



From features-first to user-first

Phil Gilbert discusses an evolution in process at IBM Design



1956:

IBM launches its Corporate Design Program. World-renowned designers and architects such as Eliot Noyes, Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe leave their creative imprints on IBM graphics, products and architecture.

2012:

IBM Design emerges as the new standard-setter for user experience. Hundreds of designers and interface developers start to transform the development process through deeper understanding of the people who use IBM products and how they use them.

What do you love about IBM software?

Whatever you think when you read that question, be assured that Phil Gilbert is working to change your answer—for the better. Because you are the focus of his plans.

As the general manager of design for IBM Software Group and chief evangelist for the design-development renaissance, he already knows what you do and don't love about IBM products, and what you'll appreciate about them going forward. He understands your frustration with products built to satisfy a feature list at the expense of usability. And he's well aware of the resistance that comes with any kind of change, even for the positive.

"Design goes much deeper than the visual aspect. It starts with developing a real empathy for real users."

— Phil Gilbert

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The evolution of IBM's design discipline, from designers' POV

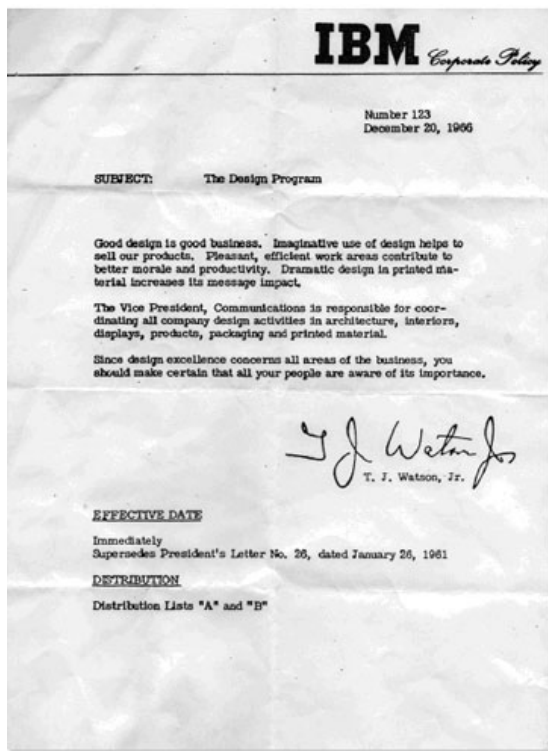
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Forward Thinker



Phil Gilbert
GM - IBM Design





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"Design must reflect the practical and aesthetic in business but above all ... good design must primarily serve people."

— Thomas J. Watson

Design and IBM

Before IBM, Gilbert was president of Lombardi Software (yes, in tribute to Coach Vince), and two other startups. Over the years, his expertise in software and strategy grew, as did his patent portfolio¹. He arrived at IBM in 2010 with a strong sense of design—not just the fonts-and-colors type, but user-oriented design. The kind that involves a person's interaction with a product and, when done right, turns a user into a fan.

By now you're probably thinking "iPhone" and that's a reasonable comparison, but the iPhone didn't come first.

"IBM has a phenomenal design heritage, and we've drawn on that heritage as a big inspiration for our efforts today," Gilbert explains. "Starting in 1956, when Thomas J. Watson Jr. asked renowned New York architect Eliot Noyes to become [the first head of design at IBM](#). Noyes gathered an unparalleled group of designers—Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, Paul Rand—who worked at IBM in the 1950s and '60s through the '80s."

The IBM Selectric: that was Noyes. Rand created the IBM logo that's in use today and inspired a young Steve Jobs. The Eames influence is too extensive to list in a paragraph.

The software revolution

As IBM was acquiring Lombardi in 2010, a shift was occurring in the software world: "People were expecting their tools at work to be more like their personal tech experience," says Gilbert.

"Users were maturing in their understanding and use of technology. Consumers' technology savviness and these incredible user experiences that are almost 100 percent software-driven were taking us leaps and bounds over even a few years before."

In early 2012, incoming President and CEO Ginni Rometty saw the need for the company's products and solutions to have greater

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emphasis on the client experience. "Robert LeBlanc (Senior Vice President, Software and Cloud Solutions Group) knew about the importance of user-experience design in Lombardi's business process management products, and that I thought this approach to design could be applied at IBM. We started working on the model that we would announce in August 2012. And we call this scalable set of practices 'IBM Design Thinking'."

IBM Design Thinking: users first

The simplest description of this development metamorphosis: from features-first to user-first.

Or, as stated in a Forbes² profile, "from a process-orientated engineering mindset to more creative design-oriented model." Gilbert believes that in a world of software-driven user experiences, starting with good design and empathy for users "can make a product connect to peoples' lives in a way we've never been able to do before."

When software acquisition and development took off in the early 1990s, most notably with the acquisition of Lotus in 1995, "Scale and security were the core principles of IBM software design. While those capabilities remain essential, we're now putting the user at the center of our design practice."



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The teams go to camp

Now, the week-long Designcamp for IBM product teams and the one-day Designcamp for Executives drive home Gilbert's message that "design is everyone's job. Not everyone is a designer, but everybody has to have the user as their north star. Day-to-day collaboration between engineering and design is the only way to get designs into final release and in an agile fashion."

So when three to six multidisciplinary product teams gather at a Designcamp at the IBM Design Studio in Austin, Texas,



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each executive-supported team of engineers, project managers and designers finds its own unique way to combine talents and play off their skills to create change for the better.

"This is a liberating capability to bring into your project, no matter what role you play. Once they understand their role in the collaboration, people who came in not wanting to lose any aspect of their job find that they can give up some of the things that they don't like and go deeper on the things they're more capable and desirous of doing. This makes everyone more valuable to the team, and the teams that get it are almost always higher performing, with happier people."

Designing for the future

Now, hundreds of designers and product teams are working together to create solutions that are engaging, with a recognizable style and personality. Solutions developed with you, the user, as the ever-present inspiration. One example: the Connect2014 conference in January offered a glimpse of IBM Mail Next, a collaboration software that is being called the "first social email solution,"³ which generated major buzz on Twitter and with tech bloggers.

"A lot of our competitors offer compelling experiences. The reason for design is more than feeling good aesthetically," says Gilbert. "It's so we can be more involved in and essential to our clients' businesses."

"We all have a great responsibility. But in the short time I've been here, I've come to really appreciate the responsibility that we have as IBMers. The capabilities that we've been handed are not here to be shepherded, they're here to be driven."

"Every one of us has to honor the heritage of the shoulders we're standing on, by driving them even faster into the world. If we don't, who will?"

¹ http://patent.ipexl.com/inventor/phil_gilbert_1.html ↗

² <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rawnshah/2013/12/02/engineering-design-into-the-corporate-dna/> ↗

³ <http://www.cmswire.com/cms/customer-experience/ibms-mail-next-original-in-the-social-business-enterprise-ibmconnect-023910.php> ↗

