

# ITERATIONS

Design Research & Practice Review

Issue 5 | June 2017



ISSN 2009-8243



9 772009 824000 >

**INSTITUTE  
DESIGNERS  
IRELAND**

Dr.Mr Hilary Dempsey / designCORE & Institute of Technology Carlow

# Reality of Embedding Design

In my role as an Industrial Design Lecturer, I enable Design graduates to build the requisite skills, knowledge and competencies to start them on their professional Design journey. In recent years, graduates have been returning confused and frustrated within their new creative roles. They want to function as designers, use their skills and prove their value to employers. Through discussion a key theme has emerged.

‘Design’ or ‘Design Thinking’ are now the new buzz words in commercial circles. With effective embedding of Design, success is being noticed. It is now the must-have for all companies. As a consequence, commercial sectors not traditionally adopters of Design, are beginning to employ Design graduates. Once employed, designers are often not utilised effectively for impact. This can lead to confusion and frustration for Design graduates and employers. Below are four observations of why this disconnect is a reality.

## 1. Discipline specific language

Interdisciplinary groups often encounter a language barrier. There is communication but it's not being understood. With the increase in interdisciplinary groupings this area is becoming identified as a major obstacle to meaningful engagement. The word DESIGN is a very good example. It is being used more readily in recent years but depending on who you talk to, an Engineer or a Business manager, the understanding of the word differs greatly. There is a need for a common understanding around language within an interdisciplinary group.

## 2. Utilising Design

We are all guilty of buying products or services that are packed full of accessories with high specification. The reality, however, is these extras are rarely used to their full potential due to a lack of understanding of capabilities or lack of need. Design is no different at the moment. Everyone wants it because everyone else has it. This lack of understanding of how to utilise Design to its full potential can lead to problems.

## 3. Unwilling to change

Change is good but not easy. It is human nature to stay within comfort zones and not take risks. Similarly every discipline is unique and takes pride in the effectiveness of their methodologies. It is the mentality that everyone should

be doing it a certain way and I'm not changing. When invested in an idea or business it can be difficult to change the approach that got the business this far.

## 4. Design requirements

This is built around knowledge and understanding. Companies looking to employ designers must be sure of the type of designer they need and how to attract them. Many graduate designers are being employed with the expectation that a business can now grow around them. However, Design graduates do not have the relevant experience to embed a culture of Design in an organisation. They are equipped with the skills of a designer that need to be nurtured, facilitated and developed in line with company strategy.

Non-effective use of Design can often reinforce stereotype and this status quo is not a good place for Industry, Design or Graduates. There are some simple steps that can be taken by all parties to address the confusion and frustration. Below is the advice I give my returning graduates and some points for employers worth considering.

## A Design Graduate Perspective - Why does no-one understand me?

### 1. Understand your audience

Remember you are not talking to another designer. Things you think are obvious may be alien to someone with



no background in Design. You are the one who understands Design and it is your job to repackage Design into an appropriate language (Business, Management, Engineering etc.)

## 2. Understand your skills

Design graduates often confuse design skills for design tools. Computer software packages, sketching, rendering and model making are all tools designers use to work through a process and communicate ideas. These are not skills. If you only promote yourself in this way then you will be utilised around these tools. If the company is looking for a Design technician these are ideal but many are not. A designer develops the skills of problem solving, creativity, dealing with ambiguity, project planning, project management, stakeholder engagement and applying the Design process. These are the attributes and skills you need to be communicating and highlighting their relevance to the business.

## 3. Design advocate

If you look around your company and see no advocate for Design then it is probably you. Finding yourself in this place as a Design graduate is tough but it is a reality. You have a job to sell Design, defend Design and most importantly prove Design works.



**4. Small steps / big goals**

No employer is going to give a new graduate free rein to implement new processes, procedures and wholesale changes across a company that their livelihood is dependent on. Developing a culture of Design takes time and it is built on small incremental steps and initiatives which prove impact. Your employer will need time to develop trust in you and Design. How can you help them do this?

**5. Key performance indicators (KPI)**

The commercial sector functions on planning and achieving impact focused goals. Design is no different. You have to begin thinking in this way. What impact is my activity having? How do I plan for impact? How do I measure the impact? Using the Design process, begin to look at key milestones and focus on how their impact can be measured in a business perspective.

**6. Design mentor**

As a Design student you developed strong bonds with lecturing staff who advised, nurtured and supported you through the Design process. That contact does not have to end at graduation. Many Design lecturers continue as mentors to graduates. Don't be afraid to get in touch. This mentorship could help you and your employer in relation to embedding Design.

**New Adopter of Design Perspective I have my new shiny Designer, but I can't find the instructions**

**1. Understand what you want from Design**

You have decided you want design which is a great starting point. However, before employing a designer you should work out what your business can gain from Design. Much of what we read today about successful adoption of Design involves total immersion, total engagement at all levels and a willingness to deal with ambiguity. Is this what you are willing to do? If the answer is yes then a Design graduate may not be the person to deliver it. If the answer is no then you need to clarify how you want to utilise Design.

**2. Experience takes time**

There is an expectation from industry that academic programmes produce the finished article ready to slot into their company and deliver. In the 1960s

in the UK there were Design graduate apprenticeships where companies moulded a Design graduate to their specific needs. Design is a growing discipline that is feeding a range of disparate industries and it is unrealistic to expect the finished article ready for your company.

**3. Nurture and engage**

You have made an investment in Design and it is as important to help graduates understand you as much as you understanding them. Like any new investment it takes time to embed. If they are nurtured and encouraged they will continually surprise you. As a first step maybe encourage one of their initiatives based on what they are observing in the business. It doesn't have to be big. Support them, implement a test and see what happens.

**4. Design knowledge**

Similar to mentorships for graduates it is important that companies are getting good information from experts in the Design field. This could be through publication or Design consultancies. Also remember that Design graduates have just left a fruitful source of Design knowledge, is it possible to go back for help or guidance? This knowledge can inform decisions and help find a designer that best suits the needs of the business.

**5. Engage in discussion**

Finally, I would recommend open discussion, developing communication lines and including Design. Remember, Design is a VERB not just a NOUN. It has a lot to bring to a discussion. Through open and regular discussions, common understanding is achieved and frustrations are minimised.

Design is a powerful asset for any company. Through developing understanding, fostering strong communication lines and embracing alternative thinking, businesses can lay a strong base for Design to grow. Industry and Design graduates working together can bring a positive experience and help in the embedding of Design. Finally, as a message to Design Graduates and Business managers looking to embed Design, before assigning blame in any situation focus on your actions and behaviours, how can you change?

**Suggested Further Reading:**

Cross, N. (2013) *Design Thinking : Understanding how Designers Think and Work*. London; New York: Bloomsbury.

Norman, D. (2014) 'State of Design: How Design Education Must Change', [www.jnd.org](http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/state_of_design_how.html). Available at: [http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/state\\_of\\_design\\_how.html](http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/state_of_design_how.html) [2017].

NWRA (2015) *Design-Driven Innovation: Why it Matters for SME Competitiveness*: North Western Regional Assembly and CIRCA Group Europe.

Rhinow, H. and C. Meinel (2014). *Design Thinking: Expectations from a Management Perspective*. *Design Thinking Research: Building Innovation Eco-Systems*. L. Leifer, H. Plattner and C. Meinel. Cham, Springer International Publishing: 239-252.

Ward, A. Runcie, E. Morris, L. (2009) "Embedding Innovation: Design Thinking for Small Enterprises", *Journal of Business Strategy*, Vol. 30 Issue: 2/3, pp.78-84, doi: 10.1108/02756660910942490

**“A designer develops the skills of problem solving, creativity, dealing with ambiguity, project planning, project management, stakeholder engagement and applying the Design process. These are the attributes and skills you need to be communicating and highlighting their relevance to the business”**