

## IxDA Sydney Podcast

S02 E04 - Rich Brophy

Audio Transcript

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**Jessica:** Hello and welcome to the IxDA Sydney podcast, a show where we can't guarantee answers, just better questions. I'm Jessica Pang, and in this episode, Sam and Vinita are chatting with Rich Brophy, a standup comedian, turn designer. Rich Brophy is the head of design at Blue Egg, a growing experience design consultancy with science at the heart.

Since making the switch from standup comedy, Rich has worked with everyone from Google to the government, designing and innovating products, services, experiences, and the design. Self rich spoke at the UX Australia conference in August, 2022, and we've invited him to come onto the podcast to share his perspectives on the bridge between comedy and design facilitation, and the importance of design principles and personal branding.[00:01:00]

Let's get started.

**Vinita:** Hey Rich. Welcome to the IxDA Sydney podcast. We're very excited to have you.

**Rich:** Oh, it's great to be here on this 2D screen. What an honor.

**Vinita:** So the first thing we usually start off with on the podcast is your background, and I'm very interested in some of the things that you've done before you've actually come to design.

**Rich:** It's been a, I describe it as a wonky career to design. I feel like a lot of designers have a wonky career path. It's something that I think should be encouraged because it works for me. I started my professional career as a standup comedian, so I did that from 18 to 28. So 10 years of writing jokes, telling jokes, bombing, thriving, working all over the world, and basically putting everything else on hold while I.

Tried to make that thing work. That was an amazing experience. That's obviously informed a lot of what I do as a designer and how I think about [00:02:00] design cuz Yeah, right at the forefront of human interaction there. I went from there to advertising, actually, I realized that it wasn't a hundred percent captivating anymore and I was looking for something to do and a friend of mine said, oh, you should do advertis.

Writing an ad is a lot like writing a joke, except instead of a punchline, there's a logo. And I was thinking I'd gone back to TAFE to do joinery. It's kind of woodwork. And so I was like, well, I have no tangible skills in the real world. And then my mate kind of framed it up this way and sort of unlocked that opportunity.

And I went and studied school, which is a creative school which teaches you resilience above all levels. It's basical. A hundred students competitively coming up with ideas for ads,

and are you being told that someone's got a better version of what you've done or that's a terrible idea? And then I did that about four or five years, and then probably about three years in, someone gave this amazing book called Baked In, which is by a famous ad guy that talks about how good products have a [00:03:00] story that's inherent to them.

Bad products need an ad or a story invented to lay over. And that was kind of a bit of a turning point. I think he thought it might be a better creative, but it made me a better or more interested product designer. So I set about coming up with ideas, working with a couple of industrial designers that happened to work down the hall and have a 3D printer and a few other interesting gadgets.

And then launched a few products on Kickstarter, including a light for your toilet seat that turned on when you lifted it up. So if you're a bloke and you need to go to the toilet at night, you can see what you're doing. And another one was a. Repair kit or flip flop repair kit. I need to clarify that for international listeners.

So I created these two products, launched on Kickstarter and thought, oh, how can I do this? How can I do more of this? How can I make something of this and learn? Really, I was looking for a repeatable process. Learned about design thinking just by googling some stuff and looking for innovation works.

Started a design meetup where every week I would [00:04:00] facilitate a little mini design sprint. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I liked what I was doing, and so I did that for about a year and a half with some very talented people working with me, and then turned that into a unsuccessful product consultancy.

Launched a crowdfunding accelerator for heart. With an industrial designer and myself had a strategic plan, and then I was midway through that and I bumped into someone I met when I was 21 who was running an innovation consultancy, and he said, oh, what are you doing? I explained this kind of recent career path and he offered me a job, and that was kind of when I became a.

I kind of validated my interests and turned me from a product and design enthusiast to a designer. So I know that's a long story, but that's my sort of wonky little path that I forged for myself.

**Vinita:** I love the wonky pathway. I was quite similar coming into design, so I'm most interested in that one liner standup comic bit [00:05:00] that you just glanced over.

But maybe just to start with, what are some of the parallels that you see from a day-to-day? Are there things that you are seeing come through quite clearly of learnings from being a standup comic and translating those into.

**Rich:** Yeah, I mean, just learning how to control a crowd. There's two different jobs in comedy.



One is to be the comedian, the other one is to be the mc. The mc has to warm up the room, get everyone kind of behaving in the right way. You need to kind of set the norms for the room and get a bunch of people who don't know each other, engaged, focused, not cing themselves, but laughing a bit and ready for the first act.

And so, It's basically fast forward facilitation with drunk strangers who have no clear objective. And so bringing years and years of that, and I'll do residencies in places. So you're going back, you can't use your jokes cause they've heard your jokes. So you really have to pull stuff out of the audience and build that relationship or that connection very [00:06:00] quickly.

When I went in as a designer off the street into a innovation consultancy, that those facilitation skills, being able to. People together very quickly were sort of invaluable. It gave me a strength to work off while I learned the other skills. That's been invaluable and it's sort of informed how I designed as well, because for me, making sure everyone in the room or in the environment is probably something that's true to me.

Beyond just being a comedian, making sure that there's an equity of opportunity to speak up in a balance of power. They're the pre-conditions for good design and facilitation, and understood how to do that as a comedian and how to gently pull down the people who were dominating or setting a path that wasn't necessary and lifting up the people who didn't have a voice, who were being heard or didn't feel empowered, sort of learning to do that.

You can do that in sort of 30 seconds if you get it right. That kind of became my sort of super skill and used that to forge your head with my career and then built the other skills on the side. But I think the other thing is, obviously when you're [00:07:00] a comedian, if the audience isn't laughing, then you are not funny.

You really need to respect that. They get to decide whether you are succeeding or failing. And as a designer, It's exactly the same. And so this idea that people push through designs that test badly because they're attached to them or just follow their dreams rather than the user feedback just was so foreign to me.

That's not succeeding. You should know what success is and that's not succeeding. And so having that humility, But also the conviction to try stuff and put that out was one of the other things that sort of set me up as a comedian. That sort of resilience you get from having to show up and bear your bones every night to strangers means that putting ideas out there, it doesn't feel risky.

Speaking up with dumb ideas doesn't feel that risky. So balancing that conviction, but also that humility, I think has set me on whatever path I'm on

**Vinita:** Those are awesome. We've had a couple of speakers on the podcast that have talked about something quite similar of designers needing to [00:08:00] be cut down, for lack of a better term, to really understand what's going on and how designers aren't these special snowflakes land on someone's product and make it all better all the time.

So it's good to have that reemphasized. So one thing I did wanna delve into that you spoke about was around facilitation, because one thing I've noticed is that coming from a design school that taught your design thinking skills, facilitation was something that really wasn't mentioned until you were basically just forced into a room and forced to lead a workshop.

That was my first experience, and I was like, oh. Oh, okay. Come along children. We're gonna make a design now. So curious on your thoughts about how we're evolving those facilitation skills from like a professional development perspective for designers.

**Rich:** I still think that your experience is probably the fastest way to learn.

You can learn the theory, but in practice it's when we make [00:09:00] mistakes as designers or face impossible challenges as designers, that's when we grow. A lot of people ask me, how can I evolve my career? Just stick around for long enough. Something's gonna go pear shape. You are gonna have to deal with. Being thrown in the deep end is really effective.

I think having diverse people around you, whether that's home, friends, work, and being curious about how and why they behave the way they do, is a really good start. Remember, when I was at uni, I studied script writing, which was an appalling waste of money, but I remember a tutor talking about listening to people on the train as a way to get different voices into your.

And being curious about why are they saying what's happening on the other end of that conversation? Why are they behaving the way they have? What's led them to this point? And I think that same level of curiosity about people sets you in really good stead as a facilitator. Because if your heart's in the right place, you know, I wanna get the best outta people.

It's really easy to think I need to get these people in a room and contributing so that I get buy-in. [00:10:00] That's a really cynical point of view, and I think undervaluing this brilliant spectrum of perspectives that any group of people. I wrote a guide called Puzzling Personalities, about 10 different kinds of personalities you'll get in a workshop.

I'm sure someone's done academic research around this, but that was just from my own experience and it was really about, Hey, if this is the kind of way that this person behaves, then that is the sort of thing that you need to, to get value out of them. I think discounting people from the design process.

Really unimportant. And so being in the room, being curious and thinking, what can this person bring either from a professional or personal perspective, and how can they contribute to the collective intelligence of this group? I think that a good facilitator actually creates an environment and a community that is more capable together than they are alone, and having that as your.

And having those sort of worthy goals of understanding people, creating a greater capacity than individuals sets you in a [00:11:00] good stead. But obviously when you are facilitating for the first time, it's scary and weird and hard, and knowing what to do is impossible. Actually, I made another thing that's like a, so my website, I'll share it at the end.

It's like a spinning wheel that throws up different situations that you might encounter as a workshop in a. So thinking through, I used to set up my workshop, think about what could go wrong. Then afterwards review it, think about what did go wrong and how I would change it, and be quite diligent about writing that stuff out.

And so going through that mental process of saying, all right, what if at the last minute the decision maker emails to say they're gonna be 25 minutes late? What are we gonna do if that happens? I think it's really important to have conviction of the outcome that you're trying to achieve, but everything else is a facilitator flexes.

So again, it comes back to that design, humility. Yes, you've got a plan. Yes, you reckon you know how it's gonna work, but throw it into a live environment and you're gonna need to flex and adapt and work out what will work in order to achieve the outcome. [00:12:00]

**Sam:** As someone who may not have facilitated before, what would your one piece of advice be to?

**Rich:** I think there's a really nice rule of thumb, which a mentor of mine, Jason Crane, extremely smart man used to employ, which is only asked questions that if you take on the responsibility for producing the outcome yourself, that's what you wanna do when you're new, but you are out of control train by just asking the questions and using those to guide.

You are no longer trying to define the direction, but you're trying to open up the path, and you'll have an idea about where things can go. But if you force yourself to ask questions rather than produce answers, then you are going to learn to manage and guide people that you don't know that well and get them towards an outcome.

And if you can do that, even if you do it for the first five minutes, the first time, then the first 10 minutes the next time, it's a really good rule of thumb that will actually help you understand what your job is as a facilitator. [00:13:00]

**Sam:** In terms of scripting and making sure that you have points throughout the session, say if you had an hour session, planned preparation is key, right?

**Rich:** It's like the high seas and probably 50% of what you need to do is getting that boat ready. But it's about planning a preparation. What do I need to pack for along the way? What are the different conditions I'm gonna face? Who do I need, who's already briefed on what we're doing, and who can just come aboard and go for a sale with.

Thinking about that sort of stuff and loading up, all right, what are the conditions you might face if that happens, what am I gonna need? All that stuff I think is old trope, but the success is in the preparation. I'm sure there's a snappier line for it, but if you are in the middle of a workshop and you are thinking, oh my God, what do I do now you are like, you are cooked.

I dunno if you guys have seen game storming, it's book of games and tricks for creating ideas or building strategies. The first 30 pages of that gives some really [00:14:00]

invaluable, extremely valuable, invaluable, even mental models for you to hold when you are facilitating. For me, that was a real game changer.

It went from managing a room to actually being back and thinking about how the room is working in front of me and what I need to do at those different points of divergence and convergence and adapt along the way. I think if anyone's starting out facilitation, that's what I've always told people and they've asked me, what should I do or read?

Just start with this. I also think, Sam, to help, it helps if you, a bit like a comedian or any professional speaker, know how you're gonna open and know how you're gonna close. If you don't stand up with conviction or if you wait until you're standing up in front of a room to brief them or on a call to brief them and you're speaking and meeting people for the first time, then that's high.

When I was a comedian and I was MCing, I would walk around the bar beforehand, chat to people, Hey, I'm the mc. Have you been here before? Let's chat, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Just build a bit of a relationship. So when I [00:15:00] got on stage, 5% of the audience already knew who I was. Maybe 2% of the audience actually liked me.

That was enough that it starts to shape the behavior of the rest of the group. So then you're setting yourself up for success and not coming in totally cold, which is high risk and hard to get those rewards as. I also think occasionally if you have the voice to be able to speak in a way that sounds like we've come to an incredible conclusion like it's been a theater, but it helps.

**Sam:** I don't have a voice for radio or a face for tv, so that's me.

**Rich:** Well use your hands. You can do a lot with your hands when you're trying to communicate the point. You can show people. This is the end.

**Sam:** Fantastic. Some great advice. I think it must have been about six years ago now. I think you presented and did a session at Academy X site where you went and spoke from your experience of the [00:16:00] comedian and how that really helped you within the facilitation space, I think you ended up bringing up like a six or seven step framework in terms of how to be a brilliant facilitator and communicator. I'm probably putting you on the spot here, but can you remember those?

**Rich:** It's probably about a lot of the stuff I've talked about, kind of setting up the room, setting up your scripts, staying flexible, you're asking questions, closing things down there.

You got it. And then the last one is for you to decide

I think they're always simplistic, right? Those things, but they give you a place to, I suppose I've always been moderately self-aware as a comedian, cause you have to understand why you are thinking the way you think and how it's different to other people. But in terms of giving advice, in the last few years, I've really tried to separate my personality and my privilege from the advice that I give because it.

Useful to give guidance to [00:17:00] people that only works for witty white men. If I can't boil it down to something that is fundamentally useful for any type of personality in any kind of situation, then it's not really good advice. It's just an opinion. And maybe I'll withdraw my comments on six of the things that make you a great facilitator.

Although I do remember one of them was about knowing yourself and understanding why you react, the way you react and how people take you and how they relate to you, and you relate to them as a result of who you are. And I think if you don't have that, Even if you haven't started that journey of self-awareness, then you're gonna get caught short and people are gonna start behaving in a way that feels unpredictable to you, but is entirely predictable to everyone else in the room.

And that's when it's gonna get out of your slippery MITs, and the power will go back to whoever's got the loudest voice.

**Vinita:** So to build on that, how do you think our virtual and remote environments and hybrid environments have changed facilitation?

**Rich:** I think at [00:18:00] first it made it easier because it was a novel experience and you could really manipulate the environment and the canvases we were working with.

Choose the platform you were using to collaborate and get great results by being Yeah. Novel. I actually really enjoyed the process as well, but now it's become just another meeting, online workshop, and people are so bored again of moving posts around, generating ideas, being called upon to speak. I'd love to do this with great conviction, but I ran a not very good online workshop today with the client, and so kind of aware of my own shortcomings, but a piece of advice that I try and follow didn't follow today, but it's really about respect.

The time of the people in the room and respecting the way that people can contribute. So I've taken to sending surveys for inputs, asking provocative questions beforehand so that people can [00:19:00] generate some options using Loom to record a walkthrough. So people understand what's coming, what are the kind of big building blocks, what's gonna be expected, that kind of stuff in the room.

A lot of what it is is about decision making and prioritization rather than generation. I'm talking quite generally like working with clients or on strategic pieces of work. I think if you're running a design studio with your colleagues, it's a bit different, but treasuring people's time. Because they all have too many meetings.

No one has enough time to do their work. A lot of people you work with spend all day in meetings and have to do their work at night. So the more that you can preload that workshop, make any conversation or any click and drag motion, high value in that workshop, I think you're getting better outcomes.

You're creating a better experience, which is your brand as a facilitator. If you run crappy workshops, people aren't gonna accept your next invite. If you respect the time and you



show people that, hey, there's been an outcome and we've produced a thing and here's what it is, [00:20:00] then I think it's really been respectful.

In a age where time is something that we're all very well aware, we might not have that much of that. That would be probably the change that I've tried to make and I've responded to. I guess what I've seen is those forces of overwork and overbook.

**Vinita:** Totally agree with you. And there's a thread in something that you said that I wanna pull on about developing a brand as a facilitator and your own design identity.

And I know you've been a proponent of setting up personal design principles, so can you talk a little bit about what that journey has been like, how you see the value in them? How do other people see the value in them?

**Rich:** I'm glad you asked about design principles. Cause I really think that they're undercooked or undervalued.

Often they get shipped with a deck at the end of a project or retrospectively invented, which is fine, right? Like it's gonna guide the next piece of work. That's cool. But in my, also, I had to design, I'm leading a design department and trying to get us all [00:21:00] working together. But actually throughout my career of working with people, I don't really know.

The more you set clear expectations for others, the easier it is for them to relate to you and work with you. And the more consistently you meet those expectations, the easier it becomes for people to work with you. Design principles are sort of guardrails, and they can be guardrails for the way you work.

The things that you say are important, introducing rules for yourself and making them explicit for those around you. They really just make you a bit of a better person because people always know where they stand. We've all worked with people who are rudderless, who kind of flip flop. I heard a great joke that Boris Johnson has the moral compass of a wind sock, and I think that it can be the same with people.

The steadier you are the more predictable you become with your own guard rail. The better people get on with you, and if they don't get on with you, that's fine, but you've put a line in the sand and said, these are the things that are important to me. They will [00:22:00] always be important to me. I've introduced these upfront and now you know, whatever happens or whatever challenge we face, these are the things that will remain consistent.

I think especially when we're changing jobs every two years, being able to know where you stand and having that, it's not even a brand. A brand is what I suppose comes out of that. You can never define a brand. It's just the summation of all the different touchpoints and experiences people have with you as a designer or a facilitator or whatever.

When you have those principles, what emerges is a better brand and a better kind of person to work with and relate. It's not about pleasing everyone, but it is about having conviction. So



I've got four on my website that are true to me. They're kind of gathered over time. One of them, which I talk about a lot, is people don't resist change.

They resist being changed. That doesn't really sound like a principle, but I've read this quote in this, Peter sends book about systems thinking. It just struck me as a really nice articulation of why we should have [00:23:00] humil. In the way we design and how we design. Because when people say, oh, we should just mandate this thing, they're like, well, you're an idiot, cuz that's not how the world works.

But I can never say that. I could say, no, you, but you remember one of our founding principles or my founding principles, people don't resist change. There is this being change. So how can we work with people rather than against them and try and change them? Good for me as a leader and manager, but also as a designer, just to have and articulate something found.

and I only did it because I thought, what are some things that will take me from being a subservient junior designer to someone who can lead and someone who has conviction? And I thought knowing where people stand is really important to that. One way I can do that is through design principles. So now when I'm mentoring stuff, I encourage people to think about what the design principles.

I guess you're human-centered or whatever, but as long as you're thinking about them, then they're starting to bubble away and you'll start making very small decisions that actually add up to bigger things as a result.

**Vinita:** I've [00:24:00] definitely struggled with coming up with design principles, and it's funny cuz when you look at portfolios, there's all this, I'm empathetic and human-centered and centered and user centered, so, Going past that and actually really giving some thought to what your personal design or guiding principles are.

I'd be really curious to see those come to light with many different designers and see how they're different or similar.

**Rich:** And look, I think they're great as an individual designer by going through that process. Even if you have to adapt them to suit different environments, that's fine. You need to know where your stand as a growing up really.

But I'm developing them with my team at the moment, and it's about having more predictable outcomes and a more predictable sort of path to quality work. The other big thing for me is it gives people autonomy when they're in a situation, they're faced with different challenges, they can refer to our shared design principles.

Think about what the options are. Make a decision with confidence that [00:25:00] they're moving in the right direction. If you are leading a team of people who are newer to design or even who are more experienced, you can talk all day about this is the kind of work we do and this is why we do it. But if you just set those guardrails that everyone can use and refer to, then it gives people a lot more confidence to back themselves, try things, and if it fails, they grow.

And if they succeed, they win. I reckon that's a pretty good. .

**Vinita:** I spent some time at Amazon and at that time there were 14 leadership principles that they made everyone memorize. But it was interesting cuz I would literally have them quoted back to me. And it's interesting cuz some of the principles are actually at odds with one another.

So they tell you, you have to understand them for yourself and then understand the context and the situation in which you would quote it to then get the kind of outcome that you want. But I use them many a time against my product manager who would disagree with me often. So it was interesting to see [00:26:00] it used in a lot of different ways for different purposes.

But the first culture I had come across where unilaterally, everyone really memorized them and then actually set them in convers.

**Rich:** I think 14 seems like a lot of principles to hold in your mind. I'm trying to keep, but it's, it's that point, right? At what point is it useful and on the tip of your tongue versus, Hey, can we just take this offline?

Then I'll come back and tell you why ethically, this is the wrong thing to do for our company.

**Sam:** Amazon sounds more like a cult by the way that you are describing it.

**Vinita:** There's people that would agree with that statement, , but interesting way to see a culture work. So Rich, I know you've mentioned a little bit before that you're currently growing a design team at Blue Egg, and I'm curious to hear some of the unique challenges that you found and what that culture is like in reference to the Amazon culture we were just talking about as well.

**Rich:** I would love to say that I'm [00:27:00] growing a design team. The founder, Adam Fork, has been working on the business for 10 years and has landed great clients and built a great framework and culture. So I think I'm supporting the growth of the culture, the business. I suppose, in terms of growing the business, I'm doing sort of two things that I'm focusing on at the moment.

For me, they're really housekeeping things, you know, things that you want to get right so that you can. One is that cohesive culture of design We've got. Offices in Sydney and Melbourne, we've got people with very different skillsets. We've got clients with very different needs, and as I referenced before in that collective intelligence is really important.

And some of the things I'm doing to create a space where a good design culture can exist is setting some design principles. I'm developing them with the team based on really what we already hold strong and kind of evidence of our own practices. They become aspirations, [00:28:00] and that's not a principle, that's an aspir.

So setting those sort of guardrails. Also developing a design framework and you can Google design framework and there's a million and everyone kind of tries to put their own stamp on it



and house has a loop and our has an extra diamond and house is called something different. I don't really give a shit about authorship when it comes to a design framework.

What's important is that it's something that provides context for the activities that. and creates a model for the way we need to think about the work that we're doing. And so I've jammed together a bunch of different design principles borrowed from sort of scientific foundations of our company, which I'll talk about in a second to everything is a draft because it's only when you put it out in the world that you work out if it actually works.

Draft that's gonna contextualize the activities we do, where they come from, what they contribute to, what are the different tools we use, what are the different mindsets we need? The framework needs to be really light and adaptable and something that can [00:29:00] break that's not fit for purpose. Because when I came on, I was a little bit overwhelmed by the amount of different tools we had.

They're all specialty tools for doing different things, which you would expect in a precise design organization, but felt like a lot. And I lacked that context of, hold on, what's this forum? Why are we using it now? What stage is this project up to versus this project? And how are they the same or different?

And so drafting something like that up. Actually have to share back with the team next week through a design script. Is that gonna create that sort of alignment? If the principles set, the expectations and the framework contextualizes the activities, then it creates some certainty for the team to start collaborating and contributing on different kinds of projects with different skills, that kind of stuff, which they do already.

But I'm not interested in something that works. I'm interested in something that thrives and that that's what we should be aiming for when we're trying to design a design culture. I've been a blue egg, as you've mentioned, not for a [00:30:00] great deal of time, about two and a half, three months at the moment. I was really impressed when I started working there because I'm used to organizations and any design department really where everything's on fire and nothing is defined.

When someone new comes on and they say, how do we do this? Everyone goes, I don't know. How do you do it? This is the first place that I've worked in that had some really clean and well-defined processes and methodologies for doing design. Adam, the founders of, I believe, a pharmac pharmaceutical scientist by trade or by qualification rather.

And so he saw an opportunity a long time ago to take what was pretty shoddy qualitative research. And add scientific rigor. And so in terms of how we do our research and testing, it's really underpinned by that scientific rigor of making sure that we've got not just a statistically representative [00:31:00] spread of users that we're testing with, but also we have enough users for that qualitative testing that we can draw quantitative data from it as.

And so all of our work goes into the magical machine, which is dovetail. All the quotes get cataloged, and we use that to do a quantitative analysis on the testing and research, as well as pulling those qualitative insights where we. Do more of that. It's like the art and the

science, I suppose. You do the sense making, but also you look at what are the numbers telling us about this thing?

What have we missed? What's the heat map that's gonna give us direction and conviction? And that's why a lot of our clients are large, complex organizations, or organizations with complex social or stakeholder challenges. Because when you have quantitative evidence to back up your decisions, it means that there's less debating and more action, ultimately more impact.

And I know that lots of research and design [00:32:00] shops do quantum qual. I suppose ours is just underpinned by a pretty fundamental scientific philosophy of what does rigor look like and how is that applied throughout this design and research journey.

**Sam:** One thing that I've found with some of the organizations that I've worked with is research is usually the first piece of the design process that gets thrown out when you lack budget or they turn around and say, okay, we need X delivered by this date.

How do you guide that conversation with your clients to say, okay, the research aspect of what we're delivering is really important. To help guide the product decision.

**Rich:** So I am in a privileged position at Blue Egg where all of our clients are behind research and starting with research, which is a real privilege to have as a designer in the past.

Something that I've done is changing now, but we like to tell people about our approach and why we have to start with, and it's [00:33:00] not solutions, but ultimately that's not how P work, right? They jump to a solution. That's why they're here. That's why they're about to hand over a lot of cash to get you to do something cuz they've got an idea they want you to.

So something I've done before is think about these things, design interventions. So how can I change people's perspective so that they understand the value of doing design? And so I was working for a big property company designing an innovation program, and a bunch of their senior execs kept talking about innovation, but.

I started to understand or decipher the fact that they didn't really know what innovation was or how it worked, or what design was and how it worked. What I did know is that there was a bunch of people who are competitive, who are used to putting ideas out there, and someone says, all right, I'll get back to you in a week.

And so what I did is I got these execs into, into our office, into our glass. Which is cool and innovating, and I set up this room. It was funny. The first thing I did was show them why they needed to innovate and so we set [00:34:00] up the room like a quiz show and ran a quiz lent on my comedy background to not give a shit about looking like an idiot, and ran a quiz that asked some questions about disruption in the property industry.

By answering the questions they started to. Which they already knew, but it just made it quite clear, hey, there's a lot of money going into smaller startups in this space. These are the kind

of cool things they're doing that are in direct competition with your different business lines, that kind of thing.

So created that space for them to go. All agree or not agree, but align at that moment. Hey, innovation is really important. And then we presented a really simple design challenge about some problem that had been reported in their company and got 'em to come up with solutions, which they were really into excited, all right, let's catch up these solutions.

Then I got the person who had submitted the problem into the room to test it in front of these people, and so they were so confident in their ideas and ready to. Ship these fantastic things, but then when I sat down and. Tested it live with someone who spoke about [00:35:00] what the real problem was, what their constraints were, that kind of stuff.

Instead of telling people about the design process and how we have to ask questions before we answer things, they kind of understood it by seeing their ideas critiqued. And I think that there's a lot of simple tricks where you can go, yes, I'm gonna give you what you want. , but the way that we're gonna do that is gonna maybe teach you a lesson, it's probably too strong, but help you see what a better path can be.

And so I think thinking about design interventions is a really fun thing to do when you have difficult stakeholders, rather than sitting around with your team bitching about how they don't get design in their idiots. Like, how can we actually change the way they think or see the world? That's a far more satisfying thing to do as a a designer.

**Sam:** With design interventions, do you have to have a lot of that research already there and know some of the answers to then be able to draw it out of the stakeholders that you are working with and facilitating?

**Rich:** Yes. Once you've been around the block a few times, you kind of get design and why it's valuable.

You get to a point in your design [00:36:00] career where you realize, The little things that you adjust along the way or that you thought were really important, like, oh, first we need to ideate solutions, and then we need to sketch them, and then we need to wire frame. You realize that they're all very small building blocks and underpinning those.

I talk about Lego versus Dulo, underpinning, those are much bigger. Building blocks of design, you know, understanding the way people work together, understanding how energy changes over the course of a project, understanding how different perspectives come together and produce something interesting in the right conditions.

They're the kind of underpinning things of design, but you have. That knowledge and that experience, you don't need to necessarily know the answer because you understand the bigger forces at play and you can think about what's the best way to use those forces to help these people see a different worldview.

Really, that was an example of a design intervention. Just having ways they can get people to question their truth is really what it's about in a moment. [00:37:00]

**Vinita:** So moving a bit further along in the design process, after you've done the research, how do you start to draw an old research to build new insights, especially if you may be using research repositories that are asking some of the higher level contextual questions, and not just, is this button working as an example?

**Rich:** Look, that's an excellent question and a difficult one to answer. I think research repositories promise the world and they're seen as a problem to all of our solutions, and they are imperfect, but they can be useful in terms of really getting that value out of them. Where's two things you need to do? You need to understand the context for those contextual question.

What was the intent of this project? Thinking that you can just ask a bunch of questions, tag up the research and come back and get insights on, say, onboarding users. When you've done employee onboarding and you've tried to quickly ship an app for [00:38:00] someone who didn't want to do much research, that's the soft or like the juicy research insights you got from there.

Necessarily applicable. If you can understand the lens with which you did that last research, you can identify which projects are gonna be relevant to what you're doing, which aren't. So instead of thinking about every time we get new work, we can draw on our backlog of research. That's, that's probably what dovetail want you to think.

Or research repository providers want you to think, but in reality, there's a lot more effort and onus on you as a designer to think it. Something that one of the guys on my team is doing at the moment is taking a bunch of different research we've done with the client and putting it into a new format, mapping it on a journey, and I think that's great for two reasons.

One is it reframes all this tactical research that you've done along the way. But also it gives you some new energy and new focus when you're not just trying to glean insights by mashing findings together, but actually [00:39:00] create a cohesive narrative with assumptions called out along the way where you have those gaps and you get that sort of natural curiosity back as a researcher.

So I always think that. And I'm sure you guys have done this, when you change the format, you get fresh eyes, you start to think differently about what you're doing. You process the information in a new way. So I think going back through research repositories and trying to produce new things rather than more of the same in terms of outputs, is a good method to get value out of a research repository.

Make sure that all the great work you've done isn't for. Also, you gotta be able to call bullshit and say, well that wasn't actually very good research. We're not gonna use that ever again. I dunno if you can tags, I would love to tag tag with pool emojis, but sometimes you need to, I think.

**Vinita:** I would love to hear a designer say that I think we're so invested in the work and the research that to walk away from something and say, oh, that wasn't actually helpful, seems difficult from just an ego perspective.

And we try to then use that in [00:40:00] different ways. So I think that's quite important.

**Rich:** Well, it comes down to what you were saying at the start, right? The holier, the now, the mighty of the now mindset of a designer is totally at odds with what this job requires of you. So having that humility and showing up and exhibiting that humility like that, that's gonna cost you some money sometimes.

But aren't we trying to deliver better outcomes and impact in the end? Like we're gonna have speed bumps along the way. No, it's great. I'll let you know when I admit to some terrible research.

**Vinita:** We'll be there. We'll bring you back on. So to close out, we wanted to end with the final question of are there any resources that you hang your hat on for designers?

And Sam wrote this question cuz he's the one that wears hat.

**Rich:** Likewise, Sam, I love your style and you, yeah, tough. So I really nerd out on more strategic ways of thinking. So one of my favorite resources is UN Tools. [00:41:00] I don't know who produces it. But it's a set of tools for just applying different mental models or different ways of thinking to the work that you're doing.

I've started reading this incredible book. I'm Only halfway through, called Dark Matter and Trojan Horses, which is about strategic design. One of the things I talk about is the matter and the meta and being able to understand, yes, we're making small design decisions here, but what is the strategic implications of.

For me, I find that a really gratifying way to think and really great things to bounce between as a designer, because if you're not thinking about the strategic implications and stuff, then someone else is, and they're gonna ask you that question and you look like a fool, I know it's a bit old hat, but reading sapiens, and I know it's been critiqued, but as designers, if we're applying human-centered, Understanding why people think and behave the way they think.

That's a really easy way to get that foundational [00:42:00] sociological understanding. My favorite book that I've read in the last couple of years is Thinking in Systems by Don Allen Meadows. I realize these are at the lost strategic end of the equation when it comes to design, but it's called a primer for systems thinking.

It's no longer a luxury to think about second order impacts in our work or to try and understand how this fits within the bigger picture. The pandemic made it well and climate change has just made it. Brutally clear that way are all connected as part of this one giant ecosystem. And if you are not thinking beyond the interface that you are designing or the person that you are meant to be designing for, then you are not, then it's just not good design or it's not true design or design as it should be.



So, I know these are all very broad and generic, but yeah, I love that stuff. And I talked about Loom before. Use Loom or a video recording tool like it. That means you don't have to get seven people in a room to hear you talk, that you can give them an overview, help them understand [00:43:00] how to take on information.

In their own time and take action in their own time. Because in the same way that we need to design for different kinds of personalities or different kinds of mindsets, we also need to design for different kinds of lifestyles. And so the more work you can do asynchronously, I found Looms a brilliant tool for that.

**Vinita:** I work at an organization where the communication language is. PowerPoints. So that is what I now have a PhD in .

**Rich:** Well, congratulations, that's awesome.

**Vinita:** Well thank you so much for coming on and having a chat with us, Rich.

**Rich:** Well, thank you for asking so many questions. Looking interested as our respondent.

**Jessica:** And that concludes our latest episode of the IxDA Sydney podcast. You can find the audio transcript for this episode as well as any resources mentioned at [ixdasymdney.org](http://ixdasymdney.org).

**Rich:** I'm Rich Brophy, and you've been listening to the IxDA Sydney podcast. [00:44:00]