Innovation is a marathon, not a sprint

Livework article on innovation

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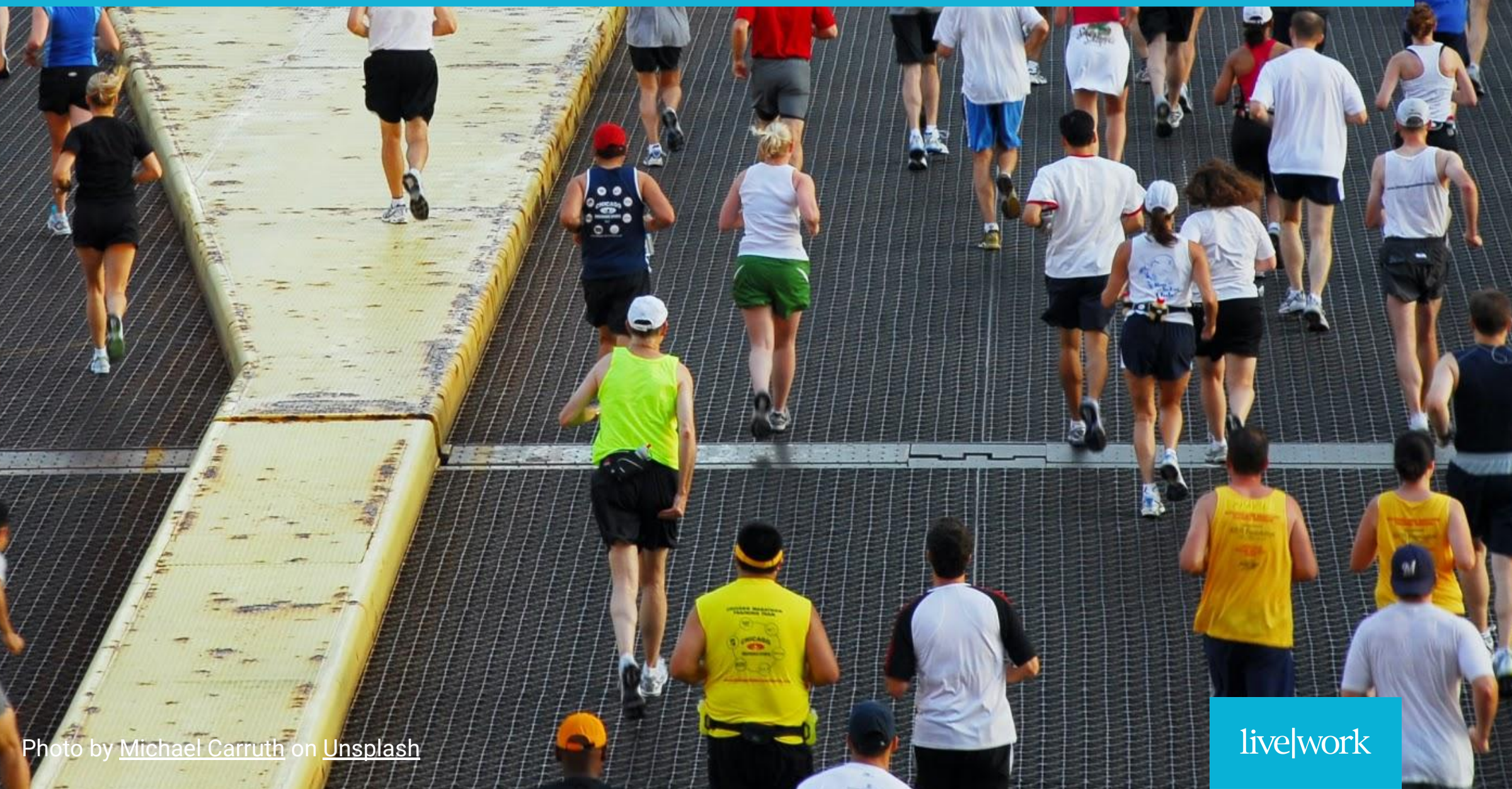
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You see them everywhere: design sprints, also affectionately called "google sprints". The concept is simple: develop and validate a vague idea in five days by quickly prototyping it and presenting it to potential users. It seems as if every self-respecting agency now has a lab in which they offer "design sprints as a service". It is the dream of every boardroom: agile innovation like a lean start-up.

There is nothing wrong with the design sprint in itself. There is a problem if this hammer is the only tool in your innovation toolbox, as Abraham Maslov's "law of the hammer" means

The horse behind the wagon

The most common appearance of the design sprint is a process of four or five days that looks like this:

1. Determine which challenge / problem you will solve
2. Think of different possible solutions
3. Select a solution and develop a prototype
4. Test the prototype with real users
5. Conclude and determine next steps

The advantage of this approach is that you quickly go from idea to validated solution. That saves a lot of time and money is the idea. But is that truly the case?

"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."
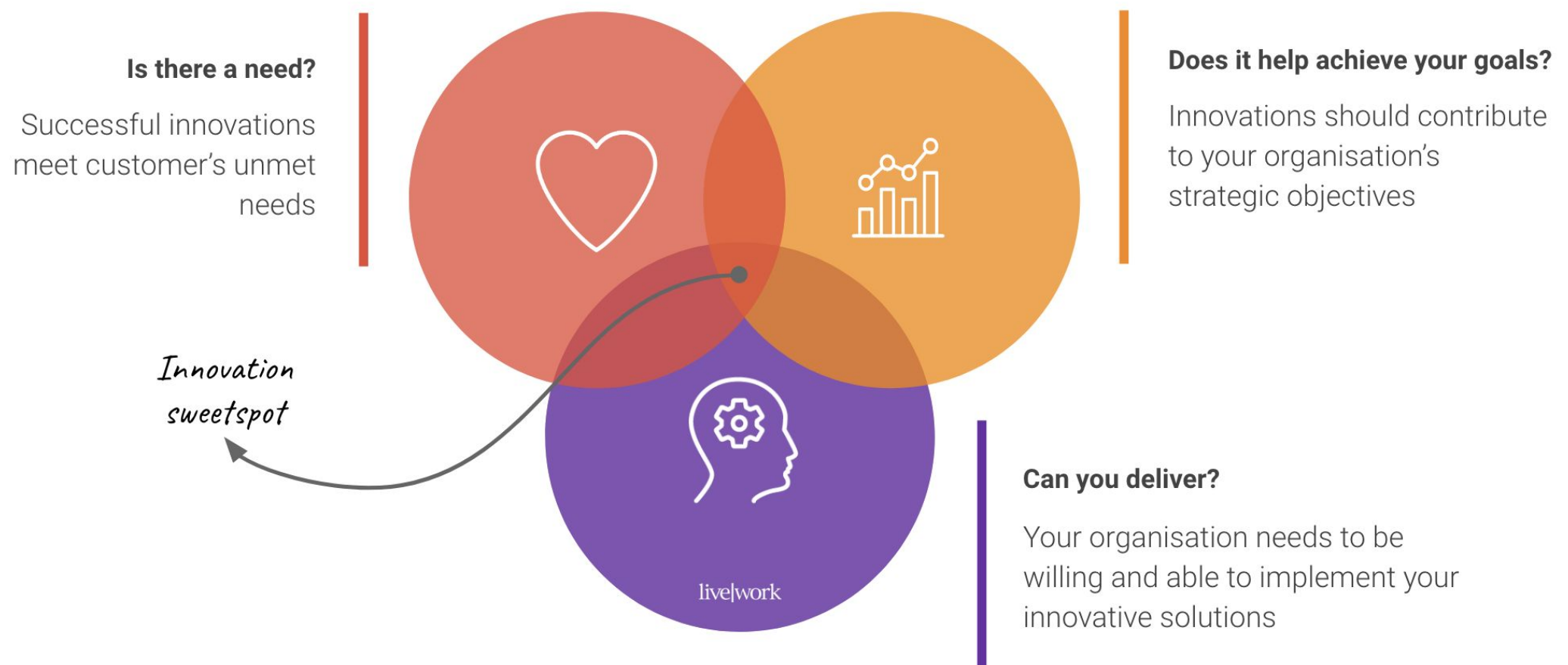*Abraham Maslow [1]*

An innovative idea often seems interesting and generates positive energy. Ideas are also often abundant in organizations. But as is often the case with innovative ideas, the question is rarely raised whether it is a good idea. Is the idea based on the reality of the organisation and its stakeholders? Do we know whether this innovation solves an important problem for the organisation and its customers? Is there a clearly defined problem at all?

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It is fundamental that organisations remember for whom they innovate (customers), why they should do this (business objectives) and what this entails (organizational impact). See figure 1. When you start with the solution (= the idea) you put the cart before the horse.

What you want to test in the design process

Is there a need?

Successful innovations meet customer's unmet needs

Does it help achieve your goals?

Innovations should contribute to your organisation's strategic objectives

Innovation sweetspot

Can you deliver?

Your organisation needs to be willing and able to implement your innovative solutions

Relevance to customers

Innovations, especially if they are technology-driven, can provide a significant competitive advantage, but are also expensive to realise. Technological breakthroughs are often ahead of the market, which means that customers are not automatically ready to accept the innovation. Therefore, innovations should not focus on technology and feasibility, but on value and relevance to current and future customer needs. New ideas must be on time, not too early or too late, for the needs of the customer to be commercially viable for the organization.

Organizations need in-depth customer insights to come up with innovations that are relevant to customers. Insights that you do not gain in a five-day sprint that aims to test an idea.

Relevance to the goals of an organization

Good innovations also serve - preferably strategically important - goals of the organization. In order to determine where to invest and how much time and money to invest, it is important to understand how performance for your customer relates to company performance and what your innovation contributes to this.

Testing ideas in a design sprint provides feedback about the idea, or, more precisely, about the prototype that represents the idea at the time. Customers and other users respond very well to what you submit to them, but that's it. Seeing more than that is wishful thinking. Even the question whether they think they will use the (innovative idea) is difficult to test reliably. Yet many organizations base their investment choices on the basis of this wafer-thin information obtained in five-day design sprints.

That said, such a design sprint still seems attractive. "Agile", cheap - because fast - and guaranteed success are some of the promises that seem commonplace. However, the truth is that ideas are cheap, but once they are fully developed and they don't seem to live up to the hoped-for results, it is of course mostly wasted money and wasted time.

Does it also work in the organization

Whether an innovation becomes successful often does not even depend on the idea. Before an idea comes on the market, there is yet another challenge:

your own organization. Successful innovations, not just the radical ones, need the support of departments, boards and internal processes. And they need strong internal supporters of the idea to organize the necessary funding, for example.
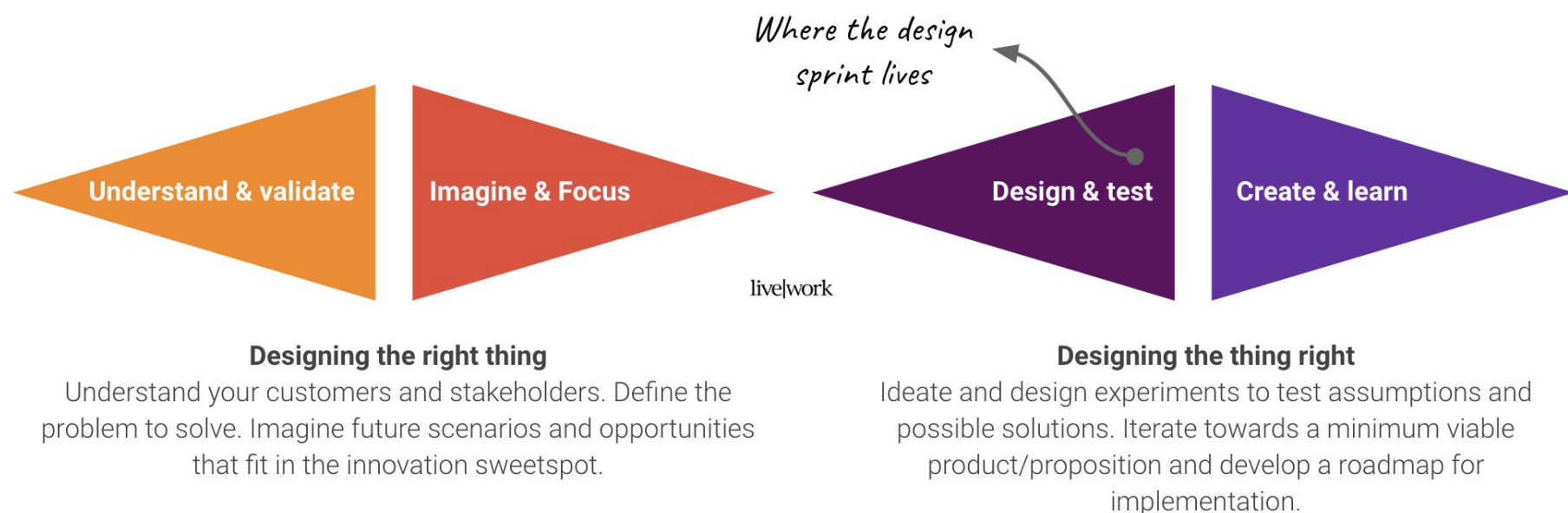
Good tests with innovative ideas are not only about testing the usability of functionalities with potential customers or users, but also about assessing the potential impact on the organization and obtaining the necessary internal support. Involving a customer service representative, a business analyst and solution architect is desirable, but insufficient to achieve the necessary support. Much more work is required both before and after a sprint.

Design the right thing

Now, of course, a design sprint does help to show the organization that there is evidence for the success of your idea. If you take a smart approach to the sprint, and especially its preparation, it will allow you to get more information from testing a prototype. For example, by not only testing functionality, but also the assumptions that underlie your idea or business case.

This makes the design sprint potentially a powerful tool. But not isolated. It should be an integrated part of a design process based on the double diamond method, as shown in the figure here:

'Double diamond' innovation process

Designing the right thing
Understand your customers and stakeholders. Define the problem to solve. Imagine future scenarios and opportunities that fit in the innovation sweetspot.

Designing the thing right
Ideate and design experiments to test assumptions and possible solutions. Iterate towards a minimum viable product/proposition and develop a roadmap for implementation.

If you do not go through the whole process, you will mainly continue to shoot with hail. The business case is a lot less convincing if you have to add the costs of all attempts to the results of that one chance hit, which is only a direct hit with the utmost luck.

Prepare for a marathon

In short: before you test how to design the thing right, it is wise to put a lot of effort into determining what your customers need (design the right thing), which competencies your organization has and must develop in order to deliver and to what purpose of the organization your innovation contributes. While you do all that, it is hard work to gain support and active support in the organization to see your idea eventually become reality. Anyone who takes innovation seriously prepares for a marathon, not a sprint.

About the author & Livework

Wim Rampen is managing director of Livework Netherlands, an international boutique service design consultancy with almost 20 years of experience in the design and implementation of customer-driven strategy, customer experience, digital transformation and innovation. Dutch customers include ING, Zilveren Kruis, KLM, Vodafone, Adidas, Nederlandse Spoorwegen, Municipalities of Rotterdam, The Hague and a global market leader in horseshoes. Livework has offices in London, Sao Paulo and Rotterdam.

Wim has 20+ years of experience in customer experience. He has stood with his feet in the call center management clay for more than 8 years and was responsible for customer experience, customer intelligence & brand management at OHRA and Delta Lloyd for almost 7 years. For over 2 years he heads the Rotterdam office and is responsible for the international marketing and commercial strategy of Livework.

Thank you for reading!

If you have any thoughts, questions, or something that you would like to share with us, please do get in touch.

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