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Integrating Design Thinking and Blue Ocean Strategies for Holistic Business Solutions: A Comparative Analysis

***Janakiram M*[1], *Rajasekhar Manda*[2*]**

[1] School of Management and School of Future Skills, Noida Institute of Engineering and Technology, Delhi, India. Email: m.janakiram@niet.co.in
[2] Department of ECE, QIS College of Engineering and Technology (A), Andhra Pradesh, India. Email: rajasekhar.m@qiscet.edu.in

[*]**Corresponding author:** Rajasekhar Manda

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Abstract

Design thinking and Blue Ocean strategies have emerged as popular approaches that foster innovation and provide a strategic edge in competitive markets. Over the past decades, both approaches have evolved significantly, offering flexibility, extensive reach, and successful business solutions. Innovation and Business problem-solving are two prominent frameworks in Blue Ocean and Design Thinking. It employs creativity, prototyping, and problem-solving, and is wholly user-centered. However, the Blue Ocean Strategy dwells on value innovation in unconcentrated market spaces. In the Synergy concern, the two approaches reveal distinct opportunities. This study explores how Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) drive innovation, profitability, and competitive advantage. Their integration reshapes business functions, enabling holistic transformation. The study further highlights the necessity of a comparative evaluation of these strategies based on their unique features to meet the evolving needs of the next generation in developing strategies and innovations, along with how companies apply creativity, strategic differentiation, and customer empathy for sustainable solutions. This helps a critical view of innovation management fill disruptive but pragmatic business practices.

Keywords

Synergies, Integration, Design Thinking, Blue Ocean Strategy and Holistic Business Solutions.

Introduction

Organizations must embrace comprehensive, innovative, and adaptive strategies to maintain a competitive edge in today's fast-evolving business landscape. Traditional business approaches often focus on incremental improvements within existing market boundaries, leading to saturated and highly competitive environments. However, the integration of Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS) offers a powerful pathway toward Holistic Business Solutions, enabling organizations to break free from competition-driven markets and create sustainable, customer-centric innovations (Brown, 2009; Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

Design Thinking is a human-centered, iterative problem-solving approach that emphasizes empathy, ideation, prototyping, and user feedback to develop meaningful solutions (Brown, 2009). It enables businesses to understand deep-seated customer needs and design solutions that resonate with end-users. On the other hand, the Blue Ocean Strategy focuses on value innovation — creating uncontested market spaces by eliminating unnecessary industry factors and redefining market boundaries— (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). While both frameworks individually contribute to business success, their true potential emerges when integrated, as they complement each other in identifying new market opportunities and crafting differentiated, scalable solutions. The flow chart for how the DT and BOS integrate to create holistic solutions is depicted in the following Figure 1.

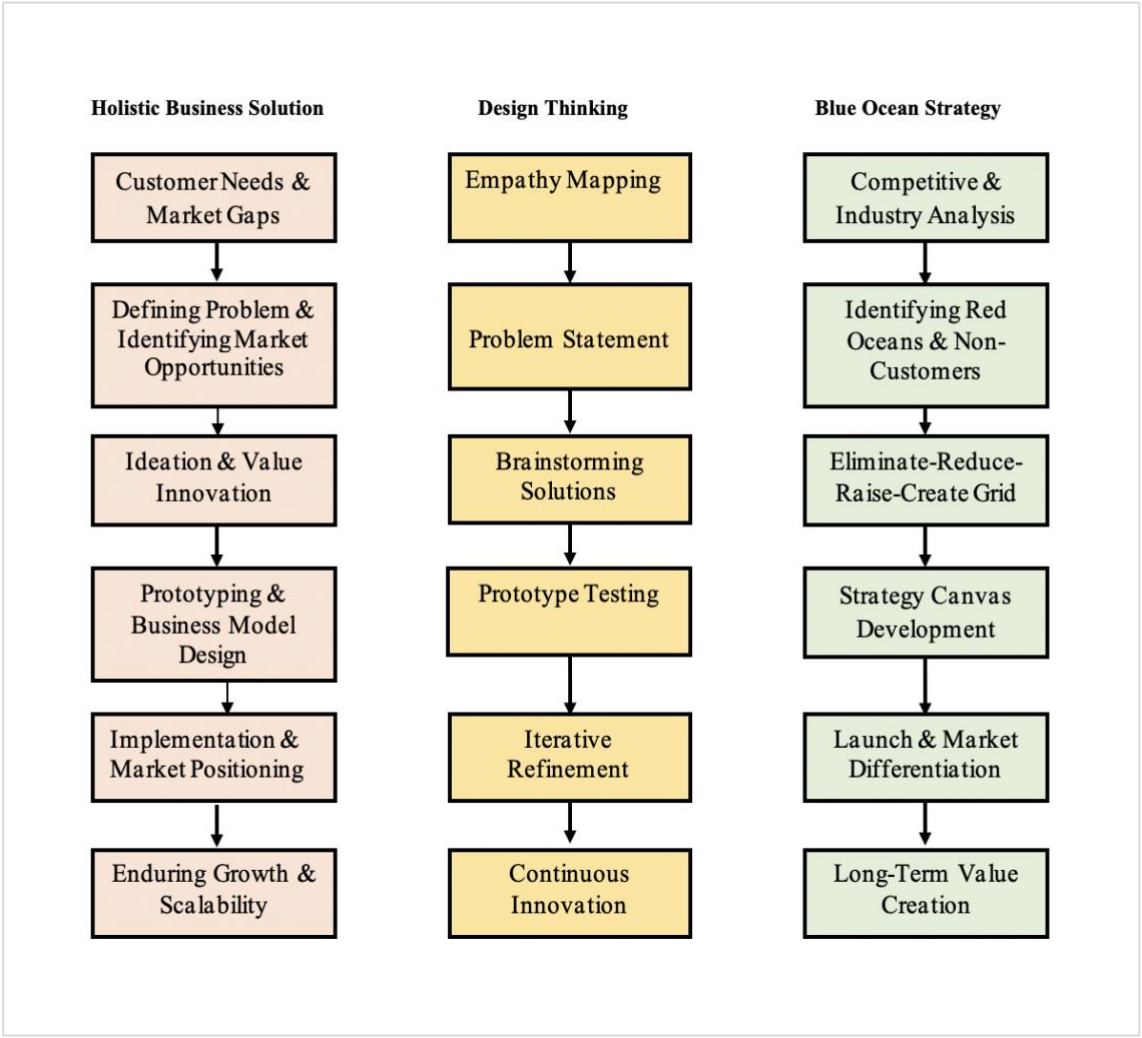

Figure 1: *Flowchart for Holistic business solution, Design Thinking, and BoS.*

In the context of strategy, the key ideology of the strategy is that, through different activities, creating a valuable and unique market position is called strategy. It is explained in Figure 2.

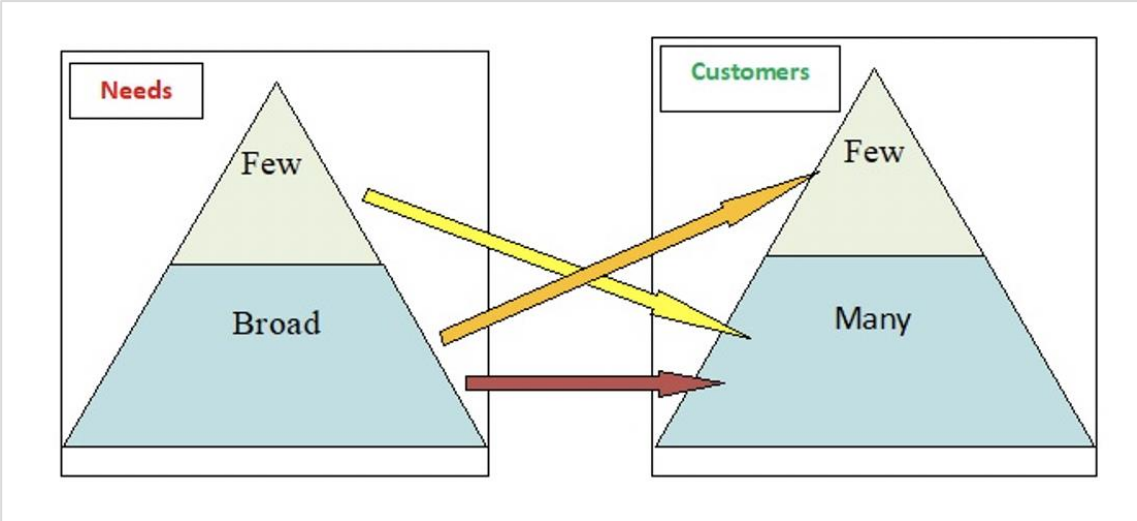

Figure 2: *Strategic Approaches to Customer Needs.*

In the market, many companies started focusing on all kinds of customer needs. Many companies compete with each other in the market to get market share. Most of the time, it is a war, and the market becomes red and bloody with high competition. The strategy has focused on the needs of the customer. However, (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004), very few companies focus on buyer value and low cost.

Despite the significance of these approaches, limited research explores their combined impact in fostering holistic business strategies. This study aims to bridge that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of DT and BOS, examining their intersections, and proposing a unified framework for organizations to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Through literature synthesis, case study evaluations, and strategic modeling, this research provides insights into how businesses can leverage Design Thinking's customer-focused innovation and Blue Ocean Strategy's market differentiation principles to drive long-term success and industry transformation.

Literature on DT and BoS

This literature dives into Digital Transformation (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) — two game-changing approaches for businesses. DT is all about using technology to stay ahead, while BoS helps companies break free from competition by creating new market spaces. When combined, they open doors to long-term growth and innovation. This study sheds light on their real-world impact, challenges, and future potential.

1. *What is design thinking?*

Herbert A. Simon first introduced this term. In 1969, He said, *Design is a way of thinking* (Warner, 1969). Rowe (1987) used the term *Design Thinking* explicitly. David Kelley and Tim Brown (IDEO) refined and promoted it as a human-centered, problem-solving approach (Sugawara & Nikaido, 2014). Nowadays, Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, is one of the most recognized figures who advocates design thinking as a structured process for innovation.

Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success (Brown, 2020). *Design thinking is a problem-solving approach that combines empathy for the user, creativity in generating insights and solutions, and rationality in analyzing and fitting various options to the problem context* (Liedtka, 2015).

Kotier and Rath (1984) Design is a powerful strategy tool, but the corporate world is neglecting it. Through the design process, company profitability and customer satisfaction can both be achieved (Buchanan, 1992). Design thinking broadly influences the four areas, such as the design of symbolic and visual communication, the design of material objects (products), the design of activities and organized services, and the design of complex systems or environments for living, working, playing, learning, and much more (Holloway, 2009). Design thinking makes the strategy more tangible by making it a prototype of the organization's goal. Mainly, strategy refers to the presentation of the number's framework or rhetorical narrative. Prototyping the strategy helps to communicate well with partners, customers, employees, and stakeholders.

Ignatius (2015), PepsiCo's CEO, Indra Nooyi, believed in design thinking and made design thinking a company strategy. As a result, the 2014 Wall Street Journal reported PepsiCo's stock price of 94.56, $ all-time high stock price in the company's history (Naiman, 2015). Top companies such as Apple, IBM, PepsiCo, SAP, Nike, and Procter & Gamble are using design thinking in their organizations. They used design thinking as their strategy for innovation. According to the 2015 design value index, 16 companies that used design thinking had a 211% return over others (Edmondson, 2011). IDEO is one of the world-leading companies that uses design thinking and promotes. One-third of IDEO's income comes from developing innovative strategies for different companies. Schülke et al. (1984) explain that the epistemological strategy has evolved into a more human-centered approach. It now embraces uncertainties and contradictions, aiming to develop Blue Ocean Strategies. There are lots of synergies if the resources of design thinking and the resources of blue ocean strategy join together for buyers to value innovation.

Kim and Mauborgne (2004) studied industries that directly impact people's daily lives, such as automobiles (how they commute to work), computers (what they use at work), and movie theatres (where they go for entertainment after work). Their research aimed to understand the strategic mindset needed to develop Blue Ocean Strategies. To discern some patterns, and studied almost 100 years of data. Blue Oceans is mostly within their core businesses. Blue Oceans is not about technological innovation, but most of the time it is about value innovation. Creating a blue ocean strategy builds the brand of the company, even if the market is unattractive.

Knight et al. (2020) suggest that to boost innovation and develop effective new strategies, managers should actively incorporate design thinking tools flexibly and dynamically. Managers should use design materials for deeper engagement to develop innovative strategies (Liedtka & Kaplan, 2019). Design thinking opens new ways to get close to the customer and customer-centric innovative strategies.

2. *Blue Ocean Strategy means?*

Blue Ocean Strategy, coined by Prof. W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, is a new market space with no competition that leads irrelevant marketers by considering 108 companies. *Blue Ocean Strategy is the simultaneous pursuit of differentiation and low cost to open up a new market space and create new demand. It is about creating and capturing uncontested market space, thereby making the competition irrelevant* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

Kim and Mauborgne (2004), Blue Ocean's strategy makes competition irrelevant and creates uncontested market space. The two key focus areas that have completely transformed operations under the Blue Ocean Strategy are:

- Differentiation
- Cost-effectiveness

Methodology

To explore the impact of Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) on business growth, innovation, and strategic transformation, this study will adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Objectives of Research

Within design thinking and blue ocean strategy.

Table 1: *Blue Ocean Strategy &Design Thinking Analysis.*

Concepts	Design thinking	Blue ocean strategy
Principle	▪ User-focused with empathy ▪ Strong collaboration ▪ Creative idea generation ▪ Continuous testing and iteration ▪ Action-oriented mindset ▪ Comfort with uncertainty	▪ Redefine market boundaries ▪ Focus on the big picture, not just the numbers ▪ Expand beyond existing demand ▪ Develop and implement the right strategy ▪ Overcome key organizational challenges ▪ Align execution with strategy
Philosophies	▪ Design thinking encourages ▪ *Fail fast learns fast* ▪ Iterative process ▪ Human desirability ▪ Technical feasibility ▪ Business viability ▪ Customer Empathy is the foundation for Innovation (Laursen & Tollestrup, 2017)	▪ Value Innovation ▪ Market Creation ▪ Strategic Shift ▪ Risk Mitigation ▪ Continuous Renewal (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005)
Methods Employed for Problem Identification	- Understanding: Problem statement, Design principles - Empathy Building and User Research: ▪ 5W+H questions ▪ Ask 5x Why ▪ Explorative Interview ▪ Extreme Users/Lead Users ▪ Interview for Empathy ▪ Jobs to Be Done - User emotions and stakeholder mapping ▪ Customer journey map ▪ Emotional response cards ▪ Empathy map ▪ Persona/User profile ▪ Stakeholder map - Structuring insights and Analyzation ▪ AEIOU ▪ Analysis questions builder ▪ Peers observing peers ▪ Root conflict Diagram - Trend and Environmental Analysis ▪ PESTEL-Analysis ▪ Trend Analysis.	▪ Buyer Utility Map ▪ Industry & Trend Analysis ▪ Exploring Alternative Industries ▪ Evaluating Complementary Products & Services ▪ Assessing Functional vs. Emotional Appeal ▪ Comparing Strategic Groups in the Industry ▪ Analyzing Market Shifts Over Time ▪ Understanding the Buyer Chain ▪ Market Research & Customer Insights ▪ Strategy Canvas
Methods Employed for Problem Framing	- 360° view - Daisy map and 9-window - *How might we…* questions ▪ Context mapping ▪ Critical items diagram ▪ Define success ▪ Jobs to be done ▪ Point of view ▪ Storytelling ▪ Vision cone	Reframing Industry Boundaries: ▪ As-Is and To-Be Scenarios ▪ Customer-Centric Problem Framing ▪ Value Chain Analysis ▪ Trend Analysis and Disruption Identification ▪ The Three Tiers of Non-customers
Idea Generation	▪ 2x2 Matrix ▪ 6-3-5 Method ▪ Advanced Brainstorming Techniques ▪ Blue Ocean Tool & Buyer Utility Map ▪ Brainstorming ▪ Dot Voting ▪ NABC Framework ▪ SCAMPER Method ▪ Using Analogies & Benchmarking for Inspiration	- Drawing the Strategy Canvas – The Four Steps of Visualize Strategy ▪ Step 1: Visual Awakening ▪ Step 2: Visual Exploration ▪ Step 3: Visual Strategy Fair ▪ Step 4: Visual Communication - Brainstorming - Eliminate-Reduce-Raise-Create
Address Risk and Mitigation	- Prototyping ▪ A/B Testing ▪ Feedback capture grid ▪ Powerful questions in experience testing ▪ Solution interview ▪ Structured usability testing ▪ Testing sheet - Testing ▪ Create a pitch 247 ▪ I like, I wish, I wonder 239 ▪ Lean canvas 251 ▪ lessons learned 255 ▪ Retrospective *sailboat* 243 ▪ Road map for implementation 259 - Problem to growth & scale innovation funnel	▪ Convenience ▪ Customer productivity ▪ Environmental friendliness ▪ Fun and image ▪ Risk ▪ Simplicity ▪ Testing for Exceptional Utility

1. Explore the fundamental principles and philosophies that underpin design thinking and blue ocean strategy. By examining the literature, we aim to uncover the core concepts and ideologies that form the basis of these approaches.

2. To identify tools employed for problem framing and problem identification.

3. Investigate the idea generation and concept development processes.

4. Examine how risk management and mitigation work.

Strategy Practitioners Can Benefit from Design Thinking Practices in Five Areas

- Strategy practitioners approach opportunities differently human-centered problem solving and new possibilities exploration by design thinking.
- Learning through Action utilizing design thinking tools to prototype, experiment, and test new models on a small scale with minimal costs.
- Managing portfolios effectively by applying design thinking techniques.
- Drives Transformation as design thinking fosters collaboration, engagement, and strategic alignment within organizations.
- Integrating design thinking into corporate strategy transforms business models, driving both incremental improvements and disruptive innovation.

Design tools and rules help incubate the idea on a large scale. As design thinking philosophy itself is human-centered innovation, value innovation for the customer is very closely connected. One of the qualities of a design thinker is holding ambiguity and looking for new spaces in the market. So, for the most part, all the cases of design thinking entered into unattractive markets only. Organizations like Apple, IBM, etc. used both approaches and were more successful. Hence, combining both will give excellent results.

According to this study, the principles and philosophy of the Blue Ocean strategy say what to do, but design thinking tells us how to do it. Design thinking finds what to do and why to do it after being immersed in the problem or project. How to do it is a typical standard process. However, it differs from company to company. David Kelly once said, *We are not experts in any area, but we are experts in the process of design thinking*. (How to Do) We know the innovation process of design thinking. If someone is very strong in design thinking tools and techniques, they can do innovation much faster and better than a technical person. There are many more methods and tools available in design thinking to identify and frame the problem than in the Blue Ocean strategy. Design thinking is known for how to do innovation. Naturally, it has a high potential for finding out the problem and framing it from the right perspective.

On the other hand, Blue Ocean's strategy focuses on creating a good market space for the product. Blue Ocean's strategy has a tool, but it is limited. For idea generation, Blue Ocean's strategy uses ERRC and visible canvas methods. Blue Ocean Strategy knows what to do for value innovation, which comes from ERRC.

ERRC means (eliminate, raise, reduce, and create).

- What industry norms or assumptions should be eliminated?
- Which aspects should be improved beyond the current industry standards?
- Which elements should be scaled down below the usual industry levels?
- What new factors should be introduced that the industry has never explored?

Whereas design thinking uses multiple approaches for ideation, the tools and rules of design thinking help generate Blue Ocean ideas. When it comes to risk mitigation, the Blue Ocean strategy generates and tests ideas using Canvas (Amount & From, 2010). Prototypes can help learners learn more effectively and create better designs. In design thinking, there are various types of prototypes, including feasibility prototypes, low-fidelity and high-fidelity user prototypes, and live-data prototypes. Both Blue Ocean Strategy and Design Thinking play a crucial role in driving groundbreaking innovation.

Table 2: *Design Thinking and Blue Ocean Strategy methodologies comparison in different dimensions.*

Area	Design thinking	Blue Ocean Strategy
Core Focus	It focuses on enhancing user experiences and aims for user-centric solutions (Brown, 2009).	Blue Ocean Strategy creates new market spaces by addressing untapped customer needs and differentiating from competitors, making competition irrelevant. At its core, it emphasizes value innovation (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).
Problem-Solving Approach	Design thinking follows an iterative process consisting of stages like empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. It encourages divergent and convergent thinking, promoting collaboration and experimentation to arrive at innovative solutions (Kelley & Kelley, 2013).	Blue Ocean Strategy involves strategic thinking and analysis. It focuses on factors like ERRC-eliminating, reducing, raising, and creating to redefine market boundaries and develop a unique value curve. It requires systematic planning and execution (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).
Application Scope	Design thinking can be applied to various domains, including product design, service design, organizational design, and social innovation. It is flexible and adaptable to different contexts (Brown, 2009).	Blue Ocean Strategy primarily focuses on strategic decision-making at the organizational or industry level. It involves reshaping market boundaries and industry structure (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).
Customer Orientation	Design thinking deeply values understanding user needs and experiences. It involves conducting user research, interviews, and observations to gain insights, which are then used to inform the design process and create user-centric solutions (Brown, 2009).	Blue Ocean Strategy also considers customer needs but broadens the scope by targeting non-customers as well. It aims to attract new customers by offering value that is unmatched in existing market spaces (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).
Timeframe	Design thinking often involves shorter-term projects or initiatives. It is used to address specific challenges or develop new products/services within a relatively shorter time frame and also long-term projects.	Blue Ocean's strategy is more concerned with long-term strategic planning. It involves identifying and pursuing new market opportunities that can sustain the organization's growth and profitability over an extended period.
Nature	Learning continuously and refinement are repeated.	Not iterative, sometimes possible depending on Management, itself is inherently not an iterative process.
On failure	*Fail fast learn fast* Design thinking embraces failure as an inherent part of the iterative process. It encourages a mindset of learning from failures and using them as opportunities for growth and improvement.	Blue Ocean Strategy does not explicitly address failure in its framework. However, the concept of strategic moves will succeed. Encouraging Organizations to take risk calculation, anticipation form growth and loss.
Idea presentation	Today new product development processes mostly depend on Prototyping (Elverum et al., 2016).	Presenting the strategic ideas and value propositions with a visual canvas.
Hierarchy	Design thinking challenges traditional hierarchical structures by promoting a more collaborative and cross-functional approach.	Blue Ocean Strategy does not explicitly address hierarchy within organizations. However, the framework can be implemented within hierarchical structures, where decision-making and strategic planning are typically top-down.
Involvement in Innovation	It emphasizes involving diverse stakeholders and end-users in the innovation process, encouraging collaboration and co-creation.	Managers and some employees

Knight et al. (2020) To have a greater impact on new idea generation, new strategy development managers should consider the dynamic deployment of design thinking materials. Managers should use design materials for deeper engagement to develop innovative strategies.

Case studies of two great organizations, Cirque du Soleil and Airbnb

Cirque du Soleil—a classic example of blue ocean strategy and *Airbnb relied heavily on design thinking methodology and experimentation to transform* are two different examples from different industries, but there are some similarities in terms of their strategic approaches and their ability to disrupt traditional markets. Here are a few potential similarities:

1. Redefining Market Space: Cirque du Soleil reinvented the circus by blending theatre, acrobatics, and storytelling, while Airbnb transformed hospitality by enabling individuals to rent out their homes, offering unique stays.

2. Creativity & Innovation: Cirque du Soleil introduced a new artistic vision, while Airbnb leveraged the sharing economy to connect hosts and guests in a disruptive way.

3. Customer Experience Focus: Both prioritized user experience — Cirque du Soleil with immersive performances and Airbnb with personalized, authentic stays.

4. Value Innovation: They increased customer value while reducing costs — Cirque du Soleil eliminated expensive animal acts, and Airbnb provided cost-effective lodging compared to hotels.

5. Industry Disruption: Cirque du Soleil revolutionized live entertainment beyond traditional circuses, while Airbnb reshaped the hotel industry with alternative accommodations.

6. Customer-Centric Approach: Both deeply understood their audiences — Cirque du Soleil catered to evolving entertainment preferences, and Airbnb designed experiences tailored to traveler needs.

7. Innovative Business Models: Cirque du Soleil fused multiple art forms to create a new genre, and Airbnb built a scalable, community-driven hospitality platform.

8. Differentiation: Cirque du Soleil stood apart from traditional circuses, and Airbnb offered local, home-like experiences that hotels couldn't replicate.

9. Strategic Collaborations: Cirque du Soleil partnered with artists and venues, while Airbnb built a trusted network of hosts and guests.

10. Technology Adoption: Cirque du Soleil integrated multimedia effects into performances, and Airbnb used technology to create a seamless booking experience.

These are all the examples differ in their specific contexts for industries, have innovation, customer experience focus, market redefinition, and disruption of established industries. These similarities highlight the strategic approaches and creative thinking that contributed to the success of both Cirque du Soleil and Airbnb.

These additional similarities further highlight the customer-centric approach, disruptive nature, differentiation, collaboration, and technological innovation that contributed to the success of both Cirque du Soleil and Airbnb.

Results

Businesses that embrace Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) don't just compete — they redefine the game. While most companies play it safe, focusing on reliability, those who take strategic risks often see massive growth and long-term success. The following tables provide a clear picture of how DT and BoS impact business performance, market expansion, and industry disruption. These numbers show why companies like Apple, Cirque du Soleil, and P&G thrived by thinking differently and creating their own market space.

A quantitative research table can enhance this discussion by presenting data on the impact of Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) on business performance is carried out in three aspects as follows, comparing companies that adopted DT and BoS vs. those that followed traditional strategies, showing revenue growth, market share, and profitability.

Table 3: *Market Expansion and Business Growth.*

Company	Strategy Applied	Market Share Increase (%)	Profit Margin (%)	Revenue Growth (%)
Traditional Firm A	None	5	12	10
P&G	DT	15	28	38
Cirque du Soleil	BOS	35	25	60
Apple	DT+BOS	20	30	45

Table 3 and the bar graph compare companies using Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) against traditional firms. Results show that firms like Apple, Cirque du Soleil, and P&G experienced significantly higher revenue growth, market share increase, and profit margins, proving the impact of innovation-driven strategies.

A table showing the adoption rate of DT and BoS across different industries and their impact on disruption.

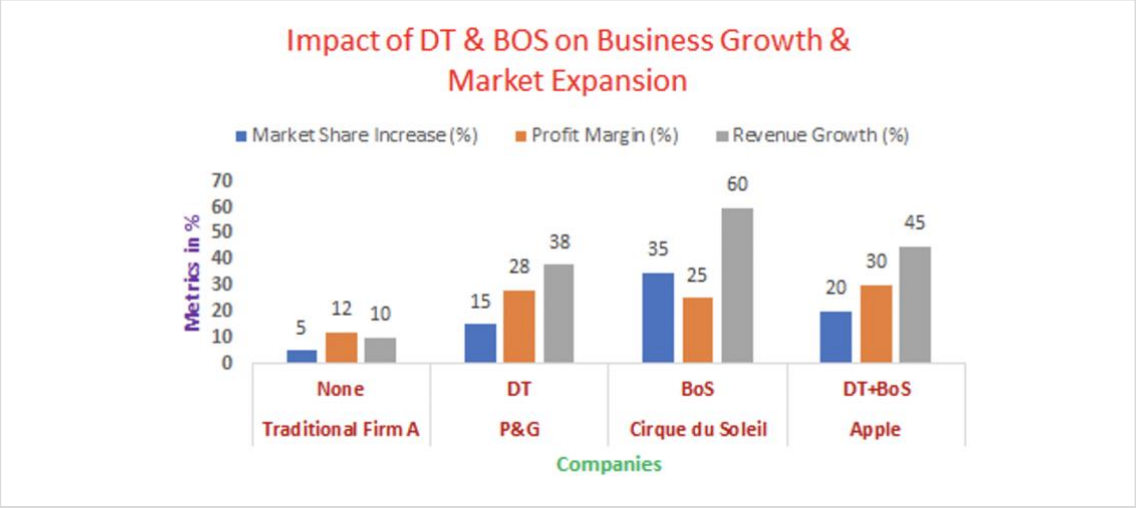

Figure 3: *Strategic Impact of DT and BOS on Growth and Market Reach.*

Table 4: *Industry-Wise Adoption of DT & BoS.*

Industry	Disruption Score	Adoption Rate %
Health care	7	65
Manufacturing	5	30
Retail	6	50
Technology	9	85

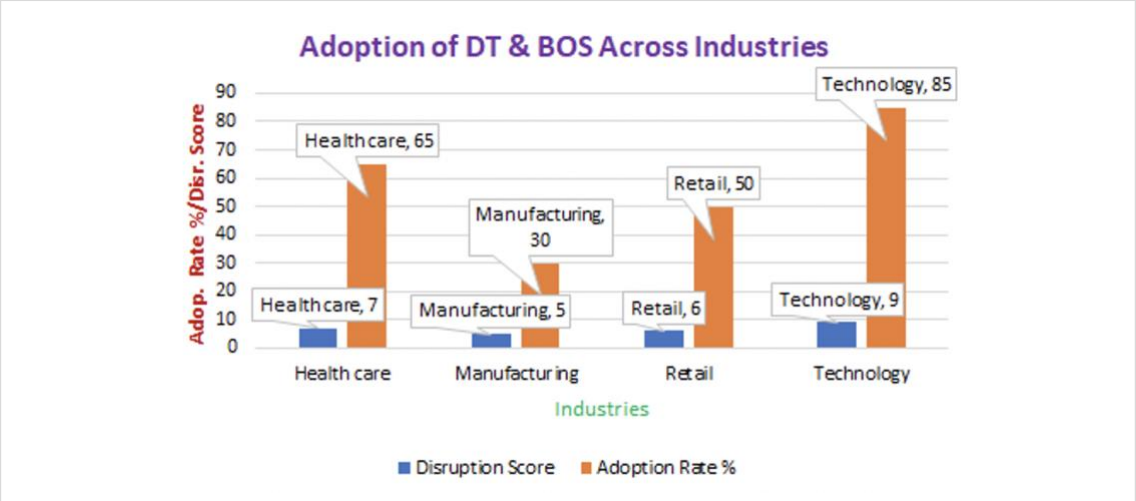

Figure 4: *Strategic Adoption of Design Thinking and BOS Across Industrial Domains.*

Table 4 and the bar graph reveal varying adoption rates of DT and BoS across industries. The technology sector leads with 85% adoption and a disruption score of 9, while manufacturing lags at 30% and a score of 5. This shows how innovation adoption differs by industry.

Data on how risk-taking companies outperformed risk-averse ones in new product launches and customer adoption rates.

Table 5: *Risk vs. Reward in Innovation.*

Company	Customer Satisfaction (%)	Risk-Taking Index (1-10)	New Product Success Rate (%)
Traditional Firms	70	3	40
DT+BOS Firms	90	9	75

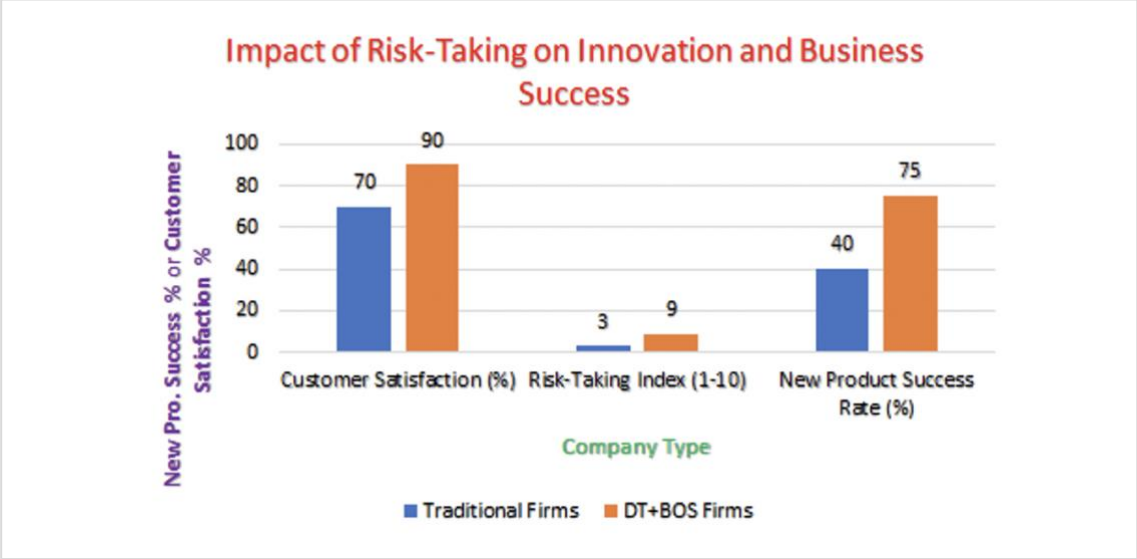

Figure 5: *Strategic Risk-Taking: Its Role in Innovation and Organizational Success.*

The data illustrates how risk-taking companies outperform risk-averse ones. DT and BoS firms show a 75% new product success rate and 90% customer satisfaction, whereas traditional firms lag with 40% and 70%, respectively. This highlights the benefits of embracing strategic risk-taking.

Conclusion

Guy Laliberté revolutionized the circus industry with Cirque du Soleil by embracing risk-taking and innovation, principles at the core of both Design Thinking and Blue Ocean Strategy. While many companies remain trapped in reliability-driven ideologies due to conservative stakeholders, pioneers like Steve Jobs and A.G. Lafley have proven the power of design-driven transformation. Apple leveraged design thinking to carve out uncontested market spaces, while Procter & Gamble thrived under a design-friendly culture. Similarly, Aravind Eye Hospital unknowingly applied design thinking principles to create an affordable, scalable healthcare model, making a massive impact in India. These success stories highlight how blending Blue Ocean Strategy with design thinking can drive groundbreaking innovation and long-term competitive advantage. Airbnb and Cirque du Soleil are both case studies that tell us that if we use a blend of both, we may get phenomenal results.

Keeping Blue Ocean a goal
Keep customers as the soul.
Mix both tools.
Set some rules.
Then Customer thrills.

The data clearly shows that companies leveraging Design Thinking (DT) and Blue Ocean Strategy (BoS) grow faster, innovate better, and achieve higher profitability than traditional firms. Businesses that take strategic risks report a 75% success rate in new product launches and 90% customer satisfaction, while risk-averse firms struggle to keep up. The technology sector leads in adopting these strategies, whereas industries like manufacturing are slower to innovate. Beyond business performance, DT and BoS together can reshape marketing (Rawabdeh et al., 2012; 7Ps), HR, operations, finance, leadership, and organizational culture, driving holistic transformation. Future research can focus on integrating these strategies to develop new models for strategy execution and cultural adoption. As businesses embrace this mindset, *Design a Blue Ocean. Strategic Thinking* could define the next era of innovation and competitive advantage. Future research can focus on execution models for strategic and cultural adoption.

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