Empathic Design

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Managing Innovation

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This is an approach to design which builds on the fact that sometimes people don't know clearly what they need or want. Drawing on techniques from ethnography it studies how people behave in the context in which the product under question is being used. For example, studying how shoppers actually explore the design and feel of a walking boot which they are planning to buy. Video film of such activity suggests that what they often feel for is the comfort of the tongue underneath the laces; their thought process is around imagining how comfortable this will feel after a hard day's walking and whether or not they might get blisters from wearing it.

The relevant information comes from indirect cues drawn from the context; video observation is a powerful tool in this context. ED forms part of a suite of design methods which can contribute to improved understanding of user needs.

Typically there are five key steps in empathic design:

1. Observation
2. Capturing Data
3. Reflection and Analysis
4. Brainstorming for solutions
5. Developing prototypes of possible solutions

Prototypes, simulation and role-playing are other forms of learning processes, typically used to gather customer feedback to designs that have been developed based on empathic design.

The design business IDEO builds much of its working methodology on this user experience work and acknowledges the importance of ethnographic methods like ED.