

Barriers to Strategic Design: A Perspective from China

Abstract Strategic design is a driver for innovation that can lead to sustainable competitive advantage. Over the past two decades, the barriers limiting breakthrough strategic design development have been studied in much detail. However, that research is based on well-developed practices in Europe, where strategic design and innovation capabilities have been nurtured for a long period. Barriers to the adoption of strategic design practices and leadership have seldom been studied in high growth economies in which design and innovation competencies are not yet mature. We examined design-led innovation cases from Chinese design clients and consultancies, and uncovered twelve barriers to strategic design practice and leadership in China. Six of these are similar to hindrances experienced elsewhere, and the other six are unique to this study. We found that in China, certain constraints limiting the adoption of strategic design in practice exist in the environment outside the firm. Based on these findings, we offer suggestions to stakeholders for overcoming the barriers to utilizing design at the strategic level.

Keywords

Breakthrough innovation
Design-led innovation
Design implementation
Strategic design

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Introduction

Strategic design is a driver of market leadership¹ and sustainable competitive advantage.² It stimulates breakthrough innovations in product-service systems (PSS),³ enhances design leadership,⁴ facilitates the appreciation of design qualities,⁵ increases strategic value,⁶ and supports brand building.⁷ Strategic designers play multiple roles. They are the catalysts and analysts of strategic analysis, the synthesizers and evaluators of strategic decisions and the implementers of strategies.⁸

Out of all the benefits strategic design has to offer, its ability to stimulate breakthrough innovation is significant.⁹ Initial studies focused on design implementation, including barriers to product innovation¹⁰ and co-design processes.¹¹ Later research topics explored strategic design, integrating design into a firm, building design capabilities, and learning design knowledge. European researchers have extensively studied the ways strategic design can lead to breakthrough innovation, including the barriers that lie on those paths. Thanks to these contributions, many organizations have been better able to adopt strategic practices. It is important to remember that in Europe, however, the areas of strategic design and innovative competency have received attention for many years. China is a high-growth economy that has only just begun to appreciate the value design can bring. The foundations of strategic design and innovation capacity are still relatively weak.

In terms of design knowledge, capability, and implementation, Chinese practices and business performance varies a great deal. At some well-known firms – including Lenovo – designers are responsible for strategic planning and design drives innovation. At some of the faster-growing firms – Xiaomi, for example – design is part of overall strategic planning. In this article, we refer to those companies that have adopted strategic design practices, and in which designers have leading roles in innovation and/or strategic planning, as design-led firms. At most traditional firms that are not design-led, management teams may not be aware of the strategic value of design, and do not utilize it as a resource for innovation. Accordingly, in addition to the need to explore the barriers that deter the adoption of design at the strategic level, it is important to learn from the experience of leading firms who are well versed in its utilization. By revealing their challenges and current strategies, we sought to further define the main barriers to adopting strategic design, and demonstrate how Chinese firms might foster innovative strategic design practices going forward.

This led to our initial research question: what are the main barriers that inhibit Chinese firms from introducing strategic design as a lever for innovation and a driver of strategic planning?

Our sub-questions were

- What are the barriers affecting the adoption of strategic design in Chinese firms?
- Which barriers are most significant for Chinese firms, and how do these compare to those confronting Western firms?
- What suggestions can we make to stakeholders for ways to bring strategic design into business?

By answering these questions, we planned to achieve the following main objectives:

- Identify the key barriers to integrating design into business and strategy in industrial practice.
- Explore the barriers most relevant to Chinese firms through comparison with corresponding barriers found in studies conducted at Western firms.
- Explore stakeholder opinions related to the barriers to strategic design and

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