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We are not alone

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46 Perhaps you've noticed some of the design terms flying around lately: *strategic design*; *transformation design*; *concept design*; *preconceptual design*. All of these terms attempt to name new combinations of activities now being used to tackle complex, open strategic questions about the future of organisations and public institutions. As a designer, I believe that our process can solve these messy problems.

But the business world has names for these activities too: *the fuzzy front end of innovation*; *strategic innovation*; *scenario planning*; *prejects*. Which got me thinking: Are we the only ones who can do this?

I interviewed design and business companies in Europe and USA which were particularly successful at adding value to their clients' organisations through these activities. Two years into my PhD, and I'm a bit shocked really. No, we are not alone. Moreover, there are teams out there successfully tackling these problems with methods which look not unlike a design process. So how do design and business teams stack up? Here's a very quick comparison based on 5 factors which my research suggests are central to the success of these projects:

Diversity & Culture

All teams interviewed were interdisciplinary, and this enabled them to explore their projects in depth from a range of different perspectives. They also had open cultures, which allowed these different perspectives to be heard. Team

members were tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity during the process, and this allowed the teams to delay their most important decisions until later when they had greater knowledge.

Process

Each team had developed a methodical, iterative process, typically based on short loops from workshop to workshop (design teams) or meeting to meeting (business teams). This appeared to keep the teams focused and moving, despite the complexity of the situation. However, all the teams' processes were flexible and opportunistic enough to exploit new insights, problem reframing and serendipity.

Anchoring

All teams identified the process of anchoring their projects in the client organisation as critical for one simple reason: without the ownership and political backing from corporate stakeholders, the project would fail to have any impact. Every team had its own anchoring methods, and these even varied from project to project in response to the specific situation. Business and business psychology tools were being adapted by all the teams though.

Knowledge Exploration

All teams developed knowledge exploration strategies for each individual project, and reevaluated these continuously throughout the project. This enabled them to carry out the highest quality research possible within

the constraints of the project. Each side clearly had their own methods: business teams used environmental analysis, academic research and market research tools; while design teams used cultural analysis and empathic research. But there was also overlap, with all teams employing ethnographic studies and expert interviews.

Concept Generation

Every team leveraged creativity to find new patterns and insights, and to conceive concepts of future systems, typically in the form of scenarios and models. While both sides were adept at employing creativity tools such as brainstorming, the design teams utilised visualisations more systematically to communicate and test insights & ideas both inside and outside the team. Regardless of whether they were from the design or business worlds, all these teams arrived at similar approaches to successfully tackle complex, open strategic questions. One could say that they were all designing. Most of the differences appeared, not at the process level, but in the tools that they used. More striking are the differences between the approaches of these teams and design processes developed in the last century. A single-discipline industrial design process just isn't going to answer this type of question. Design is clearly evolving as problem complexity increases, and it's evolving in a much broader community than ever before. Let's not forget that our biggest inspiration might just come from outside our ranks.