McKinsey's Big Design Bet

Idea In Short

A wave of consulting firms acquired design agencies during the mid-2010s, part of a broader shift some observers termed Big Design, blending traditional strategy work with the customer-centered, prototype-driven methods design firms had long practiced. The move addressed real weaknesses in traditional consulting: collaboration culture, recycled solutions and PowerPoint-heavy deliverables that failed to engage visually oriented executives.

A Wave of Unusual Acquisitions

It was not entirely surprising when a leading strategy consulting firm acquired a design company, since several major consulting and financial services firms had already made similar moves: digital agencies acquired by professional services firms, a design firm called Fjord acquired by a large consultancy, and even a design agency called Adaptive Path acquired by a major bank.1 Strategic design took many forms, several of which extended work management consultants had already been doing in some fashion for years: understanding customer needs and behaviors, looking holistically at root causes beyond a narrow project scope, using data to build narratives executives could champion, tapping diverse expert perspectives through collaborative workshops, and driving innovation through structured creativity paired with genuine project management discipline.

The Rise of "Big Design"

Design as a discipline had already moved through repeated waves of influence, disruption, consolidation and synthesis, and observers at the time coined a new term to describe the emerging moment: Big Design, capturing the sense that design methodology was becoming central to how large organizations solved problems, not a peripheral creative service.

Fixing a Collaboration Problem

A common, if uncomfortable, observation about elite strategy consultants was that they were smart but not always easy to collaborate with, sometimes coming across as arrogant or unwilling to listen. Infusing a firm's culture with design-oriented, genuinely open-ended thinkers offered a plausible remedy, injecting a collaborative instinct that pure strategy training did not always reliably produce on its own.

Breaking the Copy-Paste Habit

Consulting firms had a well-known tendency to recycle solutions across engagements, reasonable enough given how often business problems resembled each other, but the habit could slide into genuine mental laziness over time. A small design team joining a firm of many thousands faced a real challenge in shifting that broader culture, but the underlying goal, keeping thinking genuinely fresh rather than defaulting to the last engagement's template, was worth pursuing seriously.2

Making Deliverables Worth Looking At

Traditional slide decks could be genuinely dull, and executives, being highly visual decision-makers, responded far better to interactive proposals, working prototypes or visual displays that brought recommendations to life rather than simply describing them. Improving deliverable quality was as much a business-development advantage as an aesthetic one, since a memorable, tangible pitch could meaningfully improve a firm's odds of winning new work.

Root Causes, Not Symptoms

A well-known systems-thinking argument holds that most organizational issues are symptoms of the larger systems that produced them in the first place, and large companies are complicated enough that individual regions, business units and functions frequently end up optimizing locally at the expense of the whole. Design thinking's discipline of cutting through that clutter toward a simpler, more elegant, root-cause solution gave strategy work a genuinely different toolkit rather than just a stylistic refresh.

Deeper Customer Insight

Design firms typically excelled at customer insight work in a way traditional consulting rarely matched, often employing ethnographers, psychologists and sociologists to identify genuine customer behavior patterns, attitudes and preferences rather than relying primarily on surveys and structured interviews.

New Markets and Recruiting Appeal

A design firm's client roster typically covered territory a traditional strategy consultancy rarely touched, offering a growing firm genuine new markets to pursue as its core strategy business matured. The move also carried real recruiting value: ambitious young graduates increasingly preferred working somewhere that felt creative and cutting-edge over a traditional big-name consultancy, and design acquisitions helped close that appeal gap directly.3

What the Acquisitions Signaled About the Industry

Taken together, the wave of design acquisitions signaled something broader about how large professional services firms were rethinking their own value proposition. Pure analytical rigor, long the calling card of elite strategy firms, was no longer sufficient on its own to win and retain the largest clients, who increasingly expected recommendations delivered with the same polish, empathy and tangibility a top design studio would bring to a consumer product launch. Firms that failed to develop some version of this capability risked looking dated next to competitors willing to blend disciplines.

A Familiar Discipline Wearing a New Name

Course descriptions from design faculty at leading universities, covering research, observation, ideation, prototyping and refinement, read remarkably similarly to how management consulting itself is often described. The overlap was not a coincidence; both disciplines exist to solve genuinely ambiguous problems for people other than the practitioner, just with somewhat different vocabularies and toolkits built up over separate professional traditions.

- 1Design thinking
- 2Organizational culture
- 3Millennials

Summary

Design acquisitions addressed real gaps in traditional consulting: collaboration culture, recycled solutions and deliverables that failed to engage visually minded executives. Design thinking's root-cause discipline and ethnographic customer research gave strategy work a genuinely different toolkit, not just a rebrand.