

DIGNITY BY DESIGN

A practical field guide for humane interfaces, forms,
services and policies

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A usable companion: eight redesign exercises, a design audit, microcopy repairs, facilitation prompts, and a take-home worksheet. No signup required.

01 / What dignity means in design

Dignity is not a decorative tone of voice. In this guide it means treating people as agents whose time, privacy, circumstances, and ability to challenge decisions matter. A polite interface can still be coercive; a rigorous verification process can still be respectful. Design quality is judged by the available choices and their consequences, not just their appearance.

Clarity. Explain what is required, why it is required, what happens next, and how to recover from errors.

Agency. Give people meaningful choices, informed consent, and reversible actions where possible.

Respect. Do not presume dishonesty, incapacity, or one universal household, identity, or life path.

Fairness. Examine who bears time, cost, connectivity, language, and documentation burdens.

Recourse. Provide human review and transparent routes to challenge consequential decisions.

02 / The six-question dignity audit

- Who is most likely to struggle with this step, and why?
- What assumption does this field, rule, or default make about the person?

- What happens when someone makes an ordinary mistake?
- Can the person understand and challenge an adverse decision?
- Is sensitive information genuinely necessary and appropriately protected?
- Could a less burdensome option achieve the same legitimate purpose?

03 / Eight redesign exercises

01 / Household form

Problem: A required spouse field and notarised affidavit for unmarried applicants.

Redesign: Ask who shares expenses; allow lawful alternative evidence and explain eligibility criteria.

Trade-off: Fraud prevention and program rules still apply.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

02 / Unexplained rejection

Problem: A status code announces denial without an explanation.

Redesign: State the reason in plain language; show next steps, deadlines, and an appeal channel.

Trade-off: Do not expose sensitive case details.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

03 / Public student ranking

Problem: Names and scores appear on a public leaderboard.

Redesign: Provide private, actionable feedback and share only appropriately aggregated data.

Trade-off: Transparency and accountability may require different reporting.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

04 / Workplace surveillance

Problem: Cursor inactivity triggers an automatic pay penalty.

Redesign: Evaluate agreed deliverables and allow correction of inaccurate activity records.

Trade-off: Some safety-critical roles need presence monitoring.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

05 / Verification barrier

Problem: A timed visual-only CAPTCHA blocks access.

Redesign: Offer accessible authentication alternatives and meaningful support.

Trade-off: Keep security threat models explicit.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

06 / Benefit renewal

Problem: People must repeat complex paperwork every few weeks.

Redesign: Reuse information only with lawful authority and safeguards; explain what changed.

Trade-off: Data mismatches need correction and appeal.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

07 / Disability intake

Problem: A form asks only about deficits and incapacity.

Redesign: Ask about access needs, support preferences, and barriers while retaining clinically necessary questions.

Trade-off: Do not erase medical needs or legal criteria.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

08 / Cancellation trap

Problem: Joining is online; leaving requires a mailed letter.

Redesign: Offer clear, proportionate online cancellation and confirmation.

Trade-off: Consider identity verification and legitimate contractual duties.

Try it: Draft the smallest change that improves the experience without weakening a legitimate safeguard.

04 / Microcopy repair workshop

Instead of: INVALID INPUT. TRY AGAIN.

Consider: We could not read the date. Use DD/MM/YYYY; your other answers are saved.

Instead of: APPLICATION REJECTED.

Consider: Your application needs one more document. See what is missing and how to request a review.

Instead of: YOU FAILED VERIFICATION.

Consider: We could not confirm your details. You can try another method or contact support.

Instead of: ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO QUIT?

Consider: Cancel your subscription? Access continues until the end of your current billing period.

05 / When friction helps, and when it harms

Useful friction creates a meaningful pause before irreversible choices: clear confirmation, consent summaries, cooling-off periods, and accessible ways to correct mistakes. Harmful friction blocks routine access or exit through unexplained paperwork, repeated steps, inaccessible controls, or artificial waiting. Ask whether the extra step protects the person, the institution, or merely an internal metric.

06 / Workshop: redesign a real journey

1. Describe one real user journey without identifying a person.
2. Write the exact words or actions the interface requires.
3. Identify hidden assumptions and legitimate institutional constraints.
4. Map the burden: time, money, attention, privacy, and accessibility.
5. Propose two alternatives; record benefits and possible harms.
6. Test with affected users and document what remains unresolved.

07 / Printable review worksheet

Service / screen / policy:

Person and context considered:

Current requirement:

Hidden assumption:

Legitimate purpose:

Observed burden (do not invent metrics):

Redesign option A:

Redesign option B:

Privacy and accessibility considerations:

Appeal / support route:

What evidence would change our assessment:

08 / How to use evidence responsibly

The cases in this guide are illustrative thought experiments, not audited accounts of specific institutions. No numerical dignity score or guaranteed percentage improvement is claimed. To evaluate a redesign, use moderated usability tests, accessibility testing, task completion data, support contacts, appeal outcomes, and feedback from affected communities. Interpret each measure in context.

09 / Further reading and standards

- W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 — [w3.org/TR/WCAG22/](https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG22/)
- W3C Web Accessibility Initiative — [w3.org/WAI/](https://www.w3.org/WAI/)
- Nielsen Norman Group: usability heuristics — nngroup.com/articles/ten-usability-heuristics/
- U.S. Digital Service: Digital Services Playbook — playbook.usds.gov/

These resources provide relevant background; the original examples and recommendations in this field guide are not quotations or official interpretations of these standards.

10 / A closing principle

A service is not dignified merely because it is efficient. Ask whether a person can understand it, access it, refuse it where appropriate, correct an error, and obtain a fair hearing. A humane system leaves

room for human complexity.

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