

Learning from the Best: Unpacking the Journey of Organizational Design Thinking Leaders

Christi DININGZUBER^a, Louise MOODY^b

^a Coventry University and Kaiser Permanente; ^b Coventry University

Organizationally empowered people who can successfully create teams of design thinkers to tackle long-term challenges, is a coveted situation in the design field. While research has primarily focused on the organizational level, little has focused on the individuals who have achieved this goal. Inspired by a personal journey as an internal practitioner, this study reveals experiences of individuals who have successfully set up design thinking practices within large organizations.

Personal narratives were gathered using semi-structured interviews and personal journey maps. Multiple design thinking leaders from nine organizations ranging from healthcare to government to financial services reflect holistically on their own life story as well as their organizational experiences to leverage Design Thinking as an approach to innovation and creativity.

These narratives were analyzed to surface seven common conditions and behaviors. These findings are discussed in more detail along with the fledging theory of how these behaviors and surrounding supporting context form a "microclimate" within a larger organization, concluding that these approaches help enable the counter-culture design thinking approaches to occur. The study offers a set of learnings to inform and potentially elevate the practice of others seeking to understand and replicate their success.

Keywords: *design competency; organizational change; design thinking; internal practitioner; design leadership*

Corresponding author: Christi Zuber zubercc@uni.coventry.ac.uk

Introduction

Design Thinking in management literature is approached as a concept in which all firms can learn from the way designers think and work, including their focus on a user-centered approach to innovation (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009). Large organizations have developed an interest in this area and a number of organizations such as SAP, Intuit, Kaiser Permanente and Procter & Gamble have implemented their own practice (Carlgrin, *et al.* 2014; Carlgrin, 2013; Holloway, 2009; Martin 2011). There are few empirical studies that have explored the views of individuals who often catalyze these efforts within the organization to better understand how they successfully build and sustain a design capability within the existing organizational culture.

This study aims to expand the scope of research about internal design thinking practices by focusing on the individuals who have championed such efforts. Cross industry experiences have been sought from experts within large organizations. The specific objectives are twofold: (1) gather descriptive reflections from known industry experts who have created design thinking practices within large organizations; (2) develop insights from the personal and organizational perspectives of experts in the field.

Method

The study was submitted to and approved by Kaiser Permanente Institutional Review Board and Coventry University Ethics Committee.

Study Design

This research captures narratives from 15 internal design thinking practitioners who have led, and often started, the design practices within their own organizations. A unique aspect of this research is that it is conducted with individuals who have a long track record of success as deemed by their peers and by the organizational support and longevity in their roles. They are not consultants but are employed by their respective organization. The research also does not focus on one industry, but instead crosses a range of industries to identify common themes in what these individuals have done to lead successful practices over the years.

Expert interviews with individuals who worked within large organizations were conducted over 9 months. In order to gather a rich narrative with some flexibility face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted whenever possible, and included a journey map with an emotional scale to provide additional context. Journey maps are tools which help the interviewer better understand the story being told and to go beyond shallow insights (Bucolo & Matthews 2011). They were used here to gain a deep understanding of their personal experience in design and innovation as a practitioner in these environments.

Two participants piloted the interview questions. Table 1 below details the finalized interview questions and introduces the journey map as an additional tool for data gathering.

Table 1: The interview questions used in the expert interviews

1. How does innovation and design play a part in your current role?
2. How do you define innovation?
3. How do you define design?
4. This is where I'd like to spend most of my time with you. Would you start at the beginning, as early as you'd like. Tell me more about you (shared visual of journey map). Call out experiences that may relate to innovation and creativity. We will capture your changing emotions over time with the most positive experiences captured toward the top of the paper and the more negative ones going further toward the bottom.
5. When you look at that journey that the high points along the way, what do you think? What do you reflect on?
6. What has led you to put this much time into this particular work?
7. Can you also tell me about some specific positive experiences that stand out for you?
8. Were there times you wanted to quit doing this type of work? Could you tell me about it?
9. What do you love about this work?
10. When you think about the people who try to do this type of work in your organization, do you see any differences in the people who grow into it and it seems "to work" for them vs. those who don't "get it" or just stop doing it all together? Could you tell me about the differences or possible causes that you've noticed?
11. If you were to give advice to people in other organizations who want to learn and apply these types of methods, what advice would you give them?
12. What has your organization's experiences been like over time? What has kept your organization on this path up to this point? Any moments or experiences stand out to you that could impact the experiences of the individuals learning and applying these methods?
13. In your interactions with other industries, have you noticed any differences in the receptivity to innovation, how about to human-centered design?
14. Since I am trying to learn how to create approaches and conditions that help people use human-centered design as a way to enhance their own innovation ability, are there other things that I should know or think about that we haven't discussed?

Recruitment and participants

Experts (see Table 2) were targeted to provide an in-depth personal experience of design and innovation as a practitioner in large organizations. A cross-referencing of firms was performed before confirming the expert interview candidates to contact in order to minimize bias. The confirmation approach focused on individuals asked to speak as "experts" on the topic at design conferences including the Design Management Institute conferences, UX Week by Adaptive Path and Design Thinking by Marcus Evans. Additionally,

two informal networks were identified that further supported the participants. Criteria for inclusion in the study were:

- Viewed as a leader in this area as evidenced by recognition from peers and acknowledgement in press and/or research
- Employed by large organizations (over 8,000 employees)
- Had attempted use of methods in the same organization for over 5 years
- Demonstrated attempts to teach skills to internal employees, as opposed to relying solely on external consultant support for methods.

Attention was given to include a diversity of sectors. Firms were limited to those that had operational units and available contacts in the United States to allow for in-person interviewing when possible and are detailed below in Table 2. By the end of the study, 19 interview requests were sent and 15 interviews were undertaken with participants from 9 organizations.

Table 2: Organizations and participants included in the study

Organizational information		Participant information			
Company Size and sector	Year DT application began	Role	Age	Gender	Year experienced in DT
Nordstrom					
67,000 Retail	2006	Director	35-44	M	6
Kaiser Permanente					
190,000 Healthcare	2003	Specialist	35-44	M	6
		Director	35-44	M	12
		Manager	25-34	F	3
Proctor and Gamble					
121,000 Consumer Products	2004	Director (r) 2015	45-54	M	14
		Director (r) 2013	55-64	F	13
US Department of Labor					
18,000 Government	2010	Director	55-64	F	2
Intuit					
8,200 Software	2006	Director	35-44	F	10
		Director	35-44	F	8
		"Catalyst"	25-34	M	10
Fidelity					

Learning from the Best: Unpacking the Journey of Organizational Design Thinking Leaders

41,000 Financial	2009	Director Director	35-44 35-44	F M	4 18
National Health Service					
1.6 million Healthcare	2005	Executive	45-54	F	11
US Department of Health and Human Services					
79,540 Government	2011	Executive	55-64	M	2
The Gap					
137,000 Retail	2009	Executive	45-54	M	15

Procedure

Eight interviews were undertaken face to face. Five were undertaken by video and one in writing. Informed consent was gained from the participants. The in-person interviews were conducted face to face in an office setting with the use of a table, a large wall to display the interviewee's journey timeline and supplies included post-its, markers, 2 recording devices and a printout of the interview questions. To begin, the printout of the interview questions was solely held by the interviewer but after piloting the approach an adjustment was made to provide the interview questions to the participants both in advance via email and additionally at the time of the interview for those in person.

Large format sheets were placed on the wall in the interview room in advance when possible. The participants were then shown the interview questions. At question 4 (see table 1 for specifics), they were provided a description of the journey map as well as the emotional high and low points that were to be captured along with the changes over time. They were then asked to draw on the paper to visually represent their journey. Once completed, the participants were asked to explain what they had captured. An example is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Example journey map generated through the interviews

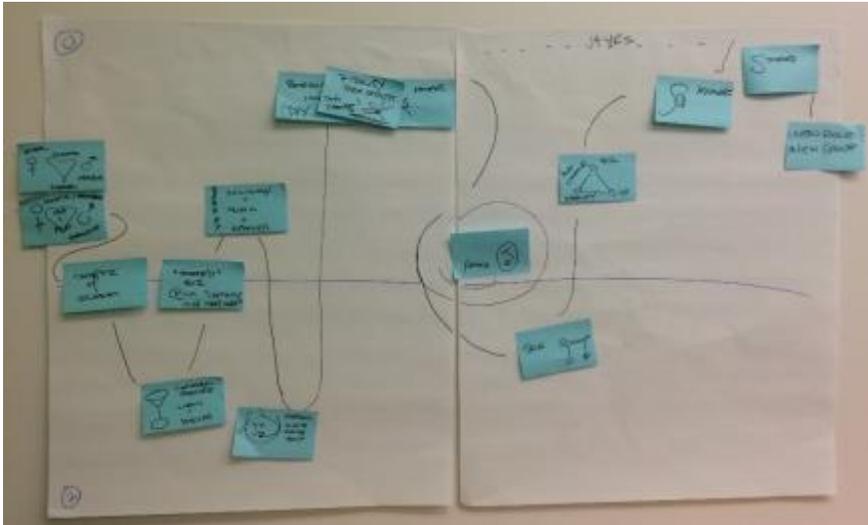


Figure 2: Close-up of two topics “mentor” and “advocate” from journey map activity



The conversation was allowed to deviate from the interview guide if questioning led to a new but related path of discussion. After the journey map had been fully discussed, the participant was invited to sit back down and complete the interview. Attention was paid at the end of the interview to ask any questions that had not been covered in the discussion.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 120 pages of typed single spaced interview data.

Analysis

The thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Particular attention was paid to potential themes that occurred across multiple interviewees and across multiple industries, topics that were mentioned by the interviewees multiple times in the course of the same interview, as well as comments that were made in a tone or with emotion that was markedly different from the majority of the interview.

To begin the thematic analysis, the contradictions were identified within each expert's coded transcript and then compared across interviews. Contradictions in people's stories can yield interesting insights into how people think (Beckman & Barry 2009). Additionally, individuals can experience flaws in their cognitive processing, called a "cognitive bias." In a certain type of cognitive bias called a "say/do gap," there is an inability of the person discussing the information to accurately describe his or her own preferences. Journey mapping is one potential tool to aid in revealing the bias found in the "say/do gap" (Liedtka, 2014). The contradictions that were revealed were captured in two columns, one stating what the experts say in relation to design thinking practices in general. The other column captures what they "do" in their own practice as stated in the interviews or captured via the journey map (Table 3). In a second pass of the data, changes or shifts to thinking or approaches were captured (Table 4). Changes, or shifts, help to provide an appreciative understanding about 'what was', to 'what is' or 'what could be' (Cantore and Cooperrider, 2013). When reviewed together this approach helped interpret the narratives and to go beyond stated norms into a deeper understanding of behaviors, environments and context. Finally, when these findings were reviewed back in the context of the larger narrative, seven key insights surfaced which will be discussed.

Results

The narratives collected through the interviews and Journey Map activities presented a rich set of data from which to code into themes and insights. These narratives were categorized into two tables. Table 3 captures the contradictions, or shifts, between experts perspectives and practice that were captured in the expert interview discussions and activity. Table 4 captures the changes that have occurred in the practice of DT in large organizations over time from the perspective of the experts.

Changes and Contradictions

Table 3 provides examples of contradictions between what the participants provided of what they say versus what they described that they do. Only recurring themes are displayed below. The themes were transferred into representative statements and listed in the various columns. By identifying the gaps in a say/do approach, the difference in the way the experts discuss the practice need of others in their organization, and how they approach and think about their own practice is notable.

Table 3: Contradictions and Shifts in Design Thinking practices of Experts

CONTRADICTIONS AND SHIFTS IN PRACTICE	
Say	Do
Our employees need a supportive environment, both physical and psychological, to enable them in this work. Otherwise how are they going to do it?	In the beginning experts pushed through barriers in the organization to show what could be possible with a design thinking approach to work
The value of design thinking is that it gives people a process to follow. That is its most important attribute	DT practices get meshed together with lean, six-sigma, change management and others
We feel strongly that that everyone can do this work, they just need the training and the conditions to make it happen	Experts stories revealed abilities and interest in design and innovation in childhood or earlier in their career
Prototyping is the hardest thing for people to do... they are terrified of it	Experts often "build to think-" they have artefacts around their workspaces and frequently bring or create prototypes in meetings
We run many training programs and workshops to reach as many people as we can in our organization	Experts try new practices with users and each other, often holding exchanges with other companies to show how they approach the work. They attended very few formal training workshops
Organizations are data driven and want to know about the dollar value and impact of design	The experts demonstrate deep skills at telling stories and creating immersive experiences for stakeholders to "feel" the value and the needs of the users
It's important for the learners in our organization to find their "tribe" within the company so they don't feel alone in the organization	Experts have a tight partner or two within their organization; a well-connected network inside of their organization and a thriving externally facing group of design thinking experts

The descriptions of the design thinking practice needs of others in their organization were identified in a straightforward manner in the coded transcripts and typically came as a direct answer to a question. The information about their own practice was more often pieced together through discussions throughout the interview, often discussions triggered by the journey map.

As a whole, the experts described the struggles that people within their organization face in practicing design thinking and creating the right conditions to allow it to thrive. On the other hand, in discussions that elaborated on their own practice, they told stories of what they had done to counter some of the challenges and what they had found to be energizing and useful over time such as storytelling, partnership, networking and active creation of ideas. This data helped to address the initial research aims of gathering reflections and enablers from internal design thinking experts.

Table 4: Changes in Practice with Time and Experience

CHANGES	
Where the practices began	Where the practice approaches are going
Design Thinking as a process to follow	Creative confidence as a personal mind-set and trait
White space- no assumptions or starting point for ideas, a “blank page” to begin idea generation	Scaffolding- building up 20% of an idea, sometimes through a scenario or prototype, to jump-start people’s ability to create and collaborate
Bring in the talent and expertise through consulting groups who come in, provide focused help, and then leave the organization	Develop internal teams who know the organizational culture and the key leaders, and who actively support each other throughout the journey
Teach the individuals who are interested because individual passion is the most important factor	Teach people in intact teams (i.e. they work together) who can try new approaches together and support each other through organizational challenges
Focus on skills and techniques	Focus on mind-sets and navigating change
Application of methods to products and services	Application of methods to support broader change and shift organizational climates
Skills and passion flourished by building own skills in design or building design skills in others	“Success” in the organization led to responsibilities outside of core design area into broader strategy and change management

The shifts in practice (Table 4) highlight how experts have changed over time based on their years of experience. When comparing the 2 columns one can note that the primary shifts have been away from viewing design thinking as a simple skill set to teach and acquire; to more of a mind-set and, when mixed with a combination of methods, it is applied to broader organizational changes and strategic issues. The approach to building capabilities in design thinking has been enhanced by identifying a few approaches that better support the early stage learner. These approaches include working with others in one's work function and enhancing ideas that have already have a foundation from which to build.

Insights

The analysis led to some broad themes and insights. Due to the focus on Appreciative Inquiry, particular attention was given to data groupings that called out behaviours or conditions that enabled the experts to develop and grow a practice within a large organization. Comments that were repeated or reinforced as well as those which were shared with more emotion were given a greater weight. Through this process, seven insights were generated and paired with illustrative comments (aonymized and labelled with pseudonym initials) to provide additional context for the research.

Insight 1: Demonstrate a deep passion and interest for people

"People-people" was a word that the experts often used when they explained how others described them and how they described people that they believed had more of an aptitude for using design thinking methods within large organizations. They did not call out personality traits such as extroversion or introversion, but rather a mindset of being empathetic and curious about others around you.

Interviewee SP: The ones that I think were the best, I think if there were sort of personality traits they tended to be very optimistic people. They were already kind of people-people. Not too methodological.

Interviewee SI: I can tell right away if people are going to have a chance to become good at this or not. Those that really get into their users, I mean not just gather data about them but really want to know about their real needs. Those people get it.

The experts themselves talked about their passion for learning about their users, but additionally they talked about others in their organization. They discussed their deep connections to diverse roles across their organization to "help get things done." Many of them also had responsibilities to help other organizational employees learn and practice Design Thinking. They shared the excitement they had when other people they were coaching began to "get it."

Interviewee MK: For people who are really looking for it and are starting to get it, you can see their transformation. It's great. It's like watching people

Learning from the Best: Unpacking the Journey of Organizational Design Thinking Leaders blossom. It's amazing, seeing them step into this confident place. It's like...seriously amazing.

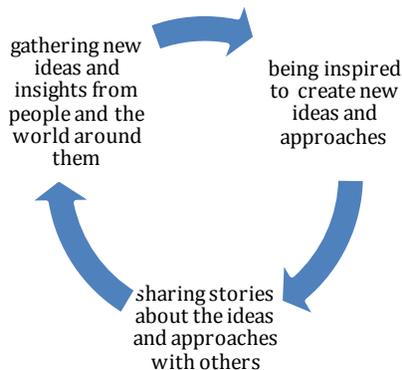
Insight 2: Freely share stories verbally and physically

The experts had many stories of users and what they needed in the context of their lives. They spoke of having an “unquenchable thirst” for gathering stories and insights about their users to deeply understand their lives and their needs. They shared many examples of how they used these stories with people in all levels of their organizations. They included images of the people in their stories in corporate presentations, some had posters or photos on the walls of their workplaces, and others had artifacts that reminded them about experiences they had gathered while “in the field” learning more about their users.

They also used storytelling as a way to pass along the purpose and history of what they believed to be a unique way of working within their organization. They shared with other employees in the organization to help them experience a different way of working and behaving that differed from the norms of the rest of the organization.

Figure 3 shows the cycle that further elevates experts as a sought out resource among their peers, whereby continuing to reinforce a growing body of knowledge. The stories and learnings were not just shared with people inside of their organization, they were often shared more broadly through social media or through personal interactions they had with their broader network.

Figure 3: Experts as a resource



Interviewee HN: ... I connect things. I was born for social media... I read 100 things a day. I connect things I find with my lived experience and I share it out. People are constantly sending me new articles and links and ideas. It grows and grows. (Note: at time of interview “Hannah” had nearly 40,000 followers on twitter)

Design thinking sees storytelling as valuable because it is able to connect the organization to the user in a meaningful way. The experts demonstrated this same value and understanding of the potential impact of storytelling to the organization. Additionally, they expanded the purpose of storytelling beyond sharing the needs of the user and into using story as a tool to potentially influence and shift the working norms of those they interacted with inside of their organization.

Insight 3: Practice an improvisational approach

The experts discussed a growing competence in improvisation. Their version of improvisation was to have the skills to read the situation at hand, in this case in a work context, and adjust in the moment. They spoke about "improv-ing" not just the design methods, but also being able to improvise approaches to new organizational situations and conditions such as new leadership, new goals, new efforts and new teammates. They say this flexibility is critical to staying connected to the priorities of the organization and to the people who both worked in it and led it.

Interviewee SP: That's what really made her (a specific design thinking expert) stand out from all of the others; she focused on improv, being able to go with the flow, and teaching others to be able to bring what's needed in a particular moment. It's not a set approach.

(Good designers) recognize (changes in energy or mood of those in their meetings) and know what to do about it, how to adjust, and how to bring the group back in a meaningful way.

In regards to the design thinking methods and their use to address challenges within their organizations, the experts expanded upon their discussion of improvisation to conjecture that it was also used as a demonstration of mastery of the methods. They expanded upon this to state that mastery is achieved when an "improv" of approaches blurs the lines between DT and other methods. Design Thinking, they stated, provided a great method and set of tools to follow for those who were early in their learning stages. The experts shared that after much repetition and practice they themselves began to evolve their DT practice by adding in approaches from other methodologies like change management, strategic management or lean.

Interviewee MK: It's like dancing...in the beginning you are doing the dance steps that you were taught; you are focusing on the steps and on what you learned. At some point something clicks and then you are able to improvise, you are able to actually listen to the music and respond. That's your moment of actual dancing.

Design thinking experts are frequently working to determine the fit between the methods of design thinking and the organizational culture. They continue that

improvisational approach in the way they apply and create new methods for problem solving, and in their mindset as they adjust to changes within their organization.

Insight 4: Build “scaffolding” both to make ideas more real and to help others contribute

The experts felt that prototyping and experimentation were some of the most intimidating and fearful Design Thinking methods to others in their organization. Moving into the stage of making ideas more tangible and descriptive required both the willingness to trust that others will not harshly judge the ideas represented. Secondly, creating physical representations or images benefited from some skill to make ideas into a form that others could contribute and collaborate around.

Interviewee SI: I think ... the biggest disappointment that I continue to see is that even with all this, people are still afraid to prototype. They're still afraid to put an idea out there. They still want it to be right every damn time. And it's so infuriating... After all this—after throwing millions of dollars into Post-its that you just rip off the wall and throw in the trashcan. You're not willing (to prototype an idea)? ...That's infuriating to me.

Many of the experts also lacked confidence in this phase of the process earlier in their career. They discussed the awkwardness they experienced in trying to follow the Design Thinking methods but that eventually they learned how to create and prototype in ways that pushed ideas further and enabled others to collaborate with them.

Interviewee BN: I think art of it to me is that it goes back to the idea of design thinking is really like scaffolding for creativity. Because inherently it was designed for people who have lost that creative confidence.

The concept that the professors coined after the project was 'endowed progress,' this idea that if you set people 20% of the way towards completing a path, they're almost double the chances that they'll see it through to completion. I sort of took that and we rephrased it as 20% creativity.

Insight 5: Approach building design thinking capabilities as a change in behaviour, not strictly a development of skills

Design Thinking has been viewed by many of the representative organizations in this study as an organizational capacity or individual skill to acquire. The experts shared that the people in their organization initially felt that they could attend a workshop and be “ready to go,” but that in reality it required application and repetition, as it was more of a behavior change than it was learning a skillset.

Interviewee SI: Plan on it taking a long time. I mean you're changing people—the way that they work. I mean they've invested decades of learning how to

Christi DINING ZUBER, Louise MOODY

work up until this point and you're asking them to change. And it's not obvious. I think we say six to ten experiences. Repetition. And fun.

In some instances, coaches were provided to organizational learners to help to guide their learning experiences. The working environments of the experts, as mentioned earlier, have physical artifacts that reminded people of the purpose behind the design projects. White boards, prototyping supplies and workspaces that allowed for groups to work openly was described as a way of supporting the “design thinking” way of working. If those interviewed had control over the projects that were assigned to novices in their organization, they took efforts to ensure that they had lower risk projects so they had a better chance to feel a successful outcome and learn how to practice design in a real organizational context without as many of the organizational pressures.

Insight 6: Create a playful and trusting workplace

Trust and play were viewed and synergistic values in that one enabled and supported the other. The majority of experts that were interviewed mentioned their pride in creating environments where people could take “risks” and that the people who worked together with them felt supported and empowered at work. They talked about being able not only to share mistakes that they had made, but also the openness to critique each other’s work. A balance of serious work critique and playful humor seemed to balance out the work team’s dynamic cultural environment. One mention of the value keeping the team’s connection intact while “performing” for others was captured in this interview:

Interviewee SP: They made silly hats together and laughed. She gave the team a collective identity...so they could perform for others when they didn't know what was about to hit them. She looked at 'How do I actually perform in the moment with my teammates in a supportive kind of way?' Her ability to do this made her team stand out from the others. They were slower to get going with ideas because they spent time upfront in connecting, but once they connected together their ideas went further faster, and people noticed.

Insight 7: Don't go it alone, have a partner and an advocate

Just as the themes revealed that the experts’ practices had shifted from focusing on individuals who had passion and interest to people in “in-tact teams” (see Table 4) the experts themselves also shared the importance of having a partner. Sometimes referred to “partner-in-crime,” my “go-to,” “my sanity” or “my most trusted colleague,” it was emphasized that the partnership and support provided by a few others in the organization was critical to creating a flourishing design thinking practice in a large organization. The partnerships took two venues; one that was more of a peer day-to-day partner, and one that was an organizational leader who helped to provide them some form of “protection” or “advocacy” within the organization when necessary.

Learning from the Best: Unpacking the Journey of Organizational Design Thinking Leaders

Interviewee JF: She talks me off the ledge sometimes. She has a much calmer demeanor than I do and knows how to navigate in this organization. After a hard day we'll just go grab a drink sometimes and blow off steam. It really helps to me keep going in a place like this.

Interviewee HN: I miss working with her. We were very close and we created a number of new approaches together for (their organization). We radically changed things around here. We worked together very well and I think others could see that.

Further iterating the importance of trust and playfulness, the experts deepened their support network with one or two other peers inside their organization. Additionally, they were provided with flexibility or protection to try out the methods within their work responsibilities. The experts viewed these relationships as a key to keeping their excitement and energy in their sometimes-challenging Design Thinking endeavor.

Discussion

This study has collected together the experiences and views of a range of industry professionals that are experienced in design thinking and embedding the practices within their organization. Outcomes of this study identified common patterns of contradictions to more clearly reveal what occurs in the often illusive internal Design Thinking practice within organizations. The outcomes also clarify shifts in practice identified among a cross-section of organizational experts. These shifts could create a clearer path for others looking to develop their internal practice and who would like to better position it in a future trajectory more consistent with the thinking of experts in the field. And finally, further analysis created a set of seven insights that clarified and contextualized the behaviors they exhibited when reflecting on the enablers of their internal Design Thinking practice.

The insights identified from the expert interviews included:

- Demonstrate a deep passion and interest for people
- Freely share stories verbally and physically
- Practice an improvisational approach
- Build “scaffolding” both to make ideas more real and to help others contribute
- Approach building design thinking capabilities as a change in behavior
- Create a playful and trusting workplace
- Don't go it alone, have a partner and an advocate

The experts reflected on their experiences bringing in Design Thinking and practices that ran counter to the more prevalent culture of their own organizations. It has been noted that frustration occurs on the behalf of employees when their individual competence or leadership abilities, in this case Design Thinking, differ from the primary competencies and capabilities of the organization capacity (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2004). A response to this frustration is to either remove oneself from the situation or to respond with a counter-

a approach (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2004). Each expert in this study experienced resistance from within the broader organization when they began to practice Design Thinking, and yet, they were able to persevere and even adapt the way in which they created their practice through the friction.

Organizational Design Thinking experts found a novel way to create a sustainable internal Design Thinking practice, coined a “microclimate” in this research. A microclimate in meteorology terms is a climatic condition within a relatively small area which is distinct from the predominant climate (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica). This climactic condition supports the development of unique and different flora and fauna from that surrounding it. In this context, the authors extend this image of distinction and apply it to a large organization. They use the term “microclimate” to convey an outline model of the expert’s insights and the unique attributes the experts believed existed to enable the Design Thinking practitioner to display despite the differing organizational culture (see Figure 4).

Each individual microclimate has an expert at the center as the catalyst and an advocate surrounding the entity who provides a level of organizational protection to support the effort. It grows with the inclusion of a partner followed by additional people that are exposed to Design Thinking and select to become part practicing norms. It is the demonstration of the insights, both the experts individual practice behaviors as well as the physical and psychological environmental conditions they created, that give the microclimates their own unique practicing norms (Ostroff and Tomkins, 2013).

Figure 4: Outline model of insights working together to form unique organizational Design Thinking microclimate



The study captured a number of individual behaviors that the Design Thinking experts shared during the interviews. In addition to their stated passion for people they worked with and for, they used their understanding of people to connect with them through stories shared both verbally and physically. They leveraged this ability to connect with people

a cross all levels of the organization. The experts interviewed learned to adapt and adjust, or “improv” their way into finding approaches that worked within their respective organizations (Weberg and Weberg, 2013; Nixon, 2012). The experts interviewed stated that they were not capable of rapidly changing the entire culture of their organization and instead focused on creating novel approaches to support and internal Design Thinking practice.

Research also supports the point of view that creating a physical element, or prototype, is one of the most effective ways of demonstrating the value of a design approach and to create a more compelling and memorable story (Schrage, 1999; Liedtka, 2015; Amabile, 2011). Prototyping is touted in the business community as a key element for fostering innovation (Schrage, 1999), and experts in this study believed that avoiding a blank page through scaffolding of ideas may be one way to get people to begin and make progress. Advocates of Design Thinking have argued for many years that people within organizations need to think like designers (Brown, 2008) and place emphasis on the mental processes of designers (Martin, 2009). Additional research expanded this notion and places a high value on “design practicing” and the need for more material practices that result in visual representations and creation of artifacts (Stiglaini and Ravasi, 2012; Coughlan, et.al., 2007). The experts in this study showed their understanding of the value of prototyping and the creation of artifacts. They not only used prototypes when they were solving design challenges, but also as an approach to communicate to others the value they saw in Design Thinking as a practice.

The psychological environments that the experts created with others they worked with was a significant area of discussion and it was uniquely described as playful. A prerequisite of play, trust sets a foundation with which groups can adjust to mistakes (Covey, et.al 2012), and share with each other without fear of retribution (Tucker and Edmondson, 2003). In large organizations, such as those represented in this study, it is important to have organizational boundaries to help people know what they are to do and with whom (Dougherty and Taacs, 2004). Dougherty and Taacs’ study showed that a boundary of team play enabled what they called heedful interrelating. Heedful interrelating consists of individuals connecting together in a meaningful way, which allowed for an easier formation of multiple teams to conduct work. As such, play and trust are viewed as synergistic.

Design Thinking experts who have had long and impactful careers have developed novel approaches to creating a Design Thinking entity within organizations before it is fully developed or supported by the organizational culture. Being able to have a command of design methods, people skills and the organizational savvy to interpret and understand the inner working of the business are not skill sets easily found within organizations (Buccolo and Matthews, 2011). This study begins to postulate that the key insights, when viewed as a whole, form an outline model of a microclimate within the context of the larger organization where the insights take shape.

It remains to be seen through future research what the broader impact of approaches will be on the organizations represented in this study and the continued sustainability of supporting organizational design thinking in this manner. More research is needed to identify additional theories that focus on subunits of that behave differently within organizations to compare and contrast the attributes identified in this research. Application of the work would be enhanced through a focus on the creation a tool or framework for

individual assessment through-out the development of internal design thinking practices. Understanding a growth approach through the development of additional Design Thinking microclimates or expansion of existing ones would further the impact of the research for large organizations.

Conclusions

This paper has collected personal narratives using semi-structured interviews and personal journey maps. The input of design thinking leaders from nine organizations from a range of sectors has enabled exploration of Design Thinking as an approach to innovation and creativity. Seven common conditions and behaviors were identified and developed into an outline model of how these behaviors and surrounding supporting context form a microclimate within a larger organization. Further consideration of these insights and developing model may enable the counter-culture design thinking approaches to occur in subsequent organizations. Future developments will inform training and coaching to further these behaviors and capabilities in individuals.

References

- Ahmed, P.K. (1998). "Culture and climate for innovation." *European Journal of Innovation Management* 1.1: 30-43.
- Amabile, T. M., & Kramer, S. J. (2011). The power of small wins. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(5), 70-80.
- Bandura, A. (1989). 'Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory.' *American Psychologist* 44 (9), 1175.
- Beckman, S., & Barry, M. (2009). Design and innovation through storytelling. *International Journal of Innovation Science*, 1(4), 151-160.
- Braun V, Clarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:77–101.
- Brown, T. (2008). Design thinking. *Harvard business review*, 86(6), 84.
- Boyd, H., McKernon, S., Mullin, B., and Old, A. (2012). 'Improving Healthcare through the Use of Co-Design'. *NZ Med J*, 125 (1357), 76–87.
- Britten, N. (1995). 'Qualitative Interviews in Medical Research.' *BMJ: British Medical Journal* [online] 311 (6999), 251.
- Bucolo, S. & Matthews, J. H. (2011). A conceptual model to link deep customer insights to both growth opportunities and organisational strategy in SME's as part of a designed transformation journey. In *Design Management Toward A New Era of Innovation*, Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, Hong Kong.
- Cantore, S. P., & Cooperrider, D. L. (2013). Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry. *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Leadership, Change, and Organizational Development*, 267-287.

- Carlgren, L. (2013). *Design thinking as an enabler of innovation: Exploring the concept and its relation to building innovation capabilities*. Chalmers University of Technology.
- Carlgren, L., Elmquist, M., & Rauth, I. (2014). *Design thinking: Exploring values and effects from an innovation capability perspective*. *The Design Journal*, 17(3), 403-423.
- Covey, S. M., Link, G., & Merrill, R. R. (2012). *Smart trust: Creating prosperity, energy, and joy in a low-trust world*. Simon and Schuster.
- Dougherty, D. & Takacs, C.H. (2004). *Team Play: Heedful Interrelating as the Boundary for Innovation*. Long Range Planning: International Journal of Strategic Management, Vol 37(6).
- Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, Microclimate Meteorology, from <https://www.britannica.com/science/microclimate>
- Gray, D., Brown, S. and Macanuso, J., 2010. *Gamestorming: A playbook for innovators, rulebreakers, and changemakers*. " O'Reilly Media, Inc."
- Holloway, M. (2009). How tangible is your strategy? How design thinking can turn your strategy into reality. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 30(2/3), 50-56.
- Liedtka, J. (2015). Perspective: linking design thinking with innovation outcomes through cognitive bias reduction. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 32(6), 925-938.
- Martins, E. C., & Terblanche, F. (2003). Building organisational culture that stimulates creativity and innovation. *European journal of innovation management*, 6(1), 64-74.
- Nixon, N. (2012). Designing Experiential Services with an Improvisational Stance. *Lessons from the Ritz-Carlton. Touchpoint*, 4(1), 32-35.
- Martin, R. L. (2009). *The design of business: Why design thinking is the next competitive advantage*. Harvard Business Press.
- Ostroff, C., Kinicki, A.J. and Tamkins, M.M. (2003). *Organizational culture and climate*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc..
- Schrage, M. (2000). Serious play: The future of prototyping and prototyping the future. *Design Management Journal (Former Series)*, 11(3), 50-57.
- Tucker, A. L., & Edmondson, A. C. (2003). Why hospitals don't learn from failures: Organizational and psychological dynamics that inhibit system change. *California Management Review*, 45(2), 55-72.
- Ulrich, D., & Smallwood, N. (2004). Capitalizing on capabilities. *Harvard business review*, 119-128.
- Weberg, D., & Weberg, K. (2014). Seven behaviors to advance teamwork: findings from a study of innovation leadership in a simulation center. *Nursing administration quarterly*, 38(3), 230-237.

Christi DINING ZUBER, Louise MOODY

Acknowledgements: *The authors would like to acknowledge Coventry University for its support during the writing this paper, to Kaiser Permanente for the years of on-the-ground experience creating an innovation and design practice that sparked the passion for this research topic, and to the experts in this study who so freely shared their personal and professional journeys.*