

Design Thinking for Project Managers

Frank Turley (FT), Director of Professional Development at PMI Belgium Chapter interviewed Marysia Lachowicz

1. What is Design Thinking (DT)?

It is a method of designing innovative products or services (or any other solutions) targeted at specific users' needs. The method implies:

- structured collaboration of a cross-functional team with mixed competencies and different angles of looking at problems
- putting human (the customer/user) in the centre of the process
- building fast prototypes that can be quickly tested and improved – DT is in fact more about doing than you might think
- using many visual and physical elements to visualize: the user, his/her problem, ideas for a solution and its prototype.

2. What is the typical process to follow?

There are various process types used by different companies, but the one created at Stanford University - where Design Thinking has been born - is probably the most universal one. It includes 5 basic steps:



1. **Empathize** – walk in your user's shoes and try to look at the world through their eyes
2. **Define** – dig deep to find out and define your user's real problem/need
3. **Ideate** – brainstorm ideas for solving the problem
4. **Prototype** – build a prototype of your solution. It should be as fast and cheap as possible but at the same time elaborate enough to give an idea of what the end solution might look like and how it might work
5. **Test** – find out what your customer thinks about your solution.

The process is iterative and the feedback you get from your customer may send you back to any of the previous stages.

3. Why is this important for a PM?

The method is very useful for PMs especially at project beginning when you gather and analyse requirements. It may help you and your team better understand your stakeholders and their needs. It also gives you tools to quickly verify your assumptions and solutions. Some elements of the method can also be used when tackling complex project problems.

It is no surprise then that according to Gartner, by 2021, lean start-up techniques such as Design Thinking will be used by more than 50% of established corporations in order to increase their chances of success in the fast changing world.

4. Can you give an example?

When IDEO was asked by Oral-B to design a new toothbrush for children, the researchers started by watching kids while they were brushing their teeth. It turned out that children do it completely differently than adults. Kids grab their brushes tightly and often have problems with manoeuvring them. IDEO came up with the idea of a squishy gripper which has been later used by other companies as well.

Another good case is when Airbnb was close to going bankrupt in 2009. One of its founders investigated the matter and discovered that the main reason why people were not using their service was poor quality of the pictures. He and his colleagues travelled to New York to take some new professional pictures and replaced the old ones with them. It turned out that improving the picture quality doubled the weekly revenue of Airbnb and we all know how their story goes further.

5. How to learn Design Thinking?

By doing it. Seriously - the best way is to start with a short introductory workshop when you can work on a case that is not typical of your usual line of work. In that way, it is easier for you to think outside the box and generate creative solutions. Then you should start using Design Thinking in your projects and elaborate on the tools you use as you progress.

6. How to involve a team with this approach?

The method itself is very engaging for teams. They work together on a solution to a problem they have defined themselves and for a person they have empathized with. It is really hard not to get involved in the process.



7. How do you know you are on the right track?

Your customer tells you during the testing phase of the process. The sooner the better.

8. Which type of companies use it?

The method is becoming constantly more popular, but there are so-called design driven companies that put design and customer experience as a priority in their activities. The list starts with Apple, Coca-Cola and Ford – you can find the full list on Design Management Institute (DMI) website. According to DMI, design-driven companies outperform S&P by 228% over ten years (more information below), so it seems that good design and customer experience pay off in the end.

9. Where to get more information?

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A Virtual Crash Course in Design Thinking by Stanford d.school:

<https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources-collections/a-virtual-crash-course-in-design-thinking>

Popular DT cases:

<https://theaccidentaldesignthinker.com/2017/09/16/40-design-thinking-success-stories/>

Information about design-driven companies: <https://www.dmi.org/blogpost/1093220/182956/Design-Driven-Companies-Outperform-S-P-by-228-Over-Ten-Years--The-DMI-Design-Value-Index>