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Unleashing the Power of Design Thinking

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The Future of Design Leadership

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Unleashing the Power of Design Thinking

by Kevin Clark and Ron Smith

In this call to action, Kevin Clark and Ron Smith posit that design professionals can and should take on leadership roles in nontraditional arenas. Their own efforts demonstrate that the ways in which designers address problems—leveraging emotional intelligence, integral intelligence, and experiential intelligence—offer organizations valuable insights across a diverse range of business activities and decision-making.



Kevin Clark, Program Director, IBM Corporate Marketing and Communications

Design is about making intent real.

There is plenty of unintentional to go around.

When you design, something new is brought into the world with purpose.

Unleashing the power of *design thinking* is about awakening design instincts and methods in business executives and organizations all around us—especially the ones we traditionally don't work with. We believe design thinking is a remarkably under-used tool for achieving strategic business initiatives that are increasingly driven by the need for innovation. The more design thinking is used to innovate and solve problems across many professions, the more design itself will be brought into significant conversations and decisions that

shape our collective future in the business world.

Recognition of the gulf between business and design is well documented. For decades, there have been calls for designers to become more conversant in the ideas and language of business.

In an age of renewed interest in innovation, we suggest the cultivation of a new generation of design patrons who want to collaborate with designers in a new way—business patrons who want to move design strategy and design methods into the mainstream of business thought to accomplish business goals. These patrons would be going to designers not just to acquire the output of well-integrated design, but also to use design methods to make business itself more intentional.



Ron Smith, Designer, Brand Experience Strategist, IBM Corporate Marketing and Communications

Guggenheim didn't have to be an artist to be a patron of the arts.

Design methods are orderly. Design methods are inclusive. Design methods are innovative. Taking advantage of design thinking can help business leaders make their intentions real—by clearly defining goals, deeply understanding customers, and getting their internal teams aligned to deliver results.

Design thinking is an established way to bring value to some parts of business, yet it remains a well-kept secret from many who could use it most. Designers tend to stay out of the domains of accounting, human resources, and legal affairs, for instance, and this is a shame.

Over the past 20 years, we have heard members of the design profession talk about learning the language of business in order to better frame design issues in business terms—initially so that our ideas would have a better survival rate, and then eventually in the hope that we would be invited into strategic discussions where big ideas have a chance to flourish. And we have seen a change in how design is embraced in many organizations, most famously today in consumer electronics with Apple, Sony, and Samsung, where design reports to the CEO.

It's time for the design leaders to reframe this conversation in the age of innovation. Design professionals need to redefine their leadership by being catalysts to help other parts of the organization use and embrace design thinking.

How do you describe design thinking to executives? It's all about *innovation intelligence*. Design thinking is driven by intelligence that embraces innovation and gives your organization the freedom to explore multiple ways to solve problems—and discover the option that best delivers competitive advantage.

From our perspective, design thinking also encompasses several related types of innovation intelligence. Cultivating these will help increase appreciation for, and a broader use of, design approaches in many professions:

- Emotional intelligence
- Integral intelligence
- Experiential intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and embrace in the context of culture that which moves us to act and which creates attachment, commitment, and conviction.

Integral intelligence is the ability to bring together diverse customer needs and business ecosystem capabilities into complete systems that deliver value and reflect the values of the birth organization.

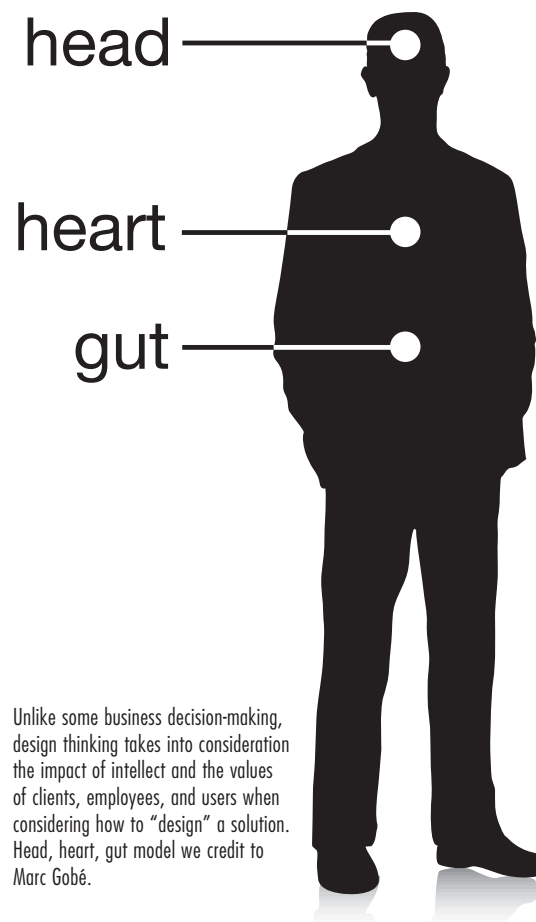
Experiential intelligence is the ability to understand and activate all five human senses to make innovation tangible, known, and vibrant.

Design is about making intent real. What organization wouldn't want to have its strategic intent made real?

Activating emotional intelligence

Connecting the two hemispheres of the brain—and aligning the head, the heart, and the gut—these are daily exercises for a designer.

Designers work to understand the culture of their organizations and its connection to the



customers and other businesses they serve. The design process is well suited to investigate the emotional and cultural realities of doing business. F.G. “Buck” Rogers, one of IBM’s most notable salespeople, famously said, “Customers buy on emotion and then justify with logic.” Understanding the emotional aspect of offering appeal and transactions is pivotal to business success, and design is particularly well equipped to help in this arena of business strategy.

The importance to business: Emotion drives action.

Example: IBM’s corporate experience design team led an unique internal engagement with the company’s human resources and communications team in India to assess the experiences of prospective employees as they apply, are hired, and are brought on board as new employees. Using design thinking to uncover underlying needs and issues, a new set of on-boarding touch-points was co-designed and is being used today to deliver an improved new-employee experience. First impressions frame entire careers—and design thinking helped shape an improved employment journey for new IBM India employees.

Activating integral intelligence

Many businesses apply a microscope to dissect all aspects of engagement into smaller and smaller pieces for improvement and refinement. While examination of detail can be valuable, design thinking re-engages the imagination to see a more complete picture. Designers keep the big idea in mind.

This should be very appealing to many c-level executives, yet for them, design tools and

processes rarely enter into the picture. To many of these executives, design is a function, not a valuable way of seeing and reframing the world for competitive advantage.

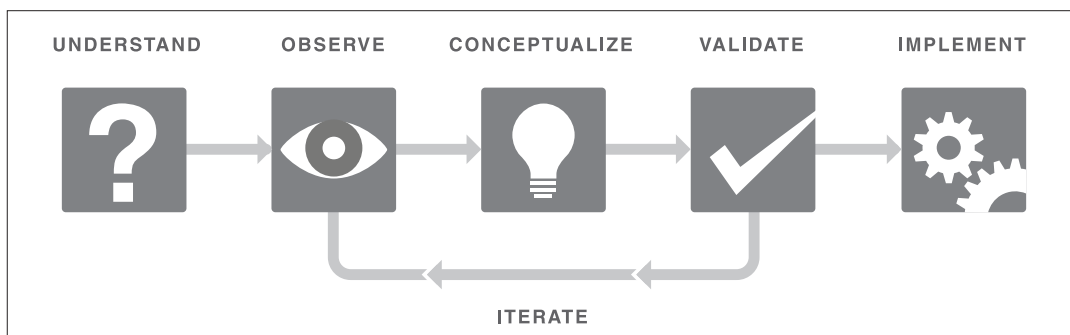
Professionals using design thinking know the details are important for success, yet also have a zoom lens to move way back and see how those details support a larger idea. Design thinkers constantly zoom in and out to keep the big idea and the details connected and meaningful.

The importance to business: *Integral intelligence* helps businesses to see a bigger picture—and create more and even larger value perspectives to drive revenue and profit.

Example: Corporate Experience Design and Systems and Technology Group Design formed a cross-functional team to study the out-of-box experience for recipients of newly delivered IBM systems. Professionals who normally didn’t have an opportunity to work closely together were trained in observational research and went out in “discovery teams” to see clients receive and set up their new large computing systems. They included professionals from engineering, finance, human factors, industrial design marketing, and market intelligence. Not only did they come up with lots of recommendations, but they also continued to collaborate after the project concluded. Building community and working across professional borders is an important residue of design thinking.

Activating experiential intelligence

Experience design is one of the faster-growing parts of design and strategy practice at IBM today. The human interaction conversation has moved from ease of use for products to ease of



The experience design method IBM uses to explore problem solving involves observational research into spoken and unspoken client wants and needs and creating new concepts with validation and iteration phases before a product or service is released into the marketplace.

use for IBM as a whole—and is serving to make our company more compelling and adaptive. This is a direct result of the transformation from a product company to an increasingly services and client consulting company. Design as a discipline is adapting to be relevant to a new generation of offerings and approaches to the marketplace. We see this journey of adaptation taken by many other organizations in a variety of ways.

A point of professional pride: Designers have long understood and used experience elements to enhance the interactions among customers and product offerings. We are now in an age of applying this interaction knowledge to all aspects of doing business. Who should lead this effort? Clearly, it is too big an endeavor for design alone or for any other single department within the business. We need to bring more professionals into the conversation and give them the tools to engage in robust design thinking.

If you have followed the literature over the past 10 years, you know that to be successful, improving customer experience must be a multi-function endeavor, including and integrating many parts of the business. A comprehensive experience strategy encompasses and then transcends the individual parts of the business, leading to customer advocates and sustainable revenue and profits.

Case Study: IBM Client Briefing Centers

An example of applying and transferring design thinking to the IBM business at large is the ongoing IBM Client Briefing Experience Initiative.

In 2006, IBM's corporate experience strategy and design department led an investigation into what it was like for clients to visit IBM at *home*. By home, we mean one of the more than 200 client centers IBM operates for hosting executives and client professionals around the world. At the centers, we offer workshops and hands-on experiences with products and services that can help make our clients' businesses more successful.

This is a fine example of the experience design method IBM uses to explore problem solving. We start by understanding what is known today about the problem to be solved. We do observational research to deeply understand both spoken and unspoken client wants and needs, and then we create new concepts with validation and iteration phases before releasing the new product, service, or experience to the marketplace. You probably have your own version of this—it has been very durable and useful in driving design solutions at IBM for half a century. It was originally intended to make products compelling and easier to use, and it has been adapted over the past five years to help make the company itself more compelling and easier to use.

What did we discover about our client centers? We found that we were all too often practicing an advanced form of what information design guru Edward Tufte has famously called “death by PowerPoint”: one or more days of individually excellent presentations strung together on an agenda in a university lecture format.

When we set out on our design journey, what



Our research showed we were missing an opportunity to emotionally engage with our clients. A day with IBM was full of IQ, but it was also draining, and clients' “emotional quotient” dropped throughout the day. It was a clear message that we needed to innovate around how we engaged with clients that spend a day with IBM.

we thought we would likely recommend were fully immersive briefing centers that would deliver a big experience to our clients. What we ultimately did was subtler than that. For one thing, turning 200 briefing centers into business theme parks is too expensive. For another, it would not have reflected the diverse nature of the centers and the clients they're serving worldwide.

The big "aha" was thinking about briefing centers not so much as places to be briefed as settings where a collaborative dialogue can take place. They became less about going to IBM University and more about clients visiting IBM at home.

We needed to move from training our professionals less in *presentation skills* and more in *listening and leading collaborative discussions*. It is a different mindset, requiring different talent.

We also didn't want to take one of our advantages—a diversity of briefing locations that were greater in number by an order of magnitude than for our competitors—and turn them toward a single unified model. This would potentially destroy the unique heritage of each location and its strengths. We embraced what the hotel industry might call a collection strategy—a collection of briefing capabilities that can clearly express IBM values, yet remain distinctive and authentic to themselves and their missions.

To accomplish this, we held a multi-day workshop with participants from our IBM briefing centers from all over the globe. This project allowed for a sustainable community to emerge inside IBM, and for a global briefing board to form across business units sponsored by corporate marketing and communications. This is a

great example of integral intelligence in action. The community and the global briefing board are two lasting organization transformations that endure today and persist in driving new innovation in IBM client briefing centers worldwide.

Back to the workshop. It was held in Somers, New York, during the summer of 2006.

We heard the results of observational research we had done, shadowing clients and briefing teams in selected centers around the world. Earlier that spring, we had also visited IBM briefing locations in the US and Europe, as well as selected customer-briefing centers of other companies through professional courtesies extended to us as a result of our membership in the Association of Briefing Program Managers (ABPM). We also heard the reports of several focus teams that had done research and came to the workshop with recommendations for improvements.

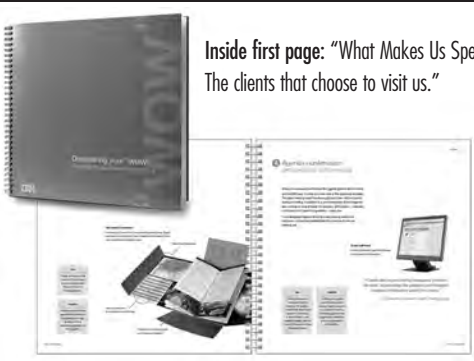
When the workshop ended, the team was galvanized to act and to make strong recommendations for improving the IBM client briefing experience. Several follow-on teams were formed, and the recommendation to create a global briefing board was a direct result of the work done that week.

The design team came back loaded with ideas.

Here are two things we did that have been declared as game changers by our briefing center brethren:

- The *Discovering your WOW* book (see sidebar below) is a cookbook created to help each briefing center design its own unique and appropriate client experience.
- The IBM client experience journey map and

Discovering your WOW! booklet—Designing the client briefing experience



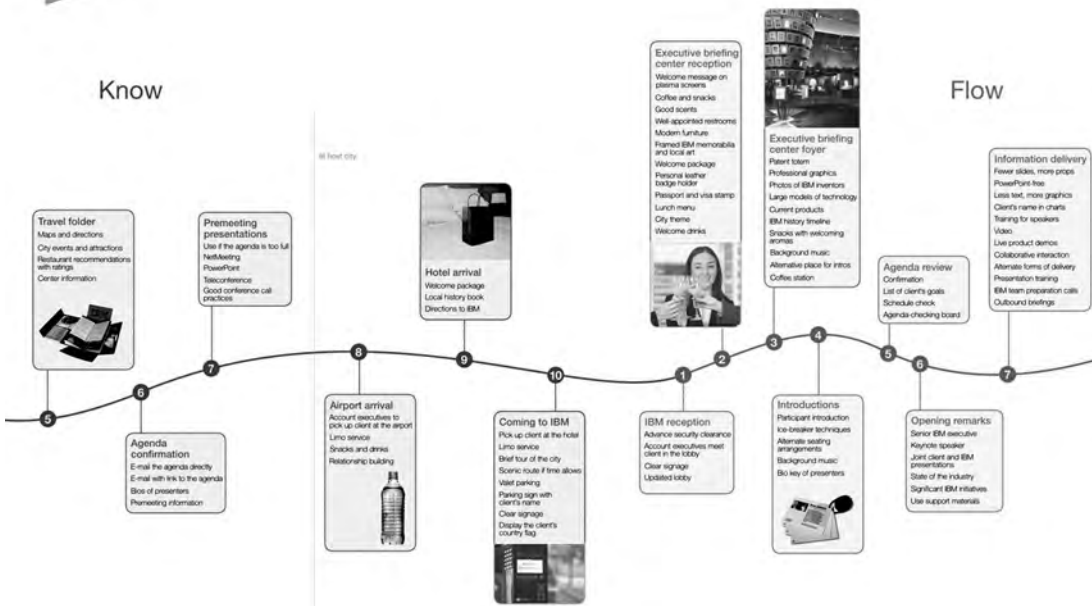
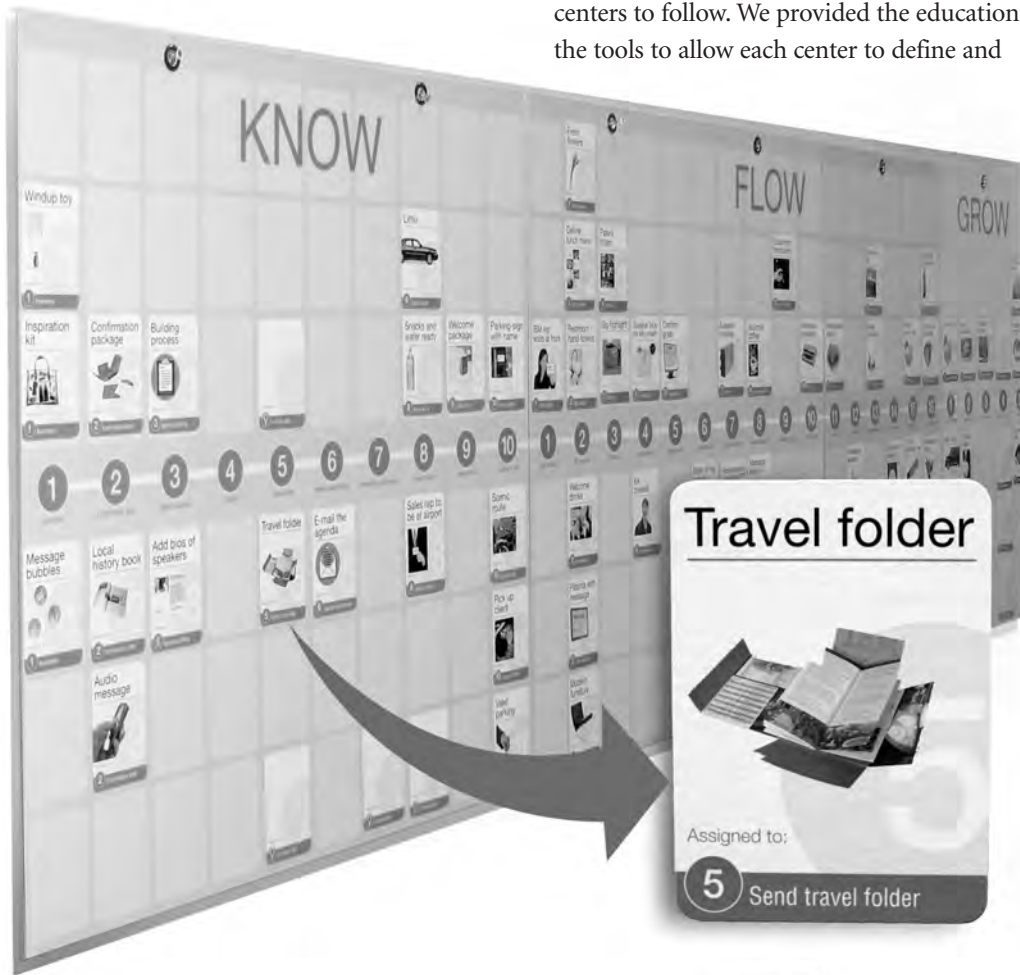
Inside first page: "What Makes Us Special? The clients that choose to visit us."

From the opening page: "We have an unparalleled capability to deliver executive briefings with depth and skill almost anywhere in the world. More than 50,000 times a year, clients visit one of our 200 major client center locations. The question is: What kind of experience will we create for them? Will it just be about selling? Or will it envelop them inside something more— what it truly means to have a relationship with IBM? At no other time in the sales cycle do clients willingly invest a half-day or more with us in a setting where we fully control the experience. That's a unique opportunity for us to show IBM at its best."

planning tool puts the power of design into the hands of the people closest to the client. The tool uses magnetic cards to help each briefing center team explore and track a year's worth of experience planning, or map out a single high-impact visit.

The book and the planning tool together offer more than 200 ideas for client briefing professionals.

Note that we're practicing what we preach in these examples. We didn't describe a tight blueprint with guidelines for each of the 200 briefing centers to follow. We provided the education and the tools to allow each center to define and



design its own authentic IBM client briefing experience. We transferred the experience bug to our client briefing colleagues, and they are now in contact with each other worldwide, and on a continual experience improvement journey. Direction, yes; dogma, no.

Being intentional: Linking business intent and design strategy

Business leaders can benefit from design thinking. It needs to be seen as another valuable tool to help shape business strategies and connect intentions to outcomes. Design thinking also helps to more-deeply understand customers' wants and needs (spoken and unspoken) and

link them to the capabilities of globally integrated enterprises.

Several years ago, we did a "sense layering" internal consulting engagement for our professional friends in IBM working on retail industry solutions.

We took one of their existing client briefing locations and worked to make it even more engaging by activating all five human senses.

Visually, this center was already a world-class immersive experience in the future of retail

banking. It was originally designed by the John Ryan Company and infused with IBM capabilities and technology halfway through its existence. You could walk right into the "set" and experience a retail bank prototype up close and personal. The design-led sense layering engagement added an acoustic background to the briefing location, along with aromas on arrival and more tactile sensations throughout.

This single exposure to design thinking and experience strategy triggered a multi-year exploration on the part of the IBM retail banking marketing and strategy worldwide. Today experience strategy is a key element of IBM's approach to the retail banking industry and our solutions for it. The team fully embraced experience and has been using design thinking to move the retail

banking agenda forward for IBM clients around the world. We helped activate the desire for design in the strategic mix and create internal IBM client patrons for design for years to come.

We've also pioneered the idea of Innovation Discovery—a day set aside for our clients that offers a structured collaborative dialogue exploring ways for them and IBM to do business in new and innovative ways with each other—and to create capabilities together that are mutually beneficial and that deliver competitive advantage.

Unleashing design thinking

We believe design should move beyond its traditional boundaries to grow. We believe in unleashing design from its "private club" status so that it can become a school of thought that can solve some of the world's most pressing problems. Design thinking can help any profession solve problems in innovative ways.

To be considered a mainstream part of the business toolbox and vocabulary, design needs to reposition itself to *do, as well as teach*. We've shared some examples of how we've reached out to a wide variety of disciplines in IBM, applying design thinking and experience strategy to create value in human resources, mergers and acquisitions, marketing, key business units, and client sectors.

Designers can be trusted advisors in helping shape business decision-making, contributing to business strategy with a seat at the table, and cultivating design patrons who will embrace and invest in design to drive competitive advantage. We can help these design patrons innovate and create opportunities for the businesses and organizations we want to see thrive.

Designers have been in the roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-it-done part of humanity for a long time. We see the new generation of design leaders not just as doers—we see designers as advisors, mentors, and coaches. We believe it's time to unleash the power of design thinking in every professional endeavor, not just design itself.

A start: Start cultivating one new executive patron for design thinking today.

*We believe
it's time to unleash
the power of
design thinking in
every professional
endeavor, not just
design itself.*

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the pioneers making “design thinking” real at IBM.

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