Design Thinking and the Need for Grit

Design has become conceptual in that it is no longer perceived merely as a form of giving life to a product, a visuality or an object only. Design has been steadily expanding into the corporate strategy world; organisations are increasingly applying design methods to develop their competitive advantage.

This growing interest in design may be linked to the increasing role of sociocultural environment in consumer decisioning. In other words, as culture and lifestyle are rapidly shifting, organisations need to revamp their businesses to remain relevant.

Design methodology is driven by consumer insight; what they care about and what interests them. Design practice is focused on consumer empathy and emphasises experimentation and collaboration. Design can change the way companies strategise by providing frameworks to solve the key questions of what do next and how to do it with the consumer in focus.
The design process begins with understanding the challenge, connecting with the consumers, then defining the findings. It is followed by an ideation or brainstorming process that leads to the prototyping phase that tests the viability of the ideas. This kind of experimental iteration allows designers to develop raw concepts into the final design that is viable, feasible and desirable.

Design in its very notion has shifted shape; it’s no longer designing for people, but designing with people and it points to the state of designing by people.

*Jane Fulton Suri,* the Executive Design Director at IDEO talks about a concept called the inspiring cycle. People’s behaviour inspires designers and people are more conscious about design and have more connection to designers, once they realise that they can bring something to life together. This leads to mutual respect.

**GRIT**

Grit is a non-cognitive skill of perseverance and passion for long-term goals, identified by *Angela Duckworth,* a leading researcher in the science of grit. According to her, “when you consider individuals with equal talent, the grittier does better”. Grit appears to be a better indicator of success and happiness than either IQ or talent.

Grit is being resilient in the face of failure and has deep commitments to a long term goal. Finns call the perseverance and determination “sisu”, the mindset of not giving up; grit is when you combine sisu with passion that endures.

*But how is design method linked to grit?*

Duckworth identified the following four traits that gritty people have in abundance. My objective is to link these traits to organisations and individuals who apply design methods. I aim to highlight the existence of grit in the design process and make people realise the both the potential and urgency to become grittier. In my view, being gritty is
essential for successful design projects. Grit and design have a lot in common as they are built on similar pillars:

**Interest**
Applying design thinking is not a job, it’s a lifestyle. Design methods will exceed your working hours because it’s a holistic way of thinking that can be applied to designing a service, an entire business or even just developing your cooking skills. One of the key characteristics of a great designer is the curiosity to explore novel ideas in a human-centered manner. Design focused organisations have a deep commitment to being relevant and human-centric.

**Practice**
Practice is a key factor for success and also for grit. Designers should value practice and exploration in a collaborative fashion. Practising and feedback are the backbones of ideating and prototyping. Anders Ericsson, the renowned psychologist who specialises in the science of peak performance, elaborates: “anytime you can focus your performance on improving one aspect, that is the most effective way of improving performance”.

Deliberate practice involves leaving your comfort zone and engaging in activities beyond your current abilities. Ericsson argues that it is not only the duration of the practice that matters (argues against the 10,000 hours rule) but the willingness and drive to practice. In other words, you can practice 10,000 hours and you’re still not guaranteed to master the skill, as what really matters is the quality of the practice.

**Purpose**
Designers are inspired by people’s behaviour and aim to design with them. This relationship is evolving again; the main objective is not to gain insights into the people anymore. Instead, designers want to help people discover things about themselves. This is the shift from design with people to design by people. The main purpose of today’s design is to empower people to apply design principles themselves. Eventually (in my opinion), the purpose of design is to drive positive change globally and improve the quality of life.
Hope

The mindset of prototyping and failing until you find the relevant solution builds not only resilience to failure but develops grit. Hope is the belief that there is something you can do to find a solution for the identified problem, and hope should be present during the entire design process. Hope needs active, hands-on participation that is fueled by future-facing and optimistic attitude.

Design thinking as passion that endures

I’ve never seen a designer who wants to create mediocre work. Design thinking is not for quitters because it requires systematic focus and the ability to iterate with an open mind. It is a whole-brain thinking process and requires a solution-focused attitude. A short-term passion won’t guide you through the systematic design process and won’t fuel your imagination. James C. Collins said that “good is the enemy of great”, and that is a very much applicable to the principles of design attitude; if you aim high, good just won’t do it.

Design method and adaptability

Design is also about adapting. Adapting to the consumer’s needs to find relevant solutions, adapting the prototypes to achieve the best results, adapting mindsets to build empathy. As Ericsson pointed out in his newest book ‘Peak’, adaptability is a powerful skill that drives success. He suggested that cognitive and psychological adaptations relate directly to expert performance. What others might perceive as luck or talent in successful people in reality is the simple ability to cognitively and psychologically adapt to certain scenarios. Practising design is a great way to engage in cognitive adaptations, as the iteration of convergent and divergent thinking requires an adaptive mind.

Design mindset as “growth mindset”
Duckworth pointed out that growth mindset develops grit. Growth mindset is an idea developed by Carol Dweck at Stanford University. It is the belief that your ability to learn is not fixed and you can develop it. Dr. Dweck has shown that when kids learn about their brain’s adaptability to challenges, they are more likely to persevere when they fail as they don’t think of failure as a permanent condition. When designers prototype, they count in the possibility of failure. And, just like children, they don’t believe that failure is a permanent state, but an opportunity to develop and prototype the idea further. Iteration can be helpful to develop a growth mindset. A design mindset is not problem-focused, it is solution focused and action oriented.

**Grit is contagious**

There is nothing more exciting than being surrounded by gritty people and share the passion and perseverance even if it’s a different subject. In my view, gritty people are the ones who are able to shape and create long-term change, novelty and development. A gritty environment fuels growth and improves productivity. Being gritty is also a responsibility; we are responsible for making grit contagious and helping the future generations to implement this skill. As Ericsson says, the noblest human ability is to improve ourselves consciously, and that makes us human beings, or as he calls Homo Exercens, the practising man.

The future facing question is: how can we all become Homo Exercens in our work and our personal lives to develop life-changing skills?