

# Harnessing design thinking to drive entrepreneurial impact, innovation

By [Gilbert Saggia](#)

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Every business leader today faces immense pressures of power and responsibility. All it takes is a few wrong decisions, or a dollop too much complacency, for disaster to land. Today this pressure is more poignant than ever. Change is in the air, only now it is happening at breakneck speed. The lifespans of companies are fast becoming shorter. Uncertainty reigns.



Gilbert Saggia

The only way to change and to shift into new spaces is to develop strong cultures of innovation.

Innovation is a tricky principle to nail down, but it has a simple formula: Innovation = Execution x Creativity. Large companies often struggle to engage this dynamic. In their way stands rigid processes, risk avoidance and complacency – anchored through faith in existing frameworks - all effectively suffocating a business' ability to push forward.

Humans are key to innovation. It is human thought that creates new ideas and tests new opportunities. But real innovation means going where a business has not gone before - and for that, humans are crucial.

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## Design thinking

SAP stumbled upon the concept of design thinking in the early 2000s. Design Thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation. It helps companies be empathic around customer and business needs, uses collaboration to bring functions and perspectives closer together, and aims to be highly iterative so to better understand and embrace the market.

When you focus on people, processes, and environments, you encourage creativity. Turn that into a scalable culture and you invite disruptive innovation, not the incremental innovation that translates to little new value.

Design thinking creates a mindset to merge technological feasibility, business viability and human experience. And it can be applied not just within the corporate sector: design thinking is a tool that can equip Africa's innovators with the framework and thought processes to solve some of the continent's more pressing challenges.

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We recently had the pleasure of being part of a group of innovation consultants who held a week-long skills transfer program aimed at teaching aspiring entrepreneurs and change agents the fundamentals of design thinking. Impact Week is an annual initiative created by German private sector companies, that aims to show how people can create business models to address current problems, and give people the tools and knowledge to establish their own businesses to promote self-sufficiency.

The program works closely with learning institutions, such as The Technical School of the SOS Children's Village, to train professors as design thinking coaches, ensuring there is a legacy of readily available design thinking skills for future impact activities.

## Problem solving



In two previous Impact Weeks - held in Kenya in 2015 and 2016 - a total of 220 students participated to develop 39 business models, with two companies founded as a result. This year, the scaled-up program was held in Rwanda and saw 100 Alumni's and pupils of the SOS Children's Village taught design thinking skills.

More importantly, the participating students developed 18 new business ideas to solve problems in areas ranging from agriculture, finance, healthcare, education, and mobility.

I won't claim that SAP has perfected design thinking, but it has done amazing things for the company. The goal of moving out of its stoic enterprise trappings is being achieved in unbelievable ways. We have engineered ground-breaking new products, created a workplace for a very diverse workforce, and realised digital transformation by becoming a real-time data-driven business.

I'm not pitching a product here. I am stating that without design thinking, SAP may today be facing extinction. Nobody is immune from this.

We have since realised the value of sharing this approach with customers, partners and the communities in which we conduct business across Africa.

The burden of pressure hangs over every business leader and aspiring entrepreneur. Instead of worrying if it will fall, you can find confidence in a new philosophy that will change your creative and innovation culture. In order to develop the business ideas that will solve the problems of tomorrow, look at design thinking today.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gilbert Saggia is managing director, East Africa at SAP Africa.