

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE ON

How to **Succeed** with Your Remote Design Team



The decision to hire a remote design team, especially when you are accustomed to managing people in-person, can cause a number of doubts, worries, and challenges you haven't faced before. It's essential, therefore, to get prepared and have a clear understanding of how to organize all work processes so that you and your designers can maintain a high level of efficiency even when you aren't all under the same roof.

At Eleken, we've been working with our clients remotely since the very beginning, that is since 2015. And in this book, we want to share our approach to handling remote design projects we've formed based on our 7 years of experience. In 6 chapters, we will present useful insights, practical tips, best practices, and all the information you may need to onboard, manage, communicate and, finally, succeed with your remote UI/UX design team.

Who is this book for?

If you are interested in cooperating with a remote design team or you are just about to start working in a remote environment and need to clear off last doubts, this book will provide you with all the details about the role of a UI/UX designer in your project, your role as a leader, possible ways of organizing communication, and more useful information that you can apply to promote successful delivery of effective design solution together with the remote design team.

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Should you be working remotely at all?



Hiring remote employees for design, development, marketing, or any other purpose, is a trend that's been highly accelerated over the last two years since COVID-19 came into our lives. In fact, it wasn't something completely new for our society. The tendency of hiring remote specialists was already here. GitLab, Invision, Buffer, Hubstaff are only some examples that prove you can be super successful while working fully remotely.

Dozens of tech companies already offer flexible work models.

Just to illustrate the point:

- Jack Dorsey, the dual CEO of both Twitter and Square, said his employees can continue working remotely forever.
- Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook people may also work from home.
- Ford has recently approved a work-office “hybrid” model for its 30,000 employees.



Sounds like a remote work revolution, and cloud technologies are in the vanguard.

After all, we at Eleken have been providing UI/UX design services to our customers remotely since day one. And from our experience, we can say that remote work gives us a possibility to attract great design specialists from different places so that we can share their talents with our clients.

On the other hand, there are a lot of challenges that a remote environment brings to employers, like onboarding, performance management, employee discipline, communication, and so on.

And here comes the question from you: *Should I be working remotely at all?*

Yes! Here's why.



In fact, both employers and employees love their new remote reality. Most people who have tasted the freedom of working from home want to keep a flexible schedule forever. Saying this on behalf of 90% of Eleken's team. **There are certainly several facts that prove telework is worth giving a try.**

- **Access to a global talent pool.** Posting a job offer in your local area only makes you limited in choice, while going nationally, beyond your location, or even time zone opens up a lot more options.
- **It's easier to retain workers.** Remote work prevents you from losing great specialists because, for example, they have to move to another city for family reasons.
- **Focus more on your team's real performance.** Being in the office often makes employers measure employees' performance based on how much time they've spent in the office chairs. Remote work will make you look at what was really done by your team rather than thinking they spend too much time for a water cooler chat.

- **Cut overhead costs.** For you as an employer, it would be much easier to focus on the project's progress when you don't have to worry about physical space requirements, buying new office equipment, paying electricity bills, and so on.
- **Increased productivity.** With the opportunity to work from home your workers get rid of getting up unnaturally early, they don't stress out while getting to the office every day, and they have the possibility to adjust their work schedule. It all promotes higher productivity.



To sum up this chapter, in the long run, **you should decide whether to work remotely or not based on your specific case, your needs, and available resources.** This book is here not to convince you that teleworking is the only cure to all your problems. Our main purpose is to explain over the next several chapters what you can do to make your experience with remote designers efficient, pleasant, and successful.

How to onboard a remote team



No matter how skilled and experienced the UI/UX designer is, they can't jump into your project and start creating mockups right away without any prior knowledge or preparations. Therefore, it's essential to take a deep breath and get ready to onboard your designers.



Remember, the more time you dedicate to onboarding in the first few weeks, the more value the employee will bring to the company later.

How we distribute designers among projects

First of all, it's important to mention that at Eleken we also have an established onboarding process for newcomers that lasts 2-3 months and doesn't get affected by the absence of the office kitchen (ok, maybe a little). During this time, newcomers have to make a concept from scratch: they choose an idea and go all the way from user flow through wireframes to visuals and animations, and finish with Dribbble shots.

Additionally, during the onboarding period, each of our designers is supervised and mentored by Eleken's design lead who pays special attention to the newcomer's strengths and weaknesses to be able to properly distribute designers among projects in the future.

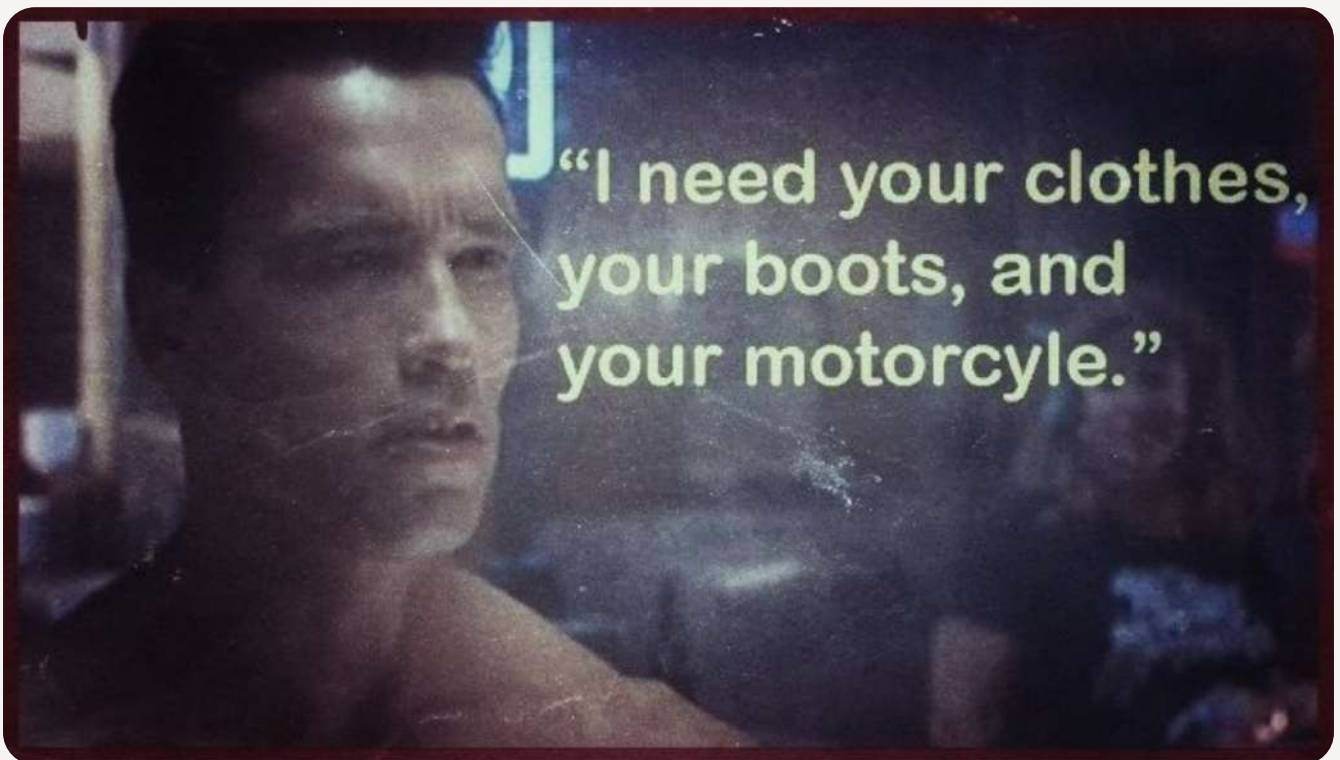
This way Eleken's UI/UX designers receive all the needed knowledge to cope with a variety of design challenges, and we ensure that our clients will get a highly qualified specialist with a proper skill set for their specific project.

Key takeouts:

- With the help of a complex and thorough onboarding process, we make sure that each designer at Eleken is ready to work on real projects and has all the necessary skills to create designs for products at different life cycle stages.
- We distribute designers among projects, taking into account your specific case and the designers' personal strengths and talents.
- In case you have any comments regarding the work of the designer, you can contact the account manager anytime to discuss the issue and find a proper solution.

The information a designer needs from you at the beginning of cooperation

This section could be as short as the next sentence: *Give designers access to as much information as possible.* Still, we are here to be much more helpful, that's why below you will find three essential steps to start designers' onboarding with.



Step 1. One-on-one conversation

It's best to start the onboarding process with a one-on-one conversation with the designer. The clearer you can communicate your needs and product vision, the quicker they will be able to deliver a suitable final result.

What is essential to tell the designer during the first conversation?

- **How it all started** (Why do you want to create this product? What is its main purpose?)
- **The current state of the project** (Do you have an idea/concept/prototype/test version/existing product that you want to refine? What features the product is supposed to have/already possess?)
- **Your plans** (What do you want to achieve with design in the medium term?)
- **Your expectations from the designer/s** (What kind of help/assistance do you expect to receive from designers?)
- **To begin with** (What is the first thing you want the designer to do for you? (UX audit, design of a certain screen, redesign of certain already-existing screens, and so on))

For sure, it's an ideal scenario when you come to a designer and clearly know the answers to all the above questions — it just saves your time. But it's okay not to be super detailed for some points. Most importantly, bring a vision, then let the designer figure out the details. Try to give comprehensive answers to all the questions the designer will ask, even if answers seem obvious to you.

Step 2: Communication with other team members

You are definitely not the only person who takes part in the product development process. To better understand the essence of the product, and therefore to be able to create effective designs, it's vital for the designer to get acquainted with each team member.

- Tell the designer what people work on the project and explain their roles.
- Share the list of all specialists with their emails/ Slack profiles and tell your new employee how/when they can contact them.
- Make sure the designer gets an appointment with the representative from each department (stakeholders, other designers, developers, marketers, customer service, and the like)

Step 3: Additional materials that will be useful for your designer from the first days of work

The next point in the onboarding process will be sharing all files, documents, and the like related to the project with the designer.

Don't forget about:

- Access to profiles and team workspaces on different apps
- Content, images, copy texts
- Figma/Sketch files with wireframes/existing design/sketches, and so on
- Data on user feedback
- Records of user interviews
- Access to HotJar, Pendo, or Google Analytics
- User journey maps
- Moodboards
- Company's brandbook

P.S. After you share all the materials, give your new team member a couple of days to get acquainted with all this data.



Don't worry if you don't use HotJar, don't have a brandbook, or anything else from the list. Designers can live without those. The only thing you should understand is that **the number of materials/info your designer receives influences the duration of the design process.**

Let's prove it with two real cases from Ihor's, Eleken UI/UX designer, experience.

- **Case 1. "A perfect onboarding"**

"It was a project with absolutely beautiful onboarding. After the first interview with the customer, we had 2 weeks to talk to people from different departments: sales, support, developers, C-levels, and so on. Everyone told us about the part of the product that is closest to them.

As a result, we gathered a lot of valuable information, got a clear understanding of what we were working with, and were able to work on design without the need for continuous feedback and clarifications. We probably knew more about the product than any single person from the team. And if we needed some help, it was always clear who to address with questions. We managed to cope with the whole scope of work in three months, and the client decided to prolong our cooperation. They have been with us for over a year now."

- **Case 2. “No onboarding”**

“On the second project, there was no proper onboarding, I can even say there was none. I had an opportunity to ask a couple of questions related to the product interface, but it wasn’t enough to fully understand the product’s purpose, client’s expectations, stakeholders’ goals, and the like.

In addition, I had to create designs from scratch. That is, there wasn’t the current version of the product that I could use as a reference or some scratches. The concept and the product requirements existed only in the heads of managers. Moreover, each manager had their own product vision which was not aligned.

After a couple of months together, I couldn’t understand what technical limitations I work with, for whom I do the design, and who is responsible for the project success.

It got to the point that the already approved design was sent to the trash bin because someone forgot to say that we can't implement it technically. From my side, I couldn’t improve the situation, because I didn’t have access to the required information. The project that had to last 6 months, lasted 3 months and was then suspended.”

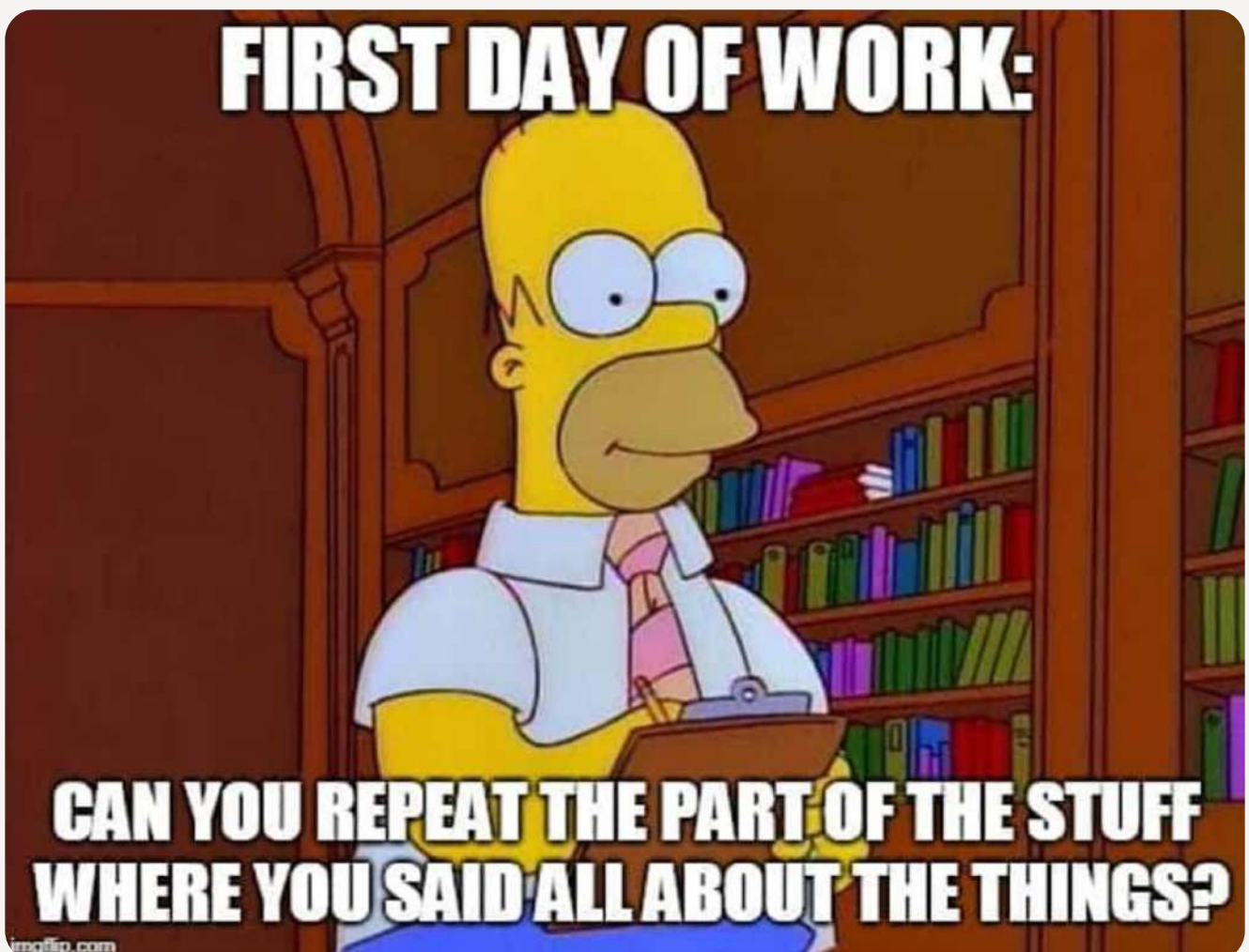
The moral of the story is that onboarding is a must and during it, your initiative as a client is very important: make sure you have a clear product vision, you know the purpose of the product, and are ready to communicate with the designer on a regular basis. A couple of weeks spent investigating the product’s essence, client’s expectations, technical requirements in detail can later save many valuable resources.

Tips for smooth onboarding

- Schedule regular Q&A and checkups

You should not only be ready for tons of questions from a new designer or even more, but you should also dedicate some time to asking these questions, apart from answering all the ongoing ones. The calls don't need to be long, often 15 minutes will do. Having regular short calls also helps newcomers not feel abandoned in all the mass of new info that they need to process.

Asking many questions does not mean that the designer doesn't know well enough how to do their work. Even when you hire a seasoned professional, there's still so much that they need to know about your product that only you know.



- **Give access to all the info designers need (and more)**

There's nothing new about the fact that you have to give access to profiles and team workspaces on different apps. Yet, there is a common problem when product managers only provide the most basic information about the product.

Here is an example. So many teams use Slack for internal messaging. The functionality of the app is the same, but the ways people communicate on it are endless. Some teams would spam group chats with memes, while others prefer personal messages and avoid emojis (by the way, Eleken designers believe that the use of emojis in Slack is a key to establishing good communication with new team members).

Even though most of these differences are unspoken, I'm sure there are a few rules of your internal communication manners that you can explain to the newcomer to help them avoid awkward situations. It can be talked through during a call, but if you notice that there are quite some rules in your company, consider writing them down in your onboarding guide.

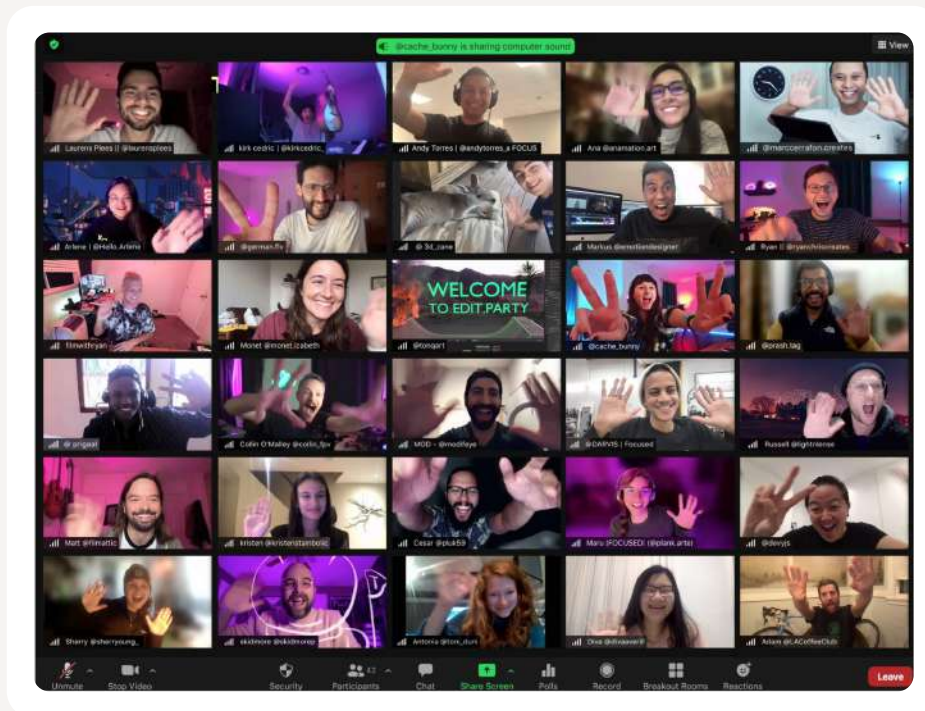
- **Do not limit communication to one person**

Product managers or senior designers are likely to be the ones who do the most of the onboarding work. Dedicating lots of time to questions and checkups doesn't mean that newbies shouldn't ask questions to other colleagues.

Give your newcomers tips on who they can refer to with different questions: developers, marketing director, HR manager, and so on. This way a designer would get to know more team members and avoid feeling awkward bombarding you with questions all the time.

- **Foster personal communication between team members**

This is one of the trickiest things about integrating remote employees into the company. If you have ever been to a corporate online party, you probably know they suck. Well, at least 95% of them.



I do envy people who can have fun at these parties. Image credit: Cache Bunny

So how do you compensate for the lack of office kitchen chit-chats? They seemed so pointless before, but turned out to be a missing link between team members when the world has shifted to remote work. For new employees, it was a natural addition to the onboarding process — informal, yet very helpful.

To make up for that, you have to get creative. Depending on the kind of relations you have between the team members, the solution can be different. For example, “donut” meetings. All the people have to be matched into couples randomly. Each couple has to schedule a video call where they can talk informally about anything (better not work-related). That way workers get to know people from the company that they may not have been in contact with otherwise.

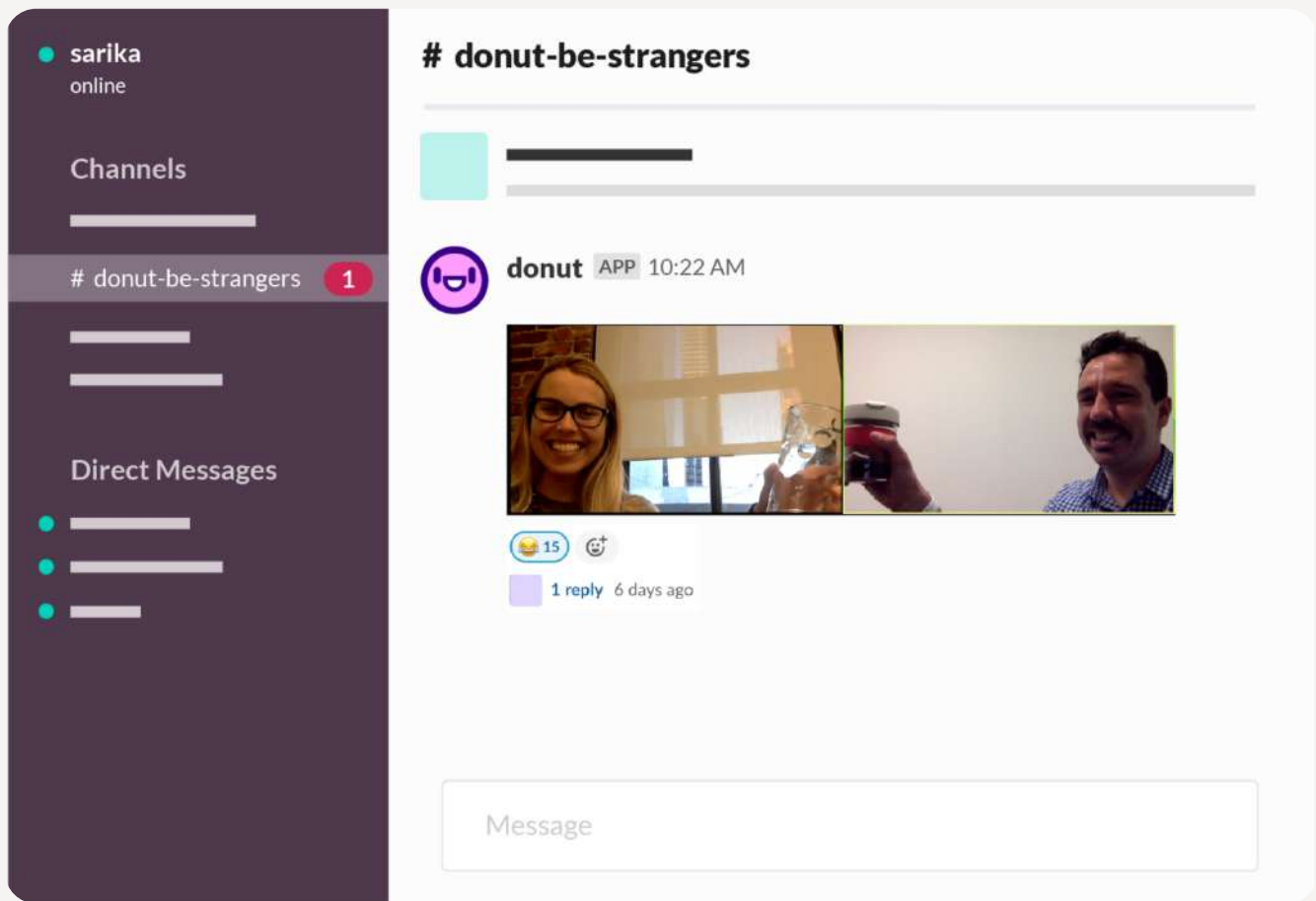


Image credit: donut.com

- **Don't stop after the first days or weeks**

After the discovery onboarding phase, a designer is ready to work on actual tasks. That is when many product managers exhale and let designers to themselves. Here is an argument that can make you inhale again.

We know that the beginning of work is not the most productive period for most people. However, a thorough onboarding can improve that. The more inputs a product manager gives, the more efficient the work of a designer will be. The newcomer may spend lots of time doing research when they could get the same info from a manager in a few minutes. That is why explaining the product roadmap, existing user flow, and technical tasks for future designs is so important.

Key takeouts

Onboarding new designers shouldn't be a problem, all in all, the rules of onboarding remote designers can be written in a few words:

- Have some time and patience for answering all the questions
- Give access to as much information as possible
- Make sure that designers communicate not only with the product manager or senior designer, but with other team members as well

Getting the work done

When co-located, the crucial moments of the design process emerge organically. This can be as simple as sharing a new idea in an elevator or discussing user personas over lunch.



The shift to remote work inevitably reveals some holes in your workflow that you need to fix to make everything work smoothly.

This chapter is dedicated to remote management and coping with its main challenges.

Our role as designers in your project and your role as a manager

Hiring a UI/UX specialist at Eleken is like hiring an in-house designer but working remotely. That is, we come to your company as a part of your team and are ready to follow your internal rules. So globally, you should manage Eleken's designer the same as your other team members.

And to manage the employee efficiently, you should know what their duties are.

Who we are



We are product designers. A product designer is a full-stack designer responsible for owning all aspects of product design including product ideation, building a design system, and UI/UX details.

Product designers identify product problems with the help of analytics and research, develop effective solutions through prototyping, and implement changes taking into account the product's business strategy. For these purposes, they combine the roles of a number of professions like UX designer, graphic designer, researcher, analyst, prototyper, marketer, and business strategist.

Product designers cooperate closely with developers, marketers, and other designers to understand, envision, and influence products and their strategy and, as a result, create a market impact.

To sum up, on your project we have the following duties:

- Explore concepts, narrow to the best solution
- Create beautiful, simple, and intuitive experiences, defining the needs of the customers
- Create user flows, sketches, wireframes, and prototypes
- Conduct usability testing and UX research
- Identify and troubleshoot UX problems based on qualitative data and feedback
- Cooperate with other designers, researchers, product managers, engineering, and customers to define both the long-term strategy and the short-term tactics to design simple and elegant products

Who we are not

Though Eleken's product designers are multi-tasking specialists, there are things we can't help you with.

- **We are not developers.**

We don't write code and can't implement the design we create into a full-fledged product.

- **We are not marketers.**

We can't make the website that sells with the design only, such tasks usually require the involvement of marketers, SEO specialists, and so on.

- **We are not content writers.**

We don't write texts, make images, and such for your business.

Your role as a manager of a designer/s



You as a manager, first of all, **should understand what you want to receive in the end**, and what has to be done to achieve this result.

If you have a clear understanding of what tasks the designer has to do, then you can expect the highest level of efficiency. Of course, we don't mean micromanagement here, it's more about global things like giving the right direction to the designer. Later you will be able to iterate on each specific piece of design, until you get to the satisfying solution.

Manager's tasks are:

- Set the scope of work, give all the needed specifications about design tasks
- Review designs and provide timely feedback, and based on it approve or make adjustments to the designs
- Make sure the designs are produced with appropriate quality, on time, and are possible to implement by the developers
- Ensure the designer has all the necessary materials and contacts to work effectively
- Align a design process with business objectives

Managing remote design work

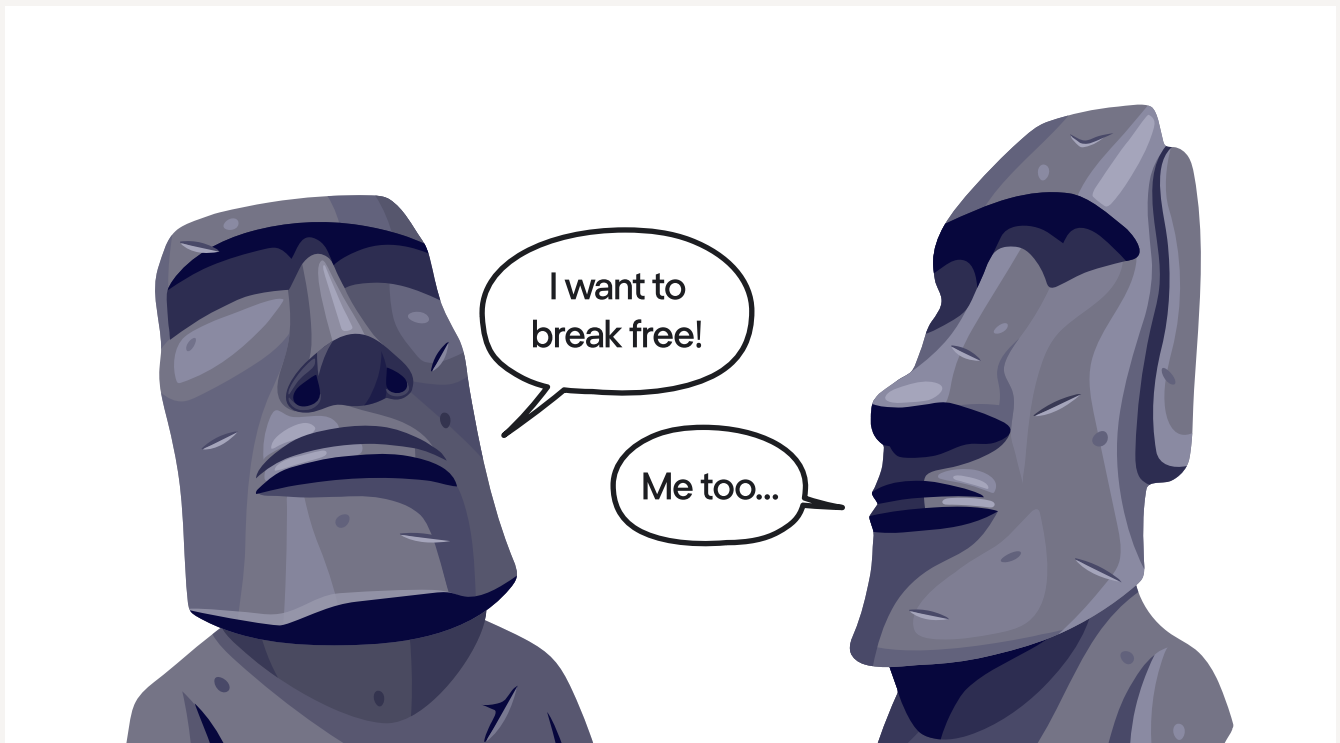
Big SaaS buddies with distributed teams generously share their experience in remote teams management. InVision, for instance, **advises** *putting more structure around the design process to enhance it*.

Adding structure means coming up with standard algorithms of how designers investigate, brainstorm, collaborate in teams, or work apart. It's like putting more columns so your design process doesn't fall over.



That was the piece of advice from big teams with design processes so heavy, that they risk collapsing under their own weight. But if you are starting to design with remote teams, you probably start small. So, here's some other advice for you from a small design team: *remove the irrelevant structure*.

If you zoom in to look more closely at the structural columns you already have or are going to have, you'll notice that some of them are irrelevant in a remote mode. You can get rid of them painlessly for the sake of flexibility.



For instance, we at Eleken revised our [design requirement gathering](#) process and cut some elements out of it.

Classical requirement gathering demands agencies' clients to fill in a standard brief that causes suffering for everyone involved. Clients have to devote time and effort to write down answers to abstract questions. Designers then have to find the grain of truth in those abstract answers.

A client brief is not the shortest way towards finding some common ground between a client and an agency. The shortest way is a conversation, so we abandoned briefs in favor of in-depth client interviews. Interviews that we have all saved thanks to Zoom's beautiful recording function.

When we got rid of excessive bureaucracy it turned out that project management is another unnecessary structural pillar. So now we don't have project managers anymore — designers communicate directly with clients and their product teams.

How to provide feedback



If you are ready to provide in-time feedback at the designer's every task, you are halfway to success.

Because, one of the most important things you as a manager can do, for your part, is being responsive. If the designer has questions, try to answer them fast to optimize their time and your investments. A designer that doesn't get timely feedback can either wait for your reply, thus being blocked, or continue working on assumptions that might lead the project down the wrong way.

There are plenty of modern tools for remote collaboration that will make sharing feedback easy and convenient for both sides (we talk about them in detail in Chapter 4). One more thing to keep in mind here is that a message in chat can sometimes be confusing or difficult to understand correctly. That's why in case it's not a minor note, try to deliver your feedback in video conversations (where you can share the screen).

Develop a culture of feedback in your team: don't leave any questions unanswered. It is not always easy to share your opinion efficiently. Sometimes, feedback can inadvertently demotivate a designer.

Here are some rules to keep in mind when evaluating your designers' works:

- **Do not correct, but ask.**

Before making any adjustments, the manager should ask why the designer decided to do it exactly that way.

- **Do not use the word "but".**

It automatically crosses out the praise in the first part of the phrase. "You've done a nice job, but..." Sounds like you didn't do anything correctly, right?

- **Don't put labels on your designers' works.**

High-quality feedback is not built on the words "beautiful" and "ugly". You should always provide arguments.

Here's a word from our design lead, Maksym:

"I never tell designers that they've created something awful, or that they can't correctly perform their job. Even if I see that the developed interface looks not that good (such a thing often happens with newbies), I prefer to say that this design is not quite what we need, and then I provide arguments why I think so. As well, I give my employee some advice, in which direction to move to correct the situation."

How to monitor the results of design work



To effectively monitor the remote design team's progress you need reliable project management software and be constantly involved in the process.

Lucky you, nowadays there are plenty of great tools that will help you not to get lost in projects, people, tasks, chats, meetings, and all the other stuff you now have to control remotely. Among such software are [Trello](#), [Basecamp](#), [Notion](#), [Asana](#), and more.

As for the second point (deep involvement), you can be sure that in case you, as a manager, have a clear product vision and are you ready to constantly communicate with the designer, and provide timely feedback there won't be the need for some special kind of supervising or using metrics to track your team's progress, it will all happen naturally.

For instance, let's take a look at what our team management looked like when Eleken was working on [Textmagic's](#) design.

- We were always in touch with the TextMagic's team to agree on the steps, wireframes, and user flows.
- We had video calls with the product manager every other day and arranged demos to present the results of our work every one or two weeks. Their feedback was always valuable and we decided upon the next sprint together.
- We maintained regular communication via Slack and designed our prototypes in Figma.

- The design process at TextMagic was user-centered. We would design the prototypes, and their team would show them to users, get their feedback during live interviews, and return to us with new ideas and improvements.

As you can see, we have an iterative design process where the successful outcome is determined by close cooperation and constant communication.

Remote design teams will do their best when **they have a clear vision of what they need to achieve and enough autonomy** to make their own decisions.



Different time zones? Here's what to do about it

The modern world shows that a 9-to-5 workday isn't relevant for most of us anymore. And thanks to the Internet the world is our oyster and we can easily employ someone in Los Angeles, even when being located in Zürich.

After years of working remotely with clients from San Francisco, London, Montreal, Amsterdam, Singapore, New York, and more Eleken team learned that it's possible for companies of a different scale to be successful even when their employees are working at different time zones.

Besides, design and remote are made for each other:

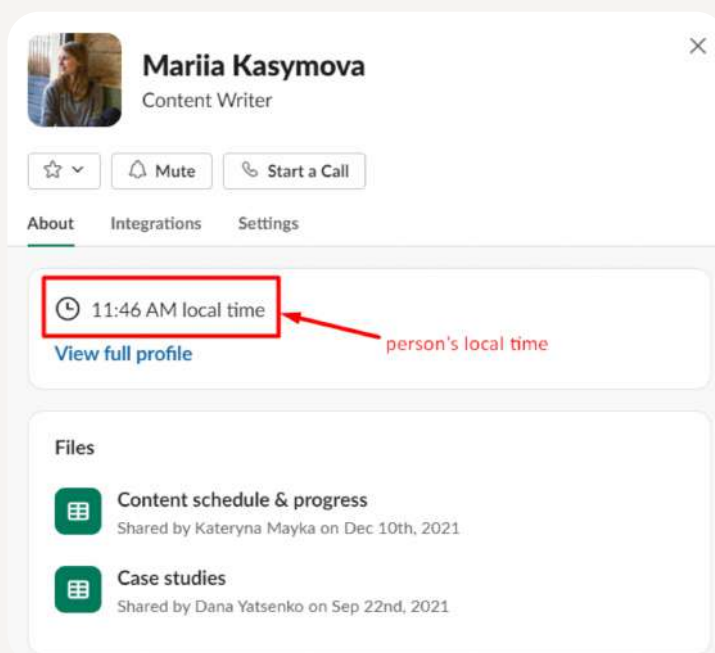
- The SaaS market has developed an exceptional toolkit for remote UI/UX teams. For example, user testing that several years ago included tons of hassle like creating prototypes, finding respondents, and finally running a testing session is now possible with minimal designer involvement.
- Some remote communication disadvantages turn out to be advantages for design teams. Designers seamlessly share and discuss pictures, and Zoom is more suitable for this task than a physical conference room.
- You can get the best design talent from anywhere, and you can painlessly try any engagement model, from hiring freelancers to partnering with a design agency.
- If you remove some irrelevant rules instead of adding more rules for remote teams, your best talents would get power over their lives working processes in a way people can't have with a traditional desk job.
- Thus, your design team would get greater flexibility to deliver the best results.

Still, if you sit in conference calls late at night or get emails all the time, you know that all the advantages mentioned above don't eliminate the difficulties that may occur because of the time difference.

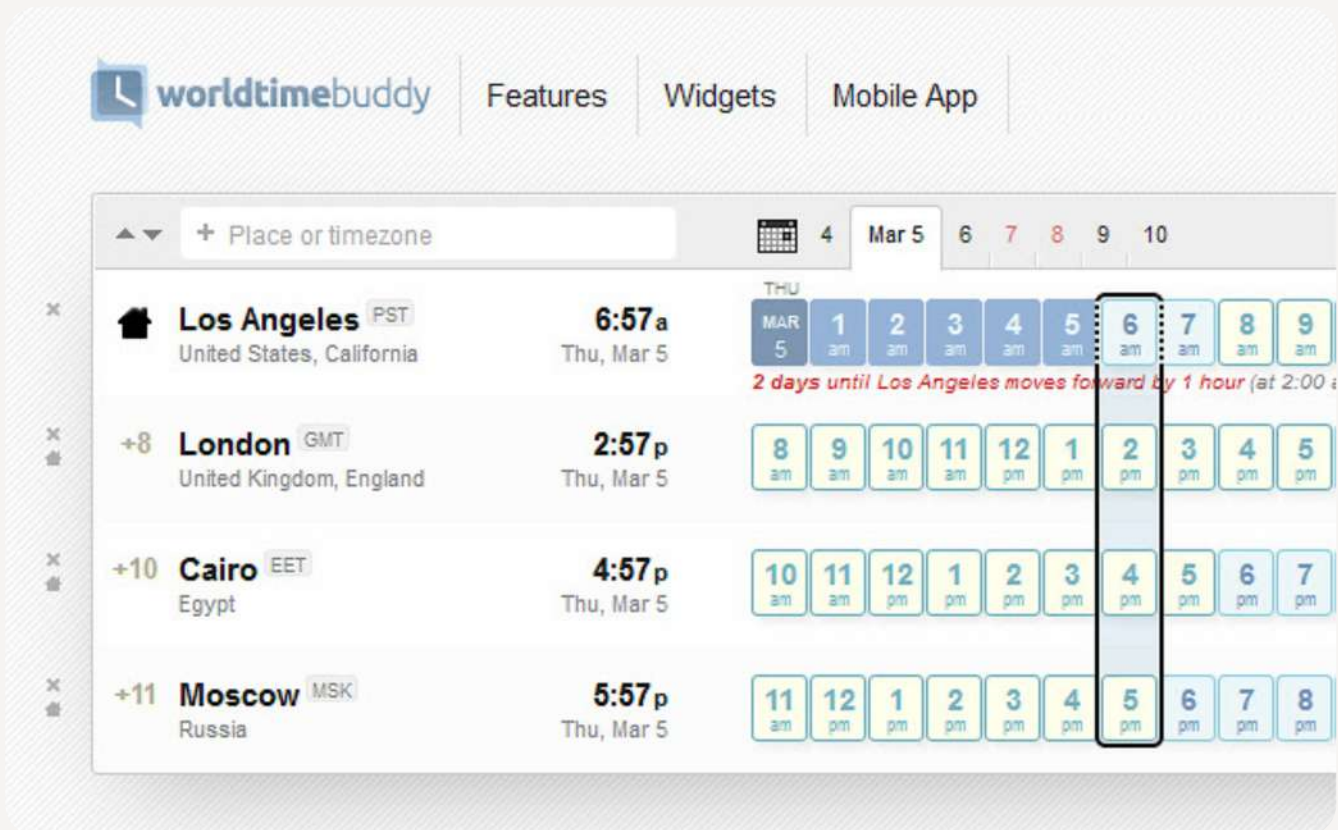
Here are several tips that will help you work across different time zones:

- **Convert time zones.**

We all should be aware that the 10 a.m. conference call organized in San Francisco is a 6 p.m. one in London and 1 a.m. the following day in Singapore. The best way to keep visibility on time zones is to have a world clock on your laptop. In case you are using Slack for work chats, you can go to the person's name, click on it, see their local time and calculate when will be the best time to contact this person.



As well, you can use the timezone meeting planners, or online tools like [WorldTimeBuddy](#), [EveryTimeZone](#), [World Clock Meeting Planner](#), or anything else to be aware of the time difference between you and your teammates.



Here are several tips that will help you work across different time zones:

- **Set tasks as if it was a relay race rather than a rowing team.**

In a rowing team, everyone has to be in the same boat at the same time. And in such a case you need everyone's presence at each meeting. Organizing work processes as a relay race you just need individuals to have some overlap to hand over the work from one team member to the other. For example, at Eleken our work hours can extend from 8 am to 8 pm EEST, so it's not a problem to find overlaps and run productive team meetings even if our client is located in Australia.

- **Manage your personal accessibility.**

You may want to be available to your team 24/7, but this is not a sustainable way of working and may actually be a sign that you are micromanaging them.

Set some clear guidelines in your team about when they can call you and when not. Protect your personal time, don't be afraid to sometimes put your phone into "do not disturb" mode.

- **Share the pain.**

If you do have regular online meetings, try to rotate the timing so that it's not always at the most inconvenient time for the people furthest from you.

- **Hire those who are ready to take responsibility for their duties.**

When hiring a new employee, look for people that are not afraid of having a lot of autonomy. Our design lead Maksym always says he trusts each of our designers, that's why he doesn't have any troubles managing a remote team. And our employees know how to break the scope of work into parts that can be worked on individually.

How to communicate productively and efficiently

Software is complex, abstract, difficult to visualize and explain. That creates communication barriers you and your designers have to eliminate on the road to fruitful communication.

We at Eleken design agency believe that the ability to understand each other is key to a successful project. That's why we literally built our working process around communication with clients.

- **We don't ask you to fill a brief** – because no UX design specification document can explain customer needs better than a real conversation when you can ask what the heck “decentralized P2P ecosystem” is when you hear such kind of white noise.
- **We arrange calls with clients, a lot of calls.** In some cases, they are even meetings and workshops — all to discuss the product and clarify our next steps.
- **We don't have project managers in our agency** — the person you talk to is the person who designs your app. Cutting out the middleman allows us to make sure the message always reaches the right person, and not in a Chinese whispers way.

So, as you may have guessed, this chapter is all about communication: means of communication, communication challenges, communication with different departments, and more. Let's start!

Tools for remote collaboration

In its purest sense, UI/UX design is about visual problem-solving. It means that communicating design boils down mostly to sharing pictures.

Sharing pictures is convenient in a chat, where you can attach a screenshot. It works perfectly in a video call, where you can show your screen. Even people who work in different time zones can discuss designs pretty well by recording screencasts with comments.

Sharing pictures when working on-site is not so easy. Aleksandra, the UI/UX designer at Eleken, summarizes it like this:



"Even if we were sitting in the office next to each other, we'd discuss designs on Zoom instead of staring all together at a single screen."

Consequently, it's a stack of design team collaboration tools that create a shared workspace among the group working remotely. To ensure you and your product team have effective remote communication, you may use some of the tools mentioned below.



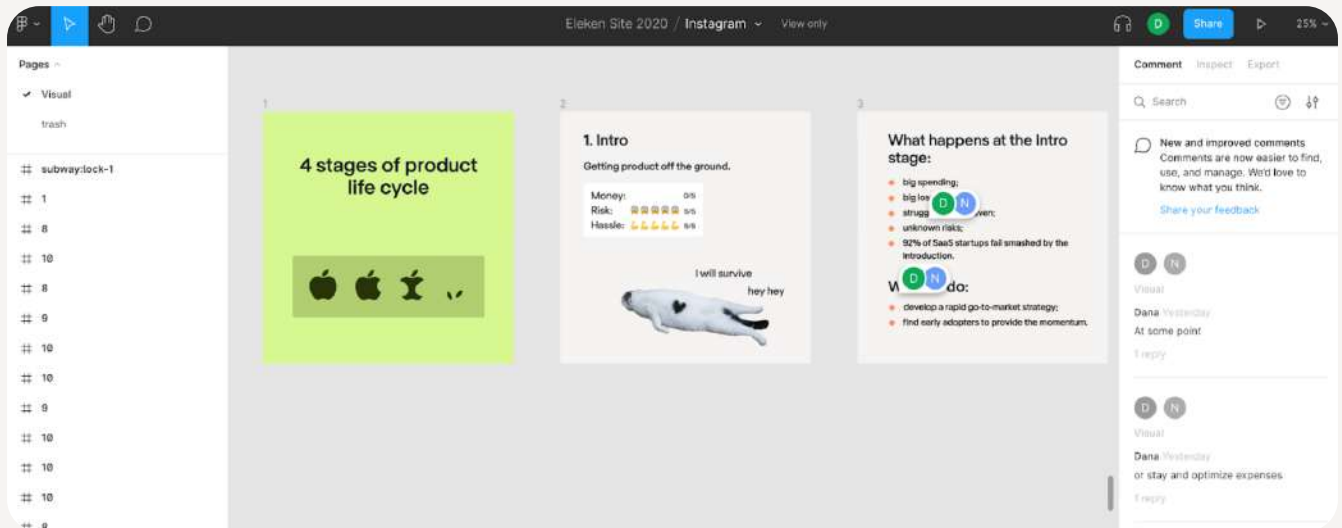
Figma, the main design collaboration platform.

When people hire us as UI/UX designers, we have to gather requirements, discuss with them our ideas, and share results. Figma is a must-have tool when the designer needs you to see wireframes or prototypes.

When we asked why Figma suites best for this purpose, Maksym, our design director, gives a list of five reasons:

- Figma is a *cross-platform app*. You can open it from any device, whereas Photoshop was available only for Windows users, and Sketch worked only on MacBook.
- Another benefit is that Figma *runs on browsers*, so developers or clients don't need to install an app when they need to view a design. They can simply open a link in any browser they have.
- Figma was the first pro app with a *freemium model*. For Sketch, you had to pay \$100 per year, while Figma's free plan is more than enough for persona
- Figma includes all possible *extra features* a product team may wish for. For instance, it has a tool that allows you to create clickable prototypes. Also, the product offers an easy way to extract code information from a specific page element — it makes Figma one of the best designer-developer collaboration tools.
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- Figma is *cloud-based*. It means that all the files are held on the web, so they don't take up space on your computer and allow you to work on them collectively.



Designing, discussing, and editing prototypes for Eleken's Instagram in Figma

Figma pricing:

- You can start using Figma for free. The Beginner tier has some functional limitations, but it's just enough to learn how to use the app.
- If you want to unlock unlimited files and sharing permissions, you'll have to pay \$12 per editor per month.

Still, no matter how good Figma is, it can't cover all communication needs with a design team.



Slack, for ongoing communication

Most of Elekens' communication beyond specific design edits happens in Slack. This tool works like a faster, better-organized email alternative. Perfect for announcements, team-management issues, and watercooler conversations. Project team discussions also happen in Slack chats.

Slack, however, has its dark side. Positioned as a productivity tool, this app can also kill the team's productivity unless used carefully. It makes it so easy to send messages, that at some point, you find yourself buried under dozens of them. Moreover, you can't take a three-day pause before replying like it was with emails. Slack communications imply almost instant replies.



Slack is the best tool for internal team communication we have, but it **requires some generally accepted communication ethics** so that team members could maintain their focus and priorities.

Slack pricing:

- Slack offers a freemium tier with limited file storage and message history that is enough to try the app.
- For the Pro mode, you'll pay \$6.67 USD per user per month.



Slack calls / Zoom / Meet — to discuss something too complex for chats

We can hardly tell you anything new about the video conferencing tools world that is remote for two years already. But still, these tools should still be mentioned as a part of the design collaboration toolkit.

In order not to overwhelm colleagues with a massive Slack message flow, sometimes it's useful to schedule short voice calls. Slack calls fit well for this. For longer calls or regular team meetings that require screen sharing, we use Zoom.

Zoom pricing:

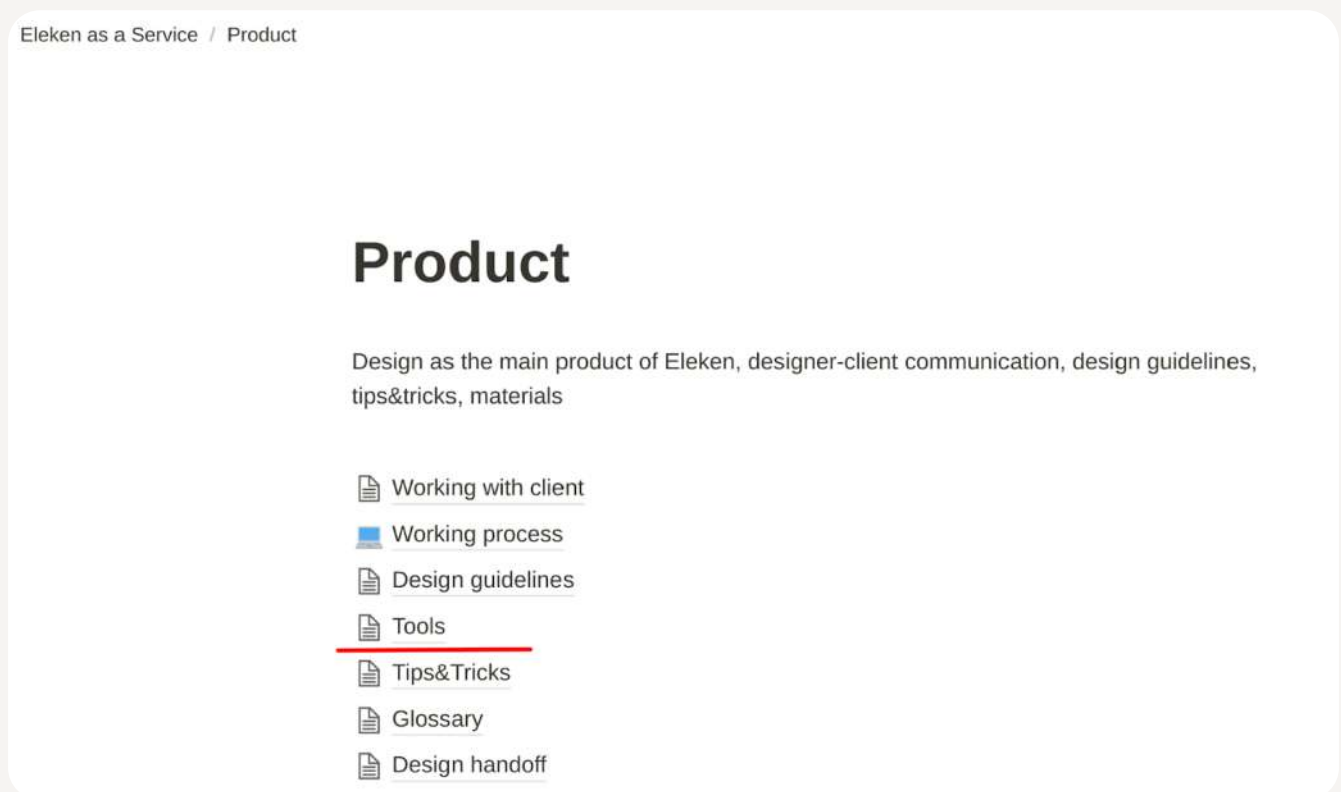
- Zoom offers its Basic plan for free, with group meetings limited to 40 minutes.
- If you want unlimited calls, you need a Pro account that will cost you \$14.99 per host per month.

Meet by Google is another tool with very similar features, it can also make video conferencing work for your organization. If you already use other Google products, you should definitely try Google Meet. For G Suite accounts, there are no time limits.

Notion, as a knowledge base

Notion is a perfect tool for building and structuring your company's database including project management and employee onboarding information.

For instance, the list of our favorite remote design collaboration tools you can see in this article comes from Eleken's design guidelines kept in Notion.



A tiny piece of Eleken's hall of wisdom

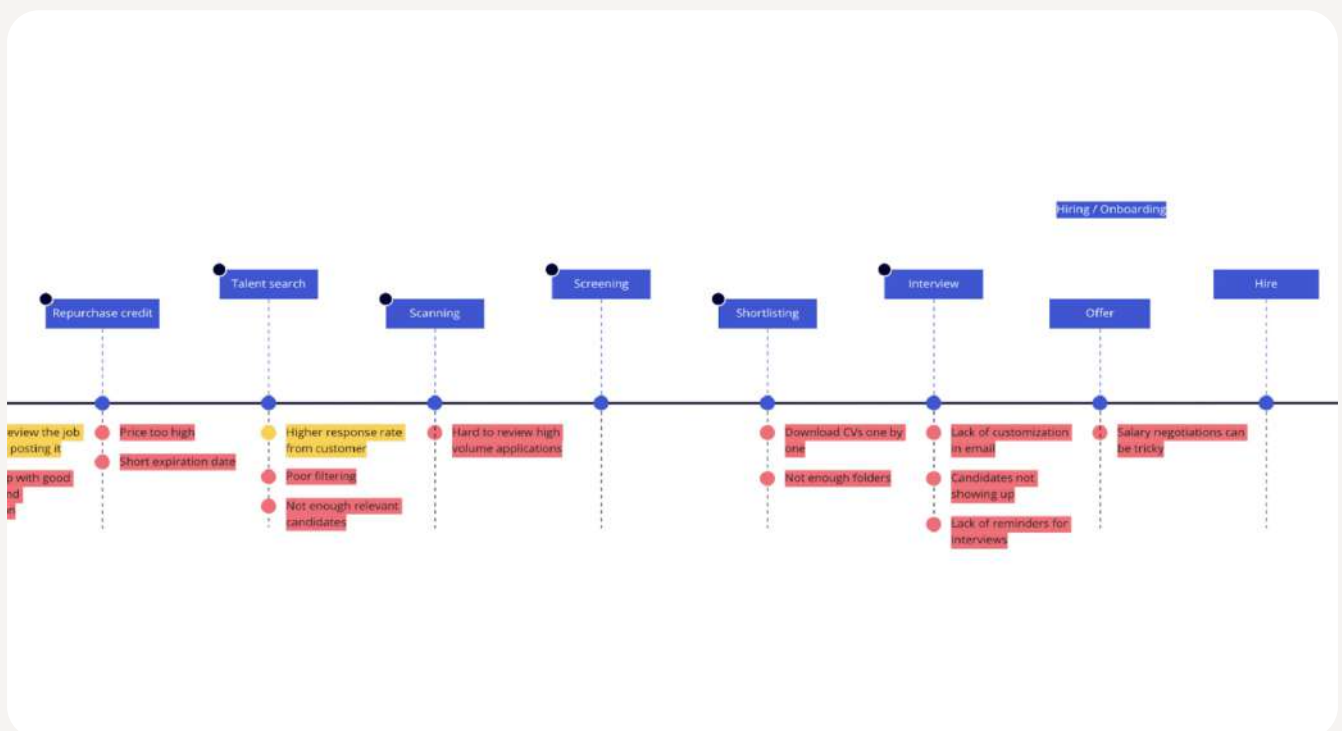
Notion pricing:

- Notion offers a free plan for personal use.
- Those who need a collaborative workspace for an unlimited number of users will pay \$4 per month.



Miro, a whiteboard to generate and present ideas

Miro is a cloud whiteboard created for people who work with mind maps, flowcharts, double diamonds, and other visual frameworks. Not only does the app have hundreds of templates, but they also look so stunning. Miro makes your theoretical brainchild esthetically pleasing and ready for presentation.



A fragment of a beautiful customer journey map we made in Miro

Miro pricing:

- You get three editable boards for free.
- More collaborative power and unlimited boards will cost you \$8 per member per month.

For presentations that require more structured information than a whiteboard allows, we recommend trying Google Slides, a free online slideshow maker.



Figjam, another whiteboard established by guess who

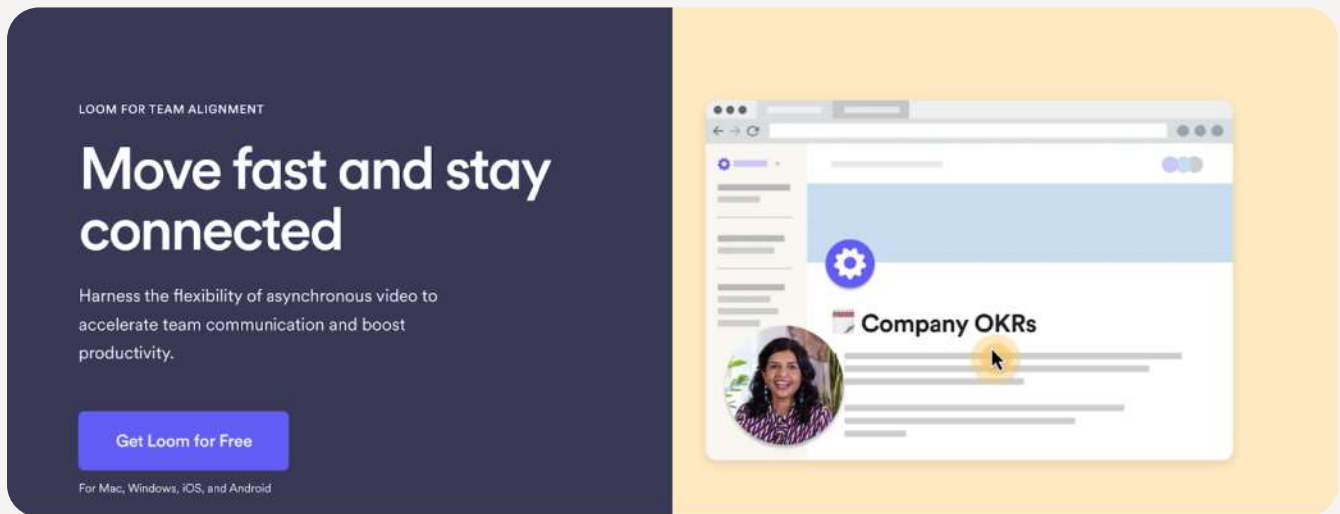
Figjam is a competitor of Miro, recently launched by Figma. As a team of designers, we couldn't miss this release. Not that we needed another whiteboarding tool. But since Figma sits in the center of our design galaxy, using a single ecosystem for both UI design and whiteboarding sounds tempting.

You can transfer things between Figma and Figjam simply by pressing Ctrl+C or Command+C, and it's a huge time-saver. What is not a time-saver is Figjam's cute stamps, emojis, and a hi-five feature.

FigJam pricing:

- FigJam is now in Beta, which means you can use the Professional tier for free until Feb 2022.
- After, for unlimited boards, you'll need to pay \$3 per editor per month.

Loom, for recording and sharing screencasts



Loom is a screencast tool that allows you to record and share short pitch videos. It's useful for asynchronous collaboration of remote teams when different time zones or busy schedules don't allow them to set up a meeting.

Loom also saves a lot of time you'd otherwise spend on writing long guidelines. Just record a few minutes with your voice, and you are done.

Loom pricing:

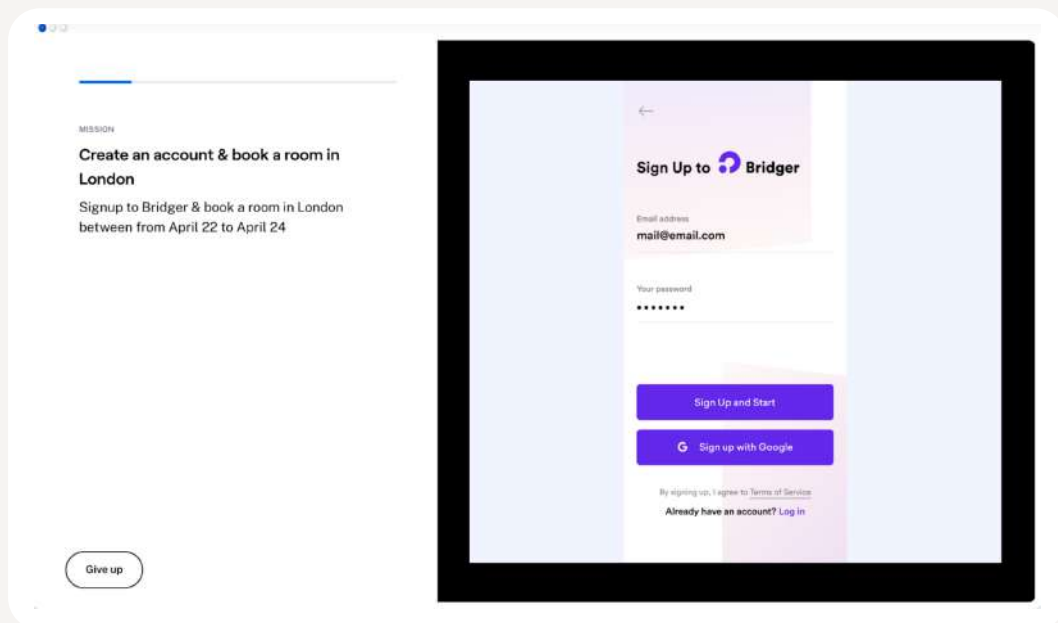
- A free tier with a 5-minute recording duration limit.
- For limitless screencasting, you'll pay \$8 per creator per month.



Maze, for unmoderated tests

You need to collaborate with people to test your work on different stages, from product concepts to prototypes. The last two tools we want to mention can help you to facilitate this task.

Unmoderated tests with Maze require minimal designer involvement. You only need to define study goals, upload prototypes, write task descriptions, and voila, after some time the results are ready for analysis.



That's how a Maze remote test looks like

A huge advantage of Maze is its integration with Figma. You can import a working prototype directly from the page you designed it.

Maze pricing:

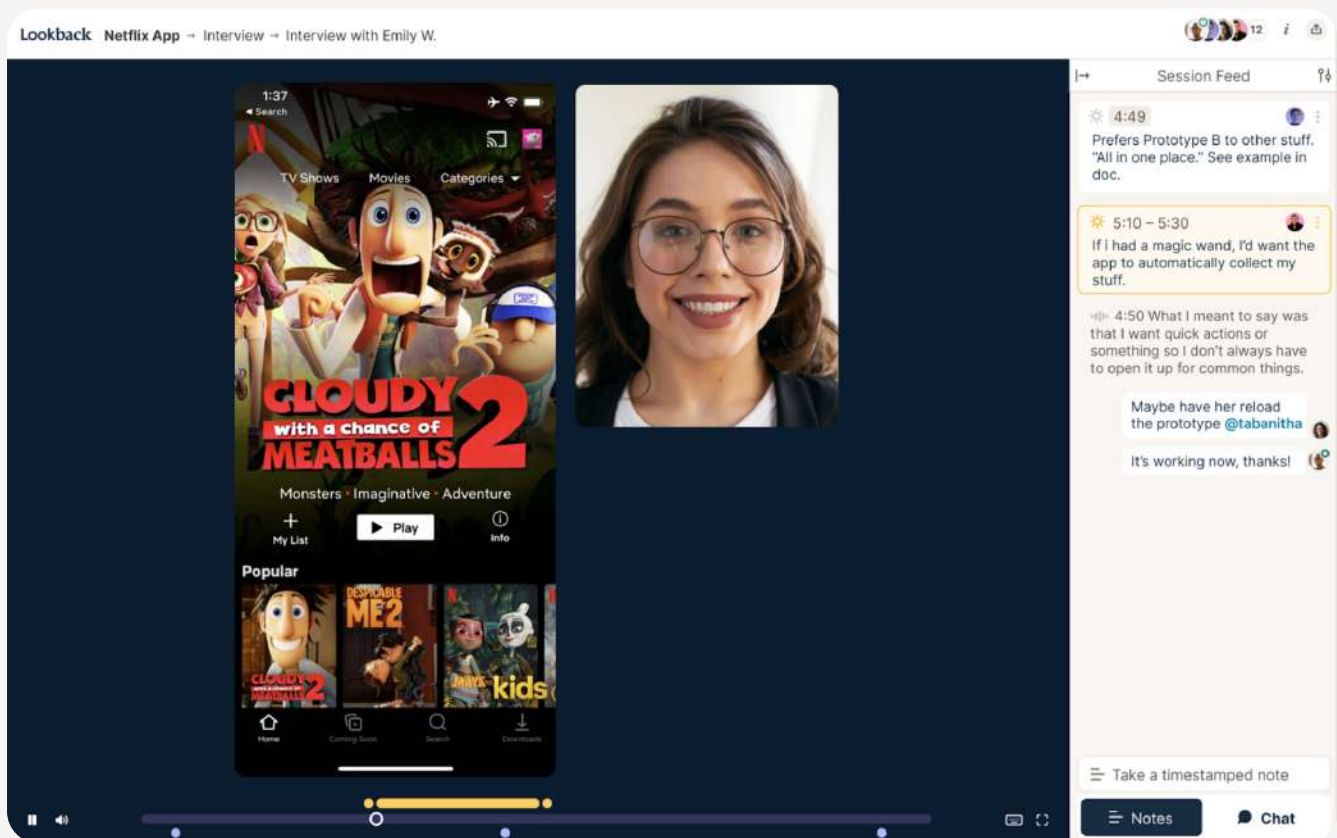
- There is a limited free version.
- For a Professional mode, you'll pay \$50 per month + \$25 per month for additional users.

Lookback

Lookback, for moderated tests

That's a tool created for tests where a researcher is talking to users, watching their reactions to prototypes, guiding them through the tasks, and getting their feedback in real-time.

The process can be recorded and saved so that other team members can explore it later and make timestamped notes.



Team collaboration in Lookback. Image credit: lookback.com

Lookback pricing:

- Free 14-day trial.
- \$17 per month for a Freelance plan that allows 10 sessions per year.
- \$99 per month for a Team plan, with 100 sessions per year.

Key takeouts

Some final thoughts that may help you build your design collaboration toolkit:

- If you facilitate BYOD (bring your own device) working policy, all online design collaboration tools must be **cross-platform**.
- **Cloud-based** tools are a must to make remote or flexible working comfortable.
- Choose the tools that **work smoothly with each other**. It will save you time and nerves.
- Remain open to new products — collaboration apps often favor freemium pricing, so that you can **try promising new stuff for free**.

Cross-team communication

Generally speaking, there is nothing special about communication between the designer and other team members/departments. The main thing here is to make sure they reach out to each other and have access to the tools (we've already discussed them in the previous chapter) that ensure their comfortable collaboration.

Still, there is usually a special concern about the relations between designers and developers. That's natural, as the work of these two specialists is interdependent and often requires a lot of interaction to deliver a successful final result. Still, at Eleken we believe that there is no such issue that cannot be fixed by communication.

Designer-Developer collaboration

Developers are designers' good friends. Each time we have an idea, but we are not sure if it is possible to implement, we ask the developer for help.

7 years of experience in design prove that if you have both designers and developers in your team, you've already solved your greatest design collaboration problem.

Eleken's designers have been working with dozens of development teams — small and big, vetted and novice, development-driven, and user-centric teams. We learned to handle them all, and now see no problem in designer-developer collaboration.

Still, let's discuss possible designers-developers collaboration problems and the ways to address them.

Concurrent UI/UX designer and developer collaboration

Design and development processes line up naturally one after another because engineers can proceed with the development only when they have mockups ready.

But in this sequential case, we get a moment of friction when designers pass a baton to developers:

- Designers may overlook engineers' requirements;
- Coders may get the wrong idea of design they need to implement;
- The team would need to go through everything again;
- Deadlines would be on fire;
- The project would sink into chaos.

Such dramatic cases rarely happen, but even a tiny hitch in production means a financial and reputational risk for big fancy software-as-a-service (SaaS) companies. To remove the point of friction, big product companies need UX designers working with developers simultaneously.



Amazon uses the two-pizza rule (if you need more than two pizzas to feed a team, then the team is too big). For Hubspot, a small team looks like one and a half pizzas: one Tech Lead, two developers, one designer, and one Product Manager.

Our design lead Maksym explains why simultaneous design and development are considered to be the most effective kind of team management:

“Right now I’m working on a project where mockups get implemented as soon as they are approved. A big advantage of this working model is that

I get an extra round of edits from engineers when they start implementing my designs. Thus, the risk of missing anything reduces dramatically.”

Concurrent design–development collaboration may work for big fancy product teams. But small startups have different resources and different priorities.

Startups need to build their product from scratch or redesign their minimum viable product (MVP). At the same time, they need to survive with limited resources and avoid fundamental errors that will later screw up the whole business. Flawless designer–developer collaboration is not on the list of priorities as you see.



So SaaS startups rarely shake a 1–2 year development process together with the UI/UX design that otherwise could have been done in 2–3 months.

They usually choose between the two options:

- Decide on how their app is going to look and feel without designers
- Organize design and coding sequentially (highly recommended)

No designer-developer collaboration — no problem lots of problems

It happens that newborn startups abandon the proven practice of including UI/UX designers in the product teams they build. It might be due to limited time and budget, but more likely it's because they underestimate the role of user experience design.



Because yes, having no designer on the team will help to keep the project within a tight budget.

But having no designer increases the risk of making fundamental *errors that will later screw up the whole business*:

- **The design gets overcomplicated.** You know the app is not touched by a designer's hand the moment you see it. The interface looks like a spacecraft control room (and works just as easily).
- **Consistency suffers.** Developers work iteratively. They may start small, and then suddenly pivot to something else because “what a cool idea, let's add this feature too”, but “now we lack that button” and “why don't we put it in the upper left corner?”
- **Mistakes get visible only in the end.** It takes tons of time to code an app, and you'll see the big picture in months, if not years. If you suddenly notice that a big picture looks like a Frankenstein's monster, it would be too late to redo everything. Product design, in contrast, allows you to quickly and easily ideate and iterate on your app before you've invested in the actual coding process.

Sequential designer and developer collaboration

Eleken specializes in designing for SaaS startups, so a sequential working model is something we are very used to. For several months, we work on a clients' design moving step by step, in close designer collaborations with a Product Manager or CEO. Only after a couple of months, when all the mockups are ready and approved they land on the developers' desk.

Maksym explains how it works on the example of [TextMagic](#), the company that hired us to design them some new functionality:

“We worked on one screen at a time, in color at once, since the app already had its own design system. Each screen we approved with a Product Manager and iterated it until he was **happy with the result**. We didn’t maintain continuous communication with TextMagic’s devs but contacted them occasionally to ask, say, wouldn’t this idea be too hard to implement?”

Sequential collaboration is not as sophisticated as concurrent design and development — the moment when designers pass mockups to developers is full of uncertainty and risks. But this cooperation model still works fine if you know how to apply it.

The short recipe from Eleken looks like this:

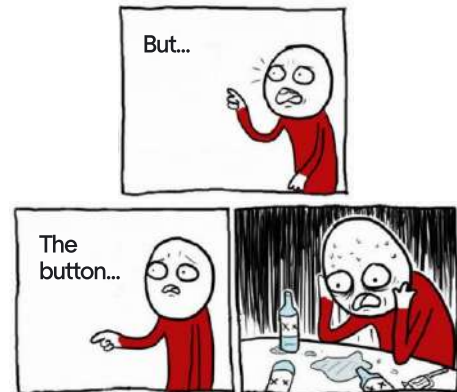


Eleken’s design director shares his wisdom

Sequential designer and developer collaboration



Designer



Developer

Designers can't foresee everything. For instance, at the implementation phase, a way-too-long title appears, and you have to decide whether you show it in full or cut with three dots. Such corner cases get fixed easily when you have designers and developers working together, but can frustrate a tech team that has to sort things out by itself.

Generally, our clients deal with little design gaps by themselves. When they feel they need help, they can check back with us asking for design support. Thus, we'll fill all the gaps that have arisen and control the design implementation.

Developers can misunderstand the design

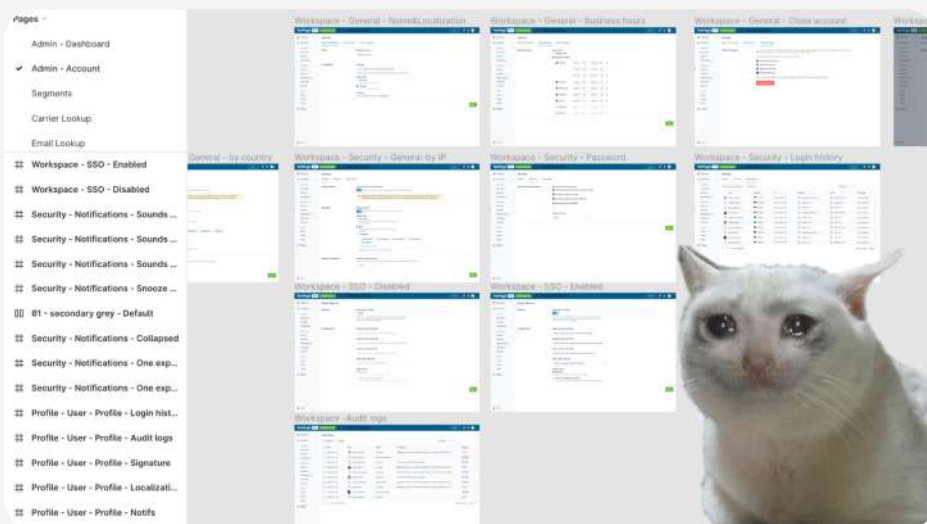


Designer

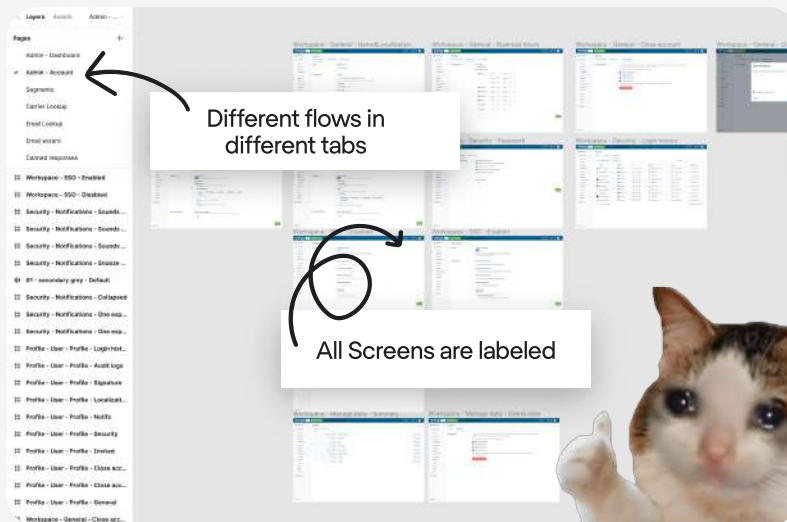


Developer

This scenario is theoretically possible because mockups usually look like a pile of screens that all look the same.



But UI/UX designers are people who know how to make things intuitive and accessible. To make a pile of mockups easier to grasp, our designers arrange different user flows into different pages in Figma. Inside Figma's pages, all flows are logically organized, and all screens are labeled.



To facilitate the understanding and the further developers' work on our designs, we usually supplement them with UI kits. UI kit is a seed of a future design system — it summarizes some UX tips for developers and all standard UI components (such as buttons, inputs, navigations), font, and typography.

General tips on fruitful communication

To sum up this chapter, here are 6 recommendations that would help you improve the quality and effectiveness of remote communication with a design team.

Mind your language

It's essential to make sure that you are communicating in a language that is clear to your listeners, no matter if it is oral or written communication.

- **Mind your sense of humor, tone of voice, and intonation.**

“Mind” doesn't mean stop doing that. Just remember, that sometimes your colleagues may understand your joke easily when they are next to you, but it may be perceived differently when written in a chat.

- **Mind the use of professional vocabulary.**

Some words that are quite common for you, may be completely unknown to your designer. Make sure you provide explanations to some narrow-focused terms.

- **Take the extra time to ensure the clarity of your language.**

Avoid using acronyms like NNTR, EOP, EOD, and so on, not everyone understands them. When writing a long message in a chat, organize it into clean paragraphs so that it's easy to perceive all the information.

Consider timing

Think about the frequency of your communication. Contacting your designer once in a fortnight would block their progress, and would seem like you are not interested in the successful outcome of a design project. In contrast, sending emails/messages every few minutes and holding 2-hour Zoom calls every evening may distract the employee from the actual work.



The communication has to be purposeful and planned.

Try to find a balance, for example, 15-minute calls each day to discuss plans and progress and chat in Slack for minor issues and ask questions.

Create a communication guideline

To ensure effective and seamless communication for your remote design team, write down the list of basic communication rules.

For example, you may clarify the following points:

- Do they need to send daily/weekly updates? When and in what form?
- Are there specific hours when the designer must be available to communicate?
- How much time is it fine to wait for a message response?

Use visual communication.

It may be difficult to explain your thoughts or provide feedback with words only. Choose video calls when possible to avoid miscommunications and support your arguments/explanations with facial expressions, screenshots, screen-sharing in real-time, and so on. It will make both your and your designer's work much more productive.

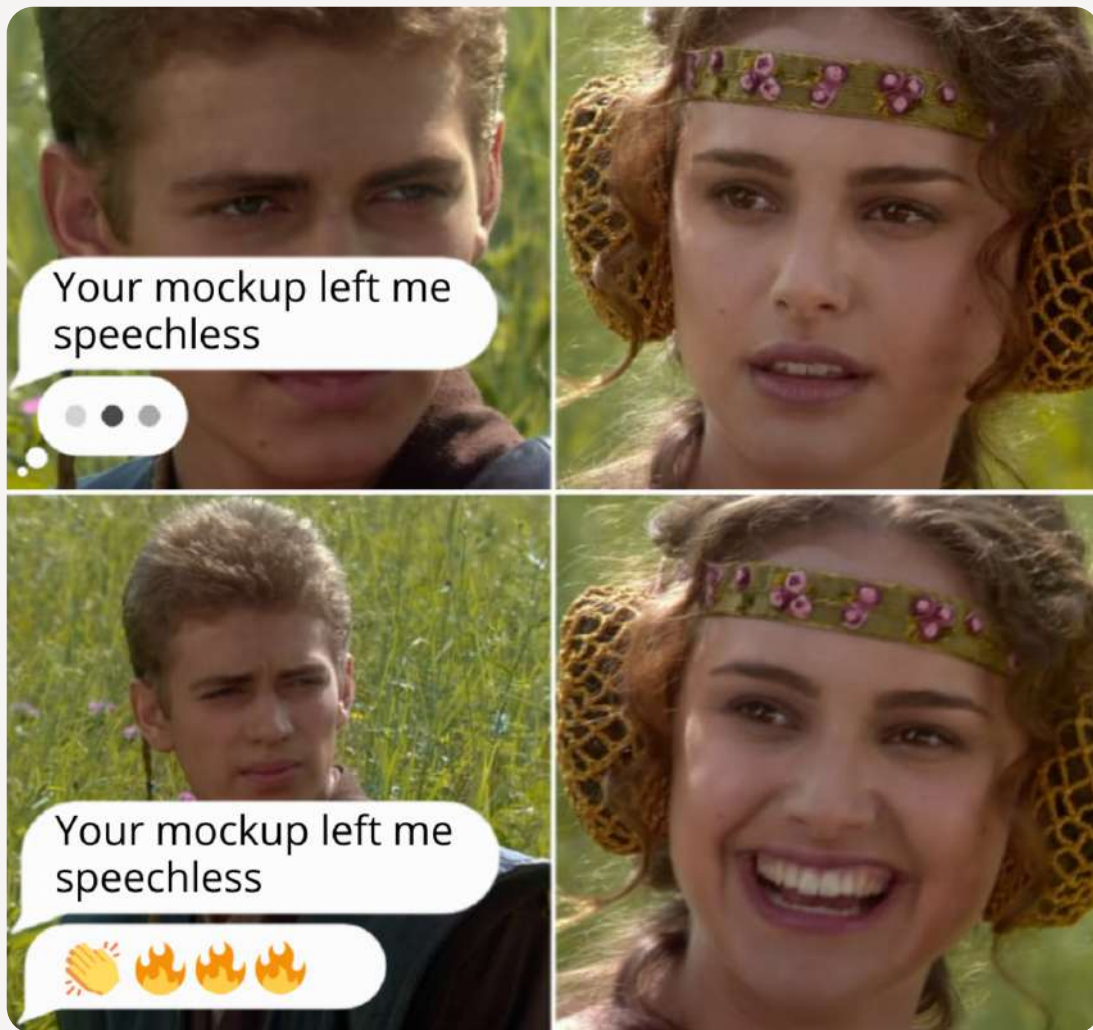
Ensure appropriate audio/video quality.

Not to be misunderstood or asked to repeat one and the same sentence ten times, make sure that you have a stable internet connection, your audio works well and you are able to put yourself on mute if you are in a noisy place.

Use emojis.

Imagine, you are a designer waiting for feedback, and you see that “typing...” bubble on your screen. Your client or your boss writes something and it feels like eternity.

It takes only a few seconds in reality, but still enough to start thinking about mistakes you possibly made or requirements you probably missed.



Our designer Kseniya says that during online communication she can't rely on facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice to tell her which way a conversation is about to go. Even when she gets some feedback in Slack, it can be hard to interpret it, since you can't read the person's intonation. Did this "OK" mean everything is fine or was she mad at me? Did this "thank you" mean they are not impressed or everything is fine?

Kseniya **recommends using emojis** to compensate for emotional misunderstandings in written feedback: "Our design director does a good job explaining in detail what we've done wrong or right. And he always adds smiley faces that clarify his attitude."

You're the boss

Being the boss is much more than distributing the tasks among employees. To achieve a successful outcome, the design project requires your deep involvement, open communication, transparency, and patience. And though, at Eleken we tend to follow your rules and work processes, there are some common principles that can help you become an effective leader for your remote employees.

Being a great leader for your remote team

- **Trust.**

The fact that you haven't managed the remote design team before doesn't mean that you should immediately start distrusting them. Remember, you hire the same people that could work in your office with the only difference that they work from home now.



Trust your team and they will trust you back.

- **Have frequent, informal, short check-ins.**

You can start every other day with a short message to your employees or a 10-minute call where you ask how they are doing and check if they need some help from you. When doing this frequently, you will build trust and keep everyone on the same page.

- **Set clear expectations.**

Setting and vocalizing your expectations early and often is essential if you want these expectations to be met.

- Be clear with your team in terms of deliverables you want them to provide, the deadlines they have to meet, the design operations they have to follow, and the like.

Communicate

- **Communicate your role.**

Tell your team what your job responsibilities are as a manager, on a regular basis. Just like designers give you an update of what they are working on, you should give them an update of what you are working on as well.

- **Communicate the company goals.**

Tell your team about company goals and big picture projects. Sharing big plans with employees makes them feel a part of something important. That's how they become more motivated in their daily work and understand the "why" behind each task. Speak with your team about potential new clients, profits, and plans for the nearest future.

- **Communicate issues.**

If issues arise, you have to communicate in a clear, constructive way. There can be situations when your employees underperform or fail a certain task. Don't keep silent, talk to your designers. To build a strong team, there's a need to always discuss every single challenge faced by designers.

As you get to know each designer, you will find the best way to communicate with them. Every individual responds in different ways so have some empathy, and accommodate each employee.

- **Communicate one-on-one.**

Speak to each designer one-on-one at least once a month. At general meetings, employees may be embarrassed to talk about problems and bottlenecks that prevent them from providing good results or working effectively as a team.

At individual meetings, you can discuss projects, successes, and failures, give your recommendations and support. In addition, one-on-one conversations are also a team-building tool: after them, team members begin to trust the leader more.

But what if your team is too big, or you are overloaded with different tasks and physically can't conduct personal meetings each week/month?

Here is a recommendation from our design lead:

"At general meetings, when we discuss regular updates, I listen carefully not only to what designers are currently working on, but I also pay attention to each employee's tone of voice and emotional state. If I feel something's wrong, for example, a designer seems tired or disappointed, I contact them to have a personal conversation."

Be human

Though you are the boss here, try to bring your employees a little bit of fun so that they don't feel too anxious, stressed, and nervous. You can create a separate Slack channel for sharing memes, funny videos, or just some personal stuff. Tell your team what you're up to these days.



The more transparent you are, the less stressed your employees will be.

Don't micromanage

Though you can't see what your employees are doing at this exact moment, don't try to control each of their actions. Focus on the results, not the activity. As long as the outcome of their work remains acceptable, you may direct your energy to something more important than attempting to ensure your team is doing what they have to.

What to do about common challenges

Instead of enumerating all the difficulties you may face when working on a design project, under different roofs with your team, we talked with UI/UX designers at Eleken and singled out **three main challenges** that may occur on the side of the client (you) that prevents the team from delivering high-quality design solutions.

- **No clear product vision that leads to:**
 1. Wasting time for suitable solution search
 2. Slower design process

When the client doesn't understand their product's purpose, or can't give clear directions about further designers' tasks, they should be ready to wait until the designer finds answers to all the questions by themselves. It would take additional time to conduct user research, competitor analysis, develop concepts, present them to you, and iterate on a suitable solution. Overall, it's not always a problem if you don't mind waiting and don't have strict deadlines.

Solution:

To avoid such situations, find time to understand what you want to create and why before hiring designers. At this moment it's enough to take a pen and a paper, get concentrated, and think on the following questions:

- What is the main goal of your product?
- What users' problems the software is going to solve?
- Why are users supposed to choose exactly your product?

When the client doesn't understand their product's purpose, or can't give clear directions about further designers' tasks, they should be ready to wait until the designer finds answers to all the questions by themselves. It would take additional time to conduct user research, competitor analysis, develop concepts, present them to you, and iterate on a suitable solution. Overall, it's not always a problem if you don't mind waiting and don't have strict deadlines.

- **Insufficient involvement in the process results in:**
 1. Impossibility for the designer to work smoothly and deliver designs in time
 2. Lack of details needed to create high-quality user-centered design

Unfortunately, designers can't read minds. If the client doesn't invest enough time and effort in communication then they risk blocking their designers' work processes.

Solution:

Communicate with the designer regularly (everyday or every other day), be ready to answer any questions, and provide feedback as fast as possible.

- **No access to all team members leads to:**

1. Miscommunication
2. Ineffective decisions

Each employee that is somehow connected to the product has something useful to tell the UI/UX designer. If, for example, the designer can't reach out to developers they can't be sure whether the mockups they create are possible to implement technically. Without the ability to talk to a customer support representative, designers can omit some essential user's pain points that will later affect the overall user experience.

Solution:

Give the designer a possibility to talk with the representatives of all the departments that work on the project.

To sum up, after all the years of working remotely, we can say that **it's not the place that determines your success, but the people you work with**. You can be as successful working remotely as in the office if you manage to find the team you can trust.

Sometimes the remote design team you are looking for is right in front of you.

All you have to do is to

[Schedule a call with Eleken →](#)



Can u see my screen?

