March 2019

Feature Article

Recommended Citation

(2019) "Feature Article," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: , 32-33.
Available at: https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol21/iss21/26

PROVIDING REAL-WORLD SERVICES THAT ACTUALLY WORK

Design Thinking crosses the traditional boundaries between public, for-profit and non-profit sectors. By working closely with clients and consumers, Design Thinking allows high-impact solutions to bubble up from below rather than being imposed from the top.

From solving the riddle of why so many young children of poor peasant families in Vietnam suffered from malnutrition (by looking at the diet of "positive deviants", i.e. the exceptions), to the unequal distribution of anti-malarial mosquito nets in parts of Africa where it was difficult to obtain them (because a limited number were given away free, thus disincentivising shopkeepers), Design Thinking has played an important part in the provision of radical social and service solutions to apparently intractable problems.

With its focus on the facts on the ground and how they affect end-users, rather than theorising possible answers in advance, Design Thinking can get to the heart of questions that have long vexed agencies employed to deal with them. It's not so much a matter of using common-sense as employing uncommon sense.

As an approach, Design Thinking taps into capacities we all have but that are overlooked by more conventional problem-solving practices. Not only does it focus on creating products and services that are human-centred, but the process itself is also deeply human. Design Thinking relies on our ability to be intuitive, to recognise patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional meaning as well as being functional, and to express ourselves in media other than words or symbols.

Nobody wants to run an organisation on feelings, intuition and inspiration alone, but an over-reliance on the rational and the analytical can be just as risky. Design Thinking, the integrated approach at the core of the design process, provides a third way.

The Design Thinking process is best thought of as a system of overlapping spaces rather than a sequence of orderly steps: inspiration being the opportunity that motivates the search for solutions, ideation the process of generating, developing and testing ideas, and implementation the path that leads from the project stage into people's lives.

Many social enterprises already intuitively use some aspects of Design Thinking, but most stop short of embracing the approach as a way to move beyond today's conventional problem-solving. Certainly, there are impediments to adopting Design Thinking in an organisation. Perhaps the approach isn't embraced by the entire organisation. Or maybe the organisation resists taking a human-centred approach and fails to balance the perspectives of users, technology and organisations.

One of the biggest impediments to adopting Design Thinking is simply fear of failure. The notion that there is nothing wrong with experimentation or failure, as long as they happen early and act as a source of learning, can be difficult to accept. But a vibrant Design Thinking culture will encourage prototyping — quick, cheap and "dirty" — as part of the creative process and not just as a way of validating finished ideas.

As Yasmina Zaidman, Director of Knowledge and Communications at the Acumen Fund, puts it: "The businesses we invest in require constant creativity and problem-solving, so Design Thinking is a real success factor for serving the base of the economic pyramid." Design thinking can lead to hundreds of ideas and, ultimately, real-world solutions that create better outcomes for organisations and the people they serve.