Radical Innovation May Need a Helping Hand

Javier Melcior
Department of Product Innovation Management,
Delft University of Technology
Landbergstraat 15, 2628CE Delft, The Netherlands

Boris Eisenbart
Department of Interior Architecture and Industrial Design, Swinburne University of Technology
P.O. Box 218, VIC3122 Hawthorn, Australia
beisenbart@swin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Design Thinking as one of the most popular, human-centred design approaches, is frequently presented as a solution to many of the problems that large organisations face when executing radical innovation projects. Yet, how to adequately implement it in large organisations that typically struggle with flexibly changing their innovation approaches, is not understood well enough yet. In this article, insights from a longitudinal study are presented highlighting difficulties with the application and implementation of Design Thinking by a novice multidisciplinary team in a large organisation in the FMCG industry.
1 INTRODUCTION

Design Thinking as promoted and coined by Tim Brown and others, is gaining increasing attention across different disciplines, stretching further and further beyond design – now becoming much more of a strategic approach for superior, visionary business venturing on almost all levels of participation [1, 2]. As an interdisciplinary and innovative strategy, Design Thinking is acclaimed to be “an approach to innovation that is powerful, effective, and broadly accessible, that can be integrated into all aspects of business and society” ([2], p.3). Many large organisations struggle with adopting a more innovative and entrepreneurial spirit as they are faced with growing competition from start-ups and SMEs that are more quickly able to orchestrate organisational change to increase readiness for innovation. In the light of strong, early promotion of Brown’s Design Thinking approach and showcasing several success stories in large organisations (see e.g. [1, 2]), for instance, it is unsurprising that the interest in using this approach in almost every area of business venturing has grown. To some extent Design Thinking is perceived today as almost a magical key for solving seemingly any problem, however fuzzy and wicked [3, 4]. And it is hence becoming increasingly interesting for organisations seeking to become more radically innovative [5].

In essence, Design Thinking proposes a so-called double diamond approach of divergent (or explorative) and convergent (selective or defining) thinking steps (see Figure 1). Divergent phases cover (1) the exploration of user needs and empathy building as well as (2) solution generation, respectively.
There are usually frequent jumps and iterations between phases, however, as insights generated at any stage in the process may affect prior and subsequent stages [7]. A key characteristic of Design Thinking is its clear focus on user-centricity, repeatedly (or even continuously) involving target user groups and other relevant stakeholders along the entire process (see below).

The literature discusses many barriers and enablers for successful implementation of radical innovation approaches in teams (e.g. [8-11]). Yet, successfully applying or adopting Design Thinking as a strategy for radical innovation is by no means a simple, straightforward endeavour and requires suitable facilitation over the entire process (compare [12]). This article presents insights from a six-months industry-university collaboration projects aimed at implementing Design Thinking for radical innovation in a large business unit of a multinational organisation in the so-called Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry. Notwithstanding the limitations to the generalisability of findings linked to a single case study, this article provides insights into the specific problems that can occur in implementing Design Thinking in large organisations.

2 THE CASE STUDY

2.1 Project plan and outline

In preparation of the implementation project, the authors of this article and the innovation manager in the relevant business unit had extensive contact over several months leading up to the project kick-off (compare Figure 2). The company sought to use Design Thinking specifically, (1) in order to grow beyond the more incremental innovation processes that were usually applied in the organisation and (2) to create a clear alignment with user needs and wants that would eventually lead to radically innovative and highly competitive product offerings.

It was decided for the main author to become part of the team as facilitator of the Design Thinking process, in order to support the other members and facilitate the process whenever required. All materials used in the project follow established literature and practical recommendations and use established workshop formats and materials (see e.g. [7]). As a first step, the author and the innovation manager chose a suitable radical innovation challenge and asked senior leadership to both support the innovation initiative publically within the organisation as well as to endorse the Design Thinking approach specifically as a highly valuable method to use in this endeavour.
This was aimed to increase acceptance and openness to try something new in the team. Next, the team composition was discussed specifically targeting members with diverse roles from different departments, including R&D and marketing. The project would be kicked-off through a multiday boot camp on Design Thinking including team building exercises to help the team members familiarise with the new approach and to set a common goal, build trust among the team members and ensure consensus for the next steps of the project. The format of the boot camp used to introduce Design Thinking to the team has been developed, tested and developed further in prior work and studies. In order to build common understanding and achieve close collaboration as advocated for in Design Thinking literature, everyone in the team would take part in all the phases of the project. Thereby, it was also aspired for team members to develop a strong sense of ownership of the project. All of these aspects are key enablers for radical innovation [8, 9].

A team of seven individuals was put together covering R&D (n=3), marketing (n=3) and the Design Thinking expert/researcher that also functioned as designer in the team. All company participants had 5-15 years practical experience at the time of the study. Following this initiation phase, the actual Design Thinking project itself began. In accordance with the established literature, this started with problem framing and empathy building in the first phase, which included several weeks of consumer research and analysis (interviews, surveys and workshop sessions) to identify and select consumer needs. From these, the team would move into a solution finding phase with iterative cycles of idea generation (including co-creation workshops with target user groups), prototyping and testing, again directly involving target users (see Figure 2).

2.2 Challenges Encountered

Whilst the kick-off meeting by and large was carried out very successfully, fairly shortly after, the project ran into substantial problems. Deliverables were not provided by team members or were of low quality. After a total of five weeks with alarmingly slow progress, the innovation manager and the authors decided to completely restructure the team. A small core team was built selecting highly motivated individuals from the original team. The core team was now able to operate much more flexibly and worked on the basis of requesting additional support/expertise from others whenever required. This eventually led to quick progress and resulted in very good outcomes of the project overall.
A total of four central challenges were identified that led to the initial breakdown of the project:

- **Lack of trust in the Design Thinking approach:** whilst the innovation manager involved in the project was keen on trying out Design Thinking in the company, this was not the same for other team members, who to a certain extent perceived it as something imposed on them from the outside; what made this perception even stronger is the fact that the Design Thinking facilitator – being a researcher rather than an industry practitioner – was not accepted as an expert to the extent that was expected/hoped for, which contributed to the lack of trust in the approach.

- **Lack of time and autonomy:** the team was not given the necessary autonomy to operate outside of the daily business structures; as a consequence, team members could only invest a minimum of time for this project due to pressing issues in other projects they were involved with; this was one of the main causes for the encountered slow progress.

- **Lack of suitable team management mechanisms:** a clear hierarchy between participants was missing, which brought about challenges and personal conflicts in relation to leadership, inevitably leading to tensions and limited team cohesion.

- **False assumptions:** the above mentioned challenges were not recognised as being as critical as they turned out to be in practice during the project; it was assumed that the managerial support for the project would be enough to warrant enough autonomy and time being allocated, whilst the kick-off boot camp was expected to create enough enthusiasm and trust in the team for the Design Thinking approach – as discussed, this was not the case.

### 3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Innovation projects executed within a large organisation require adequate organisational support structures, particularly relating to project governance, team management and managerial support. Making sure that team members are motivated and open to novel approaches is the next imperative challenge to be addressed. If these prerequisites are not met proactively, this can significantly affect the quality of the outcomes and the speed of the project, as experienced in the described project. In this respect, our findings are consistent with established literature on barriers for radical innovation in large organisations [8]. The collected data in the longitudinal study was extremely rich leading to diverse insights into barriers but also enablers for radical innovation through the use of Design Thinking.

Future work will focus on a more detailed analysis spawning the development of concrete measures to help tackling the found challenges and, eventually, to ensure the full potential of Design Thinking can be more effectively exploited in innovation projects.
REFERENCES


