Article

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Design thinking: more than a buzzword

How can something 'design' led be useful in the tech, business, and innovation spaces? Business Consultant Helen Creaney shares her thoughts and experiences with the term, the process and what it means to her.

The phrase 'design thinking' is being used ever more frequently, but why?

Design thinking was popularised by design agency IDEO in the 1990s, but as an approach to solving problems it goes back decades before that. You'll likely have heard it in relation to product and technology innovation which it became known for, but over the past 10 years it's increasingly used as an approach to solving diverse problems faced by businesses, government, education and social organisations.

Research published by the design management institute in 2014 assessed the share value of design-led businesses and showed that over a 10-year period, these firms out-performed S&P 500 by over 200%, highlighting the value of design in businesses. It's no surprise that leading companies such as IBM and Google have truly embedded design thinking into their organisation and culture.

What is design thinking?

Often the mere presence of the word design loses the interest of those who don't self-identify as designers, but while design thinking insinuates an exclusively creative approach, it is in fact scientific and methodical – showing there is space for both science and creativity in problem solving and innovation.

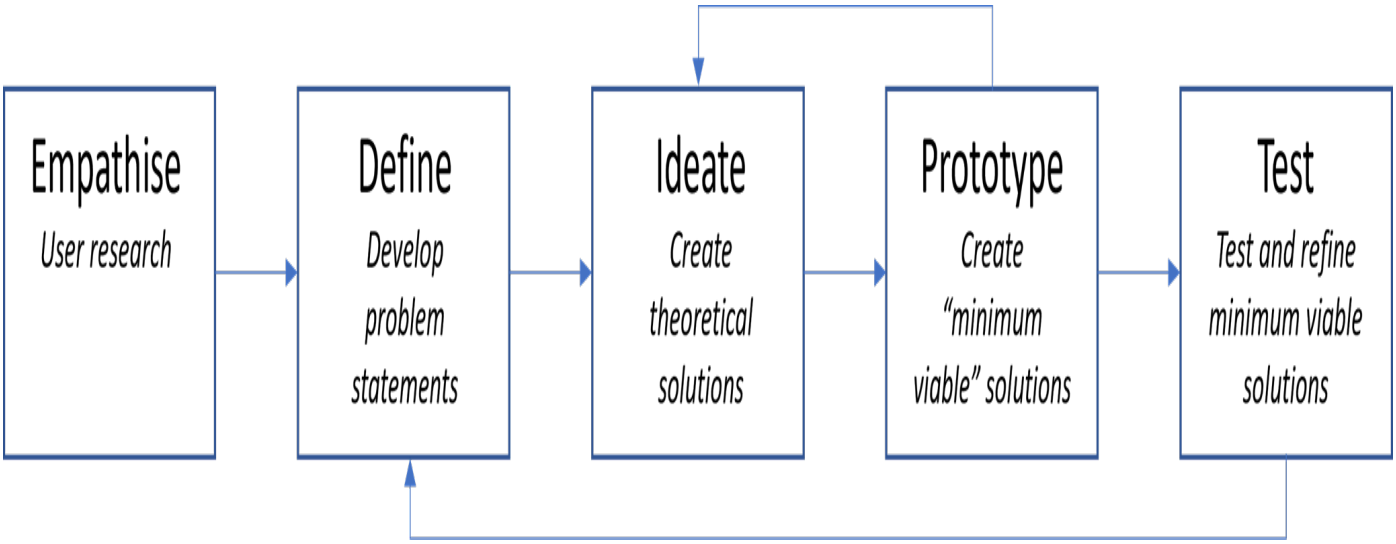
As it is a method, an approach, a way of thinking; there is no single definition of design thinking, but Tim Brown, the chairman of IDEO, described design thinking as:

"… a human-centred approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success."

This definition translates well into the business world; it is a human-centred, experiment-led method adapted to solve complex problems and innovate.

What does it look like?

The Institute of Design at Stanford University breaks design thinking into five processes: empathise, define, ideate, prototype and test. This is how the process looks.



The 'empathise' stage aims to understand actual problems and is generally achieved by user research; interviews, focus groups or workshops. These real insights are then used to define problem statements in the define stage. Potential solutions to these problems are developed through brainstorming and are then prioritised in the ideate stage, then tested through experiments, and this often requires the creation of a prototype.

The final test stage is an experiment of the prototype with the user to gain further insight so that the solution can be refined before being implemented.

This is a simple way of looking at it, but design thinking is not linear, and insights revealed during testing often lead to better-defined problem statements. Similarly, prototype creation can bring about new ideas. A lot of the value of design thinking comes from testing ideas and taking the insights back into the process.

How does design thinking differ from traditional problem-solving?

User first

Design thinking is end user-focused aiming to empathise with and understand the users before defining the problem. In doing so, it aims to fulfil a concrete un-met human need in contrast to an assumption.

Show, don't tell

The hands-on and iterative approach to design thinking means that potential solutions are tested and refined before final delivery. This leads to better alignment between outcomes and objectives and increased efficiency.

Think outside the box

Design thinking is inherently creative. It challenges assumptions based on ingrained thought patterns and past experiences, meaning solutions are innovative and responsive to real problems. The ideation stage is designed to encourage brainstorming and broad-minded thinking.

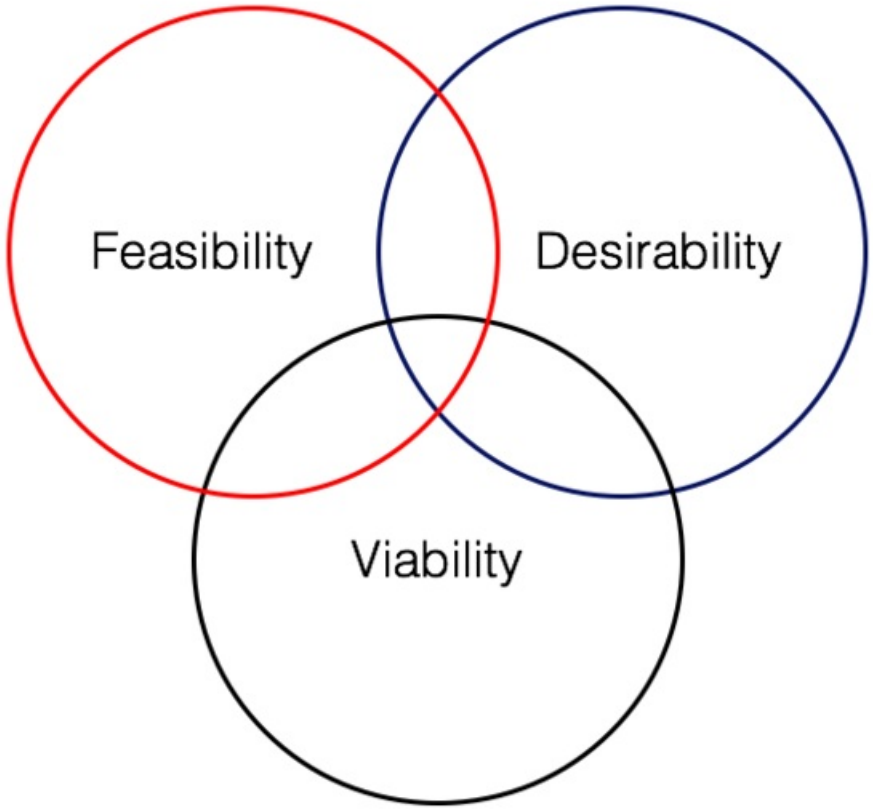
Collaboration is key

Collaboration is key to looking at a problem from multiple perspectives and is actively sought out in this process involving multiple stakeholders providing the opportunity to discover unique perspectives which may not have otherwise been gained.

When should you use design thinking?

Recognising that design thinking is a way of thinking reminds us of its capability; it does not have a start or an end, nor is it a bullet-proof process that can change the world or solve any problem on its own.

In the business world it can be combined with other methodologies, models and practices, and by incorporating some of its features, you will increase the likelihood of fulfilling the desirability component of the value centred model, which can be applied to all transformation projects.



Find out more about design thinking, author Helen or how we can support your business journey here, or drop a note to helen.creaney@waterstons.com