



Forget That MBA and Other Thoughts

Recently, I've been thinking about three things. 1. How does a designer learn to become a manager or design leader? 2. Design has become a critical and strategic function in today's evolving organizations, but will design educators adapt curricula to enable graduates to meet rising expectations for design performance? 3. Will design education embrace experiential learning, through internships, to remove barriers between education and practice?

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Must design managers be MBAs?

Many designers aspire to become design managers and some think they will get there faster with an MBA. Not true. First, most business schools do not recognize design management as a critical business function. Second, business schools do not stress the importance of developing skills of persuasion and developing meaningful relationships in organizations in order to get things done. Without relationship-building skills, how will a design manager

succeed at guiding an organization through the process of integrating design into their corporate structure?

Has design become too important to entrust to designers? (No!)

Design curricula can adapt to the evolution in business, technology and the social environment by providing students the experience, i.e., internships, to test classroom learning about design fundamentals, research and the process of design in organizations. If curricula do not adapt, design education will be preempted by other specialists who have discovered that the process of innovation, "creativity applied to a purpose,"¹ or "design thinking" (called a "business behavior" by

Bruce Nussbaum of *BusinessWeek*), is fundamental to the creation of marketplace value.

Design thinking is critical to organizations in transforming their functions and form to respond to evolutionary marketplace forces. Business has raised its expectations of design process deliverable—more than nice typography, lovely form or space. But will design education adapt so that grads can deliver "more" and move up the value chain to the front-end of product development? Or will traditional design program grads be relegated to executing other people's strategies and concepts?

What an MBA is or isn't

My goal is to demystify the MBA, not denigrate it; to remove it once and for all from consideration by designers who seek to become design managers.

As Harvard Business School professors explain in "Is Business Management a Profession"² (and I paraphrase), "The basis of most business school curriculum today is a functional approach, the grouping of courses to mirror the differentiation of finance, administration, operations and marketing as the major activities of the firm." (Please note, design is not considered a major activity.) "This structure evolved in response to turning out grads to perform tasks that would be required of them by employers."

Business students are provided with no more information about getting things done in an organization than are students who study design. An MBA program does not teach leadership skills. And, for the record, leadership and management are not synonymous. MBA programs do not provide study in relationship building, flexibility, collaboration, influencing, presentation and other skills vital for working in organizations. Actually, it is more important to provide experiences where students can practice these skills.

Business schools have lost their way according to recent articles in the *New York Times*, the *Harvard Business Review* and books about the Wharton School and Stanford Business School. Professors "know too little about how real businesses work and spend too much time cranking out highly technical papers of the kind that the academic system mistakenly

rewards,” said the *Wall Street Journal*.³ “They are locked into dysfunctional competition for media rankings (‘Top 10 Business Schools,’ for example), that divert resources from long-term knowledge creation.”

Can design schools adapt to today’s environment?

Many design educators are also locked into systems that evolved in response to teaching grads to perform tasks required by employers from another era. Most cannot adapt to the need to offer the integrated array of tools designers need, and accreditation bodies have no incentive to encourage change.

Design work is now done in integrated, multidisciplinary teams. Guiding students in building relationships across “the deep gulfs of understanding between design and other disciplines”⁴ requires experience doing it.

I recommend a requirement that design educators have at least five years of experience working in major consultancies, corporations or organizations. Many become teachers right after graduating from the very schools where they teach. Many do not keep up with design and design process evolution. Many practicing designer/design managers participate

in shaping the education process by making presentations at conferences, which educators rarely see, and providing internships. Smart students with career ambitions beyond sitting at a computer screen quickly realize the limitations of their education and so consider an MBA.

To stay current with the latest design thinking, designers and professors should read *BusinessWeek*, follow the online links, and study the Web sites of leaders like IDEO, Design Continuum, The Idea Factory, Doblin Group, University of Cincinnati and Institute for Design at Illinois Institute of Technology. I suggest learning how design became a critical business function at Whirlpool, JCI, Nissan, Samsung and Ben Q, and scouring the Web sites of the Design Management Institute for conference presentations and other organizations.

It has never been easy to describe design, but ‘they’ get it now

In the defunct British magazine *Design*,⁵ I described a panel about American design in New York moderated by Ralph Caplan, one-time editor of *ID* magazine. The presenters were Jay Doblin, pioneer and guru of design planning and methodology, Lella Vignelli, a designer of furniture, exhibitions and interiors, and Chuck Mauro whose industrial design work focused on human factors. When they had finished, Caplan asked if they were all in the same business. They said, “Yes.” In his new book Caplan writes (a bit romantically), “design is deliciously applicable to almost everything, almost everywhere, the design process is inclusive to the point of non-definition.”⁶

It has been a long, hard struggle, but organizations now understand that design has more value than simply producing artifacts. Some use the design process, “design thinking,” as an integrator and facilitator for innovation, a means of strategizing about the future, identifying new markets and developing products. And some recognize that a “great product” like an iPod creates emotional bonds with consumers, generates excitement and provides a shorthand for a company to talk about itself and for everyone to talk about the company.

Toward a solution—The professional model for design education

Only the University of Cincinnati is structured to provide students with internships or ‘co-ops,’ real-world educational experiences, during which they learn to collaborate, communicate, strategize, interpret, adapt and lead. Through five non-consecutive internships, alternating with quarters in the classroom, design students test their design, technical, writing, presentation and relationship-building skills. They often work side-by-side with incredible people and are exposed to an array of business and cultural contexts that will become available to them when they graduate. Many companies later

hire their interns because of the relationships built and the talent and intelligence they exhibited.

And, equally important, the curriculum is informed by student feedback.

Medical education has always incorporated work experience. The *New Yorker* magazine, in its Annals of Medicine series, describes Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston as the only hospital in the country “to require surgical residents to demonstrate proficiency in simulated [surgical] procedures in order to advance to the next year.”⁷

“Though surgical skills can improve with practice,” Dr. Daniel Jones, the chief of minimally invasive surgery there, said, “medical schools shouldn’t encourage students with poor hand-eye coordination or other severe limits in psychomotor ability.” Instead of letting them become surgeons, as at other schools, they are encouraged to move on to specialties that may suit them better.

This kindness should be extended to design students, who through internships, will learn whether or not they have the combination of form, intellectual and personal skills to succeed in a career in design.

Changes in the marketplace

Organizations building brands in the U.S. no longer rely solely upon mass-market advertising to reach consumers. They seek new ways to connect with consumers, or more precisely, to be invited into their lives.

And as a result, the design of products, communications, services and environments, has become more important than ever before. Organizations are eager to incorporate the process by which designers learn about consumer/user needs into their cultures to enable designers to create delightful experiences that enhance consumer’s lives through all of the above.

The future is now

Enrollment in design schools is strong. Design is a hot topic. Now that the value of design and design process are being discovered by non-designers, will the study of design be confined to design schools?

Even designers who become individual contributors need to learn how to get things done through other people.

Today, every designer is involved in design management or leadership (whether or not they are a Design Manager). Many are being asked to take responsibility for how a brand or category of brands is experienced by the customer across all touch points. Many are responsible for developing innovative products, communications, environments and services in ways compelling to consumers who may not have known they want or need them.

Being a successful designer or design manager today also requires an understanding of business, marketing and sales. Why must so many design students wait until graduation to get hit on the head by the real world when they could have gained experience with it through internships? **CA**

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- 1 The Idea Factory’s Philosophy, www.ideafactory.com.
- 2 R. Khurana, N. Nohria and D. Penrice, *Working Knowledge Newsletter*, *Harvard Business School Newsletter*, February 21, 2005.
- 3 Daniel Askr, “Vocational School for the Elite,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2005.
- 4 John Heskett, professor of Design at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, INDEX: *Designmatters* no. 10, July 20, 2005.
- 5 RitaSue Siegel, “Getting Started in Design Today—Managing Expectations,” *Design* 397, January 1982, pp. 22–27.
- 6 Ralph Caplan, *Cracking The Whip: Essays On Design And Its Side Effects* (Fairchild Books & Visuals, 2005).
- 7 Jerome Groopman, “A Model Patient,” *New Yorker*, May 2, 2005.