Denmark’s MindLab, a cross-ministry innovation unit that involves citizens and businesses in developing societal solutions, is located on the ground floor of a government building in the inner city area of Copenhagen. While the office does have a security desk, the space is generally more accessible than the provincial or federal government offices here in Canada.

Located within the Ministry of Business and Growth, the office, like most of Copenhagen, reminds one of an IKEA space, with clean lines and a simple colour scheme—in this case green and white to match the MindLab logo.

All of the furniture is on wheels and can be easily moved and reconfigured as needed.

The first section of the office is the main workspace, an open concept area that accommodates approximately 15 staff members who work in pods of three desks. Each workstation has its own desktop, computer and filing cabinet on wheels. There is also a desk set aside for guests.

MindLab’s staff are all public servants, but the organization has been very strategic in employing project managers with a diversity of backgrounds, including sociology, business, anthropology, policy, history, design, research and science. MindLab also hires student interns—or trainees as they call them—at the master’s or PhD level. They currently share a PhD student with NESTA.

The workspace is open and airy, with lots of clean lines. And there are posters on the walls that encourage innovation and creativity.

The second section of the MindLab office contains couches, chairs and plants; it is separated from the main space by curtains and is generally set up for lounging. The couch and tables are also on wheels, and the space is meant to encourage conversation and informal dialogue.
The third section of the office, also separated by curtains, contains a work table, a library (which is also on wheels) and a TV. The space is right next to the kitchen, and the whole team eats breakfast together at the table as often as possible, taking time to start the day by sharing food and connecting.

This space feels critical to the MindLab set-up in the same way that the kitchen is the centre of activity in many homes.

I had the chance to use the large table when I met with some of the Danish ministries looking to better understand social enterprise, and we were able to fit about 20 people around it comfortably. And of course, we were also able to wheel in a flip chart to help me to better explain the work we do at MaRS. Everyone at MindLab speaks English beautifully—apparently they consider learning the language essential as so few people speak Danish globally—but a diagram often helps and having access to the flip chart was essential.

The office also has a more private workshop area that is separated by a door. While I was visiting, a MindLab team was using it to lead a workshop with several ministries on how to better embrace innovation—it seems this is a work in progress.

This workshop space can be reconfigured as needed as it holds both small and large working tables that can be used depending on the group’s needs. The room can also be configured using only chairs.

The final workspace is MindLab’s shining glory—they call it “the egg” for obvious reasons, as it is a pod made entirely of white boards. To me, this is just this side of heaven. While I was there, the pod was empty, but the white boards were full of drawings, charts and what appeared to be random thoughts. The pod is separated from the workshop area by a curtain and it is an essential part of what MindLab is able to offer their clients.

The office also has an internal cloakroom and a washroom nearby. Ultimately, the space feels open, welcome, clean and amenable to collaboration. Just as intended.
Meeting the MindLab team

I met with the 15 or so members of the MindLab team over breakfast to learn about their work—and yes there were danishes!

Christian Bason, MindLab’s Director of Innovation, introduced me and had many kind comments on both Social Innovation Generation and the MaRS Discovery District.

As I spoke about the work we do, he remarked that he had recently attended a meeting on social entrepreneurship organized by students at the Copenhagen Business School. The MindLab team was very surprised that the 300 students in attendance showed such an interest in this space. Apparently the students were responding to what they see going on at Harvard Business School, which hosts an annual conference on social entrepreneurship.

My first insight about MindLab is that the group does not see the extent of the social innovation and social entrepreneurship movements that we live and breathe in Canada; and they certainly don’t see themselves as a part of them.

As my presentation continued, we discussed social finance. The MindLab team was not familiar with impact investing per se, though they were very interested in the concept and attempted to wrap their heads around it.

Given the state of socialism in Denmark, concepts such as social entrepreneurship and impact investing are met with the expectation that the state takes care of such issues which is why citizens pay such high taxes. Interestingly, I read an article in the English-language Danish newspaper about a new political party that wants to max out the tax rate at 40% and to put in place many other “American-style” policies. The paper simply stated that the party has no political support among the electorate.

Denmark has a newly elected government, and bureaucrats are encouraging the new government to consider social enterprise. Everyone I spoke with at MindLab said that exploring these concepts would not have been allowed under the previous government.

Problem selection

The projects that MindLab works on are not actually initiated within the group. Rather they are initiated by governmental ministries that bring forward issues as identified by bureaucrats.

These issues are presented to the MindLab Board, which is made up of senior staff and sounds much like our deputy minister level, with representation from each ministry. The board then makes a list of the priority projects under consideration, and the projects are then passed by a secretariat, which is also made up of senior staff (and is comparable to our assistant deputy minister level) who advise on the appropriateness of the projects. These recommendations are then passed back to the MindLab Board for discussion with the MindLab team, at which point the final decision is made.

What considerations go into the decision-making process?

The questions considered include:

- Is the project core to the mission of the department, or is it offside?
- Is it an issue that actually requires MindLab’s expertise? For example, sometimes MindLab is asked to take on what are essentially communications projects—which they pass on.
- Is the focus and interest of the issue on the end user?
- Does the issue require cross-sector collaboration?
- Is there a “burning platform” that elevates this issue to the top of the agenda?

MindLab then goes on to scope the project, which generally takes about one year. While completing this scope they consider:

- who to engage;
- how to facilitate the project across ministries that are sometimes “in open war” with each other;
- the possible scope and size of the project;
- ownership issues;
- the funding required; and
- competition issues.
Co-creation process

The co-creation process goes as follows:

- Each project manager works on two to three projects at the same time.
- The project managers conduct research and interview end users. The interviews are not about “user satisfaction,” but rather about the experiences the end users have had in their interactions with government.
- After research has been completed, the project managers create a prototype.
- They then confer back with the end user.
- Ministry staff are engaged along the way and are included as observers (not questioners) in the interview process.
- MindLab sees their job as “creating the conditions for success.” They do not come up with the answers, but rather unveil the options.
- They also use all the social innovation tools that we in SiG deeply understand, including appreciative inquiry and other asset-based approaches. The focus is on helping people to do the right thing and then celebrating that, instead of trying to catch them doing the wrong thing.

Managing expectations

In order to manage expectations, the MindLab team maintains the following practices:

- They position their work as an experiment.
- They make clear that it is not their job to present the perfect solution but to work with others to uncover options, test them out and correct the course.
- They consider their work successful when there is a consensus on the changes to be made, however they make it clear that it is easier for people to accept ideas about what needs to be changed if the changes do not include them personally.

Staffing

- The MindLab staff members introduce themselves based on their backgrounds, including anthropology, sociology, history, policy, etc.
- Although MindLab has a core staff, they are also open to internships and secondments.
- Since much of their work involves interviewing service users, one of their main roles is to put people at ease. This has implications for the staff we hire for the Solutions Lab. Can they employ professional empathy?
- The backgrounds and skills required in this setting could include research, counselling and active listening skills.
- One issue that seems to come up in these discussions is procurement. It might be worthwhile to engage someone with a background in this field.

Critical factors to consider

Co-production is a concept that is not readily understood by the public. MindLab tries to take away the mystique of co-production by giving examples that are easier for the public to understand. One such example is the “mothers’ group.” In Denmark, as in some places in Canada, new mothers are invited by a public health nurse to meet with other new moms to learn together about breastfeeding, proper nutrition and other infant-care knowledge.

These mothers’ groups consist of about a dozen or so new moms in a geographic area, and although the nurse is the facilitator, the new moms are there to help each other, co-create the agenda based on their needs and ideally stay together long after the nurse leaves. This is one example of co-creation that all Danish people can relate to. (As a side bar, after 16 years my mothers’ group is still a critical part of my support network.)

If the MindLab staff could change one thing they indicated that they would save so much time if they could figure out how to get people to co-operate better - imagine that.

MindLab also warn us to scope potential projects carefully as politics can often get in the way. They see it as critical that they have access to all levels of government and are given the tools they need to succeed.
Technology is often—but not always—an important part of the solution. For example, some in government assume that if you put anything online, youth will make use of it. This, of course, is not true—especially if the website in question is poorly designed.

One tool the MindLab team finds very helpful is making use of personas or archetypes of characters to help make situations real.

MindLab positions itself as an “innovation enabler.” They do not come up with solutions but simply create the conditions for solutions to emerge.

Both Christian from MindLab and Gorka Espiau, Head of International Programmes at Innovalab in the Basque Region, have indicated the desire to form a “community of practice” around labs. All agree that we need a learning community to enhance our chance of success.

---

**Case examples**

Here are three examples that may be relevant to our work (the first two of which are pulled directly from the MindLab website).

**Case example No. 1:**

**Networking to kick-start growth entrepreneurs**

Entrepreneurs play an important part in sustaining the Danish economy. The political interest especially concentrates on ‘high-growth entrepreneurs’ who generate new jobs and high turnover. That is why MindLab visited a range of Denmark’s best entrepreneurs to understand how government initiatives might be designed to help more growth entrepreneurs realize their businesses potential.

“If I should take an advisor seriously, then he has to know, like really know, what it means to be an entrepreneur. It doesn’t work if it is a 9-5 employee with his lunchbox. I don’t need theoretical knowledge but someone who can give me straight tips because he has tried it himself.”

— IT-company

When new businesses grow from a two-man firm in a basement to being one of the most profitable companies with dreams of conquering US markets, important decisions have to be made. How does the founders let go of responsibility without loosing the feel of being in control of the company? Should they have a professional board, and who should be board members? How should a business plan be designed so it works across the Atlantic?

When growth entrepreneurs themselves are asked to explain who they think can help them to make difficult decisions, they are adamant that the person across the table has practical experience with entrepreneurship and under their drive. That is why the Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority and the Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs are currently developing initiatives, which will match competent and experienced entrepreneurs with those with the potential to be so.

**MindLab involved**

- 8 growth entrepreneurs
- 3 potential growth entrepreneurs
- Researchers and advisors working with innovation and entrepreneurship

**Principal results**

- A comprehensive catalogue of ideas, from which 8 ideas were chosen to be tested in detail.
- A prototype of a network for entrepreneurs
What MindLab did

MindLab and the Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority and the Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs visited 6 growth entrepreneurs and asked them to narrate their journey to growth. When was it hard? Who helped them on their way when it was not public sector organizations? What role did professional networks, families and friends play?

Especially two elements in the project were crucial in creating concrete initiatives targeting the best entrepreneurs. Personas, which are detail-rich archetypes of entrepreneurs, and journeys to growth that mapped all events in the companies' journeys from just established to successful enterprises.

The most important insights from the field research have now been translated into specific proposals for how to support Danish entrepreneurs. The proposals were subsequently developed into prototypes that were tested with the entrepreneurs. Here entrepreneurs were asked not only to give their immediate assessment whether it would be productive to meet other entrepreneurs. They were also tasked with considering how each specific element in the planned initiatives could be useful. It became obvious that the public sector’s involvement must fall in the background, and that the entrepreneurs themselves must run events that exude drive and entrepreneurial spirit.

CASE EXAMPLE No. 2

Away with the red tape. A better encounter with government.

The Danish government’s “Away with the Red Tape” plan has put the citizen and deregulation at the top of the agenda. Three studies of young citizens present solutions that improve citizens' overall experience of the public sector.

“I don’t understand why the public sector is so bad at communicating and I think it’s provocative. I don’t know where they are, what they look like or what they do. And so I get irritable when I speak to them on the telephone.”

−Student, 24 years old

Incomprehensible tax returns. Frustrating online assessment systems. Bewildering letters from the authorities. These were some of the experiences that were described to MindLab when we interviewed a large group of young Danes about their encounters with public sector bureaucracy under the headline “Away with the Red Tape”.

The project is a result of the Danish government’s “Away with the Red Tape” plan, which puts the citizen and deregulation at the top of the agenda. The aim of the government’s “Away with the Red Tape” plan is to see how we can eliminate outdated and unnecessary rules and digitise and simplify complicated administrative procedures and processes.

The “Away with the Red Tape” plan led to three studies being carried out by MindLab; working in collaboration with the Danish Tax and Customs Administration (SKAT), the Danish National Board of Industrial Injuries and the Danish Commerce and Companies Agency (DCCA).

MindLab interviewed:

- Nine young taxpayers under the age of 30
- Seven young victims of industrial injury under the age of 30
• Seven young business owners who worked without any staff
• Relevant external experts

Most important results

Working in collaboration with our colleagues in a range of government departments and agencies, MindLab developed a number of different possible solutions that are intended to eliminate the perception of red tape for the three different groups of young people.

• Solution Type 1: Knowing what to expect. Having a clear overview of how a case is handled by government decreases the likelihood of misunderstanding and frustration. We explored how case work can be more transparent, so that decisions and experiences seem more reasonable to those affected by them.

• Solution Type 2: From digital access to digital self-reliance. Citizens don’t just require digital literacy, they also need to understand how to complete a given online task. This means that usability must be understood as more than just a technical solution.

• Solution Type 3: Investing in personal contact. Even the best IT solution cannot translate laws, rules and procedures to a citizen’s everyday solution as effectively as a face to face meeting. For this reason a personal encounter can be used as a way of making an initial investment in a citizens long-term self-reliance.

• Solution Type 4: Building strategic alliances. Caseworkers are only one of many other different actors that individual citizens typically meet in their encounter with public sector bureaucracy. We looked at how to ensure that other actors contribute positively to the overall handling of cases and deliver the right information at the right time.

What MindLab did

Deregulation has often focused on objective criteria, such as time consumption and the number of rules. But the MindLab studies deliberately avoided predefining a rule or procedure as the “red tape”. Instead, the three studies examined citizens’ subjective experiences with public sector regulations, communication channels and service.

The initiatives that have been devised in the three studies stem from a design-driven process, which is characterised by systematic idea development and prioritisation, the development of concepts and the description of specific prototypes in direct dialogue with citizens.

CASE EXAMPLE No. 3

One other case example I really liked involved asking seniors about “what they would like to do again, if they could.” Interestingly, many seniors indicated they would rather do light housework themselves rather than have strangers in their home to do it. MindLab helped these seniors through improved nutrition and physiotherapy. The result was lower long-term home-care costs.

As we well know, one of the challenges in health care is that the end user is not the one who pays for the service. There is a disconnect between the purchaser of the service and the person who receives it.
# Future strategy

Historically, MindLab would work with a ministry to select a project to work on together, then work toward finding a solution. Once a solution was determined MindLab would then go on to the next ministry and to the next project. Their new strategy is to continue to develop deep connections across more ministries and to continue to engaging with those ministries even after the project is over.

MindLab’s funding is precarious, and with the election of Denmark’s new government, MindLab was unsure if their funding would continue. Ultimately, this requires someone very skilled in relationship management, and the MindLab team all acknowledge that their success is due to Christian’s profound skills in this area. It is extremely important to have a leader who understands the drivers, levers and barriers to innovation.

“Our work is not the eradication of wicked problems but rather the hope and belief that we can do better.”