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# **Exploring the Application of Design Thinking in the Leadership Development of Creative Industry Businesses**

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## **Abstract**

Notwithstanding the growing contribution and recognition of the Creative Industries (CI), it has been reported that CI businesses are lacking modern leadership, commercial confidence, and acumen to realise their growth potential and take risks (Bazalgette, 2017; DCMS, 2016; PwC, 2015). It is argued that developing the leadership skills of small business owner-managers can lead to increased business growth (Smith et al., 2017). Yet, there is a lack of leadership programs designed to meet current challenges facing business owners and managers in the CI (NESTA, 2013). This is especially evident in terms of the unique circumstances of micro businesses (Armstrong and Page, 2015; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), which make of the majority of CI firms. It has been argued that unique ‘creative’ leaders should be shaped with models relating to the creative context (Clare Leadership Programme, 2002). Therefore, by acknowledging Design Thinking (DT) as a ‘creative thought process’ (Ingle, 2013), this paper seeks to explore the use of DT in the CI and how it may be applied in a leadership development programme for micro business owners.

**Keywords:** Leadership Development, Creative Industries, Design Thinking, Micro Business

**Track:** Leadership and Leadership Development

**Word Count:** 2893

## 1.0 Introduction

Leadership is crucial to entrepreneur success (Jensen and Luthans, 2006), specifically in terms of recognising and implementing innovative potential (CSS, 2011) in a global market characterised by fast paced technological advancements, increased competition, market uncertainty and hostility (Armagoh, 2009; Dalakoura, 2010; Leskiw and Singh, 2007). Research suggests there is a requirement for all leaders in all sectors to develop a unique way of viewing the business world and the inherent opportunities and challenges (Greenberg et al., 2011). Effective leadership defined by agility, resilience and responsiveness (Pinter; 2008; Zemke and Zemke, 2001) is critical to navigating the ever-changing global market. While economic uncertainty is prevalent across all sectors (Scalder, 2017), it is argued that Creative Industry (CI) firms encounter a greater uncertainty and instability compared to other industries (Pfeifer et al., 2016). Therefore, the research study in this paper focuses on the CI sector and specifically seeks to explore the use of Design Thinking (DT) and how it may be applied in a leadership development programme for micro business owners.

This paper will focus on the theoretical considerations of the study and provides a literature review of key research contributions, as well as outlining the proposed methodology for the next steps of the research study. During the literature review stage, a range of databases, specifically ABI, Emerald, Business Source Complete and Google Scholar were used to gather appropriate material regarding research concepts. Keywords were carefully considered to use for terms which would generate the explicit information required (Younger, 2004) as outlined below:

- **Micro business:** micro business, micro organisation, micro enterprise
- **Leadership development:** leadership skills development, leader, entrepreneur, owner-manager
- **Creative Industries:** creative and cultural industries, cultural industries
- **Design Thinking:** creative thinking

It is important to note that alternative keywords were used to ensure maximisation of literature coverage (Medgalia, 2011). Boolean operators, such as AND and OR also incorporated to aid these keywords in creating a combination of elaborate search terms for enhancing specific search returns (Boell, 2014).

## 2.0 Leadership Development

Leadership Development is a highly debated topic in academia where much of the literature has focused on larger organisations due to their ability to commit the necessary resources to training programmes (Fuller-Love, 2006; Leskiw and Singh, 2007). Leaders are considered to be central to an organisation's network (Hewison et al, 2010), responsible for increasing the capacity to learn, understanding complexity, and setting the vision (Dalakoura, 2010). It is well known that organisational effectiveness and survival are dependent on leadership competence and development (Amagoh, 2009; Barnes et al., 2015). Yet, the entrepreneurial leaders of small businesses do not perceive leadership as important, even though they practice leadership daily (Barnes et al., 2015). This gap in the literature is particularly evident in terms of micro businesses recognised as the 'backbone' of the economy (Jamak et al., 2017).

Micro businesses are more central to the CI economy than larger businesses, accounting for more than 1 in 6 jobs (Creative Industries Council, 2012). Creative businesses and their entrepreneurs are by their very name unique; intuitive, informal, decisive with creative products and services differentiated from traditional sectors (Powell, 2008; Townley et al., 2009). Yet, ‘creative’ micro businesses are often considered less productive, innovative and growth orientated than that larger firms (Frontier Economics, 2016). It has been found that these entrepreneurial leaders do not engage in professional development training as a result of job pressure, lack of capacity and time and financial constraints (Armstrong and Page, 2015; NESTA, 2013). Indeed, research also shows that micro business owner-managers approach external training focused on growth with unease (Devins et al., 2005), meaning they are less likely to engage in management training than the larger business (Rae et al., 2012). This is also because they do not realise that it is indeed important or relevant (Jones, 2011; Hutchinson, 2017).

Other research demonstrates that the owner-entrepreneurs of micro businesses associate the term ‘leadership’ in a negative manner and in some cases as a result of experience with leadership role models in past employment (Jones, 2011). In a study of leadership development in small business, Garavan et al. (2015) found if owner-managers adopt a positive attitude towards leadership development and perceive it as strategically important, then leadership development is adopted effectively. Taking this premise into account there is no doubt that part of this research study will need to focus on demystifying the concept and practice of entrepreneurial leadership order to engage CI firms. The authors also believe this uniqueness and the challenges facing the sector, underscored by the consequences of their size demands a differentiated offering and further research is necessary to identify leadership development best practice for the CI micro business leader.

### ***2.1 Hard and Soft Skills Development***

Many reports, such as the CSS (2015) Employer Panel Results and the Bazalgette Review (2017) have identified leadership skills development as important within the CI. However, it is not evident exactly how creative businesses are performing through distinct soft and hard leadership skills. These reports identify “leadership skills” as a sub-category, as opposed to recognising the performance of specific skills within the industry. Soft leadership skills are the personality, attitude and behaviour required for ‘professional success’. Traits of soft skills include: communication, adaptability, critical thinking, negotiation skills, time management, team building, managing time, negotiating, writing, listening, reading, presenting, problem solving, situational awareness, self-motivation, decision making, creativity, purpose, recognising opportunities, trust, moral behaviour, values, vision, authenticity, emotional intelligence, empathy, spirituality, sustainability, mindfulness, dependability, initiative, self-confidence, resilience, empowerment and perseverance (Rao, 2012; Robinson and Stubberud, 2014; Ebrahimi Mehrabani and Azmi Mohamad, 2015; Chatteraj and Shabnam, 2015; Marques and Dhiman, 2017).

Whilst soft skills relate to communication, interpersonal and people skills, hard skills are defined by the technical competencies and relevant disciplinary knowledge (Rao, 2012). These include determining and meeting goals, empowerment of others, maintaining rigorous business processes, managing conflict, establishing motivation schemes, ambition, global understanding, information technology, building relationships with others, introducing and maintaining complex business processes, initiating training programmes, sophisticated recruitment and planning (Iles, 2001; Design Week, 2005; Marxer et al., 2012; Hensley and

Allen, 2016, Marques and Dhiman, 2017). “*People rise in organisations because of their hard skills and fall due to a dearth of soft skills*” (Rao, 2012, p48). Thus, soft skills are key to complement the hard skills (Chattoraj and Shabnam, 2015).

## **2.2 Transformational Leadership**

Both transformational and transactional leadership have been associated with the small business owner-manager (Visser et al., 2005; Matzler et al., 2008; Rosing et al., 2011; Yitshaki et al., 2012; Matzler et al., 2013). Transformational leadership has a positive impact on innovation, growth and profitability of the small business (Matzler et al., 2008) as it allows the leader to inspire and challenge others, be a role model, intellectually stimulate employees, provide followers with a sense of confidence and supports individualised consideration (Visser et al., 2005; Matzler et al., 2013). In contrast, the transactional leadership places focus between leaders and followers using extrinsic rewards such as motivations for performance which derive from management expectations (Yitshaki et al., 2012). Furthermore, the transformational leader can develop more innovative ideas and stimulate change within the business more effectively than that of the transactional leader (Bass, 1985). Therefore, due to the focus on the leaders of micro business, the emphasis will be on developing the transformational aspects of the entrepreneur to enable growth.

## **3.0 Arts and Leadership Development**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, businesses have been incorporating artistic processes as a result of artists being proficient in creating value for the business. Taking this into consideration and acknowledging past leadership practices should not replicated, society is moving toward leadership models based on hope, aspiration and innovation (Adler, 2006). Research suggests a combination of both arts and leadership can positively impact leadership development programmes (Edwards et al., 2015; Garavan et al., 2015; Tawadros, 2015). Arts programmes focused on developing leaders reflexivity and aesthetic awareness (Garavan et al., 2015) have been found to be effective at enhancing emotional intelligence, improvising, leader identity and feedback orientation, increasing organisational performance and developing intellectual tools (Edwards et al. 2015; Garavan et al., 2015; Tawadros, 2015). The learning process of conventional programmes have traditionally focused on the leader as an individual resulting in a single loop learning, whilst arts programmes show emphasise on the leader and their followers, meaning double loop learning is implemented which triggers emotions, resulting in an enhanced learning experience (Taylor and Ladkn, 2009; Shynes et al., 2011; Garavan et al., 2015). Art programmes are different in their pedagogic approach which makes the use of performance and artefacts with a determination of improving managers performance, whilst conventional interventions use didactic instructor led content in the format of content driven structures such as lectures (Garavan et al, 2015). This area of the literature in the context of the micro CI firm is an important consideration in the development of a conceptual model (discussed in the next section).

## **4.0 Design Thinking**

According to Ingle (2013, p.2), DT, first championed by Tim Brown (CEO of IDEO), can be defined as ‘*An exploratory approach to problem solving that includes and balances both analytical and creative thought processes*’. These processes are essential to analyse the past, create developments and generate a sustainable future beyond expectations of the past performance (Euchner, 2012). By utilising visualisation tools, DT permits the understanding

of complex problems, allows the acceptance of decisions, enhances emotional intelligence and facilitates the creation of new and better ideas, focusing on how real human needs can be satisfied through empathy in imaginative ways (Fraser, 2007; Leavy, 2012; Welsh and Dehler, 2013; Wu, 2013). This enables the development of strategic vision, values and commercial mindset for competitive advantage and growth (Hnatek, 2015; Kleinsmann et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2009). According to Ward et al. (2009) companies that invest in design are likely to grow in terms of turnover twice as much as those who don't as they can increase their ability to collaborate with stakeholders whilst including them in the value creation process, enhancing the range of solutions to create business opportunities (Leavy, 2012).

Existing literature acknowledges that DT is associated with a unique approach to innovation, leading to commercial and economic growth, and competitiveness (Design Council, 2015; Karol, 2015; Kleinsmann et al., 2017; Wattanasupachoke, 2012). As a result, DT is increasingly being implemented by professionals across many industry's (Ingle, 2013; Wrigley and Straker, 2017) through a committed leadership approach (Hnatek, 2015). In addition, due to the growth of digitisation, and transformation effect this has on a business, it is essential for businesses to create digital leaders. In this instance, DT methods are appropriate to foster innovation (Deloitte, 2017). Motivation has also been linked to using DT within projects by Kroper et al., (2012), which is particularly important to improve effectiveness of leadership development e.g. to increase skills and knowledge base and enhance capacity of knowledge transfer.

Buchanan (1992, p21) describes DT in application as being “*directed toward new integrations of signs, things, actions, and environments that address the concrete needs and values of human beings in diverse circumstances*”. He was one of the first theorists to propose the shift of DT from product innovation to the notion of it being applied to any area of human experience. According to Kleinsmann et al. (2017) the growing application of DT in an uncritical manner is due to its vagueness, meaning it is difficult for non-experts to grasp, and thus achieve effectiveness. This therefore implies it will be of utmost importance during this research of ensuring that the DT concept is understood to determine how it may be applied effectively to the leadership development context.

Existing literature acknowledges a direct link between the application of DT and increasing innovative performance (Kleinsmann et al., 2017; Knemeyer, 2015; Srhojmagoec and Milovanovic, 2016; Wattanasupachoke, 2012). Innovation can facilitate responses to the fast-changing external environment (The Business Times, 2017) and drive economic growth (USCOF, 2014), thus is critical to develop successful leaders (Karol, 2015). Furthermore, Welsh and Dehler (2012) propose that users of DT are enabled to envision desired future states and therefore plan and strive for growth. Albeit that existing research focusing on small business leadership has mainly taken an Action Learning applied approach (Leitch et al., 2009; Cope et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012; Rae et al., 2012; Barnes et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2017), this research demonstrates the appropriateness of exploring how DT methodologies can be appropriately applied to a leadership development context for micro businesses which will result in having an economic impact. In light of this, two research questions are posed:

*RQ1: In which way are DT methods currently used within industry?*

*RQ2: How can the DT practice be applied to a leadership development context within micro businesses to achieve a real economic impact?*

## 5.0 Towards a Framework

Gaps in the literature indicate that although micro businesses are unique in terms of resources and challenges they face, research regarding leadership development is inadequate due to resource limitations, specifically within the CI. Additionally, it is surmised through the literature that leadership skills are unmapped in the leadership development context for micro businesses in the CI, and more specifically, in Northern Ireland and across the UK. There is a link apparent between DT characteristics and leadership development skills, specifically soft skills. Considering this, and the association of DT and business growth, the authors believe there is an identified requirement to explore how it can be applied in a leadership development context, tailored to the micro business with the CI as illustrated in Figure 1.

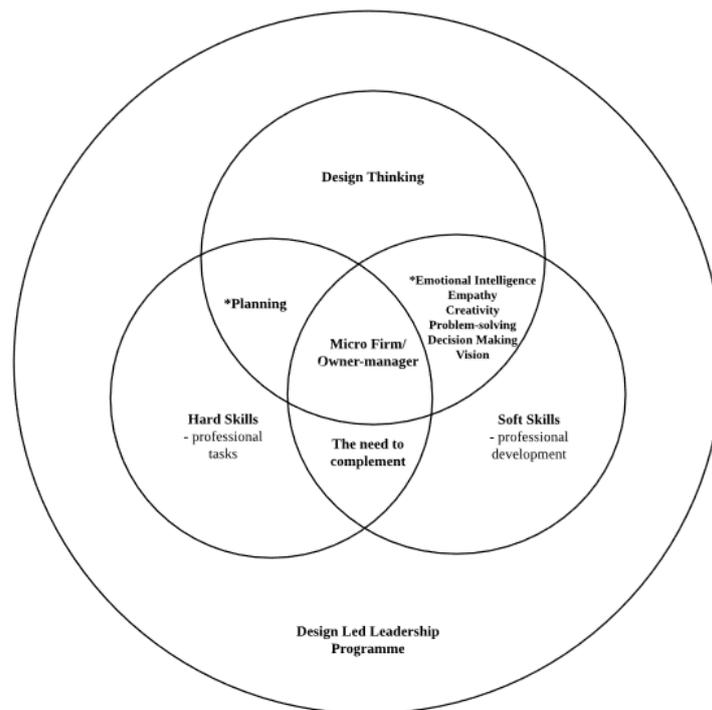


Figure 1: Incorporating DT with Leadership Development in Micro Businesses – Source Authors Own

\*(Peers, 2002; Crosbie, 2005; Fraser, 2007; Euchner, 2012; Leavy, 2012; Rae et al., 2012; Rao, 2012; Ingle, 2013; Welsh and Dehler, 2013; Wu, 2013; Chatteraj and Shabnam 2015; Garavan et al., 2015; Hnatek, 2015; Kleinsmann et al., 2017; Marques and Dhiman, 2017)

Figure 1 presents the theoretical parameters of Leadership Development for the creative micro firm owner-manager. As well as the identified need to develop leadership skills of the owner-manager, both hard and soft leadership skills have been found to be key for driving success by complementing each other (Rao, 2012; Chatteraj and Shabnam, 2015). Synthesis of the literature shows that DT is associated with soft and hard leadership skills as it: helps envision desired future states and therefore uses *planning* (Welsh and Dehler, 2013); develops *emotional intelligence*, identifying the emotional realities of a business (Clark and Smith, 2008); focuses on satisfying human needs *empathetically* (Fraser, 2007; Wu, 2013); enhances *creativity* through its process (Ingle, 2013); facilitates the understanding and

*solving of problems* (Leavy, 2012); allows *acceptance of decisions* (Fraser, 2007; Leavy 2012); and enables *strategic visions* to be implemented (Hnatek, 2015; Kleinsmann et al., 2017). Therefore, by implementing the DT method in a leadership development programme, it is anticipated that an owner-manager will be able to develop these skills identified.

## 6.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

This developmental paper has identified the lack of discernment within micro businesses regarding the importance of leadership development, even though organisational effectiveness and survival are dependent on it. This, along with the lack of resources small businesses have to exploit when embarking on such leadership development initiatives, has resulted in a lack of knowledge and understanding evident within current literature. Specifically relating to leadership development, research shows micro businesses require soft leadership skills to succeed and hard leadership skills to achieve growth. Furthermore, it was identified that there has been little focus on the leadership skills development of micro businesses within the CI, even though they tend not to be growth orientated. In this paper, DT has been linked with developing the commercial mindset for growth due to its innovative approach.

This paper has therefore identified a link between DT and leadership development of micro creative businesses to achieve an economic impact, however further work is required to define in what ways DT tools have the biggest impact and are most applicable to this leadership development context. To develop this work, it is proposed qualitative data collection is carried out through both interviews and observations to develop gain a comprehensive understanding of how DT is used within industry and analyse the behaviours of DT ‘users’ (Robertson et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). A brief overview of the proposed methodology is outlined in Table 1:

<b>Expert Interviews</b>	A specific type of semi-structured interview (Flick, 2007) will be carried out with both DT experts and business support organisations (experts with engaging local CI firms in training programmes) as it is an efficient and concentrated method of gathering data in the exploratory phase of research (Bogner et al., 2009). The literature is vague surrounding the correct number of expert interviews are appropriate. It is anticipated that this study will comprise of 12 expert interviews, including six DT experts and six business support organisations (including relevant public-sector bodies) (Baker et al., 2012). Outcomes of these interviews will confirm relevant DT tools and processes used as barriers for engaging with creative micro firms and motivations are acknowledged and exploited.
<b>A Focus group</b>	Focus Group will be carried out with 6-8 participants which have an interest/expertise in the research concepts and are able to articulate their views on the proposed plans for the targeting and engaging with creative micro firms and provide critical suggestions and pitfalls (Morgan, 1988). The focus group will be multi-category, discovering motivations and behaviours of creative micro firms (Krueger and Casey, 2015).
<b>Observations</b>	Observations will be used in best practice visits in order for the researcher to enhance the research learning experience, meaning and understanding of key research concepts (Neuman, 2014).

*Table 1: Overview of Proposed Methodology to Explore the Application of Design Thinking in Leadership Development*

The above methods proposed will inform a leadership development programme, which will then be piloted later during the research process. By using interviews, focus groups and observations during this research it is expected that a triangulation of data will be produced to explore learning outcomes. NVivo, a qualitative based data analytics software will be used as a system to systematically analyse both the observations and interviews. In comparison to manually analysing the data, NVivo reduces time pressure (Wiltshier, 2011) and provides ability to document processes used through analysis, therefore achieving transparency (Welsh, 2002).

## **7.0 Paper Development**

It is anticipated that the findings from data collected will identify the DT methods in which are most impactful and appropriate to apply in an entrepreneurial leadership development environment for creative micro businesses. The fieldwork involves interviews and observations which are initiated to take place between April 2018 - September 2018. Once data is collected, the significance will be to identify the best way in which DT tools and processes can be applied to develop a leadership development context. This will ultimately lead to the development of a leadership development framework for micro businesses in the CI. To our knowledge there is no current theoretical framework as outlined above. The authors welcome comments from BAM participants in relation to the theoretical background discussed, identifying similar types of studies that may have not been highlighted and further techniques for data collection and analysis.

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