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Two books advocate `design thinking'

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Innovation may well be the engine to get us out of this mess -- nothing new about that idea. Using the left and right parts of the brain in concert? Being practical and creative? Daniel Pink and a host of other major thinkers have been tooting that horn for years. Now dubbed ``convergent and divergent thinking,'' this notion is poised to enter the mainstream -- if it's not already there.

Let's define our terms: Convergent thinking is more Western; we analyze all available data and choices and ``converge'' upon it by choosing among possible alternative solutions. It's linear.

Divergent thinking is more open-ended and multi-dimensional, ``creative'' and freewheeling. Instead of narrowing the choices (as in convergent thinking), divergent thinking multiplies them.

One synthesis of these two thought processes is now popularly known as ``design thinking.'' Here are two books that examine this approach and its importance to business.

Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation. Tim Brown. Harper Business. 288 pages.

Brown is CEO and president of IDEO, an innovation and design firm, and more of a visual person than a word guy, so his table of contents resembles a chalkboard sketch. But he's hardly inarticulate. His text explores the ways that creativity is applied to real-world situations through design thinking. It's partly intuitive (heuristic) but also applies scientific principles to achieve an elegant and efficient result that's also aesthetically pleasing.

This is not a recent phenomenon, by the way. Brown, who grew up in Great Britain, opens his book with a recollection of a railroad line he often rode as a child and how it had been designed for comfort and enjoyment -- physically and aesthetically -- as well as efficient transportation. Truly a whole-brain solution.

Illustrating many of his points with examples of projects executed by his own company (naturally), Brown makes a potent case for employing this creative collaboration in a variety of settings. It's not only a good idea, he says, but the efficiencies borne of the partnership between the practical and fanciful can also be good business. Companies like Nissan, Toyota, Whole Foods, Apple, Microsoft and lots of other large companies are on board, but I didn't see many smaller organizations cited herein. What they may lack in size, they make up for in nimbleness and are often the best source of innovative ideas and practices.

The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking is the Next Competitive Advantage. Roger L. Martin. Harvard Business School Press. 265 pages.

Martin's contribution is a bit more focused on the functional manifestations of design thinking for business, and he draws from many of the same sources as Brown -- including Brown himself. His narrative threads through the usual suspects (similar to Brown's) but also includes some interesting sidebars on challenges, processes and results, authored by colleague Jennifer Riel.

Though Martin is dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, his writing is interesting and, at times, personal, thankfully avoiding unnecessary academic memes and tropes. It's a worthwhile endeavor on its own, or a useful companion volume to Brown's effort. But ultimately, given the troubled publishing business and their presumed familiarity, one wonders why Brown and Martin didn't do a bit of convergent and divergent thinking themselves and join forces to collaborate on a single book on this fascinating and provocative subject.

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