

Design thinking

Design thinking is a human-centered theory of practice which enables non-design practitioners to access the *ostensive* (the idea) and *performative* (the enactment) components of expert design practice in order to generate [enhanced] value for end users of a product and/or service (Carlgren et al., 2016). The management concept of design thinking arose in 2008 and gained popularity as a means of understanding and potentially solving so-called *wicked problems* – i.e., problems that appear to be unsolvable or are at least not thought to be solvable through existing approaches. Early models of design thinking developed and promoted by Tim Brown and Roger Martin at that time focused on the personality profile of design thinking practitioners and offered straightforward instructions for undertaking the process (Joachim et al., 2024). By 2016, design thinking had matured to the point that it could be empirically studied in management practice. At that time, Carlgren and colleagues identified five themes which characterize the principles/mindsets, techniques, and practices used within organizations employing design thinking: user focus (maintaining the unmet needs of the user as the focus of design efforts), problem framing (engaging with and interpreting the problem and/or opportunity at hand), visualization (the manner in which design thinking practitioners conceive of their path toward meeting unmet user needs), experimentation (iterative testing of solutions and/or ideas), and diversity (seeking and drawing upon differing perspectives within the team). These themes provide an academic frame for studying and discussing design thinking practice.

Accordingly, the first studies of design thinking in sport management employed Carlgren et al.'s (2016) thematic design thinking framework to explore the potential usefulness of design thinking for sport management practice. To assess the potential fit of design thinking for sport organizations, Joachim et al. (2020) sought alignment between sport for development (SFD) research and Carlgren et al.'s five themes of design thinking. The authors concluded that SFD organizations are already capable of the *performative* component of design thinking (the enactment) and need only to engage with the *ostensive* component (the idea) in order to enjoy the potential benefits of using design thinking (Joachim et al., 2020). This finding is corroborated by Svensson and Mahoney (2020), who discovered evidence of design thinking approaches and attitudes within innovative SFD organisations.

Practically, design thinking has been successfully introduced and integrated into the practice of a professional sports club: the Sydney Sixers of the Men's and Women's Big Bash League (Australia's professional T20 cricket competitions). The practice of the Sixers was found to be aligned with all five themes of design thinking, suggesting the organization was capable of the *performative* component of design thinking practice. To “complete” the design thinking practice of the Sixers, then, an intervention was undertaken to introduce the *ostensive* component of design thinking. This intervention took the form of a design thinking activity – a structured approach to brainstorming called the Lightning Decision Jam (LDJ) – which was introduced to the Sixers and ultimately adopted into their ongoing practice (Joachim et al., 2024).

In three studied executions of the LDJ, the Sixers designed for three different user categories: themselves (i.e., their own internal processes), attendees of men's matches, and attendees of women's matches. These three different focuses highlight the flexibility of design thinking approaches in general, and of the LDJ in particular. Ultimately, the Sixers' use of the LDJ (as a technique within design thinking practice) improved reflection within their practice, assisted them in navigating competing institutional demands (i.e., hybrid non- and for-profit organizational goals), created new links between their practice and design thinking themes (hence strengthening their existing performative design thinking capabilities), and enhanced their own perceptions of their organizational performance (Joachim et al., 2024).

Sport scholars have further highlighted approaches to adopting design thinking practices into the field. Specifically, Pierce et al. (2019) explained how the popular and durable Stanford d.school model of design thinking might be usefully employed within an undergraduate sport management capstone course. They offered recommendations for specific activities (in parentheses below) which students might undertake within each of the five steps of the d.school model of design thinking: empathizing with end users (using ethnographic techniques such as interviews and observation), defining the problem (using techniques such as “how might we” questions), ideating solutions (through any number of brainstorming exercises), prototyping (rapidly developing viable versions of ideas in the form of physical objects, storyboards, etc.), and testing of prototypes with end users. Further, Pierce and colleagues outlined how design thinking might be used to approach ill-defined problems in sport management including redesigning the youth sport travel experience, encouraging free play among children, and redesigning the experience of purchasing event tickets.

Taken as a whole, ongoing research of design thinking in sport management foregrounds the overall usefulness of the concept for sport management practitioners. Most recently, this research has addressed how critical issues with design thinking – identified and outlined by Kimbell (2011) – can potentially be overcome by sport organisations in all sectors. Specifically, popular models of design thinking do not call for the reflexivity found in professional design practice and, consequently, the importance of reflection in the work of expert designers is ignored. However, and as previously noted, the “domestication” of design thinking (i.e., the adoption of the management theory of design thinking into the sport management context) undertaken by the Sydney Sixers increased opportunities for [structured] group and individual reflection (Joachim et al., 2024). As the canon of design thinking studies in sport management continues to grow, existing and emerging weaknesses of design theory can continue to be overcome through design thinking research and/or practice in sport management. Such transdisciplinary work has the potential to further enhance the fields of design, design thinking, and sport management alike.

GREG JOACHIM

References and selected further readings

Carlgren, L., Rauth, I., & Elmquist, M. (2016). Framing design thinking: The concept in idea and enactment. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 25, 38–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/caim.12153>.

- Joachim, G., Schulenkorf, N., Schlenker, K., & Frawley, S. (2020). Design thinking and sport for development: Enhancing organizational innovation. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 25(3), 175–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2019.1611471>.
- Joachim, G., Schulenkorf, N., Schlenker, K., Frawley, S., & Cohen, A. (2024) 'It's given us a much wider perspective': Exploring the adoption of a design thinking activity into sport management practice. *Sport Management Review*, advance online publication.
- Kimbell, L. (2011). Rethinking design thinking: Part I. *Design and Culture*, 3(3), 285–306.
- Pierce, D., Davies, M., & Kryder, B. (2019). Innovate with design thinking in the sport management capstone course. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 13, 26–34.
- Svensson, P. G., & Mahoney, T. Q. (2020). Intraorganizational conditions for social innovation in sport for development and peace. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 25(3), 220–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2020.1727358>