



GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DESIGN
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Design Thinking for Creativity and Business Innovation Series

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/A DESIGN THINKING PRIMER

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/// There has been a plethora of interest recently on Design Thinking but is Design Thinking helpful or does it merely export the dogmas of design to business strategy? Corporations are facing crises on several fronts, not only from the obvious such as low cost competition, economic sustainability and social development, but business leaders and governments are also experiencing a profound crisis of trust and legitimacy. All these factors have triggered a loss of confidence in traditional processes. The core of many management theories are being questioned and “management” is close to a point of failure. Leaders are looking to find something new to grasp onto in order to make sense of what’s going on and to prepare for a future of unprecedented uncertainties.



Many organizations have been battered by system level economic failure, and the collapse of traditional management processes. These wounds have left businesses gazing hopefully towards design thinking as a new management “wonder drug” that will help make sense of the current situation. Design Thinking presents itself as an attractive approach to problem solving for those who need to address complex, ambiguous, uncertain and volatile circumstances across multiple contexts and cultures. Design Thinking brings a refreshed, revitalized and rejuvenated approach to management and strategic thinking however, it is far from a cure-all.

Will Design Thinking sink in the upcoming years much like many other short-lived management fads or will it change business forever? Traditional design firms (and even branding and design studios) are quick to claim that they can change the world. Corporations however, may be disappointed with these promises if these companies lack an understanding in business strategy, industry dynamics, channel economics and capital intensity. Change requires more than just sexy designs and catchy slogans but adding a few MBAs to your employee roster does not equal a strategy consultancy firm either.

There are many ways to define Design Thinking. It is:

- / A way to instill customer-centricity and empathy
- / A means to solve complex problems
- / A methodology to foster exploration and experimentation
- / A design buzz word to tell you a designer can do more than design
- / A management buzz word sold as the “next” strategic tool
- / A marketing slogan or tag line

Design Thinking has a lot of value but a few questions remain, is it time for us to reinvent design? Will a new organization redesign design? The transformation of design agencies to strategy consulting firms is an interesting idea but an extremely challenging one. The term “design thinkers” implies that designers are craftsmen and not thinkers, which is not always the case. It is also a stretch for traditional design firms to rely solely on design thinking to solve strategic issues. Design firms need to explore cultural transformation within themselves before they can implement it for others.

Today, Design Thinking is frequently compared and contrasted to business. This is often an over simplification that forces us into predetermined roles along with their associated rules, conventions, behaviors and formal expectations. It is important to recognize that Design Thinking is not exclusive to designers or unattainable to those in another discipline. Design Thinking is natural and inherent in all of us. It is an approach to inquiry and expression that complements and enhances existing skills, behaviors and techniques. It is also critical not to define the discipline as the antithesis of data-driven analytical thinking. Design thinking is its own mode of analysis – one that focuses on forms, relationships, behavior and real human interactions and emotions. These may include:

- / How an entity (product, service, system or business) currently lives in the ecosystem or sub-system?
- / How individuals or groups interact with that entity and the nature, frequency and attributes of that interaction?
- / How the different elements in the environment relate to one another and what if any system level impact exists?

Design Thinking is a cognitive and intellectual process that balances the rational and emotional – in effect combining left brain and right brain thinking. When applied, it harmonizes with other modes of thinking and closes knowledge and information gaps, creating order and refining meaning.



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DESIGN THINKING CORE VALUES

The evolution of mankind has survived because we work well in groups, we communicate, empathize with one another, anticipate, understand and exchange. This collaboration between individuals and groups is tangible and finite and has ultimately helped us to survive.

Design Thinking is a reflection of this culture and evolution – it is driven by modes of inquiry and expression that are accessible, functional, attractive, sustainable and iterative. In that regard, the culture behind Design Thinking and the customs, values and beliefs involved are potentially more empathetic, human centered and courageous when compared to business management. Design Thinking's mode of inquiry and expression is intentionally more accessible and human-centric. Design Thinking speaks many languages.

A multi-lingualism, multi-functional and multi-perspective approach to sensemaking and collaboration has influenced many of the principles inherent in Design Thinking. Design Thinking has the power to influence our core values, our identity, our expectations and our view of the world.

DESIGN THINKING CAPABILITIES AND TOOLS

Incorporating Design Thinking into business practices requires certain capabilities – a tool kit that includes observational techniques, needs mapping, opportunity scanning and rapid prototyping. These tools facilitate the identification of problems and allow us to creatively solve for them. This process comes with a “responsibility to shape the future,” as businesses often have, where we need to acknowledge and act upon this human need for meaning, identity and connectivity.

Codified through language, Design Thinking often requires communication that differs from other cultures and disciplines. Design Thinking expresses itself through common and familiar modes, mediums, traits and artifacts such as sketching, mapping, model making, prototyping, animations and dramatizations that can give form and meaning to Design Thinking.

Design Thinking needs to be seen as a culture – it is not just what marketers and designers do, or how their work is organized, it also includes the effect it has in many other fields. We have to acknowledge that design thinking has been popularized – held up as a “cure-all” – and on some level, is being exploited rather than properly applied. From a metacognitive perspective, Design Thinking is a wrapper, an umbrella, a network of many types of “thought.” It is part of a larger cultural phenomenon that has emerged and will continue to evolve.

Many however approach Design Thinking from the perspective of automation complemented by imagination – as it employs in some cases predictable and repeatable processes that can, to some extent, be codified as algorithms. It can also simultaneously embrace more serendipitous, ad-hoc and adaptive approaches to inquiry, synthesis and expression that leverages the power of intuition.

Design Thinking is about seeking out possibilities and demonstrating the willingness to make inexpensive mistakes to expand one's scope of thought and work. Ultimately Design Thinking is a bridge builder, an interface that brings us together, helping us to shrink the gaps between people and processes, customers and the company. As a new concept, Design Thinking needed to be carefully adopted and integrated with traditional business management practice. It should not be exploited as a marketing tool, tactic or an excuse for creative ideas to avoid analytical-based criticism or common sense business logic. It should be positioned as a creative logic tool that can facilitate innovation and strategic transformation.



/APPLIED DESIGN THINKING IN BUSINESS PROBLEM SOLVING

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/// Applying Design Thinking to business problem solving empowers individuals and organizations to better understand their competitive and operational environment; the values, beliefs and behaviors of people; the driving forces and key influencers involved; the strategic and tactical options therein; and the systemic issues behind these not necessarily well defined problems. This process enables organizations to identify strategic options in order to make better more informed decisions even in the face of extreme ambiguity.



Applied Design Thinking in business problem solving incorporates mental models, tools, processes and techniques from design, engineering, economics, the humanities and social sciences to help identify, define and address business challenges (i.e. strategic planning, product development, innovation and corporate social responsibility). This integration, when executed correctly, forms a highly productive dynamic between traditional business management approaches and design approaches, complementing and enhancing one another in a symbiotic fashion.

The increased adoption of multidisciplinary approaches to business problem solving, including the application of Design Thinking, helps organizations fill in critical, and often overlooked, knowledge gaps and information deficiencies. By combining the two, organizations establish more complete and ultimately competitive bodies of actionable knowledge and insights that allows for a human-centric and future-oriented approach. This approach does not discount or diminish the value of traditional and other analytical business methods in problem solving, rather, by leveraging the best qualities of both business and Design Thinking it establishes a more sensitive, powerful and potent analytical tool set that escalates our thinking to a new level. This results in a more holistic perspective and learning experience that is meaningful, valid and practical.

Introducing Design Thinking to business management also has a positive effect on organizational culture – it reveals and introduces new behaviors and it challenges people to communicate and learn in new ways while empowering them (through the adoption of tools, techniques and culture) to think differently.

Organizational structure, reporting hierarchies and processes are considered hard management and Design Thinking can fill the role of the soft management system – the creativity, sensibility and social bonding that holds an organization together.

The principles and techniques of Design Thinking are rooted in and distributed throughout the design community and is not necessarily a subject area you will find in a textbook. Design Thinking is becoming more widely recognized, but it is still not fully understood, even by audiences that already subscribe to its qualities and principles.

The following are ten of the core Design Thinking principles that should be considered when it is used in the context of business and management:

- /1** Design Thinking is action oriented. It proposes a cross-disciplinary learning-by-doing approach to problem solving. It allows us to accommodate varied interests and abilities through hands-on and “applied” learning experiences between many individuals. A big part of Design Thinking is Design Doing. It is, by nature, getting your hands dirty and trying things instead of being an arm-chair strategist.
- /2** Design Thinking is comfortable with change, is disruptive and provocative by nature, and promotes new ways of looking at problems, often through new lenses. The strategic framing of complex and ambiguous issues requires thinking approaches that are free from organizational dogmas, codified limitations and old assumptions. A large part of the Design Thinking process is to step out of conventional roles and escape from existing dogmas in order to explore new frames of thought and approaches to problem solving.
- /3** Design Thinking is human-centric and is always focused on understanding the customer’s or end-user’s needs, including unarticulated, unmet and latent needs. To do this, Design Thinking employs various observational research techniques as well as design tools, such as journey mapping, to systematically think and learn about the needs, tasks, steps or milestones of a process.
- /4** Design Thinking integrates elements of foresight and anticipatory imagination into the strategic planning process. It opens up the future and invites us to explore uncertainties. It encourages us to be comfortable with working with many unknowns. Design Thinking expects us to cope with inadequate information and multiple unknowns in the process of discovering and creating a tangible outcome.
- /5** Design Thinking is a dynamic constructive process that is iterative in nature. It requires ongoing definition, redefinition, representation, assessment and visualization. It is a continuous learning experience arising out of a need to obtain and correctly apply knowledge and insights to achieve goals that may change as more in depth knowledge of the problem is acquired. Here, prototyping and the creation of tangible “sharable” artifacts becomes an import piece of the Design Thinking tool kit.
- /6** Design Thinking promotes empathy. It puts users at the very core of everything. It encourages the use of tools to help us communicate with people in order to better understand their behaviors and expectations; the values, motivations and needs that surround and drive them. And we can use these insights to develop new knowledge through creative learning

and experimentation.

- /7** Design Thinking can greatly reduce risks for developing new products or services. The common saying “fail early and fail often” should not be a part of the core Design Thinking values. There are many benefits in learning from small failures, but applied Design Thinking practices should help reduce risks, including technology, market and customer risks. Failure is not encouraged at any stage – the key is to use the principles of Design Thinking to manage risks.
- /8** Design Thinking can create meanings. Power Point and Excel spreadsheets are very limited in their ability to communicate all meaning. Creating meaning is the hardest part of the design process and the communication tools employed by Design Thinking (maps, models, sketches and stories) help to capture and express the information required to form and socialize meaning. Arriving at this is not easy but emerges through multiple iterations and conversations.
- /9** Design Thinking as organizational culture can bring enterprise creativity and knowledge management to the next level. It helps to foster a culture that embraces questioning, challenge and discovery including frequent reflection-in-action, celebrating creativity, embracing ambiguity and visual sense-making (interactions with physical objects as well as people). A Design Thinking organization creates strong “inspirationalization” and “sensibility” to give tangibility to the emotional contract that employees can have with organizations.
- /10** Design Thinking as the new “Competitive Logic of Business Strategy.”
This is the most complementary practice that can be applied side by side with Michael Porter’s theory of Competitive Strategy. It allows companies to apply them to create new products, experiences, processes and business models beyond simply what works and turns them into something people desire – a truly sustainable competitive advantage through innovation.

The principles listed above are a sample of Design Thinking’s qualities – its tone, culture and approach to problem solving – their use and application in business problem solving contexts (in addition to traditional methods) can help to significantly fill in knowledge gaps while inspiring new perspectives, framing better questions and driving more competitive answers and solutions. Ultimately Design Thinking approaches increase an organization’s “sensitivity,” improve communication between all stakeholders (internal & external), and enhance an organization’s ability to process, synthesize and act upon the potential that is real, latent and inherent allowing for the constant extraction of economic and social value.



Using Design Thinking in business problem solving contexts can help to significantly fill in knowledge gaps while inspiring new perspectives, framing better questions and driving more competitive answers and solutions.

