How to Nurture Future Leaders

Design thinking brings creative techniques to business. The only problem? No one can agree on how to teach its methods

It's a scary time to be a new graduate. But some seem more optimistic than others.

Around the world, graduates are emerging from interdisciplinary master's programs that integrate design, technology, and business. These professionals are trained in "design thinking." Sure, it's the latest trendy term to sweep the business world, but it's a technique that designers and executives alike hope may help to provide a solution to some of the world's serious challenges.

The only problem? There's no consensus on how to teach it. And there's no agreement on where these thinkers should spring from. Should design schools create more business-focused creatives, or should business schools foster creative thinking in their MBAs? For now, both approaches to innovating education are rolling out, and both types of programs appear on the 2009 *BusinessWeek* D-school List.

Different Programs, Different Results

As departments build on their unique strengths to formulate new programs, varied results have emerged. Some programs are co-taught by professors from design, business, and other departments, such as at Stanford's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (d.school). Others, such as a partnership between three schools in Helsinki, bring together students from various universities for cross-disciplinary project work. Another approach: dual degrees in business administration and design, such as the MBA and Master's in Design program from Illinois Institute of Technology.

Despite the different approaches, the programs have a similar aim: to merge design, business, and technology. Professors urge students to value cross-disciplinary teamwork, to defy inclinations and shatter silos. The theory: Working across functions will offer fresh perspectives on perennial problems and generate more comprehensive and original results. The goal is to combine creative confidence and analytic ability, says David Kelley, founder of Stanford's d.school and design consultancy IDEO. "The best students are competent in both."

It's still early days, and the chasm between business and design yawns. Closer cooperation is necessary. Designers who exhibit business acumen can be involved at a more strategic level within a corporation. Executives who learn to apply design methods such as prototyping or brainstorming have a better shot at building a corporate culture that nurtures innovation—and the business' bottom line.

What to Expect?

According to **Roger Martin**, dean of the **Rotman School of Management** at the University of Toronto and one of the early supporters of the discipline, "Every corporation needs a design-thinking type." That includes industries that may seem like unlikely bedfellows for design, such as banks and law firms.

Visa (V) launched the Global Innovation Strategy Group in September 2008 to align corporate strategy with consumer needs. "As great as an MBA is, we were looking for something more," says Scott Sanchez, senior business leader for the group. Earlier in 2009, Sanchez hired Laura Jones, 27, a recent graduate from Stanford's d.school program.

And a number of corporations such as Procter & Gamble (PG), Samsung, and Steelcase (SCS) are beginning to integrate design thinking and its proponents across operations.

Harley-Davidson (HOG) has hired graduates from Northwestern University's joint MBA and Master's in Engineering Management program into its Leadership Development Program and gradually promoted them to all levels of management—from product development and marketing to finance and global manufacturing strategy, says Matt Levatich, president and chief operating officer.

Designer-Led Backlash

And yet, as design thinking moves to the front burner as an innovation tool of choice, questions remain about how its theories can slot into the framework of the business world. Jones is quick to detail that not all of her classmates have found jobs that call for design thinking. Not all corporations know what it is or how to apply it. "It is a work in progress," she says.

Some designers also balk at the concept, seeing it as a dilution of an industry and discipline they themselves have studied so hard and for so long. "If you teach design thinking, you're teaching talking: how to use words to describe design," says Dev Patnaik, founder and chief executive of San Mateo (Calif.)-based design and innovation consultancy Jump Associates. Patnaik says he looks to hire designers and then trains them in business skills as necessary.

Gadi Amit, founder of San Francisco-based NewDealDesign, also has reservations. "Some people think they graduate with industrial design plus capabilities," he says. Instead, he says, the graduates lack grounding. Nonetheless, Amit acknowledges things may yet evolve. "I am not precluding that maybe there will be a new type of designer, splitting the profession into all sorts of strands and directions, but we are not there yet."

At this stage, the true impact of design thinking has yet to be seen in industry, as classes are small and graduates are a mere drop in the ocean of global business. But educators, executives, and public officials around the world are investing in the

potential of the technique to provide new insight and enhance innovation in a time that desperately needs both. We may not truly appreciate the fruits of these educational experiments for some time, but if effective, these graduates might just redefine the way the world does business.

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