



Picturing the art of business

Put creative design and MBA students together in the right environment and the best of business and innovation can rub off on both. INSEAD MBAs visit the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

Could you describe the place where you go to work without using words? That's the task that confronted 20 INSEAD MBA students on an exchange trip to the United States as part of an innovative theory that teaches the value of creativity in solving complex problems.

So-called "design thinking" has grown in vogue in the past 10 years, and was a concept coined by David Kelley at Stanford University's Institute of Design. The aim of the week-long field trip was for the MBA students to glimpse how design thinking is taught at the Art Center College of Design in southern California.

The idea was to get the students out of their analytical comfort zones to see problems and solutions the way a creative designer might, stretching those logical trains of thought in other directions. One workshop set them the objective of "visualising what INSEAD means without using words" - not an easy challenge, and not a PowerPoint slide in sight.

The results opened eyes. For MBA student Grace Chu, the course "really broadened my horizons with respect to the importance of innovation in any business. It's not just about being creative but there is a process, which, when done right, can be

extremely powerful."

Thinking outside the box

Many of the students found that their preconceptions about the skills of design students were overturned. "They [designers] are accustomed to thinking outside the box," says Chu. "MBAs are trained to think in a certain way and to ask the "right" questions. Designers tend not to ask a lot of questions, but just do. They are also as business-minded as any MBA."

Other MBA students weighed in with similar insights from the exchange. "It made me realise that I would enjoy working in a much more creative environment than in a "regular" job, which I had before," one student observes. "It was pure enjoyment to work with the Art Center students as their take on each and every problem was significantly different from ours."

The opportunity to work together much as a creative team would in real-life business was instructive. "The Strategies for Product and Services Development (SPSD) education is indispensable and is something that everyone should experience because of its direct and realistic correlation to real world teams," another MBA student notes. "Seeing

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the business side of a product design project made designing more of a reality for me. It turned once intangible product designs into a possibility.”

INSEAD introduced the exchange with the Art Center College of Design in California in 2005 to bring together MBA and design students to learn and experience the process of developing new products and services. Each year, 10 design students from the Art Center College of Design spend four months at INSEAD in MBA elective courses related to innovation and 20 INSEAD MBA students take a one-week field trip to southern California to learn about design thinking.

The field trips in California this year explored the design studios of major corporations including General Motors Advanced Design, Disney Consumer Products and the studios at Paramount Pictures to see how design and business is managed in the real world, from a concept through to the production line.

In turn, students from the Art Center College of Design learnt from their exchange how to survive and succeed in a business context. One designer student observes: “As a designer, you are taught to assume that the “business” is always against the “creative”, but the collaborative effort of our SPSP team showed me the potential power behind a successful pairing of the two disciplines.”

Changing career paths

In some cases this elective has changed career streams for participants. As a qualified doctor, Frank Drummond (MBA '06J) began his MBA wanting to improve his hospital management skills. But teaming up with two design students to design a mobile phone for seniors triggered a rethink on the next phase of Drummond’s career. Now as a serial entrepreneur, he produces everything from telecommunications products to baby bottles, with international distribution. “Take as many of the entrepreneurial electives as possible,” he advises business students, adding the electives showed him that “it is feasible and do-able to start your own company”.

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