

The Monthly Brew

HDI Newsletter

September 2026



A Thought to Begin With



Hello again,

Last month we said the most valuable learning happens in the messy middle. This month we want to be specific about where that middle actually sits.

It sits in the question.

Almost every engagement we ran this quarter began the same way: with a client who already knew what was wrong. Returns were being approved incorrectly. Deliveries were slipping. Scrap was being

managed on paper. A newly deployed sales application wasn't being used. A gate pass took longer than the work it authorised.

None of those are problems. They are symptoms with a job title attached. The work that changes anything happens in the days before the workshop, when a cross-functional group sits down and argues about how to write the question.

Not "our agents make errors" but how might we reduce incorrect return approvals without adding a step for the customer?

Not "adoption is low" but how might we get a sales team to use a tool to its full capacity when the old way still works well enough?

A badly framed problem produces good solutions, but for the wrong cause. And a good solution for the wrong cause is more expensive than doing nothing, because it comes with its own rollout plan and deflects your attention from the real issue.

We have watched teams spend hours on a single "How might we" statement and think they were wasting time. They were doing the most valuable work of the week. By the time the statement was right, the solution space had



narrowed from everything to about four options, and two of them were obvious.

What has surprised us is how far that discipline travels once it lands. The same groups that resisted spending a morning on a question have started opening their own meetings with one.

We're learning a second thing, and we are less sure about it. A well-framed problem makes the value measurable. Sometimes uncomfortably so. When a team can put a number against what the current situation is costing, the conversation changes character. It stops being a change programme and starts being a business case. We are still working out when that is a gift and when it is a trap.

More on both in this issue.

Warmly,

Ajay Aggarwal

Founding Partner | Humane Design & Innovation Consulting LLP



Welcome to The Monthly Brew

What We're Working On: Design Thinking journeys across manufacturing, e-commerce, financial services and pharma, plus our work with educators.

What are we Building: Research and diagnostics taking shape at HDI.

A Featured Insight: From "How might we" to the P&L.

Community Updates: The Humane Design Collective, one month in.

This publication will evolve as we learn from our work and from the community we're building together.

Our hope stays the same. Every issue should leave you with at least one idea worth exploring, one question worth discussing, or one perspective worth carrying into your own work.



What We're Working On

A glimpse into the work currently keeping us curious, challenged, and energised.

A Design Thinking journey across a diversified engineering group
We are partnering with a diversified Indian engineering and manufacturing group on a multi-business Design Thinking journey. What makes this one interesting is the range of what teams chose to work on, from the shop floor to the customer's inbox.

The problem statements teams are carrying include:

- How might we digitise the scrap management process at a manufacturing plant?
- How might we redesign and digitise the employee gate pass journey, reducing manual dependency, improving employee experience, and building in tracking for process control?
- How might we improve adoption of a newly deployed digital sales application, so a business unit's sales team uses it to full capacity?
- How might we redesign the aftermarket sales model for customer service support, increasing sales and profitability while reducing lead time on new product replacement?
- How might we improve customer experience through stage-wise order status updates, so delays are detected early and stakeholders stay aligned around a shared goal?
- How might we redesign the penalty cost process across vendors, customers, dealers and suppliers to reduce penalty costs?

Six questions, six cross-functional teams, one shared method. We will share what the teams achieved? in a future edition. Wonder if we should share Solution as that is proprietary for the client?



Design Thinking with a large e-commerce marketplace

With one of India's largest e-commerce marketplaces, three challenges moved from problem statement to solution set this quarter.

Reducing incorrect return approvals. Agents were approving returns that should not have been approved. The team worked through a simplified SOP, AI-enabled error detection using photo and video evidence, and a story-led agent enablement programme built on real cases rather than policy slides. Reducing late deliveries and getting ahead of them. Solutions in play include AI-enabled delay signal tracking with proactive customer alerts, a subscription model for frequent buyers enabling pre-planned purchases, and cross-leveraging quick-commerce infrastructure for on-time delivery.

Eliminating counterfeit products on the platform. The team designed an enhanced brand norms playbook, an AI engine that flags likely counterfeits with a confidence level and suggested action, proactive crawling to detect sellers listing fakes on other platforms, and a more stringent seller tagging and enforcement policy.

Entrepreneurial Thinking in Financial services

With the financial services arm of a global technology and engineering group, we are running an Entrepreneurial Thinking programme in which leaders work on live growth challenges rather than case studies. The projects include growing the business through structured asset-financing solutions and deepening penetration in target industries; mining the existing customer and vendor base to build a factoring opportunity pipeline by reading payment behaviours, financial needs and transaction histories; and opening up the group's own OEM ecosystem; identifying, engaging and onboarding OEMs as vendor partners to create a scalable channel for growth.

Agile execution in pharma

We are working with a leading Indian pharmaceutical company on an agile execution programme, helping teams shorten the distance between decision and delivery.

Teaching and enabling

With a new-age business school, we are working to build a Design Thinking mindset among first- and second-generation entrepreneurs. A group that arrives with unusual conviction and, often, an unusually strong attachment to the first idea. Making space for the problem before the solution is most of the work.



HDI System Health Assessment

Recently, we launched the “HDI System Health Assessment” which is an audit that will help the businesses check how their organizational systems are working.

Just as a financial audit reveals hidden fiscal liabilities or a medical scan exposes internal blockages, the Systems Audit acts as an organizational diagnostic. It renders invisible structures visible; mapping how policies, feedback delays, and misaligned incentives quietly shape day-to-day behaviour.

When projects fail or growth hits a wall, leadership typically reacts by changing personnel, buying new tools, or running culture workshops. Yet, a few months later, the exact same friction returns under a different name. The HDI System Health Assessment was hence developed to bridge this diagnostic gap.

If you are a Strategic leader in complex conglomerate, or an Operational head seeking to reduce systemic inefficiencies, or an L&D Professional focusing on advanced cognitive skill-building or even a Design Thinking Practitioner who is handling multiple users / stakeholders at the same time, this assessment is for you.

The HDI System Health Assessment shifts the conversation from "Who / What is failing?" to "What system design is making this failure predictable?"

Take Our Assessment free of cost, right here:
<https://humandesignthinking.com/resources/>



What We Are Building

Research & Insights

Employee Lifetime Value (ELTV): How much value does an employee create across the course of their journey? Our ELTV research continues to develop a more commercially meaningful way to evaluate people investments. Connecting employee interventions to measurable business outcomes and strengthening the case for spend on talent, development, and retention. We are looking for co-inquirers among CHROs and people analytics leaders.

AI Proofing Global Capability Centres: As AI reshapes work, roles and operating models, how do GCCs stay resilient, relevant and human-centred? Leadership interviews are underway. If you lead or advise a GCC and would like to contribute a perspective, we will welcome the conversation.

AI Labs: Each lab takes a real business challenge, identifies where AI could create meaningful impact, and demonstrates what a solution could look like, moving the conversation from AI possibility to relevance and measurable outcome.



Featured Insight

From "How Might We" to the P&L

Most organisations are generous with problems and stingy with problem statements.

Ask a leadership team what is wrong, and you will get a list in ninety seconds. Ask them to write one of those items as a question a cross-functional team could work on for six weeks, and the room goes quiet. That silence is the actual starting point of the work.

We have noticed three things about problem statements that produce real outcomes.

They name a tension, not a target. "Reduce returns" is a target. "Reduce incorrect return approvals without adding friction for the genuine customer" is a tension, and a tension is what a team can actually design against. Targets produce compliance. Tensions produce ideas.

They are small enough to be owned and large enough to matter. A statement about digitising the gate pass journey at one plant sounds modest next to a transformation programme. But it has a named owner, a visible user, a measurable before-and-after, and a version that can ship in weeks. Transformation programmes have none of those.

They can carry a number eventually. This is the part we are still thinking about and working on. When a team can say what the current state is costing, the work gets sponsorship, protection and pace. But a number attached too early narrows the exploration before anyone has understood the problem. Our working rule is to frame first, quantify second, and never let the business case write the problem statement.

One more pattern is worth naming. In almost every journey we have run this year, the highest-value problem was not the one the sponsor brought us. It was the one that surfaced two conversations later, once the team stopped defending the current process and started describing it.

A question worth sitting with: what is the most expensive problem in your organisation that nobody has written down as a question yet?



Community Updates

The Humane Design Collective, one month in

The Humane Design Collective launched last month, and the early conversations have been better than we expected. Less broadcast, more genuine contribution in terms of masterclasses.

A highlight from this month

HDI, in association with Momentum Strides, hosted a masterclass on Women in Leadership for Business Impact, facilitated by Dr. Shalini Singh, Founder & CEO of Momentum Strides.

The session explored the structural and psychological barriers shaping women's leadership journeys, along with practical actions leaders can take to strengthen visibility, access, sponsorship and business impact.

In the months ahead, the community will host:

- ***Practitioner discussions***
- ***Masterclasses***
- ***Ask-Me-Anything sessions***

A prompt for the Collective this month:

Share a problem statement you are currently working on badly framed, half-framed, or finally right. We will pick a few to work through together.

Every edition of The Monthly Brew will carry highlights from these conversations, so the collective wisdom of the community becomes part of our shared learning.

If you haven't joined yet, we'd love to welcome you. Join the Humane Design Collective: <https://humanedesignthinking.com/why-choose-us-2/#join>



Our Offerings



Consulting Services

Design & Innovation

- New product discovery and design
- Service, System and Process Design
- Innovation Culture Design

People experience & Culture

- People culture design
- People systems design
- People experience design



Learning Services

Design & Innovation

- Design Thinking
- Systems Thinking
- Strategic Thinking
- Business Storytelling
- Leading a Change
- Business Agility
- Behavioural Design
- Entrepreneurship
- Product Management
- Psychological safety
- Negotiation

Leadership Suit

- Advanced Leaders
- Emerging Leaders
- First time Managers
- Women Leadership

AI Suit

- AI Opportunity Masterclass
- Design Thinking for AI Strategy workshop
- Design sprint for AI innovation

About HDI

Founded in 2021 by Ex KPMG leaders, We are a strategic consulting firm, working with leading brands in India & across the globe. We are passionate for **fostering innovation & delivering business outcomes. Till date we have worked with over 100+ clients to 5x their topline/ bottom line** by delivering Product, Process, People & Culture innovations using our **proprietary Design Thinking, System Thinking, Agility & Storytelling frameworks and toolkits**. Our consulting approach combines evidence-based research, deep client co-creation, and delivery by experienced practitioners.



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