New Research Reveals the Impact of Design Thinking
Lisa Perrine, Ed.D.

Those of us who practice design thinking (DT) recognize it generates successful solutions that users readily embrace. And a recent study found companies that focus on design have 32% higher revenues with 56% higher profits than those that do not.[i] But the specific reasons for design thinking's success have not been well understood – until now. New academic research from Jeanne Liedtka and Kristina Jaskyte Bahr[ii] offers important insights into why design thinking delivers valuable outcomes.

Liedtka and Bahr studied 471 individuals who practice three DT activities: researching users, generating ideas, and testing multiple prototypes. Their research sought to understand how people use design thinking methods, and the outcomes that these methods generate. They also measured whether a person's level of design thinking experience can predict specific outcomes. While Liedtka and Bahr stress that current findings are preliminary and require further research, their study offers several important perspectives.

Three core design thinking activities, used together, generate better solutions than just one or two. The study indicates that user-centered research and idea generation are most used by DT practitioners, while prototyping and testing are used less often. Liedtka and Bahr observe that innovators often enthusiastically embrace user research and ideation, only to fall in love with one idea at the expense of testing others. Yet developing multiple ideas and testing them with users is essential to developing the best solution, and creating ownership that leads to quick adoption.

Trust building and cross-disciplinary collaboration are two of design thinking's most valuable outcomes. Practitioners indicate that trust building is an important DT outcome, roughly equal in value to creating better solutions. The study shows this trust is generated by five DT practices: team diversity, active listening, diverse ideas, user feedback, and real-world experiments. Adding a sixth DT practice, creating design criteria, increases collaboration and provides access to new resources. Liedtka and Bahr note that trust and collaboration across an organization have a powerful impact on both efficiency and innovation.

Successful outcomes require limited design thinking experience, and individuals with moderate DT experience offer the same value as DT experts. This finding indicates that design thinking can be learned and successfully practiced by non-designers. The benefits of trust building and cross-disciplinary collaboration are accessible to those with little or no DT experience. Moderate DT experience is valuable in developing better product and service solutions and implementing them efficiently. However, the study shows no incremental value of extensive DT experience in creating beneficial outcomes.

Liedtka and Bahr's research illuminates how design thinking delivers benefits at the project team and organizational level. For teams tasked with delivering a new product or service, DT is a vehicle for successful designs that are quickly adopted. For organizations, DT breaks down division barriers and builds trust amongst coworkers. Perhaps most important, this study shows how limited experience with design thinking can still yield significant benefits. In other words, a little bit of design thinking from everyone delivers measurable value to individuals, to teams, and to the entire organization.

[i] Sheppard, B., Kouyoumjian, G., Sarrazin, H., & Dore, F. (2018). The business value of design. *McKinsey Quarterly*. Retrieved from https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-design/our-insights/the-business-value-of-design

[ii] Liedtka, J., & Bahr, K.J. (2019). Assessing design thinking's impact: Report on the development of a new instrument DSWP 19-13. *Darden Working Paper Series.* University of Virginia Darden School of Business.