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Design Thinking can give a business the edge over its rivals

By Harold Hambrose

Business schools need to take design seriously. Design potentially is a very valuable element in the curriculum, but in the wake of the financial crisis, amid the soul-searching by business schools about whether the MBA curriculum needs revising, design is being overlooked. By design, I mean much more than an outcome, an aesthetically pleasing useful object, such as the iPhone or the Concorde. I mean the process of innovation through the collaboration of specialists from a wide range of disciplines, manufacturers and consumers. Practised this way, good design helps to create better organisations, superior products and services, and to save money.

Design thinking - shorthand for the role of design in a business - allows an organisation to explore the future, test innovations and minimise risk cheaply. That is why it deserves a much larger place in the MBA curriculum than it gets in most institutions. As organisations grapple with scarce capital and pressure on natural resources - epitomised by the Copenhagen conference on climate change - embedding design thinking into business education can help us to do more with less. Nothing could be more central to the MBA, a degree meant to equip the managers of the future to run organisations as effectively as possible.

For decades, traditional business thinking has been to increase returns by squeezing waste and error out of production. But what happens when companies have already cut to the bone? That is where design thinking comes in. It shifts the vision of the entrepreneur or manager towards new ways of thinking. It allows organisations to find new ways of working as well as new and better products and services.

Romantic as the image may be, modern designers are not lone geniuses - if they ever were. At the heart of design thinking is a collaborative process similar to that widely espoused by business schools and companies. Creating a new MP3 player can draw on the skills of psychologists, sociologists and designers as well as electronic engineers. And just as business schools rightly insist on never losing sight of the bottom line, commercial success is an integral part of design thinking.

Despite the way design thinking echoes some principles upon which the typical MBA curriculum is based, the schools themselves all too often regard design narrowly, as the aesthetic gloss that makes a product more marketable. They have a point, in so far as designers do have particular talents and training with which, by definition, not

everyone can or should be blessed. I am not arguing that all MBA graduates ought to be designers. That would be impossible and undesirable, although it would be great if more MBAs had a greater appreciation of the value of aesthetics. I am arguing that business schools need to understand the place of design thinking in business and, therefore, in the curriculum.

I appreciate that this is not simple. An already dense curriculum faces increasing demands ranging from business ethics to climate change. But the heart of the typical MBA is change management which, despite the other demands, remains a central skill in the eyes of the majority of faculty and students. The process and the products of design are precisely about how managements and organisations adjust to competition and events, predictable and unpredictable. Learning to include designers in business - and learning to think a little bit more like them - can only be an asset for the business school curriculum.

Some schools are already working along these lines. According to its website, the d.School at Stanford University is focused entirely on design thinking. The University of Toronto's **Rotman School of Management** builds its curriculum around "integrative thinking" - another innovative approach. I hope these exceptions will soon become a new norm.

The writer is the founder of Electronic Ink, a business design consultancy. His book "Wrench in the System" was published by Wiley in September 2009.

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