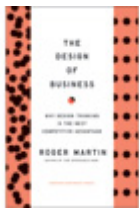


## Why Design Thinking Matters

*"Design thinking" proponent and business school dean Roger Martin argues that the discipline provides executives with competitive advantage critical for success*

By Helen Walters



Editor's Rating: ★★★★★

**The Good:** A nuanced argument in favor of bringing design thinking into any organization

**The Bad:** Sometimes dense, academic language can make reading a bit of a slog

**The Bottom Line:** Insightful analysis of a hot management trend, useful for executives of all levels

**The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking Is The Next Competitive Advantage**  
**By Roger Martin**  
**Harvard Business Press; 208pp; \$26.95**

One of the most compelling examples in Roger Martin's new book is a personal tale from his own days as a consultant. Asked by a Canadian bank to come up with a new strategy to cater to high-net-worth clients, Martin and his team came up with a bold plan they thought might revolutionize the bank's entire business. The bank's chief executive met the excited presentation with one question: Had any competitor already gone this route? "No!" Martin replied brightly. "You would be the very first!" And with that the meeting was over, the idea was killed.

The story, and others in Martin's new book, *The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking Is The Next Competitive Advantage*, illuminates more than just the risk-aversion of so many members of the C-suite. Instead, Martin is calling for a new way of thinking to permeate business that embraces the tricky reality of executing innovation and in doing so transforms it into action. He calls the technique "design thinking" and argues that it provides the necessary balance between the poles of analytical and intuitive thinking that are commonly taught and nurtured in today's professionals.

Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto since 1998, Martin has been a key figure in driving understanding of the concept of design thinking for some time now. Here he again outlines his theory that this perspective provides a new—to his mind, critically important—method of running a business in today's fiendishly complex world.

With examples from companies such as Procter & Gamble (PG) and Research in Motion (RIMM), Martin shows the power of design thinking in action. He also makes the case that it can—and should—be adopted by any department within an organization.

Indeed, the most interesting insights within the chapter on P&G are not the well-trodden stories of A.G. Lafley and Claudia Kotchka shaking things up by holding mandatory hands-on innovation workshops. Instead, it's the work of Filippo Passerini, head of P&G's global business services, that emphasizes the potential impact of the technique. By applying design thinking within the traditionally uncreative corporate engine room of the organization, Passerini brought about radical transformation that could both support and spearhead the turnaround of the company at large. Without this in place, the flashier, more talked-about product introductions would not have had the strong foundation needed to flourish in the marketplace.

## **dealing with the backlash**

Design thinking has received more than its share of attention in recent years, not least from magazines such as *BusinessWeek*. Somewhat inevitably, a backlash has bubbled up, with designers grumbling that the concept detracts from the purity of the design discipline itself, and some executives skeptical of its worth outside of design agencies or creative consultancies.

Smartly, Martin acknowledges the tension and he remains steadfastly nuanced in his own argument that balance remains the key. Sometimes Martin's language reflects his long tenure as a university professor, but bushwhacking through the academic terminology is a worthwhile exercise. An accountant can learn to embrace the concept of validity, or leap-of-faith ideas, through the

help and guidance of a more creative thinker. Likewise, structure and data can help the free-wheeling, blue-sky dreamer make a difference. Neither can exist without the other for long, and Martin's is a clarion call for all parties to lay down their defensive weapons in order to move toward a culture of openness and acceptance that nurtures a culture of sustainable innovation.

And while Martin emphasizes that design thinking is of the utmost importance within the C-suite itself, he doesn't let readers off the hook. Instead, everyone can learn to become a design thinker, and should try to understand the position of their colleagues.

As he explains, his own mistake as an excited consultant pitching a new strategy to that Canadian bank CEO was to speak in the language of validity when what the CEO really needed to hear was the language of reliability. Had Martin reassured the chief executive that while there were no direct comparisons, some well-performing European banks had employed a similar approach with some success, the CEO might have been persuaded to take the leap. The purpose of this useful book is to equip the reader with the tools needed to make sure that happens.

[Helen Walters](#) is the editor of Innovation and Design at *BusinessWeek* .