

03.13.09

Just What is Design Thinking?— The View from the Blogosphere

By Fred Collopy

There is considerable interest in design thinking and its application to management. A google search on “design thinking” and “management” produced 146,000 items. When “business” is substituted for management the number goes to 180,000. Many of the highest ranked of these include blog entries in which designers struggle to make sense of this phenomenon and attempt to characterize design thinking. Similar searches on google scholar produced 1,330 items and 1,050 items respectively. Some common features permeate the discussion. In what follows, I will attempt to relate their ideas to how managers are usually viewed and to identify what seems to distinguish the design thinking view.

Design thinking deals with wicked problems. Because no single objective can be identified in advance, design thinking is aimed at drawing on and synthesizing a wide range of knowledge and influences rather than at optimizing (Huang; Saffer; Owen). For the same reason, it is viewed as interpretive (Lombardi), holistic and integrative (Lombardi; Owen). Both how the problem is framed and how to evaluate possible solutions must be devised as part of the designing process.

Given the unstructured nature of the situations on which design thinking bears, it will come as no surprise to business researchers and educators that it constitutes a fertile ground for the application of heuristics. The design literature expands, though, on the sense in which business research has explored and categorized “rules of thumb” for solving problems too complex for algorithmic computation.

In addition to having a rich set of heuristic analogies, metaphors, and topologies to draw upon “design thinking is supported by a rich set of tools, processes, roles and environments” so that “Designers work like craftsmen. They know when to use the right tool at the right time (Tim Brown on Wroblewski).”

A good deal of attention is given to the fact that design thinking is “human centered”. Placing “A focus on customers/users” at the top of his list of features, one blogger wrote “It’s not about the company and how your business is structured. The customer doesn’t care about that” (Saffer). Another asserts “Being human-centered is unique to design. Designers think about people first then the business second. The opposite is true for most companies” (Wroblewski). Tim Brown, the CEO of IDEO observed that design thinking is a human centered process that comes into problems “through the

route of people” (Brown). Owen notes that unlike art and science which proceed where discovery takes them, design must be client-centered (Owen 2006).

The people-centeredness of design can be seen from the provider’s side as well as the recipient’s. Because each designer is unique, so is that which she creates. Design thinking is personal in the sense that problems will be considered differently by different designers and in different contexts (Lombardi). Frank Gehry noted that designing a building with Edwin Chan is different from designing one with Craig Webb.

Related to the personal nature of design thinking are the ideas that design thinking is inherently collaborative (Saffer) and that these collaborations are often *ad hoc*. Designers live in the world of projects. They function as members of teams often for only the duration of a project, then are off to work with others on something else. Managers have traditionally assumed permanent positions with an ongoing set of responsibilities (Martin 2005). Also related is the idea that design is emotion embracing (Saffer).

The process that supports design thinking is generally described in terms of phases, such as inspiration, ideation and implementation (Brown), or moving between ideation and prototyping (Saffer), or moving iteratively from building prototypes through posing hypotheses to testing them (Lombardi).

Descriptions sometimes make allusion to the environment-centered concerns of design. “Present-day thinking puts environmental interests at a level with human interests as primary constraints on the design process (Owen 2006).” This suggests that sustainability is an important consideration in a program aimed at developing design-thinkers.

Tim Brown, <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/357/>

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Victor Lombardi, What is design thinking?, http://noisebetweenstations.com/personal/weblogs/?page_id=1688

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Charles Owen, Design thinking: Driving innovation, <http://www.bpminstitute.org/articles/article/article/design-thinking-driving-innovation.html>

Dan Saffer, Thinking about design thinking, http://www.odannyboy.com/blog/new_archives/2005/03/thinking_about.html

Luke Wroblewski, Tim Brown: Innovation through design thinking, <http://www.lukew.com/ff/entry.asp?451>

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