Getting the Most Out of a Design Thinking Workshop

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Initiatives: CIO Leadership of Innovation, Disruptive Trends and Emerging Practices

Design thinking workshops are an innovation technique gaining popularity. To achieve the best results, CIOs must ensure that design thinking workshops are conducted only after appropriate goals have been established, necessary prework is completed, and realistic expectations are set.

Overview

Key Findings

- Too often, design thinking workshops are conducted without a clear problem to solve. The output from such workshops is grand, often exciting vision statements that go absolutely nowhere.

- Many companies are unwilling to fund the cost of qualitative and quantitative research that should form the foundation of all design thinking workshops. As a result, these workshops are prone to amplifying the biases of their participants.

- CIOs and other executive leaders often fall into the trap of seeing design thinking workshops as a design training program. However, design is a formal business process that requires skilled practitioners, so this perspective ultimately delays an organization’s ability to build competent design capabilities.

Recommendations

CIOs seeking to improve leadership of innovation and emerging practices through the ongoing and successful integration of design thinking workshops:

- Ensure the delivery of actionable innovation ideas by requiring all design thinking workshops be directed at specific problems that have a measurable impact on the business.

- Avoid amplifying internal biases by funding an appropriate level of quantitative and qualitative research for all design thinking workshops.

- Support efforts to create a design-centric enterprise by using design thinking workshops as a link between design teams and the IT organization.
Introduction

Design thinking workshops have emerged from the field of design. The broader design view is one that promotes investment in empathetic learning of customers or other stakeholders. Its application through design thinking workshops is largely used as an ideation methodology — one that ensures a human-centered approach and works to minimize uncertainty and risk in innovation efforts. But it’s a good idea for CIOs to understand that a design thinking workshop is a subset — an extraction — of the design process itself (see Figure 1).

The popularity of design thinking workshops has increased dramatically over the past few years. Gartner saw a 79% increase in inquiries on the topic between 2019 and 2020. Many organizations now have some experience with at least one design thinking workshop. And Gartner's interactions show that the experience that most people have with them is overwhelmingly positive.

Figure 1: Design Thinking Workshops Are a Subset of the Design Process

And yet, we are hearing growing concerns. There are growing questions as to whether these workshops actually lead to any meaningful outcomes.
Gartner believes this is a valid concern. Too many design thinking workshops are deemed successful, based primarily on feedback from participants, rather than measurable business value created. This, however, is not a flaw with design thinking workshops themselves. Rather, it's the result of a flawed execution and in approaching these activities with unrealistic expectations.

By ensuring design thinking workshops are targeted and conducted appropriately and by expert practitioners, CIOs can ensure that this methodology will realize its potential within innovation management and digital product initiatives.

Analysis

Direct Design Thinking Workshops at Defined Problems, Rather Than Broad Ideas

The profile of the design thinking workshop was initially built on being a powerful approach to tackling what are termed “wicked problems.” These issues are difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory and changing factors that are not easily recognized.

The success in having tackled some seemingly intractable problems has resulted in some romanticization of the approach. This leads to a situation where design practitioners who lead these workshops become enamored with the pursuit of profound insights over pragmatic ones. One anecdotal example highlights the flaw well.

Design Thinking Workshop on K-12 Education Delivers a Compelling, but Unactionable Vision

A group of senior public-sector executives looking at K-12 education took part in a multiday design thinking workshop. The result was a comprehensive reimagination of how K-12 education would be conducted. At face value, it was a compelling vision of the future of education. But, in speaking with us, they were wondering why the ideas had gone nowhere. After a cursory exploration of their new K-12 education model, we found that no consideration was given to teachers’ unions or parents’ groups and whether they would, or could, buy into the plan. The technology and real estate cost implications of the plan were significant. All of these factors combined meant that politicians would have little willingness to wade into these competing interests.

All that executive leader energy, directed through the design thinking workshop, resulted in a profound solution that was disconnected from a specific problem that would justify the allocation of resources. The result was a stalled vision.

This type of outcome is not uncommon!

This is not to say there isn't merit in using a design thinking workshop to establish a long-term vision, if that's what an enterprise needs. But there's little point in creating a long-term vision when one isn't required. The problem with any design thinking workshop is that it “abhors a vacuum” — when design thinking workshops run without a clear challenge, they end up producing a vision, rather than a solution.
And a unique perversity of this type of workshop is that the less clear the challenge is, the grander and more profound the vision.

What CIOs should aspire to from their design thinking workshop efforts are pragmatic solutions that emerge from profound insights. Fortunately, a unique virtue of this type of workshop is that profound insights are a likely outcome if the effort is directed and conducted properly.

**Answer Three Questions Before Holding a Design Thinking Workshop**

Directing design thinking workshops is actually a relatively simple effort (see Note 1) if the following conditions are true going into the workshop:

- Is there a specific business problem or unrealized opportunity that we can focus on?
- Can we measure the impact that a potential solution will have on that problem or unrealized opportunity?
- Do we have an identified audience — a group of stakeholders whose activities are connected to the issue we want to examine?

If the answer is, “yes,” to all three questions, then a design thinking workshop is a great option to pursue. It is all the more so if the issue being considered is highly complex and has failed being solved using other approaches. That is, after all, the definition of a “wicked problem.”

With a design thinking workshop properly directed, CIOs must now turn their attention to ensuring the effort is conducted properly. This leads to the next best practice.

**Obtain UX Research Inputs for Effective Outputs of a Design Thinking Workshop**

One of the most important value propositions of a design thinking workshop is that it is effective at crafting an outside-in view of reality. This is the central point of people centricity. By looking at things through other people’s eyes, we can glean insights that we would normally miss.

At a broader level, a design thinking workshop can be seen as a directed act of empathy. So, let’s consider the definition of empathy:

*Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference — that is, the capacity to place oneself in another’s position.*

Let’s look at one part of that definition — “... from within their frame of reference ....” How then do CIOs ensure that, within some form of a multiday group workshop, the customers’ or other stakeholders’ frame of reference is considered?
The only way to do this is to ensure that research is conducted prior to the workshop. Design thinking workshop participants should be working with as rich a source of data as possible. Analytic insights from an enterprise's internal system are good, but are not enough. Design thinking yields the best results when people are also working with data that comes from observational, UX research.

But this type of research takes time, and it can be expensive. As a result, design thinking workshops are often conducted with little to no research data. And the design agencies that commonly conduct these workshops know the problems associated with the absence of meaningful data, but are loath to push the matter for fear of losing the engagement.

Invariably, efforts to empathize without an objective basis to determine an audience’s frame of reference result in design thinking workshop participants projecting their own biases. The most concerning of these biases are not the personal ones — they’re the process-related biases. Participants are likely to interpret the stakeholder's frame of reference relative to the business processes through which they themselves interact with or observe these people. And who can blame them … what else do they have to go on?

**Create Journey Maps With Data — As No Data Can Reinforce Existing Biases**

The result of this flawed approach is best seen in one of the key tools used in design thinking workshops — the journey map. What should be a model that describes the stakeholders’ behaviors relative to a goal that they’re seeking to achieve ends up being little more than a stakeholder swim lane of a process diagram, but an exploded and elaborated one. This is anything but an outside-in view of reality.

**Banks Shift Perspective of the Customers’ Journeys**

Several years ago, as retail banks were initially getting involved in design, Gartner observed a large number of mortgage journey maps being produced from their own design thinking workshops. While the goal was admirable — understanding and improving the experience of obtaining a mortgage — these journey maps were the very type of elaborated process diagram that is of limited value.

As the design thinking of banks improved, it increasingly dawned on them that nobody was on a journey to get a mortgage. People are on a journey to get a home, and the mortgage is just one, sobering step on that path. With this shift in perspective, banks held design thinking workshops, supported by proper UX research, that helped them better understand who their customers were and the process that they went through to buy a house. These insights enabled banks to do things like drawing customers to their banks by directing innovative design initiatives to other non-banking-related steps in their journeys. It also has helped banks better understand emerging asymmetric competition coming from the fintech sector. These are exactly the benefits that come from an outside-in point of view.

This is another reason why directing design thinking workshops at defined problems is so important. Specific problems that can be measured are the foundation for establishing a business case to cost-
justify the UX research. With these elements in place, the only thing left for a CIO to do is to make sure that the design thinking workshop is being undertaken with realistic expectations.

**Frame Design Thinking Workshops as a Participatory Ideation Methodology, Not a Training Program**

CIOs should be on guard against an increasingly popular belief — namely, that design is fundamentally a mindset. The thinking behind this belief is that, anyone, in any position, can function in a design capacity if they can just learn the right mindset to have. This assertion is no more true than claiming aviation is a mindset — so with the right perspective, anyone can fly a plane. Yes, there is a mindset associated with design. But it’s one that practitioners come to, over time, by being involved in the design process. A design mindset emerges from design practices — it doesn’t precede or create the design process.

The net result of this confusion is a common trap that Gartner sees many organizations fall into. This is the belief that the involvement in a design thinking workshop leads participants to be designers. It’s seen as a sort of two-for-one deal. The organization gets some great ideation activity, and then, when the workshop is done, participants head back to work with their mindsets adjusted. The design work that is being recognized as important to the strategic requirements of the organization proceeds accordingly.

And who wouldn’t want this to be true? For the low price of a multiday workshop, CIOs and executive leaders can be spared the cost and complexity of creating a design capability. They won’t have to hire in design expertise, implement design processes and integrate those with other business processes into end-to-end workflows.

But, in reality, that’s not what happens. Design thinking workshop participants, after having had a heady experience with the design process, go back to their regular jobs. There, they have no ability to start creating and iterating prototypes with an intended audience, evolve design specifics, and interact with development or engineering teams. Not only does a design practice not emerge, no matter how many design thinking workshops are run, but also, any good innovation ideas that did emerge fail to advance beyond an idea.

CIOs and other executive leaders can get great results from design thinking workshops if they frame it correctly. Design thinking workshops **bind** design teams (the group of skilled design practitioners chartered with the execution and oversight of the design process) with other parts of the organization.

**In that context, a design thinking workshop becomes a participatory ideation methodology that creates effective cross-team collaboration.**
This improves the effectiveness of the design process, while establishing, across the organization, a greater appreciation for the design mindset.

This view should be reasonably apparent to most people who attend a design thinking workshop. Most are run by outside design agencies that are, for organizations, their design teams. But the value of taking this perspective of a design thinking workshop really comes into play when design teams are insourced. That’s because these teams can maintain a distinct identity, while creating meaningful connections across a broader span of departments.

**Evidence**

- Analysis of Gartner client inquiry volume on the topic of “design thinking” based on the term found in personal tags, purpose, question asked and discussion summary.
- Examples and insights from direct inquiries with Gartner clients.

**Note 1: Rules of Design Thinking**

The rules of design thinking have been stated as:

- The Human Rule: All design activity is ultimately social in nature.
- The Ambiguity Rule: Design thinkers must preserve ambiguity.
- The Redesign Rule: All design is redesign.
- The Tangibility Rule: Making ideas measurable always facilitates communication.


**Recommended by the Author**

*Ignition Guide to Conducting a Design Thinking Workshop*