

There are few words in the English language that hold as much potential as the word '*design*'.

By definition, *design* is all about planning and implementing, function and purpose. And while there are a number of traditional definitions, Oxford, Wikipedia, etc none are as all encompassing as the practice itself.

Head of design at Carnegie Mellon School of Design, Professor Dick Buchanan's definition is probably the closest, "Design is the human power to conceive, plan, and realize products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of any individual or collective purpose." This at least goes to the reasons for design, which is to the service of people's needs. "I would venture to say that it's more, as design is not about product alone. It's an all-pervasive discipline that underpins almost everything we do, inhabit, eat, consume or adorn. More importantly, it's probably the most underestimated discipline in business," says Cross Colours founding director, Adelle Wapnick.

According to Roger Martin, Dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, to get ahead in today's globalised and rapidly-evolving world, the competitive advantages of countries lie not in the finite reserves of natural resources, but in the infinite flow of ideas. Through globalisation and the resulting free movement of capital, the production of goods and services has become increasingly standardised and cost advantages have swung towards emerging giants such as India and China. The successful companies of tomorrow will be the ones that can out-imagine and out-create their competition.

This signals the emergence of The Design Economy, where design and creativity are drivers of the economy, not just through the stimulation of new ideas and innovation, but also in their potential to generate wealth and create jobs.

Despite this, and although awareness of the importance of design in business success is growing – thanks to initiatives such as the Design Indaba – this belief in the power of design still hasn't permeated into the top echelons of corporate South Africa to the extent that it has elsewhere in the world. And nor has it been readily understood by government.

"It is time for South African business to recognise the potential in design, to embrace it as a business tool and to actively use design to increase competitiveness and yes, enhance the bottom line," says Wapnick.

According to Wapnick, *design* has come into its own. As a discipline, its time is now – especially in South Africa. However, the lack of investigation into statistics, facts and figures is a serious downfall, she believes.

In the UK, for example, a survey conducted in 2006 by the Design Council to uncover the attitudes of the British business world towards design, revealed that over two thirds of UK businesses believe that design is integral to future economic performance and almost half of all UK businesses believe that, over the past decade, design has become more important in helping them maintain a competitive edge.

The same research reveals that rapidly growing businesses are three times more likely than the rest to consider design crucial to success and nearly six times more likely to consider design as integral. On average, 16% of UK businesses think that design is the most important factor in their success, 15% consider that it plays an integral role in success, and 22% believe that it plays a significant role. Rapidly growing businesses are twice as likely as the UK average to have increased investment in design.

Nearly half of design alert businesses in the UK saw turnover increase by more than the amount that they spent on design. On average, design alert businesses have increased their market share by 6.3% through the use of design. Those in the retail, wholesale and leisure services and manufacturing sectors saw the biggest increase, at 6.9 and 7.2% respectively.

Turnover growth is also more likely for businesses that increase their investment in design. And businesses that see design as integral to their operations don't need to compete as much on price – less than half of design-alert businesses compete mainly on price compared to two thirds of those who don't use design.

And the research confirms all these findings through the ultimate tester, the share market. Shares in design-led businesses have outperformed the FTSE 100 by more than 200% over the past decade.

Importantly for a country like South Africa, where unemployment is rife, design alert businesses with more than 250 employees are most likely to increase staff numbers as a result of using design to develop their business. On average, such businesses hired 13 new people in a year.

According to the UK Design Council, 88% of businesses surveyed commented that, after hearing these statistics, they would definitely benefit from some design advice.

“Imagine if we had these kinds of facts and figures in South Africa, to substantiate our pitches and strategies with potential and existing clients. They lend credence to our firm belief that design builds business,” says Wapnick.

“In an environment where every penny is counted and must be accounted for, a survey demonstrating the real returns on design investment would bolster the reputation of the industry as a whole, prove it's efficacy and help drive it into the boardrooms of corporate South Africa.”

Wapnick believes that the only way to shift the image of design from a 'nice to have' to a 'must have' is through solid demonstration of the positive effects of design.

“The design industry needs to give the business community hard facts and bottom line reasons as to why business should utilise design,” she says.

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