

TRANSFORMING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES USING HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN THINKING

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CIRCLE Women Association is a non-profit dedicated to empowering women by providing them with essential skills, knowledge, and resources through digital and financial literacy. It aims to support the long-term success of women entrepreneurs by providing ongoing business coaching and monitoring. One of CIRCLE's biggest initiatives is the Digital Literacy Program (DLP) which trains low-income women entrepreneurs to equip them with digital, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial skills across Pakistan.

CIRCLE

CERP
EVIDENCE MATTERS

PROBLEM

Due to overlapping responsibilities, ambiguity in roles, and lack of process standardization, the DLP team consistently faced communication lags, process implementation issues, and inefficiency at each stage of the program. These problems hindered effective decision-making and scaling up of this initiative.

SOLUTION

Employing a human-centered design (HCD) thinking approach, CERP worked extensively to map CIRCLE's existing processes, identify key challenges, and recommend targeted improvements at each stage of the Digital Literacy Program (DLP) implementation.

HCD is a creative problem-solving approach that places people's needs, experiences, and perspectives at the core of the design process. The two-day HCD workshop organized by CERP brought together CIRCLE's DLP field and head office teams to identify pain points from their respective experiences and co-create solutions through open dialogue. The workshop fostered cross-team collaboration through structured brainstorming sessions and user-focused activities, ensuring that the proposed solutions were practical, scalable, and directly addressed the identified challenges. The outcomes of the workshop included actionable solutions aligned with CIRCLE's overarching mission and strategic objectives.

During the two days of the workshop, the process flow posters (mapped and designed by the CERP team in advance) were displayed around the room, serving as a reference point for participants to frequently iterate on their ideas. Participants were also provided with three tailored Design Activity Cards (explained in the next section) to document the challenges, process journeys, and proposed solutions. Each session concluded with team presentations, allowing participants to share their ideas, receive feedback, and engage in group discussions.

HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN APPROACH

Using the 7-step approach, CERP worked in collaboration with CIRCLE to co-create solutions to address their challenges.

STEP 01 Multiple exploratory meetings with the DLP team and CIRCLE core team were conducted to develop an understanding of the processes and resources involved in DLP.

STEP 02 Activity mapping document was created detailing various steps involved in DLP and the challenges associated with each, as discovered during the exploratory meetings.

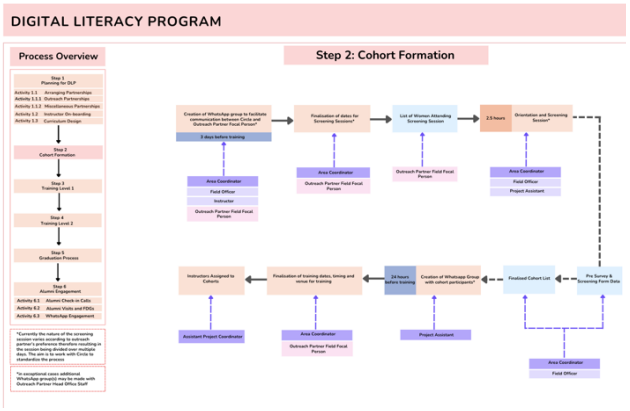
STEP 03 DLP processes were divided into nine categories and were visually represented through detailed color coded process flows mapping DLP's activities, their frequency, stakeholders involved and outputs produced.



Human centered design approach

For example, step 2 of the DLP process was cohort formation which began with creating a WhatsApp group to facilitate coordination between CIRCLE and its outreach partners, followed by finalizing screening

dates and the list of candidates. An orientation and screening session was then conducted to assess these candidates, after which the cohort list was finalized. Lastly, training dates and venues were set and instructors were assigned to cohorts.



Process overview of Step 2 Cohort Formation

STEP 04 A human centered design workshop spanning over 2 days was conducted for the CIRCLE team to assess the alignment and effectiveness of CIRCLE's internal DLP processes, identify challenges, and devise solutions for their program optimization together. DLP's processes were divided amongst nine groups and the following group-based activities were conducted.

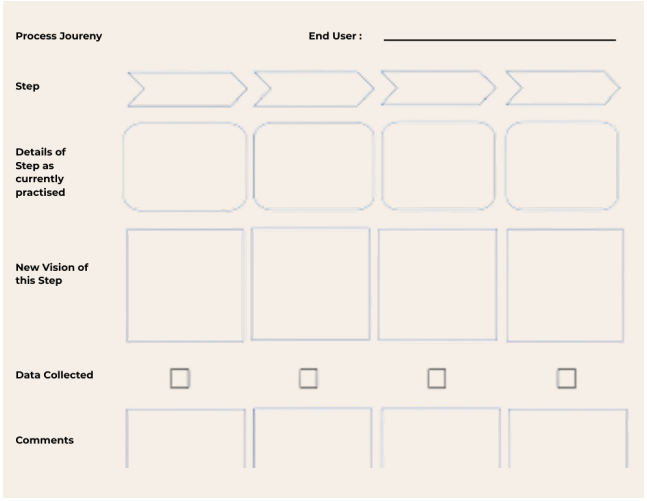
Day 1 began with an introduction to the workshop, followed by dividing participants into groups to engage in activities. Each group was assigned a DLP process and provided with an activity card.

The first activity, "Value Proposition," was to understand who is the end user for the process, to define their characteristics and identify the benefit that they will get at this step of the process. Groups completed the activity card and presented their findings to the room, seeking feedback and different perspectives from the rest of the team. This activity helped ensure alignment across teams regarding their target audience and value proposition. For instance, the outreach team identified the characteristics of ideal partners for CIRCLE and refined their pitch strategies for securing partnerships.



Value Proposition activity card

The second half of the day was spent on the **"Process Journey"** activity which involved discussing sub-steps currently practiced to run DLP. Just as for activity 1, participants worked in groups to fill out their activity cards for this exercise and presented their findings to the group at large for further discussion. This activity helped improve organization-wide understanding of the various steps that went into organizing DLP, the data collected at each stage and harmonize the processes in different regions.



Process journey activity card.

Day 2 of the workshop consisted of finalization of the process journeys for all DLP steps and a deep dive into a **"Design Challenge"** activity which was to brainstorm creative solutions to the challenges identified previous

day. It allowed participants to discuss desired result of the respective step of the process and tailor solutions accordingly. By collaboratively coming up with solutions, team members took ownership of the ideas and expressed enthusiasm for their implementation, recognizing the potential for impact.

DESIGN CHALLENGE:

HOW MIGHT WE [CHANGE THE WAY] (Activity, process, weakness, strategic decision)

_____

_____

SO THAT WE EXPERIENCE DESIRED BENEFIT

_____

_____

Feedback form including workshop output report

STEP 05 A workshop output report was generated by CERP detailing the challenges with respective processes explored in the workshop. It incorporated findings uncovered by participants during the three activities along with feedback from the presentations and concluded with a section on 'CERP Insights,' offering perspectives on the program's delivery and outcomes, that were gathered in addition to the workshop discussions..

STEP 06 Nine follow-up meetings were conducted with champions and supportive leads for each DLP process to get an update on the work done post-workshop, to eliminate challenges faced, provide verbal feedback where needed and/or requested, and share 1-2 other challenges discussed in the workshop that the team should work on.

STEP 07 Lastly, minutes of the meeting from all follow-up discussions were documented and shared as a detailed workshop follow-up feedback report for the DLP team and as a condensed summary in the form of a workshop follow-up report for the CIRCLE executive and DLP core team.







Human centered design workshop

KEY FINDINGS

Following are key insights gathered during the HCD workshop, regarding challenges faced in DLP:

Operations and Logistics

- Logistical constraints, lack of feedback loops, and internal team misalignment.
- Lack of strategic partnership management creates inconsistencies in partner communication and missed branding opportunities.
- Inconsistencies in the screening process result in a restricted participant pipeline.
- Lack of formal procedures causes event planning issues during DLP graduation.
- Inadequate transport and accommodation arrangements for staff during training.

Human Resources and Recruitment

- Hiring delays due to the inability to identify the right candidates for open roles.
- Lack of standardized assessment criteria during hiring.
- No formal orientation or clear job descriptions, leading to unclear role expectations.

Program Delivery

- Difficulties in data collection and validation.
- Non-serious attitudes of participants during training.
- Family restrictions, phone incompatibility, and missing documents limit the uptake of digital tools.
- No centralized database to track graduation certificate issuance.
- Low post-graduation participant engagement results in a gap in alumni relations.

KEY RESULTS

Following are key actions taken after the workshop to optimize DLP and address some of the major challenges uncovered, as mentioned above. One Champion from each group was selected to represent the respective process and ensure that identified solutions were implemented post-workshop.

Operations and Logistics

- Creation of a well-defined M&E framework to introduce feedback loops that promote evidence-based decision-making.
- Refinement and standardization of partnership management procedures including drafting of a sample MoU, documentation of key CIRCLE offerings, identification of potential partners, and development of a partner selection criteria and partnership management toolkit.
- Development of an extensive screening strategy, a standardized screening instrument, and training of CIRCLE staff on implementation.
- Standardize logistics during training and graduation ceremonies to ensure optimal user experience.

Human Resources and Recruitment

- Hiring delays countered by widening of HR department's search networks to reach a larger talent pool.
- Procedural recommendations to reduce communication gaps between the HR department and respective CIRCLE team.
- Revision of team responsibilities based on feedback received at the workshop, also reflected in revised job descriptions.

Program Delivery

- Laid the groundwork for an extensive data strategy including refinement of data collection tools and methods.
- Identification of SOPs for curriculum research and development.
- Recommendation to conduct gender sensitivity training of staff to ensure participant safety and data protection.
- Review of instructor kit and provision of support to instructors for carrying the kit.



OUTCOME

The human-centered design workshop had a significant impact, strengthening CIRCLE's team cohesion by acting as a team-building activity that fostered collaboration. It promoted an environment that encouraged every team member, from executives to field staff, to share ideas, creating an inclusive atmosphere where contributions at all levels were valued. Being involved at each step of the workshop encouraged a sense of ownership, shared responsibility, and commitment toward achieving solutions together with all participants. Lastly, a follow-up plan was created to sustain momentum and ensure that the solutions crafted at the workshop were implemented under the supervision of the respective Champion.

"Excited about our recent participation in a dynamic workshop with the CERP. It was inspiring to witness the collective enthusiasm for leveraging technology for positive societal change. Throughout the session, we brainstormed innovative solutions and fostered partnerships to drive meaningful impact and foster inclusive growth. Looking forward to continuing this journey of impact!"

- CIRCLE Women Association

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the successful execution of this project.

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CIRCLE Women Association

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