



Anchoring Innovation

When companies work with development and innovation processes, they often lock themselves into a particular approach, based on an idea about the intended outcome. However, new research into strategic design shows that it can be beneficial to shift one's attention from the specific problem to the broader, underlying issue and to examine how the development process is initiated. It also makes a difference how the innovation process is anchored strategically in the company. These are some of the key insights that industrial designer Brett Patching has reached in his Ph.D. project at the Aarhus School of Architecture.

By Mads Nygaard Folkmann

In many cases, design research is about looking behind the premises that determine why design and design processes are the way they

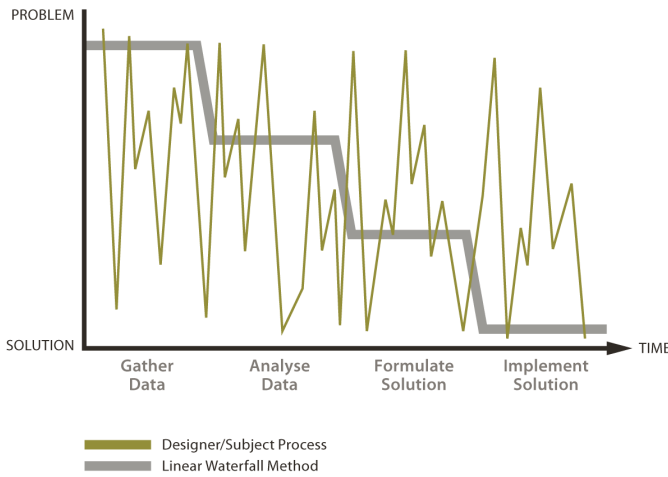
are – and clarifying them to achieve optimisation. In a study of strategic design Brett Patching's Ph.D. project takes a close look at the phase of a company's development process where projects are initiated, for example with a view to developing a product; this is a phase that is characterised by a lack of tools for giving the development process the proper direction.

Benefits for Companies

The underlying idea of Brett Patching's work is that both companies and designers can benefit from focusing on what happens initially, as the groundwork is laid for the development process.

"It's a relatively new approach to the development process, which has only been around since the 1990s," Brett Patching explains.

"At the same time, there is a degree of confusion in the field with many different and vague expressions. For example, there are expressions like early phase innovation, fuzzy front end of innovation, scenario planning, strategic innovation, preject, concep-



Adapted from: Conklin, J. (2006) *Dialogue Mapping*, John Wiley & Sons, England

An important insight in Brett Patching's Ph.D. project is that complex problems cannot be solved in a linear fashion as in the uninterrupted waterfall in the model; instead, they must be approached in an ongoing exchange between asking questions about the problem and offering possible answers in the form of partial solutions. Furthermore, it is a strategic advantage to keep the problem definition open as long as possible in the development process in order to avoid excluding potential directions for the project while the team is still developing new insights.

tual design and strategic design. Meanwhile, each of these terms usually has a stakeholder with a particular agenda of defining and claiming a conceptual territory.”

One of the main ambitions of the Ph.D. project therefore is to look behind the words and turn to concrete observations in a wide range of Danish and foreign companies to examine the mechanisms that are involved in the early phase, and which can secure the success of the development project.

“If companies are to handle complex, open strategic issues concerning the future for themselves and their products, they need a certain openness, and here, it’s important to take a step back and ask some fundamental questions,” says Brett Patching.

“If the approach is truly open, then the team doesn’t know where they’ll wind up. In that situation it’s crucial to be willing to take that step back and openly ask, ‘where do we go from here?’ In my experience, companies are interested in learning more about how to ask this question.”

Applying a Variety of Methods

In his project Brett Patching combines methods from design and organisation theory, which enrich each other.

“I’m exploring the knowledge that’s required to promote project

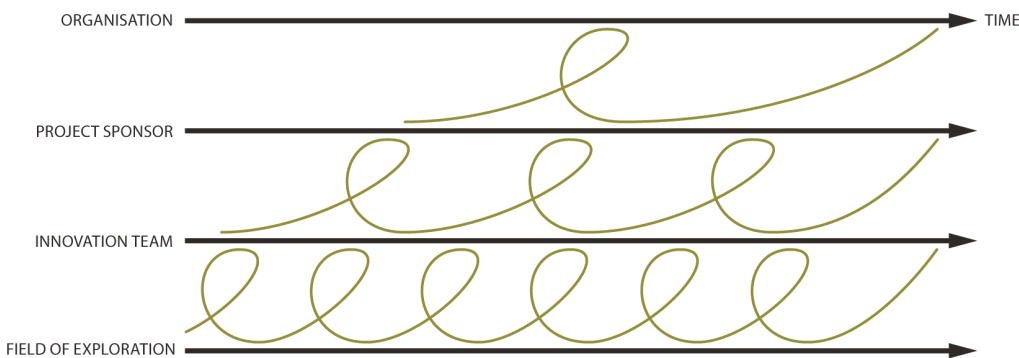
dynamics and development and trying to make that knowledge explicit,” Brett Patching explains.

“Among other things, I look at the dynamics between problem and solution in addressing a type of problems that are so open that they’re hard to define. The design theorist Horst Rittel called this type of problems *wicked problems*, and companies can use them to develop an understanding of the routines and manoeuvres it takes to navigate in an uncertain future. It’s necessary to remain open all the time to reassess one’s understanding of the problem and restate one’s search perspectives accordingly. In this sense, it’s crucial to aim for partial solutions as a tool for grasping the issue better – rather than aiming for the end-solution right away,” says Brett Patching.

Brett Patching also considers the role of the team in companies’ development projects, not least how these projects are anchored in the organisation.

“In my Ph.D. project I’m also looking at the character of the team process, what the practices are like, and what tools the team has available. It’s in the team that the collaboration about the development process takes place, and any team can define its own method of innovation. At the same time, the interdisciplinary approach and the way it integrates knowledge perspectives make it

Flows of Insight and Change



Adapted from: Jaskov, J. & Patching, B (2009) *Managing Strategic Innovation*, Laboranova Co-creative Workshop

A development project will fail unless it is anchored strategically in the organisation. Anchoring begins with communication upward in the organisation. However, the farther up one goes, the rarer are the opportunities for reporting about the project and its insights. Brett Patching’s research indicates a need to invest more time in dialogue about the project upward through the organisational hierarchy to ensure that both the project sponsor and management grasp the team’s insights and are able to act on them.

possible to reach beyond one's knowledge horizon and thus gain new knowledge," says Brett Patching.

Strategic Anchoring

The main eye-opener for Brett Patching was that the survival of the development project relies on the project being anchored strategically in the organisation.

"You can have the best conceivable development project with lots of great ideas and new perspectives, but if the insights generated by the team aren't anchored in the organisation, there's little chance that it will go through," Brett Patching explains.

"This is an approach to development processes that designers aren't trained in, but which there's a great need to know about. Thus, the knowledge that's generated through my Ph.D. project can shed light on a key perspective of the innovation process, which both businesses and educational institutions should be more aware of."

Brett Patching has attempted to uncover how information about development projects is conveyed upward in the organisation.

"Typically, there are several levels to work through before a development project is anchored," says Brett Patching.

"Often, the project has trouble getting through to the higher levels in the organisation, so you have to make a strategic choice concerning what to say about the project. You have to develop a sort of strategic conversation with the project sponsor and further on to the management level."

Conveying Understanding Upward

To illustrate the need to prioritise the strategic anchoring, Brett Patching explains that software manufacturer SAP's Design Services Team typically devotes at least 25 percent of the resources in a development project to the political management of the position of project in the organisation. Sometimes, however, the anchoring can occur by coincidence.

"In one of the companies I work with, the development project achieved strategic anchoring as the result of a random meeting between the project manager and the director in completely unrelated context. That offered the project manager a chance to talk about the current project and the new approach that it invited," he says.

"Ultimately, the point is understanding – achieving understanding throughout the organisation for the new perspectives that were achieved as a result of the project," says Brett Patching.

Brett Patching's Ph.D. project is carried out at the Aarhus School of Architecture under the auspices of the Danish Centre for Design Research.

In the project Brett Patching works together with a number of companies: VIA DESIGN (DK), Radarstation (UK), SAP Design Services Team (USA), Workz (DK) and Novo Nordisk (DK).

Cover: Pilot strategy workshop in 2009 at Danmarks Radio; the participants are experimenting with new methods developed as part of Brett Patching's Ph.D. project. Photo: Gert Sterner

DANISH CENTRE FOR DESIGN RESEARCH

The Danish Centre for Design Research DCDR comprises the design researchers at the Aarhus School of Architecture, The Danish Design School, Designskolen Kolding and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. The DCDR aims to contribute to establishing a strong design research environment in Denmark and to strengthen the exchange of knowledge about design research and facilitate the identification of potential areas of collaboration for researchers, schools and enterprises, on a national as well as an international level.

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