

d.confestival: The Future of Design Thinking

International innovators and research experts gathered in Germany to explore the importance of place to design thinking.



Today's economy, driven by the acceleration of digitalization, is challenging organizations to reevaluate how their teams work on a global scale, how they can improve velocity and how they can better serve customers. Design thinking is a user-centered framework that helps teams discover innovative solutions based on user inspiration and working in iterative, rapid cycles. To better support their teams' processes, more companies are incorporating design thinking into their operations.

With the global business climate as a backdrop, Potsdam-based Hasso Plattner Institute (HPI), an internationally-renowned university known for its design thinking school, the d.school, hosted d.confestival. The d.confestival is a unique event that brings together international innovators and multidisciplinary thinkers from the management, education and research fields to listen and learn from one another.



Light-up robots, piles of Post-It notes and wild experiments dotted the landscape. In-between the prototypes and jaw-dropping moments, key learning sessions included a “d.bate” on the theme of “Design Thinking in the Corporate World” with a focus on place being one of the key pillars of design thinking. Panelists included leaders from Steelcase, 3M, Bosch and SAP.

Sam Yen, SAP chief design officer, shared a mistake he believes his organization made around design thinking. He said they created “design thinking rooms” which he described as the exact opposite of what you want to do.

“You want design thinking to be part of the overall environment, not a specific room where you go to be creative and you check the box,” said Yen.

Guillaume Alvarez, Steelcase vice president in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, discussed the need to create a culture of creativity and how design thinking can support the process of leading, learning and innovating in global organizations.

“It can’t be an additional layer to what people do, it has to be what they do,” said Alvarez. “If it’s added on top, it creates more work, more stress, more confusion. Design thinking is the new engine. It’s the new soul of what everyone needs to do.”

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He also highlighted how leaders need to adapt to the new way of working by curating experiences that reinforce beliefs, actions and results.

“I don’t think we convince people by words anymore. They have to be convinced by experiencing themselves everyday that what we talk about is real and it does work,” said Alvarez.

The workplace can play a key role by acting as a tool to communicate culture. As Yen mentioned, if there are specific rooms for design thinking, the message is outside of those rooms the method isn’t necessary. If an organization is working to encourage the free expression of ideas, what does the work environment communicate? Are desks assigned based on hierarchy? Does everyone have access to the same comfort, look and quality of seating? Is there equal access to technology, video conferencing and white boards?

To support design thinking teams, the panel agreed place is an important way to encourage the practice of the process.

“Learn by doing. Learn by practicing. It’s about unlocking your creative confidence,” said Monica Dalla Riva, 3M head of design Europe.

* Video and Photos courtesy: HPI School of Design Thinking

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