

Designing and Envisioning a More Resilient Social System

How to Start from What's Good to Create Something Better in Public Services

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Segurança Social (Portugal's Social Security System) offers multiple service channels to the people. However, they were not perceived as a whole because the assistance was not standard, depending on the channel or person answering—leading to cumulative problems that could take months to resolve.

We faced the complex nature of a big governmental organization. Our research made us more aware of people's general reluctance towards public institutions as they tend to expect poor quality service. We used the information from field research to create four prototypes that would bring tangible results to citizens and impact the institution's culture in the long term.

Segurança Social has always been about resilience: the organization itself and the people it serves. Despite its flaws and fragilities, it's the social system that allows many to thrive. That's why we envisioned the system's sustainability, rooted in the workers' resilience and processes.

Keywords: Public Services, Digital Transformation, Organisational Impact, Systemic Design, Transformative Design, Resilience

INTRODUCTION

Project Setup

Allow us to start by telling you a bit about us as we believe our way of doing things plays a big part in our client's projects success. We are With Company a transformative design company that blends strategy and innovation through a systemic approach to create a positive impact with each project—no matter its nature. From strategic branding to the shaping of cultures, from in-depth research to service design; we pair an optimistic mindset and critical thinking, to generate insights and back up our strategies designing solutions around non-closed answers. We rely on multidisciplinary teams to deliver outputs that future-proof small businesses, governmental organizations, and mindsets.

The project here presented, required us to work in the fields of ethnographic research, strategy, service, and digital transformation. To address the challenge, we gathered a multidisciplinary team composed of one researcher (with a background in psychology and social reintegration), one multidisciplinary designer (with a background in education and experience volunteering in social work), and one service designer with a focus on innovation. Leading the project, we had a project lead focused on UX, service, and strategy and the supervision of a senior service/strategic designer.

Our client—the Portuguese Social Security, constitutes Portugal's national social security system and aims to ensure universal rights, equal opportunity, well-being, and social cohesion for all Portuguese and foreign citizens who exercise a profession or reside in Portugal. Thus, part of the dependent, self-employed or legal person's income (contributions) is collected to create a community reserve. This fund is valid for situations of unemployment, pension reforms, guaranteed minimum wage, family benefits, health care, and other social benefits.

We were working with the board of Directors, and the departments of the Communication and Client Management Department, the Benefits and Contributions Department, and the Information Analysis and Management Department). We've collaborated with six delegates from these areas that helped unlock roadblocks, smoothing things in the field and providing valuable inside knowledge and context to the problems we were tackling.

On a local level, we collaborated with Beja and Setúbal District Centers, conducting ethnographic research and working closely with several departments to implement and validate our prototypes. We've involved more than 200 employees across varied hierarchical levels.

Context

Segurança Social (Portugal's Social Security System) offers multiple service channels, and there is an effort to become more digital. Yet, the services are not perceived as a whole because the assistance is not standard, leading to cumulative problems that could take months to resolve.

Root Problem

To better illustrate one of the main pain points we identified in the services, we will share the interaction of a persona we named Salvador. Salvador has been unemployed for the past two months, but he just got a job offer and needs to suspend his unemployment benefits.

As so, he goes to the local services and submits the required paperwork. The front-office technician working that day informs him that they (front-office) need to send the documentation to the back office for validation as those are the only workers with autonomy to complete the request. Although the process could be concluded with a few clicks, Salvador realizes it may, in fact, take some time.

Several days go by, and Salvador gets closer to his first day at work and worries about his affairs with the Social Security not being in order. Trying to find some answers and peace of mind, he logs into Segurança Social Directa (the social security platform for citizens), hoping to see the status of his process, but finds no information. Worried about the timing, Salvador looks for a direct email address and sends one. He is not aware that due to covid-19, the organization receives thousands of emails a day, and it can take up to a couple of months to get a reply. Most Citizens who don't receive an immediate response send more emails, overloading the mailbox.

Needless to say, Salvador didn't get an immediate reply either, so he called the contact center. The worker in line can't access his records and therefore can not tell him the status of his process, leaving and suggesting that he goes back to his local service or wait for a formal reply by mail. Salvador feels powerless waiting and goes back to the local service, where he files a new request.

Salvador's story illustrates how citizens choose the channels according to the urgency and expectations they have about them, creating multiple contacts and requests for the same issue. To solve a problem or anticipate an answer, citizens try all accessible channels as often as needed until they get a solution that answers their needs.

As you can see from this history, this type of situation directly impacts citizens' life but also undercovers how it affects internal teams and processes, creating more problems and delays in the future.

The challenge

Our challenge was posed as: how can we increase the resolution of citizens' requests in one contact? How might we increase the capacity to solve requests promptly, map situations that compromise or delay citizens' service, and ensure consistency in responses?

Our client offers multiple service channels to the people. However, they were not perceived as a whole because the assistance was not standard—depending on the channel or person answering, leading to cumulative problems that could take months to resolve. Our challenge was straightforward: how can we increase the resolutions in the first contact?

If you remember Salvador's story, you did not forget that citizens interacted with multiple contact points before solving their situations. First contact means that a request from a citizen would be solved at first contact, either by the front-office worker or by citizens being able to find all the information needed to solve it on their own.

Some requests were solved directly by the front-office attendant, but most had to be sent to a particular back-office department to be analyzed, delaying its resolution. Additionally, some actions that front-office workers could solve weren't currently being done. Our mission was to increase the number of actions performed by front office workers while improving citizens' satisfaction. We mapped current actions and asked: If they could be solved at first contact, why weren't they? What improvements could we make? How could other actions be transferred from back to front office?

We broaden the scope of the initial problem by looking at the organization as a layered and complex system instead of focusing only on the first layer of the problem (citizens requests taking too long to be resolved). Our research started from the notion that public institutions are ecosystems that live and co-live within different realities. Despite serving the same purpose, the different branches of the organizations are influenced by factors such as culture, location, community and resources. All those layers play a part and by having an holistic approach we were able to figure and point out how to build a sustainable, more resilient, and proactive social system through collaborative actions.

RESEARCH

Target

As a public organization present throughout the Portuguese citizens' life-cycle—and foreigners living/ working in the country, we saw society as a potential target. Internally, the project outcome would also impact everyone.

Focused on main goals, we narrowed the targets and extracted two main targets:

- Citizens who need to complete an action visit one or multiple service sites (in-person or remotely via e-mail, phone, or digital tools).
- Technicians (front and back office) who handle citizens' requests.

Approach & Methodologies

We've developed a professional service design project composed of two parts: the first focused on an ethnographic study of the organization and its target users (employees and citizens). Second, we used collaboration and co-creation to transform research insights into prototypes. Using a Service Innovation Process (Ojasalo, 2015), we went from sensing to seizing change in only five months.

By starting the project with an immersive kick-off week and the organization's project team, our goal was to dive deep into the institution's culture and map key processes and services.

We led the project with research at its core, involving internal and external stakeholders. That allowed us to understand how Customer Service works and the different touchpoints between citizens and organizations, looking at current actions from different angles. We mapped Service Blueprints for the key processes and services.

We looked forward to understanding how the organization was structured, focusing on action support. We quickly gathered that there was much to uncover behind culture, behaviors, and systems in practice. We brainstormed research hypotheses to explore during ethnographic research. Immersive field practice was in dire need.

We used qualitative and ethnographic research methods to explore the problem from different perspectives. We did in-depth interviews (nine with front and back office technicians on the field, plus 16 interviews and user testing with citizens), learning the needs, stories, and relationships people have with social support. We made participatory and non-participatory observations—visiting six services, encompassing 1238 km traveled—to witness how workers manage requests and learn about how citizens experienced the service. We immersed ourselves in the context by answering almost 100 phone calls in the contact center. We used mobile ethnography so that employees would document their daily experiences, and we've interacted with more than 200 internal workers through observation, quick interviews, and research probes. As for quantitative research, we did two surveys for the organization's employees (+1000 replies), and citizens (+350 answers).

A statement that rose during the kick-off was the ambition of looking at this public institution as an industrial or commercial company. With this in mind, we used the Ishikawa diagram (Ishikawa, Loftus 2015)—often utilized in the engineering and industrial sector. We mapped the event's causes and outlined the different steps in the process. We categorized current blockers under seven categories (Resources; Personal Beliefs; Systems; Internal Processes; Information; Organizational Culture; Citizens) and used abstract laddering to comprehend the root problems and their underlying connections.

Key Insights

- Design vs Reality: some departments have fewer resources than needed to follow up on processes as envisioned;
- Pressure from citizens in line can have a significant impact on the workers' performance and the service provided;
- Allocated time for tasks are often short and doesn't contemplate abnormal situations;
- Time for learning and staying up to date is meager and overlaps with opening hours;
- Numerous things depend on the coordinators, who need to juggle between responsibilities and local services;
- Many problems are born internally from good intentions: some measures and guidelines aimed to solve something urgent or temporary end up causing friction in the long term.

We established a new paradigm for action and what it means to solve it in one contact. To handle requests in one contact, we understood we needed to facilitate the involvement of decision-makers without adding an overload to the front-office workers.

To improve "resolution at first contact," we had to address this problem quickly. We understood that some blockers categories were more actionable than others. Therefore we applied some insights uncovered during the research:

- Resources: External dependencies (technological, financial, or human) are not easily actionable;
- Personal beliefs: There are many ingrained habits and individual behaviors that are difficult to change in the short term (generational factors);
- Systems: Initiatives that seek to revolutionize computer systems tend to be limited in their scalability due to the limitations of the systems (requires an infrastructure change);

We decided to focus on the dimensions of problems that are more actionable. We were left with four categories: Internal Processes; Information; Organizational Culture; and Citizens. Because there were still many issues to address, we added a filter based on a key insight. As stated in the key findings, 50% of problems originated internally—solving issues on the go but not addressing the root problem. We committed to identifying internal issues and their direct repercussions on citizens.

We matched our personas with the critical blockers to understand the impact of solving internal issues on an eclectic group of citizens, potentially triggering systemic change. Our aim was to prototype solutions that brought tangible results to citizens with a long-term impact on the institution's culture.

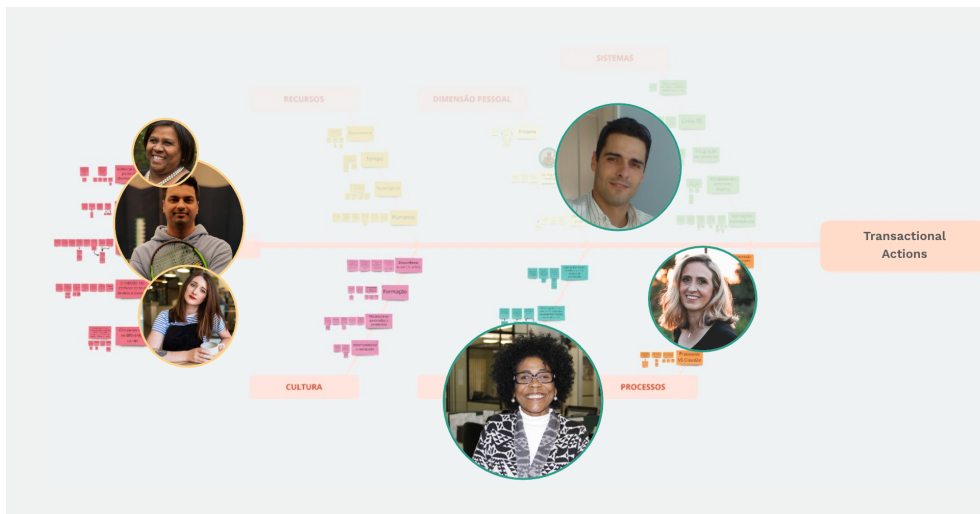


Figure 1. Personas matched with problems identified to understand potential for areas of impact: Graphics © With Company, used with permission.

STRATEGY & VISION

Building Trust: A two-way phenomenon

We started from these insights to design a proactive system instead of the current reactive one: a system where Segurança Social is attentive to society's changes and needs and proactively offers solutions to cover those needs. A proactive approach will also consider the bigger picture and the ultimate goal of ensuring the system's sustainability.

We saw it as crucial to lay the foundations to build a long-term relationship of trust on both ends—social security is present throughout a person's life, although often not perceived that way by citizens. On the other hand, the contributions partly ensure the system's viability.

The path toward the institution's sustainable future is a two-way road. It's not enough to create actions on the Social Security side, whose primary objective is to collect contributions. It's essential to cement healthy, active, and voluntary relationships between citizens and the system, with trust on both ends.

To promote the institution's sustainable future, it must diversify and supplement income sources—it's not enough to respond to crises and collect contributions. The report "Pensions at Glance" (OECD, 2021) praises the Portuguese early-pension model but warns of "an additional correction [to the pension age adjustment] to respond to changes in the size of the population that contributes to the system [active population]."

Considering a negative natural balance, it's not only pensions that might be at risk. A long-term strategy is needed when it comes to social responses.

While designing a strategic path for this future, we envision opportunities for the organization to map, anticipate and respond to the citizens' needs. By providing them with a value framework, citizens will also acknowledge the value of Segurança Social and the impact of their contributions to the system. That clouts an opportunity to change the way citizens perceive the services.

We were determined not only to tackle the problem we were first presented with but to start from there and envision the future of the social system alongside the people in the field. We used that vision as a strategy to craft and backup each prototype we delivered, and we believe that was vital to its success.

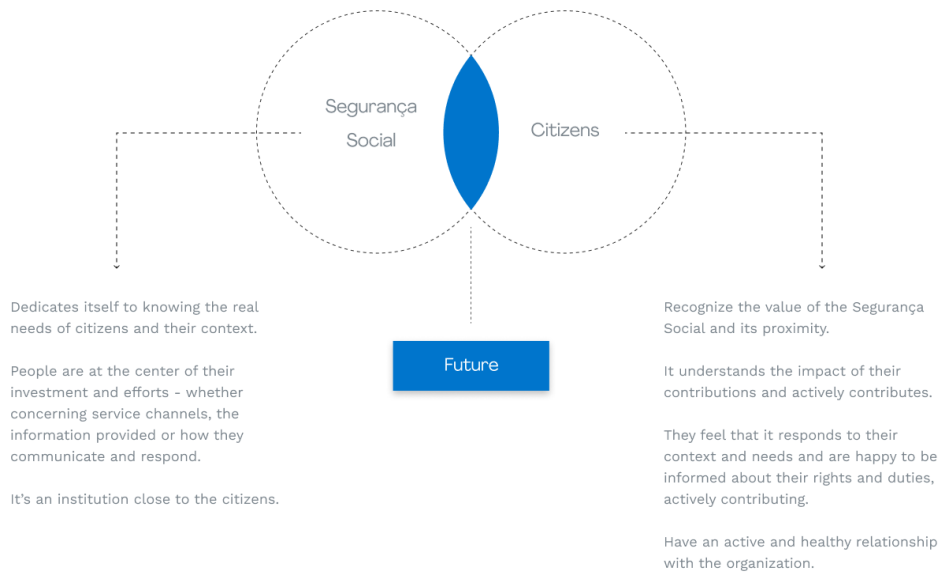


Figure 2. A two-way strategy towards sustainability: Graphics © With Company, used with permission.

OUTPUTS & OUTCOMES

Delivering solutions with space to grow

We led two prototype cycles for three weeks with interviews and user testing (internal participants/citizens), iterating solutions between cycles. After the last one, we iterated all solutions and designed recommendations and roadmaps for further development.

For citizens, we developed solutions that speak to their needs and help them acknowledge the institution's importance throughout their lives. Both solutions consider specific struggles and opportunities in the users' journey, benefits citizens, and reduce the number of requests, as users can now find information and act independently.

- **Independent workers' chatbot**

Independent workers interact with the organization regularly, but those interactions often raise tension and doubts. We developed a chatbot that answers the most common questions.

Aftermath: Our chatbot prototype worked as a basis for the now implemented version on the organization's website.

- **A visual guide for parenthood**

Understanding information regarding rights and duties should be straightforward, and that is especially important when life changes (e.g., new family member). We developed a visual and interactive guide that practically helps parents understand

their rights.

Aftermath: The guide deployed as a pilot on their website and worked as a foundation to enable workers to design solutions for analogous situations.

Internally, we focused on creating easy-to-set-up solutions that worked during the prototype phase and would significantly impact the organizations and citizens. Our solutions focused on collaboration and knowledge sharing.

- **Enabling best practices**

Across the country, we found countless strategies developed by workers applied daily. We created a channel to share good practices between departments, local services, or districts.

Aftermath: Internal teams have analyzed best practices for implementation nationwide when applicable.

- **Service support channel**

To solve requests in one contact, we needed to narrow the span between attendants and back-office without overloading any side. We prototyped a direct channel between the front and back offices, allowing them to solve requests while assisting a citizen.

Aftermath: The support channel became an official pilot rebranded as "Resposta Agora" (Reply On-Demand), aiming to implement nationwide.

AFTERMATH

Impact and results

The impact was easily measurable during validation. Before, only back-office technicians could only perform these actions, which could never be solved in the first contact, making the baseline stand at zero. The number of first-contact resolutions reached 90% of the cases—the other 10% would be contacted by the service until the end of the day. Now, citizens can see their problems solved as quickly as in one minute—a record registered in several services. Workers actively suggested the addition of new actions. We started with 13 actions and now stand at 50.

In October 2021, we broadened participation to everyone in Setúbal and Beja (new district). In January, the number of actions expanded (50), and in Spring 2022, Segurança Social extended the pilot project to three new districts – Bragança, Coimbra, and Évora.

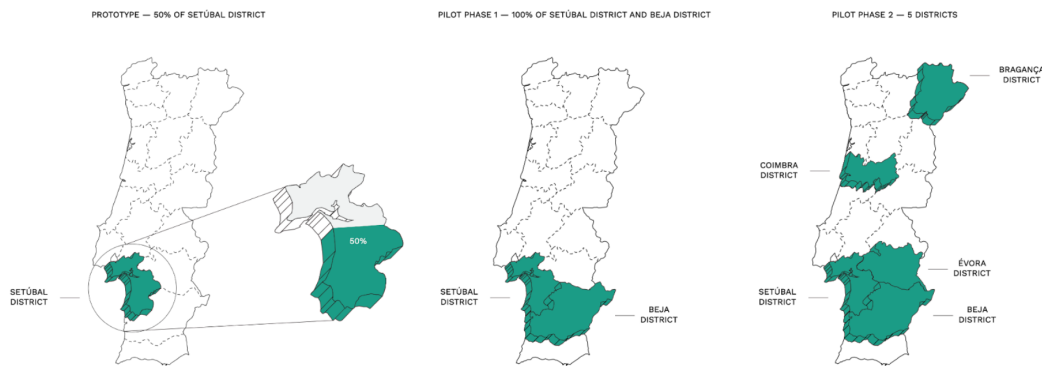


Figure 3. Pilot Expansion: Illustration © With Company, used with permission.

After the validation, we delivered a report with recommendations plus an implementation roadmap. Several were put to practice enabling a global 79% success rate for requests resolved under 15 minutes, 88% up to 30 minutes, with all requests solved in hours (data from January 2022). Ultimately the goal is to answer 90% of the requests in under 15 minutes, with a continuous growth.

Organizational Impact

During validation, we identified a positive influence in satisfaction reports from participants and citizens. Qualitatively, participants saw this initiative as one that impacted their daily work and the citizen's satisfaction.

As stated by a participant when asked how the new channel (and tasks) impacted their workflow: "If it makes Segurança Social more effective in responding to citizens, then it is more valuable for us. It gives us satisfaction to know that the beneficiary had an immediate response in such a simple situation."

Front and back-office worked in closed (digital) quarters, developing the feeling of belonging and mutually helping to focus on a common purpose. We saw an organic hype around the solution and highlighted its potential among employees. Peer-to-peer recommendations helped promote the initiative and eased the expansion of the pilot nationwide.

Our participatory research, co-creation approach with internal players and immersion within the institution revealed their willingness to keep developing the pilots. It also confirmed the importance of service design practices and the collaboration of diverse stakeholders in the field.

The relationship with the client was not a formality but a thoughtful process. We went beyond and above the initial objectives by looking at Segurança Social as a layered system—considering the different realities and dynamics within the organization. That made us understand and point out how to build a sustainable, resilient, and proactive organizational culture through collaboration. As stated by the client at the end of the project, "By engaging and conducting research and co-creation activities within different layers of the organization, the team could find impactful insights that shaped the project outcomes and organizational culture."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Aware of people's general reluctance toward public institutions (Bhattacharyya, 2020)—an intuition validated by research, we turned insights into the stepping stone toward a more resilient system. We expanded the scope of the challenge—by envisioning a sustainable future, diving deep into the needs of citizens, workers, and the sustainability of social systems. According to the client team, [the project] "has allowed our customer service to achieve new levels of efficiency and client satisfaction by using new and more effective forms of digital communication."

Besides key deliverables, we presented a vision using strategic foresight tools such as backcasting, scenarios, and future cones. We aimed to plant a sustainable roadmap mindset within the organization, so we interpolate the future from the outcome we want to create and back to where we are now to define the values and actions to happen in the meantime. This vision works as a guiding star for the organization's future endeavors.

Facing the complex nature of this type of organization, we had to work both with and for internal/ citizens for the project's success, creating bridges without overloading internal teams.

We've rushed to create tailored solutions from scratch in past projects. Developing new tools can seem an obvious solution for clients, providers, and end-users. For the first, it leads to the promise of modernization and fresh design; for designers, it expands the limits of creativity and experimentation, pushing the solution closer to the user's most authentic needs (and ranking pleasingly high during validation).

However, we've learned from experience with the public sector that moving from validated prototypes to implemented solutions can be slow, expensive, run out of resources, and sometimes just not possible.

- With those learnings in mind, we designed the prototypes using the platforms that workers were comfortable with—technology was the enabler, not the goal. We believe that was key to the positive impact of the project.

- Instead of creating a tool for inquiries and communication, we used Microsoft Teams to create a channel for front and back-office workers;

- Instead of creating a new website to communicate, we've prototyped an editable PDF with easy and customizable visuals (plus a Figma workshop and support as the team edited the final content).

- Instead of developing a chatbot from scratch, we've focused on clarifying its decision tree and iterating and validating the process using a simple tool for conversational interfaces using Typeform.

- These tools might not be 100% polished on the first take. Still, we believe that digital transformation is more about adapting to users' behavior changes and culture than implementing fast-paced technology.

A project's success can be determined by how well you convey your learnings. In the final presentation, we brought key learnings to grow research in the public sector. We showed how using those tools can promote cultural change in an industry desperately craving innovation but still behind on using/ implementing ethnographic methods.

Still, we believe it's fundamental to use collaborative research practices to collect and distribute insights to the organization. We proved the value of this approach by successfully implementing ethnographic research methods in collaboration with the workers. It's crucial

to transform research into actionable solutions that drink from the findings, creating real change, cycling back to the added value of research-informed decisions.

When the project ended, the client team had acquired the right tools and mindset for a new approach to running projects, evolving internal players, and making them part of the solution.

With the project being approached with an ethnographic mindset, the client had the will and tools to keep the pilots alive and flourishing. After our contributions to the project, the client team used methods such as interviews, observations, and collaborative feedback to iterate and launch new projects and solutions.

They led the transformation of our prototypes into national pilots and went through scaling, validating, and iterating the solutions.

Embodied Resilience

Social Security has been increasingly active in responding to economic, work, and social crises in recent years.

The response to the pandemic was a stress test and an example of the capacity to respond to an unpredictable event that quickly destabilized the normal functioning of Social Security. It was necessary to introduce emergency benefits on health and support measures for work, family, and social protection. Between March 2020 and October 2021, Segurança Social spent almost 4 million euros on emergency measures (I.S.S.—Instituto da Segurança Social, 2021).

Still, the response is often seen as incapable of answering societal needs, especially when we talk about disruptive events, extreme cases, or outside the norm: "(...) In COVID-19, we face a unique existential threat for which our social, economic, and political systems are woefully unprepared(...) now so desperately needed both to contain the spread of the virus and to treat those affected by it." (Blakeley, 2020)

Social Security needs a large structure to respond to all social dynamics. However, this compromises its adaptability and makes the organization subject to weaknesses in times of crisis, weakening its ability to respond to recurring problems and maintain long-term sustainability.

We envisioned the system's sustainability, rooted in the workers' resilience and processes. We increased the response to the people not by focusing only on that one problem we were presented with but by making the connections mentioned above and working from what was positive to build a better and more viable future.

The organization has always applied resilience—to itself and the people it serves. It withstood an unprecedented health crisis that led to another economic one. We were constantly reminded that despite its fragilities, it's the social system that allows many to thrive, providing means that represent a real chance to change one's social conditions and life.

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