DESIGN THINKING FOR
BETTER PERFORMANCE

THE REGIS COMPANY

WHITE PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

Design thinking is a hot topic in learning today, thanks to Bersin by Deloitte's report Predictions for 2016: A Bold New World of Talent, Learning, Leadership, and HR Technology Ahead. As it continues to gain popularity, many organizations are jumping on the bandwagon and proclaiming that they employ design thinking in their learning and development strategies.

But simply declaring yourself a "design thinker" or leading teams through repetitive blue-sky activities is not true design thinking. At its heart, design thinking is a scientific method for solving complex problems—not just a fun way to brainstorm. It confronts the ways in which teams view and break down business challenges and, perhaps even more important, how they articulate the challenge itself.

In this paper, discover how to apply the core principles of design thinking to solve today's most pressing learning and business problems while also exploring valuable lessons learned, as well as the challenges that businesses may encounter when integrating design thinking in their own organization.

DESIGN THINKING FOR COMPLEX PROBLEMS

Learning organizations are inherently good at solving problems. After all, it's central to what learning and development professionals do every day. A few years ago, real challenges were presenting organizations with problems that were deeper or more complex than what was visible at the surface. **Problems would be uncovered with statements such as:**

> "Our leaders need to be able to think more strategically about the business."

> "We need to innovate more effectively to be more competitive in the marketplace."

> "We need our people to be better critical thinkers and problem solvers."

In each case, the solution wasn't as simple as having an expert stand up in front of a classroom and tell people, "You need to think more strategically," or providing a slick new tool that would better enable performance. While these are both laudable and not uncommon approaches, they address only the top layer of a given problem.

Over time, clients who were unwilling to dig beneath the surface found themselves in a type of "Groundhog Day" situation in which a quick fix helped temporarily, but the same issues kept occurring.

Let's review the four rules of design thinking that allows organizations to sidestep some of these challenges to provide a better approach to adapting performance to true business needs. ⊙

CREATE EMPATHY FOR MANY USERS

Many performance solutions focus on telling people how to think or the ways they should perform differently, typically followed by providing an opportunity to practice in a prescribed environment. Rarely do organizations try to deeply understand the experience their people have as they encounter and address these issues on a purely human level.

Instead of asking, "What results are important?" design thinking asks, "Who are the users? What experiences are they having every day? What biases do they have? How would they behave if they experienced the problem (and solution) differently?"

Design thinking has the unique ability to generate deep empathy for the **user**. This is why you'll often hear design thinking coupled with the terms "human-centered design" and "user empathy." When you generate true user empathy, you not only solve the right problems, but you solve them in ways that drive real value.

WHAT IS A "USER"?

Conventional design organizations sometimes use the words "user" and "learner" synonymously. The mixing of these terms is not only incorrect, but it subtly gives these learning and development professionals the permission to speak on behalf of their learners.

While learning and development (L&D) teams might be able to define the surface characteristics of a target population, being a mouthpiece for your learners is never as good as actually talking to the learners themselves. In design thinking, your goal is to connect with human beings directly, not make assumptions based on a compilation of surveys and assessments.

A more contemporary view of "users" includes anyone who has something to lose or gain from a design. If you limit the meaning of "users" to learners, one group is effectively being examined in a vacuum, putting the organization at risk for overlooking who affects the learner's performance, who challenges them, to whom they relate, and how their learning is generally enabled. Expanding the definition of "user" to include other groups helps to better predict what will make a program successful. In summary, there isn't just one "user" but multiple user personas.

CASE STUDY

The Regis Company was recently approached to redesign an employee orientation program for a large professional services firm. The client initially said:

> "Our current program doesn't do a good job of 'selling' the organization to new joiners. We want people to understand the opportunities they have if they stay with us."

> "Our new employee orientation is completely dependent on the facilitator. When someone's really dynamic, people are super charged; other times, they're just trying not to fall asleep."

Instead of asking for more data that supported what the client thought they knew, The Regis Company conducted empathy interviews and asked questions like:

- What do you say when friends or family ask you what you do?
- What did you have to learn the "hard way"?
- How soon did you understand what it would take for you to succeed in the company?

The client soon realized new employees were so focused on staffing and chargeability they were missing opportunities to create their own long-term success in the organization.

The focus of the program changed from selling the benefits of the organization to better setting expectations for how new employees could create a niche, build a legitimate network, and seek out ways to gradually affect the business, instead of immediately going after project work.

EMBRACE DIVERGENCE BEFORE CONVERGENCE

The ability to quickly and creatively generate a solution is critical to any consultant's success. But there's a natural human inclination to reach consensus that can lead even the most well-intentioned consultant down the path of least resistance, especially under time pressures. The strength of the "consensus bias" often leads to embracing the first solution instead of the best solution. You may have seen your own teams fall into this trap: everyone meets in a room to do a traditional whiteboarding session. After hours and hours of talking and sketching, the team finally reaches agreement on one idea, and someone says, "I think we're at a good stopping point—let's move forward." Exhaustion has taken over, and everyone is relieved to just move on.

When organizations obey this desire to quickly reach consensus and implement the first or second idea proposed, teams discover that they didn't actually have the best idea. Even worse, stakeholders can easily overrule ideas generated this way because they're not rooted in substantive thinking. When this occurs, there may be significant time, cost, and team morale implications.

Design thinking challenges the need to rush to consensus by deliberately inviting in divergent thinking. The idea of **ideating, not implementing**—or holding space for lots of different ideas at the beginning of a process—allows all ideas to be sifted through methodically. When combined with rigorous processes that efficiently and systematically eliminate faulty ideas, the practice of divergence before convergence generates more effective, cost-sensitive solutions.

DIVERGENCE CREATES AMBIGUITY

However, the concept of embracing divergence isn't easy. It requires diligent effort to become comfortable with not rushing to development—but also acknowledging that the innate drive for certainty is hard for teams and clients to override, and that it can make the gray area of divergence feel uncomfortable. It is possible to find yourself in an engagement where stakeholders say, "Can we just skip this part and move straight to creating the solution?"

There are two proactive steps that organizations can take to mitigate some of this discomfort:

1. Be very up front with the team about ambiguity that participants will experience as they engage in this process. Prepare teams for the cognitive discomfort they might feel by assigning pre-work and painting a picture of the milestones they'll encounter during a design thinking session.

2. Use **a lot** of structure and timeboxing in the sessions to generate ideas and set up opportunities for evaluation. This creates a very different tone, especially compared with unstructured brainstorming, in which participants become exhausted to the point of accepting nearly any idea in order to move forward.

There are many ways to deliberately introduce divergence into the process, such as:

- Inviting a broad group of people—not just the learning and development team—to engage in a design thinking session

- Actively inviting vocal dissenters of the program and/or process to participate

- Structuring exercises so that participants can silently generate their own ideas first before having to discuss them out loud

- Putting time limits on design thinking exercises so that the focus is on speed, not quality

- Avoiding too much "priming" about a potential solution before a design session so that individual bias is limited

Emphasizing divergence as a goal leads to lots of ideas, which in turn lead to rich discussion and discovery of hidden problems. This brings us to the third rule.

FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION

This may sound counterintuitive, but by deeply focusing on the problem before moving to the solution is crucial to solving the right problem altogether. Design thinking's emphasis on cause instead of outcomes helps to do just that.

Organizations often want to address a problem they believe exists because they have a lot of data to back them up. They may also suggest solutions to the perceived problem. When this happens, don't regard the insights—but accepting foregone conclusions as fact can create other issues when starting to develop a learning program.

Focusing on the problem instead of the solution means trying to reach common understanding around root causes before doing anything else.

Through design thinking exercises, ask such questions as:

What **assumptions** are we making about our learners?

What **facts** do we absolutely know?

What **behavior** is causing the problem?

What **observable behaviors** should be prioritized?

What **goals, attributes, and design implications** can we identify for the users?

How would the user (learner, facilitator, administrator) **feel** as they experience our envisioned solution?

And maybe most important, what **problem** are we solving?

Lean principles remind us to ensure that we "build the right thing" so that later we can "build the thing right."

CO-CREATE TO REACH A SHARED VISION

The fourth rule of design thinking is co-create to reach a shared vision. This means working side by side cross-functionally in design thinking sessions, co-creating work products as a cohesive group. Everyone in the room participates in these sessions—even if it's not their domain, even if they aren't responsible for a program's ultimately delivery, and even if they can be there for only an hour. Everyone participates so that both teams can converge on a shared vision. Partnerships that begin with a goal of **co-creating** a solution are easily the most successful and satisfying from relationship management and product development standpoints.

Introducing the idea of co-creation can be tricky. After all, if you've been engaged to solve a problem but instead choose to enlist stakeholders to co-create work products, they may be resistant, openly question your methods, or claim that "design by committee" doesn't work.

CASE STUDY

The Regis Company partnered with a large organization going through significant changes in their business due to mounting pressure from expanding commercial and international markets, government austerity, and massive retirement-related turnover in their workforce.

The client had a robust competency model that included setting a vision for the future of both the industry and the company. The model said that this type of innovative thinking was the singular quality that would enable their people to successfully transition to the envisioned organization of the future.

But upon digging into the "identified" problem (championing innovation) and speaking with other leaders in the organization, it was discovered that the competency that was most highly valued wasn't innovation, but risk management. This dichotomy created a situation in which the desired behavior actually worked against the stated vision of the organization.

Had this dissonance not been revealed, The Regis Company team would have tried to solve the wrong issue — leading to skewed results.

Setting strong expectations for co-creation is important to ensuring buy-in on the process. A strong facilitator who can successfully lead rapid idea generation, real-time evaluation, and systematic iteration on the best ideas from even a skeptical audience is a valuable asset.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF STEPS THAT ENABLE SUCCESSFUL CO-CREATION:

- **Invite the right people** to be part of the process and invite people who might have different perspectives on the problem and solution. Leaving dissenters out at the beginning may derail your efforts later on when it is expensive and time consuming to make changes.

- **Don't overvalue an expert opinion.** While one party in the process may seem to have all of the answers, the goal for everyone involved in the solution is to understand the same things at the same time. Many design thinking exercises are designed to mitigate the "expert effect."

- **Set ground rules for working together.** Determine what will make you successful and establish expectations around contributions to your process.

- **Ask the same question many times** but in a slightly different way—you'll determine what a group agrees on a lot faster than if you save gaining agreement until the very end.

- **Push your group to get to a working vision** for the solution sooner than you believe you're ready—it's easier to reject something half-baked on paper than fully baked in real life. Find ways to test out with your audience small aspects of the vision.

- **Use available tools** to gather opinions on emergent design—for example, use an electronic survey to test how well your ideas might be received by the target population.

- **Don't assume** that once you achieve a shared vision your work is done—it's easy to diverge over time, and small deviations can grow quickly.

Co-creation can be challenging; it feels different from what a client or stakeholder is used to— but the end result is worth it. When teams work together for a couple of hours or days creating work product together, it doesn't just mean that they're good partners—it means that all members of the teams understand the same information at the same time. Enabling convergence in this way helps everyone reach a shared vision, which will make your project that much more successful.

CONCLUSION

The design thinking approach is more complex than simply declaring you're "a design thinker" and investing in vast quantities of sticky notes. Successful design thinking typically involves more than the guidelines covered here, but these basic principles are the keys to an effective, rigorous process that gets to the heart of even complex performance challenges. Solutions that fall short of adequately addressing real issues facing people and business today are becoming more obvious and obsolete as methodologies like design thinking take root. Embracing this new era of tackling business and performance challenges with design thinking allows us to lead the way to more effective learning and business outcomes.

If you're looking to create a human-centered learning program that transforms thinking, grows leaders, and generates measurable impact, then it's time to start a conversation with The Regis Company.

Visit **regiscompany.com/design-methodology** to discover what design thinking can do for your learners and leaders.

ABOUT THE REGIS COMPANY

The Regis Company is the industry leader in creating personalized leadership development solutions across the world's most progressive organizations. Our targeted design methodology results in impactful and transformative learning experiences that enhance critical thinking skills, improve decision making, and build leadership capabilities for leaders at all levels. No matter where they are in their development journey, our award-winning solutions enable organizations to transform their leaders, drive change, and achieve business results. With extensive experience in more than 25 unique industries, The Regis Company has created and implemented hundreds of leading-edge programs across the globe. To learn more, visit www.regiscompany.com.

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