



ThinkLab

DESIGN NERDS ANONYMOUS

Navigating what's next in design.

Bridging the Gap: ThinkLab Data Meets Global B2B Insights

(Please excuse any grammatical errors in this transcript as it was auto-generated from an audio file.)

[00:00:00] **Amanda Schneider:** Hey listeners, I'd love to personally welcome you to season six of design nerds anonymous. It's hard to believe we've reached this milestone together and I'm thrilled to have you with me on this journey. When I first started this podcast, I certainly could never have imagined the incredible community we'd built.

And now here we are 5 percent of all podcasts, not just within our industry. And I have all of you to thank for this achievement. So as I reflect on the creation of these past six seasons, I want to tell you that creating and hosting Design Nerds Anonymous has truly been one of the most rewarding parts of my job.

It's given me a platform to do what I love most. Make connections out of chaos. This podcast has been a way to spark curiosity, challenge norms, and ignite conversations that matter. To everyone who's tuned in, [00:01:00] shared an episode, or joined the conversation, I want to thank you. Your support and engagement have been the driving force behind this podcast's success, and I am more excited than ever to continue this journey with you.

So with that, I'm going to dive into a little bit of an unconventional approach for this podcast. And share with you a bit of a detailed overview about season six and what's to come. Now, this season, we're diving into a topic critical for anyone involved in projects for the built environment, the future of customer decision making.

We spent the last six months immersed in what we called ThinkLab's 2024 Hackathon. It's a comprehensive exploration about how decisions are made in our industry. You may have caught a glimpse of some of the results in our mini season. And if not, I would encourage you to look back in your podcast feed and check it out.

We explored the entire spectrum of key players from corporate [00:02:00] to healthcare, hospitality, education, and even developers. So you'll find specific episodes on each of those in your feed.

Our research started with a mini survey last fall. Then we moved on to virtual mapping sessions directly with end user decision makers to understand the landscape of what was happening in their world today. We then launched into a very in depth survey across a broad industry range of stakeholders. But the real magic happened at our live events.

We brought together end users, architects, designers, manufacturers, and other industry players. This was the first live research event of its kind, but certainly not the last for us. Together at these events, we didn't just analyze the research, we reacted to it, challenged it, and perhaps most

importantly, We brainstormed the all important, so what, that turns that data into [00:03:00] actionable insights for you.

And let me tell you, the findings have been eye opening. We discovered that 86 percent of end users say that their decision making process has changed in the past few years. When you look to A& D, 95 percent said that the decision making process of their clients has changed. Now, this is a massive shift and we wanted to dig deeper to understand how it's changing.

Why it's changing, and most importantly, what each of us can do to better serve our customers. These insights are the foundation for every discussion that you'll find in the podcast this season. Each episode will break down a piece of the puzzle, bringing you actionable takeaways that you can apply in your own work.

Whether you're navigating decisions in corporate, healthcare, hospitality, or any other sector, this season is designed to help you make more informed, effective choices in a world that certainly feels more [00:04:00] complex than ever. Now at the end of this episode, I'll share an overview of what to expect from the rest of the episodes this season.

This will be your season roadmap. And hopefully get you half as excited as I am about season six. But let me tell you what you're in for today. Episode one, you are here. We've titled this one, bridging the gap. Think lab data meets global B2B insights in the world of B2B research. You've likely encountered insights from the likes of McKinsey, Gartner and Forrester.

Their data offers a high level view, but what we've found is that much of it doesn't fully apply to the complexities of our unique industry. For example, Gartner reported that 75 percent of B2B buyers prefer a rep free buying experience. Does that sound right for our industry? You've got it. It's not in our industry.

Only 3 percent of end user decision [00:05:00] makers prefer a rep free buying experience. That is a staggering difference. Similarly, Gartner suggests that 65 percent of B2B buyers are millennials and Gen Z. However, think lab research shows that when it comes to end user decision makers making decisions for complex projects in the built environment, only 31 percent fall into these generational categories.

And then there's a great Forrester stat that says the average B2B decision making committee has expanded from two to as many as 14 people. And while this gets a lot of nods when think lab presents, we wanted to validate it with our own data. And what we found is that for our industry, the average number of decision makers on the typical project has officially doubled in the past five years.

I share all of this to help give you perspective. I want you to think of ThinkLab as the McKinsey of the built environment, [00:06:00] clarifying and translating these broader B2B trends to make them actionable and relevant specific to our industry. If you want more or a complete report style view of the research that this season was built around, you can download the full report at info.thinklab.design/backslash/end-user-decision-making. We'll be sure to put a link in the show notes as well. And while you're waiting for each episode this season to drop, if you're looking for more from me and Think Lab, I want to invite you to check out my recent TEDx talk titled Work is Broken, Gen Z Can Help Us Fix It.

This was, without a doubt, The most challenging speaking engagement I have ever tackled. Imagine trying to convey our complex industry's challenges and opportunities in just 12 minutes or less to an audience that doesn't know me or our world at all. But it inspired me a lot to think about how we as an industry should be leading the way out of these loud and uncertain [00:07:00] times.

The talk isn't just for those in our field. It's for anyone who works, who leads and who wants to help shape a better future. This season's focus on decision making in the business. And my TEDx talk on the future of work share a common thread. They're not just about workplace. They're about the way we work across all sectors, how we approach leadership, communication, and innovation across the board.

Whether you're leading a team, making high stakes decisions, or simply navigating your own daily responsibilities. I'd say all of these insights are directly applicable to you, your projects, and how your company operates. I'll be sure to include the link to the TEDx talk in the show notes. And I'd love to personally invite you to share it if you enjoy it throughout that talk, this podcast, and all of the episodes to come this season.

Let's continue to challenge our assumptions and push for a better future, a better future of work, a better future of our industry, a better future just in general of our world. [00:08:00] Now for this first episode, we wanted to zoom out a bit, ease ourselves in and talk to someone who's in constant conversations.

with creatives at different levels of their careers. Amy Devers is a designer, educator, and the host of Clever. If that name rings a bell, Clever is one of our sister shows on the Surround Podcast Network. It's a podcast about the creative visionaries who shape our world and culture. So I was curious to see if Amy had heard rumblings of any increased pain, frustration around decision making, and if her time with Gen Z University art students had led her to any interesting observations.

Here's my conversation with her.

[00:08:42] **Amy Devers:** I'm Amy Devers and I am a podcaster and an educator and a designer. I'm trained as a furniture designer. I have a master's degree in furniture design, but the bulk of my professional career was spent in media, actually hosting television shows and design and architecture, home [00:09:00] improvement, design makeover, international high design architect and architecture, culture and food.

But I had about 15 years in front of the camera and the way my brain works. I really enjoyed learning the mechanics of storytelling. I, Like to build things and so I saw stories as buildable things from TV I pivoted into podcasting and in 2016, I started a podcast called clever I like to think of it as a window into the humanity behind the design of the world around us Each episode is a deep dive candid portrait with an individual creative from all different disciplines Who's shaping the world around us?

And my thought is if we can get to know the person in their own voice, in their own inflection, their own passion, their motivations, we can start to understand the world around us with a lot more of a soulful connection. We're 217 episodes in [00:10:00] now, and it is my life's work and my great joy. That's amazing.

And outside of the podcast, you teach, is that correct? That's true. I teach furniture design at my alma mater, Rhode Island school of design. And it is absolutely amazing to be plugged into and tending. I like to think of it as like tending to the. The greenhouse of creativity. I'm not doing much but trying to keep the soil fertile and the conditions right for them to sprout their own ideas.

It's so awe inspiring to behold, and I'm so grateful to be part of the community and be contributing in that way.

[00:10:39] **Amanda Schneider:** I'm excited to talk to you here, because obviously our world is research and data and facts, but with 217, you said? Mm hmm. Episodes. Obviously you have incredible insight. You've done your own de facto qualitative research about what creatives care about, what they're thinking about, what makes them human behind that.

So I'm curious [00:11:00] because one of the things that think lab loves to do is really tackle big, hairy industry challenges. I'd love to hear from your perspective. What are the biggest challenges that you think are out there for design, for designers, for this industry

[00:11:14] **Amy Devers:** and beyond? I mean, challenges are relative, right?

But some of the things that I see coming up, equity in the creative pipeline is a big issue. And part of that goes back to our education system. Part of it goes back to our cultural understanding of what design and creativity is and how it's valuable to adapting as things change more rapidly. As we start to understand more about the value of creativity.

The pipeline will expand naturally, but in the meantime, it's up to actual creative thinkers to intentionally expand the pipeline and to figure out how to do that. And I think it's really important because representation needs to be at the creative level. If the creatives are shaping the world around us, [00:12:00] then everyone needs to be represented in that class.

[00:12:03] **Amanda Schneider:** And this is a hairy and weighted question, but I'm curious what you see as the roadblocks to that happening today.

[00:12:09] **Amy Devers:** Oh, a lot of it's cultural. I think a lot of people don't understand that the arts and design are really important to STEM, and when you mix the two, that's when you get the real fertile magic.

I think there's still myths that need to be deconstructed, like the myth of the starving artist. There's a lot of well meaning parents who still dissuade their children from pursuing a creative path. Because they think it's not economically viable. And yet I see firsthand, it's the creatives who are able to be resilient in the face of uncertainty and adversity.

And I know that creativity is the superpower, is the muscle that needs to be trained and cultivated. Creativity is the thing that's going to allow people to survive and evolve. And it can be strengthened, trained, flexed in everyone. It's not just some [00:13:00] people are gifted with it. And Yet, as a society, we still tend to relegate it to something that's not quite taken so seriously.

And that just baffles me because in, in my experience, it is the thing. That is framing and solving the problems. It's so

[00:13:19] **Amanda Schneider:** interesting. You know, I'm a product designer by background. You and I had a conversation earlier about using your powers for good and sustainability. I'm curious because the most sustainable thing is to not keep creating yet.

A lot of the very future forward thinkers. I just got a notification that Daniel Susskind came out with a new book talking about how GDP should not be the way that we measure our future economy because it forces this creator mindset, this consumption mindset that is not always good for that dance that you're talking about.

So I'm curious if that resonates with you at all in terms of you run a product design studio, Education. You're [00:14:00] looking at this design element. How do you see that future unfolding?

[00:14:04] **Amy Devers:** It's funny that you say that. I don't think it's the creator mindset that's the problem. I think it's the sales mindset. I think it's the very assumption that everyone's creating to sell product needs to be untethered.

[00:14:17] **Amanda Schneider:** Interesting.

[00:14:18] **Amy Devers:** Process innovation. I think that's a form of creation. They all work in tandem with each other. So many of the students are not. really creating to put more product in the market. They're creating to design new social systems. They're creating for the land back movement. They're creating for communications and dissemination of information to be more equitable.

So I really pushed back against that. Like the creator mindset goes haywire when we only think about pushing out product to sell. That means designing for systems that work with nature and work with natural properties as opposed to just taking natural ingredients and cramming them into pre existing industrialized processes.

That means [00:15:00] very innovative new materials, raw materials and working with them to build things. But where the materials come from, how they're harvested, if they're coming from an ethical place, who's being harmed in the process. Are these materials being extracted from the earth? Are they working in a regenerative process?

Can we retool these materials so that our built environment is less, like, violent towards us acoustically? tactically all of our sensory inputs, but it means actually returning to nature, not just to copy it, but to synthesize those strategies into multiple solutions for what we see coming down the road.

So I'm, I'm feeling them grapple with those questions. It's almost unconscious, but it's coming out in these really incredibly innovative and emotionally resonant works of sculpture, of industrial design, of furniture that sort of lives [00:16:00] in a space between sculpture and function. And it's really exciting to see because I can see them processing in real time.

And it's part emotional outlet, but also part future proofing.

[00:16:13] **Amanda Schneider:** I think that there is an assumption that there is a need and a business case around these things. And there could be a need and a business case, but it might not be around

selling product. It might be around creativity to solve some of these process challenges that could be even more impactful to this future dance.

So, I want to move to talk a little bit about our next season of Design Nerds Anonymous because I'm really curious about how some of this lands with you and your broad and storied view of the world of design. We've uncovered things like 86 percent of end users surveyed say that the decision making process has changed in the past five years.

39 percent said that decisions are taking longer. 42 percent said there's more people than ever [00:17:00] involved in the decision making process. And in fact, we've estimated that that number has doubled. 30 percent say they want more data to make decisions. When we dug into that, we really discovered that they have data, however, it's not translated and contextualized and put into ways that they can action that data.

So they have what we're calling infobesity. Just so much data, they can't do anything with it. So to wrap that back just a little bit, we're really looking at this challenge of it's taking longer to make decisions. I'm curious if that sparks

[00:17:29] **Amy Devers:** anything for you. Just now I got this really clear visual of a pendulum and when it has swung as far as it can go in one direction, it starts to slow down and change direction.

And I almost feel like that's the moment we're in. Like, the universal law is that things that are out of balance seek balance, right? And so, that makes me think, well, what's out of balance there? And part of it is, maybe we need to slow down building. Maybe [00:18:00] we do need more data because we are reconciling with the weight of the decisions and we're also experiencing this existential tension at the point of, like, we can't keep going in the method and manner that we have been, so we know something needs to change, but we're still looking for that model of change to emerge for us.

So we're actively creating our own change right now, and this is why I think your work is so important, is through contextualizing and translating that data, we get a more granular picture of where we are and maybe how we can adjust the vehicle to the banks and the road that we're experiencing. So what does that mean?

What I think it means is we are probably developing a whole new framework for making decisions. For That isn't so deeply capitalistic. Based in capitalism, like how can we create environments that have a well [00:19:00] being quotient for the end user in that space? If you happen to be in a position where you're making an innovative material, an audacious new material or interesting new process innovation in terms of supply chain, the way people are really going to be able to get behind it is through storytelling.

And of course you're going to have to demonstrate that and impact will come, but in order to even imagine what it could be or how it could change your decision. You need the storytelling and then you also need to be able to pass that on to the other people who are the decision makers in that situation so that they can understand how you arrived.

I think we're in a really interesting space and time because I do think the very essence of our decisions are changing. You know, frequently the person who's passionate about the work is able to

sort of sum up that contagion. But if you're sharing these stories around, Distillation starts to become, I think, the more important thing, but how do you distill it down [00:20:00] without getting rid of that passion, that kernel of passion that makes it contagious?

And that's a whole art, you know? Each story needs to be crafted for its audience, but in general, most people are just trying to sell you on something, even if it is their idea, right? When I think about storytelling, I also think about how the authenticity needs to be so transparent. that its integrity isn't in question.

[00:20:26] **Amanda Schneider:** I would agree. And I'm smiling to myself over here. Our listeners can't see that, but I'm starting to chuckle just because so many of the word choices that you use get me so excited for what I think is going to be my favorite season. But I kind of say that about every season. People are trying to share with executives that have executive level attention spans.

So it's about getting that message more concise and succinct to really empower these designers to tell their story. I want to talk about one other episode and then we'll start to wrap here. One of the other episodes is called The Generation Gap, Rethinking Soft Skills in the Hybrid Workplace. I know you work with [00:21:00] students.

A lot of our work here at Think Lab has been around Gen Z. One of the complaints that we have is that they have all these digital skills, but maybe they're lacking the people skills in the real world. And one of the things that I challenge in this episode is that we're all lacking these skills. As we move to this hybrid world, this digital era, a lot of the rules are changing.

And add to that, I think whether we're talking about the design industry or beyond, a lot of us that have. An amazing skill and a very specific area are often promoted because we're so good at our job. But what made us good at our job sometimes is the opposite of what makes us a great manager. I want to argue that everyone in the world should be looking at soft skills.

It's not just a Gen Z thing. It's a everyone thing. And the more we can master those soft skills, again, it's about that power of storytelling. It's about the power of persuasion. It's using your power for good. It all strengthens those. So I'd love to hear what you're hearing

[00:21:55] **Amy Devers:** in your work. That's interesting.

I'm so glad you bring up the idea of soft skills. I [00:22:00] taught a class once where I introduced the concept of soft utility, which translates that concept into hard physical product. What kind of soft utility could a table have if it fosters communication, if it fosters community, right? If it brings people together.

And can you do that through materials? Can you do that through gesture, through form? through design choices. And these are important things to think about in the creative process of actual physical objects. But at the essence of that assignment was to also think about how you have the power to create community.

And what is your value stance on that? Is it important? Do you need to execute on this power? Or do you need to develop this soft skill? One of the things that we really focus on in art school is the idea of how to iterate and take feedback and offer feedback, and it's as important for you to be able to

weigh in [00:23:00] and share your thoughts and, and critical insights with your peer group as it is for you to receive any kind of feedback from a professor.

That's just one form of feedback, right? So. We need to create this really safe culture of vulnerability and feedback. And I think art school does that really well. And, and so I think our students are a little bit equipped for that piece of it when they go out into the world, but then there are other things that don't get talked about so much, and that's asserting yourself with confidence or seeking out mentorship from people that you might even be intimidated by, but how to do so without.

Repelling them while being really conscious of what's the exchange, how do you make this reciprocal and not just an extractive, hey, can you help me, but what could I bring to this? What I love about that kind of equation is it makes you turn the mirror back inside and think about, well, what do I have to offer?

I think of this person, this [00:24:00] mentor as somebody who knows so much more than me, but maybe I have something to offer too. And that's a soft skill, right? Thinking about what you have to offer and contribute to a situation. Always being mindful.

[00:24:12] **Amanda Schneider:** I think it's really interesting to hear these overlaps from the broad view that you have.

I'm going to ask you the same question that I've asked every other interviewee this season. If you had to give me one word. that summarizes what makes you excited about the future, given technological changes, given industry shifts, world shifts that you've seen, what makes you excited about the future?

[00:24:36] **Amy Devers:** Biodesign. I think it's the most fascinating front of creativity and design right now. And it's all based on working synergistically with nature in a regenerative way. But it's so beautiful. And it promises to To, I think, reconnect us through our connection. Consumption [00:25:00] through our products, through our habits, through our socialization to natural cycles that we've gotten pretty far away from and gives me a great deal hope for how we might retool the things that are out of balance now.

That's amazing. How can listeners get in touch with you? Find me on LinkedIn. I'm at Amy Divers, definitely listen to Clever. We have 217 episodes of really interesting life stories. They're all evergreen. I would love for you to scroll through them. You know, you'd be surprised even if you don't recognize the name, they all have a fascinating story to tell.

When we get really candid, they feel substantive. It feels like you've made a friend after listening to an episode. And I want them to keep you company and I want them to help you feel a little more connected in the world and maybe in any sort of creative endeavor. And if you don't identify as creative, maybe it'll help you access that.

See it in yourself. Well,

[00:25:55] **Amanda Schneider:** fascinating. Thank you so much. It's been so fun. I feel like I've known you on the phone, but [00:26:00] it's fun to see your face. It's fun to get on the podcast, Mike, with you. So thank you so much for your time.

[00:26:04] **Amy Devers:** Thank you for having me. And it's always great to see your face. I hope I get to see it in person soon.

[00:26:09] **Amanda Schneider:** I was so grateful to have this time with Amy. where she could share her perspective and her contagious enthusiasm. She helps us think creatively and I loved her passion for process improvement as vital for success in decision making across all sectors. So moving forward, each episode this season will be structured on a specific topic or insight that was uncovered in our research.

So here's what to expect on Design Nerds Anonymous season six. Buckle up. Next up is episode two, titled In Their Words, Decision Maker Insights on Opportunities for the Built Environment. This episode will give you a front row seat to decision makers across a variety of sectors. They'll shed light on how they experience these common pain points, sometimes a little bit [00:27:00] differently, but it's not just about identifying challenges.

It's really about understanding the nuances that make these challenges unique to each sector. Let's move on to episode three titled managing up today's crucial skill. You weren't taught with a number of decision makers on the average project team doubling managing up has never been more critical. In fact, this was the most discussed topic at our live events and for good reason.

Today, much of that broadened decision making team are made up of executives with limited attention spans. This episode equips you with the strategies to capture and retain their focus. Let's move on to episode four, the number one issue frustrating your clients today. Spoiler alert, pricing and inflation are the top culprits enhancing decision making anxiety and risk aversion today.

So unfortunately, while we didn't solve the inflation piece of the puzzle, this episode will dive into what you [00:28:00] do need to know to support your clients better moving forward. We'll reveal the top two pieces of data that end users are craving to help with their decision making, both of which are tied to pricing.

So if you're feeling the pressure of cost volatility, we think this episode will help provide clarity and direction of where to go next. Then we'll move on to episode five. Why traditional workplace metrics are obsolete in an era where 96 percent of end users demand data to make design decisions, yet 88 percent of them feel that the data they receive is inadequate.

It's clear we're at a crossroads. This episode zeros in on the workplace sector where the shift from input based metrics like people per square foot to output based metrics like productivity is creating a data dilemma. You'll hear how one company is redefining corporate benchmarks, offering new ways to navigate this evolving landscape.[00:29:00]

So if you're a company that's struggling with outdated metrics, perhaps this could be your roadmap to the future. Then we'll move on to episode six, titled Getting to Consensus, a masterclass for all sectors. Again, back to this decision making committee doubling in size. Reaching consensus has become a Herculean task.

This episode will take you inside one company in the hospitality sector that's mastered the art of swift decision making amidst rapid change. It's a toolkit for anyone managing a project and trying to

improve internal processes packed with insights that every company should hear. These strategies will help you not only reach consensus, but make better, faster decisions.

Episode seven, the future of work, an entanglement of it, H. R. and design now. This dives into an interesting topic that's near [00:30:00] and dear to my heart, data. Now everyone says they want data, but in reality, what we discovered is they have it. In fact, too much of it. The challenge lies in making sense of this data, especially when it's siloed across it, HR and design departments.

This episode tackles the need to entangle these critical elements, particularly as hybrid work blurs the lines between them. We'll feature a very lively discussion amongst experts in all three fields, IT, people, and design, exploring where our collective future is headed. We'll almost last, but definitely not least, we'll move on to episode eight, which is another favorite of mine from this season.

It's titled Generation Gap, Rethinking Soft Skills for the Hybrid Workplace. Now, this is something we heard about a lot and has a huge effect. On decision making and navigating team dynamics, we often point fingers [00:31:00] at Gen Z for lacking soft skills, but the truth is in this increasingly hybrid, awkward era, we probably all could use a refresher.

This episode confronts the reality that in today's hybrid work environment, soft skills are more crucial than ever for all generations. You'll learn how to hone these skills and not just to bridge the generational gap, but also to improve communication and decision outcomes across the board. Whether you're a seasoned leader or new to the workforce, I'd say that this episode offers valuable lessons on how to thrive in this increasingly digital hybrid digital era.

No matter where you stand in this industry's complex decision making ecosystem, each episode this season is packed with insights that we believe will help you navigate this crucial time. In closing, I want to thank you so much for your continued support and enthusiasm for Design Nerds Anonymous. Your engagement means the [00:32:00] world to us and keeps the conversation lively and impactful.

So if you haven't yet, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and rate us. Or better yet, share it with your network to spread the insights we're uncovering. We always welcome your direct feedback. So at any time, feel free to DM me on LinkedIn with your thoughts or suggestions. As we dive into this new season, I'm incredibly excited about the valuable and thought provoking content we have in store.

So stay tuned for more episodes that will challenge your thinking, inspire new ideas, and help you navigate the complexities of decision making in the built environment today. Thanks for being part of this journey, and here's to an amazing season ahead. All right, that's it for today's episode. Thanks so much for joining us.

Please remember to subscribe, review, and of course, tune in next week as the season continues. Design Nerds Anonymous is a proud member of the SURROUND Podcast [00:33:00] Network. Special thanks to the production team, Hannah Viti, and Rachel Senatore, and Rob Schulte.