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Gaëlle Dechamp, Berangere Szostak

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***5<sup>th</sup> International conference on Design Principles and practices***

***IS DESIGN A SOLUTION FOR THE SMALL AND MEDIUM  
ENTERPRISES' FUTURE?  
THE "DESIGN CONCEPT" CONTEST***

Gaëlle DECHAMP-GOY, PhD

Saint-Etienne University, France

6, rue Basse des Rives, 42023 Saint-Etienne cedex 2 - France

gaille.dechamp@univ-st-etienne.fr

*and*

Bérangère SZOSTAK, PhD

Lyon University, France

ISH, 14-16, av. Berthelot, 69363 Lyon Cedex 07 - France

berangere.szostak@univ-lyon2.fr

**Summary:** This article develops the idea put forward by Washington and Ventresca (2004) that institutions can sustain an emergent strategy in a given field. Ordinarily considered as stable elements of that field, these institutions may be subject to change. This theoretical approach is the object of a case study set in the framework of a contest. Organized by the General Council of the Loire and aimed at SME located in its constituency, the contest

goal is to encourage innovation through design. By design, one must understand a creation produced by Man for industrial and commercial use. An emergent strategy is defined as new when situated within a defined context and a specific period of time.

An exploratory case study has been conducted in order to help understand how this integration works. It takes into account qualitative data such as the RFID patch project led by the DOING Company within the framework of “Design Concept” Contest. Based on the mechanisms formulated by Washington and Ventresca (2004), this analysis has been elaborated to illustrate how an emergent strategy can be successfully incorporated. Several empirical questions subsequently follow: “What are the characteristics that allow business managers settled in the Loire district to adopt a design strategy? Which fields of activity in the Loire area are the most inclined to be compatible with the design strategy? Which business projects are the most eligible for partnership with designers? How will the General Council choose the subjects for the contest in order to initiate change within institutions?”

**Key words:** Emergent strategy for innovation, design, Neo-Institutional Theories, case study.

**Introduction :** It is a known fact that the theoretical developments anchored in Neo-Institutional Theories highlight the importance of these institutions in order to understand the homogenization of forms within an organizational field. However, Desreumaux (2004) likes to remind us that, today, many questions remain unanswered regarding change in institutions<sup>1</sup> (Desreumaux and Hasfi 2006). The role of the actor is emphasized once again. On the other

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes initiated by an institution

hand, this questions the relationship the said actor has with referential rules and ideas (Beckert, 1999).

However, what happens if the actor is an institution setting rules and norms within the organizational field? In other words, if an agent is considered a source of stability in a given field, can he encourage the other organizational actors to change, more particularly to innovate, by incorporating an emergent strategy? Washington and Venstresca (2004), who focus their attention on visibility strategies, give a positive answer to this question in their article. According to these authors, “institutions” may be defined as “*those shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships*” (Barley and Tolbert 1997, p. 96).

The above research insists on the “positive effects” the institutions may have on how organizations change. This approach, however, may seem paradoxical when compared to the definition of these institutions. Scott (2001) explains that institutions form a framework, and it is within this framework that organizations generally carry out their action: Not only are they the sum of interactions between people and organizations, but they also serve as points of reference which help understand the actors’ and organizations’ actions.

However, Washington and Ventresca (2004) point out three mechanisms liable to provide institutional support for the organizational incorporation process within an emergent strategy: (1) the prevailing logic<sup>2</sup> of the organizational field<sup>3</sup> and its capacity to resolve ambiguities, (2) the nature of the characteristics that are liable to initiate a new strategy within the field and (3) competitiveness between the organizations in a given field. This research brings a new light on Neo-Institutional Theories. It therefore becomes interesting to study

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<sup>2</sup> A prevailing logic is a system that encompasses coherent and inter-related beliefs, norms, laws and values. (Scott, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> An organizational field is the totality of relevant actors implied in institutional realm (competitors, suppliers, consumers, regulation organizations....).

these institutions' approach by regarding the legitimization of emergent strategies as a source of change within this field.

According to Yin (1994), it is possible to illustrate this theory by studying the action carried out by the Loire General Council. Since 2007, the latter desires to encourage SMEs settled in its constituency to incorporate a strategy for innovation based on design. This action is thus in line with Washington and Ventresca's approach (2004) which puts forward the existence of rules and norms that validate innovation through design as an emergent strategy, viewing them as legitimate as the usual strategies often used by these generally sub-contracting companies. This action also implies new relationships between the field actors, and in this case, between SMEs and designers. What is the nature of the process initiated by the Loire General Council to encourage the incorporation of design? What relation is there with the three different mechanisms put forward by Washington and Ventresca (2004)? What other tracks are still to be explored?

After having explained how design can be considered an emergent strategy, the present article will put forward the case of the DOING Company<sup>4</sup> who, supported by the Loire General Council's initiative, successfully incorporated the design strategy. Because Washington and Ventresca 's studies (2004) are conducted at a mesoscopic scale, that is to say based on the interaction between organizations, our work studies the relationship between the following field actors: the DOING Company and the design agencies. This qualitative research will also allow us to share with co-workers our first comments on the theoretical and managerial implications of such an approach.

## **1. HOW THE LOIRE SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESSES VIEW DESIGN AS AN EMERGENT STRATEGY FOR INNOVATION.**

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<sup>4</sup> A research is currently being conducted on the Loire General Council's initiative (the initiative in question is described further in the article) and concerns several companies. The above article has chosen to focus on one of them.

The aim of the first part of this paper is to clarify the premise of our research which upholds the idea that “the incorporation of design within the strategy of the Loire small and medium businesses qualifies as an emergent strategy for innovation”.

### **1.1 DEFINING THE CONCEPTS OF “DESIGN” AND “EMERGENT STRATEGY”**

Instead of a unique definition for “design”; we prefer to proceed by presenting “touchstones” in order cover the wide range of designations peculiar to each designer. Design is above all a “state of mind” (Brun, 1995). According to the latter, this implies “*considering the elements of design not as an accumulation, but as an entirety. By considering design in this way, it is possible to portray the goals of enterprises as a whole. This is achievable because it allows the interpretation of factors of all kinds from technical and semiological*” (Brun 1995).

These considerations find an echo in the etymological definition of the word design: it comes from the Latin word “designare” which leads to the words “designer” (to intend) and “dessiner” (to draw) in French. Therefore, for many specialists, the concept of design has a double objective: i) a design in that it implies an intention, a process; ii) a drawing in that it gives life to a project through a sketch, a pattern, i.e. a visual creation. In this article, design is consequently referred to as an activity of creation produced by Man for industrial and commercial use.

When using the term “emergent strategy”, we refer to Washington and Ventresca’s (2004) approach. They use the concept of institutional support to highlight how the mechanisms mentioned in the introduction (1) create conditions favorable to change and (2)

define the elements eligible to be incorporated. In their attempt to illustrate the concept of “emergent strategy”, Washington and Ventresca’s (2004) article develops arguments similar to Straw and Epstein’s (2000) work. Moreover, they point out that their work enhances general research on the emerging sociology of strategy<sup>5</sup>. Their aim is to use neo-institutional theories to explore how “new” strategies, also referred to as “emergent” strategies, become relevant typified solutions easy to relay on a wide scale because recognized as such. As a result, a strategy is qualified as emergent when applied to a particular context featuring characteristics that enable to distinguish between what is “normal” and what is “new”.

Furthermore, the concept of “emergent strategy” can only apply to a given situation: the initial context appropriately demonstrates how the incorporation of a strategy is innovative. In addition, we are led to adopt an open-minded approach to the definition of organizational strategy. In order to qualify design as an emergent strategy for innovation for the small and medium businesses of the Loire, we must define their current strategic situation.

## **1.2 – DESIGN: AN EMERGENT STRATEGY FOR INNOVATION FOR THE SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESSES OF THE LOIRE.**

According to a recent study carried out by the local Chamber of Commerce, only 18% of small and medium businesses settled in the Loire use design. According to the General Council, the fact that this figure is largely below the nation’s average may be explained by the important amount of sub-contractors.

The economic context of this district has been shaped by important historical events: in the 60’s, prosperity emanated from industries linked to coal, clothing, metalworking and weaponry. The result was the creation of many competitive enterprises, albeit sub-contractors to principal firms, such as ManuFrance, GIAT France and Creusot-Loire. However, industrial

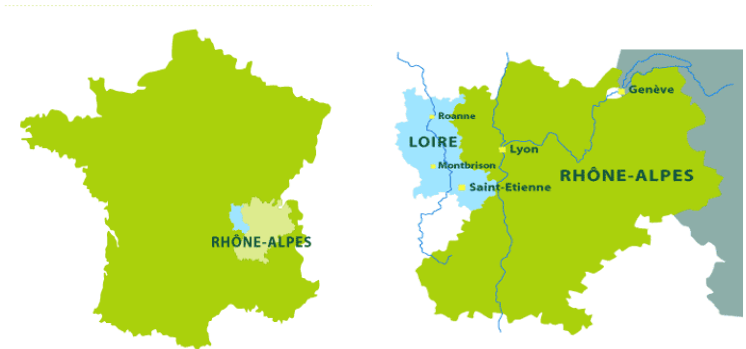
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<sup>5</sup> Cf text p.93

restructuring led to the gradual disappearance of these firms who were the Loire small and medium businesses' principal clients. Although 60 000 jobs were lost, the present economy may still be described as harboring enterprises as competitive as ever. However, a large majority of them are sub-contractors.

Today, institutions such as the General Council, the Chamber of Commerce and the Agency for Development all come to the same conclusion: very few SMEs in the Loire are liable to become principal firms. Hardly any possess departments dedicated to research, development and design. In this context, design may therefore be viewed as an emergent strategy for innovation in that it is of small importance, if of any importance at all, to a majority of the Loire's small and medium businesses.

**Diagram 1 - Department of Loire in France and in Rhône-Alpes (4773 square kilometers, 73000 habitants)**



However, this pessimistic assessment may be tempered when considering the nature of the Loire small and medium businesses' environmental strategies. Multiple networks link these companies together (Szostak, 2007). The networks in question are viewed as institutions by those at the source of these geographical groupings. As a result, the "clusters" organize the Loire enterprises into groups according to industrial sectors such as the mechanical, medical



or digital industries. They are specified as Local Productive Systems (SPL)<sup>6</sup> and include the following entities: Mécaloire, Pôles des Technologies Médicales (PTM), Inter Forêt Bois 42, Loire Numérique<sup>7</sup>. The Loire General Council financially supports their actions in favor of the local economic fabric. In this way, the Loire General Council will encourage the incorporation of the design strategy qualified as emergent because it is considered innovative in this particular context (see the *infra* case study).

## **2. HOW THE DOING COMPANY INCORPORATED DESIGN AS A STRATEGY FOR INNOVATION**

This research is based on a qualitative approach. Given its exploratory nature, it is also based on a case study. The study of a case that has the characteristic of being unique allows one to better understand a particular question (Hadly-Rispal, 2000), and is perfectly justified when particularly critical, revealing or extreme (Yin, 1994). Furthermore, design as a new rule favoring innovation and the creation of new relationships between field actors (sub-contracting companies; design agencies) reveal an unprecedented situation that requires the exploration, rather than the exploitation, of data. For this reason, we have opted for a case study so as to better detail and understand this unmatched situation.

The DOING case study therefore aims at deepening the impact of new rules and relationships between actors who make it possible for design to be incorporated as a strategy for innovation. The department of Innovation and Economic Competitiveness of the Loire General Council is well aware of the growing importance of design in revitalizing the Loire district. As a result, it invited companies belonging to 5 regional clusters to take part in a contest in which they would collaborate on an innovative project with designers.

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<sup>6</sup> “*Système Productif Local*”

<sup>7</sup> Loire numerique’s website features a good illustration: <http://www.loire-numerique.com>

## **2.1 THE DESIGN CONCEPT CONTEST OR THE MATERIALIZATION OF THE INSTITUTION**

Underlying this case study is a contest named “Design Concept” whose principal initiator is the Loire General Council. The latter noted that although innovation has an intrinsic influence on a company’s strategy, implementation is less effective where resources are limited. Such is the case for many small and medium businesses located in the Loire. Consequently, various policies helped them innovate. These policies are based on the principle according to which the dynamics of companies and territories interact with actors within a delimited geographical area. As mentioned above, the actions carried out within clusters answer to the same logic.

The General Council (in cooperation with partners) consequently decided to launch a program entitled “Innovation and Competitiveness” aimed at developing an “innovating territory”. It decided to organize projects around transversal themes such as the digital field, design and economic intelligence. At the source of this method was the intention to gather companies, researchers and stable structures around these themes in order to introduce business managers to innovating practices. The project on design was the first to be launched under the banner of the “Design Concept” contest.

After having drafted a first selection of the most innovating projects<sup>8</sup>, the guild in charge of the contest settled on 5 of them: all in all, 15 companies, grouped into aggregations, were to work with 3 to 5 design agencies each, the work specifically related to design being directly financed by the General Council. Each aggregation is associated with a territorial cluster: Loire Numérique, Mécaloire, Pôle Optique Rhône-Alpes, Club ERF (Entreprendre en

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<sup>8</sup> The projects selected were those that featured an important collective dimension and were the most likely to develop into a specific product.



potential influence of institutions on the development of innovation and the importance of design in this process. Our choice is based not only on the success met by the project, but also on the fact that the company in question succeeded in appropriating both the new rules of “design” and the new partnership with the design agencies. We believe that major ideas will stem from the study of this case and allow one to understand how an institution is responsible for its success. Directed by the DOING Company, the case in question consists of a RFID prepaid card with access to various services offered by the city of Saint-Etienne (see methodology below).

#### **Methodology for the analysis of the “RFID project”**

This qualitative study is based on three kinds of material. The General Council forwarded all the data it possessed concerning the contest in general. It also sent us information related to the work undertaken by the aggregation of enterprises concerned by the project. The above structure (the innovation department) also transmitted its personal analysis of the project during two meetings between researchers working on the assignment. Furthermore, we attended the selections that took place in May and July. Finally, we carried out semi-directive interviews with the six people concerned by the project for an overall of 6H25.

- The DOING company: M-V Gellet (1h20) and Laurence Cote (1h)
- Loire Numérique: S. Nait-Idir (1h)
- Designers’ Guild : X. Charquet & E. Lair (1h45) and A. Paquelet (1h20)

The interview guide was adapted to each interviewee (whether enterprises, institutions or designers. However, the main themes remained the same: (1) Presentation of the person and the organization he/she belongs to, (2) His/her idea of innovation/design, (3) Description of the project (how the project is viewed, description of the encounters between actors, how the project unfolded, personal opinions on the conclusion/benefits/limits of their work).

Each interview was entirely recorded. The themes chosen for analysis were: (1) Description of the initial situation: the actors the sector, (2) Defining the actors’ roles, launching the project, (3) The meetings organized around the monitoring of the project, how the actors

communicated throughout the project, (4) The results, whether or not design was successfully adopted as a new rule, whether or not new partnerships with design agencies were successfully established. The validity of the analytical scale is being tested on the study of 4 other projects currently in process.

## **2.2. CASE STUDY: THE LOIRE NUMERIQUE PROJECT ENTITLED RFID AND CONDUCTED BY THE DOING COMPANY.**

Loire Numérique (LN) is an association grouping companies specialized in the digital, computing (IT) and communication fields. LN's role is to federate the skills of its 120 current members and assign these particular competences to major projects.

DOING has existed since 1992 and was created by G. Moulet, an analyst-programmer. The growing importance of the Internet is at the source of the company's rapid expansion in the late 90's, until the beginning of 2000. However, the founder didn't feel capable of continuing the venture: "no, managing a company is really not my cup of tea, I prefer to resign". This crisis could have triggered the company's downfall. But the determination of a certain amount of employees who refused to let go. As a result, M-V Gellet became manager and decided to search for another shareholder in order to wipe out the company's debt and gain stability. In 2001 the arrival of a new shareholder, Neyrial, involved strategic changes. This consisted in the suppression of a SBU<sup>10</sup>: retailing was to be exclusively assigned to Neyrial, whereas DOING was to remain in charge of programming and development. The company currently

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<sup>10</sup> Strategic Business Unit

employs eight people and is specialized in the creation of data bases in association with a variety of websites. DOING's competencies serve a strategy of differentiation in that the company proposes tailored websites with special specifications.

The company wanted to create a multiservice "city card" which would apply to public transport or parking and decided, in October 2007, to submit the project, in association with Loire Numérique, to the jury of the "Innovating Ideas and Design Concept" contest. Until then, the incorporation of design as an instrument of innovation had not yet occurred<sup>11</sup>. They therefore seized the opportunity to test design: DOING views design as new way to espouse a strategy of innovation.

Laurence Cote, in charge of the development of Fidelium, recounts: "*In October 2007, we submitted to the jury our multiservice card project and it was chosen. This enabled us to work on the project with people from a different professional circle than ours, and with a point of view centered on design.*" The question here was to rely on the interaction of complementary competences to initiate the project. In May 2008, DOING presented the progression of its project (the name had been changed to TWIZY) to the Jury who decided it would stand amongst the finalists.

Those in charge of the project chose to work with two design agencies specialized in graphics: KALK and Mademoiselle E. They also contacted a product design agency: Paquelet Design. Originally, DOING was thinking of working on the material for the card and whether that material should be recyclable or not. "How can one optimize a smart card by making it original and practical?" Thus was the challenge the designers, with a strategy of innovation in mind, were to respond to.

The three principal project managers for DOING were: the company director, the person in charge of trade development (L. Cote) and the technical director. The Economic

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that DOING had previously employed a graphic designer to work on the presentation of the software related to the Fidelium-Net card

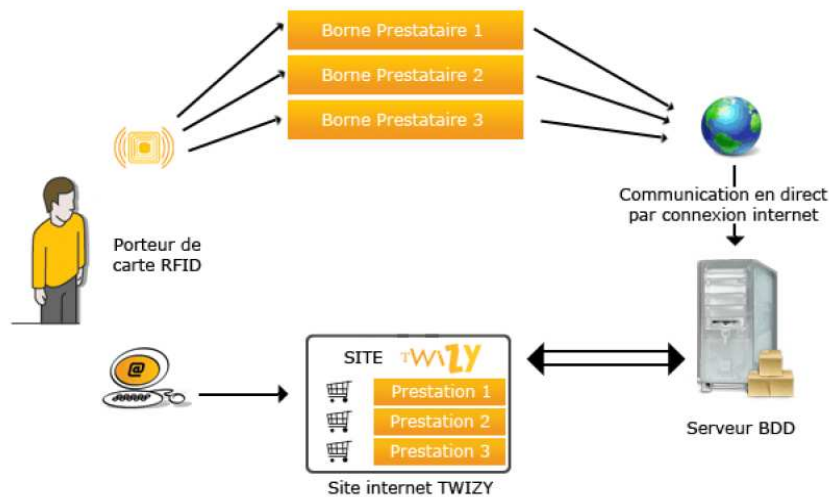
Intelligence representative for LN (S. Naït Idir) also closely followed the project as SPL correspondent. In this way, the institutions all collaborated in an effort to give design as much legitimacy as the other strategies of innovation used by DOING (mainly technical).

The collaboration with the designers lasted for four months. Each gathering provided the opportunity for project actors to share with each other their findings or ideas according to their specializations: technical feasibility research was assigned to DOING, adaptability research relating to the conception and utilization of the product was assigned to the designers who are collaborated partners on the project. The latter came up with a truly original idea which consisted in “dematerializing” the product by turning into a patch: small, original, and capable of sticking to various objects. One of the designers explains that: “It was necessary to create this product, but why materialize it into another object?” This is how the concept was born: a patch that could be placed onto a personal device, a telephone, a bracelet... It resembles a stamp that just needs to be “repackaged”.

DOING explains: “The only difficulty we experienced was adapting how we visualized the final product, to the solution the designers finally proposed. This meant that we had to accept a different point of view and the possibility of adapting it despite our technical constraints. However, we can’t really say we encountered real “difficulties”.

According to DOING, the project resulted in 4 proposals:

- 1) A scenario centered on communication and the use of TWIZY on a daily basis
- 2) The idea of a “repositionable patch” that can be incorporated into the object of one’s choice.
- 3) The graphic conception destined to enhance and present the product.
- 4) A generic designation easy to memorize (“*tout ici*” or too easy).



**Diagram 3: A depiction of the TWIZY project (in French)**

[translation : RFID card holder / Direct communication via an internet connection / TWIZY website /Database server]

The project is regarded successful at various levels. At an industrial level, the project enabled DOING to incorporate design and therefore enhance the value of its product thanks to two features: its “dematerialized” packaging and its name (TWIZY). DOING emphasizes the fact that the project would not have reached such a high standard if it hadn’t been for the designers, further admitting “we should have done this earlier”. As for Loire Numérique, the project provided the opportunity to gather various enterprises specialized in digital technology around a common venture in collaboration with designers. In doing so, Loire Numérique fully met the General Council’s requirements.

The designers also viewed the project as successful, praising the protagonists for their open-mindedness and their simplicity. They appreciated the fact that they were listened to, that their ideas were selected and that they were given a role in the industrial procedure: “we had the satisfaction of feeling part of a whole”. The designers’ main satisfaction was to know that DOING had chosen their concept, therefore enabling them to become an example for other firms who can learn from their experience in incorporating design as a legitimate



strategy. Until the “Design Concept” contest, this kind of relationship had not existed. As a result, a new agreement was settled between them, enacting the first step towards the institutionalization of their relationship {small and medium sub-contractors; design agencies}.

DOING team assert that “What we find interesting in the process of incorporating design is that we were able to examine our project under various angles. Because this approach is more creative, we were able to give a concrete expression to the product. This is all the more true with TWIZY because we had to deal with a virtual “no contact” product: there was an even stronger need to visualize it in spite of the nature of the concept. Being the manufacturer, our technical visualization is perhaps a little too close to the subject. The design approached allows us to be a little more detached and therefore reach a more “presentable” result; like a jewel case that adds value. If we were to compare our product to a car, we could say that the designers provided TWIZY’s body. How could we possibly do without them?”

Today, poor on resources, DOING depends on subsidies (the Loire General Council, OSEO...) for the creation of a prototype of TWIZY (still being discussed end of 2009) in order to test its functionality and commercialize it. In 2010 the company continues to collaborate with the design agencies.

### **2.3 ANALYSING THE CASE STUDY AND DEFINING RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

In this last section, we suggest areas for further exploration. The General Council used the contest to encourage SMEs to incorporate design into the process of innovation. It also wanted to help them understand the subject by referring to major structures from different organizational fields. In the DOING case study the objectives seem to have been reached for the most part: the interviews reveal that the DOING and Loire Numérique protagonists have successfully established a link between design, creativity and innovation. As a result, they no

more associate design with products found in magazines. They now understand that design transcends the object itself, implying that companies adopt a more wide-ranging approach to innovation. “Design is a combination between business and pleasure, with Man in the middle” (manager of Doing); according to DOING personnel, it has become easier for them to consider design agencies as a typical actor in the innovation process. This category of actors is now in a stable relationship with the DOING Company recommending them, when necessary, to the other firms belonging to the same cluster.

Furthermore, the relationships that grew between the firms and design agencies during the contest still exist at the present time. The recent contacts we had with DOING indicate that they intend initiating other projects with the “design agency” actor.

This success finds an explanation in the three mechanisms put forward by Washington and Ventresca (2004) and mentioned in the introduction. In our case study, the logic of innovation applied to the digital sector may be defined, above all, as a “technical conception”. If design is integrated in the process, it is only to “dress” the product. However, trying to stay in line with this logic, DOING had trouble finding a solution that would make its multiservice card truly competitive: the prevailing logic was a shortcoming. This context encouraged institutional support for the integration of design as an emergent strategy for innovation. Indeed, the integration of the designers at the outset of the project resulted in a creative, innovative and competitive solution.

Beside the fact that the project success is clearly illustrated by the theoretical approach, we instinctively believe that this case underlines what is at stake when a SME integrates design in a strategic attempt to innovate: created and implemented by stable structures (General Council, Loire Numérique), the Design Concept contest created a partnership between DOING and other professionals that wouldn't have existed otherwise. The designers helped the company discover new perspectives. *In fine*, these perspectives are

essential: today, DOING not only owns an innovative product (a card that isn't really a card!) but it has also succeeded in integrating design as a full-fledged strategy for innovation.

To be more precise, the analysis of this case reveals the factors that boosted the successful integration of design within small and medium businesses. Concerning TWIZY, the designers explain that the principal reason for success was “the capacity of each actor to communicate and work together on a clearly defined idea”. Although this sentence corroborates several of our observations, it needs to be validated by other case studies.

First of all, it seems that the integration of design within a business is possible only if the actors possess (or successfully define) a common language. In DOING's case, the manager had studied arts and communication in college and this background obviously helped the actors to understand each other. She even explains how she served as an “interpreter” to the engineers and technicians of her company and adds that, without her help, they wouldn't have been able to work directly with the designers. In the same line of thought, we have the intuition that belonging to the same social network also encourages the integration of an emergent strategy. This is corroborated by the fact that one of the project designers was also a member of Loire Numérique, thus establishing from the outset a confidence-building atmosphere.

As a conclusion to the findings of this case study, one has to keep in mind that the objectives of the General Council were to encourage SME with specific qualifications to innovate through the integration of design. This structure relies on mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in order to typify the “renegade” behavior of certain businesses and establish it as a new norm in the field (Kondra and Hinig, 1998).

## **CONCLUSION**

The functions of small and medium businesses and the theme of organizational change are major issues of management science. In their article, Washington and Ventresca (2004) claim that an institution, on the contrary, can sometimes encourage change and even sustain the integration of an emergent strategy. To illustrate this hypothesis, our paper analyses the existing case of an institutional initiative (the “Design Concept” contest) that aims to legitimize the emergence of innovation based on design within organizations.

Finally, there are two other possible prospects of research we would like to explore: 1) because certain factors are known to encourage the legitimization of design, it is pertinent to ask oneself *whether any business manager can integrate an emergent strategy via design, and whether there are industrial fields, if any, that are more or less liable to use design to innovate*. The resulting observations would serve to reveal the extent to which institutional efforts to introduce changes in a given field are successful. 2) The second observation relating to the analysis of the DOING case highlights the necessity to provide designers with the opportunity to provide a platform for their creative skills. The latter’s function is to propose creative and original ideas –in the end, the firm can decide to choose the ones it wants to keep. If the specifications are too restrictive, creativity is less free to express itself (Michlewski, 2008). The aim of this reflection is to funnel institutional actions, as early as possible, on design projects where co-construction is more feasible. Thus, the following research prospect becomes conceivable: *Which business projects are the most receptive to an innovation effort to co-construct with designers?*

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