

The Curious Case of Changing Management Imperatives and their Effect on Design Activity

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Abstract

This study looks at recent opinion shifts in management theory and practice and illustrates how two key design consultancies are responding to significantly new contexts for design. These changes may well be the result of the current period of extreme uncertainty, many aspects of which are contributing to general public anxiety: social changes and international politics among them.

The paper investigates examples of designers' responses to dealing with client uncertainty and change and thus falls into the conference's general 'knowing and not knowing' theme. New thinking on organisational behaviour and the training of managers is examined. Executives and designers in two major product design consultancies now undertaking strategic analysis for their clients are interviewed: Seymour Powell in the UK and Ziba Design in the USA.

The work of designers is now more universally pervasive and at the forefront of modern consumerism. And yet the designer's traditional role is being re-appraised by both clients and design practitioners themselves. Designers appear to have reached an important stage of public and corporate recognition, but at a level that may not adequately reflect their diverse range of activities and their true worth to society. Designers are now in a significantly enhanced position to lead. The study considers new publications that impact on the future of design activity both in practice and education. There appears to be a type of convergence between new management roles and new design roles

There is an expanded new world opening up for designers to enlarge their range of activity. Whether designers choose to take up new roles or not, the expectations of their position in business life have become significantly heightened. Design consultancies are increasingly rising to this challenge by broadening their horizons and enlarging their frame of reference. Seymour Powell and Ziba executives describe the changes they have had to make in their own organisational strategy to fulfil client needs in the following categories: Strategic focus, Structure, Processes, Culture and values and Competitive environment. They comment on the increasing overlap of their work with that of management consultancies. In conclusion, the paper discusses the ongoing debate on future cultural shifts in design professions.

Key Words

Changing Roles in Design and Management, Innovation Imperative, Design Debate

Introduction

Working in new creative disciplines, like detectives, we are encouraged to find meaningful connections between apparently disparate components and occurrences. Very often, those connections that ultimately appear blindingly obvious are initially hidden in the overwhelming proliferation of conflicting information. This study examines a number of recent opinion shifts in

management theory and practice and finds a growing convergence between this phenomenon and the evolutionary change occurring in design consultancies as they experience new industrial and commercial contexts for design.

Current management theory encourages industrial and commercial companies to think more creatively and at the same time more design consultancies are recognising their potential for making a broader contribution to business and society. The study indicates how key consultancies have undergone change in their organisations to accommodate the provision of innovation strategy for their clients. In effect, they have engaged in the process that is now being prescribed for all companies.

These changes, both prescribed and existing, are a likely outcome of the current period of extreme complexity, many aspects of which are contributing to general public uncertainty: economic instability, rapid technological advance, social changes and international politics among them. A familiar business mantra now is “innovate or die“. In the framework of complex adaptive systems, companies in a fast-changing business environment, such as is now being experienced, need to be able to transform themselves continually to produce innovative products and services. They need to be constantly adapting and evolving, if they are to remain viable. (Lewin, Birute 1999)

This paper investigates examples of designers’ strategies for dealing with client uncertainty and change and thus falls into the conference’s general ‘knowing and not knowing’ theme. Selected writing reveals new thinking on organisational behaviour and the training of managers. In seeking rich information for design case studies, two product design consultancies, Seymour Powell in the UK and Ziba in the USA, were selected. These consultancies are regarded as typical of organisations in their field now undertaking strategic analysis for their clients. Principals in both organisations, researchers in one, were interviewed for this study.

Design Metamorphosis

The question of designers’ status, whether working in-house in companies or working as consultants with client companies, has been uppermost in the author’s practical work and research direction. This concern extends to the relationship of the activities of designers to their closest working colleagues, engineers, marketing and advertising personnel and further still to the roles designers play in the larger global scenarios.

Designers appear to have reached an important stage of public and corporate recognition, but at a level that does not adequately reflect their diverse range of activities and their true worth to society. Designers are now in a significantly enhanced position to lead in the corporate world – although few opportunities exist, more could be created. If we look back we can see that there has been a long struggle, out of which emerged in the 80s, a diversity of new, and unexpected, design roles. Many designers are adapting to change by inventing new partnerships with clients and by multidisciplinary collaborations. (Gornick 2001) Complexity theorists would say that new phenomena occur because expected resolutions in established areas do not materialise. Despite a steady stream of adherents to change, there appears to be considerable resistance to these new directions from many in the design industry.

Management Imperatives

It appears that business and industrial companies are embracing change faster than design consultancies. Over the years abundant management theories have confounded and enlightened

followers. Recently international gurus have been promoting new management skills that contain a remarkable resemblance to those inherent in design activity – conceptualising and prototyping ideas and enhanced understanding of the consumer. Tom Peters (1993) connected these ‘new’ requisite skills with designers and design activity immediately, often using the design consultancy IDEO as a key example. Conversely, many design practitioners do not recognise this connection. It could be argued that the design community in general has been slower in coming to terms with the fact that their skills have far wider usability. Other closely related-discipline players such as marketing and advertising have no such qualms in expanding their sphere of operations. (Gornick 2004).

Consider significant new thinking that impacts on the future of design activity both in practice and education:

The discussion raging on the need for massive corporate organisational change described in “The Support Economy” (Zuboff and Maxmin 2002) as a current ‘transaction crisis’ between institutions, companies and consumers promotes the idea of a new and greater understanding of the needs of all stakeholders. Very few engagements between consumers and the organisations with which they deal are working as well as they should. A new support system is required, which will humanise existing traditional business practices. The authors take a meta-view of a new economic system required to deal with fluctuating markets and uncertain business environments.

Management education is frequently criticised for failing to imbue students with the creativity required for effective leadership and strategic thinking. A leading management theorist holds MBA programs in business schools responsible for many of business’s ills, as the teaching stresses formal analysis and control rather than much required vision and experience of webs, networks and teams that evolving companies need today (Mintzberg 2004).

As if to follow Mintzberg’s thinking, Harvard Business Review’s Breakthrough Ideas for 2004 includes the fact that corporate recruiters are now seeking MFAs rather than MBAs because their intuition, enhanced conceptual and modelling skills can help generate new ideas and find better solutions to problems.

Seismic Shifts

Great changes for managers, great changes for designers

Most successful managers understand that their traditional structures and a more creative approach to managing need to coexist harmoniously. Few managers today are capable of striking a logical balance between the two but there is a better understanding of creativity as a social process rather than as a spark of individual enlightenment.

The cultural and linguistic gap between different organisational units is normally wide. Managers and designers have to look for new ways to create formal and informal occasions for productive, far-ranging conversations about the future. Nothing will succeed without a new quality of dialogue. People who are able to bridge the gaps need to be identified and encouraged. A key test is whether an organisation is capable of “disruptive growth”.(Christenson 2003)

These shifts point the way to an expanded new world opening up for designers to enlarge their range of activity. Whether designers choose to take up new roles or not, the expectations of their knowledge and position in business life have become significantly heightened. Their opinions and advice will be sought after more than ever before. As we shall see in the following case studies, two prominent design consultancies are rising to this challenge by broadening their horizons and enlarging their frame of reference.

One can begin to see a connected pattern of changes emerging, very much in Moss Kanter's (1988) sense of 'kaleidoscopic' re-arrangement of elements: Management writers' exhortations for speedy corporate change to innovative structures and processes, flexible teams, transparent systems and customer focus taking a leaf out of designers' iterative processes and lateral thinking. Design consultancies' response to client company changes by developing new knowledge and areas of practice that again feed into companies' corporate behaviour and systems. Moss Kanter suggests that many important innovations are developed by people who step outside of conventional categories and traditional assumptions. She calls them 'boundary crossers' or 'generalists' who move across fields or among sectors and who bypass what everybody else is looking at to find possibilities for change. These people have also been called "new idea practitioners". (Davenport, Prusak, Wilson 2003)

The Innovation Imperative

Advanced design consultancies seem to be embracing the same type of strategic organisational development being prescribed for the integration of an innovation culture in industrial and commercial companies. They understand that they must advance to a position where their value is based on more than simply their aptitude to provide style and multiple choice

If we look at business theory and strategic design consultancy, standard questions on innovation management apply equally to both areas: For example -

How does a company clearly define a strategic focus that channels its innovative efforts realistically – in ways that it will be profitable

How does a company create and sustain a corporate environment that values better performance above everything else

How should the innovation process be structured in an organisation

How are new behavioural patterns developed to operate the process effectively on a continual basis

How do you attract a mix of bright, creative minds (to get ideas) and experienced operators (to keep things practical) (Tidd, Bessant, Pavitt 1997, Pearson 2002).

In the investigation of the study's two selected design consultancies, both organisations were asked to describe their strategic focus, structure, processes and value culture. Finally they were asked to comment on the competitive environment in which their organisation operates. How do they view their own organisations when many designers often see strategic advice for clients as an undesirable diversion from the main thrust of the consultancy, or as an area in which designers should not be involved?

First case: Seymour Powell

Interviews with Richard Seymour, Dick Powell, consultancy principals, and James Samperi and Paula Zuccotti, research team, SeymourPowellForesight

Strategic Focus

Seymour Powell was established in 1984 and founded by Richard Seymour and Dick Powell. It is a London-based group of designers dedicated to producing radical product innovation for worldwide manufacturers of consumer goods. Industry sector projects ranges include automotive, mobile communications, computers and domestic appliances. The group is currently 52 people strong.

Seymourpowellforesight - SPF, their strategic arm - was established in 1992 and is now a six-person research and strategy unit that calls upon a global network of local research and design specialists. SPF develops design strategy for consumer product companies. Their aim is to help companies strike the right balance between technology, market realities and consumer desires by combining designers' creativity with rigorous analysis. Clients include: Ford, Jaguar, NCR, Nokia, Renault, Samsung and Yamaha. SPF's remit includes: forecasting social and technology futures, global and lifestyle trends, market dynamics and competitor analysis, consumer behaviour and design strategy

Richard Seymour and Dick Powell maintain that design consultancies working deep inside organisations realise that there is a lack of adventurous corporate leadership in new product development, and that predicament creates an opportunity for them to advise in an enhanced capacity. RS: "Companies are fearful of making a decision without consulting the consumer and the consumer cannot predict what they are going to want. Advice by management consultants very often misses the mark. We offered more strategic thinking because we noticed this lack of direction, commitment and understanding in our client companies".

Seymour Powell discovered that the business environment was changing under their feet. The establishment of SPF was evolutionary and enabled the consultancy to understand much more clearly the context of their work for clients. They believe that industry now sees the brand through the product. DP: "Audi and Skoda, both of which have achieved astonishing levels of success, are prime examples of brands whose goods and services are underlined by a research-oriented process. The quality of products, service and attention to detail are intrinsic to this activity."

(It is interesting to note that Skoda shifted consumer perception in terms of product reliability, safety, comfort and price in a relatively short time frame due to the leadership of Volkswagen. It is now understood to be one of the most dramatic stories in the automotive industry, a case that is not lost on forward thinking design consultancies.)

James Samperi and Paula Zuccotti in SPF say that the group mostly work with large organisations and with market driven products. The group has developed a reputation for certain expertise in their specialist areas, so there is no shortage of work. The group undertakes strategic research for 50% of SP clients mostly at the front end pre-briefing stage of design projects.

Structure

The consultancy initially developed Seymour Powell Forecasting with James Woudhuysen followed by Seymour Powell Foresight with Kevin McCullagh. Kevin has now moved on and Seymour Powell Foresight carries on.

RS: "SPF was added on to the side of our own business and we let it develop on its own. We use it as a research company . To some extent it encompasses work previously done in client companies by consumer research and management consultants.

The central gravity of our business has shifted. We are talking about enhanced clarity at the front of a project before the physical work starts. Its an interesting area of negotiation, leading to some heated debates on occasion. There has been some friction between both designers and researchers but a levelof respect and understanding has grown up between departments. We divide researcher's roles up for each project based on their different specialisms. The consultancy mutates to meet a challenge when it occurs. The representatives of SPF are the "Pied Piper" in the

client company. SPF is now a clear profit centre in its own right and has benefited our whole consultancy. We call it the “sagacity” engine.“

Processes

Once SPF was established, it became a different kind of organism within the consultancy’s structure. The research group provides an ability to “forensically deconstruct” what is going on in the client company, past and present, to allow for a rational perspective on what is going to happen next. The consultancy can analyse how the organisation’s brand works with the product

The consultancy designers found themselves doing two distinct kinds of work, either answering a brief for designing a toaster or creating a process with no tangible outcome. RS: “I found myself moving increasingly in this latter direction with my own work as a result of my fascination with these companies and what they are doing and how they are doing it. The automotive industry handles this very well. They understand the cultural meaning of design. Being able to distil the inner chromosomes of the organisation to finesse the relationship between brand and product”

SPF researchers carry out a company audit first, either formally or informally, which gives them a foundation for the project. JS: “We are trying to make the design process more informed. We are focusing the design activity, so we need to have a clear idea of the client’s needs. The investigations themselves include user research, market dynamic studies, social trends, business trends, technology trends and visual design – all normally related to product design. We try to track as many of the trends as possible that are closely related to product design. The research centres on learning about the client products, the industry as a whole.”

Researchers consider that their work sits between product design and marketing. They communicate very effectively with the marketing people who are essentially driving these projects. The marketers, in turn, frequently come to SPF for an outside perspective. PZ: “Marketing people have usually carried out the sort of work we are now doing, designers have not done this sort of research in the past. Advertising planning strategies and product planning strategies affect the brand in the same way. SP designers can focus their work much better with the results of our work in SPF.”

Culture and values

DP: “Innovation projects are not exclusive to Foresight activity. The projects go through with or without Foresight depending on the nature of work. We also have a panel of experts, whose composition varies, made up of independent designers and other consultants who validate research studies. We like working in this way.”

The consultancy is a product design business primarily. The outputs are mainly product driven. It is necessary to determine the future of product trends and ranges. Similar work is done by advertising agencies whose outputs are campaigns and innovation agencies whose outputs are research reports. Seymour Powell maintain that they can give client companies a wider picture than most agencies and strong direction for new product development.

Competitive environment

RS: “All the boundaries we know, as designers, are dissolving. Designers should take a meta-view of themselves and of the world around them. They are people first, before they are a profession. Until that breadth of understanding is taught they will remain in their comfy world.

If design is an industry, it is in peril, because it is a changing industry and designers' work currently lacks relevance. I am dismayed at the lack of knowledge of designers. What we should look for in design activity is the ability to make connections both with native intelligence and known facts."

DP: "In the last five years manufacturing, design and development have moved to the Far East. Designers in the west no longer have the intellectual high ground."

(This sentiment was echoed by Bill Moggridge of IDEO, when commenting on survey findings in a 1994 study on UK Design Consultancies "the survey took place in the middle of the recession, conclusions are sombre, chronicling a design industry in decline". 1994 also saw the start of the Masters programme Design, Strategy and Innovation at Brunel University, in direct response to the design industry crisis. James Samperi and Paula Zuccotti are 2001 MADSI graduates)

Second case: Ziba Design

Interview with Sohrab Vossoughi, principal of Ziba Design.

Strategic focus

The consultancy has shifted from designing objects to designing experiences; Ziba's mission is to help their clients develop the three-dimensional aspects of their brands. The consultancy's goal is to align design experience with their clients' brand position by translating brand attributes into three-dimensional objects, environments, and communication materials. "We couldn't do that, without first doing our strategy homework. That's the only way to get the right solutions." (Vossoughi 1999)

SV: "The consultancy was established in 1984. In the first few years of working with clients we realised our designed products on markets did not seem to do anything for client and user. It was design as arts and crafts. In 1990 we started a service to our clients defining problems in a more focused way. We realised we had the knowledge for creating information for a strategy through tools and methodologies developed over the years.

Structure

The strategy structure is very similar to that of an ad agency. We changed to this structure 18 months ago. We have a creative director on each team and 2-3 client relation managers. They all develop strategy under the creative director.

Ziba has been a multicultural, multidisciplinary firm from the day it started. We began with engineering and industrial design and have grown to include research, design planning, strategic planning, graphics and communications services.

Our 60 people have diverse backgrounds, ranging from industrial design and engineering to architecture, anthropology, sociology, social sciences, graphic design, and business specialties. For this era MBAs are not appropriate. 50% of our staff are designers, 50% are from other backgrounds. We use multi-disciplinary teams on every project, regardless of whether clients ask for them. We want to ensure that multiple perspectives are reflected in our work. Young designers normally want to do craft design. We give them the opportunity to be involved with the whole team from beginning to end, we create buy-in for them. Over the long term they understand our direction.

Processes

We started concentrating on user- centred issues. We created a strategic tool that can connect with target customers. It is a design tool for action, a design process for making connections. It has won many awards.

In the first stage of a project, we ask more questions. Now we undertake 80% design process strategy work and 20% actual design. We want to create the right experience for the client and the target customer. We are connecting client to target customer and the leverage from this knowledge is where companies find value.

Culture and values

We have evolved over the years and continue to do so. We continually reinvent and redesign ourselves. As we get larger, we need to understand the kind of experience and message we give to our clients and make sure the message stays coherent and consistent. We are counting on that to build loyalty and trust with our clients. Visual design or engineering services last only as long as the product. But what we do ties back to the whole idea of brand. We preserve, enhance, and build our client's brand equity so that it continues long after the project.

We also think we are in the business of innovation management in that we try to reduce the inherent risks in product development and innovation. We optimize the value of innovation within the context of business and brand.

I now spend most of my time designing Ziba, the organization, because it is continually evolving and has to be designed, redesigned, and developed. Although I think this aspect has brought forth my most innovative work, the company has benefited from all its members. Ziba is a very participatory company.

Competitive environment

We need to collaborate with management consultants. Managing creativity is very difficult. Re-adjustments have to happen, and both sides need to work together. This is the tip of the iceberg for this area of work. There is a massive opportunity for this type of strategic consultancy. We have been inventing and re-inventing the company in the last 2 years – and we're still refining.

There are still a lot of designers out there who don't know what it is they possess. They appreciate only the artistic aspects of design. They're still talking about how it looks rather than how it preserves, builds, and enhances brand—which is the language of business today. Sometimes, it's too late for these designers to jump out of their pigeonholes.

Many of our clients work in organisations in which brand is driven exclusively by the marketing group. They regard design as a marketing tool. Design and marketing should support each other on an equal basis to develop products within the context of brand. Clients who view design as a core activity are able to utilize it to its fullest.

Today, design is becoming a commodity. There are many design firms doing excellent work on this basis. Their clients, however, will not be able to survive if they continue using design as beautification. It is a short-lived advantage. Larger companies have to find opportunities to differentiate their products or risk losing market share. More companies are beginning to understand that design can affect decision making on a strategic level. There is a lot of talk from design firms about strategy. This is a problem because firms that do not deliver what is expected of them can drag down the design industry as a whole. They may be a step further from

traditional design, but they are not on the path the design industry is starting to follow now. Research and design planning has had a growing impact on management consulting. I think this is more than a trend; it's a permanent restructuring.

Designers have wanted more respect for a long time, and a knowledge-based approach to product development elevates the value of design and designers. Design firms that understand the contributions of research and design planning to strategic thinking will be valued. US business culture indicates that design consultancies who don't adhere to this will miss the train. Design stars will always be there and will flourish. Tactical work is now being carried out overseas. Consultancies have to move up the food chain to change."

Conclusions

Like their business clients, the design industry is going through significant change. As we have seen, our traditional economic systems are being questioned, major business theorists think a new type of corporate strategy is emerging and management education norms are being re-examined. Richard Seymour asks: "Is the design industry capable of being fast enough on its feet to understand what is needed from them to fulfil client needs?"

Consultancy interviews

Strategic Focus

It is interesting to note that both consultancies were established in the mid-80s at a time when the expansion of the design industry was at its highest, to the extent that a number of leading UK consultancies were listed on the stock market (USM) for the first time. The evolution of both consultancies' strategic directions in the early 90s, came about at a time when recession hit the design industry hard on both sides of the Atlantic. Both organisations responded to the new business environment by taking due regard of their clients' expanded needs and expectations.

Structure

It is in this area that most divergence between the two cases occur. Both acknowledge evolutionary organisational change and the need to be highly sensitive to the business climate. One consultancy has established a collegiate formula and the other has adopted an advertising consultancy team paradigm.

Processes

Considerable similarities exist in both consultancies' approach to incorporating new work systems within their organisations. A greater proportion of their work with clients' is carried out at the front end. Research activity is carried out by multi-disciplinary teams with a wide range of knowledge and skills. The knowledge base of each organisation increases over the years.

Culture and values

In the balance between pure product design and strategic thinking, both design organisations have developed a new consultancy culture. Their tools and techniques are attuned to client companies' brand values. It is apparent that principals in both organisations are spending the majority of their time fine-tuning their organisations' strategic innovation processes with a view to enhanced future activity.

The Competitive Environment

Comments received from principals in both consultancies indicate a high level of agreement as to where the design profession, in general, should be heading, at the same time recognising the industry's dilemmas and obstacles to change. Both consultancies are aware of the shift of design-related activity to the Far East. They are responding to the increasing overlap of their work with that of management consultancies

In practice and education, both management and particularly design institutions, with a few admirable exceptions, are struggling to come to terms with the new environment. There are two schools of thought as epitomised by the work of the following two authors. There are choices to be made, but this paper submits, one, challenging, seemingly inevitable pathway for the future.

The Great Debate

Resistance to Change in Design Consultancies

In 'The Culture of Design' (Julier 2000) many designers were asked how far they saw the integration of the different domains of design, branding, marketing, management and distribution. Asked whether they aspired to orchestrating a complete product in all its aspects, from the origination of form to organisation of production through to its mediation and after-sales strategy so that they might retain a seamless coherence throughout its lifecycle, the majority of respondents considered this unviable and also, most did not see it as desirable. Julier states that to see this direction as an ultimate destination of the design profession for the near future would disregard the culture of its working practices and the various contexts in which it works.

The findings here appear to demonstrate many design professionals' unwillingness to countenance new activity that would remove them from their traditional pathways. In today's complex conditions, designers will need to make up their minds where they want to be, and how they want to work. It's almost similar to how one decides to vote at election time. One asks: What issues are the most important to me? Designers have to put the whole of their intellectual life, not just their discipline training, into the deliberation. Zuboff and Maxmin maintain "You can't leave your whole self at the door when you go in to work."

Encouragement to Change in Design Consultancies

In contrast we should consider GK Van Patter's 2004 interview in NextD review with Larry Keeley:

LK: "If you look at the centre of gravity of design practice and compare it to the average pace of change in the world, design seems to be losing steam. Certainly we are not advancing our field anywhere near the pace of medicine, computing, entertainment or sciences research...Design is rapidly becoming a technical vocational field with the emphasis on people who can use automated tools. So we end up with design being overwhelmingly used to give us good style and a hyper-abundance of choice. The world may be coarser, harsher and less humane, but at least we've got dozens of well-designed toothbrushes to choose from at Walgreen's and cool stuff available cheap at Target.

In a world with far more designers, designing far more artefacts, some commoditisation is inevitable. As ever, there is a cadre of individuals who want to think deeply about what life could be, what it should be, and what our role is in closing the gap with our daily reality. Thoughtful designers must find one another, and continue to ask the tough questions.

We must fundamentally embrace a watershed change in the nature of the role and the source of value that designers contribute today. The essential challenge here is to rethink what we ought to do and with whom. The times we inhabit are ambiguous, complex and volatile. Designers must make active choices, otherwise unpleasant options will be forced upon them. So many parts of human life need to be humanised, reinvented, made more gracious, involving and understandable. Corporations can't and won't do this in the best ways without being led by people with an acute design sensibility. So pick an arena and pitch in." Keeley ends with "There's important work to be done"

To watch change processes in organisations as they evolve is absorbing, sometimes painful, always rewarding. We have looked at the inexorable progression of management thinking from a comfortably secure scientific framework to a flexible culture of creativity and ambiguity. We see the gradual acknowledgement of design as a major industrial, public sector and commercial resource and in its wake the inevitable attraction of the design process as a management model. We are in the midst of a major dichotomy on the future of the design industry.

What we have yet to discover is how lasting these cultural shifts will be and how each organisation is weathering the impact of change.

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