

Preface

The Story Behind Our Stories

For those of you who don't read prefaces, feel free to continue on without remorse—the stories you are about to hear will be just as satisfying. But for those who like to know what is going on backstage, we thought a bit of detail about the origin of our ten stories might be of interest.

In the spring of 2010 the Design Management Institute (DMI) and researchers at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business (a team that included us) launched a multistage research program to assess the prevalence and impact of design thinking in business organizations. Sponsored by the Batten Institute, a center for the study of entrepreneurship and innovation at Darden, the study set out to develop an understanding of the extent to which the methods, techniques, and processes traditionally associated with design and designers had been adopted within established business and social sector organizations.

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Spurred by burgeoning attention to the topic in the popular business press, we set out to assess the *actual* impact that design thinking was having. We wondered: Was the increasingly prominent role for design in business just *talk*, or could we observe it in action? To what extent was design thinking just the latest fad, destined to fade away as quickly as it had arrived, or was it really driving some fundamental changes in the way managers saw and interacted with their world? But since design has been around in organizations as long as there have been products, we wondered to what extent design—and designers—had been embraced by corporations *beyond the traditional design functions*?

By gathering information about the pace and process of the adoption of design thinking in business organizations, we hoped to inform designers and practicing managers about how to improve their collaboration and elevate and accelerate the recognition of design's capability to enhance innovation within their organizations.

We began Phase I of the study by conducting a series of interviews with design and innovation executives across a variety of industries. The idea was to start with design advocates who occupied roles at the interface between designers and managers and who, we felt, would be best positioned to help us understand the relationship between the two and how it was evolving in their organizations.

A fascinating thing happened as we progressed through the Phase I interviews: Our conversations with the design executives surfaced a different set of issues than those we had anticipated (perhaps not a surprise at all to designers), which sometimes seemed to have little to do with our hypotheses and more to do with organizational politics. Rather than talking about the prevalence of design thinking per se, interviewees wanted to talk about questions such as, Who owns design? How much design thinking should managers be encouraged to do? How do you sell design to business executives? Even the definition of design thinking itself emerged as a contentious issue. We heard neither inspiring stories

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about how design thinking was in fact permeating new spaces in organizations, helping designers and managers work together in new ways, nor confirmation of the competing hypothesis, that design thinking was mostly smoke and mirrors with little output resulting from it.

As *researchers* we were perplexed by what we heard in these initial interviews and unsure of what made sense for the next stage of the study. What we were learning might make for some great business school cases about how organizational structure and politics challenge the introduction of new approaches to business, but we didn't think it would help practicing designers or managers on the front lines figure out how to work together to meet the challenges they faced more creatively and successfully. However, as *educators* we saw an opportunity to help organizations and individuals sort this all out. Our feeling was that we could do more to aid managers interested in learning about how to use design thinking by profiling success stories than by detailing political battles. We hoped that by gathering examples of the adoption of design approaches to solve problems in various kinds of organizations, we could identify the ways in which it was enhancing organizational performance beyond traditional incremental product development.

So we wrote to a wide range of DMI and Darden stakeholders to ask for their help in identifying examples in which design thinking was affecting organizational performance in ways not traditionally seen as "design." We wanted to explore the adoption of design thinking across a range of organizations and geographies through interviews with those involved in pioneering efforts to extend the influence of design beyond formal, established design groups or traditional research and development (R&D) functions. We created a website that made it easy for people to nominate organizations they knew about.

The response to our request exceeded our best hopes. The stories that people sent us were truly inspirational. The breadth and

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richness of the ways in which design thinking tools and approaches were being used to innovate around a varied and important set of problems and opportunities were impressive. So we tossed out our original plans for Phase 2 of the study, which had focused on identifying the variables that would indicate the prevalence of design thinking in organizations that we could use to survey a larger and more diverse group of people. Instead, we opted to go the best practice route—to do a deep dive into situations where design thinking *was* working, sometimes despite the politics going on around it but more often because these forward-thinking organizations were doing it right.

In the end what we discovered was so inspiring that we decided to write this book, in the hope that we could help the people we cared most about—managers and designers—see new possibilities to break through inertia and politics to use design thinking to accomplish the things we believed it was capable of, if we could only get it into the right hands.

And now maybe we're ready to go back and try that survey as Phase 3 . . .

Acknowledgments

First things first: Our profound thanks to the managers and designers who have shared their stories with us, for their generosity with their time, the candor with which they told their stories, and the insights that accompanied them. They were nothing short of remarkable. They inspired us to write this book: We felt a keen obligation to pass on to a broader audience all that they shared with us.

We also want to acknowledge the support and involvement of the Design Management Institute and, in particular, Tom Lockwood, who participated in many of our initial interviews.

The support of the Darden School, Dean Bob Bruner, and the Batten Institute has been essential to our ability to do the work that allowed us to produce this book. Our colleagues and friends at Darden have been a source of inspiration, learning, and encouragement, especially Ed Hess and Marian Moore, our partners in design crime.

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