

WHEN IS DESIGN THINKING RELEVANT?

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

It is not uncommon that leaders often grapple with choosing the right approach for their challenges. [Design thinking](#), while powerful, isn't a universal solution. Let's explore when it's most effective – and when it might not be – through real-world examples.

The Sweet Spots for Design Thinking

When should you make use of what design thinking has in store for you?

1. Complex, Ill-Defined Problems

During the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems worldwide faced an unprecedented challenge. The Rochester School District's experience illustrates the power of design thinking in such situations. Their challenge wasn't simply moving classes online – it was reimagining education itself.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay



By using design thinking, they:

- ✦ Conducted virtual ethnographic studies with students, parents, and teachers
- ✦ Uncovered unexpected challenges like students sharing devices with siblings
- ✦ Created flexible learning modules that worked across different home situations
- ✦ Developed new ways to maintain student engagement and social connections
- ✦ Built support systems for parents becoming part-time teachers

The result? A holistic solution that addressed not just educational needs, but the entire learning ecosystem.

2. User Experience Challenges

Netflix's evolution from a content platform to a personalized entertainment experience showcases design thinking's impact on user experience. When faced with the "choice paralysis" problem, they didn't just add features – they reimagined the viewing experience.

Their design thinking approach revealed:

- ✦ Users spent 90 seconds on average deciding what to watch
- ✦ Decision fatigue led to abandoned viewing sessions
- ✦ Social proof heavily influenced viewing choices
- ✦ Different user segments had distinct browsing patterns

These insights led to innovations like personalized thumbnails, auto-playing previews, and sophisticated recommendation algorithms that reduced decision time by 50%.

3. Innovation Needs

Bank of America's "Keep the Change" program exemplifies design thinking's role in breakthrough innovation. Instead of traditional product development, they started by understanding why people struggled to save money.

Their process uncovered:

- ✦ Many customers mentally rounded up purchases
- ✦ Small, automatic savings felt more achievable than large deposits
- ✦ People wanted saving to feel painless and automatic
- ✦ Social elements could reinforce saving habits

The resulting program, which automatically rounds up purchases and saves the difference, has helped millions of customers save billions of dollars.

4. Service Transformation

Mayo Clinic's patient experience redesign shows how design thinking can transform complex service systems. Their approach went beyond traditional customer service improvements:

- ✦ Created detailed journey maps of patient experiences



- ✿ Identified emotional pain points throughout the care process
- ✿ Redesigned everything from wayfinding to appointment scheduling
- ✿ Developed new tools for patient-provider communication

The result was a 20% increase in patient satisfaction and reduced wait times across departments.

5. Cultural Change

Ford's transformation under Jim Hackett's leadership demonstrates design thinking's role in cultural evolution. The company moved from traditional auto manufacturing thinking to a human-centered mobility mindset:

- ✿ Established innovation labs for rapid prototyping
- ✿ Trained thousands of employees in design thinking methods
- ✿ Changed meeting structures to encourage collaboration
- ✿ Shifted focus from products to mobility solutions

When Design Thinking Might Not Be the Answer

Not every situation calls for design thinking. Tesla's Model 3 production challenges in 2018 required immediate, technical solutions focused on manufacturing optimization. The problem was well-defined, and the solution needed engineering

expertise rather than user research.

In other words, design thinking might not be the best approach when:

- ✿ The problem is already well-defined with clear solutions
- ✿ Quick, tactical fixes are needed
- ✿ Technical optimization is the primary goal
- ✿ Compliance or regulatory requirements dictate specific solutions

Making the Right Choice

In conclusion, design thinking is most valuable when:

- ✿ Human behavior and needs are central to the solution
- ✿ Multiple stakeholders need to be considered
- ✿ The problem requires reframing to find innovative solutions
- ✿ There's room for experimentation and iteration
- ✿ The organization is ready to challenge existing assumptions

Ready to Explore Design Thinking for Your Organization?

Every organization's challenges are unique, and determining the right approach requires careful

consideration. We'd welcome the opportunity to discuss your specific situation and explore whether design thinking could be valuable for your organization.

Let's schedule an exploratory conversation to:

- 🔗 Understand your current challenges and opportunities
- 🔗 Explore how design thinking might apply to your context
- 🔗 Share relevant case studies from your industry
- 🔗 Discuss potential next steps

[Contact us](#) at to start the conversation. Our calendaring feature allows for scheduling a 30-minute Zoom meeting at a day and time that is convenient for you. Or simply send us a message. Together, we can determine if design thinking is the right approach for your organization's needs.