

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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Jacob: Hello everyone. Welcome to another episode of the Future Of Work podcast. My guest today is Tim Brown, the CEO of IDEO and we are here at the IDEO offices in San Francisco. Tim, thanks for joining me.

Tim: Hey thanks very much.

Jacob: I'm really excited to talk to you. I know a lot of people online are excited to ask some questions because when I told everybody I was talking to you, I got a bunch of a LinkedIn responses, but before we get into any of that fun stuff, why don't we start with some brief background information about you. From what I understand, you were at the company since, what is it 1987.

Tim: That's right. Yeah been a while.

Jacob: And so how did you get involved with all this stuff? How did IDEO get created? How did design thinking become so popular? Where'd this all come from?

Tim: Sure. I'll try and do that as briefly as I can. I trained as a designer in a fairly classical way back in the UK, trained as an industrial designer, came out to California pretty much straight away because I joined a design firm, had a base in London, also had a base in California, led by what I think of the most sort of imaginative and innovative designers around. Guy by the name of Bill Moggridge. And he did things like, coined the term interaction design back in the mid 80s. Recognized the need that we had for designing software, not just hardware, but he also designed the first ever laptop computer, which is in the Museum of Modern Art. Pretty cool guy. And I had decided that I wanted to work with one of the coolest designers I could find, and he was the one that said yes, and I was very lucky.

Came out to California, started to discover the potential of Silicon Valley, and the energy with which those companies, companies like Apple and the many others that were down here in California or even up further up the coast Microsoft in Seattle were applying to design and realizing that design was helping drive the uptake of all of this new technology.

And I'd always seen design as the coming together of technology and people and what we do as designers is try and figure out what that layer is in between to make this

technology as relevant to people as possible. I got totally excited about that. Loved California, started doing all my work here in a little bit in Japan also. And began to realize that it was more than about technology products, the design, this shaping the world to meet the needs of people applied to everything around us. And it applied to everything in business. And so that's where this term design thinking really came from. It was trying to distinguish between the design of things, or that maybe the design of posters and websites and design as a state of mind, design as a way of solving problems.

And so we started this term design thinking. It had been around a while before that, I had to come out of academics back in the 70s but we were interested in sharing with businesses really, the opportunity to think more creatively about their futures, about all aspects of their futures by taking this design based approach. It's all kind of evolved from there.

Jacob: It's crazy to think about it. You've been in California so long, you remember all of this before Facebook, before LinkedIn, before Twitter, before Google, like these companies didn't even exist.

Tim: I think of those as the new kids on the block. When I first moved here Apple was a relatively new kid on the block. And the old generation were Intel and Fairchild.

Jacob: Cisco was just getting started too [crosstalk 00:03:46].

Tim: Cisco was just getting started, I remember we actually got to work on one of their earliest products and San Francisco was not part of Silicon Valley by then either. Silicon valley was this distant place that started in Palo Alto and went down to San Jose and I lived in San Francisco and it felt like there was literally a whole world in between the two places.

Jacob: For people that are not familiar with IDEO, maybe you can also give us a little bit of background information about the company and what do you guys do? How many people do you have? All that fun stuff.

Tim: We're about 800 people spread around the world helping organizations, these days not just businesses but also nonprofits, governments use this design based approach, design is a mindset, design thinking to tackle all kinds of problems. Some of them are still in the world of new products and new services and new experiences. Some of them spread to kind of totally new systems or one of the projects that over the last few years that we're very proud of is we got to design a whole new school system for Peru.

Jacob: Oh really.

Tim: Where we really literally thought the curriculum, the technology, the campuses, the teacher training methodology, everything is new private school system, which now is getting close to 50 schools and thousands of students and we're now rolling it out in Mexico as well. Very successful. And so the opportunity to design a whole system like that, they're the kinds of things that we get very excited about.

Today we're working in education, in healthcare across almost all of healthcare, in mobility and transportation, new mobility approach to mobility. We're working around the problems to do with the circular economy. How do we make products and services stay in use for much longer because we simply can't afford to be digging stuff out of the ground, manufacturing products out of it and then throwing them away after one year. We're running out of space in the planet.

Those kinds of more systemic level challenges are the kinds of things that we're really excited about working on these days.

Jacob: Can you give any examples of some like what would be a typical project IDEO would get hired for, for example you mentioned redesigning the school system in Peru, which is a fantastic example. But for example in healthcare or food or in any of these other types of industries, what do they come to you for?

Tim: It's always a question. An organization will come with a question. Now that question sometimes can be very specific, which is we have this new product or service we know we need to create. Can you help us figure it out what it is? And that used to be everything that we did and more often now it's either we need to grow in this market or we think we're kind of struggling with competition over here and we need to figure out what the opportunities might be in a different market. Much more broad based question.

Another question that many organizations come to us with today is, we know that we have to become more creative ourselves, that innovation, that change is going to be what our future's all about. But we don't have that capability. We don't know how to do that. Can we work together? More and more often now we're creating these labs, these places which we costaff with people from IDEO and people from the client organization who work together often over long periods of time doing these projects. In fact, that's what happened in Peru. The end of a school system was created by a company called Intercorp. And we have a lab with them in Lima that we've been running now with I think about five or six years. which has costarted with folks from IDEO and folks from Intercorp.

We've done many, many projects together over time. And it's all about taking these principles and methods and skills of creative problem solving and design thinking and getting them out into the organization. And I think that's one of the things that's changing in the workplace in almost every organization today is that creative problem solving is part of the portfolio skills. It's kind of everybody has to have.

And unfortunately, most of us are not trained to do that when we go through university or college or whatever.

Jacob: And I'm definitely gonna ask you about that as well. What does a typical day look like for you? As the CEO of IDEO what is the usual day in the life of Tim?

Tim: Well I try to make it not days full of meetings, if I can avoid it. Because I'm a designer I need to be creatively inspired otherwise I literally run out of steam.

Jacob: You do some of the design stuff yourself?

Tim: I get involved with clients, I try and get involved. I mean one of the things I use my design skills for these days is imagining the future of IDEO, where are we going as an organization, what are the next things? One of the things that I've found has helped me with my career is I've actually had one question that I've constantly asked since I was a student. And I keep asking it, and it helps me think about the future and it's this very simple question is, what's next for design? Where's your design go next? It's been something that's inspired me and driven me right from the beginning. I make sure to spend time thinking about that. Whether it's because I'm speaking at conferences and meeting with other executives and other designers and maybe it's at Davos, maybe it's at Ted, maybe wherever or because I'm getting involved in projects with teams here and clients and kind of just wondering about where the world is going. I constantly come back to that question as a creative challenge for myself.

Jacob: Yeah. It's good that you're still involved in the actual design process.

Tim: Yeah.

Jacob: From your perspective, since the podcast is of course all about the future of work. You've been in the industry, you've been in this space for a while. How have you seen work change? I don't know if you can remember, maybe your first job. How have things changed since your first job with, I mean, everything, leadership style, technology, corporate culture and where do you think things are going in the world of work?

Tim: My first job as a designer was in a old industrial engineering company in the north of England, which is where I trained.

Jacob: How old were you?

Tim: I was probably 20, something like that and I was still at college. But I was lucky enough to get a long six month internship with this company and even luckier that they had never hired a designer before.

Jacob: First one, wow.

Tim: I was the first one that ever worked there, if you imagined jumping back like 70 years, 80 years, and imagine what an engineering shop in a factory was like. Least bit the factory was out through the glass doors with all of these massive great machines and they were manufacturing woodworking machines. Things with people's woodworking shops and they were these engineers who were designing or drawing up these like complicated little parts of metal for these machines. And I walked in and they said, "Hey, we've never had a designer before. How can you make our products better?"

Tim: Over that six months, I redesigned every product they made and they trusted me. It was crazy of them to trust me so much. But I had a whole range of products out in the market about a year later, funnily enough I was visiting a design school for quite a famous design school in London year before last and they took me on a tour around the new building, I went to the wood shop. There was one of the circle sorts that I designed 30 odd years before, it was kind of exciting to see the things still being used.

Anyhow that was a very traditional environment. No computers, none at all. Everything was drawn by hand on vellum, on tracing paper. The place was kind of oily and noisy and you couldn't imagine a world more different from the world I work in today. Yes, the environment in which design happens has changed.

Jacob: It was a very hierarchical commanding main control.

Tim: It was totally, but at the same time it was a small enough company that I had surprising access to the hierarchy to the point by the end of my internship, the chairman of the company took me off on a few day trips in his Jaguar to visit the various factories they had around the country to advise each of the managing directors on how they should use design or the products. Again, incredible trust that these people had for me. I was very, very lucky.

But it was a very different world. One of the things that's happened in the world of work is that our way of doing things as designers which is all project oriented. Everything we do is we put a picked team together and we tackle a project, with a question at the beginning and a process for getting to some kind of real answer at the end, which is a new product a new service, whatever it might be. I think that, that way of working project based team based is what's happening more and more in organizations today.

I think one of my other first jobs when I was trying to earn enough money to go through college was I worked in a couple of accounting firms just helping out with paperwork. And it was so boring.

Jacob: Sorry for any accountants listeners.

Tim: Yes I apologize for acc ... Some of my best friends are accountants. Everything was processed driven. Your job was a process. Mine was filling pieces of paper basically. I think what's happened is that more and more jobs have gone from being processed based to being project based because organizations have to create more and more new stuff than they ever had to before. The skills that we need today, let's talk about how do I manage this process, just be honest, machines are doing that better and better. And instead how do I-

Jacob: Its what they're built for.

Tim: Exactly. How do I work with other people? How do I co-create with other people.

Jacob: Human skills.

Tim: Human skills. How do I learn how to make the most of somebody else's skill and as they learn to make the most of my skill, how do we navigate the unknown and this sort of ambiguous future where we don't know what we're actually going to create together, but we're going to create something. These are the kinds of things that I think of change but luckily enough as a designer that's what I was trained to do.

Jacob: Have you ever had a organization bring you into just, think about work differently in the company? Any employee facing stuff like thinking about new, on our policies, procedures, just redefining work at the company, your leadership, anything around those?

Tim: Yeah, absolutely. It's happening more and more. We do it for ourselves obviously, we can't help but take a design based approach to everything. Whether it's the way we design our career journey is that we have a way of doing that. This is sort of particular to us.

Jacob: Are you able to share a little bit? I think people would find that interesting.

Tim: We have an approach to careers, which is all about this idea of mastery, what we think is that each of us go on these arcs of learning and mastering skills, as we go through our careers perhaps change from being the skills of an individual contributor to the skills of operating successfully in a team and maybe leading teams then to the skills of actually often leading teams of teams. We have an approach at IDEO which literally you call IDEO journeys. But each one of us that have essentially, we have four levels people go through, as they increase their scope and scale of activity. And inside each of those is a cycle of learning, practicing and mastering. Teaching basically.

We have a belief, we come from kind of an educational background. When IDEO was founded, the founder David Kelly also taught at Stanford and we've had a connection to education all the way through our existence. And we believe of this idea that in order to really master something, you should teach it.

Jacob: I like that approach.

Tim: What we look for here at IDEO is evidence of mastery because people are able to teach it to each other, teach whatever that skill is, whether it's a technical skill of using a piece of software or something like that or a leadership skill.

We've designed this sort of system of this cycles of learning, which then kind of get evidenced as people move their career and several of our clients who got interested in that and asked us to help them apply similar kinds of approaches in their own organizations.

Jacob: I love that approach. Applying design thinking even to work.

Tim: Yeah. For a long time we've been applying design thinking to organizations.

Jacob: Just at large.

Tim: Just at large. Yeah and mostly to do with the fact that as companies come to us and say, "We want to be more creative, we want to be more innovative." The first thing is obvious is that their existing organizations, which are all focused on efficiency are not well set up to deal with innovation so there has to be something new that has to happen at an organizational level in order to create space for creativity and innovation to happen. Sometimes it literally is a space, these labs that I was talking about earlier, but it's also who reports to who and what certain skills you need to have in the organization and how you put teams together. And all of these things have to change.

What people learn about and how they learn that changes. And we have quite a big team of organizational designers, for instance, here at IDEO who help organizations think about that stuff when we're working with them.

Jacob: Very cool. I realized, we never actually talked about what design thinking is. If you had to explain design thinking to somebody that's never heard of it, probably, I don't know, maybe my dad who I know listens to the podcast. Sorry Dad, I don't know if you know what design thinking is. But for people that don't know design thinking, how would you explain what it is and how is it different than, I don't know, thinking.

Tim: Yeah, Ironically, the big difference between thinking and design thinking is the doing bit, which doesn't crop up in the term design thinking. One of the things I wrote about this a few years ago in a book that I published called Change By Design, and we've actually just updated it and just published an updated version. But if that is really an attempt to explain what design thinking is and where it goes, in its essence it's the methods that we use from going from basically nothing to something.

If you think about what we're trying to do as creative people, we're trying to take a question, like "please take this", there's sat in front of us right here is a drinking glass full of water and say, "Please try and make the experience of drinking water a better experience." You don't have a lot to go on there.

You don't know what the answer is, that's the point. When you start the creative process you do not know what the answer is. Most people when they're presented with the problem of solve a problem but you have no idea what the answer is. They're sort of, you don't know what to do with it, it's like the proverbial blank sheet of paper. And so what design thinking is, is a set of processes and methods for getting you to an answer. The first one is to really understand what the question's all about. What are the needs that you're trying to satisfy with that question?

If it's how do I make the experience of drinking this water better, I'd want to come and spend time with you and lots of other people trying to understand, what is it about drinking water that matters to you, when you do it? How do you do it? Where would you like to do it differently? Where could you not do it and you wish you could? All of those kinds of questions and that-

Jacob: And this can be applied to any, whether you're in HR, IT. Any same process.

Tim: Totally. Anything where you're trying to satisfy some human need, but you're trying to make something different or better or maybe something that's never existed before. And so one starts with trying to understand what are the needs that we might be trying to satisfy. And then it's the process of trying out lots of ideas.

Jacob: It's limitation.

Tim: It could be where we instead of having a cup with water, which should spill easily, we put it inside of something so that we can not have it spill or their sort of magical idea of dehydrating water, wouldn't be water then but what are the various solutions to the problem that we might be able to explore? We explore lots of ideas. We make them, we make very quick prototypes so we can try them out and get feedback. And then we slowly kind of out of that process of exploring lots of ideas, kind of consolidate and converge down onto the most promising ones, eventually the most promising one. And then it's that process of refining and developing to the point where you've got something finished.

Jacob: It's kind of like cropping, cropping a picture [crosstalk 00:20:19].

Tim: It is. Funnily enough, most people are pretty comfortable with the convergent piece of making an idea better and better until it's ready. What they are often uncomfortable with is the divergent piece of exploring many ideas at the same time. We tend to have an approach in our world and particularly in business of whatever our first idea is we're just going to chase that idea until it doesn't work and then go all the way back to the beginning.

Jacob: It's gotta be right.

Tim: But that's a very inefficient way of getting to the right new ideas. One of the skills that creative people have is the ability to explore and diverge and explore many ideas at the same time and then understand how to make the best choices of those new choices, new ideas that they've created.

Jacob: Do you find that typically inside of companies, are there usual just specific teams that are responsible for thinking like this? Because this seems like this would be relevant for every team in a company, but you don't really hear about HR or IT or operations or facilities management thinking like this. It's typically just designers.

Tim: Well obviously traditionally it would be the R&D organization. You would obviously hope would think like this. What we have seen over the last decade or so is a series of other parts of organizations. Early on we started getting executive teams, CEOs coming and saying, "I need to think like this because I'm trying to think about what the future of my company is." That's a design process, I told a little bit, what I spent all my time doing is that, I applied design to what the future of IDEO should be. Well CEOs are also trying to do that.



We started having CEOs come to us. One of the earliest in fact was Jim Hackett who was then just taking over the job as CEO of Steelcase, we worked together very closely for many, many years and now he's the CEO of Ford doing it all over again around the future of mobility. He was one of the earliest CEOs to understand that his job was essentially a design job and there are many more-

Jacob: Even as a leader design job.

Tim: Yeah, exactly. There are many more CEOs that are thinking that way today. And then we started seeing IT teams come as digital transformation started to take off. We starting to realize that actually, how we apply digital technology inside organizations both on behalf of our customers but also in terms of our own internal processes had ... The opportunities to do that in many, many different ways and innovate through that is getting greater and greater. We've started to see more and more IT organization to realize they needed to apply these approaches inside their organization.

More recently it was talent organizations, the human resources organizations have started to realize that as talent, as the kind of competition for talent gets stiffer and stiffer and the need to help people develop in their jobs, not just do a job. But actually develop their skills. They've started to realize that they also need to have some of these design thinking skills. And so my view is there's no part of an organization that doesn't benefit from some kind of ability to solve problems creatively.

Jacob: What is it like to be an employee at IDEO? Because I feel like a lot of people when they think of IDEO, they think kind of like Hogwarts, Harry Potter. Like it's this unique, weird, crazy place. I'm looking around the offices, there's giant boards everywhere, there's posted notes. Looks like you guys are scheming on something. Every time I turned the corner, I'm like, "Ooh, there's some kind of planning going on here." What is it like to be an employee here? Do you have any unique practices or is it just like any other company, annual performance reviews, engagement surveys?

Tim: I think we're starting to do some of that kind of stuff. We try to be diligent about giving people a chance to reflect on their careers. We have approaches to it that are different. Some organizations and probably some of the others. I would say that the biggest differences to most organizations, well firstly the obvious one, which is we spend almost all of our time creating new things. Whereas in most organizations only some people spend some of their time doing it.

Jacob: Yah, if they're lucky.

Tim: Yeah. People come here to be creative, to join teams, to work on projects. and 90% of what of what we do is project based which is different for most organizations probably. But I would say the other thing that is not different to other companies because there are plenty of other companies do this too but unique in a sense is the way we think about our culture.

Not surprisingly we have a culture that attempts to optimize around creativity, give people a chance to kind of learn and explore and be inspired. But we have a particular approach to it that's different from many other creative organizations actually. We believe in group creativity rather than individual creativity. We want people to be individually creative and inspired, but we believe that we can be most effective when people work as teams.

We have certain cultural values that are very important to us here. One which is help others be successful, not just focused on your own success.

Jacob: Yeah I love that one.

Tim: Which is really totally ingrained in the culture here. And people do spectacular things to help each other and we perform much better because of it. And I think it does make the place feel different. Because people have kind of got your back and they help you out and they dive in and help. I've been working on projects before where literally people come in, you get in the morning, people knock on the door and say, "Hey, I've got a couple of hours today." "Can I help you? I don't know what can I help you with?"

Jacob: Oh Wow.

Tim: That kind of behavior, you don't see that in most organizations.

Jacob: No you don't.

Tim: It's usually energizing and again allows you to get a lot done. I'm not claiming that that's totally unique, but it's very important to us.

Jacob: How do you structure your teams by the way? For example, do you focus on team size? Do you focus on diversity of teams? When you think of a team, how do you make an effective team?

Tim: I would say the grand experiments of IDEO has been how diverse from a skills perspective is it possible to have a group of people and still kind of hold it together. We have people with many, many different disciplines, many, many different skills and a normal team might be three, four or five people. It's not huge but every team member will come from a different background.

One might come from design research, so they might have a psychology degree or an anthropology degree. Another might be a digital designer who's been working in software and another might be a business designer who's got an MBA and come out of some entrepreneurial background. We bring these different people together, but we all share the same methodologies. We share this methodology of design, which is what holds, I think our teams together and holds our disciplines together. We have practicing physicians working at IDEO on healthcare projects. We've had chefs where we do a lot of work in food. We have chefs working here and they're not cooking our lunch. They're

actually working on design projects. We have writers, filmmakers, I mean all kinds of people.

Jacob: Very diverse.

Tim: Very diverse. We bring them together with a shared methodology to work on projects.

Jacob: Yeah, I love that. How do you approach a problem? And so the reason I'm asking you is because I'm hoping that maybe people listening to this podcast, regardless of what field or industry or role they have in the company, maybe they can learn something from how IDEO approaches a problem so that they can approach a problem the same way. Again, whether you're an HR, IT, facilities, operations, leadership, let's say you're tasked with something, you have an idea for something, how do you go about approaching a problem, trying to come up with something?

Tim: The first kind of rule of creative problem solving is to assume that the problem that you're presented with is not actually the problem you should be solving.

Jacob: Oh, interesting.

Tim: Step one is to reframe the problem almost always. And the reason for that is whatever assumptions have been made about what the problem is. One of the things that most affected me in my career was seeing a movie very early on when I was a design student made by Charles and Ray Eames called the Powers of 10.

Jacob: The Powers of 10?

Tim: Yeah. Made in the 60s. I would recommend anybody who's interested in creative problem solving to watch it.

Jacob: I'm gonna write that down.

Tim: It's totally easy. It's available on the web. And it was a little movie that was made by these, these are my designer heroes and it starts off with an image of somebody lying on a picnic blanket on a field and then it backs away at steps of 10, increments of 10 times the magnitude all the way back out to the edge of the universe. Then comes all the way back in and then goes into the person's hands and all the way down to the level of an atom. And each increment is a step of 10 and you realize how your perspective changes as you go from one to 10 times to 100 times. And that's the way to think about problem solving is that whatever kind of altitude or scale the problem has brought you a, there's a huge benefit from going at least 10 times greater scale and looking or at least 10 times less scale and looking. 10 times close to a 10 times further away in order to change your perspective of what the problem should be.

For instance, I'll try and give you a practical example. If somebody comes and says, "Hey, our industry's being disrupted with digital and we need to design a new digital version of our product." The right response to that is not to run away and start designing digital

versions of that product, but it's to say, "Well, maybe you need a whole new business." And what's the new business you should be in and not what's the new product you should be designing.

Tim: And so you step back. That is one approach to problem solving that is endemic at IDEO.

Jacob: I like that.

Tim: We always reframe the problem. Now sometimes that can be very frustrating. 'Cause whoever's brought the problem to you, because I just want you to solve my problem. Well, yes but are you thinking about the right problem? But that's a negotiation.

Jacob: Let's say for example you're in IT. In IT it's typically around, we need to adapt to all of the changing technologies. If you're an HR, it's usually around how do we focus on creating a better experience for people, employee engagement blah, blah, blah. I'm just trying to think if you were to go 10 layers out from that of like better technologies for people or better experiences for people. Even my mind I can't think of what ...

Tim: Let's take the IT-

Jacob: Like automation in IT is a good one.

Tim: An obvious one would be we regularly kind of ask IT folks to think about this, which is they might come and say, "Okay, we need to find better technologies to help support our users." One of the questions we ask, what role should you really be playing with your organization in the first place?

Jacob: Oh, okay.

Tim: Are you the providers of technology or should you be enabling everybody in the organization to use technology to reach their goals?

Jacob: You could do the same for HR, what is the role of HR in the company?

Tim: What is the role of HR? Is it to manage talent policies or is it to enable talent growth? That's one obvious one. It does not always as grand as that.

Jacob: And if you were to go 10 times in.

Tim: Well that can sometimes be looking at ... Let me see, try to give you a good example of that. Sometimes it can be, I need to design a new website, or I need to design some sort of new digital experience. And it might turn out actually what's wrong with your current one, is not that it's the wrong website. It's just the quality of the experience is bad. If you dive in, and you make it a much better experience for people, actually what you're doing today is just [crosstalk 00:33:02].

Jacob: Seeing how both perspectives, diving in and zooming out.

Tim: Diving in and zooming out. One way we often get to what the big problem is with users when we go and do research is ask them, just tell us all the bugs you have with what your experience is today. They're diving in the same way, I hate this feature, or I hate the fact that I've got to call this person up in order to figure how to go to this transaction. And so you're diving right down, but when you assemble all of those bugs, and you start to see the patterns and realize what might be wrong with the product.

Jacob: And I love that you mentioned you actually interview the users 'cause I feel like oftentimes a lot of companies, they design things for their employees but not with them. No, they don't bring employees into the process.

Tim: We don't just interview them. We both go and literally watch them doing what they're doing. We use observational approaches and more and more often now we design with them.

Jacob: Which is crucial.

Tim: I think so. And it gets easier as more and more people, we see more and more young folks coming out of college and out of ... Today with some kind of design skills themselves. I find it easier and easier to go into organizations and work with people and have them know how to engage a little harder with older people. But there's a lot of enthusiasm that young folks, not surprisingly it's fun to do this creative stuff.

Jacob: And it's been taught more and more.

Tim: Yeah.

Jacob: That was the first step, kind of reframing the problem. Where would you go from there?

Tim: Well then we've talked a little bit about it. Then it's go understand who you should be thinking about in terms of users. And one of the important things to remember there is we have a tendency when we think about users to target the middle of the classic bell curve, where are most of our users? If we make a mobile phone, who are most of the people who buy that mobile phone, you go and talk to them. But actually what we're interested in when we go and study users is not actually what the most people do. It's like we want to be inspired and get insights actually from the edges.

And so we have this concept of what we call extreme users, which are, who are the people who are right at the edge of the market. Sometimes that might mean advanced users, people who are early adopters. That's a classic thing to do here in Silicon Valley obviously.

Sometimes we take the opposite approach, which is who are the people who struggle to use this thing? They may be older people or they may be kids. I'll give you an example. Many years ago we were designing a whole series of kitchen implements for a consumer product company. And we went and talked to normal consumers but we also went and talked to professional chefs to understand what the issues they had with implements.

And often for them it was things like cleanability 'cause they were, having to use something, clean it, get back and use it again.

And then we also went and spent time cooking with a whole bunch of kids because the thing that you could discover from kids was where they physically struggled to manipulate a tool or do something. Do you wanna?

Jacob: Somebody's doing construction.

Tim: Yeah, they are. When these kids physically struggled, it was often something that adults struggle with as well but you couldn't quite, they disguised it better. But with the kids it was obvious, when they had a hard time stirring something.

Jacob: They'll let you know.

Tim: They couldn't put enough pressure on that pizza to cut it. It was obvious. And so we learned from these kids, we had insights about what needs might actually be for adults.

Jacob: Maybe the lesson there is sometimes don't just focus on who the main users are, but kind of understand-

Tim: Go for the edges, go for people who you think might be ... The obvious thing to do is go find people who are not actually using the thing that or not actually going through the experience you're trying to solve for. And so for instance if you're an internal HR department, you're trying to make things better for your employees as well. Maybe you should go and talk to alumni and maybe you should go and talk to people who were not yet employees in your organization so that you're understanding folks who are not yet in your system.

Jacob: It's prospects that are gonna be coming in the future.

Tim: Exactly. Think bigger again, it's back to think bigger again, just in the way that we did when we talked about framing the problem.

Jacob: But all of this also requires time, which I find that a lot of organizations, and I don't know, maybe this is a broader issue. A lot of employees in companies are just like, "Oh, we don't have time." Tasks, I'm up to my ears. I don't have time to talk to anybody. Do you think in the corporate world we need more time for this stuff?

Tim: Totally do. And if you look at the organizations that are really successful with the design and really successful with innovation, they take time.

Jacob: Who would be a couple of successful-

Tim: The classic example is Apple. How long it takes them to launch products. It's years and years in some cases. And they hold things back until they are ready. Now they are an

extreme version and they have extreme power in the market so they can get away with things that not all organizations can.

Jacob: Maybe Lego.

Tim: But Lego is a another very good example. They take time to develop things, the world's most successful toy company. There maybe is a bit of a pattern there, particularly around things where the experience really matters.

Jacob: Yeah. I interviewed their chief people officer and they're big believers in the power of play. They encourage everybody at the company. They have Lego sets in all their conference rooms. They're always wanting people to play around and tinker, which is great.

Tim: It's completely in their culture. I think to some degree we have to stand up for time, we need it. On the other hand, we also have to be clever about how we use time. And one of the best ways to waste time, in my opinion, is to do too much time slicing.

When it comes to being creative, it's an intense focused activity. And if you break it up with lots of meetings and you ask people to, "Hey, yeah, work on this project all day, but a two o'clock we want you to come and do this half hour meeting and at four o'clock we want you to come and do this other one hour meeting."

Jacob: Yeah everything's chopped up. [crosstalk]

Tim: ... nobody gets into the flow. And so you essentially waste, you've probably taken a day, but instead of taking 15 or 20% of the efficiency away, you've taken 50% of the efficiency away.

Jacob: That would be a good design problem, how to design a good day for an average employee. What should the ideal day for an employer look like?

Tim: We even struggle with it here. It's very easy to distract people with other things. And the best teams have figured out how to create core time where they're all together, they're all working on the project no distractions, may not be the whole day, quite often what teams will tell you is like from 10 until four, we're just focused.

Jacob: But it's solid time.

Tim: But it's solid time.

Jacob: It's six, seven, eight hours.

Tim: And that actually there's a limit to how much you can really work intensely.

Jacob: But it's not like 30 minutes of creativity time.

Tim: No, no.

Jacob: seven hours of meetings.

Tim: No, it's not. Avoiding time slicing when you want people to particularly work together. It's one thing as an individual you might be able to grab 30 minutes and do something productive. I find that I actually can be quite productive if I'm writing something or creating a new talk or thinking about an idea in a quite a shorter period of time, as long as I'm not too tired. but that's me as an individual. Is it possibly if you're trying to do that with other people.

Tim: I think avoiding time slicing, and that's one of the great diseases of the modern organization [inaudible 00:40:15].

Jacob: Oh, for sure. Especially with social media and with apps and it's a nonstop, bombarded every five seconds. What would be the next step. I don't know, did we get to the end of the process?

Tim: Well, I think we've talked about extreme users. And we talked earlier about the need to explore many ideas in parallel. We have actually have real evidence of this. We run these kind of surveys within hundreds of organizations around their creativity practices and look at the relationship between the data we get back and how effective organizations are. And we've now got very convincing data that shows that teams that explore, somewhere in their sort of three to five ideas in parallel are more than twice is likely to launch something at the end of the project.

The ones that explore just one idea at a time. In some ways the sort of lean startup of idea of like pursue one idea, then pivot. The evidence which show that tends not to be as effective at actually launching something at the end. Exploring multiple ideas in parallel and having the ability to do that, which means you've got to work fast. It means you've got to have fairly low fidelity ways of exploring those ideas. Because obviously if you're building some huge expensive pilot of every idea you explore, it takes forever and costs a fortune.

Jacob: 10 million dollars.

Tim: You've got to have low fidelity ways of doing that. And that's one of the skills that I think creative people learn is clever ways of prototyping. And so that's really important. Designing the processes by which decisions get made about what to take forward is really important and understanding and agreeing at the beginning what the constraints are. What are the things that this idea must actually deliver on in order to be effective is important.

Jacob: What's your process here? How do you know, inside of IDEO, I don't know, let's say you're working on a project, either with a client or something internally you come up with these three to five ideas. How do which one's the best one?



Tim: You never know to be really frank with you, which one's the absolute best? It's a combination of two things in my opinion. One is what feedback you're getting from trying out your prototype with real people. And that's important. You build prototypes in order to try ideas out. That's one, so getting out and getting your ideas into the hands of other people, users if you want to call them that, as early as possible is the mark of a good team.

The other is you build an understanding of what the constraints are, the things that the project must deliver on, in the brief in the first place. In the question you ask at the beginning. For instance, I'll go back to that school project that I mentioned earlier. The brief was create a world-class scalable school system that's going to be low cost and that in fact \$100 a month.

Jacob: Wow.

Tim: That was the brief. And that's what we delivered.

Jacob: That's what you started-

Tim: It was actually \$130 a month in the end, but that's still super low cost. That's way less than we spend per student on the public school system in America.

Jacob: Not even close.

Tim: We had a really clear, world-class is a pretty open ended idea, but we knew the way we got to world-class is we took with took things like the Khan Academy down and built that into the curriculum. Scalable meant we had to be able to operate, build and operate many, many, many, many schools. And then the number gave us like, this cannot be \$1000 a month because the middle-class in Peru can't afford \$1000 a month. And then everything else was up for grabs, they were the three things we had to deliver on. Everything else was up for grabs, how big it was, how we taught the students, what form the classrooms, lots and lots of creative space to explore. But there were these three things that were constraints that had to be delivered on.

Tim: Ideas that fell with the outside of that, you either question them really hard or you just throw them away because they're not delivering on the brief. Actually having clarity about what really matters or not what just what would be nice to have, but what really matters is an important discipline at the beginning of a credit process.

Jacob: How do you deal with failure? I know that was one of the questions on LinkedIn that somebody asked and I was going to look up the person's name. But his comment was how do you deal with creativity and with failure in an organization? Because oftentimes it's not encouraged. Oftentimes we're not encouraged to experiment, failure is viewed as a bad thing. If you fail, it's not good. How do you deal with that and can you share any stories of when IDEO has failed?

Tim: Depending on your definition of failing, we are failing at very high rates everyday. And indeed we build failure into the design process.

Jacob: And His name was Jacob [Goodapple 00:45:16], and he works at GE actually. Good name by the way Jacob.

Tim: Great name. The reframe around failure has asked to be, how do you maximize the rate of learning in the organization and learning what doesn't work is actually great learning because you can build on it and seek what does work. But the form of that failure you have to be thoughtful about the form of failure. What I think of is, is it's this difference between what I think of is kind of catastrophic failure, which is the equivalent of a bridge breaking, when you have catastrophic failure, there is no way forward. When a bridge breaks you can't cross it anymore. Have you got to this point in a project where the only alternative if you fail, then the only route forward is to stop. That's catastrophic failure.

That normally means you've gone too long before you've tried something out. It normally means you've risked too much. You've put too much money, too many resources, too much time to the point where you literally cannot afford to fail. And of course then if you do fail at that moment you're done.

Jacob: Kind of like the bullet train that we were supposed to build in California?

Tim: Yeah. I mean, yes. I do think there's a class of project, which is in its own class, which are these massive high risk infrastructure projects like building nuclear power stations where actually all the failure has to happen long before you even start the project. You can't afford to have failure in a project like that. And that's based on a company like GE for instance. It's actually a pretty expert at this in designing all the failure out of the product by often through years and years of expertise and development and maybe failure in an earlier sense.

But I think for most of us when we're exploring new ideas, we're not talking about that scale of complexity or we're not talking about the kind of risks of failure of a, let's say a nuclear power station. But even then we should be building in the opportunity to fail as early as possible when the cost of failure is low or as low as possible. For instance, if you try an idea out in the first week and people say, nah or I would like it if it did this, you can respond really easily in the investment you put in, it's only a week's worth of investment.

You wait a year to do that then it's a lot more painful to find out that it's not the right thing or you should have thought of something else. One of the things I encourage leaders to do, whether that's a CEO of a company or somebody who's leading a team is not to wait too long to give feedback around the idea. Often what happens in organizations is people are scared of taking new ideas to senior executives and think they need to be super polished before they take them. But the trouble is if you wait until that moment to take them to a senior executive all they can do is say, "Okay, fine."

Or "It's terrible." And then you've wasted all that effort. But if you take that idea early on, they can give you the benefit of their wisdom.

A CEO that I worked with years ago was A.G. Lafley when he was CEO of Procter & Gamble. And that's one thing he changed in that culture when he started, generally people wouldn't take anything to him until it was 18 months in the project.

Jacob: Oh, wow.

Tim: And he totally changed that. And was very comfortable with people taking early prototypes in to him. He'd give them feedback about what he ... Because he had this huge scope. He's seen so many things, he had lots of great ideas. He had lots of knowledge. He was very, very good at asking good questions. And that was much more valuable to a team early on in the process than it was when they'd already been working on [crosstalk]

Jacob: You mentioned leadership. What role do leaders play in all of this? Obviously leaders need to give time. They need to give space. Probably the leadership style, the command and control is not gonna work very well.

Tim: Totally.

Jacob: What advice would you have for leaders listening to this?

Tim: One thing that leaders definitely should not have and don't have is the best ideas.

Jacob: And they need to know that?

Tim: And they need to know that, and they need to be comfortable with that. The kind of classic notion of leadership is that you have the answer. In a creative process if you believe you have the answer then why the heck are you hiring a team of your own people or somebody else's people.

Jacob: Just do it all yourself.

Tim: Just do it all yourself. And if you think you can do that, that's what you should do. The style of leadership changes and the way I think about is that leadership, when it comes to, kind of creative teams and when it comes to creative problem solving is a role in which is played out through multiple stances. And I think of three.

There is the classic leading from the front, but the form in which that takes, and I use the metaphor of the explorer and that is to ask the question of what's over the horizon and give permission for the team to explore what's over the horizon. That takes power, it takes authority, it takes bravery, it takes vision to ask the question, but that's what you should do, you should ask the question, not answer the question, ask the question.

Jacob: Even if you know the answer.

Tim: Even if you think you know the answer.

Jacob: Think you know the answer yes.

Tim: Even if you think you know the answer, almost certainly the team will come back with something that's better and even if they don't it will still inform what you thought the answer was. And so the leading from the front stance is about asking the right questions and setting the team often in interesting direction.

Tim: And then there's a second stance or second mode which I use the metaphor of gardening, which is really setting the conditions for the team to be successful. That's all about nurturing and weeding and all those kinds of metaphors we can think of to do with gardening. It's about providing the time, the right team, the motivation that designing the rituals that help teams be successful. All of these kinds of nurturing qualities that require real leadership actually 'cause it takes discipline to take the time to worry about that kind of stuff. But if you don't, you will have a dysfunctional team.

And then the third stance, is less of a metaphor and actually it's a real leadership approach is being the player coach. Good leaders of creative teams have done it before themselves, they've participated. They've been entrepreneurs. They've been through the process and therefore they've got wisdom right now that wisdom should not be played out by being the leader of the team. But if you think what a player coach does or a coach of a great team, it's about knowing those moments. Either to give the team extra confidence or reassure them they are taking the right risks, or even to redirect them if they're perhaps going a little bit astray.

It's knowing when to step alongside and play along with the team. and so those three stances of front behind and beside are all important when it comes to creative problem solving and design thinking and the best leaders can play all three stances even though inevitably any one of us is stronger than the others, but we can play all three modes.

Jacob: Okay. I know we're almost at a time and I do want to get to some of these questions from LinkedIn, maybe I'll just ask you a one or two more. We didn't even get a chance to talk about like purpose and meaning and AI and all that stuff. but maybe it'll come up during some of these other LinkedIn questions. One of the last questions for you, at least for me is around where to get started. People listening to this, they are inspired by what you're saying. They want to bring design thinking. They want to bring in some of this creative problem solving into their organization. Let's start with individual contributors or employees who are not in position of power to necessarily drive change, but they want to embrace some of these concepts and ideas. Maybe they've been at the company for a couple months, maybe a year, or maybe they've been there for a while, but there's still just individual contributors. Is there anything they can do or are they just kind of ...

Tim: Well, I think one of the things that anybody that's relatively new to organization can do that's valuable is observe the organization as they see it because it'll be different to those who've been there a long time. And they will have insights, and they will have

thoughts about and questions about, well, why do we do things that way? Or why do we not consider this? Or why do we not? Why are we not tackling this problem? And as difficult as it some kinds of times might be to bring that up. I would say for most people in most organizations, the some body or some place where it's reasonable to bring up observations and insights, even if it's just your three month check in with your business lead.

Jacob: You gotta speak up.

Tim: Speak up the things that you observe but record them. Make that a practice. One of the things that, those of us who are sort of inveterate design thinkers do is we all have sketchbooks and notebooks and we record our observations. We see something, we take a picture of it, we remember it, we write it down so that we have this big collection of insights that we can call on when we want, when we want to go solve the problem. And so don't just kind of go through your day having these new experiences and not thinking it. Record the things that occur to you,

Jacob: Keep track.

Tim: The things that you're curious about, the things that you're questioning, the the things that you observe that are different from what you've seen in another organization you might have been in.

Jacob: Yeah. Even in my notebook I jot down, I wrote down some of the questions here, but as I go through books, as I have ideas, I'm working on a new book on leadership. I always jot down like little frameworks and ideas and concepts.

Tim: Exactly.

Jacob: Okay. I think that's a great place for individual contributors and speak up and for leaders I think we talked about some good advice. I don't know if there's anything you want to add to that. For leaders that want to implement some of this design thinking process, it seems like it's largely about time, space and kind of your leadership style. Just encouraging [crosstalk]

Tim: Yes, exactly. It takes bravery from leaders to to realize that actually, there are problems to be solved, opportunities to be grabbed and that if we put resources and teams against it there's a payoff. It's very easy for leaders just to kind of think, "Well, I just need to keep managing the processes and the things that I'm already doing, and I'll be fine." It takes bravery to stand up and say, "No, actually there's a better way or there's something that's worth tackling." And so, I would say that, that it's the similar same bravery that it takes for an entrepreneur to leave their organization and go and start a new company. There's that level of entrepreneurialism is necessary for all creative problem solving.

Jacob: And part of me wonders if one of the issues is we have a lot of the wrong leaders in place. We have a lot of the wrong people who are leading companies are just.

Tim: Well, I don't know if the wrong people, but they've had a certain set of experiences, they were trained-

Jacob: Wrong background yeah.

Tim: Often at business school to run processes to focus on efficiency and that's made them successful in their careers and now we're asking them.

Exactly. Now we're asking them to think totally differently and it's no different. And I would say no less significant than as we talked today about how as AI begins to automate more and more knowledge work. Again, we're asking people to rewire their brains to figure out how they can bring the most of their kind of humanity to work because that's the most valuable piece.

It's the thing that machines can't do, it's all part of that same change in my opinion. I actually think that being creative is a pretty good defense against AI.

Jacob: I agree as well.

Tim: AI is really good at recognizing patterns and that can look like creativity sometimes but really all it is an exploration of lots and lots of options and that's different. It's useful, but it's different. Real creativity, real insight gathering, real leaps of the imagination is something that machines cannot do today and don't believe are going to be able to do for quite some time to come.

Jacob: Well maybe with all the influx of artificial intelligence, it'll give us more time to use design thinking and creative problem solving.

Tim: Would be nice if AI actually helped us so that we don't have to spent half of our lives figuring out how to our calendar works.

Jacob: Yes, yes. That would. Okay. Here's another question from LinkedIn from a Teen and Allen and he says it would be splendid to hear how Tim Brown and his team approach hiring, the work that IDEO does is so revolutionary. It's likely that very few people hired have been spending years doing what they'll be doing at IDEO. What are they looking for in their hires and how can others learn from them about hiring for people for how they think versus what they've done?

Tim: Really that's a great question. One that we consider all the time and I have to say, we kind of constantly evolve how we think about this. I would say at one point we hired a lot for what people had done, but we hired people who had come through the same experiences that we had, we hired designers who had designed experiences and you could hire based on that portfolio, the collection of projects they've done. And we still do that for plastically trained designers, but more and more we weed high people who are not classically trained designers who don't necessarily have those kinds of portfolios. And so we're hiring for mindset.

Some of you may have read or come across Carol Dweck's work around the growth concept.

Jacob: Yes.

Tim: We totally hire against growth mindset.

Jacob: You've embraced that concept

Tim: Yeah you totally have to. To be honest with you, design is all about growth mindset. You can't be a designer unless you have a growth mindset. But we're looking for people who come from other backgrounds who also have a growth mindset. We also hire against values, I mentioned this idea of people who make others successful, we get people who are very smart, have a very clever and sometimes you read quite creative, but exhibit sort of a selfishness around that, whether it really interested in showing up well themselves and less interested in how they help others. And they don't fit at IDEOs, we don't hire them or we try not to anyway.

We hire against value. There are a number of other values that we care about. We've talked quite a lot about making, about the need to kind of move to prototypes. We look for people who show evidence of going from words to actions. We're not so interested in people who can talk forever. We're interested in how they take something and go and figure out a way to make something, might be in their private lives rather than in their professional lives if they haven't had a chance to do that in their professional life. But we look for it all the same. We hire for values. We high for growth. We hire for growth mindset.

For a long time and we still talk about this idea of T shapeness, which is something that I discovered actually through McKinsey originally, which is this combination of breadth and depth. Again, the depth is really is this kind of attitude of making some sort of depth of skill that is world-class in whatever form it takes. And then the breadth is the level of curiosity and interest and excitement to work with others and to cross disciplines and explore other things. I mean, in my own experience, one of the things I was lucky enough to do is, when I turned up here at IDEO as a classically trained designer, one of the first things I was thrown into was design research, I'd never done it before.

We were just discovering this discipline of interaction design that I mentioned early, I'd never done it before, and I found myself designing software. I've never even used software before and I was designing, and it was wonderful and I loved it, not everybody loves that experience, but most of us at IDEO love it. We love the opportunity to learn about something new.

Jacob: New things yeah of course.

Tim: And explore it.

Jacob: Yeah. I love it. Okay. To wrap up I just have a couple of fun, rapid fire questions just about you. Starting off with, who has been the greatest mentor you've ever had?

Tim: I already mentioned him, this guy Bill Moggridge. One of the founders of IDEO.

Jacob: Yes.

Tim: I literally worship him. It was very sad that he died a few years ago but he taught me how to be completely optimistic about the power of design and constantly curious.

Jacob: I love it. Curiosity comes up a lot. What has been your greatest business failure?

Tim: Relatively early on in my career, I had this idea that I knew everything of course as we do. And I was running our office in London back then and I made an investment in a company that I thought we should, quite was a huge disaster, it cost an absolute fortune. It was the biggest amount of money I think we'd ever lost in one go.

Jacob: This is with IDEO?

Tim: This is with IDEO, yeah. The cool thing is I was given permission to do it. And the cool thing is I wasn't fired over the fact that I screwed it up.

Jacob: I was just gonna say yeah, cause that would be considered a failure.

Tim: It was a huge failure. And it was for the right reasons. It was genuinely an attempt to like move into some area that we weren't expert at but we want to be with people who I thought had lots of experience, but I just didn't know enough about what it takes to integrate cultures at the time.

Jacob: Interesting.

Tim: They were just like oil and water.

Jacob: Didn't work.

Tim: And didn't work out. I've since that then done it differently, and it's been very successful. But that was a great lesson.

Jacob: What are you most proud of?

Tim: IDEO. Just the culture, the people. I mean, we have this rather large alumni group that's come out of IDEO over the 40 years we've been around. And they are all still connected together. They are one big community. They all help each other. They all work together. And I'm proud that we've created a culture that people want to stay part of, even if they've moved on to other careers and been very successful in other places doing other things. That there's something here that people want to stay connected to.



Jacob: What's a business or a non business book that you recommend?

Tim: Well, I'll answer cheekily there and say we just republished my book Change By Design. I'd love people to try it out. It's got a new chapter about what we've learned around design over the last 10 years. And I think it makes for some interesting insights. The book that most influenced me when I was first discovering design and broadened my outlook on what design could mean was a book called Design For The Real World by a guy called Victor Papanek written back in the 70s.

Jacob: Design For The Real World. Okay. I can't remember if I read that.

Tim: If you can find a copy, I think it maybe still available. It's worth a look. And then the other one that affected me, I read it at the same time, was Dune by Frank Herbert.

Jacob: Dune. I love science fiction.

Tim: I love science fiction. That was the one that made me realize the concept of ecology was maybe the biggest design problem of them all. And it's the reason why things like working on the circular economy and climate change is hugely interesting to me today because the planet we live on, in that case it was another planet, but the planet we live on is the home we have. And if we're going to shape the world around us, there's no bigger part of the world to shape than the planet we live on.

Jacob: Totally agree. And last question for you. If you were doing a different career, what do you think you would have ended up doing?

Tim: I like to think that probably I would have ended up doing something similar to what you do. I think I might've been a journalist or a writer because I love pattern making. I love seeing things in the world and trying to make sense of them. I've been lucky enough to do that in a way that allows me to create new things as a designer. But I think I would have found it equally interesting. In fact, I enjoy writing and I enjoy those activities now. I think I would have found it equally interesting to do it as a writer or a journalist. I'm not saying I would have been a good writer, but I think that might've been where I found myself.

Jacob: Very cool. Where can people go to learn more about you and IDEO, your book. Maybe you can give people the full name and where people can go find it as well.

Tim: Yeah, the book Change By Design by Harper Collins, you'll find around on the various book selling platforms. Right now we've just launched a new site called [designthinking.ideo.com](http://designthinking.ideo.com) which is a full explanation of everything we've ever learned about design thinking.

Jacob: [designthinking.ideo.com](http://designthinking.ideo.com).

Tim: [designthinking.ideo.com](http://designthinking.ideo.com). Indeed, and it's got lots of resources there. If you're interested in the topic, you want to explore it more. That's a great place to start.

Jacob: And you also have courses.

Tim: We do. On IDEO, what's called IDEOU. Got to [ideou.com](http://ideou.com). There are a series of online courses. They're on all aspects, there's a course on creative leadership, some of the topics we've just talked about are covered there, others on storytelling and every other aspect of design thinking.

Jacob: Very cool. Well, Tim, thanks so much for hosting me here and for being a guest.

Tim: Thank you. It's been a lot of fun talking.

Jacob: And thanks everyone for tuning in. My guest again has been Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO and I will see you next week.