

# TRULY EMPLOYEE CENTRICITY? YES IT CAN! START APPLYING DESIGN THINKING

Maike Küper is an HR Innovation Consultant and Design Thinking Facilitator at Detecon in Germany. She facilitates teams and supports projects who want to work in a human-centred and creative way. During the next L&DTalks in October she will bring a key-note and a master class to reveal the secrets of Design Thinking. During the master class you will experience this very creative and effective approach at first hand. Employee centricity will not stay a slogan, but you will practice how you can really obtain it. This interview gives you already a preview.

## **You are a consultant experienced in design thinking working for Detecon. How did you come to design thinking?**

It was by coincidence really. I studied intercultural studies and during my master's degree, I became a research assistant at the Fraunhofer Institute IOF in Jena. In 2014, two colleagues started trying out design thinking. They were facilitating researchers and I was always there – we were a physicist, a marketing expert and an intercultural student, so that was a great interdisciplinary mix. In the beginning, when the academic staff saw the prototyping material like LEGO building blocks and PLAY-DOH, some were quite skeptical. But eventually they saw that getting closer to the customer leads to valuable insights that can help you in product development. After graduation, I was looking for a job where I could continue working on innovation and new ways of working. Detecon already had a Design Thinking community and ever since starting there in 2016, I've been doing very diverse projects in all kinds of departments and sectors. I love working with multidisciplinary teams, also international ones, on new ideas and enabling them to develop products and services that the users love.

## **Can you describe design thinking in a few sentences?**

The most important element is to focus on the user at all times. You don't design solutions for your management and you don't design a product that you like yourself. You base everything that you do on the users that you are looking at and that you talked to. Design thinking is an agile method, an iterative method so it really encourages you to experiment and try out solutions. You build a rough prototype and test it with the users to see what they like and what they don't. And if they don't think it's useful, you throw it away and start again with a different idea. At the moment, most companies set up huge programs and develop something for a year, and the customer only sees it when it's done – but if it's not successful, or a start-up put a rough version of it on the market 6 months before you, you wasted a lot of time and resources. We instead incorporate the user very early to make sure it's a desirable product or service. This also encourages a failure culture that is really helpful if you want to be innovative.

## **You mentioned user centricity. Haven't we been user-centric for years?**

No, most people haven't. They say they are, but when you ask them when the last time they talked to a user was, they normally fall silent. Especially managers who decide on budgets and projects are often very far away from the end user.

## **You mentioned 'agile'. This is also new in the L&D world, what do you mean by that?**

I don't mean agile project management like Scrum, but agile in the sense of the principles in the agile manifesto: Focus on people and interactions and make small steps while always being open to change. You iterate towards a solution in small steps with a heterogeneous team.

## **Why do you think design thinking is so popular?**

First of all: it looks fancy, and the name also sounds creative. There are a lot of colorful post-its, you're not sitting at a table with your laptop. You are moving, and it's fun. We are used to the thought that fun and work are not going together. Some people think when you have fun at work, you are probably not very productive. But that is wrong. When we enjoy what we are doing, we are more productive. Also, when working





in a small team in small iterations based on user feedback, there is a lot of interaction with people. You need to focus, there is no distraction, no e-mails. It's different from the 'multitasking working day' we usually have.

Furthermore, you get to a solution quite quickly. You have a myriad of ideas and a prototype after a few days, and we're more used to long projects and hierarchical decision-making.

### So is it a hype?

Yes. Some also say that the hype is already over, and many people misuse design thinking like other hyped methodologies. They just want to show: 'Hey I did this modern thing, I was super creative.' Then they go back to their old way of working. Many don't actually want to change – 'seeming' innovative is enough. Fortunately, that's not the majority, but if they don't do it the real way, the results are not good and then they say the method didn't work.

### Do you mean that they followed only the process behind it instead of the mind set?

Sometimes not even that. Sometimes people say: hey, I put ideas on post-its and we built a LEGO prototype and that was design thinking. They leave out the key element of putting the user in the focus and not your sales goals or your management perspective. This is the hard part of design thinking for traditional organizations: you really have to change your perspective and open up. And it's not only customers who misuse it, but also consultancies or agencies who sell it as an easy blueprint. '1 day design thinking and you're disruptive', and then they do fake user interviews. That of course damages the reputation of the method.

### Let's go back to the user-centricity since it seems so important. How does this work during a design thinking process? When you write down ideas, you shouldn't do it from sales perspective or a product designer perspective. I have seen you facilitating this process, but can someone internal also do this?

I'm pretty convinced that you need a facilitator, but it doesn't have to be an external one. If it's an internal one, I'd always recommend someone who is not in your team and has a different expertise so you're not in a double role. It's always nice to have someone in the room who can ask the stupid questions like 'Why are you doing this process this way? I don't get it.' So you can challenge the status quo. Of course, an interdisciplinary team setup is even stronger.

**You start with user interviews which give you a kind of an image of them, who they are, how they feel. But how can you keep this image constantly in your mind when the users are not part of the team? Isn't there always a threat that you start thinking from your own perspective?**

Yes. That's the most important job of the facilitator, to let you know: 'Hey, is this idea great for yourself or for your user?' It takes some time to get used to it because in most jobs you are not forced to do so often. This is totally fine, it is my job as a facilitator to remind you. The great thing is that people start incorporating this mind-switch quite quickly and continue doing it in their daily work. Empathy is so important and it helps in all kinds of situations.

**At the start, it was indeed a shock for me when I sent you the challenge we wanted to work on and you replied 'Hey, we have to discuss this. This is a challenge from the organization's perspective, not from the user.'**

Yes, but that's normal and that's our job. It's always the first step where we have to be the bad cop. (laughs) You have to explain that it's now 'how do we make the user happy first' versus 'how do we make the management happy first'. No company will survive by putting the boss behind every product idea.

### How do you get 'traditional' management involved in this exercise since they decide about resources? How do you get them on board in this way of working?

The first 'touch point' is the assignment clarification with the responsible manager. We are quite strict here – if they can't accept that it's a process with an open result, we won't even start. You can't say 'I want this collaboration App, please use Design Thinking'. During the process, we have regular touch points where they come and see the progress. We normally involve them after the interviews so they hear the direct user quotes. It often contains feedback that never gets to them, especially when it is negative, because in the normal communication chain it is filtered. They come a second time when we have first tested prototypes. Here, they can give some input how this could be implemented or which experts or responsible people we should talk to, and they can help to prioritize which is the best idea.

This involvement helps to create ownership and they know what you are doing and why. For them, it's also a mindset change, especially when they are very finance- or technology-focused. And without their consent, of course, you usually can't implement.

### What are success factors?

So many. The first one is the assignment clarification to set the right expectations and requirements. If you don't do this, chances are very high the team will be frustrated with the result and not be able to implement what the users asked for. You also need a good team, meaning people open to try out the method. A multidisciplinary team is best, different backgrounds, hierarchy levels, age etc. They need to engage: The responsibility for the result is not with the facilitator but with the team. If the team doesn't do interviews or can't think of ideas, nothing is going to happen. Be careful with having the responsible manager in the team itself, because it can block some people in being really crazy and free with ideas, but it depends on the personality of course. The team members don't have to know each other upfront. The phase that is most important in my view is the interviews. It is difficult when you're not used to it. You have to ask quite often 'why?' You need to find out what the users 'feel' about certain issues they struggle with. What stories do they have? The quality of the exploration makes or breaks the

outcome. Every step you take is based on the user insights. If you do a bad exploration, nothing interesting will come out later in the process. There are many success factors for the facilitators: you have to be flexible because you have to follow the group, but at the same time you have to know when to stop them when discussions become ineffective. Also, you have to know many different techniques to bring the team to the next stage - it is impossible to follow a cookbook for success.

#### Why is the user testing during the process so important?

After the interviews, you analyzed, ideated and prototyped with the team. Sometimes during these steps you decided something that was not in the interest of the user, and you can only find out if you check with them again. User feedback can feel uncomfortable, but this has to do with our culture of wanting to be perfect. We have to get rid of this perfectionism because otherwise we are not open enough. We can't prepare everything 100% before launching it. We might be too late, a

competitor might launch a 70% ready solution before us, or there is a new technology making our product obsolete.

#### Why can Design Thinking help HR and L&D specifically?

One specific aspect is to work on the employee experience. Many companies have realized they need to focus on the customer experience. But many companies forget that their employees are also users. If you have a great service for your external customers, but the internal process is super-complicated, that's not ideal. Also employees are used to work with smooth processes when they order something online at home. 'Why can't we have the same experience at work?' Furthermore, if your internal service like your onboarding process is really bad, employees will have negative emotions and the whole mood in the organization can suffer from it. Fred Reichheld, an American author, once said 'You can't be the best place to buy if you're not the best place to work', and I strongly believe that. ■



**Geert Nijs** is a Learning Architect at KBC. Last years he became passionate about the possibilities of social technology. He combines this passion with exploring the future of learning. He is investigating social learning at KBC. He also gives keynote sessions about social collaboration and communities.



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