



Late by design



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 by [Marc Buyens \(@mbuyens\)](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com
 url: <http://www.xpragma.com/view137.php>

Design thinking is the new mantra. Redesigning the enterprise and our society. But will it succeed where so many other approaches have failed?

Over the past couple of weeks, we've been following the discussions on the theme of "design thinking" on the [Unstructure website](#). Bruce MacGregor, Managing Partner for IDEO, initiated the debate with his post [How does design thinking give companies a competitive advantage?](#)



The overall concept of design thinking as a better approach for innovation within organisations is attractive and this certainly explains part of the present enthusiasm for it, not to say the present hype. However, while looking closer, very little of this is fundamentally new. Most of the methods and tools that are used in design thinking are also used in other approaches and methods that try delivering new value through innovation.

So, knowing that none of these other approaches has been found to be the miracle solution, why will design thinking be the better path?

Unfortunately, we fear it will not be and this for the reasons explained by Noah Raford in his post [The coming boom and bust of design thinking](#), where he states that *"Whatever our speciality, we are most often engaged to bring a given product, building, or service to life that has already been substantially conceived by others before them"*.

Same as for any other attempt to drive change, improvement, knowledge building, innovation... the potential outcome is largely determined by the starting context and the ability you have (or don't have) to change this context. Therefore, as we have already written in earlier posts, in most cases, the success of a certain method must not necessarily be viewed as the proof for the value of the method but rather as the confirmation that the right conditions were in place allowing the method to succeed.

However, as we all know, changing starting conditions is hard, very hard, if not impossible. Consequently, the majority of our initiatives will not live up to their promises.

It will not be different for design thinking.

Starting conditions. We know them very well. Management knows them very well. But there are a myriad of reasons for not changing them. So, consultants have to conceive the ultimate workaround that will deliver success against all odds. We should know better.

Last month, the Belgian national railroad company had to report a historically low score for the timeliness of their trains over the past year. Less than 90% of all trains were arriving on time.

As a result, the focus for this year will be on improving this aspect of the service. Very likely, scores of consultants will be contracted that will use approaches such as operational research, systems thinking, design thinking and perhaps even chaos theory, trying to find ways to

improve the service.

They will fail. The service will not improve.

Why?

Simply because today, the definition of timeliness at this railroad company is a train that is not more than six minutes late. ***Six minutes late.***

How on earth can a project to improve timeliness succeed in an environment where there is a mindset that not being on time is still OK?

This six minutes late mindset will feed through all procedures, all schedules, all decisions and all attitudes of employees, continuously allowing for small "glitches" to occur since well below the six minutes rule, but finally resulting in the complete failure of the system.

Using design thinking to conceive a better railroad system is OK, but first make sure that you are allowed to set the counter to zero.

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.



<http://www.facebook.com/marcb254>



<http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcbuyens>



<http://www.twitter.com/mbuyens>

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Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium
Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com



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