White collar or no collar: the choice for designers

High-profile success stories have shattered the glass ceiling for creatives, says *Rachel Abrams*, revolutionising our idea of what makes an effective design leader

Times are changing for the UK's design talent. Whether Jonathan Ive's mooted succession to the top job at Apple proves feasible or is simply industry tittle-tattle, the fact that such an unashamedly creative talent could be realistically touted for one of the highest-profile jobs in industry is significant in itself.

Some of the barriers which separated designers from the upper echelons of business have been lowered by the success of Ive and his peers, making it easier for ambitious creative talent to progress in organisations. But many designers still feel a 'them and us' culture persists, particularly in business.

Our notions of design leadership are changing, as business acumen, an ability to deal with internal politics and conflict resolution increasingly become pre-requisites for the role. A number of initiatives in the UK and abroad combine design teaching with elements of an MBA. So what more can be done?

This year, the Design Council is converting the recommendations of its 2007 *High-Level Skills for Higher Value* report into practical initiatives. One of these efforts, the NextNet programme, aims to give designers skills to influence boardroom life, harnessing the leadership qualities and transferable business skills it takes to ensure more smart-thinking design practitioners ascend the org charts.

As business schools churn out MBAs versed in number-crunching, innovation, leadership and opportunity-spotting, the design profession is keen to keep up and nurture its own next generation of leaders with equivalent, transferable skills. The hope is that, together, they will communicate and collaborate better to run businesses that conceive, »

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Nick Leon on the 'glass ceiling' and Design London

Nick Leon is director of Design London, an ambitious project involving the Royal College of Art and Imperial College London's Tanaka Business School. Design London has created multi-disciplinary courses for MA, MEng and MBA students offering insights into design and its role in successful innovation.

What is the thinking behind Design London?
The Cox Review identified the need to broaden awareness and transfer knowledge between disciplines. We have so much talent in the UK, but very often it's not utilised by businesses. They tend to treat designers as someone to bring in when there's an emergency: if the product has a bad hair day, a designer needs to give it a cut and blow dry. Businesses need to be engaging design on a more strategic level.

We are creating four core elements to Design London: an academic programme with modules for businesspeople; a research agenda focused on demonstrating the value design methods bring to business; an incubator which demonstrates how our approach to design-led innovation leads to success; and a suite of technologies for visualisation.

How far can a designer progress in a corporate structure?
I started my career as a graduate product designer at IBM and I can think of plenty of designers I've worked with who were comfortable in a business arena. They were still great designers, but they learned to work in that environment. Jonathan Ive is a great example: his skills have transformed Apple. There is no glass ceiling that says you can't move upstairs.

How can Design London change things for the better?
Our MBA graduates will be filling the boardrooms of firms within a decade, perhaps earlier. We're going to make design a core, mandatory component of our MBAs. We want people in the boardroom making key strategic decisions who understand design. But we're also teaching business capabilities to our engineers and design students, so they can explain the value of what they do to businesspeople.

create and market globally competitive, effective products and services.

Inevitably, some designers are more suited to business than others; a rare few, committed to their craft, remain focused only on being creatives, while others, like Oliver King at service design consultancy Engine, are willing and able to think strategically, facilitate understanding across disciplines and appreciate collaboration. Not everyone needs to lead, but those who can should be able to consider leadership as a viable option, introduced to role models and given a path to pursue.

What do CEOs do exactly?
So what are those leadership qualities and skills? It's subtler than swapping a subscription from *Creative Review* to *Harvard Business Review*. If you asked designers what chief executives do, many would be struck by visions of men in grey suits. At one end of the scale, business leadership involves setting vision and strategy, making deals, brokering client relationships, answering to shareholders; on the other, it entails running the organisation day to day, managing the infrastructure, projects and personnel.

Michael Eisner, chief executive of Disney, says there are four facets of executive-level leadership: "The boss is required to be an example, be a nudge, be there, and be a 24-7 idea generator. That is, he or she must set the tone, motivate others, put in consistent face time, envision and inspire." In a design business, are leadership roles necessarily hands-off? Dick Powell, co-founder of British industrial design practice Seymour Powell, says not: "You don't deny your craft as you progress through an organisation. Rather, you become senior by virtue of your talents."

Maybe you get to that envisioning exercise once or twice a year, says Powell, but the rest of the time is spent on relatively boring but 'fantastically necessary' sales, presentations, deal-making and team management, not to mention financial accounting, all "without going nuts just because you've started to manage other people".

Once the roles are defined in terms of activities, relationships and outcomes, you can see common ground between design and effective leadership. Put job titles and vocational qualifications to one side, and consider how designers and effective leaders think, rather than what they do.

In his 2007 book, *The Opposable Mind*, the chair of the University of Toronto Business School, Roger Martin, adapts a famous line by F. Scott Fitzgerald to argue that leaders have "the predisposition and the capacity to hold two [or more] diametrically opposed ideas" in their heads and then "without panicking or simply settling for one alternative or the other" can "produce a synthesis that is superior to either opposing idea." In other words, they think like designers.

How do designers come to think this way? It starts with process: besides raw individual creativity,

designers live and breathe within a collaborative project arc, from definition to delivery. Within this conceptual framework, they observe and analyse, as business consultants would, but go beyond this, predicting the future by inventing it. Sensitive to context and end users' mindsets, they synthesize and juxtapose, imagining beyond what currently exists. It's how they innovate.

In managing other people, designers call on core skills, first learned, then dredged from experience of the design process. Chris Fahey, co-founder of information design practice Behavior, is author of the thoughtful blog, graphpaper.com. He picked up a wealth of transferable skills and conceptual thinking techniques at art school that, without an MBA or design management training, he applies to his everyday job: "I learned to champion and defend my ideas… present and test-drive concepts, distinguish between taste, technical skill and empirical efficiency… recognise talent in my peers, and collaborate effectively."

Arguably, with experience, designers can handle surprises, contingency and fluid uncertainty better »

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Martin Darbyshire, Tangerine

than those trained to minimise risk and eliminate the unpredictable. When making complex trade-offs, they are grateful for some definitive parameters while still drawing from their own personal experience and insights to infer from what they see.

Michiel Schwarz, an associate of the Design Academy Eindhoven, says that "what sets designers apart is our values: our capacity to be reflexive, to empathise, to step in and out of the client's shoes, to understand context and to earn trust".

Designers have no monopoly on these attributes, processes and values, and nor are they without shortcomings, so why have design thinkers become so compelling to business? Because companies recognise their value as a competitive differentiator in a global consumer economy. And the act of design is no longer just an exercise in executing someone else's strategy, or a styling afterthought. Influence from within design studios can drive corporate strategy.

Blogs and entrepreneurs
Ive, chief designer at Apple, is a poster boy for designers spinning corporate straw into gold. In the last few months, soundings from the blogosphere – specifically from Jess McMullin's bplusd.org – have raised questions about a post-Jobs succession plan. Calls for Ive to ascend to the Jobs throne have implications that reach far beyond Apple.

Such speculation suggests that from within a corporation's in-house design department, hands-on designers can have huge strategic impact, perhaps enough to grab the board's attention. Once out of the studio, they may have what it takes, in the right environment, to become effective business leaders.

Martin Darbyshire, chief executive of London design consultancy Tangerine, is more circumspect: designers' capacity to lead depends on the kind of business they're in. There's no reason why, in the right context, designers can't be visionary leaders. An amazingly gifted designer, a visionary master craftsman, paired with a strong CEO, works fantastically well, if the primacy of the designer's talents is respected. For others, he says, "a designer's best contribution might be to keep out of the boardroom and stay in the studio".

Indeed, designers can feel uncomfortable and unprepared for the responsibility. When consulting with clients, the design enterprise can act as a form of change-management, but designers on certain kinds and scales of projects may retreat from the transformative corporate impact of their design decisions. They may fear they'll be told it's not their place to inform strategy, or manage change, even though their design work is the manifestation of a client's desire to transform their business.

This partly suggests why, in spite of their credentials and capacity, there aren't more designers in leadership positions. As companies vary in size and personnel navigate all stages of their career trajectories, leadership takes various forms. The transition from designer to design manager is arguably the greatest leap, from minding your own business to minding the whole business.

Les Wynn is proud to be a design manager. A genuine design ambassador within Xerox, he comes from the craft, influences other departments to integrate design with wider business processes, inspires, mentors and extends the skills of his team and cares about the quality of their work. Even with an MBA under his belt, Wynn remarks that "the provision of support on the way up, for designers learning to lead, can be highly variable."

So should designers be learning this stuff in art school? How should the places they work change to find, keep and nurture the right calibre of creative leader? Many designers admit they opted for art school over other vocational training, choosing no-collar over white-collar environments. Only a handful of students will want to acquire those management skills and may do so more effectively on the job, through work experience.

'The point at which an organisation moves into opportunity-finding is where there is room for designers to lead'

Mat Hunter, IDEO

Though evidently he's figured it out, Mat Hunter, interaction designer at IDEO, wishes that during his degree, he'd had more exposure to social and business entrepreneurs: "…to be inspiring about impact, to make us think about what we want to do with our capabilities. We could use the help to frame where to play and why, especially now everyone is talking about innovation, about doing more than just making money for clients."

Suits and felt tips
Designers might be getting in their own way. Often kept out of strategic decision-making, their bunker mentality might be inhibiting them from thinking as leaders and acquiring transferable skills. As Darbyshire says, the environment in which designers work is a major factor in their success as leaders. An institutional divide persists between the 'suits' and the 'felt-tip fairies', as the client services and the design services teams might disparagingly refer to each other. Mixing up the seating in an organisation can be a significant gesture towards integrating these two, and establishing trust and respect for one another.

Even then, are there places for designers at the boardroom table? Not necessarily, if the business requires a tolerance and objectivity for hard facts, a head for numbers, metrics, pricing structures, the discipline to assimilate volumes of data to make small decisions, or the rigour to present business cases in terms senior management will relate to.

Hunter says: "It depends whether the environment is conducive, whether opportunity is important to organisations. The point at which an organisation moves beyond operational efficiency and problem-solving towards opportunity-finding is the point where there is room for designers to lead."

No matter which direction innovators or leaders come from, the whole team is strengthened if they can continue to contribute their expertise, learn to talk each other's languages and share equally the burdens and triumphs of running the organisation.

Designers can afford to think of themselves as organisational change agents without surrendering their craft skills. Businesspeople can become more fluent in schematic process so they can ride out the uncertainties of iterative innovation to deliver meaningful value to customers.

If designers can articulate themselves in terms of their actions, experience, and outcomes, rather than a vocabulary of fixed roles, they stand a good chance of designing effectively in interdisciplinary teams and complex organisations. If they can bust their own preconceptions and overcome a legacy which has constrained their ability to lead, they could benefit others and themselves, as they could reconcile the business of delivering meaningful user experiences with the creative discipline of making a profit. In the end, CEOs are only temporary heads of institutions; designers are designers for life.