

Eco-designing in a complex world

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I've been involved in eco-design most of my professional life and, wearing my author's hat, have celebrated practitioners, advocates and 'doers' in *The Eco-design Handbook*, *The Eco-travel Handbook*, and, most recently, *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*. I've always seen the sustainability challenge as a series of innovation opportunities. I believe my half-glass full optimism, that businesses will thrive if they adopt more ecological models of enterprise, is not misplaced.

The eco-design approach enables innovation because it:

- requires that we think upstream and downstream of our product, service or experience that our enterprise¹ offers. It therefore provides a means of **holistic risk assessment**, a sort of eco-SWOT analysis.
- reveals potential **innovation** points by examining the whole life cycle of our products/services/experiences. It helps enterprises move from a linear to a cyclic enterprise model and helps 'future-proof' the enterprise against near-future resource limitations (energy, water, metals, minerals, timber, or any other raw material).
- helps us deal with the **complexity** of today's global economy by encouraging us to think about 'stocks', 'flows' and 'capitals'.
- focuses us on a more diverse range '**capitals**'- financial, man-made & technological, human, social and environmental - and asks us how we can nurture these to maintain a healthy enterprise.

However, applying the full gamut of eco-design tools sounds a big 'ask' for an SME (average size 8-10 people in Europe). How can enterprises face this daunting task?

For the last three years I've been using an approach called '**co-design**', *designing together*. I've developed a generic process called 'the co-design loop' which enables any enterprise to bring together an appropriate group of actors and stakeholders and co-ordinate a series of activities that lever '**collective intelligence**' to deal with complex challenges. There are three key elements to the methodology - experiencing together, understanding the (deep, underlying) problems together, and creating the solutions together (Figure 1).

¹ I prefer 'enterprise' rather than 'business' because more and more everyday services are now being provided by social enterprises, community interest companies and modern co-operatives, alongside private commercial businesses.

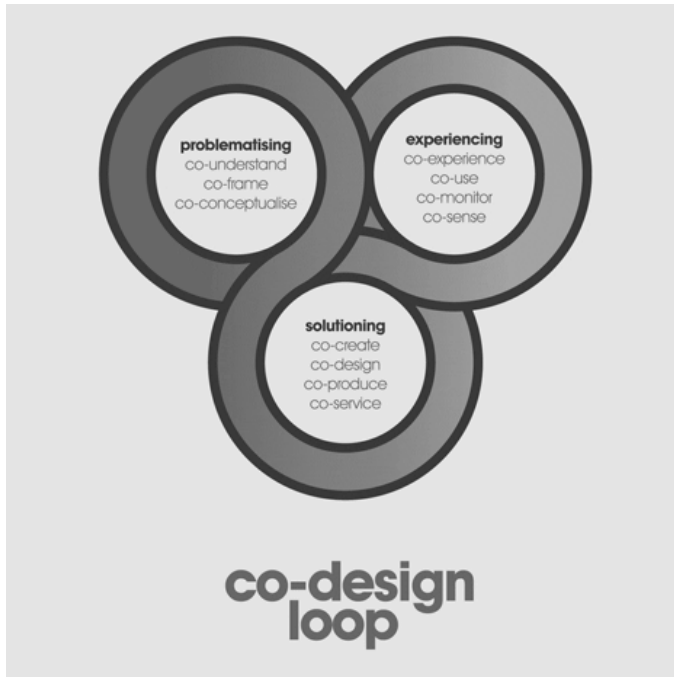


Figure 1. The co-design loop.

These workshops generate a shared understanding, build trust between the actors and stakeholders, suggest new methods of value creation, and imbue a holistic awareness as to how everyone can help each other (Figure 2). Co-design enables us to understand that the commercial and ecological life cycles of our products and services are embedded in larger interactive systems and networks. Co-design helps eco-design to go beyond **eco-efficiency** to achieve real **eco-effectiveness** and shift the culture of enterprise. Co-design encourages mutual support – and, in this fiscally challenged world, that sounds pretty useful.



Figure 2. The co-design workshops.

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