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# I want to break free: how a design approach guides nascent intrapreneurs in a global public service organisation

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## Abstract

In this paper, we expand our understanding of how a design approach can enable and guide employees to break free from their incumbent mindset and ways of working and become intrapreneurs in public organisations. While previous studies have identified desired behaviour for intrapreneurs, there is a lack of understanding how new intrapreneurs adapt such behaviours, especially in public organisations. This paper shows how the readily available approaches of design practice can guide new intrapreneurs to break free from their routines, adopt entrepreneurial behaviours and provide the practical tools to help them to persuade others to collaborate with them on their innovative ideas. We draw from 19 interviews with nascent intrapreneurs, and documentation collected at the UN Refugee Agency to inductively develop a model for how design supports employees in their journey to become an intrapreneur. Our findings illustrate how adopting a design approach provided aspiring intrapreneurs to become ambidextrous in navigating between the creative and the calculative logics and heuristics in highly structured organisations. Both the design attitude and the tools associated with design practice helped new intrapreneurs to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset, position their new ideas and align them to the needs, priorities and constraints of colleagues and stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Intrapreneurship, Design, Nascent intrapreneurs, Intrapreneurial behaviour

## Introduction

Public service organisations increasingly recognise the value of innovation as a way to increase productivity and to explore new ways of meeting global challenges (Bason, 2010; Choi & Chandler, 2015) to enhance their public service value (Hartley et al., 2019). Consequently, they need to attend to innovation inhibitors such as ingrained routines and a predictive planning and control mindset (Borins, 2001; Sørensen, 2007). A common practice to overcome these and change behaviour is hiring external innovation capabilities to come up with novel ideas and ways of working (Collm & Schnedler, 2014). Yet in some public service organisations bringing in external innovators is less desirable due to the sensitive nature of the work and associated security risks. In these cases, organisations are reliant on the innovative capabilities of internal

staff and need to encourage entrepreneurship within the organisation, often termed intrapreneurship (Ireland et al., 2009). Fostering intrapreneurship in public service organisations enables exploring new ways of working whilst leaving existing administrative organisational structures and processes intact (Antonicic & Hisrich, 2003). Defined here as “a process whereby individuals within organisations pursue new opportunities and depart from the customary” (Halme et al., 2012: 747), intrapreneurship involves individuals thinking outside of formal processes and across organisational boundaries.

The continued interest and recognition of the value of intrapreneurship in public organisations (Kearney et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2019; Liddle & McElwee, 2019; Sadler, 2000; Tremml, 2021) goes hand in hand with an ongoing scholarly discussion on how to nourish intrapreneurship (Glinyanova et al., 2021; Phan et al., 2009). A central theme in the intrapreneurship literature is how organisational antecedents such as structure (Zahra et al., 2000), managerial support (Kuratko et al., 2005) or culture (Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2010) hinder or support intrapreneurship. Alongside this organisational-level focus, an emerging body of work has started to pay more attention to the individual intrapreneur, which begin with the notion that intrapreneurship is fundamentally a bottom-up approach to innovation placing the individual at the centre of the analysis (Gawke et al., 2019; Park et al., 2014; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013).

Despite the recognition of the role of the individual in intrapreneurship, this perspective has received limited attention (Blanka, 2019; Santos et al., 2020) especially in the context of public administration. This is unfortunate as an individual perspective is particularly valuable in the study of large public service organisations, as the rigid structures of these organisations often limit the possibilities for structural changes to facilitate intrapreneurship (Jones & Butler, 1992). Consequently, this places emphasis on the capabilities and behaviour of the individual to find creative ways to work around these fixed structures to initiate innovation (Alt & Craig, 2016; Halme et al., 2012).

A systematic review of the intrapreneurship literature (Neessen et al., 2019) finds that innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, opportunity recognition/exploitation and networking are the central behavioural characteristics for intrapreneurs. However, the methods by which internal employees can adapt their behaviour within the boundaries and limitations of their organisation remain still largely unexplored (Hughes & Mustafa, 2017). Some recent studies (e.g. Klostén et al., 2021) have started to address this need and propose that the “dynamic capabilities” framework is a suitable tool to support intrapreneurship. While we recognise its potential, studies putting this idea forward remain abstract and do not include practical tools and methods that are needed to help internal employees of large public organisations to adopt an innovative attitude, leaving a gap in our understanding of the practical steps that new intrapreneurs can take to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset.

An emerging and promising avenue in the entrepreneurship literature turns to the design discipline and suggests that a design mindset and associated methods can help to guide entrepreneurs (Mansoori, 2020; Romme & Reyman, 2018; Telalbasic, 2021), particularly in early-stage learning of entrepreneurial capabilities (Garbuio et al., 2018; Linton & Klinton, 2019; Sarooghi et al., 2019). This literature is based on the premise that the inherent features of the design approach, such as an appreciation of an ambiguous

environment, experimentation and risk-taking are aspects closely associated with those of successful entrepreneurship (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Rauch et al., 2009).

Given the convergence of entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship, where intrapreneurs act entrepreneurially within the boundaries of the organisation (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003; Audretsch, 2021), by extension our study explores how the design approach can also benefit intrapreneurs. Specifically, we focus on the role of design to support nascent intrapreneurs in adapting their own ways of thinking and working and how the tools and design mindset can help them in inspiring others to collaborate on their innovative projects. Based on this premise, we frame our study by asking: *How can the design approach guide new intrapreneurs in global public service organisations?*

We examine the case of the Innovation Fellowship Programme (IFP), a learning programme within the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) that is built around principles and methods of design innovation (Brown, 2008; Cross, 1982). The IFP aims to foster innovation across the organisation and facilitate the development of intrapreneurial practice. Based on interviews held with past participants (Fellows) of the IFP programme, complemented by documentation, we examine how the design approach enables Fellows to adopt an intrapreneurial mindset and support them in getting new ideas adopted in public service organisations.

Our study contributes to the literature of intrapreneurship in two ways. Firstly, we address the shortcomings in the literature on individual intrapreneurship by showing how the design approach, including actively adopting an empathic mindset, and design practices, such as visualisation and prototyping, enables incumbents to adopt an exploratory approach. Secondly, our findings illustrate how the design approach guides them in their interaction with direct and indirect colleagues to introduce and operationalise innovative ideas and help to overcome resistance and persuade others to join them in their innovation journey in a highly formal and technocratic context.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we review the challenges of intrapreneurship in large public organisations, where new intrapreneurs need to navigate established and novel ways of thinking and working. We then turn to ambidexterity as a conceptualisation to deal with the tension between these opposing mindsets and practices and review the literature that argues that the design approach includes helpful concepts to deal with ambidexterity. Next, we discuss our methodology and subsequently the findings. Finally, in the Discussion section we synthesise our findings and discuss how the design approach guides nascent intrapreneurs.

## Literature

### Intrapreneurship in public service organisations

Innovation in public service organisations (PSO) can be defined as “the development and implementation of a novel idea by a PSO to create or improve public value within an ecosystem” (Chen et al., 2020: 1677). Chen and colleagues point to three essential attributes for innovation: the need for *novelty*, the need for simultaneous *development and implementation*, and the recognition that innovation within public service organisations fundamentally operates within an *ecosystem*.

These attributes have much in common with earlier scholarly works in entrepreneurship (e.g. Singh, 2001), which classify the process of intrapreneurship in broadly

two key phases: finding novelty during opportunity recognition and development and implementation during opportunity exploitation (Kraus et al., 2019; Menzel et al., 2007). These phases require a different and contrasting mindset and behaviours (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Whereas *exploration* requires an intrapreneur to have an exploratory mindset and ways of working that is deviant from the existing ways of working, during *exploitation* the intrapreneur is required to align to the existing ways of working to operationalise innovative ideas. In public service organisations, such existing way of working is often associated with a predictive, planning mindset and practices, which stands in strong contrast to the explorative, innovative mindset required for entrepreneurial action (Sarasvathy, 2001).

The contrasting mindset and behaviour required for these two phases places intrapreneurs in a “conundrum” (Heinze & Weber, 2016: 159), where they are expected to “break free” from existing thinking and work patterns to find new ways of doing things, whilst simultaneously being dependent on those same patterns, as they need to deliver their new ideas within the formalised processes and boundaries of their organisation (Halme et al., 2012). As scholars in public service organisations emphasise, novelty requires to be introduced in the wider ecosystem, meaning various actors need to be engaged to mobilise an innovation (Piening, 2011). In other words, intrapreneurs not only need to adopt an innovative mindset to come up with new ideas, but they also need to finding ways to translate these new ideas into the existing mindset and ways of working to convince incumbent colleagues to collaborate on their innovation projects (Abraham, 1997; Alt & Craig, 2016; Halme et al., 2012).

This is particularly challenging in large public service organisations where innovative ideas may face resistance from colleagues or superiors who strongly identify with established ways of working (Freeman & Engel, 2007; Haveman & Rao, 1997), or who may fear personal reputational damage if the innovation fails (Greene et al., 1999). This can lead to a clash of logics (Heinze & Weber, 2016) between risk-taking intrapreneurs and the “risk-averse, non-innovative, and reactive” (Covin & Slevin, 1989: 77) incumbents.

Consequently, successful intrapreneurs need to switch between existing and novel logics to negotiate access to resources by building partnerships and commitment (Blanka, 2019), achieving leadership endorsement (Halme et al., 2012), while embedding new processes and ideas into established ways of working (Alt & Craig, 2016).

### **Ambidexterity and design**

To skilfully “perform contradictory activities and switch between different mind-sets and action sets” (Bledow et al., 2009: 353) while simultaneously adhering to and challenging established rules (Holmqvist & Spicer, 2013), requires “ambidexterity”, the skill to balance two mindsets or do two things well (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013).

Ample studies (see Mu et al., 2022 for an overview) have identified antecedents for ambidextrous individuals, yet they are scattered and contextually shaped (Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015; Rogan & Mors, 2014). Consequently, some scholars have called for unified approaches to achieving individual ambidexterity, arguing that the design field is suitable to address such needs (Beverland et al., 2015; Randhawa et al., 2021; Zheng, 2018). Designers’ ability to switch between exploratory and exploitative modes of thinking (Calabretta et al., 2017; Garbuio et al., 2015) enables them to come up with novel

ideas and at the same time operationalise them in a predictive planning context, which is arguably specifically useful in rigid structured contexts, like public service organisations.

Recent empirical evidence from Nielsen et al. (2021) shows that both the design attitude and specifically the methods such as persona mapping and journey mapping stimulated managers' exploratory, entrepreneurial thinking, while simultaneously methods such as visualisation helped managers to "crystallise" their ideas and supported them in exploiting existing knowledge and resources. This is further supported in other contexts, where design approaches have been reported to change the mindset and culture within organisations (Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018).

While individual ambidexterity is important for intrapreneurship, *organisational* ambidexterity is equally important (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009); the ability to blend exploitative intrapreneurial behaviour with exploratory methods to make new ideas a reality. Intrapreneurs should not only themselves switch between exploration and exploitation but convince others to follow competing logics and practices during different phases of the project. As such, intrapreneurial ambidexterity is not only an individual's internal challenge, but also an external communicative challenge to bring people together and persuade them to tolerate or adopt an alternative mindset.

As Nielsen et al. (2021) found, the design attitude and practices are particularly useful in this regard as they are structured around the inclusion of others (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011). The use of visual and participatory methods enables the combination of different worlds, such as those of exploration and exploitation, hence enabling organisational-level ambidexterity.

## Methodology

To reveal how design guides nascent intrapreneurs in their innovation journey, we adopt a single-case study approach (Yin, 2017) to analyse intrapreneurial activity in a global public humanitarian organisation. The unique access to the organisation and the special nature of the UNHCR as a complex, global public service humanitarian organisation provided justification to focus on a single case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007). Our data were collected from interviews with intrapreneurs (past Fellowship participants) and secondary data including teaching materials, planning documentation, slide decks of workshops and year-end reviews.

### The setting: innovation fellowship

The UNHCR is a global public service organisation that was established in 1950 to address the refugee crises of World War II. As of 2021 the UNHCR operated in 132 countries with personnel totalling over 17,878 (UNHCR, 2021). It is the key global organisation mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people. UNHCR generates public value by prioritising the human rights, safety, and welfare of individuals (Geuijen et al., 2017; Moore, 2013).

The geographical scope, mandate and number of people that fall within the remit of the UNHCR, results in a unique, extraordinary and complex organisation where structure and rigid processes are crucial. The complexity both within the organisation and the challenges of the nature of the work create a complex operational

environment that requires creative, efficient and innovative solutions on various levels within the organisation.

To facilitate creative and innovative thinking, the UNHCR set up its Innovation Service and the Innovation Fellowship Programme (IFP) to address various challenges with the aim to build a “culture of innovation” (Saarelainen et al., 2019). To date, there are close to 200 participants IFP Fellows working in the UNHCR’s field operations worldwide and at headquarters, representing a diversity of nationalities, skill sets and expertise. The programme aimed to develop intrapreneurial practice among UNHCR employees through inducing new ways of problem-solving, diffusing the skills of design thinking, and the adoption of the design attitude and associated practices, including rapid prototyping and other tools. These approaches were seen to be relevant and aligned with the types of problems UNHCR employees faced.

Through a competitive procedure, around 25 participants (‘Fellows’) are selected, and, over a period of 12 months, they go through an innovation process in their own duty stations. The overall structure of the IFP includes a series of workshops, an innovation project that allows them to put the learning of design innovation into practice, and a series of webinars and other, different types of support activities.

Over the course of the year IFP Fellows learn and use design principles and methods and embed new approaches in real-world innovation projects, whereby the workshops begin by setting out the broad issues of innovation in humanitarian contexts.

The “hands-on” workshop activities are carried out in groups, emphasising diversity and collaboration in innovation. Alongside the workshops and webinars, programme participants initiated an innovation project. In this project, Fellows were expected to individually apply their newly acquired intrapreneurial skills and capabilities to a real-life project in the context of their duty station. As the subsequent findings illustrate, most Fellows utilised their skills beyond the project and implemented the design mindset and practices in other projects beyond the Fellowship programme, and as such created lasting positive change in the organisation (Reference Anonymised for peer review 2023).

### Data collection

This study draws from two sources of data: interviews with past programme participants (Fellows) and programme teaching materials (slide decks, reports, compendiums, year-end reports). The interviewees were randomly selected from a population of approximately 100 Fellows from 2013 to 2018. From those 100 participants, 19 semi-structured interviews were held (see Table 1 for an overview). Interviewees came from various duty stations over the world, spanning from Lebanon to Chad and from Ecuador to Iran. Altogether interviewees operated in 15 different country operations and headquarters’ locations. Interviewees had various backgrounds, experiences and differing levels of seniority.

During these interviews the Fellows were asked to share their perceived change in capabilities and competencies and how the Fellowship had allowed them to utilise the newly acquired design skills in their daily practice to set up innovative projects.

**Table 1** Overview of interviewees

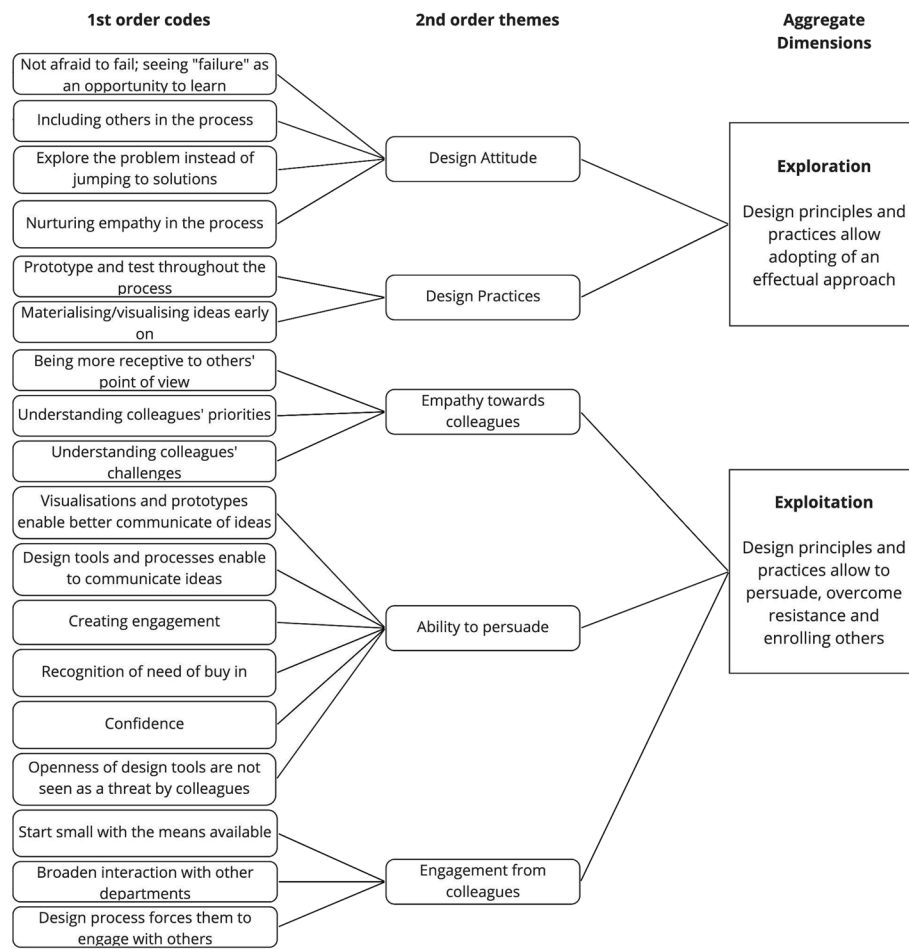
| Interviewee ID | Year joining the UNHCR | Interview date | Years of UNHCR experience at the time of the interview |
|----------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 1              | 2017                   | 2020           | 3                                                      |
| 2              | 2008                   | 2020           | 12                                                     |
| 3              | 2015                   | 2020           | 5                                                      |
| 4              | 2008                   | 2020           | 12                                                     |
| 5              | 2013                   | 2020           | 7                                                      |
| 6              | 2011                   | 2020           | 9                                                      |
| 7              | 2008                   | 2020           | 12                                                     |
| 8              | 2015                   | 2020           | 5                                                      |
| 9              | 2014                   | 2020           | 6                                                      |
| 10             | 2012                   | 2020           | 8                                                      |
| 11             | 2014                   | 2020           | 6                                                      |
| 12             | 2015                   | 2020           | 5                                                      |
| 13             | 2008                   | 2020           | 12                                                     |
| 14             | 2016                   | 2020           | 4                                                      |
| 15             | 2012                   | 2020           | 8                                                      |
| 16             | 2011                   | 2020           | 9                                                      |
| 17             | 2014                   | 2020           | 6                                                      |
| 18             | 2016                   | 2020           | 4                                                      |
| 19             | 2015                   | 2020           | 5                                                      |
|                |                        |                | Mean 7.2 years tenure                                  |

### Data analysis

We adopted an inductive approach using the Gioia method to analyse the data (Gioia et al., 2013). We started by reviewing the learning materials to get an understanding of the design attitude and methods taught on the programme which helped the interpretation of the interview data. We then transcribed all interviews and engaged in open coding, where we coded instances in the transcripts that related to methods, attitudes and struggles to innovate that the Fellows experienced, resulting in 134 codes. We then clustered these codes in 18 categories (first-order codes) related to design attitudes, methods and intrapreneurial behaviours. In the subsequent stage we utilised axial coding, where we sought for themes that captured groups of codes in the first stage. We reflected these codes to existing concepts in entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship and design literature, specifically issues relating to behaviour and mindsets of both intrapreneurship (Hughes & Mustafa, 2017; Menzel et al., 2007) and design (Cross, 1982; Garbuio et al., 2015; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011), overcoming resistance to innovation (e.g. Alt & Craig, 2016) and encouraging collaboration (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Halme et al., 2012). Going back and forth between our codes and the literature resulted in five second-order themes. These themes allowed us to aggregate these further into features of the two-stage process of becoming an intrapreneur (see Fig. 1).

### Findings: how design training helps nascent intrapreneurs to become innovative and overcome organisational barriers to innovation

We report our findings in four sections following our data structure (Fig. 1). We first summarise how the Fellows adopted the design approach. In the following section, we explain how the notion of empathy made them more receptive to the needs and mindset



**Fig. 1** Data structure

of their colleagues, which helped to overcome resistance and persuaded them to join in their project.

### Adopting a design attitude and practices

The IFP programme was set up to transform incumbents into innovators. A central part of the programme was the adoption of a design attitude and to help the Fellows to adopt different approaches to their usual ways of working. In other words, using design to shift from an existing structured, predictive, planning mindset to an innovation mindset. Learning materials included readings with titles such as "Design thinking process guide", "Human-centred design" and "Design mindsets for personal leadership development".

Design attitude or design mindset was a recurring theme throughout the programme. This attitude consisted of seven key principles: (1) "Nurturing of empathy", where Fellows were encouraged to engage in active listening; (2) "Encouraging to build", to stimulate Fellows to test and prototype ideas; (3) "Embrace failure" to advocate a positive attitude to failures as an opportunity to learn; (4) "Optimism" to promote a positive attitude to the problems at hand; (5) "Messiness of innovation" to build trust in the process by acknowledging the complexities and unstructured ways of working; (6) "Radical collaboration" to encourage Fellows to put more emphasis on collaboration; (7) "Encourage

feedback”, to incentivise Fellows to seek feedback, often phrased as “all feedback is good feedback”.

In relation to the teaching material on design, five returning themes emerged from our interviews. The first impact of adopting a design attitude was the ability for incumbents to overcome their “fear” of failure. Instead of focusing solely on success, which was nurtured in the organisation, the design attitude considers failure as an opportunity to learn. Several Fellows reported a shift in attitude from risk reduction and focus on success to risk-taking and acceptance of failure. As one fellow noted:

*“We don’t want to tell our colleagues or our boss ‘Hey, you know, I did this thing, but in the end, it didn’t work out.’ We always want to succeed. So, we want our ideas to say, I was right. And [show] that I achieved things. But through the Fellowship I actually realised that you can also phrase failure in a positive way.”*

A second theme we identified was a focus on identifying underlying problems instead of focusing on solutions. Whereas before the programme, Fellows tended to jump to solutions for identified problems, the design approach encouraged them to take a step back and better understand the problem first. As one fellow reflected:

*“Now when I am facing a problem, a complex problem, I avoid running to solutions. I have more focus, at least in the initial stage, in understanding the problem.”*

A third theme that emerged was the prototype mindset. In contrast to the usual way of working, where Fellows fully designed a solution and subsequently deployed it into the real world, they reported the design attitude inspired them to take a more iterative approach whereby they would develop a prototype of their idea early on which they then tested with colleagues and end-users. As a Fellow stated:

*“It doesn’t have to be perfect. You don’t have to finish things, like you can just plant the seed. And I think that this was with me throughout the whole process, like, let’s just test something, let’s just pilot it”.*

This also encouraged them to include others in the project as prototypes require input and feedback from users and colleagues early on in project initiation. As one Fellow noted:

*“So instead of just sitting here and drafting it, we identified different people from the field to agree to come together and we did a big session. [...] We did a whole series of workshops in 2018 in all the different regions. So, I think well over 300 staff members.”*

Practical tools such as visualisations or practices such as workshops encouraged them to include others in the development process, where some Fellows stated that they now start each project with mapping stakeholders to better understand the priorities of others.

### **Understanding colleagues**

Another central theme that emerged from the data was becoming more conscious of their empathic abilities and operationalising them. Due to the nature of the work carried

out by the UNHCR, employees see themselves as empathic. Yet, as project management requires rationality, the empathic mindset might not always be at the forefront in project work. Empathy in the design process is a conscious “decision” and step in the process, encouraging designers to situate themselves in “users’ shoes”. As one fellow stated: *“[the design approach] helped me to understand how to actually systematically always look for the perspective of others”*. This empathic approach did reach beyond the direct users of their project.

Here, the practical tools such as prototyping efforts, supported being systematic in taking an empathic approach to others, where the inclusion of their colleagues in the development made them more sensitive to their issues and challenges. Specifically, Fellows noted how they became more sensitive towards, not only their end-users, but also to the needs and priorities of their colleagues. To quote one Fellow: *“I tend to pay more attention to the actual hurdles that people are facing. So, I would say I am more empathetic to my fellow colleagues than I was before, definitely”*.

### **Ability to persuade**

The attitude and methods of design did not only support the Fellows in adopting an entrepreneurial approach to new projects, it supported them in selling their ideas to others. For example, one Fellow reported that the inclusion of others early on in idea development allowed them to better understand how others communicate at work, improving engagement: *“And how to identify other people’s communication style, working style, personality, and how you better engage”*.

The skills learned in the presentation of innovative projects, and specifically in the use of design framing, such as providing a prototype or simulation of the idea, enabled intra-preneurs to feel that they were better equipped to convince others:

*“You learn how to better present your ideas by offering a little simulation of it. It’s extremely useful for communication purposes”*

Another fellow reported the use of stakeholder mapping to get an overview of the individuals that need to be persuaded in the project:

*“Before I start the innovation process, I have a stakeholder mapping on how to influence people within my team for anything. I need to understand their priorities, and I need to understand where they’re coming from. So I think that a part that required a lot more thinking for me was the influencing, and I think it’s really early on in the process of the Fellowship, which was good, I needed to understand, like, who I needed to get on board, who were my allies, who were really like the team of people that were totally against it. And I think that it’s good to start with that”*.

### **Engagement from others**

While the Fellows reported having good working relations, employees have a tendency to enforce jurisdictional control over their work, which led some Fellows to perceive an atmosphere of non-collaboration. The processes and workflows that the design approach brings made it easier to engage others in their projects from both their own and other departments. As one Fellow mentioned:

*"... we want it to be more open and to allow people to be sincere, where they are not afraid to give their own thoughts and feedback because of my way of speaking. I try to do this always in weekly meetings with my team, allowing everyone to have a voice."*

Another insight came from one Fellow who noted that the ability to engage others and bring in new ideas could be attributed to the process of innovating through design. The loose boundaries of the innovation process and iterative approach meant that the outcome is not predetermined. According to one Fellow this reduced the perceived risk and encouraged others to engage:

*"Because it is a process. I think people are more likely to engage because they know the outcome isn't predetermined. They're not like, 'Oh, here's headquarters with another initiative. They want us to do X,' you know, it's more like 'OK, they are interested in X.'"*

## Discussion

Our study set out to explore how design can enable and guide employees in public service organisations to become intrapreneurs. Previous work in entrepreneurship has pointed out that a design mindset and practice are well-suited for teaching new entrepreneurs (Garbuio et al., 2018; Linton & Klinton, 2019; Mansoori, 2020; Neck & Greene, 2011; Sarooghi et al., 2019). Yet these studies have primarily focused on the practical execution of intrapreneurship and consequently placed less emphasis on the early stages of intrapreneurship: how to become an intrapreneur.

We will discuss the role of design in supporting becoming an intrapreneur in relation to the two broad dimensions of the intrapreneurial process: exploration and exploitation. First, aligning to studies in design-driven entrepreneurship, our findings show that the design attitude and practices are equally supportive of intrapreneurs in their efforts to adopt an explorative mindset to create valuable new ideas. Specifically, we found that seeing failure as an opportunity to learn, a shift in focus on solutions to problems and early inclusion of others in the innovation process enabled an innovation mindset.

Second, our findings extend this work by showing how the design approach enhances individual capabilities in exploiting their innovative ideas, thereby increasing the ability to position and communicate innovative ideas and overcome potential resistance. In the following two sections, we elaborate on the two phases.

### Individual exploration and breaking free

Our analysis shows that the design approach, such as a problem-based approach, systems perspective, acceptance of failure and being exploratory through testing and prototyping provides intrapreneurs with the guidance and motivation to approach work differently. As such, the design attitude enabled the Fellows to adopt entrepreneurial behaviours of *innovativeness*, *proactiveness* and *risk-taking* (Hughes & Mustafa, 2017; Kraus et al., 2019; Neessen et al., 2019). This behaviour stands in contrast to the risk-averse, causation logics of public service organisations. As such, our findings align with recent studies who argue for the utility of design approaches in adopting innovative mindset (Mansoori, 2020), whereby design methods such as prototyping, engaging users

and visualisation enable innovativeness (Hughes & Mustafa, 2017). Moreover, our findings show that intrapreneurs find support in both design attitude and methods to “break free” of their routinised behaviour and existing structures to do something different.

### **Individual exploitation and enrolling others**

A key challenge for new intrapreneurs is to overcome resistance from colleagues as their ideas might contradict the existing routines and rules of the organisation or the attitudes and beliefs of colleagues. Therefore, a central task of intrapreneurs is to persuade their direct and indirect colleagues to join in their innovation journey (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Halme et al., 2012). Previous studies have signalled the importance of aligning logics associated with innovative ideas with the existing logics of the wider organisation (Alt & Craig, 2016; Heinze & Weber, 2016), yet have provided limited guidance on how to do so.

Our findings illustrate that both the design attitude and associated practices are helpful in guiding new intrapreneurs in framing their new ideas. We found that the adoption of an empathic mindset, not only towards their final end-users (Kouprie & Visser, 2009), but to colleagues who need to support the intrapreneur’s innovative ideas, enabled them to situate and frame their ideas to the logics and worldview of the receiver (Alt & Craig, 2016; Martens et al., 2007). In line with Nielsen et al. (2021), we found that the methods to communicate new ideas, such as visualisation or prototypes, enabled the intrapreneurs to cross the entrepreneurial and managerial mindsets.

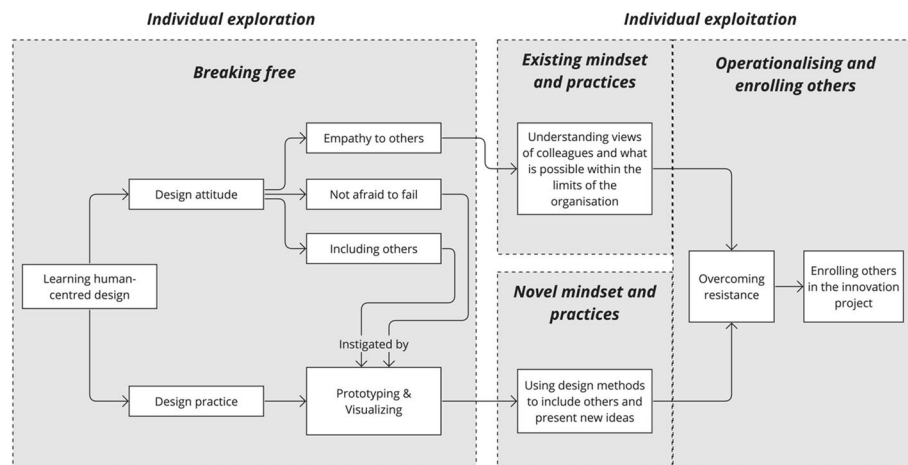
Moreover, the design approach, and specifically the inclusiveness of the design process, allowed intrapreneurs to frame their ideas in ways that were non-obtrusive to their colleagues. The framing of design as being an open-ended process, due to its iterative nature, stands in stark contrast to the “jurisdictional mindset” and as such provided engagement from members outside of their direct working environment.

Our analysis further indicates that the design methods helped intrapreneurs to increase collaboration. The emphasis on involving users in the process that was taught to the Fellows helped them to engage those they needed to convince early on. Specifically, methods like visualisation, prototyping and process planning allowed intrapreneurs to introduce their ideas in novel formats, allowing them to help bridge potential discrepancies in logics and reduce potential resistance.

### **Intrapreneurship guided by design**

To synthesise our findings, we propose a model of how design guides new intrapreneurs in a public service organisation (Fig. 2). We situate the design attitude and practices onto the two dimensions of intrapreneurship, that is, opportunity recognition (exploration) and opportunity exploitation (Kraus et al., 2019).

As our model illustrates, before entering the exploration stage, the new intrapreneur first needs to learn how to explore by adopting an innovative mindset. Teaching about the design approach provides the building blocks of such a mindset. The design attitude that our case reveals include empathy, testing with means available, being unafraid to fail, and including others. Following the argument that intrapreneurship is primarily a team effort (Halme et al., 2012), our analysis reveals that the principle of design empathy encourages intrapreneurs not only to understand the end user better, but also their



**Fig. 2** Intrapreneurship guided by design attitude and practice

direct colleagues, allowing them to learn the limits of causation and enabling them to better frame novel ideas in the worldview of their colleagues.

Learning about design practices such as prototyping, visualising and testing with users and colleagues enables new intrapreneurs to operationalise the design attitude and frame the new ideas in accessible ways that align to the worldview of their colleagues. As most design methods are focused on an inclusive approach, intrapreneurs are encouraged to include both end-users and their colleagues early on in the prototyping efforts. In combination with the use of accessible methods of presentation such as visualisation or prototypes, this provides a persuasive mix which reduces resistance to innovation and encourages others to join the innovation journey.

## Conclusion

New intrapreneurs face two key challenges. First, they need to adapt their mindset and ways of working to set it apart from the traditional ways of working, and second, they need to convince their direct and indirect colleagues to collaborate on their innovative ideas. Yet learning about entrepreneurship tends to emphasise the exploratory dimension, providing limited attention to need for intrapreneurs to learn how to balance the exploratory and the exploitative dimension, hence, how to become ambidextrous (Kraus et al., 2019). Our paper showed that the design approach can address this need by providing incumbents to change their mindset and practical tools to operationalise ambidexterity to foster an intrapreneurial approach in a public service organisation.

## Limitations and future studies

Our aim was to illustrate, through empirical material, the utility of design in supporting new intrapreneurs to adopt an intrapreneurial approach in formal and highly structured contexts. To do so, we analysed a single case to allow an in-depth exploratory study. While single-case studies are famous for their ability to explore interesting phenomena in detail (Siggelkow, 2007), they are infamous for their limited generalisability (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As our study is staged in a particular type of formal public service organisation, the size, history, nature of work and engrained practices of a global organisation such as the

UNHCR are not necessarily transferable to other contexts. Therefore, further exploration in other types and sizes of public service organisations might provide further contribution to the utility of a design attitude and practices in guiding new intrapreneurs in public service organisations (Urbano, 2013).

Another attribute of our study is how intrapreneurship is initiated. In our context, intrapreneurs were selected by the organisation, which stands in contrast with most studies on intrapreneurship that place emphasis on individual entrepreneurial orientation (IEO), whereby the level of commitment and dedication of individuals are used to justify intrapreneurial success. Yet our study does not include this dimension and as such, our findings, and specifically Fig. 2 is relevant for “organised” intrapreneurship. Future research could explore the requirements for self-initiative intrapreneurs and study the preconditions that enable them to adopt a design approach.

The context and culture in which intrapreneurship is studied has a significant impact on its success (Urbano, 2013). The Western orientation of both intrapreneurship and design research raises the question as to whether the identified individual level antecedents of intrapreneurship (e.g. innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking) and that of design (e.g. being unafraid to fail, including others in the process) are prevalent in non-Western contexts (Fry, 2017; Hughes & Mustafa, 2017). The organisation which is the subject of our study operates in 132 countries and our informants were based in 15 different countries across the world. As such, our study provided a global socio-cultural cross section on the suitability of design as a guide for intrapreneurship. Yet our study did not include the socio-cultural background of intrapreneurs and as such further studies could take this into account to better understand the success of design as an inspiration for intrapreneurship in different socio-cultural contexts.

#### Abbreviations

|       |                                               |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------|
| UN    | United Nations                                |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| IFP   | Innovation Fellowship Programme               |

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#### Author contributions

All authors contributed to the initial conceptualisation, development and execution of the research project. AV: theoretical framing, data analysis and write-up. MK: contributed to the theoretical framing and editing. ES: editing and liaison with the UN. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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