

Design thinking has business potential

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Some South African businesses have made design thinking a cornerstone of their success, such as banks and corporates, which by using these techniques, are able to develop prototypes of their best-known products in just a few days.



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The challenge is that most managers do not have a good understanding of what design thinking is. From their perspective, the creative process looks flaky. However, the odd thing is that successful products had that creative spark at the outset but as you focus on monetisation, creative processes start to look irresponsible, immature and a waste of time and money.

Managers are necessary for managing scalability and finances, but they are terrible at managing innovation. The design thinking approach should be constantly iterative and focused on improving a product or service in response to feedback from users. It is something business schools need to be more involved in teaching.

Constant improvement

This mantra has been adopted by software developers and codified in the 'Agile' programming technique adhered to by major technology companies such as Facebook, Google and Uber.

It is inherently disruptive because it holds that anything can and should be improved. More corporates should adopt this

philosophy internally because, in the digital age, they are increasingly under threat from start-ups with lower overheads and businesses that are more risks averse.

Entrepreneurs enter the market with more creative ideas. Therefore, bigger companies feel vulnerable, afraid of competitors and want to disrupt the market themselves.

This presents a conundrum for those who, rightly, believe South Africa should be equipping more people with the skills to become entrepreneurs and start the small businesses the economy so desperately needs.

We need to train entrepreneurs to be business people and make entrepreneurs more creative and confident in what they do, and do it better in that creative chaos.

Design thinking hard to quantify

The challenge for business schools is that design thinking is hard to pin down and quantify. We teach a few bits of knowledge but the practice of thinking and looking at the vagueness that surrounds it is not taught. If that as a starting point sounds a bit too ephemeral, do not worry. You still need exceptional skills and education to make brilliant products.

Henley teaches design thinking to grow future leaders. Most people think educating people is easy, but it is one of the most challenging areas to succeed in. To design learning that is useful, has real outputs and helps people grow and learn, requires enormous imagination and is a detailed and complex process.

In its deepest sense, education is about transforming and moulding minds rather than just imparting knowledge. It is about getting minds to forge new pathways to creativity, innovation and understanding.

We think about how we can innovate and add greater value to our learning so that people who come here grow their intellectual, problem solving and analytical capabilities, feel greater confidence, and, more importantly, grow their imaginative and creative abilities. Our job is to, by any means possible, help people achieve their highest potential, even beyond what they see for themselves.

In the context of business, a good education should not just create efficiencies, but should enable the capability to grow new types of businesses and developing new sources of value.

We have design teams and an innovation centre that offer special programmes on learning how to do that. Our focus is to create design that helps people grow their minds to the point where they can create better organisations and value, use money more efficiently and effectively, and create institutions and businesses that are going to help to uplift countries and develop their people. Our main driver is to build people who build businesses that build Africa.

Role of education in developing economies

It is important to reflect on the role business schools are playing in developing countries. There is this idea that if you go and get an MBA you become part of the global elite – that an MBA from a business school somehow endows you with magical powers to run businesses at senior level, create global consortia and get involved in mega projects.

I do not share that view. It is great to learn those high-level corporate capability skills, but many of those skills come with experience and years of hard work.

Business schools should not be about creating elitist positions, but rather about giving people the skills to build their own businesses and build better organisations, especially in developing economies. Moreover, if it is about that, should business schools not be doing that for many people, rather than just a few?

Building better tomorrows

I believe these schools need to create models of learning that are accessible and affordable to more people so that business skills can be more widely shared. While there is a place for high-level programmes, if more people can gain access to quality business skills, their business ventures will be better run and have a greater chance of succeeding. By creating better organisations, we can grow the economy, create employment and offer hope to future generations.

Business schools also need to evolve to prepare the business leaders of tomorrow. Historically business has been solely focused on making profits and increasing shareholder value. In today's environment, this just does not cut it anymore. There has to be an emphasis on shared value creation and the shared value economy. We must prepare people to create businesses that are more community minded and environmentally conscious, where value is created for employees and their communities, and where employees understand the business imperative to contribute to society.

We see the transformation that happens when the companies we work with place their executives into an NGO context. These executives quickly come to realise that work has meaning beyond just making profits and needs to contribute to the growth and development of society and make a difference.

Governments in developing countries rarely have the funds to create the quality education, housing and health facilities they would like to. Our job in business must be to assist with such development through private sector solutions and by providing executive and managerial skills and skills transfer to the public sector so that public sector projects can run well and contribute to economic growth.

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