Introducing XLAs

In the business world, it's likely you've come across service level agreements (SLAs) and key performance indicators (KPIs) before. In the briefest terms, an SLA is an agreement between service provider and customer of what a service will offer, with KPIs being the metrics that determine if the said service's performance correlates against the agreement. Since they focus on a service, they surround factors such as server availability and response times to tickets. They do not tend to focus on the human experience of the service. Arguably, why would they need to? Their focus is to establish a threshold by which the capacity to utilise the service is held against. From this, we see they focus on the outputs, but not necessarily the experience, of said service.

An experience level agreement (XLA), on the other hand, is more human-focused, centring around the employees and customers making use of these services. An XLA is an agreement, in the form of a statement, between two parties where a desired/designated level of experience will be maintained. Instead of determining the function of a service, it will determine how the users of said service felt about it, what need and want from it, and ultimately, whether they had a good experience whilst using it.

As a concept, XLAs are the bridge connecting application and technology services to outcomes. The application enables us to create and work and the outcomes are what we aspire to produce. However, in all of this, our experience of the application is what will connect these both. I'm sure we've had an experience where a sudden frustration with a hardware device or piece of software has caused us to take a break from our work/hobbies, or even stop them completely. With an XLA setting out the commitment to creating a defined threshold for experience, it works to avoid this.

So how do we define a commitment? To do this, we use a mixture of current user experience sentiment and our own analysis of where we would like experience to be. This is the first stage of any organisation wanting to introduce XLAs and we will go into full detail of this and more later in the book. For now, let's assume we know why our employees are having bad experiences with their workplace services e.g., application crashes are affecting their ability to do their job and causing feelings of frustration. When crafting XLA statements it is important to use what we call outcome words. As the name suggests, these are words where the customer's/employee's outcome is the focus. Using the example above, the current outcomes are frustration and an inability to work. Therefore, a suitable XLA commitment would be to ensure that our employees are happy with our services and are able to stay as productive as they can.

If an SLA works to show what the service is doing and how well it is doing it, an XLA works to ask, ‘How did you feel about what we did’? Instead of SLA KPIs being the metric to determine whether the agreement is being upheld, an XLA uses experience indicators (XIs). XIs are the metric gathering tools of an XLA that will bring us data to determine if the desired experience set forth by the XLA is being upheld. Just like KPIs, these indicators will need to be measurable, and so typically we’ll use survey questions to gather XI data.

You might be asking at this point, if an SLA and XLA are similar in nature and measurements, why would we need an XLA? Well, in a practical sense, an SLA in operation may have all its KPIs met. That’s great, but does that mean the user of the service is having a good experience? As we’ve said previously, experience is very important to our decisions in general life. An SLA cannot truly say whether the experience was good, but an XLA can. We will expand upon the balance between SLAs and XLAs and how they ultimately work together later in this section, but for now let’s look at the main differences between them…