

Design Thinking – Hire A Facilitator or DIY?

“Why would we bring someone in to help us with our own innovation processes? That will just add time and money.”

“How will an outsider help us if they don’t even know our business/challenges?”

“Are we going to pay to bring in a consultant every time we have a challenge? Why can’t we just do it once and have them ‘train the trainer’?”

“Can’t we just do an on-line course and apply the design thinking process ourselves?”

Those are good questions and, as with all good questions, the answer is “it depends.” It depends on what you’re trying to do. It depends on how much time and money you have to invest. And it depends on whether you are looking to tackle an individual project or inject the Design Thinking methodologies and mindset into your on-going or long-term operations.

I’ve seen four main approaches by which companies engage the Design Thinking methodology. There are variations, iterations, and combinations of these, but let’s go with these for now.

- 1) Hire an individual or team to work ‘in-house’ – they can then guide your teams through the process and (potentially) provide training.
- 2) Hire an experienced Design Thinking firm for a couple of short sessions to guide teams through the process on a particular challenge or a few key opportunities.
- 3) Hire a Design Thinking firm to train your team members in-depth on the process (through a boot camp or other method) and the approaches that are most applicable to your business and team.
- 4) Self-train using on-line courses and apply with in-house personnel.

Each, of course, has its own pros and cons.

In-house. This is probably the most expensive option for most companies but may make the most sense for larger organizations who need that type of expertise in house on a recurring basis and available on demand. Companies such as Capitol One, FaceBook, and Accenture have all hired entire formerly independent design thinking firms and brought them in-house to meet their needs. Smaller organizations may go this route as well by hiring a single, dedicated resource but this is often less satisfactory, as design events often require more than one facilitator, and/or may run concurrently for different functions.

Hire a firm for particular challenge(s). This is like an entry-level exposure to the Design Thinking methodology. It enables companies to gain a quality, first-hand experience with the process to tackle a challenge or opportunity but doesn’t invest them in the process long-term to the degree that bringing on in-house capability does. This option provides teams with the ability to gain exposure, use the process on one or more of their challenges, reap the benefits, and yet “try before they buy” on an on-going basis. It also brings the advantage of an outside

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perspective—both on the challenge and the process—that can help innovation teams break through their unrecognized assumptions and move beyond their perceived limitations. And of course, a good facilitator will also leave the Design Thinking challenge participants with an understanding and appreciation for the process, as well as additional tools in their toolbox to tackle future challenges.

Hire a Design Thinking trainer. Once a firm has discovered they trust the Design Thinking methodology and want to invest in an in-house capability, the next step may be to bring someone in to train a set of core team members on the process as the foundation for an internal capability for on-going use across the organization. This typically involves investing in a boot camp or similar training methodology from an experienced Design Thinking firm to provide tools, methodologies, and application approaches to the organization. Depending on how many challenges a company anticipates applying the Design Thinking process to, the return on investment for this more in-depth training may be greater, and more quickly recouped, than bringing in outside assistance each time.

Self-train. There are numerous courses and models for Design Thinking available on-line. So, why invest at all in bringing in someone to facilitate sessions and/or train people in a company on the design thinking process? On-line courses can be fabulous for exposing teams to the underlying concepts of the Design thinking process, but good results depend on how well your team can pick up the concepts and apply them. Many people find that the exercises have to be experienced to resonate—on paper (or on-line) it is often difficult to visualize the group dynamics and stakeholder interplay that are the most powerful aspect of the Design Thinking approach. One of my former co-workers (and a brilliant scientist) at Air Force CyberWorx—the U.S. Air Force cyber innovation center—had a great analogy, which I'll paraphrase slightly: It's like the difference between WebMD and your personal physician. You can look at WebMD and get an understanding of what may be going on based on your generic symptoms, but if you really want someone interested in YOU, and who can assess and deal with more complicated issues, then you probably want to go to your family physician. Experienced design facilitators can sense when the process is getting off track, or when a different Design Thinking tool might work better with a particular group, and then adjust. They can also help teams overcome status-quo thinking by pressing groups to work outside their comfort zones. Still, for a small team with little budget (or cash-strapped organization), self-training may serve to at least help them apply the most fundamental methods to some of their challenges.

What are your thoughts on the role of outside experts in applying Design Thinking?

Keep moving forward!