BRAINSTORMING IS A CRITICAL PHASE OF DESIGN THINKING

"DESIGN HAS BECOME TOO IMPORTANT TO BE LEFT TO DESIGNERS ALONE."

META DESIGN

CEO and president of design consultancy IDEO Tim Brown believes that design has a much broader calling than making products look nice, advocating organizations apply "design thinking" in order to innovate in the realm of business.
By YEO SUAN FUTT and HAFIZ RASID

Photography_ **IDEO**

TIM BROWN

Short of plucking something from a tree or digging it up from the ground, almost everything we use and consume is the product of design: by its very definition the expression of the creators' intelligence, innovation and intent. As design practice itself has matured and become more professional, we have reaped a thief's bounty of beautiful objects that surround us, from shoes to music players, clothes to buildings and bridges; everything that bears the label "man-made". Yet even this conception of design is too limiting for Tim Brown, CEO and president of IDEO, a global design consultancy which helps public and private organisations innovate and grow. For Brown, who advocates "design thinking", the principles of design have wider application beyond products and implements; they can be applied to ordering systems and relationships, the way we work and interact, to solve real-world problems.

Tell us a little about "design thinking"?
Design thinking is a set of principles that can be applied to a wide range of problems. It's really about using the sensibilities and methodologies that designers have developed to create new choices, new alternatives, and new ideas that haven't existed in the world before. It's the same skills that designers developed literally for decades, but those skills are now applied on a much broader canvas than they used to be.

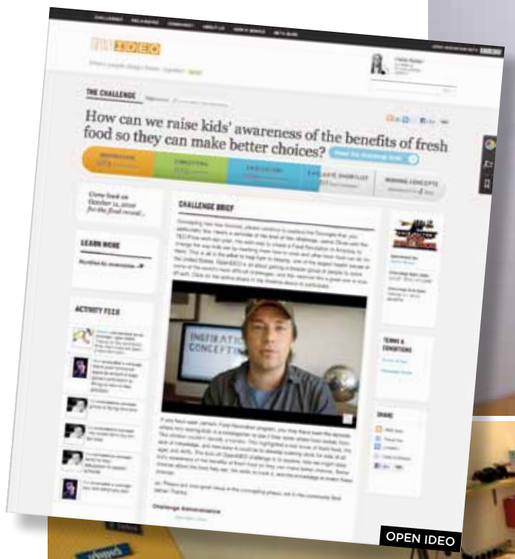
How does that apply to an organisation?
Design thinking has begun to move upstream. As the centre of economic activity in the developing world shifts from industrial manufacturing to knowledge creation and service delivery, design has become critical to surviving and thriving. It is no longer limited to the introduction of new physical products but also includes new services, businesses, processes, interactions, entertainment forms, and ways of communicating and collaborating. This natural evolution reflects the growing recognition on the part of today's business leaders that design has become too important to be left to designers alone.

How much of an impact does the government have on driving companies to embrace design thinking?
Having a government that promotes design and innovation is important in fostering a business culture that's supportive of new technology and innovation. The ability to easily get funding and set up new businesses is key to creating fertile ground for design thinking. Organisations must complement these efforts by cultivating their own cultures of experimentation and exploration.

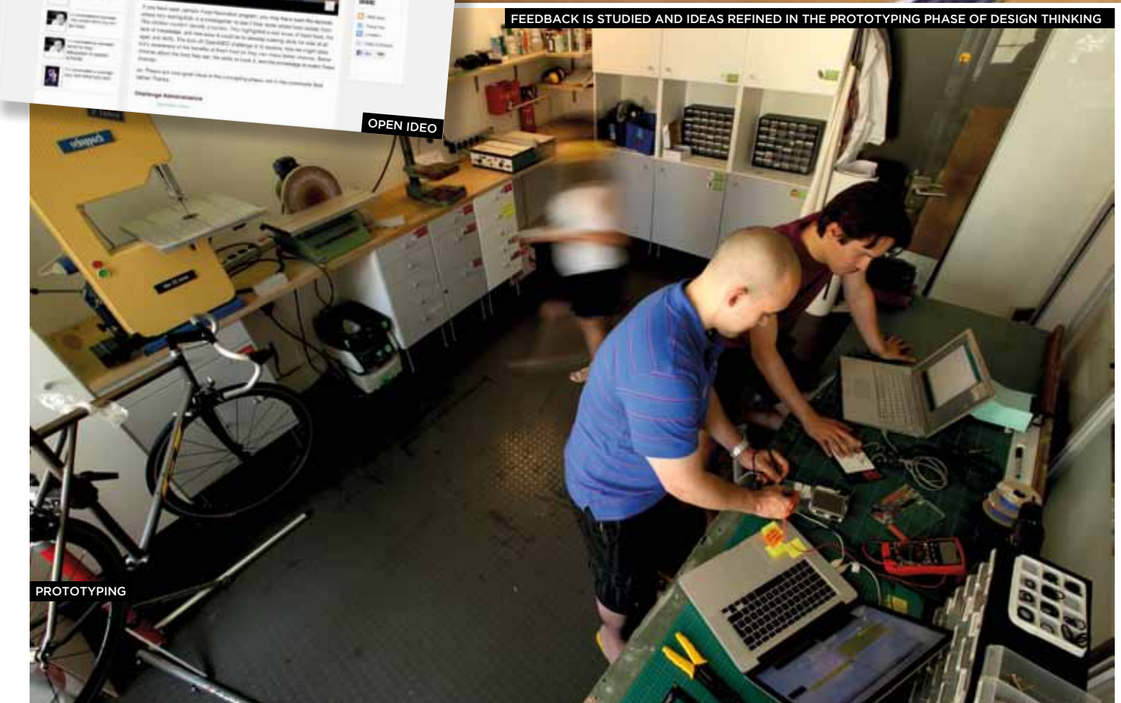
Are there any examples of a product or service that's come about using this approach?
One example is IDEO's work with Kaiser Permanente, a large healthcare organisation. They have an approach to design thinking that improves the quality of the patient experience, with teams of nurses and other healthcare professionals consistently working on projects. One particular project centred on how nurses change shift. The team realised that too much time was being spent with nurses hidden away in the nurses' station at the end of every shift during the time they exchange information about the various needs and states of patients. And by using observation, rapid prototyping and brainstorming, they came up with a new approach, whereby now they change shift in the ward, in front of patients.

"EXPERIMENTATION, EXPLORATION, AND AN ENTHUSIASM FOR NEW IDEAS ARE KEY. IT'S IMPORTANT TO MAKE IDEAS TANGIBLE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, THROUGH STORYTELLING TOOLS, SKETCHES, OR ROUGH PROTOTYPES. AND THEN YOU TEST THOSE IDEAS, AND GET RID OF THEM IF THEY DON'T WORK."

PUTTING IDEAS TOGETHER IN A SYNTHESIS SESSION



OPEN IDEO



PROTOTYPING

FEEDBACK IS STUDIED AND IDEAS REFINED IN THE PROTOTYPING PHASE OF DESIGN THINKING

"HIRING T-SHAPED PEOPLE IS MORE COMPLEX THAN HIRING PEOPLE WITH JUST ONE DEEP AREA OF EXPERTISE."

They've developed a simple software tool to help them do it, and they've brought the time in between shifts that they're away from the patients from an average of 40 minutes down to 12 minutes. And that has increased the confidence of the patients because the patients can watch and listen to the information being translated and transferred, and they can also participate and contribute in the exchange if they want.

How does a company create a culture where ideas grow organically?

You need to create a culture where respect is given to the idea, rather than the person suggesting it. Experimentation, exploration, and an enthusiasm for new ideas are key. It's important to make ideas tangible as soon as possible, through storytelling tools, sketches, or rough prototypes. And then you test those ideas, and get rid of them if they don't work.

There's a difference between putting away ideas that don't work and shutting down ideas before they have a chance to become real. If ideas are shut down, or only happen in a designated innovation time or space, you're not tapping into the innovation potential of an organisation.

How does a global company that is spread out geographically sustain a consistently innovative culture?

We have eight offices around the world and are running projects in many more places. As we've grown, we've found that we need to adapt to the local culture and practices, while also keeping true to our core values and methods that we believe have the ability to create real impact.

We have learnt that it is valuable to move people around the company so they benefit from the exposure to different countries and cultures. This helps maintain the IDEO culture as we grow around the world.

You identified T-shaped people as the backbone of IDEO's collaborative culture. What's a T-shaped person?

T-shaped people are individuals with strengths in two dimensions. On the vertical axis, every member of the team needs to possess a depth of skill that allows him or her to make tangible contributions to the outcome. They also need to be able to work well in the messy environments required to solve complex problems. Design thinkers cross the "T": They may be electrical engineers who studied theology, or sociologists with MBAs. In addition to having a depth and breadth of skills, T-shaped people have a collaborative disposition that allows them to work across disciplines with others who have complementary areas of expertise.

How do you identify a T-shaped person?

You can't always judge by résumés. Hiring T-shaped people is more complex than hiring people with just one deep area of expertise. Usually, you can tell a T-shaped person right away when meeting them. You can see it in terms of how they talk about the people they collaborate with – if someone is talking about the projects they've worked on, and they're only mentioning their contributions, that's a problem. We look for people who have diversity in experience, background, interest, and who will talk about how other people have helped them to do what they've done.

Finally, the more complex the job you're hiring for, the more contact you need to have with a person before bringing them on. We don't rush the process, and get to know potential employees before hiring.

What are some companies you have seen that understand the value of collaboration and the notion of T-shaped behaviour?

Kaiser, which was mentioned earlier, has assembled a great team of T-shaped design thinkers to be part of its innovation consulting team. Many of them come from nursing backgrounds. Other great examples include the Aravind Eye Hospital in Madurai, India and sportswear company Nike.

What were the most important leadership lessons you learned, and how did you learn them?

Perhaps the most important lesson was to realise that I could treat leadership as a design problem. When I took over leading offices at IDEO and eventually the company when I became CEO, I felt I was unqualified as a leader because I had no management training. I eventually came to realise that although I may not be skilful in reading spreadsheets or knowledgeable in accounting or finance, my design training does give me other useful leadership skills. I know how to identify needs, explore potential solutions and present those solutions in a form that others can understand. These are all tremendously useful when it comes to driving innovation or change within an organisation.