Developing product applications

A process to turn ideas quickly and cost-effectively into practical on line solutions

About us:

Established in 1994, we have worked with a wide range of organisations - in the corporate and public sectors, as well as consulting firms - to translate their ideas into practical on line applications for personal effectiveness, team development and organisational effectiveness. Projects have included:

- an on line profiling application for line managers to review their people and prepare for talent reviews
- a 360 feedback tool targeted at female professionals and executives
- tool kits for recruiting managers to build interview protocols based on specific role requirements
- surveys of the dynamics of organisational innovation
- practical tools to develop cultural competence within the healthcare sector
- a measure of leadership styles to evaluate versatility
- setting up on line career resources to support the outplacement process
- a 360 feedback instrument for academic leaders in higher education
- a team development process that provides a reality check from key stakeholders
- a diagnostic of organisational culture to identify the balance of hard and soft power
- a personal review of leadership resilience with a supporting development resource

Some of our products have included in-depth research to explore market opportunities and the pros and cons of competitor offerings to identify "strategic space" for product innovation. At the other end of the spectrum we have simply worked from established content and design to translate an existing application into a working on line system.

For some projects, the process has involved extensive trialling and piloting and statistical analysis to evaluate the application's measurement properties. For others, common sense and end user feedback are sufficient indicators of impact.

Overview

All content is a potential asset

How to package information, knowledge, ideas etc. in a format that widens access

How to make content available to the target audience/market

How to optimise the impact of this application

- The big idea and concept at the core of a product

- What does it mean for a product to work; criteria for success

- Elements of a successful application

- Trade-offs in the product development process

- The phases from initial specification to a working application

- Maintaining momentum

Our operating principles:

Having collaborated with different clients and partners on over 200 on line applications, our operating approach emphasises:

- **Differentiation**. No doubt there still is a place for "me too" products. Our preference is to work on projects in which the application has a distinctive "voice" within a specific niche or particular target market. The days of the "one-size-fits-all-but-does-nothing-brilliantly-well" application are largely over. We think the future lies in targeted products that are exceptional.

- **Speed**. 95% fit for purpose that can be implemented quickly for feedback and ongoing improvement beats the 100% of perfection that takes a year to design.

- **Pragmatism.** We believe that "validity" is achieved when an application achieves the purpose for which it was designed. This may involve technical analysis to assess measurement properties and build a comprehensive evidence base of the product's impact. For other applications, end user feedback and usage levels provide "good enough" measures of effectiveness.

- **Innovation.** In our experience most innovation emerges from combinations, and in particular: the interaction of content, design, technology and process. A compelling concept will fail without, for example, an attractive user interface and high impact report output . And a brilliant application will fall by the wayside without an insight into the realities of how new ideas are introduced and implemented within the realities of organisational life.

- **Responsiveness.** The disciplines of sequencing and scheduling against an agreed specification, with robust accountabilities for delivery and sign off are key to rapid product development. But we prefer to save everyone time and money by "doing" rather than "talking" about it in project management meetings.

- **Collaboration.** We draw on a breadth and depth of experience and expertise, as well as different technology platforms, and extensive databases of content. In addition we have an established network of partnerships that accesses specialist skills in particular fields, from graphics design to high end statistical analysis.

Types of product applications

Our focus is largely on people, their talents and careers within an organisational context, and the connections between the drivers of personal effectiveness, how individuals collaborate as part of productive and innovative teams, and the dynamics of organisational performance, short and long-term.

Most product applications are variations of:

- **diagnostic tools**; for individuals, teams, functions and organisations - "how am I, we doing?" - to provide insight about effectiveness and impact

- **process methodology** as a guide from "here to there" to accelerate the journey

- **research benchmarking and "indices"** to understand "how we stack up" and provide context

- **tool kits** to inform action planning and improvement; "what to do when"; practical resource to draw on the wisdom of what works and will make a difference

- **and more;** books, videos, training material, programmes, consulting tools

A successful product application

The product applications that succeed in the market place hit the "sweet spot" that combines content, design and technology and process.

- **Content**. This is about powerful and innovative questions/prompts that translate insight into action whilst optimising the trade off between speed and simplicity and comprehensive coverage

- **Design**. How things look matters. This is positioning the application within a distinctive brand and compelling graphics, generating intuitive inputs and an output that people "get". It also helps if the application has a memorable and "wow" name

- **Technology**. This is the utilisation of "fit for purpose" technology to provide robust flexibility that will accommodate change. It also manages the trade off between leading edge tools (sometimes fragile) vs. the lowest common denominator of user access

- **Process**. A clear map of the positioning of the application with an overall process that users understand what to do and how the application helps them in the context in which they operate.

What are your criteria of success?

The hurdles of success

- **take up and usage levels**

- **end user feedback**

- **sales revenue**

- **organisational impact**

- **longevity**
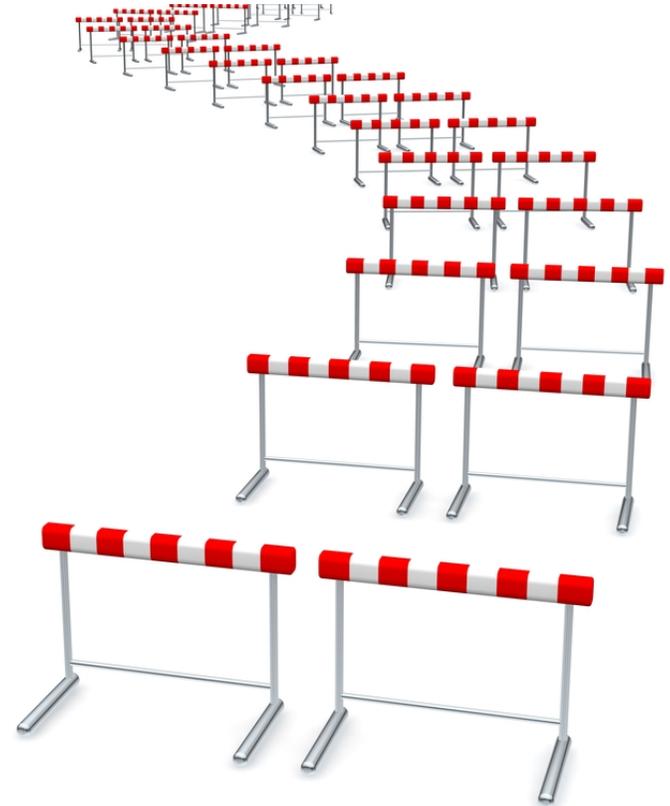
The development process: overview

1. Product Specification

- Product scope: framework and "name"

- Target audience

- Design principles: look and feel and "voice"

- Time-scales, process logistics and AM Azure support

AM Azure: agree specifics of our input

Client: clarify scope of project and required support

2. Design of storyboard

- On line completion process

- Draft content

- Template for report output

AM Azure: produce first cut mock-ups and implement changes

Client: review, feedback and sign off

3. Translation into working on line system

- Set up of on line completion process

- Administrative functionality for client management

- Activate automated reporting

AM Azure: set up of working version

Client: review, feedback and sign off

4. Ongoing Support

- Option of AM Azure managed process, or:
- Devolved user for direct client management

- Statistical analysis and report back on measurement properties

- User evaluation

AM Azure: service level agreement

Client: provide user feedback and required changes

Clarifying purpose and scope

What is this product "for"? What problem is it solving?

How will practitioners use the product to solve this problem?

What is the target population for the product?

Why will people pay for this product? What is their preferred pricing model?

How robust does it need to be (e.g. associated rigour, research and efficacy?)

How extendable is the product into other applications?

What are the practicalities of development and maintenance?

Product specification

Product scope: framework and "name"

Target audience

Design principles: look and feel and "voice"

Time-scales, process logistics and AM Azure support

How we can help

- conducting a desk top review, competitor intelligence, and market research to explore the initial concept, target market and business model

- establishing "what is this product for?" to identify the problem it solves, and the organisational value

- finalising the conceptual framework, methodology, and product positioning in its market (application/market/level)

- agreeing the product's scope and the required associated resource and support (eg facilitator guidelines, on line tool-kits)

- assessing the trade-offs between simplicity and complexity, and the need for defensible measurement properties

- generating initial ideas for the design "voice" and budget for graphical design

Design of storyboard

- On line completion process

- Draft content

- Template for report output

How we can help

- assisting in the first cut generation of prototype content and/or reality check of initial draft version

- design of the "look and feel" of the user experience, and associated branding and imagery

- drafting examples of report output, and the initial generation of content, with algorithms for scoring and presentational display of results

- mock up of support resource: action planning and development prompts, and user and facilitator guidelines, tool kits

- finalisation of specification, with project plan and budget
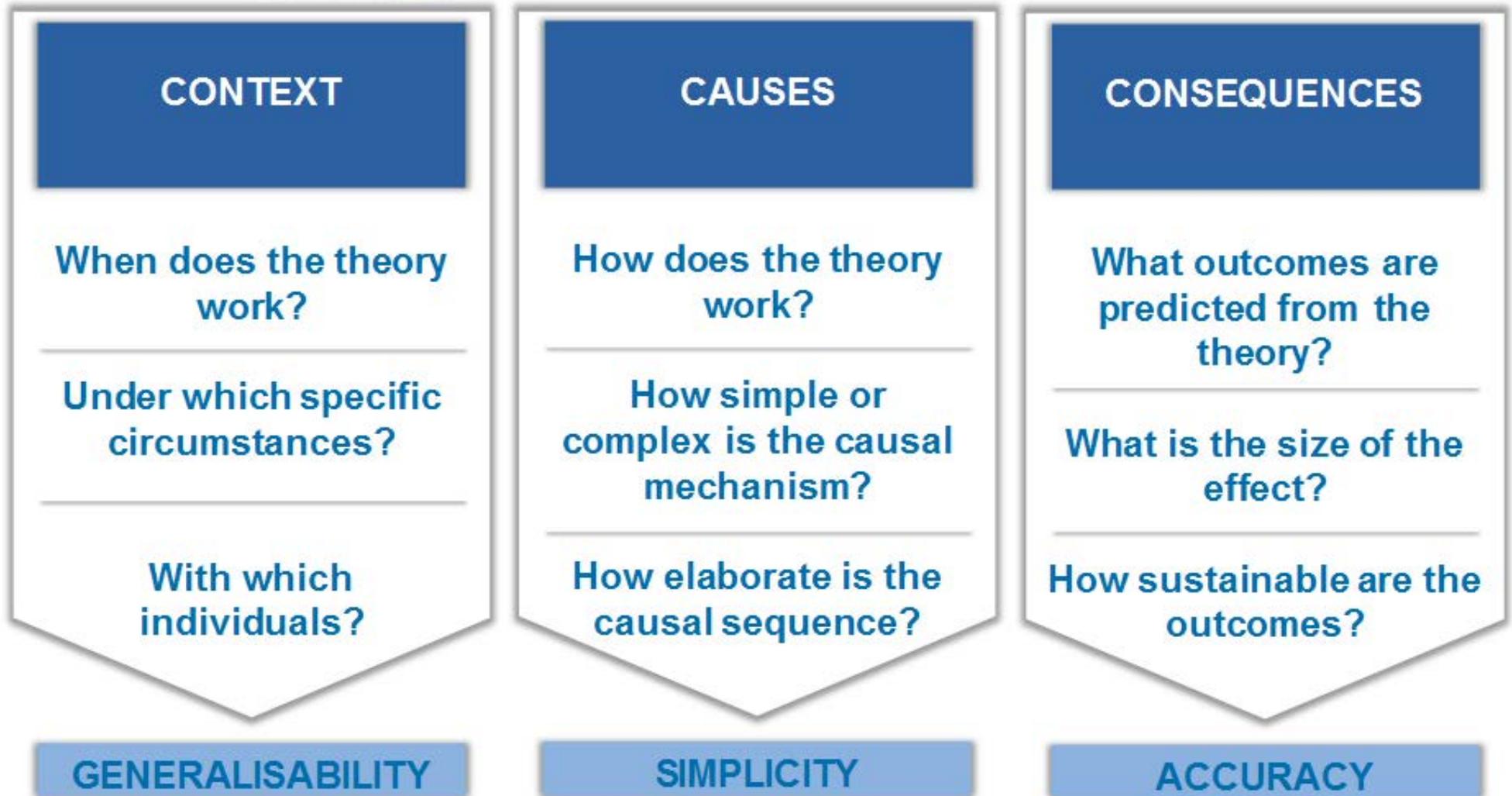
The trade offs for a product application

Limited explanatory and predictive power but potential for mainstream popularity

Generalisability
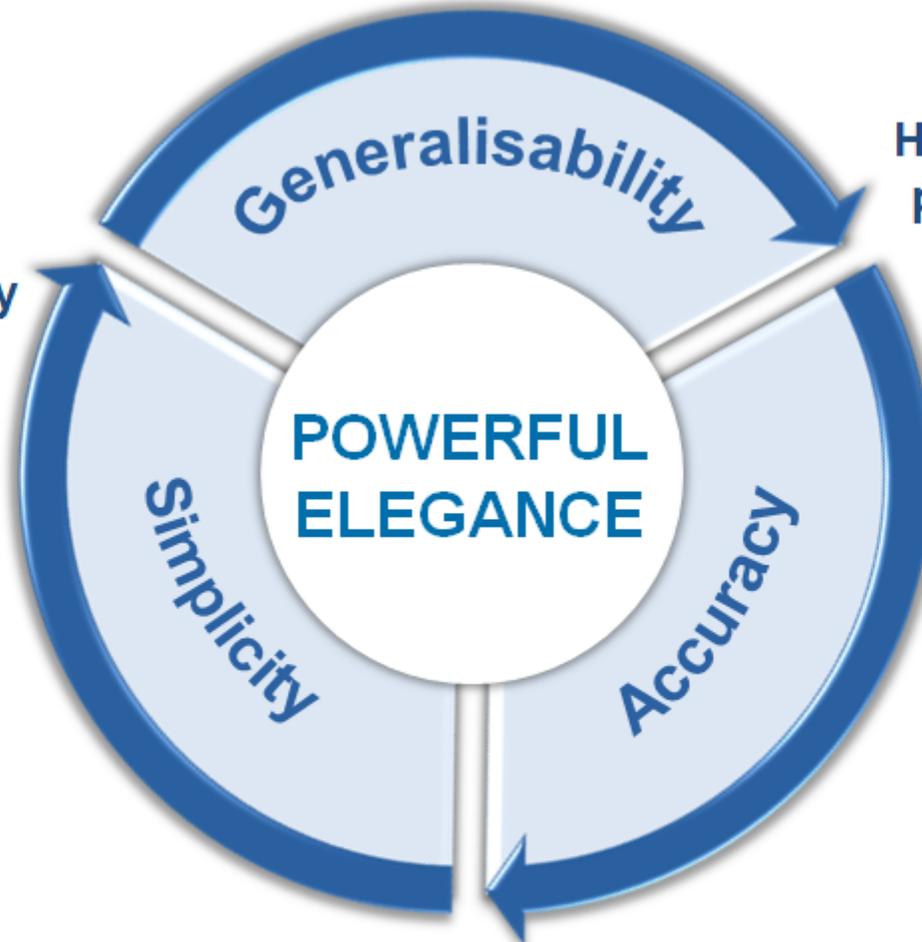
High explanatory and predictive power but its complexity is unpopular

Simplicity

POWERFUL ELEGANCE

Accuracy

High explanatory power within context that limits its broader appeal

What's the "theory" behind the product?

CONTEXT	CAUSES	CONSEQUENCES
When does the theory work?	How does the theory work?	What outcomes are predicted from the theory?
Under which specific circumstances?	How simple or complex is the causal mechanism?	What is the size of the effect?
With which individuals?	How elaborate is the causal sequence?	How sustainable are the outcomes?
GENERALISABILITY	**SIMPLICITY**	**ACCURACY**

Translation into working on line system

How we can help

- process mapping of the end user experience

- setting up the system for on line delivery, security and data capture

- supporting administrative functionality for set up, tracking and automated report generation

- editing of email templates: invitation and reminders

- agreeing formats for analysis: aggregate and trend

- functionality for devolved account administrators

Ongoing support

- Option of AM Azure managed process, or:

- Devolved user for direct client management

- Statistical analysis and report back on measurement properties

- User evaluation

How we can help

- training for devolved administrators

- statistical analysis, review of measurement properties and recommendations for improved efficiency and effectiveness of assessment

- long-term tracking and validation against reference criteria

- documentation of product development process

- required support: hosting/technical support only or client support and coordination

An initial check list

Overall Philosophy

What is this product "for"? What problem is it solving? How will practitioners use the product to solve which problem?

What is the target population for the product?

Why will people pay for this product? What is their preferred pricing model?

How easy or difficult will practitioners find it to use the product?

How important is defensibility and the need to establish measurement properties?

Framework

What makes this model similar and different to other competing frameworks?

What are its theoretical and empirical origins? What is it building on, and what is it challenging?

What makes the framework distinctive and superior to existing models?

What language is used to reflect the constructs of the model? Is this language sufficiently distinctive to stand out?

Is the framework capable of multiple applications? Or is it focused on one?

Design

What methodology is preferred (e.g. self report, 360 feedback, interview, survey)? Why?

How easy or challenging should it be? How transparent should the content be?

What is the optimal trade off between defensible measurement and speed and practicality of completion?

What expert input and end user feedback is needed to shape the content of the first trial version?

What level of graphic design/production values is required to establish a credible pilot?

Pilot

Which organisations can be contacted who have access to large numbers to speed up piloting?

What additional data is available or can be accessed easily for pilot participants (e.g. bio demographic, other assessments, work performance data)?

What will participants receive as output on completing the pilot?

What statistical analysis should be used to evaluate the product's measurement properties?

Finalisation

What additional work is needed to "expand" the product (e.g. report output, interpretative text, development support, user guidelines)?

How much more graphical design and on line technology is needed (e.g. on line completion, administrative functionality, reporting) to create the "wow" factor?

Implementation

What training/accreditation is required for practitioners? How extensive and expensive?

What infrastructure is needed for logistical and client support for different scenarios of usage level?

What processes are in place to review end user feedback and longer-term validation?

The seven deadly sins of product development

- **Arrogance to develop content before purpose and positioning has been determined**

- **Profligacy to spend money before testing the concept and piloting a draft version**

- **Fear to over-engineer too quickly to avoid criticism**

- **Envy to plagiarise an existing product application or create a "me too" imitator**

- **Impatiemce to neglect systems for database management; usage patterns and evaluation**

- **Greed to implement devious pricing models**

- **Sloth to allow the application to become dated; in design and/or technology**

AM Azure Consulting

Established in 1994, AM Azure Consulting works with a broad portfolio of clients – in the UK and internationally - in the design and implementation of online services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; online leadership tool kits, 360° feedback; performance management and talent and succession management.

If you are interested in our approach to talent management, our consulting expertise, assessment tools and talent planning software:

Call us: 44 (0) 1608 654007

email: officesupport@amazureconsulting.com

Or visit our website www.amazureconsulting.com for further information, including articles which you can download for free.

We:

- summarise complexity to provide solutions that are pragmatic and build and maintain momentum for our clients.

- help trouble-shoot the messy organisational problems to see the key issues, identify options and put in place actionable plans that make progress.

- cut to the chase to focus on the distinctive challenges of our clients. We enjoy the innovation that results from our clients with ideas and we help translate them into practical applications.

- draw on an extensive research base, library of resource and range of tool kits, and up-to-date thinking to help design and implement practical solutions quickly.