yin, 2009). In a single instrument case study, the researcher focuses on an issue or problem and then chooses

one limited case study to explore this problem (Creswell, 2007), in this case the utilisation of SSOs for the embedding of organisational knowledge, learning and strategy influence. The study was conducted by a single researcher using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Methodology. Rooted in the principle of learning while doing (Reason and Bradbury, 2007), it uses an iterative process of practice and adjustment to refine the applied approach and closes the gap between theory and practice (Soh et al., 2011). The PAR methodology allowed the researcher to see and interact with the challenges faced by participants and hone their understanding of influencing factors and contextual considerations. Understanding was further developed by continuously prototyping new interventions and observing results. This data - which would otherwise not be reported due to overfamiliarity, unconscious and/or embedded practices – would not be captured or harnessed with traditional case study design. PAR was coupled with a design thinking framework. This offered an innovative approach to address complex user-centred problems while allowing exploration, understanding and reflection of the process in real time (Treisman et al., 2016; Hahn-Goldberg et al., 2022). It encourages participants to reflect on their individual and collective practices and patterns of engagement (Ripoll and Gale, 2020), and expedites transformational change within the organisation (Vallaster, 2004). Through the design thinking framework, the researcher could embed insider action research and enhance continuous learning and improvements for organisational impact.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The PMO team (n=7) and relevant key stakeholders (n=3) participated in the project through a series of collaborative design thinking workshops (n=3). Secondary data and a preliminary interview with the SSO manager were used to provide an understanding of the organisation before the project began, the current role of the SSO, and to support primary data interpretations throughout the project. There are many iterations of ‘design thinking’ models but the activities that underlie these models are closely aligned and can be categorised into four main phases (Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018): discover, define, develop, deliver. Though often depicted as linear, the process integrates feedback loops as participants learn and evolve their knowledge. The phases covered in each workshop was determined by the insights made in the previous workshop and the learnings gained through application between workshops. Each workshop was 4-6 hours long (with 40 minutes/ 1 hour for lunch), were held in the organisation’s head office and were facilitated by the researcher (see table 1). It is important to emphasise that collaborative outcomes were not influenced by the design thinking process but was facilitated through its approach. Participants were provided with a series of design thinking tools – such as prioritisation matrixes, strategy frameworks and brainstorming matrices – which they completed with guidance and support from the researcher.

**Table 1: Workshop 1 and 2 Summary**

Workshop no.		Design Thinking Phase(s)	Objective
1		Discover	Identify documented & undocumented activities.
			Review current team strategy.
		Define	Critically review the activities for potential project governance growth/value add.
			Prioritize areas for strategic growth/expansion
2		Discover	Brainstorm <i>new</i> areas for potential project governance value add.
		Define	Identify <i>next</i> steps to implement priority project governance activities.
3		Define	Define specific steps to implement identified activities & grow project governance impact & value-add (short, medium & long-term).
		Develop	Development of a defined value-offering for clear communication outside of the core team.

Due to industry sensitive information being discussed, sessions were not recorded. Detailed field notes of the discussion between participants were taken throughout the use of the tools, and during cross-share of findings at the completion of each tool. Participants were asked to identify any key findings/outputs of each tool and

additional discussions were held to gain further insights on these points. Supplementary notes were created immediately after the workshops in a 'debrief' to capture additional perspectives, observations, and thoughts (Beyea and Nicoll, 2000). Completed tools were photographed and used for further analysis following each workshop. Workshop findings were documented in reports for circulation within the SSO team before the successive session to allow participants to reflect on the topics/findings discussed and undertake actions where appropriate. The notes and completed tools of each workshop were reviewed and cross-compared to identify common themes and insights. The author was primarily responsible for data analysis, and regular discussions were held with the SSO manager to provide further insight into arising themes.

## **4. Workshop Findings and Results**

### **4.1 Embedded Output-Orientated Mindsets Must be Actively Challenged**

In the first discovery phase of the first workshop, participants were requested to capture *all* SSO services and their corresponding value to individual projects and the wider organisation. To provide a degree of objectivity and context, participants provided supporting evidence through work and/or situation examples. In the initial discussion, staff were clear and confident of the tangible deliverables captured through project Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – e.g. reports, training, budget management, project delivery milestones. In contrast, 'soft strategic activities' were overlooked, despite constituting a significant percentage of SSO activities. As these were not formally reported, staff considered them 'just something you have to do'. In subsequent workshops, through discussion and critical reflection, the extent and degree of the value of these 'soft activities' to the organisational strategy were exposed. Activities - such as knowledge dissemination, skill share, a 'helicopter' view of the organisation, cross-departmental collaborations, ongoing strategic clarification and guidance - confirmed the unit as an overarching strategy support presence. This emphasised to staff the potential of the SSO to unify operations and support the achievement of organisational goals. With this shift in mindset, participants developed new short, mid- and long-term unit goals and actions which clearly captured and communicated all SSO activities - KPI and knowledge driven. Frequent, high strategic-value projects were prioritised as key opportunities to demonstrate the strategic support role of the SSO. Priority activities were then cross-referenced to identify key engaged stakeholders. Using a communication matrix, the team developed a stakeholder engagement strategy. This captured relevant key stakeholders with the authority to reposition the SSO as strategy coordinator; the key strategic-value offering(s) for these stakeholders; appropriate, meaningful long-term communication channels for each stakeholder; and relevant projects confirming the SSOs strategic impact. Succinct and streamlined messages were developed and integrated to the communication matrix to purposefully shift SSO engagement from 'crisis point' to pertinent engagement. The communication plan clarified unit's strategic value for the organisation, and established actions to establish a consistent unit identity within the wider organisation.

Utilising the value of *all* activities identified in the workshop, the unit developed a clear and transparent document proposing a new SSO role as strategy support. Included were the strategic benefits and impact of this approach emphasising both their KPI and knowledge-based value. This document was presented to and agreed by high-level management. Through this agreement, the unit categorically repositioned themselves as 'architects' responsible for the overall design and execution of the performance management processes, and 'process custodian' of integrated organisational planning and control systems. Within this new role, the unit would now attend at all high-level management strategy meetings and was granted permission to critically review the organisation's divisions and their alignment to the organisations strategic pillars. This embedded the SSO as strategic co-ordinator, ensuring a comprehensive overview of the strategic position and objectives of the organisation, and insight into the decision-making process of current and future strategy policies.

### **4.2 Critical Reflection is Necessary to Question Assumptions and Expediate Knowledge Exchange**

Over the course of the workshops, participants were encouraged to *critically* reflect on their current activities, approaches and assumptions. Opinions differed when participants were asked to review the role of the SSO in relation to strategy support. While risk management was clearly communicated as part of the high-level management project allocation process, organisational capacity building was significantly less structured. As SSO staff were engaged at 'crisis point' within high-risk projects, there was limited time for knowledge transfer of best practice project management. As knowledge transfer was primarily organic through learning by application, some staff were of the opinion this was not a priority activity. This highlighted an unclear unit direction and a need 'to stop and ask what we are trying to do'. To facilitate discussion, participants were then asked to divide activities into a four-quadrant matrix based on their level of strategic criticality and frequency of occurrence. Time was given to collectively discuss where each activity should be placed. The value of this

reflection strongly resonated with participants. It highlighted an incorrect assumption of common knowledge and understanding of SSO activities and its strategic direction. Reflection provided a 'mental distance' from the day-to-day operations, space to question embedded practices and to understand the operations of the unit as a whole. This provided an opportunity to consider the SSO activities beyond streamlining and into strategic support.

Based on the learning from the critical reflection, the SSO employed a 'thinking more than doing' approach for impactful strategy support by developing a streamlined, closed-loop strategy management system. With SSO at its centre, the system first works with high level management to restructure the lines of strategy responsibility and cross-collaboration across the organisation. High-level managers are now individually or jointly responsible for a strategic pillar, and are supported by the SSO to thinking strategically, instead of operationally. Managers now critically reflect annually on their pillar's achievements, consider the pillar performance from a strategic alignment perspective, and identify/develop additional opportunities for the following year which directly contribute to their pillar's strategic impact. As described by the SSO manager 'We are there to challenge and guide the pillar lead. This is very different from our previous admin voice. We now have an emerging strategic support voice to ask are we doing the right thing and are we doing it in the right way?' Secondly, SSO support the organisational strategy through tactical project collaboration, streamlining and solidifying links between organisational strategy and operations. The unit prioritises the communication and maintenance of projects, initiatives, and policies between departments under each pillar. SSO staff have been given 'licence to discuss and adapt non-priority projects that don't contribute to the overarching strategic alignment'. They are encouraged to challenge actions – 'Why do you want to do this?' – as well as a strategically align their own activities to the pillars – 'What do we need to do for this pillar?' SSO embeds regular strategic reviews and critical reflections to enable the collaborative, innovative and rapid response of staff to changing organisational needs. Moving away from the previous 'first come, first serve' model of engagement, SSO now examines and prioritises their activities - in collaboration with high level management – based on strategic alignment.

## **5. Relational User Engagement Must be Deliberate and Strategically Designed**

The PMO develop a project management framework to formalise and systemise their role in project management capacity development. This provides a three-strand engagement structure with key lines and responsibilities for engagement. This framework restructures the unit into three distinct but complementary service streams: Project management capacity building, SSO support and mentoring, and the allocation of a dedicated member of SSO staff. The framework is broken into seven steps: Scoping the project, work package breakdown, stakeholder management and communication, project plan strategic alignment, maintenance plan, risk analysis and impact report. The stream allocation is determined by the project's strategic importance and potential risk. SSO acts in an advisory role for low risk, low strategic projects. Moderate strategic impact and risk projects engage through ongoing collaboration with SSO staff, who also act in a mentoring capacity 'to work with them to co-create a solution'. High strategic value, high risk projects are allocated a dedicated member of SSO staff. SSO best practice principles are reinforced through a structured training and mentoring program. Consisting of three modules delivered annually, it empowers project managers and support staff to become SSO leaders within their own units/divisions. In addition, the SSO team have adapted a set of project management tools such as actions trackers and a project maturity index to reflect the organisations strategic priorities. This provides a homogeneous SSO approach across all projects and a consistent review process to determine the appropriate level of SSO engagement. From an organisational perspective, this three-stream approach has expedited organisational learning and knowledge dissemination for effective and consistent project management; and embedded best practice SSO methodologies across the organisation. From a SSO perspective, it streamlined SSO engagement across the organisation; and prevented/limited SSO staff time spent on non-strategic, undocumented and low-value activities.

## **6. Discussion**

This case study demonstrates three key managerial considerations in utilising SSO operations for effective collaborative governance. Firstly, it cannot be *assumed* staff in a service provider role have a service orientated mindset or user-centred approach to service provision. Until relatively recently, public service delivery has been dominated by approaches that consistently treat public services as manufactured goods rather than services. This has resulted in a sectoral focus on efficiency and performance evaluation rather than the process of service delivery and collaboration. Under this logic, emphasis is on *co-production* –

focusing on the output – which can be added to ‘traditional’ public service delivery for a distinct end. In contrast, a service approach considers *collaboration* as an essential and intrinsic process of interaction between a service provider and service user during service delivery (Radnor et al., 2014). It cannot be ‘added on’ but instead is an inalienable element of the service delivery. While the SSO considered themselves as service providers, the organisational focus on KPIs overlooked the operant value of the unit and reinforced this output mindset both within the unit itself and the organisational perspective of the unit. Focusing only on quantified operations limited its potential for expansion into strategic support services as a substantial amount of its resources were spent on undervalued and undocumented activities. It was only as the unit became more confident in understanding its *own* operant value could it cohesively and effectively communicate this with the wider organisation.

Secondly, a user-centred process must provide staff with a structure to critically reflect and question current operations in an open and frank atmosphere. During the workshop process, critical reflection orchestrated a shift from simply doing, to providing space to question assumptions and expedite knowledge exchanged between individuals. It identified the need for a collective team perspective and generated a depth of knowledge and learning to develop a unified SSO strategy approach. It must be noted, critical reflection is not a superficial exercise. It is a transformative process which must be intentionally designed to provide structure and guidance, while being simple to understand and apply. The presence of a third-party facilitator – in this instance the researcher – is a useful source of prompt questions which focuses the discussion, ensures equal voice to all participants and acts as an unbiased perspective to question embedded practices. Nor is critical reflection necessarily a quick exercise. While initiated within the workshop, the SSO continued to reflect on the value and objectives of the unit and critically *self-reflect* on their own assumptions and perceptions between workshops. Users can question and reason more powerfully with visual representations (Liu et al., 2008). User-centred design tools were powerful visualisations of the intangible activities, values and organisational perceptions of the SSO. This transformed abstract information into actionable mapping exercises. This both supported a unified consensus of information within the unit, encouraged further discussion outside of workshops, and provided a visual representation of the impact of potential strategic development plans. Taken together, the time to critically reflect and self-reflect with the visualisation tools facilitated a deeper and transformative dimension of learning. This reflection is evident in both the continuation of this approach as part of the SSOs activities and the formal integration of critical reflection into high level management operations.

Thirdly, our research identifies the need for deliberate and strategic integration of relational user engagement and communication within SSO service strategies. While the quality of the service is shaped by the active or passive role of users in the service (Osborne, 2018), there is little guidance on managing these relationships to ensure appropriate and relevant interaction. In our study, the three-stream operational framework was instrumental in the effectiveness of the SSO as a strategic coordinator. The structured hierarchy of engagement manages expectations of services delivery. It explicitly communicates each participants collaborative role and responsibility within the service, and provides clear operational and interaction guidelines. This ensures staff can *justifiably* refuse non-priority projects and empowers them to lean into their strategic role, question high level management and support critical strategic thinking.

The findings of the research have proven extremely valuable to the case study organisation as seen in the improvements to its SSO strategy support operations and wider organisational strategy alignment. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the body of empirical research in collaborative governance, demonstrating the power of applied empirical studies to capture the contextual considerations of the public sector. There are some limitations to the case study. It adds to the limited body of empirical research within the public sector, but additional work is required to extrapolate the findings across multiple contexts. Collaborative services are, by their nature, dynamic and variable; it is difficult to validate theoretical collaborative models due to the complexity of service network. As collaboration is ‘a means of transforming public services, by challenging traditional relationships or power, control and expertise’ (Durose and Richardson, 2016) further empirical studies of the relational dynamics within public sector organisations is required. It is only through application and reflection that insights and limitations of theoretical models can be tested and adapted to the dynamic environment of collaborative governance.

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