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HOW DESIGN THINKING IS TRANSFORMING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE



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INTRODUCTION

This e-book examines the five phases of [design thinking](#), and how you can implement them into your training design to create truly impactful learning.

While traditional instructional design models are analytical and based on systems thinking, the work of learning and development leaders is also highly innovative and creative. Course design needs to follow proven methodologies, yet learners want to be engaged and perhaps even inspired to learn.

Can these two approaches meet and work together effectively? [LinkedIn's](#) 2019 Learning Industry Report lists “meeting learners where they are” as one of the top priorities for training departments who want to create meaningful learning experiences for employees. So, instructional design models are going to need to evolve with the modern learner in order to create compelling training.

“

Corporations are shifting to experience-based businesses, and learning is no different: we need to focus on the experience of the learner in order to be successful.

”

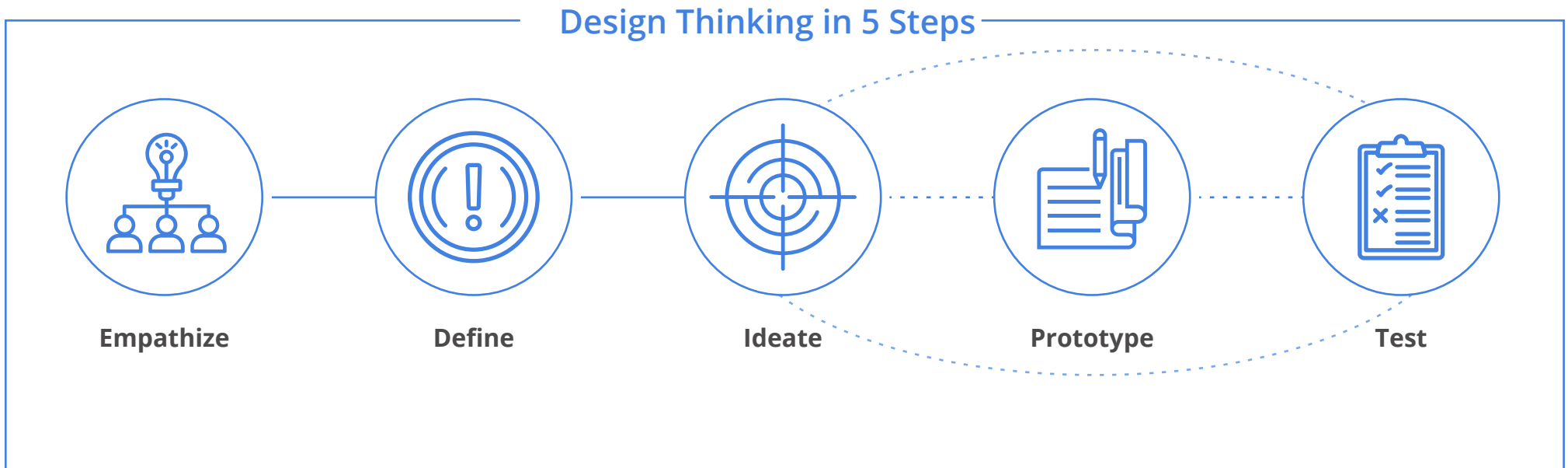
-Travis Jordan, CEO, Instructional Design Central-

WHAT IS DESIGN THINKING

Design thinking is a process in which we focus on the user, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems in an attempt to identify alternative strategies and solutions that might not be instantly apparent with our initial level of understanding. It's a way of thinking and working as well as a collection of hands-on methods.

Simply put, design thinking is empathetic and iterative - two **key traits** needed in learning and development. Design thinking does not replace instructional design; rather, it can enhance instructional design techniques.

There are many ways to interpret design thinking. One of the original approaches taught by Stanford's d.school and endorsed by the Interaction Design Foundation can fit in well with many instructional design models. It consists of five phases or steps:



EMPATHIZE



L&D managers often have to study and record the needs of the learners in their organization in order to build effective courses. However, the Empathize stage of design thinking is more than simply analyzing an audience's capabilities from a skills gap perspective.

Today's instructional designers need to go further and understand the feelings of their learners - to place themselves in the shoes of the learner in order to fully understand their goals, challenges, and perspectives. Such understanding can have far reaching effects on the course, such as level of language, choice of multimedia elements, style of assessments, and other aspects.

The Empathize stage goes even further. There also needs to be empathy for your subject matter experts (SMEs). Having a deeper understanding of your SMEs can facilitate relations, speed up the course development process, and ultimately, create better learning outcomes.



It's not 'us versus them' or even 'us on behalf of them.'
For a design thinker it has to be 'us with them.'

-Tim Brown, CEO and President of IDEO-



DEFINE

Without correctly defining a problem, it's nearly impossible to generate the necessary solution. In the famous words of management consultant Peter Drucker, **"You can't manage what you cannot measure."**

Businesses often prefer to quantify a problem by the numbers, but design thinking also allows for the definition stage to include qualitative aspects as well. The more accurately you define the problem, the stronger your focus will be.

Indeed, often times in the Define stage of design thinking, you may discover that training is not the solution at all; rather a change in process or systems is all that is needed in that department.

[Solenis](#) used a unique approach to defining the problem by carrying out an in-depth skills gap analysis so training could be tailored by individual employee's specific skill gaps.



We must design for the way people
behave, not for how we would
wish them to behave.

-Donald A. Norman-

IDEATE

The Ideate stage is a critical step of design thinking. Ideally, this is carried out by teams from different departments or groups, who generate potential solutions to the problem identified in the Define stage of design thinking. Collaboration goes a long way here.

Try to generate **as many ideas as possible**—more ideas means more potential solutions. All ideas should be considered and evaluated. It's about **leveraging the combined synergy of the group and deferring immediate judgment** so that increasingly creative solutions can be brought to the table for consideration.

It's also important not to narrow down the ideas too quickly between the Ideate phase and the Prototype phase. Bringing several ideas and approaches through to the Prototype phase allows the innovative nature of the process to sustained and for ideas to flow throughout the process as a whole.



“We spend a lot of time designing the bridge, but not enough time thinking about the people who are crossing it.”

-Dr. Prabhjot Singh-

PROTOTYPE



A prototype is simply a rough draft or preliminary version of an approach which provides a way to rapidly try out ideas without a large investment of time and money. It's an iterative process where the aim is to "fail" as quickly as possible, as each failure and adjustment brings you closer to the end design.

Paper and pencil sketches and storyboards, or taking photos of the whiteboard in the conference room, may not do the trick. There should be a process in place to create, distribute, and engage with prototypes so that they can be accessed anywhere anytime by teams and be dispersed geographically.

It's important not to spend too long on one prototype and **keep the empathetic attitude towards the learner in mind at all times**. Seek a software solution that can auto-produce blueprints, storyboards, mockups, and prototypes for a seamless handoff to team members.



User-centered design means understanding what your users need, how they think, and how they behave – and incorporating that understanding into every aspect of your process.



-Jesse James Garrett-



TEST

Design thinking is an iterative process that involves much testing and modification. This part of the design thinking process is often highly intertwined with the prototype phase. The Test phase is all about seeing what works in the real world, getting feedback, and refining (or ditching) prototypes.

For this process to work, be sure to test your solution with the target population through all of its iterations. **Let the users find the experience for themselves in order to get unbiased feedback, so they can evaluate the experience rather than measuring it against your explanation.** It's also important to be clear on which variable is being put through its paces on each test.

As the flow chart suggests, the Ideate, Prototype, and Test stages can form a virtuous cycle.

WAIT: Where Does ADDIE Fit into this Model?

The ADDIE model is the generic process traditionally used by instructional designers and training developers. The five phases - Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation - represent a dynamic, flexible guideline for building effective training and performance support tools.

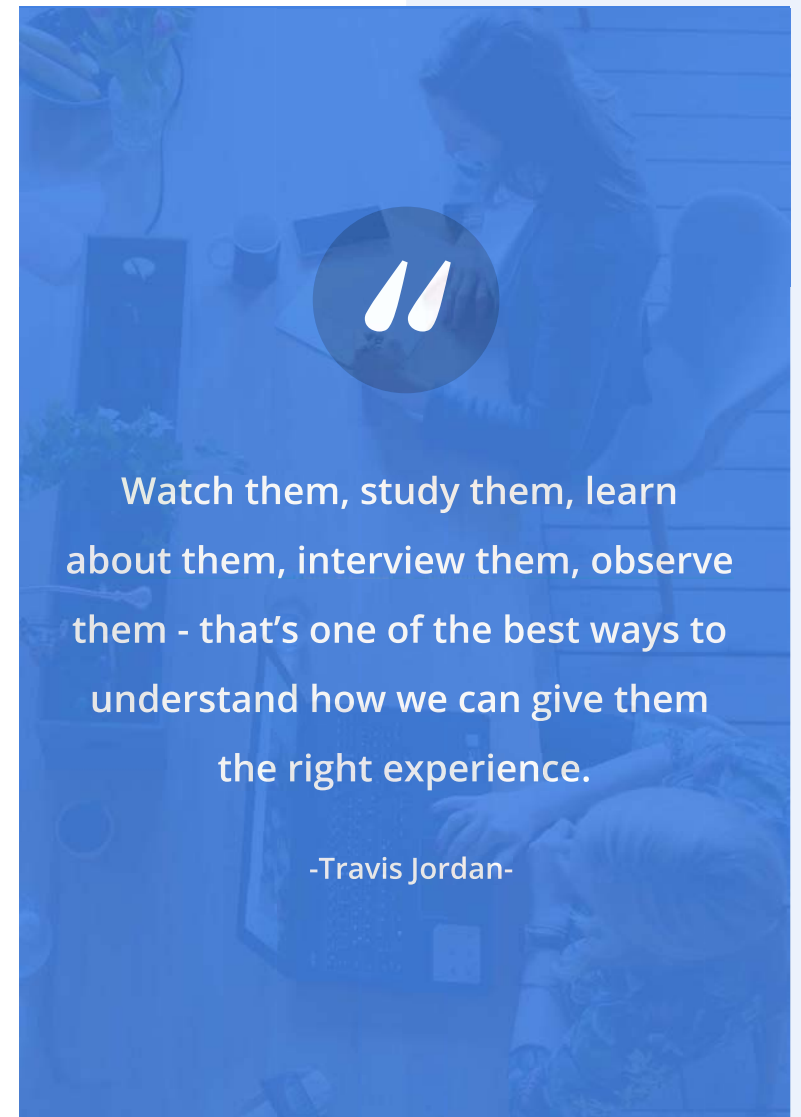
As mentioned earlier, design thinking does not replace ADDIE. Rather, many of the principles of design thinking can be inserted at various stages of ADDIE. For instance, the Empathize and Define phases of design thinking can be used in the Analysis phase of ADDIE. Ideate and Prototype of design thinking can be inserted in the Design and Development phases of ADDIE.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN IS NOW LEARNING EXPERIENCE DESIGN

Deloitte's 2016 [Global Human Capital Trends](#) report boldly advised HR to adopt design thinking, placing the employee experience at the center. Two-thirds of companies now believe complexity is an obstacle to business success and a barrier to growth in productivity. The numbers demonstrate this: **79% of respondents to the Deloitte survey rated design thinking an important or very important issue.**

Design thinking moves HR's focus beyond building programs and processes to a new goal: designing a productive and meaningful employee experience through solutions that are compelling, enjoyable, and simple. HR can move from serving as a "process developer" to an "experience architect." Design thinking empowers HR to reimagine every aspect of work: the physical environment, how people meet and interact, how managers spend their time, and how organizations select, train, engage, and evaluate their employees.

Travis Jordan, founder and CEO of Instructional Design Central, points out that organizations have long been focusing on the experience of their customers - customer experience - but now need to start thinking about the experience that they deliver to their learners. As such, there is now a trend of "LX," or learning experience, based on the principles of customer experience and even user experience, which has become a generally accepted practice in design and product management disciplines. "What's driving LX design is the experience of the user - what's happening positively and what's happening negatively as they experience content," notes Jordan in a recent [webinar](#).



Watch them, study them, learn about them, interview them, observe them - that's one of the best ways to understand how we can give them the right experience.

-Travis Jordan-

TRANSFORMING BEST PRACTICES WITH TECHNOLOGY

Learning is personal. As everyone has a different learning style, how can today's L&D professional create effective courses even when substantial time has already been spent on the Empathize phase of design thinking? **The key is making the learning adaptive. A best practice is to build courses and adopt technologies that adapt to learners at scale.**

Nick Howe, Chief Learning Architect at Area9 Learning and former Chief Learning Officer at Hitachi Data Systems, points out, "Regardless of how good the design work is, eventually the question becomes, how can you adapt to the needs of the learner, particularly in an elearning environment?" Indeed, in a small classroom setting, a superior instructor can potentially adapt the instruction technique to meet the needs of a handful of learners. But how does this work in organizations with thousands of employees who are dispersed geographically? It is best practice to build courses and adopt technologies that adapt to learners at scale.

In addition to building the course itself, the platform should also be able to perform administrative tasks, such as managing inbound training requests, conducting a needs analysis, surveying learners, and crowdsourcing training content among subject matter experts.

Since many of the tasks related to both the Empathize and Define phases of design thinking form an important part of the instructional design process, any and all findings, notes, and feedback are critical for the success of the learning initiative.

What is Adaptive Learning?

Adaptive learning is an **elearning** delivery method that adapts to each and every learner, recreating at scale what a tutor would be able to do on a one-on-one basis. Once the design work is done - design thinking principles with ADDIE, for example - a platform can use big data algorithms to replace human instructors.

The algorithms can adjust in real-time to every single learner, assessing their current state of knowledge, their motivation, how they happen to be feeling, whether they really understand a particular topic or whether they struggle.

As the goal is proficiency and getting employees back to work, assessments should also be built in real-time with remediation as necessary.

LEARNING DESIGN SYSTEMS

Experience counts: today's most successful L&D managers build courses with learning experience in mind. Design thinking principles incorporate empathy and iteration into the instructional design process. Combined with the right technology solution, managers can deliver the most effective learning experiences possible by incorporating design thinking into training development.

Synapse is changing how learning and development departments scale their training programs. Our Learning Design System automates and streamlines the entire training development process making training programs more effective and less time-consuming to create. Our customers leverage embedded best practices and a proven framework to collaborate on tasks like training requests, needs analysis, instructional design, storyboarding, prototyping, course development and more - all from one place.

SYNAPSE

Synapse empowers organizations around the world to automate and streamline their training development processes. Our Learning Design Systems enables learning teams and subject matter experts to design, develop, and scale corporate training in a fraction of the time and at a fraction of the cost of typical processes and tools. Studies show that it can take up to 90 hours to produce an hour of training content, Synapse reduces that number dramatically by automating the planning and design phase of content development and helps you turn every employee into an SME.

Automate and Streamline Training Development in your Organization with Synapse's Learning Design System

[Schedule a Demo](#)

A SPECIAL THANK YOU

Thank you to the following executives who contributed to the content of this e-book

Ryan Austin, CEO at Synapse • Bror Saxberg, CLO at Kaplan • Nick Howe, CLO at Area9 Learningv
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