

Developing organisational design capability in a Finland-based engineering corporation: the case of Metso

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This article focuses on the emergence and development of organisational design capability in an analysis of the historical development of design activity in a Finland-based engineering corporation between 1975 and 2004. By identifying transformational periods, critical events and developmental actions in the evolution of design, the analysis suggests that expert-centred, tool-centred, strategy-centred, and process-centred approaches to developing design are not optional methods but rather phases in the broader capability development process, which bases on the transforming object of the business activity.

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Since the 1990s, public authorities in Northern Europe and in South Korea and Singapore in Asia, have invested considerable sums of money in promoting design for industry (see Designredegörelse, 1997; Korvenmaa, 1998; Korvenmaa and Mutanen, 1998; Saarela, 1999; Heskett, 2001; Dong-Sung, 2004). For example, between 2002 and 2005 the Finnish government alone invested 30 million euros in design research and development in Finland. Design has become a vessel of technology policy, and investment in it — especially in user-oriented industrial design — is expected to provide a return through new product innovation (Thackara, 1997, 2005), increased corporate productivity (Ainamo, 1996; Bruce and Jevnaker, 1998; Gemser and Leenders, 2001; Bertola and Texeira, 2003; Rich, 2004), and improved dialogue between production and use (Bertola and Texeira, 2003; Hyysalo, 2004).

The popular idea of improving the competitiveness of companies by increasing ‘the use of design’ and especially ‘the strategic use of design’ is based on the understanding that in any of its various professional forms design is something that already exists out there ready for use. This view would seem acceptable if we were to understand the potential of design in business in terms of managing

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outsourced design services on the market. For an alternative perspective that focuses more on its emergent and built-in potential, we would have to replace the idea of ‘design as ready’ with ‘design as developing’.

Although there are plenty of excellent cases on the proven benefits of design to business, there is hardly any empirical evidence of how design activity develops in large technological firms over long time periods.¹ This is partly because most longitudinal studies have taken a more holistic perspective and focused on product development and innovation activities, of which design is one part (Miettinen et al., 1999). Researchers who have studied industrial design in technological firms have shown that the strategic use of design is not unproblematic, and that without an organised design function industrial designers are typically assigned to operational tasks (Valtonen, 2007). Subcontracting practices typically favour short-term involvement (Hakatie and Ryyänänen, 2007), which means that external industrial designers are often invited only to style or customise products (Valtonen, 2007). In sum, neither technology companies, in-house designers nor external service providers seem to have the pre-existing, matching knowledge or capabilities that, in combination, would easily turn design into a strategic asset. On the contrary, new strategic capabilities are reported to emerge out of the questioning, re-conceptualising, and re-arranging of the existing organisation and practices with regard to the firm’s business goals (see Dosi et al., 2000; Fujimoto, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to study the emergence and development of *organisational design capability* by analysing the evolution of design activity in Finland’s biggest engineering company, Metso, which has a long history of employing industrial designers. In the light of previous research, I will first identify four basic approaches to developing design in business organisations. In the second part of the article I will propose a methodology for studying the development of organisational design capability, and introduce the concepts of *transformational period*, *critical event* and *developmental action*. The third part is a historical analysis of the development of industrial design based on my empirical data from Metso. The paper ends with a discussion of my findings and their implications for future research and design policy.

1 Four approaches to developing design in business organisations

One can identify four basic approaches to design in business organisations in the literature. These approaches differ fundamentally in at least two respects. Firstly, *design activity* is either viewed as a professional ability possessed by individual industrial designers (see Heskett, 1980, 2001; Papanek, 1984; Cross, 1995; Racine and Findeli, 2003) or as a collective product design capability held by various organisational actors (see Bucciarelli, 1994; Henderson, 1999; Bechky, 2003). The former draws on the notion that there are particular

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