Musings of an Apprentice: Business Thinking Meets Design Thinking to Create a Design-led Innovative Company

Vidya Priya Rao, Founder and Director, Innovatus Marketers Touchpoint LLP., Mumbai.
E-mail : vidyapriya.rao@marketerstouchpoint.com

Abstract

Businesses realize that delivering an awe-inspiring customer experience is the digital era is no longer an option. The business imperative is the need to transform themselves to avoid losing existing and future customers to competition. However, to visualize the blueprint for success and become an "Experience Maker" and fine-tune offerings based on what customers expect, the business requires rethinking everything, though some of the ideas may seem overwhelming. To leverage the "experience wave," the business aspiring to be "future-ready" need to focus on: connectedness, immediacy, relevancy and visual quality. This calls for the change in mindset of the senior leadership to realize the underlying reality of an experience business and their ability to empower employees across all levels to take timely decisions with real-time data for the value segments and elevate the perception of the company's ecosystem. The article shares A the perspective of a redesigned, reformed and transformed business design professional. The author shares her journey, experience, progress, and point of view on today's often discussed "design thinking or building a design-led innovation culture,." a must have skill in today's digital and experience era.

Background

While I love the idea of design being applied by a battalion of brains to make a meaningful impact in business and the world, I have mixed feelings about Design Thinking. I firmly believe the term was coined by Tim Brown (2009) of IDEO in a well-intentioned manner. Pioneers like Roger Martin (2009) and Tim Brown (2009) have directed the shifting role of design from a noun to verb in the networked economy. It can and is being applied by forward-thinking businesses and disruptors to create a USP (unique selling proposition) or differentiator to respond to changing trends, consumer and employee behaviors and expectations, and gain a competitive advantage that ultimately drives business growth and impacts bottom-line.

I have realized that the whole brain thinking, empathy, diverse viewpoints, research, analysis, big data insights, ideation, validation; balances the art and science behind the ways a human can engage their mind to solve complex problems in today's networked economy, is spot on. It's agile, learnable, repeatable, disciplined and flexible process ensures that even an ordinary person can use to get things done while creating unique and qualified value which complements the existing value management capability.

Inspired by the success of Apple, Amazon, Google, Airbnb and many more, the good news is its gaining traction globally, and India too is joining the bandwagon. However, I also have my fears. It stems from the fact that, often businesses lured by innovation and sweeping organizational change are jumping into it without really understanding what design thinking is, how it works and why do they need it in the first place.

Even worse, there are many claiming to be "design thinkers" after learning about the standard methods and tools of design thinking process or those who run a UI/UX design firm. Their engagements are driven by one-off workshops which usually ends in creating a prototype with a roleplay or pitching session, without focusing on following through the ideas for execution. Most often this is resulting in misdirected solutions and outcomes disappointing business, who abandon it and return to the old ways of working.

Because of these illusions, and the rampant use of the term, I fear it has perhaps, led to some misdirection and misconceptions, and has diluted the value of design thinking and the ROI it can realize. It is also delaying the management buy-in to invest in this critical tool that is the need of the hour.

The need of the moment is the right know-how of how businesses can apply this idea-inspiring, culture-building, co-creating and revenue-driving approach, and the commitment they need to make is to take a call, if they are ready to embark on the journey. I am glad that many business schools and are all set to demystify the concepts of design

thinking, by imparting the know-how of design thinking tools and techniques and the necessary mind set to students and business leaders.

Back in the school days

Design Thinking? What is this? Oh, and post-it notes was unheard of, even in the product design sessions in my engineering school or while understanding consumer behavior in business school.

I attended engineering school in a mostly pre-digital age. I was sharing a 386 PC with my classmate learning to code or using Auto CAD to design a product, and we had heard of something called the internet.

A couple of years later, when I joined a business school email was beginning to gain traction, surfing the internet was an expensive affair, but one had to wait for your turn to access the PC in school or internet café. eCommerce was elective coursework exposing us to a new disruptive model using technology. There was no mobile phone, social media, wearables, mobile apps, mobile or cloud computing.

There was no concept of User Experience (UX), Customer Experience (CX), Employee Experience (EX) or Service Design (SD). There was architecture, graphics and industrial design in engineering school. In business school, there was Kotler's 4 Ps (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion); and the focus was to learn how to get the final product to market while reducing internal costs and increasing margins. The customer was another crucial factor in decision making.

Well to cut the story short, the schooling equipped me with the basic skills to become employable

Engineering:

Hard, or concrete, skills: Knowledge of core subjects, machine design, CAD, application of the knowledge, familiarity with industry standards, understanding the mechanisms between components in a system, soft, or complex skills – attention to detail, scientific mind-set, analytical and creative thinking, adaptability, collaboration, team player.

MBA:

Hard, or concrete, skills: accounting, economics, statistics, marketing, sales management, operations, finance, investing and supply chain. Soft, or complex, skills: business thinking, communications, ethics, organizational behaviour, strategy, leadership, change management, negotiations, and entrepreneurship.
For better or worse, most associate an Engineering degree or MBA with only the hard skills. While hard skills are vital and important, but the "secret sauce" for success I realized later in my career is to learn and hone the complex soft skill set.

Noticeably absent? Design Thinking.
Oh, and post-it notes. I never saw those in industrial product design or consumer behaviour sessions either.

The early years of my career

I rolled up my sleeves and got immersed in the tough world of sales, and consulting.

Post-engineering, a couple of years in sales taught me valuable lessons about business. To name a few, I learned to talk to strangers, ask them questions to understand their needs and gauge their interest, take notes without losing eye contact, deal with rejection, looking and reacting to signals, prioritization, building relationships and business ethics.

With the burning desire to learn how a business functions, I landed in a business school.

I entered the emerging world of software product consulting immediately upon graduation from business school. I was among the first wave of management professional hired by the company to become a multi-tasker – a product manager, function tester, and implementation consultant. I was tasked to collaborate with software engineers, sales, and marketing to start shifting software from a highly technical, unapproachable space to solve business

problems and help the client's employees accept this software.

I resisted any notion of my role being constrained:
– **as a sales executive** – to miss sales closure on the grounds of poor product features
– **as product manager** – to becoming reactive to changing market dynamics
– **as a function tester** – to have no foresight to envisage all possible scenarios the users can use the software
– **as an implementation consultant** – to create the necessary balance between "let's move to action" and "let's make sure we are acting on the right things" in client organizations.

Instead, I worked diligently to understand the business needs; business or people constraints of clients in different industry; their business process; the underlying process variations because of the different business models and organization culture; passing on consumer feedback to the product team; the (often) non-trivial limitations of emerging technologies and so on.

The curiosity to apply my engineering design and business thinking fundamentals challenged me to grow my literacy (I realized it much later that it's a must for design knowledge) to help my clients reshuffle their focus:

1. **Understanding and applying principles** of the software interface layout, color, space, typography, while keeping in mind the end-user context
2. **Identifying context and forming relationships** between users, things, activities, systems and business process, honed my facilitation and change management skills
3. **Accurately identify problems and requirements** – solution requirements, business needs, end-user needs and wants constraints and timelines
4. **Not oversell and pretend to know everything** accepting "I don't know" is a valid answer and being honest builds trust
5. **Creating compelling stories to get the buy-in** that could move people, get them out of their comfort zones, impacting their point of view and get their full support and understanding
6. **Exploring possibilities** by focusing on partnering, co-creation, and enablement – by ideating with clients, peer colleagues, and think-tanks; enable clients to be self-reliant
7. **Faking it till I could make things with my hands** my profile was often sold to the client as a senior expert consultant, just to get me off the bench, the reality being I knew nothing about it. I had to learn on the job and start delivering overnight while embracing the qualities of deep craftsmanship in all one produces to avoid getting caught
8. **Applying critical thinking** to critique client processes, to refine concepts, establish new objectives, spot the quick wins and identify the long-term benefits, implement the solution, measure the progress and uncover additional opportunities
9. **Stay abreast of upcoming changes** in the industry, technologies and business concepts to add spark to the conversation and to justify my relevance
10. **Practice what I preached**, e.g. if I said "this solution meets your requirement" then I demonstrated "that this solution meets their requirement"; I can't change how others think if I didn't model what that looks like myself.
The collaboration with software engineering, sales, and marketing paid off, and I successfully took multiple products and solutions to market. Moreover, I was pretty good at it.

And, still no design thinking?

A necessary change
If you were hand-picked tomorrow to make strategic decisions and run a business, would you be able to? The answer was a "Yes."
The itch for career advancement, made me climb a straight vertical ladder with the destination of an M&A program manager, marketing director and later a practice head. I was soon saddled with additional management responsibilities, and it required me to "master people." Unfortunately, there were no horizontal ladders available, opening the bridge to a bunch of doors on the same floor and help me gain "mastery of oneself."
While my consulting stint had helped me meet me new people from different departments, and get a hands-on feel of the problems and everything that was going on in the client organization and deliver solutions and getting appreciated for the outcomes, it had not geared me to break down my own organization's departmental silos.

In the leadership role, I became increasingly frustrated with a lack of ability to impact strategic direction in a short period. So many times we had a get-together to brainstorm and attempt solving a problem, but nothing was getting accomplished. How many times after I left a formal meeting, I doubted that anything was actually going to change? I realized, this damage was self-inflicted, as internally within the organization, we were not practicing what we preached to clients as consultants.

This discomfort resulted in a search for a solution and some self-reflection.

The reflection:

As a consultant, there was often a well-defined problem, and I complimented it with a pre-packaged solution. The solution was modular in nature as we knew "one-size-does-not-fit-all," giving consultants like me the flexibility to customize it to meet the client requirement. The business skills acquired helped me quickly solve linear problems. It was dealing with the non-linear business problems having the following characteristics – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity; I was struggling with.

The realization:

"In the rush to meet deadlines and numbers, we were not allocating sufficient time to think through the problem truly. Instead, we jump at the first solution dished out, without measuring its merit as a functionally, financially and technically viable solution meeting the customer's actual need. In the process, we often end-up treating symptoms and not the actual problem. Surprisingly, it is that "little thing" that was missed—something so obvious – paving the direct path to failure."

Finally! Enter design thinking: During this challenging time, my organization exposed me to a design thinking workshop, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

My total transformation – A new way of thinking by connecting design to strategy

I transformed from being in the business of designing point solutions to being in the business of designing businesses.

Since then, I have been participated and facilitated multiple such sessions, with diverse cross-functional teams across different companies in different industries. Its collaborative nature helped circumvent the friction created by the departmental silos, involving the relevant stakeholders, right from the start in its workshop based approach. I honed the art to balance between "let's get to action" and "let's ensure we are acting on the right context at the right time," while steering the team forward into expansive waters of exploring incredible options. I learned to manage this energy and empower teams to share ideas and participate without any inhibitions to deliver outcomes efficiently and effectively.

It helped me realize that innovative business changing ideas can be fleeting at times, but design thinking provides a structured approach to deal with it. I got the opportunity to try various elements of design thinking and became really passionate about it because it works. This gave me the confidence to practice, master and tweaked the method so that it provides value to my clients.

Fortunately, my thinking got rewired, and I was transformed by the design thinking process, framework, toolkit, and mindset. I got a new lens to view the business, and a fresh perspective on reality, performance and success.
– The "what is" shows me the mirror and face the current reality.

– The "what if" makes me a futurist to envisage desirable and sustainable paths of action. It helps me combine empathy and data to analyze trends; recognize patterns, opportunities, and breakthroughs in social and business innovation to create a preferable future. It gives me the ability to remove the barriers while implementing a game-changing design – using data, empathy, imagination, and intuition.

– The "what wows" keeps me grounded to focus on creating and delivering this magic over and over again.
– The "what works" helps me make and keep things simple, relevant and convenient.

I entered with a design thinking toolkit, which provided a set of lenses through which I could find solutions from the perspective of the users and not try to fix the problem based on the originator or creator. Perhaps it was a cube,

allowing me to flip a problem around in order to notice, empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test and refine.

With a rewired mind set and applying the principles of service design, I exited with an ambidextrous design-led innovation framework for the network economy which gave me a strategic multi-dimensional lens, to sees collections of interdependent components in the organization as a set of relationships. It helped analyse the relations between emerging behaviors influenced by the complex social, technological and economic ecosystem in which the organization operates; to attack problems and find the best solution. Now, I can flip a much more complex shape. I am not sure what it is – perhaps it's a kisdodecahedron.

Reboot the management – a new operating system

Still Confused? Let me use a simple metaphor to clarify your doubts. Imagine a stage in a theatre; the front stage is where the magic and engagement happens and what the audience can experience. The lead actors being sales and customer service professionals, your website, mobile apps and social media. The front stage view encompasses what your business does that customers can see, hear, feel and touch; and forms their opinion based on the interactions.

The backstage view comprises of things a business does but is supposed to be invisible to the customer, but critical to enable the experience. The backstage experts support the front stage, with the crew, the lights, the sets, the makeup, and the extras and so on. In the organization context, the backstage, are the different departments marketing, product engineering, operations, information technology and so on who make front stage magic happen.

Then there is the behind-the-scenes actors – the leadership team, who provide the strategy, tools and create the conditions to make both the front and backstage break-down the silos and work as a team to address the customers and business needs. The work environment, guiding principles, practice and systems; and all the things that aren't really a part of either the front or backstage. The leadership team cultivating a new mind set to bring external 'chaos' into the organization and view it as something positive. They make bold decisions and change things, only to change them again shortly after. They do so by reducing the formal hierarchies, reduce control and fear – build trust and share the work of setting direction, exploit the diversity and re-invent strategy making and leaders who create meaning for every individual stakeholder.

The key is to reimagine the front stage and backstage from the outside in, to reduce ambiguity, uncover opportunities and simplify the organization. By connecting design to strategy, companies can apply design to clarify business strategies, simplify and humanize complex systems and create a roadmap to systematic and sustainable innovation.

Quite often this is a business case for behind the scene teams, to embark on a cultural change initiative and rewire the thinking for systematic sense making and fast decision-making to shape experiences for solid business outcomes, especially in the networked digital era. The intent is to create and reinforce a design-led innovation culture, which promotes speed, entrepreneurship, diversity, innovation, and risk-taking. As a master of ceremonies, my role is to aid businesses to prepare for this journey using the ambidextrous design-led innovation framework.

Essentially, I went from being in the business of designing point solutions to being in the business of designing businesses. Since then, I never looked back.

My biggest fears, concerns, and complaints

My passion in Design Thinking and arriving at an approach to prepare the organization mind set to Build A Design-Led Innovation Culture was born from a personal journey. My schooling and professional experience, combined with the curiosity, created a burning desire to rise through the distraction of detail and combine design and business into a single thought process, uniquely tuned to do what, I call practical service design thinking and doing.
Yet, most design thinking practitioners operate, in a complex environment and still a nascent market. Design Thinking is tossed like a magic potion capable of solving all ailments. And, any design project related to UI and UX is characterized as "design thinking."

The things I actually don't want to see happen are:

1. Design thinking replaces design doing – Whacky ideas, sticky notes, great visuals, fashionable clothes and know-how to use the toolkit, don't make good designers.

Reason: It about – a well-honed understanding of business fundamentals, using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to empathize and reflect the customer's voice, helping build an emotional connection to the brand, hands-on creation to visualize and communicate complex information, evaluate prototypes and acting on user feedback a routine, defines design.

2. The designer skill set gets unacceptably exaggerated – Having a design degree or title doesn't qualify one to design anything and everything.

Reason: Designers need to understand the limitations of their practice. They need to move beyond creating an aesthetically appealing product or focus on winning design competitions. They need to embrace their limitations and work with their business counterparts, and focus on skills they excel in (e.g., amazing ideation and visualization skills) and take a more holistic view of how to create a Minimum Lovable Product, and how their designs will be received in the marketplace.

3. Design thinking becomes misunderstood as design-led – Too many designers hold up Apple, and digital stalwarts like Amazon, Google, and LinkedIn as the success mantras of what's possible when an organization is "all-in" on design thinking and calling it design led.

Reason: The truth about Google's famous 20% policy is employees are encouraged, to spend 20% of their working time on what they think will most benefit Google, apart from working on their regular projects. Last time I checked, the late Steve Jobs was not a designer. He was a business leader, with a clear vision for his firm and the leadership acumen to implement that vision, including insights to making timely acquisitions, investments and partnerships.

4. Empathizing replaces market analysis – Human-cantered design is essential but doesn't guarantee results of new product/service innovations

Reason: Henry Ford's statement comes to my mind – "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." So if you are a disruptor, depending on the potential of the innovation, it might be counterproductive to follow the customers initially, as they operate from the frame of known. For example, Uber would have learned that people want to pay for their taxi with a credit card and maybe order it on their phones, but surely not ride in the private car of a stranger, who is not a licensed driver or share a ride with a stranger. Once the product/ service is out in the market, design thinking has helped Uber build sustaining service innovation to resonate with the audience.

5. We lose view of the big picture – Design Management is as much about management and employee empowerment as it is about design

Reason: Innovating the customer and employee experience is just a small piece of the puzzle. The orchestration of people, process, technologies, context, content, conversations, scenarios and environments requires a clear understanding of business dynamics. It is the ability to tackle customer, business, and organizational challenges, and setting boundaries where employees can exercise their empowerment, to build capabilities and deliver the business outcome. It is not getting obsessed with building great products but also about offering excellent service, as service can cause more frustration to customers than the product. It is about the leadership freeing up time to think, passing the baton to the middle management to manage the daily grind of managing the business, and focus on the actual work of leadership.

My hope

I'd like both Design Thinking and Business Thinking to be at par, and be viewed as a necessary acumen for building a design-led innovation culture.

However, we are still very much at the start. But, it's not enough.

We need to realize that many of the soft, complex skills in the engineering and management framework are as relevant as design thinking skills. Perhaps it is more critical. Skills like facilitation and change management, effective communication, storytelling, visualizing are key enablers to design thinking and innovation efforts.

Like leading business schools, I hope the design community takes a step back to assess what it does and does not know. Their curriculum too needs to be modified to help designers augment their understanding of business.

The crux is we need design leaders who can design and think, not ones that have been taught how to do today's wireframe, persona, empathy map, journey map, service blueprint or few other tricks up their sleeve. We need them to help organizations become trendsetters, and uproot once-thriving businesses by questioning the status-quo and embracing new ideas, unfamiliar approaches, and alien concepts. We need to get the leadership to shift from "business as usual and focusing on creating profit for shareholders" mindset to become "an opportunity and growth hacker while creating value for stakeholders."

It's the beginning of the journey to design business to survive and sustain in today's networked economy.

Back to you – design thinking and design doing in the era of 'Always-on' transformation
(this is actually the conclusion)
To disrupt, you need to design the system or get disrupted with your organization getting designed by the system.

As designers and architects of the future, you have an opportunity to play an influential role in constructing the "new reality" and improving the experience of people on the planet in the network economy. A short-term profit focus or reacting and responding to current conditions will be an opportunity lost. Alternatively, you could be a visionary and help redefine "how things work." By acknowledging this and setting out with a clear charter, you have the potential to explode into a 21st Century Renaissance.

I am curious about the relevant education, how as budding designers, you choose to step up to the challenge and lead us towards a future characterized by innovation – aesthetics, functionality, and relevance.

In the wake of this: What is your view on Design Thinking and Design Doing to become a Design-Led organization? Do you agree that if design is an approach to a creative organization, it can't be independent of logic – as creativity is the skill to make sense of new logic? What experiences would you like to share by mixing Design Thinking with hard and soft skills from Business Thinking?

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