

What is Design Thinking?

A Powerful Methodology for Projects, But NOT “Thinking About Design”!

Why do simple and effective approaches to getting things done often become obscured by jargon? For example, way back in the last century when I worked at HP we experienced big changes in the business environment. Although layoffs are common at HP these days, back then everyone I knew believed that HP had a “no layoff” policy. But as offshoring became commonplace and global competition increased, it became clear that the lifetime employment contract was no longer viable for businesses that wanted to survive.

I’ll never forget the response to all of this change. Executives and HR people started using terms like “career self-reliance” and “workforce resilience”. These fancy phrases were used to convey a pretty simple message “You’re on your own when it comes to career development and job security.” Unsurprisingly there were layoffs of thousands of people in the ensuing years. Me, I didn’t mind being laid off. If we hadn’t cut these jobs the entire company – and EVERYONE’s jobs! – would have been at risk. (And my mom and I owned a lot of HP stock.) But what bothered me was how the reality of our situation was needlessly obscured by buzzwords. I remember advising my friends in manufacturing to upgrade their skills and transfer into jobs likely to survive the massive changes coming. When the layoffs began many of my colleagues seemed genuinely surprised to

have been let go. Although denial certainly played a role, I strongly believe that the terminology used in communicating the changes was unnecessarily complicated and indirect. As a physicist, I have learned that complex doesn’t necessarily mean complicated, and I prefer to follow the guidance that Einstein offered in this quote, one of my favorites.

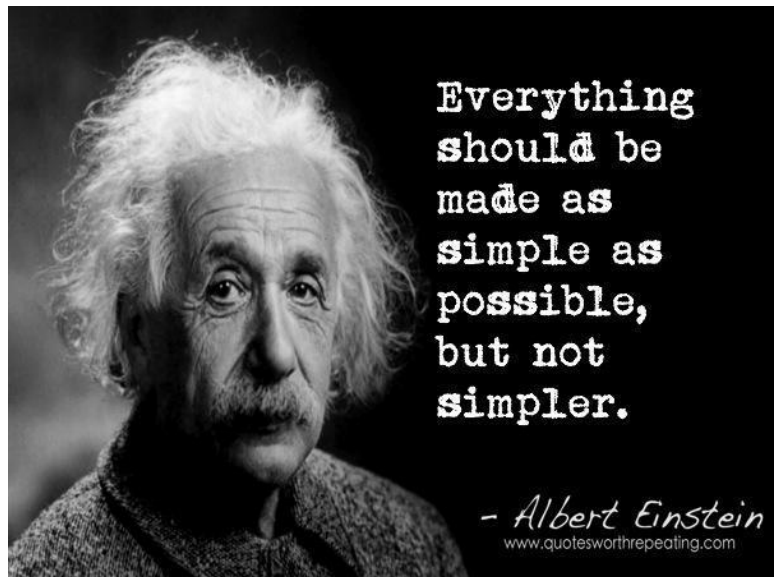


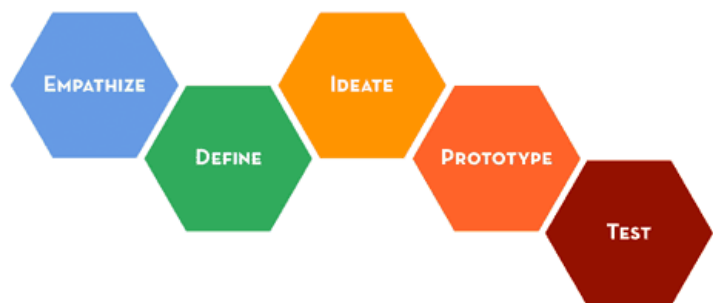
Image reference: <http://www.quotesworthrepeating.com/albert-einstein-quote-gallery/8/>

Design Thinking Isn’t Merely Thinking About Design. Now, on to my rant about “design thinking”, another elegantly simple methodology shrouded in complicated jargon. Over the past five years I’ve had the opportunity to learn and apply the powerful methodology referred to as “design thinking” through working closely with an expert in this field. This cryptic term, popularized by IDEO for a solutions-centric approach to creating breakthroughs, refers to an incredibly powerful set of processes and tools that are extremely useful in designing innovative products and services, and indispensable to anyone facing seemingly insurmountable challenges. Although there’s a lot of interesting information on Wikipedia about design thinking, reading it won’t really help you learn and apply this methodology unless you are already familiar with it. (Much better: Check out the “Design Thinking Bootcamp Bootleg” document here: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/the-bootcamp-bootleg>) If asked, most people in my

hometown of Silicon Valley, USA, could tell you that it's something that IDEO does. But many of them would be hard pressed to offer a coherent explanation of what design thinking is without access to the internet. And, in spite of getting a lot of visibility in the past decade in the Harvard Business Review and through the d.school at Stanford University, I've met many technical professionals around the world who haven't heard the term, or don't know what it means.

A Leap Year Isn't a Year of Leaping. I've come to understand what an incredibly valuable methodology design thinking is, and have personally experienced applying this approach to project management, business leadership, and beyond. But, while it's natural to assume that design thinking would mean "thinking about design" - and that does describe *some* of what goes on in this process - that's somewhat misleading. It's kind of like thinking a "leap year" is a whole year of leaping, or that a "jumbo shrimp" is big. (And don't even get me started on whether a "small crowd" has a lot of people or just a few!)

The Classic Design Thinking Diagram. First, let's start with the classical design thinking model. Here is the diagram typically used to explain the process. Unfortunately, unless you are experienced in product development, the meaning of this diagram is still pretty obscure. While you

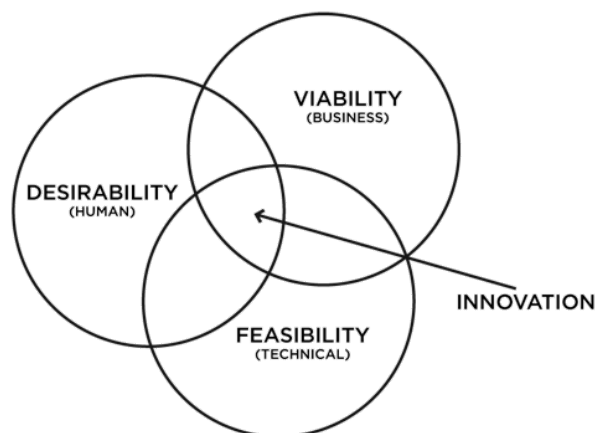


might know that empathize means "to experience the intellectual identification with, or vicarious experiencing of, the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another", you could be left clueless as to what the heck to DO to empathize, and with whom? (This is the first time I have used "whom" in an article - please forgive me!) And "ideate" is likely to leave newbies equally puzzled about how the idea generation approach of design thinking differs from everyday problem-solving. Even the definition offered by the president and CEO of IDEO, the company central to the design thinking movement, doesn't do much to help us get started actually DOING design thinking. Tim Brown says "Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success."

Image reference:

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/01/02/how-working-walls-unlock-creative-insight/>

Design Thinking is a Way to "Innovate on Purpose". Although many innovations are accidental, such as teflon and postit notes, businesses can't afford to wait for happy accidents to satisfy their innovation needs. Design thinking is an approach that can produce innovation predictably and repeatedly. (Of course there are dramatic differences of opinion as to the definition of innovation, and experts will likely disagree as to whether a specific product, service or solution deserves the label "innovative", but let's not get into that here.) Here's a diagram that depicts the 3 key aspects in Tim Brown's definition. I've found this very helpful in distinguishing innovation from invention. A particular invention may be feasible without being desirable to human



beings or viable as a business. For example, a smart phone app that makes fart sounds is an invention, but not innovation, in my opinion. (Of course innovation isn't limited to the design phase of a project, and this diagram doesn't cover what some people describe as "innovation all along the lifecycle".)

Image reference: <http://www.ideo.com/about/>

A more elaborate version of the three circles diagram, again from IDEO, clearly indicates that the design thinking methodology is people-centric, and not a purely rational, analytical, fact-based approach. At the center is something called "Experience Innovation", another term that could be easily misinterpreted. In this world "Innovation" doesn't describe a "thing" that is produced, but rather a human experience that is transformed for the better. It includes a deep understanding of the purpose (the "BIG WHY") to be achieved as well as the human beings impacted (the "BIG WHO").

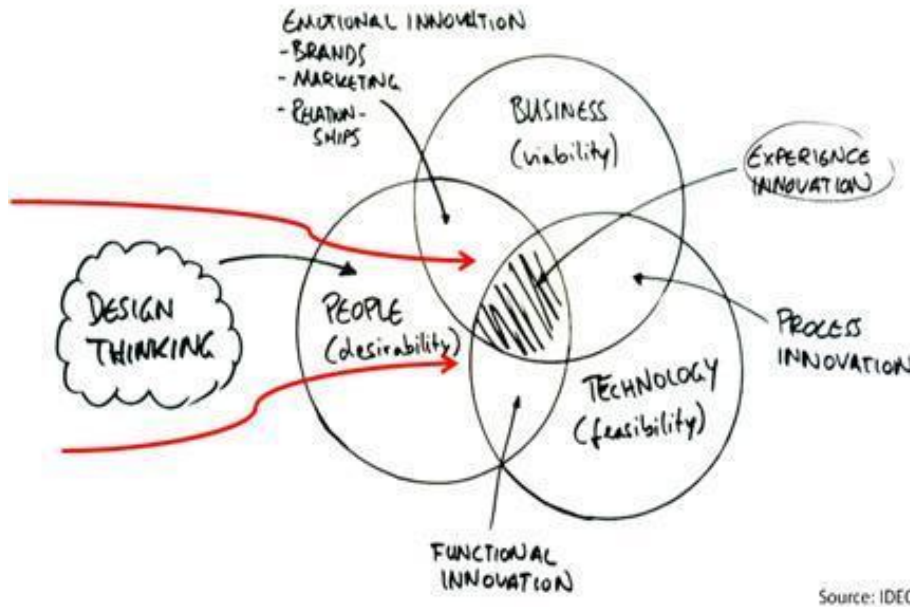


Image reference: http://www.itmp-sg.com/de_Design_Thinking.ebs

Design Thinking vs. Problem-solving. One way to understand design thinking is by defining what it is not – *problem-solving*. When solving a problem we typically start with the problem and look for solutions. For example, in the 1800's a person living in the countryside might have been frustrated by how long it took to get to town by riding a horse. The obvious problem-centric solution? Get a faster horse! As you can see, the focus is on the problem, which tends to result in obvious, often incremental, solutions – making something better, faster, cheaper. A design thinking approach, on the other hand, might lead to a much more innovative solution, such as inventing a bicycle or automobile, or moving closer to town, or finding ways to eliminate the need to go to town at all. This diagram is a terrific visualization of this concept. A problem or question results in an answer, but leaves more attractive solutions unexplored.

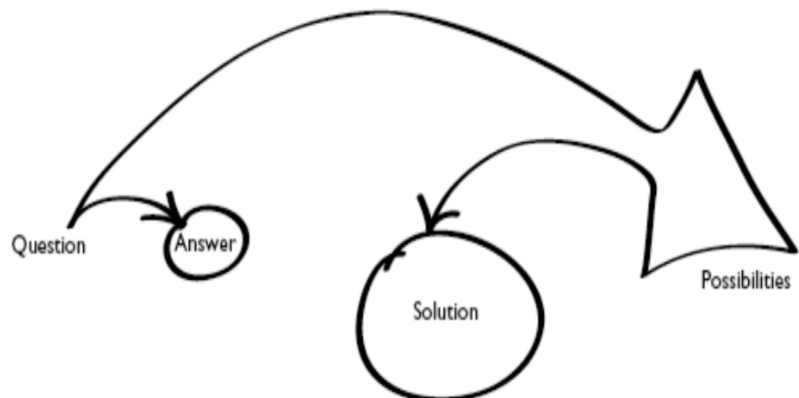


Image reference: ISKME Action Collab®

NOTE: This diagram is from the “Big Ideas Fest 2013 Action Collab Facilitator Manual” published by the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME), which is quite a mouthful. Don’t worry, while the Institute’s name is complicated, and the acronym awkward to pronounce, the manual is very clearly written, and lays out a step-by-step approach to creating an experience that incorporates key tools from the design thinking toolbox. Unfortunately I have been unable to locate this manual anywhere on-line, so you’ll have to contact them for a copy.

Using a design thinking approach, we are guided to exploring both the question and the possibilities in ways that lead to breakthroughs, some of which would be very difficult to discover through conventional root cause analysis and idea generation techniques.

Scrappy Design Thinking. With an overview of design thinking under our belts, I’d love to share my “Scrappy Guide to Design Thinking”, but I’m already at the end of the reasonable attention span of even an avid reader. How about I save that for my next column? The delay will give you time to explore some of the other helpful resources available on this important topic.

In my opinion, not many of the techniques that are part of Design Thinking are entirely new. I’ve encountered them under other buzzword banners. But, like the string that gathers together the beads on a necklace, design thinking strings together these tools in a way that makes them far more useful – and beautiful – than just a pile of beads.

To be continued in the future, a place full of possibilities! – Kimberly

Kimberly Wiefing is the author of Scrappy Project Management, published in Japanese, and the executive editor of the whole series of "[Scrappy Guides](#)." Her favorite is Scrappy Women in Business, a collection of the stories of a dozen scrappy businesswomen. She works primarily with globalizing Japanese businesses, traveling extensively in the US, Europe and Asia.

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