1. Overview

Lupapiste – Desirable Public Online Service (www.lupapiste.fi)

Applying different kind of permits in Finland has usually been a slow and bureaucratic process. Among citizens, especially building permits have had a reputation of an almost a painful and arbitrary action, where it hasn't been rare to have to wait several months for an answer and not knowing during the process how the applying is proceeding, if at all.

For authorities the situation has not been any better. As the whole permit function has so far been based on using printed paper documents, it has been typical to not know where the exact paper applications, attachments etc. go at a given time. A single authority may have had over 30 applications on her/his table at the same time.

These issues described, as well as many other typical paper bureaucracy challenges have made both applying and handling the permit process an ineffective and expensive function where frustration is often present.

By digitalizing the applying process, Lupapiste, an e-service for applying and processing permit applications, aimed at better overall quality, where processing times would be shorter, and the whole entirety would be simpler and easier – and even nicer. The work was started with the Ministry of Environment, and our goal was to create a one, nation-wide common service for all parties involved in building permits: authorities as well as construction, planning and architecture companies and private persons.

By applying online, the applicants would not be dependent anymore on office hours and bureau locations. Information from both sides to each other would always be available in digital format and no more papers lost or late.

All these combined to the growing demand of public online service created a huge possibility for us to build a widely needed service for the Finnish society. On the other hand, public services traditionally have been famous for not being user-friendly and even complicating working more than easing it. Also there is typically strong

resistance within the authorities regarding new ways of doing and new technology – usually based on prejudices and false assumptions. These could not be ignored.

What we needed to do was to win authorities to our side, build a desirable service as well as to market and sell the idea to everyone.

We did it.

2. Process

Lupapiste was designed in collaboration with its users. By iterating design rapidly with the pilot user community (consisting of several Finnish municipalities), using paper and html prototypes, Lupapiste team gathered vital information about possible user scenarios and functional UI patterns. Combined with usability testing, workshops and ethnographic research Lupapiste quickly found its core form.

UX designer worked as part of the development team and the whole team was co-located. This enabled team to create a common understanding of the problem in hand. Also design details and iteration could be done on the spot.

Lean UX principles were applied also when minimum viable product was launched early for pilot use on March 2013. Constant user feedback from actual usage proved much more valuable than anything we could have accomplished through workshops or interviews. Feedback was evaluated weekly and backlog reprioritized accordingly. New features were added and some old ones were dropped, as they did not create value to the users.

Design was communicated to user by using clickable UI prototypes or by creating an html mockup to test environment to which pilot users had free access.

In addition to UX, the whole service, its features and functions were closely communicated to the authorities. Since the project began in 2012, we've held over ten user meetings per year, and our customers have been deeply involved in giving ideas and feedback.

Our ideology has been to work at the same side of the table with the customer; together, not against. For authorities this has been something they have not been used to. But who did participate, did enjoy and spread the word forward.

Today, we talk about Lupapiste-community, which is an active group of committed people, both authorities and professionals, who want to develop public services via today's digital possibilities.

3. Benefits

Digitalizing an existing paper process has failed in too many cases by trying to put the old ways of doing into a new context without questioning the primary needs and targets. In Lupapiste we put the authorities to ask themselves what really is the information they need in order to process the applications. By questioning the old practices we were able to freely define and build a user interface that actually helps both applicants and authorities to proceed in the application process easily and understandably.

The applicants who are using Lupapiste are mostly professionals – architects, planners, engineers etc. – but also common citizens are able to use the service. Therefore it is crucial to create a workflow and experience to the user, that no matter how complicated the actual building project is, the permit applying process would be a help instead a redundant trouble and pain. And as we are providing both customer and end-user support, it gives us an additional pressure to maintain an easy to use service.

During the first months in production (summer 2014), the application numbers grew steadily as also did the number of support issues. By developing the service with the knowledge gathered from organizing the user events, usability tests & interviews, and producing FAQ's, tutorial videos etc. we gradually were able to slow down the growth of the support issues and finally turn the curve downward.

This has in turn helped the overall growth of usage, which by the end of June 2015 has been over 30 percent monthly. During the first year in production, there were on the average less than 100 monthly applications in the service, but at the moment the

total monthly amount of applications is nearly 3.000. The peak has been even twice as much (May 2015).

Overall in Finland, the building authorities receive approximately 20.000 applications per month, so within 20 months, we succeeded to digitize a lion's share of the building permits and raise an awareness that has had impacts even in the new Government Programme, published in May 2015 by the Prime Minister Juha Sipilä. In the programme, digitalization has its own chapter and is held as one of the primary subjects for renewing the public sector. Lupapiste has been a praised example in media and we've received a vast amount of positive and thankful user feedback.

4. Effect

In building permits, Lupapiste has at its best shortened the applying process from 3-4 months to less than a month. In excavation permits, the change has been even more radical; from previous processing time of 3-4 weeks into average of one day. This has enabled each party to improve their daily doing and has added a concrete relief to the authorities, who have for a long time suffered from undersized resources.

In addition to the processing times, Lupapiste has been a huge help to external applicant parties as well by enabling e.g. online neighbor hearings, simultaneous authority statements and giving transparency and trust to the whole process.

The Ministry of Environment has calculated that by digitalizing the building permit processes, there will be approximately 40 million euro direct savings yearly, which means roughly 33 percent cost decrease per permit.

Lupapiste nonetheless is not built for building permits only. At the moment authorities are able to use it overall in 95 different operations and the number is growing. In the near future we will launch a cloud service based electronic archive for public sector, which will remove the need to handle paper in the permit process at all.

Electronic archive is just one example where we will proceed. Lupapiste is designed and built to act as a platform for several different kinds of public processes and provide all of them easily, cost-effectively and openly to the public sector and its

customers. We have already seen a snowball effect as digitalizing has started from the permits; we have been able to offer growth to our partners, who are providing complementary services.

We have had one key thought in our minds: "There are no bad users, only badly designed services". The service has to be – and Lupapiste has been proved to be – a service that users want to use. This can be found out from the feedback and impact we've seen and one particular authority email sums it: "I've really been impressed by the user experience of Lupapiste. I think now we have found the best public online service ever."

We are proud to have earned that kind of trust.