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Start-up Saturday: Where design thinking is the strategy

Design thinking is a fast-emerging key vertical which companies are using for ultimate user experience

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People understand you better when you are an expert in one area and not many, says Manoj Kothari(second from left), founder, Turian labs. (HT PHOTO)

Design thinking is the new mantra, these days. Be it IT, manufacturing or marketing, everyone is now talking about design thinking as a strategy. Says Manoj Kothari, founder of Turian Labs, a company he launched in April 2015, "Design has been around for the last 20 years, but it was mostly restricted to product or graphic design. However in the last five years, there was a huge rise in design thinking, or design as strategy. There has been an exponential rise in design thinking."

Earlier, Manoj was working at Onio Designs. He understood the trend and felt it was time to start a new company that focussed on design as strategy. "Earlier, all we did was to design either a physical product or a graphic but, the thinking has changed drastically now . Firstly, the companies want to understand how the user will view his product or service and how it will impact his usage. What does the user want? It has become all about user experience."

Even IT companies now focus on User Experience or UX as is commonly known before getting into providing solutions. As an example Manoj says, "Imagine if an IT company has to design a solution for a car dealer in the US. What will an IT engineer know about the needs of a car buyer in the US? How will he build a solution without understanding this? Earlier, it was done without the understanding of UX but now things have changed. Companies want to first satisfy user needs."

With the aim to fill this gap, Turian Labs was started with just one employee. "When you start off on something new, people do not have the confidence that you will do it. After much cajoling, I managed to get one from Onio Designs to work with me."

Boot strapped with only one employee Manoj set off on his new venture. "I guess it was a right move because in the business of design or branding, it helps to be narrowly focused. People understand you better when you are an expert in one area and not many. Onio was a company that was diluted; it had research, strategy, design, and engineering. Turian Labs was focused on just one thing - Design thinking as strategy."

With initial business coming in, Manoj realized that he could meet the need by outsourcing. "It is important for a start-up to maintain a lean team. When the going is good, there is no problem, but things get messy during a lean period. More important than the salary expenses, keeping your staff motivated is a big problem. So, I outsourced some jobs. As a design company, it is important that the outsourced work output reflects your standards. Turian has to own up for every piece of work that goes out whether it is outsourced or not. "

Quality manpower is still a challenge for Manoj. "The IT industry is our biggest competitor. They too have woken up to this UX business and now employ anyone and everyone with salaries that I cannot match," he says. And getting talented people to work is extremely important for his business, he adds. So, Manoj has come up with a way to beat the talent drain that IT companies are causing. Says he, "I cannot afford a National Institute of Design(NID) graduate at Rs 12 Lakhs per annum. So, I choose a person who has the passion to do something with design. I have a person who has worked for 10 years in the banking sector. A purchase manager from Tata Motors who was eager to change his profession after a decade, is also part of my team. These people are committed to the job. They give a better return on investment (ROI) than people with a design degree."

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Apart from hiring people with passion, Manoj realised that he needed to leverage his network to aid his business. "If I have to think of solutions for a client in Indonesia or in the US, I need people from there to do the thinking. I can't do research for a client in China, sitting in India. So, I tied up with people who work with us for local clients. This works better than having branch offices everywhere."

Though he does not want to reveal numbers, Manoj says that in the second year, revenues were 200% more than the first and now Turian is posting a 50% growth since the last year. While the going is good, he now aims to write a book "that will reflect the renaissance mind. Leonardo da Vinci could paint, dissect the human body, and build machines simply because the mind was not limited to one way of thought. We need to refocus our thinking to the renaissance kind of thinking, so that our output will be much better. We are also working on an online version of an innovation tool. Design has certain methods and tools. And a lot of companies are looking at tools for remote collaboration in innovation. This online version aims to provide just that. Our version will be like a **SAAS.**

Design Thinking in Practice

Extentia is a company that provides IT solutions to its customers. With the exponential growth of design thinking and UX, the way they do business has changed. Says Umeed Kothavala, CEO, "our design team is now an experienced team. So, if we have to develop a solution for a hospital we do not just sit in your office and think of all the things required. My user experience team will visit the hospital interviewing the customers, doctors, admin staff, asking them how the service can get better. After this understanding, we will design the solution.

"Or if a sugar manufacturer wants us to think of solutions for his famers, we do not just think of it like we did earlier. We now know that it is important for the company to have its machines running 24/7 during crushing season. They have to streamline the trucks carrying sugarcane that line up outside their factory. Now, if the trucks are made to wait for a few days the sugarcane will dry up and the output will reduce. So, it is important to have the farmer cut his cane just in time for it to reach the factory for crushing. We understood this and created an app that would tell the farmer when to harvest his crop, so it would not dry up, waiting outside the factory. We should not be obsessed with the answer; we have to first understand the problem. The way companies do business has changed. The user of the product or service comes first."