THE PATH TO Senior Product Designer

An Actionable Growth Plan for a UX Design Career

ARTIOM DASHINSKY

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by Artiom Dashinsky

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Why I Wrote This Book

In 2017, before WeWork went through the crisis that led to its failed initial public offering (IPO), I left my job there as senior product designer. At that time, WeWork was one of the fastest growing startups in the world. I worked with talented people who came from interesting companies of all sizes and types – Meta, Adobe, Warby Parker, VC firms, etc.

So, why did I quit? I left because the career development and advancement opportunities were really unclear. Even though I understood the reasons why that was the case, I couldn't get past the fact the company failed to provide a development plan or a career growth horizon I could work toward.

Does that sound familiar to you? Even if you haven't been in the same situation, you're likely to face it at some point in your career. According to a McKinsey report, lack of career development and advancement is the number one reason that people quit their jobs. Forty-one percent of people surveyed named it as the main reason they left; far more than any other reasons like inadequate compensation (36%), uncaring/uninspiring leaders (34%), lack of meaningful work (31%), unsustainable work expectations (29%), or lack of workspace flexibility (26%).[1]

Here are a few reasons why designers suffer from a lack of career advancement.

1. DEFINED CAREER PATHS AND COMPETENCY LEVELS FOR DESIGNERS ARE STILL UNCOMMON

According to the Design Career Index report from 2019, 71% of companies are lacking any formalized career progression.[2] The smaller a company is, the lower the chance that they will have some form of career ladder or progression model in place. A company with more than 100 employees is twice as likely to have one than a company with 25 to 49 employees.

Things have changed since 2019, but it's still common to find companies with no competencies matrix or performance reviews tailored for designers. What this means is that these organizations, and the designers working within them, don't have clear expectations about what they should do in order to grow within the organization.

2. NO CAREER PROGRESSION OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPERIENCED INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

In most organizations, the only career progression available for designers is to become a manager. Designers who want to grow into a more senior position while staying involved in products and not people only have these options:

- Move to a different (and normally bigger) company that has a career pathway toward staff or principal designer roles.
- Stay in limbo as a senior designer, which may lead to frustration, burn-out, and career stagnation.
- Force themselves into management. Over time, in design management, they will have less and less to do with design (what they enjoy doing) and more with people management.

The latter option only fuels the next issue.

3. LACK OF (STRONG) DESIGN LEADERSHIP

Many organizations do not have strong design leaders. It's so common as it can be hard to find people for this role. As a result, they lack the knowledge and experience to provide their reports with a career development plan.

Here are some reasons why we may be lacking design leaders:

- **A lack of career paths creates unmotivated managers** – As I said in the previous point, when designers have no other choice but to become design managers in order to grow within the organization, it creates leaders whose real desire is to focus on products and not on people. This creates a vicious cycle; without a focus on their people, these design managers are unable to develop new career paths for their reports, and the issue is never resolved.
- **Designers reporting to non-designers** – Often, companies don't have enough designers to justify hiring a design leader, so designers report to the product function. This means they are

sometimes being led by people who've never managed designers before and who don't have the right knowledge to help them grow.

- **A lack of role models** – A lack of leadership means designers are less likely to get exposed to designers on levels such as director, VP, staff, principal, etc. Therefore, it's harder for them to imagine being at that level themselves one day, or even just to know more about these roles, including what responsibilities and level of experience they normally have.

4. SHARED COMPETENCIES BETWEEN PRODUCT MANAGERS AND DESIGNERS

At some organizations, there is some overlap between the PM's competencies and the competencies that designers are often expected to have. For example, designers are often responsible for areas such as problem definition, research, testing, user stories and personas, advocating for the user, and thinking cross-product, but it may be that these areas are allocated to PMs in certain workplaces. When PMs are doing this type of work, designers are left with the skills areas that no one else in the organization has, which is visual design.

When your role is minimized in this way, to creating UI, you move further and further away from the arena of strategic decision-making. As a result, your impact and influence within the organization is reduced. Lower impact means less growth opportunities.

What adds complexity to this issue is that designers may often report to PMs, which potentially creates a conflict of interest. Theoretically, if a PM wants to have more influence, they could easily take over the responsibilities mentioned above and shut their designers out.

At organizations with shared competencies between PMs and designers, three things may happen:

- Designers may feel that they don't have much room to grow, since all they are left with is visual design. This may mean they become even more focused on their visual skills, which will hurt their long-term development beyond that organization.
- Different expectations of the design role at different companies could create confusion for designers on what skills they should

work on.

- Companies may hire more PMs instead of designers thinking that designers only cover the visual elements of product design. This would only reinforce the cycle of giving more power to the product function instead of design.

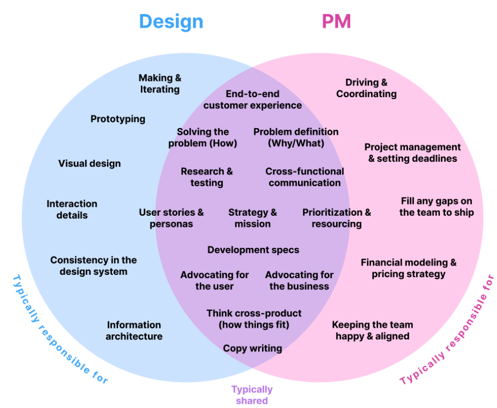


Figure 0.1. This diagram is made by Noah Levin, VP of design at Figma. [3] *License: CC BY 4.0.*[4]

5. THE LEGACY OF THE DRIBBBLIZATION OF DESIGN

For many years, we have seen design discussion being overly focused on visuals, leading to the “dribbblization of design,”[5] an obsession about how things look over how they work. This has created the wrong perception in the minds of both designers and businesses i.e., that product design = dribbble.

While designers are gradually recovering from that and understanding the importance of their impact on the business, the damage was already done in terms of how we are perceived by others. Now we have to work harder to prove that we can bring more value beyond making things look pretty.

Ironically, because we’ve been focused on improving our UI skills, we’ve neglected those skills that will help us change that perception and prove our value to businesses: communication, stakeholder management, ownership, strategic thinking, and hiring.

Without these competencies, and without being able to demonstrate our value to businesses, they won’t create growth opportunities for designers.

Helping designers to reach their full potential

All five challenges mentioned above are interconnected and, to a certain extent, they cause one another. They affect both sides – designers and companies – negatively:

- **Designers may feel dissatisfied with their career** and frustrated in their day-to-day work. It may lead them to switch jobs often.
- **Businesses lose money due to employee turnover**, which is shockingly expensive. According to Gallup, the cost of replacing an individual employee, depending on their seniority and other factors, can range between 50% and 200% of the employee's annual salary.[6] Considering the common salary range is $74,000 to $117,000 for product designers, according to Glassdoor, companies may be losing between $37,000 and $234,000 for each designer that leaves.
- **Businesses lose the potential performance** of their best individual contributors by forcing them into management (or to leave).
- **Businesses may lose money** by hiring more PMs instead of designers, who are often trained and capable of taking on this role, since the PM's salary is normally higher.

So, what does this all mean? Solving the challenges listed earlier would benefit both companies and designers. There are two things that could help in solving these issues – **providing designers with a career growth plan** and **improving their skills beyond pixels.** In this book, I provide the knowledge and tools to do exactly that. Doing so will also help designers to get promoted faster and it will indirectly educate their employers on the importance of career plans. Ultimately, this will mean they are more likely to recognize these plans and potentially incorporate them as a company-wide policy.

In addition, this book hopes to level the playing field for designers by making the techniques used in big tech more accessible to them. This is particularly important for those who work at small companies who may not have the resources or knowledge to provide them with the right tools for growth.

Designers who leverage the techniques I describe in this book will be more capable of helping their organizations fix their business problems, build better products, and, hopefully, solve the most urgent problems the world is facing today, making it more sustainable, healthy, and equal.

Why You Should Read This Book

I published my first book, *Solving Product Design Exercises*, in 2018. It helped tens of thousands of designers get jobs at companies in all industries and of all sizes, including MAANG companies like Meta, Amazon, Google. Not a week passes without me getting an email or message from a designer thanking me for creating such a highly-accessible resource with such a high return on investment (ROI).

In this book, I'd like to help people to tackle another pivotal part of their careers besides getting a job – getting promoted. We're going to do it by first understanding what is required to get promoted, building a growth plan, and then acting on it.

I've worked in senior positions at many different types of organizations, but this book isn't based solely on my own experience. I've collected and analyzed the internal documentation and processes of dozens of companies, spoken to many designers, and reflected on the careers of thousands of designers and open design positions.

The result of that work, presented in this book, will hopefully benefit designers in the following ways on the many different steps of their career.

Students and graduates:

- will be able to explore different design career paths.
- will learn the skills that aren't taught in school but which are required for a successful design career.
- will learn which opportunities to look for in order to have a better career and make the right choices early on.
- will become more prepared for real-world design work and, in doing so, differentiate themselves from other graduates.

Junior designers:

- will better understand their career options and set goals.
- can adjust their career strategy to reach these goals quicker.

- can build a growth strategy for their skills.
- will learn tools and techniques to use in their daily work.

Mid-level designers:

- will be able to assess what skills they need to grow to get promoted.
- can build an actionable career growth plan for the short- and mid-term.
- can increase their impact.
- will build a foundation to get promoted faster.

Senior designers:

- can explore which career path options they have.
- will get ideas for further growth and advancement.
- will learn new techniques and tools to increase their impact.
- can get a structured overview of the design career to help them mentor other designers effectively.

Solo designers will especially benefit from this book as it allows them to take ownership of their career development. If you are the only designer working at a company and you are managed by non-designers, this may feel particularly challenging as you'll lack design peers or design leadership to provide guidance or champion your needs within the organization.

If you're a manager, you can find dedicated materials that will help you to build growth plans for your team members, define design titles and leveling, and provide designers with educational materials at https://productdesigninterview.com/.

How to use this book

This book covers many topics and, as a result, it could feel overwhelming, especially if you decide to implement every single technique. On the other hand, you may find new perspectives or information on themes you're already familiar with.

For example, you might have already set an exact long-term career goal, but you're not sure how to get there. Or maybe you've already gone through a performance review with your manager and you know exactly what skills you need to improve but you're not sure how. So, feel free to jump to the parts that are relevant to you and find the knowledge that you can immediately apply.

Part I. Set Your Career Goals

1. Design Career Paths

Before you define your career goals and start building a growth plan, let's map out the possible career paths designers have. It will help us understand what options are open to you and then, later on, we can build an optimal way to achieve them.

Keep in mind that some of these options can be combined. For example, I started and ran a few businesses while doing freelance work. Some people also start a business or do freelance work while being employed full time.

Individual contributor (employee)

A long-term design career as an individual contributor (IC) was considered a failure until recently. At some point, a designer was expected to become a people manager. This was happening due to a lack of senior individual contributor positions. In the past few years, however, organizations have started to apply best practice from software engineering career paths to designers. Now it's much more common to see experienced designers in positions like staff and principal designer, especially at big companies.

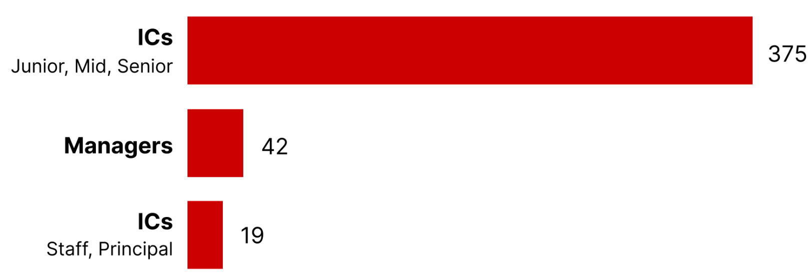


Figure 1.1. From 435 open design positions in the Bay Area, only 19 are for staff/principal roles vs. 42 for managers (February 2023). Considering many senior management positions aren't published publicly, the real ratio is probably much bigger.

Although currently there are more than double the amount of manager positions than staff/principal positions, the latter option will become more common.

Big companies are more likely to have positions for staff/principal, so by picking this path, you'll be more likely to work in larger organizations. This path also often allows you to switch to management.

People manager (employee)

Traditionally, this is considered a natural progression for designers, although many of them underestimate how different the people manager role is from being an individual contributor. It gradually has less and less to do with design.

Big companies that have staff and principal positions for ICs often don't consider becoming a manager as a promotion but as a separate career track. This approach has been adopted from engineering organizations, and I believe it will become the norm with time. For example, in their internal levelling document, Square explicitly says: "*Becoming a manager is not a promotion. […] We define a promotion as moving up a level. When an engineer first becomes a manager, they remain in the same level and move laterally to the engineering management track. Again, we don't want to incentivize becoming a manager solely for career advancement*."[7]

Airbnb's VP of design, Alex Schleifer, says a similar thing about Airbnb's design team approach: "*Management is not a promotion, but a separate track. ICs can continue to advance upward in their careers without any dotted lines leading up to them.*"[8] (By dotted lines he means without having people reporting to them).

Freelancer

In 2018, half of Google's workers were contractors.[9] In 2022, people reported flexibility as the third most important criteria for choosing a job after salary and career opportunities.[10] It's not surprising that freelance workforce is growing every year. As someone who worked as a freelancer for many years, I believe that, gradually, more and more work within organizations will be done by "free agents" – freelancers and contractors.

Naval Ravikant, the founder of AngelList (and Wellfound), predicts that the highest-quality work will become available in a gig fashion. "Free agents" will wake up in the morning to a few different jobs from people who they have worked with before or have been referred to them (a bit like Hollywood already works today). You decide to accept a project, organize a team, work on it, get paid, get rated, and then rest until you decide to take on your next project.

Product designers are uniquely positioned to be a good fit for this sort of future. We work mostly in tech-savvy organizations that, by default, have all the tools to outsource. In addition, design projects are often easy to outsource and can last just a few days, unlike software development that requires more effort to outsource.

Switching to a specialization (employee)

For designers, common specialization career paths are user research, motion design, service design, design operations, etc. Specialization may provide a more fulfilling career since you'll be able to do more of what you like.

The downsides are that:

- it limits you to working mostly within big organizations. For example, a startup with three designers won't need a dedicated design ops person.
- it limits you to working at organizations of a specific type. For example, a motion designer is more likely to be needed in a company with a mobile B2C app than for a B2B SaaS tool.
- it will provide less opportunities to become a manager. For example, to become a director of research you'd likely need to have a team of researchers to manage. This is unless you become a manager of all designers (and not only researchers), in which case it contradicts your initial goal of specializing in a specific area.
- it could mean you lose your more general skills that would be needed if you eventually decide to start a business.

Business owner

Some of the most successful tech companies are founded by designers:

- Airbnb is founded by industrial designers Joe Gebbia and Brian Chesky.

- Kickstarter was co-founded by Charles Adler, who worked as a designer, information architect, and creative designer beforehand.
- Pinterest is co-founded by Evan Sharp, who worked as a product designer at Facebook. In fact, even after becoming a billionaire, his LinkedIn title for his new venture is still: “Designer.”

Designers are well-positioned to be business owners since they understand users’ needs, have a grasp of marketing, and know how to build and ship.

I personally believe that starting a business is a higher calling, since this type of career provides the most potential for impact. In fact, not starting a business is the third most popular regret people express in regards to their career.[11]

Switching to product management (employee)

As we’ve seen in the *Why I Wrote This Book* chapter, many of the responsibilities of designers and PMs intersect. Therefore, designers who tend to be more analytical and business-oriented may feel naturally driven to switch to product management.

This is how Intercom defines the PM role: *"Identify the most valuable problems to solve, enable your team to ship and iterate high-quality solutions quickly, and validate market impact.”*[12]

Out of all the full-time employment options for designers, the PM role provides the biggest potential for future growth. Product positions have a higher ceiling than design positions for long-term promotions inside organizations. It’s more common to see a director or VP of product or even a CPO than similar positions for designers.

Being a PM is also a better starting point for launching a business compared to being a designer.

Comparing these design career paths

Ultimately, picking the right career path depends on your life goals. I had a chance to work in almost every position in this list, so I’ve prepared a comparison table that captures my experiences in case you're unsure which one is for you.

Parameters	IC	Mngr	Spec.	PM	Owner	F-lancer
Impact	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Low
Work-life balance	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	High
Long-term financial outcome (potential)	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Financial stability	High	High	Medium	High	Low	Low
Challenging work	Medium	High	Medium	High	High	Medium
Compensation	Low	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Growth opportunities	Low	High	Low	High	High	Low
Flexibility	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	High
Job security	High	High	Medium	High	Low	Low
Innovation	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Low
Learning	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Leadership	Low	High	Low	Medium	High	Low

Figure 1.2. A subjective comparison of design career paths.

In the next chapter, you'll find decision-making tools that will help you with your career choices.

2. Setting Career Goals

Dr. Stephen R. Covey, in his *New York Times* bestselling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* shares the principle: *"Begin with the end in mind*." Covey says, "*Effectiveness does not depend solely on how much effort we expend, but on whether or not the effort we expend is in the right jungle."*[13]

You might already have a very clear vision of where you'd like your career to go. Perhaps it's important for you to maximize your impact so that one day you can start your own business, or perhaps you love working with people so you definitely want to become a people manager. Or maybe you're still not sure what your long-term goal is. Regardless, you can benefit from these exercises for making career decisions. Through them, you will become more aware of your life goals, desires, and personal fit as well as which design career option will support these in the best way.

Picking your career direction

Exercise 1: Personal fit evaluation

		IC		Manager		Specialization		PM		Freelancer		Business owner	
Parameters	Importance	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score
Impact	5	3	15	5	25	5	25	5	25	3	15	5	25
Work-life balance	3	3	9	2	6	3	9	3	9	5	15	2	6
Financial outcome	2	3	6	5	10	5	10	5	10	5	10	5	10
Financial stability	3	5	15	5	15	5	15	5	15	2	6	2	6
Intellectual stimulation	5	5	25	3	15	5	25	5	25	5	25	5	25
Compensation	5	3	15	5	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	5	25
Growth opportunities	2	3	6	5	10	5	10	5	10	5	10	5	10
Flexibility	2	2	4	2	4	3	6	3	6	5	10	5	10
Job security	5	5	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	2	10	2	10
Innovation	1	3	3	2	2	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Learning	4	5	20	3	12	5	20	5	20	5	20	5	20
Reputation / Social status	4	3	12	5	20	5	20	5	20	3	12	5	20
Stability	3	5	15	5	15	5	15	5	15	2	6	2	6
Leadership	5	2	10	5	25	3	15	5	25	2	10	5	25
Total score			**180**		**209**		**225**		**235**		**179**		**203**

Figure 2.1. Career decision scoreboard, available at https://productdesigninterview.com/materials.

With this exercise, you can find out which types of careers may suit you as a designer. Take a look at the table above for reference and then build your own:

- **Step one:** List your values – the factors that are important to you in your career. For example:
  - Impact
  - Work-life balance
  - Long-term financial outcome
  - Financial stability
  - Intellectual stimulation (is it challenging work?)
  - Compensation
  - Growth opportunities
  - Flexibility
  - Job security
  - Innovation
  - Learning
  - Reputation/social status
  - Stability
  - Leadership
- **Step two:** Assign weight to each of these factors – rate each value from one to five based on its importance to you.
- **Step three:** List the potential career options – which would you like to consider? For example:
  - Individual contributor
  - People manager
  - Switching to a specialization (e.g., user research, motion design, service design, design ops, etc.)
  - Switching to product management
  - Business owner
  - Freelancer
- **Step four:** Rate each value for each career option – give a score from one to five based on how much this value is realized by this role. For example, the work-life balance for an IC could be

five, for a manager it could be three, and for a business owner it could be one. In the template, I've already pre-filled these numbers, so you can use it as a starting point and adjust according to your own views and career options.

- **Step five:** Calculate the weighted score – multiply the numbers for each value from steps two and four. Add up all values for each option to find the overall weighted score for each career path.

Now you can compare the career options. The higher the score, the more likely this career will be a good fit for you. Remember, as with any tool, it can't be relied on blindly and shouldn't be the only basis for your decision. Moreover, your values may change over time, so this table should be updated whenever you need to make a decision.

Making career decisions

Again, none of the techniques below should be solely relied on when you are making a decision, but each of them can be helpful in evaluating your decision from a different angle, and they can be especially useful when combined.

Exercise 2: Values comparison

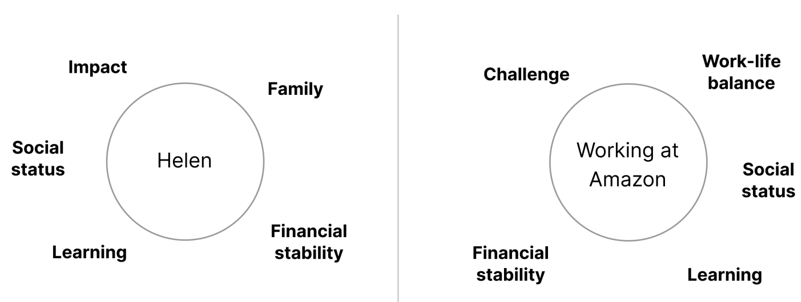


Figure 2.2. Values comparison exercise.

This technique is useful when you already have an option in mind for a change of job (e.g., switching to freelance, becoming a manager, etc.) and you're not sure if it's the right decision.

Last year, I wanted to start a new high-risk business venture with a new business partner. To ensure I was making the right choice, one of the things I did was consult with a career coach. He showed me this simple technique which I found useful at the time:

1. Take a blank sheet of paper, write down your name in the center, and draw a circle around it.
2. Write down all the values that are important to you around the circle. Examples might include things like challenge, community, inner peace, impact, personal growth, family, financial stability, etc. You can write down as many values as you like, but try to focus on the values that have most resonance for you.
3. Take another sheet of paper, write down the name of the decision you are trying to make in the center, and draw a circle around it. It could be a career switch ("Switching to freelance") or a new job offer which you're not sure if you should accept ("Working at Shopify").
4. Around the circle, write down what this new reality is going to bring (e.g., financial instability, challenge, personal growth, positive impact, poor work-life balance, etc.)
5. Compare the two circles and check to see how closely they align to evaluate how well this decision echoes your values.

This exercise was helpful for me. In addition to making the decision in the first place, it also helped me after the decision was made when we hit a bump in the road. When we had to make a significant change to the business, I found myself questioning if I still wanted to be part of it. Revisiting the results of this exercise helped me to see that despite the change, the outcomes still aligned with my values. It was a quick way to overcome this crisis and move forward with confidence.

If you're making a career decision right now, here's something you can learn from others' mistakes. If we look at the research, career regret is normally in the top two or three categories of life regret after romance and family,[14] while within the category of careers, the top three regrets, according to Harvard Business School, are: 1) taking the job for the money; 2) not quitting earlier; and 3) not starting your own business. [15]

Exercise 3: Visualization

Another technique you can use if you're deciding on a specific career option is a visualization. I learned it from a friend who is a highly successful entrepreneur. When I told him about a new business idea I was about to pursue, he suggested evaluating it not just on a business potential scale but on a personal scale. Here's how it works.

Imagine yourself in a few years' time, assuming the career path you're considering worked out and you successfully became a PM, a people manager, started your own business, etc. Now, imagine what your day looks like:

- **Who are the people you're interacting with?** It could be co-workers in the company you're working at like designers, developers, and PMs. But it also could be business owners or product leaders if you're a freelancer, or farmers and restaurant owners if you've decided to open a marketplace connecting the two.
- **What is the work you're doing?** Is it designing things in Figma, sending emails, managing tickets in Jira, being on back-to-back Zoom meetings, mentoring younger designers, or talking to non-profit CEOs?
- **Where are you?** Are you in a downtown office, at WeWork, in an Airbnb in Cairo, or working from home?
- **How are you feeling?** Are you exhausted, excited, bored, challenged, or stressed?

Feel free to add any additional details to that image beyond what is prompted by these questions. Now evaluate if that's the life you want to have.

When you're doing this exercise, make sure to validate your assumptions as much as possible about this new role to make sure you base your visualization on fact rather than fantasy.

Exercise 4: Job offer comparison

Criteria	Weight	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3		Co 1 Calc	Co 2 Calc	Co 3 Calc
Getting Stuff Done								
Easy to Ship Things	7	6	5	2		42	35	14
No Politics	7	6	8	6		42	56	42
Good PM	5	6	6	10		30	30	50
Good Devs	4	8	8	3		32	32	12
Quality of Life								
Quality of People	10	10	10	7		100	100	70
Social Life	9	4	10	8		36	90	72
Work / Life Balance	9	8	8	10		72	72	90
Flexibility in Work Hours	6	7	8	10		42	48	60
Growth								
Growth Potential	9	8	8	2		72	72	18
Mentorship	7	8	4	4		56	28	28
Comp								
Compensation	5	10	9	6		50	45	30
Confidence in Co Future	6	10	6	7		60	36	42
Co Growth Potential	4	4	10	6		16	40	24

Figure 2.3. Job offer comparison chart by Joel Califa.

When you have a few job offers but you can't decide which one to take, you can use the same approach as in Exercise 1 and create a decision scoreboard comparing them.

You can follow the same five steps, but you may want to use different criteria. Joel Califa, the VP of design at Heap, whom I interviewed in my previous book, used these criteria during his job hunt:

- **Getting things done**
  - Easy to ship things
  - No politics
  - Good PM
  - Good developers
- **Quality of life**

- Quality of people
- Social life
- Work-life balance
- Flexibility in work hours

- **Growth**
  - Growth potential
  - Mentorship
- **Compensation**
  - Compensation
  - Confidence in company's future
  - Company growth potential
- **Satisfying work**
  - General problem space
  - Product that resonates
  - The thing I'd be working on
  - Level of impact
- **Future success**
  - Company brand recognition
  - Role/title
  - Path to leadership
  - Flexible future

It will be challenging to get all of this information about the roles before you actually start working there, but you could make your best guess by doing research, asking your interviewer questions, and asking people who already work there.

You can also use this list for your due diligence process before accepting an offer.

Here's a link to a ready-to-use template: https://productdesigninterview.com/materials.

Exercise 5: Decision evaluation with a catalyst

If you have a binary decision to take (e.g., “Should I take this job or not?” or, “Should I take the job offer from Shopify or from Bumble?”), here is another research-based technique that I’ve found useful.[16]

In this technique, we’re going to flip a coin. But we’re not going to let the coin toss determine what happens. Instead, we’ll use the coin as a catalyst to uncover your true inclinations. Rather than relying on the coin to make the choice for you, this approach provokes an emotional response that may reveal your actual desires.

Choose what decision heads or tails indicates. Flip a coin, and as the coin determines the outcome, focus on your immediate emotions. A feeling of relief or contentment suggests that the decision reached by the coin aligns with your innermost preferences. However, if unease or doubt creeps in when you see the result, this could signal that your heart lies with the alternative option. Utilizing the coin toss in this manner enables you to tap into your subconscious and make a less technical but more intuitive choice that resonates with your true aspirations.

Exercise 6: Moving you toward your goal

One technique for more easily reaching long-term goals and avoiding becoming overwhelmed by a big goal is the ABZ framework which Shaan Puri shared in *My First Million* podcast.[17]

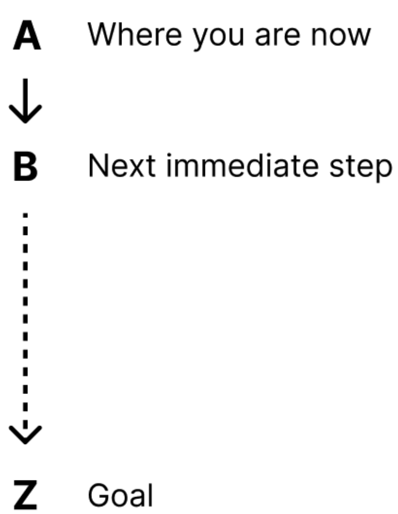


Figure 2.4. ABZ framework.

Here's how it works. Identify where you are now (A), the goal (Z), and the next immediate step you have to take in order to reach that goal (B). You don't have to know every single step between A and Z; you only need to focus on B, the next step. Once you reach B, you repeat the process to determine the next step, and so on.

From what we determined above, for most long-term goals (Z), the next step (B) will be becoming senior designer.

You can leverage this technique to zoom in on the steps. For example, in order to understand how you become a senior designer (Z), your next step (B) is going to be to understand what the requirements are for being a senior designer. And that's exactly what we're going to do in Part II of the book.

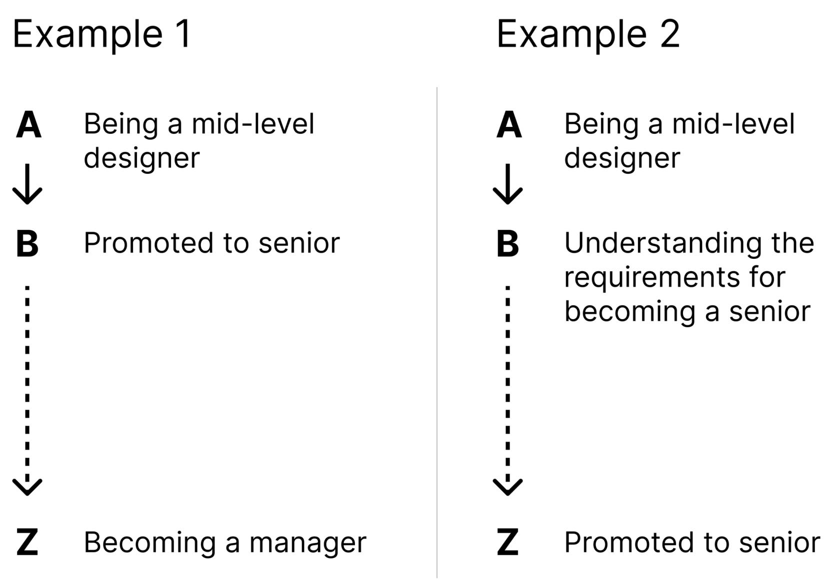


Figure 2.5. ABZ framework examples.

Further learning

- For a great guide on career decisions, search online for *How to Make a Careers Decision*. This is a guide created by the Oxford University Careers Service.[18]
- For a more impactful career, check out project 80,000 Hours.[19] This is roughly the number of hours in your career, and this project

explores how we can make the best use of it by solving the world's most pressing problems.

- To reflect more on your career at your current company, search for *Questions to Kickstart a Design Career Conversation* by Mig Reyes, director of design at Instagram.[20]
- To evaluate if it might be the time to leave your current job, search for the article *5 Signs It's Time to Quit Your Job*[21] by Cate Huston, engineering director at DuckDuckGo.

3. Why Become a Senior Designer?

The immediate and obvious outcome of becoming a senior designer is better compensation. But when it comes to your long-term career strategy, becoming senior is highly beneficial to almost any long-term career goal.

Let's take a look at each option, depending on your career goal.

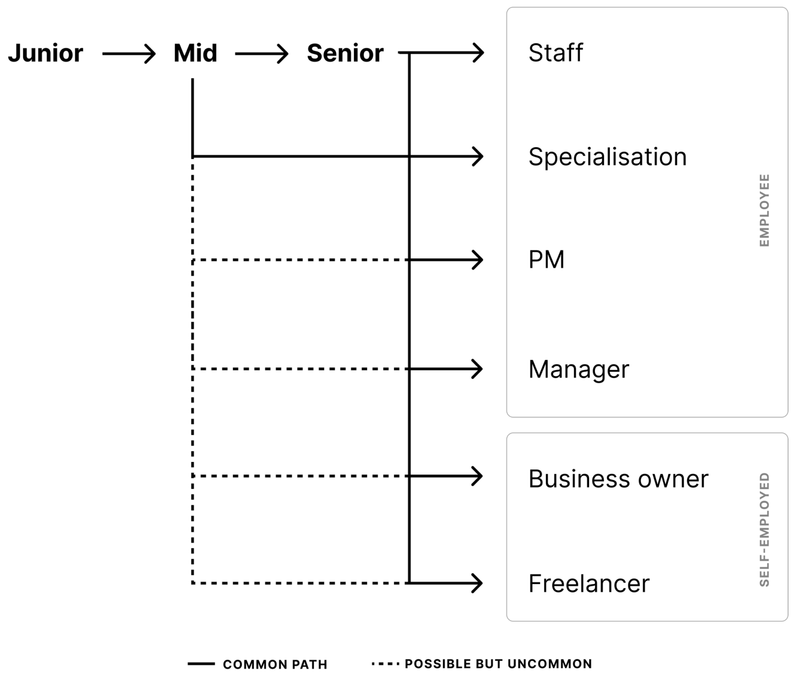


Figure 3.1. Design career paths.

Let's look at what this figure tells us in more depth.

SENIOR DESIGNER IS A REQUIRED STEP FOR THE MOST COMMON CAREER PATHS

- **Individual contributor** – In order to get promoted to staff designer or principal designer, being a senior designer is a must.
- **People manager** – In most cases, one needs to go through being a senior designer to become a design manager. At companies where the manager role doesn't require hands-on design work, becoming a manager is also possible from a mid-level position.

However, it's rare and requires a designer's soft skills to be highly developed.

At organizations that have a staff track, a switch between management and IC is often possible (for example, a principal can often become a manager and vice versa).

SENIOR DESIGNER IS A GREAT STARTING POINT FOR MOST OTHER CAREER OPTIONS TOO

In contrast to becoming a staff or principal designer, becoming a senior designer is not a must if you want to go freelance, own your own business, specialize, or become a product manager. However, it will put you in a much better position to be successful at the next step. To illustrate that, as someone who has worked in most of these roles, I mapped out the minimum requirements in terms of design competencies for each career option based on my experience.

Skill/Career	Jun	Mid	Senior	PM	F-lancer	Owner
Design craft	3	4	5	1	4	4
Communication	2	3	4	5	4	5
Collaboration	2	3	4	4	3	4
Ownership	2	3	4	3	5	5
Strategy	1	2	4	5	3	5
Mentorship	1	2	3	2	1	4
Leadership	1	2	3	4	3	5
Community and self-marketing	1	2	3	3	5	5

Figure 3.2. Estimated competency levels for different design career paths (we're going to talk in-depth about each of the competencies listed in this table in the following chapters).

- **Freelancer/contractor** – Theoretically, designers can switch to freelance at any time. However, if they've reached the level of competency of a senior designer, they'll be more likely to find clients, communicate with them efficiently, manage their administrative work and workload, and provide a good design service.
- **Business owner** – Depending on the business type, managing a business may not have anything to do with the craft of design, but all the other skills a senior designer requires will be crucial: understanding business strategy, communicating effectively, knowing how to sell your ideas and vision, leading people, shipping fast, operating independently, etc. Being a senior designer will prepare you better for all of these challenges.
- **Switching to product management** – PMs require all the non-craft skills designers have on the highest level. This job is all about vision, strategy, collaboration, and making things happen. For PMs, these competencies are crucial and so being a senior designer is a better starting point for them.
- **Switching to a specialization** – This is the only path that can be taken relatively easily without becoming a senior designer.

CONSIDER THE COST OF INACTION

At this point, it might sound like becoming a senior designer is a no-brainer, no matter what long-term goal you have. This is certainly true for IC and management positions. If your goal is to become a freelancer, business owner, or to switch between careers, however, it would only be a no-brainer if you had an infinite amount of time, which isn't the case.

So, you need to weigh the pros and cons. The cost of staying at the company for another one or two years to improve your skills could be too high compared to making the switch now and learning by doing as you go. Here are the two pieces of advice I would give:

- **If there's a specific opportunity available, consider it even if you think you're not ready.** For example, I left my first full-time job to start my business when I met two people and we all knew we wanted to build something together. Once we had a plan, I quit. After a couple of years working with them, I learned more about building a business than I would have learned if I'd stayed at the company.

- **You may be ready before you realize it**. Sometimes, designers want to make a change in the future which they could easily make right now. I remember interviewing a design candidate and I asked her what she ideally wanted to happen in her career. She said that eventually she wanted to relocate to a different country and live there for a few years. She was happy to work for us, even though we couldn't promise relocation. I knew that she could easily find a company who would sponsor her visa now and encouraged her to do that. A few months later, she sent me an email from Amsterdam after her successful relocation thanking me for pushing her to act and not to wait.

SENIOR DESIGNER IS A SAFE STRATEGY IF YOU'RE UNSURE ABOUT YOUR FUTURE CAREER PATH

It is common for designers not to see the trajectory of their career beyond the next role, which makes it harder to plan effectively. If, after going through the exercises in the previous chapters, you're still not sure which career options you're aiming for, progress toward a senior position following the advice in this book. It will not only keep your options open, but it will bring you closer to achieving all of them, since, as you've seen for most career paths, the skills of a senior designer will be beneficial anyway. As you can see from Figure 3.3, the role of senior designer is in demand.

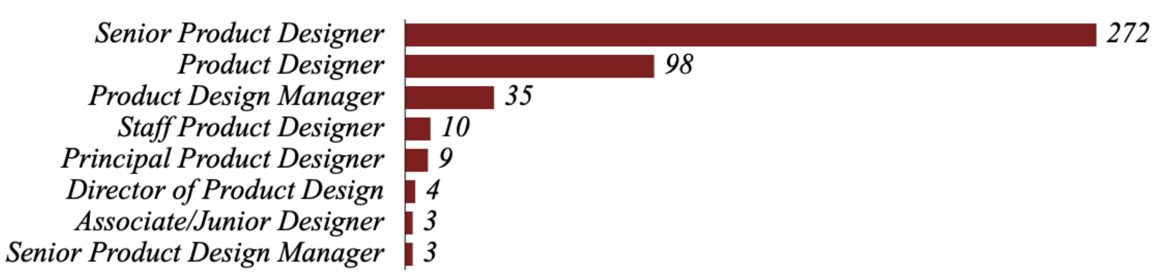


Figure 3.3. Split of open design positions in San Francisco and Bay area in February 2023 (434 positions in total). Senior designer is the level that's most in demand in these companies.

Moreover, if your end goal is to be self-employed as a freelancer or a business owner, from my experience, working at a company could provide you with important benefits:

- **Getting exposure to organizational processes** – For future freelancers, working at a company will help you to understand how organizations (your future clients) operate and make decisions. For future business owners, observing internal operations and processes can be valuable in teaching you about the problems companies commonly experience. My first book was written as a result of the problems I was exposed to while working at a company and interviewing designers, as I realized they couldn't properly prepare due to lack of resources and tools. Asana, a task management tool, was created by Dustin Moskovitz after he worked on solving a similar problem on an internal work management tool while working for Meta (back then it was still called Facebook).
- **A well-known company name on your CV is a great door-opener for a self-employed person** – Clients will be more likely to book you as a freelancer, investors to take the meeting or invest, and customers to trust your brand. For example, despite the controversy around the company's financials, having WeWork on my CV was highly beneficial. Yes, the company is now known mostly for the scandal around its failed IPO, but also for setting an industry standard for the design of the second largest asset class in the world (commercial real estate).

FURTHER LEARNING

- For advice on picking a particular size of company to work at, search for *Design Fund – A Designer's Guide to Working in Tech.*[22]

Part II. Understand the Career Path

4. Design Titles and Levels

There could be a whole book written just about titles and levels inside organizations, but that's not what you're here for. Instead, I've given you an overview below of the basics of how design titles work. This will help us to determine the level of skills required for each of them.

Design titles

Design titles help companies to define roles and responsibilities internally, and they provide employees with a clear way to grow and a sense of career development. Externally, titles help companies to hire candidates with appropriate skills.

There are no strict rules for how many and what titles companies must have. Below, I've prepared a list of the most common design titles. I've also analyzed 400-plus open, full-time design positions in the San Francisco and Bay area to see how many years of experience companies require for each level on average. Some of the management positions didn't have enough data, so I've had to add my estimation:

Individual contributors:

- Junior product designer (normally this is seen as a first full-time design job)
- Product designer (4 years)
- Senior product designer (5 years)
- Staff product designer (7.5 years)
- Principal product designer (10 years)

People managers:

- Product design manager (6 years)
- Senior product design manager (estimated 6-9 years)
- Director of product design (estimated 9-12 years)

- VP of product design (estimated about 15 years)

Here are some things to keep in mind about titles:

- **Companies call the product design role different things** – For example, product design roles are called UX designer at Amazon, interaction designer at Google, and experience designer at Airbnb, while all three are doing similar work. In this book, I'll refer to these positions as product designer or designer for the sake of consistency.
- **The number of different titles is normally dependent on the company's size** – The bigger the company, the more likely they'll have a wider range of roles. Bigger companies are more likely to have senior roles like principal, director, or VP, but they might also have additional layers of seniority like senior director or wider-ranging titles like fellow or distinguished (IC roles that are more senior than principal).
- **Some companies use the design lead title for ICs and some use it for manager positions** – This can be confusing. That's why I didn't include it in my list of titles. In my list, design lead equals staff designer or design manager, depending on whether it's a management or an IC position.
- **Designers on the same professional level may have different titles at different companies** – The bigger the company, the lower the title will be. For example, someone who was a senior designer at a 30-employee company doesn't necessarily become a senior designer at Google. And this also works the other way around – a design manager at MAANG moving to a startup may become a director.

For the sake of our goal in this book – to grow your skills, no matter what title you'll be calibrated with at your company – the techniques we're going to talk about will universally help you to become a better designer.

Grade	Management	Individual contributor

9	VP	Fellow
8	Senior director	Distinguished
7	Director	Senior principal
6	Senior manager	Principal
5	Manager	Staff
4		Senior
3		Mid
2		Junior
1		Intern

Figure 4.1. Titles are often used to create more equal and structured compensation at organizations with a dual track (ICs and managers).

Levels

Bigger companies, with organized HR processes in addition to titles, have an internal grade system for employee leveling. All MAANG companies have it.

Levels have neutral names like L3 or M6, where L stands for level for ICs and M stands for managers. These levels are only known to the employee and their manager.

One title may include a few levels. For example, designers at Coursera have one level for associate designer (L1) but two levels for all further IC positions: L2 and L3 for product designers, L4 and L5 for senior designers, and L6 and L7 for principal designers.[23] VMware have these levels: PD1, PD2, PD3, Senior, Staff, Staff 2, Senior Staff, Distinguished.[24]

Such levels help companies to:

- create a more structured compensation system. They can tie a level to a title and define, for example, that a design manager and a staff designer will be on the same grade and, as a result, compensated comparably.

- provide an opportunity for employees to get promoted without a title change and do it in a more private way.

Levels are also helpful for companies that declare they have a “no titles” policy. In this way, all designers can be called product designers, although each of them will still have the opportunity to get compensated based on their experience and impact.

For simplicity, in my framework, I’ll use titles without levels, so each title will refer to just one level.

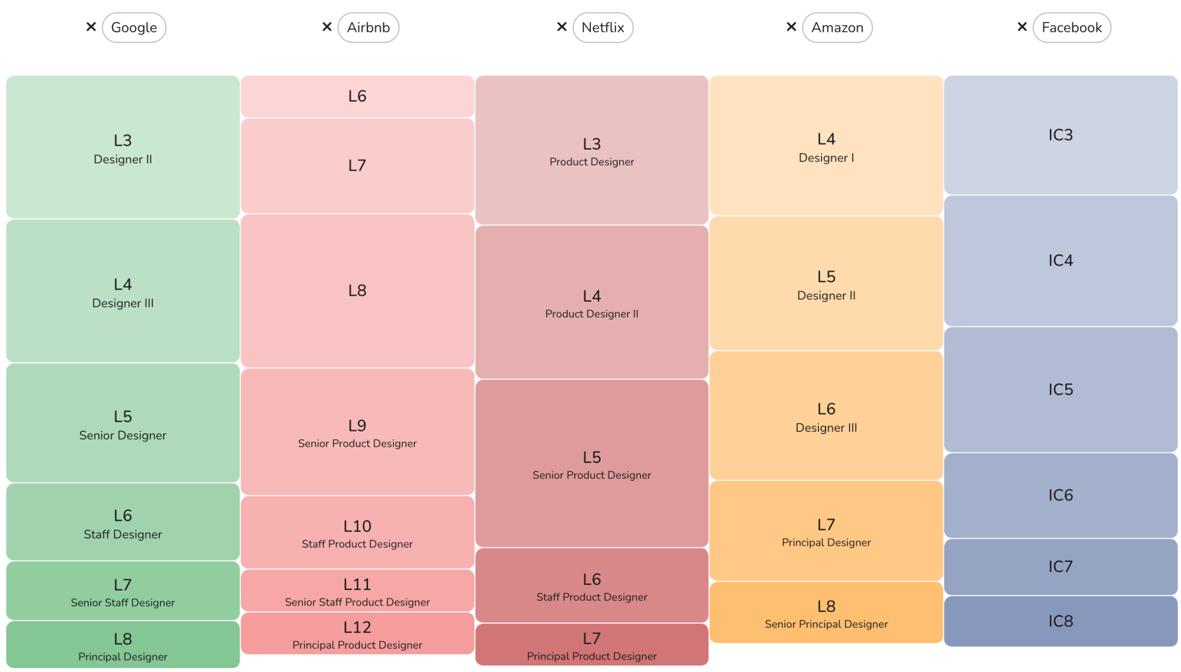


Figure 4.2. ICs levels compared between companies via Levels.fyi.

Seniority differences between designers

The initial title calibration when joining a company is affected by skills, years of experience, the company’s needs, your ability to negotiate, your previous titles, etc. When you’re already inside the company, promotions are normally affected by self-review and reviews from peers and your manager. We’re going to talk about promotions in more depth in the *Getting Promoted* chapter.

Eventually, the most important predictor of a designer's seniority is **the size of their impact** and how it benefits the organization. Impact consists of a designer's influence on themselves, the product, the business, and the team. This is a factor that is mostly within a designer's control, and so we're going to focus on it within the book. The skills and competencies we're going to discuss in later chapters aim to increase this impact.

For now, let's look at an overview of the high-level differences between various seniority levels:

	Junior	**Mid**	**Senior**	**Staff**	**Principal**
Range of impact	Self	Team	Org	Company	Industry
Competency	Basic (being developed)	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	Master
Recognition	Contributor, executor, learner	Contributor	Solid contributor	Org/company leader	Industry leader
Task difficulty and scope	Simplest routine tasks with limited scope, working on a task or a small feature level	Somewhat difficult tasks with moderate scope, designing a feature or a flow	Difficult tasks with diverse scope, designing a flow or a project	Highly complex issues, designing a cross-area project or a product	Exceptionally difficult, unique, and significant challenges, designing a new advanced product or special initiatives end-to-end
Involvement	Learns and contributes to the work	Does the work	Leads the work, sometimes initiates work	Leads, initiates, oversees work	Leads, initiates, oversees work
Tasks type	Tactical	Tactical	Strategic	Strategic	Strategic
Project ambiguity	Well-defined	Somewhat defined	Not well-defined	Ambiguous projects	Highly ambiguous projects

Cost of failure	Additional review/feedback cycle from a more senior designer.	Delays in development sprints	Delays in shipping a feature or a product.	Delays affecting the org's roadmap	Affects the performance of design operations or the company roadmap

Figure 4.3. The differences in core levels/titles

As you can see, what makes a designer senior is taking on projects with a bigger scope, completing them independently, with little guidance, and, as a result, having a bigger impact on the business. That will require application of non-craft skills and involve collaboration, presenting work efficiently, providing and accepting feedback, and mentoring others.

Let's review an example of what type of work each level of designer may do. Let's say a company has a mobile app that helps people to treat common physical pain issues (back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, etc.) They discover that back pain is the third most common reason for employees to take sick days, which causes losses for companies, and they decide to build a B2B offering. Here is how tasks may be split between designers:

Junior

- Transitions the app elements that stay the same or require only minor design adjustments from the B2C to the B2B app (e.g., FAQs, About, Contact Us, and Support pages). Works under supervision and uses predefined solutions and processes.

Mid

- Adjusts highly important main flows existing in the B2C product that have to be redesigned for B2B customers, such as login flow, user onboarding, and payments.
- Designs new flows and product areas of medium importance.
- Designs a new landing page for the ad campaign for the B2B product. Works with PMs on optimizing the sales funnels.

Senior

- With little guidance, designs challenging features for the B2B offering that are essential for its success. For example: a) the new app area dedicated to people spending a lot of time sitting; and b) company owner onboarding. Collaborates, presents their vision, and gets buy-in from PMs and the marketing department.
- Creates a backlog of future ideas and effectively presents them to the PMs.
- Works with the product department to map out the end-to-end employee experience of the B2B app to identify the new features that need to be built.

Staff

- Takes ownership of the design of the manager dashboard, a new web product for company owners that allows them to manage their subscription and get insights on the usage.
- Gathers the requirements from other designers about new elements the design system has to include and updates it accordingly. Communicates back to designers and updates the documentation. Mentors junior designers on how to use the design system efficiently for their tasks (often the responsibility of a less senior designer depending on the company size).

Principal

- Initiates and implements two experimental projects:
    - Designs a one-of-a-kind flow helping company managers to apply AI algorithms and predict which employees may have back pain so as to offer them a preventive plan. Identifies that such a digital product was never created before and initiates registering a patent by working with the company’s legal team and an external patent attorney.
    - Provides users (employees) with an option to get a back pain treatment kit of physical products (heat pad, massage gun, acupressure mat, etc.). It’s delivered to

their home or office within two hours with a pre-paid return shipping label. Designs the end-to-end experience, consults with the company's medical advisor on which products to include, and works with PMs to set up a test measuring the feature's success.

This example is relevant assuming the company has roles from junior to principal and at least a dozen designers. With just a few designers, the range of responsibility compresses and mid-level designers may take on responsibility for many of the features mentioned between junior and staff levels. In that case, they would complete these tasks less successfully and with more guidance and support from the product department.

How companies describe different levels of seniority

To get more of a sense of how companies expect each level of seniority to perform, let's take a look at the phrases often used in competency definitions for each level (more about this in the next chapter):

Junior:

- Learns to …
- Uses good judgment in …
- Familiar with …
- Seeks guidance and mentoring from …
- Proactively learns more about …
- Shows an understanding of …
- Comfortable working on …
- Limited direct experience of …
- Theoretical knowledge of …
- Maintaining an acceptable level of …

Mid:

- Comfortable using …
- Considers the …
- Some working knowledge of …
- Has a solid understanding of …
- Incorporates …
- Consistently demonstrates …
- Solid display of …

Senior:

- Displays an expert level in …
- Identifies overlaps and gaps in …
- Able to consider potential connections or collisions between …
- Demonstrates best practice and depth of skill with applying principles of …
- Possesses a strong …
- Suggests new initiatives and approaches to …
- Leads and directs …
- Demonstrates a deep dedication to …

Staff:

- Differentiates themselves by their ability to …
- Demonstrates a well-rounded ability to …
- Contributes actively to the execution of …
- Exercises independent judgment in …
- Proactively contributes to the improvement of …
- Proactively works toward maintaining quality across the …
- Proactively takes care of the future of …

Principal:

- Consistently displays excellence in …

- Demonstrates, articulates, and teaches a high skill level of …
- Creates work that raises our bar for …
- Proactively identifies …
- Assists and educates fellow designers in …
- Defines the strategy for …
- Influences …
- Regularly evaluates …
- Advocates for and educates …
- Proven track record of impactfully using …
- Coaches other designers on …
- Takes a leadership role in …
- Mentors others from across the organization in …

Manager:

- Effectively coaches others to …
- Supports others in …
- Actively leads others and facilitates on …
- Fully leverages each encounter with …
- Takes the lead and solves …
- Sets goals and objectives at …
- Represents the group of …
- Is an inspirational leader in …
- Helps people grow by …
- Reminds designers of …
- Is a role model to …
- Understands the personal and professional objectives of …
- Fosters the career growth of …
- Drives discussions on …
- Thinks a step or two ahead on …

Senior Manager

- Leads challenging stakeholders into …
- Able to connect between …
- Assumes responsibility for …
- Builds better processes on …
- Effectively influences …
- Independently leads …
- Motivates others to …
- Initiates improvements of …
- Understands and teaches how …
- Rationalizes and motivates …
- Consistently delivers clarity for …
- Proactively asks for feedback from …
- Communicates and organizes …

Director

- Empowers teams with …
- Grows the skills of others by …
- Presents the overarching ideas of …
- Helps to break down silos within and across …
- Has a sense of responsibility and obligation to …
- Proactively shares information across …
- Communicates regularly and effectively with …
- Demonstrates excellent judgment on …
- Confidently guides the strategy and execution of …
- Defines the vision for …
- Establishes and maintains a …

VP

- Masterfully guides the organization to …
- Defines and sets the standard for …
- Delegates various operational aspects of …

- Identifies new areas of …
- Displays consistent excellence in …
- Manages relationship with the executive team on …
- Anticipates challenges for …
- Becomes aware of any lapse in …
- Removes barriers to collaboration across …
- Ultimately accountable for …
- Deeply understands what is happening in …
- Ensures the right balance of …
- Establishes and maintains a …

From the way these titles are described, we can already get a sense of what level of responsibility and influence is required for each of them. In the next chapter, we'll look at the exact skills by which designers are measured.

5. Design Competencies

Competencies matrix documents

Now that we've got a sense of the general definition of each of the titles, let's take a look at the specific competencies that companies require designers to have. Companies often describe these in competencies matrix documents, using them internally and sometimes even making them public.

Competencies	Associate	Mid-Level *In addition to Associate*	Senior *In addition to Mid-Level*	Staff *In addition to Senior*	Principal *In addition to Staff*
Product & competition	• Understand your product • Know our competitors, their solutions, and gaps	• Consistently leverage knowledge of your product area and competition to make decisions	• Show deep understanding of your team's products and competitors in your solution design	• Deeply understand your group's products and competition	• Deeply understand the entire product and competition
Customer understanding	• Know Intercom's target customers and buyer personas • Know who's using your product, their jobs, tasks, use cases, and goals	• Be hungry for new and deeper insights about customers to deeply understand their needs, make decisions, and increase confidence • Leverage knowledge from Sales and Support to better understand and serve customers		• Identify gaps and opportunities in customer understanding for your group that drive real business impact	
Strategy & vision	• Know the strategy and vision for our company, product, your program, your group, and your team • Work toward the vision for your product area	• Actively contribute to your team's strategy and roadmaps • Frame your work to relate back to the long-term goals of the product	• Grow your influence on the future vision for your product area • Actively plan for how your designs will help us surpass our competitors	• Contribute to the group strategy • Collaborate with group leads to turn the group strategy into a product vision	• Actively contribute to program and group product strategies
Commercial thinking	• Know the metrics and outcomes we aim for in your product area	• Consistently focus on driving outcomes, not just outputs • Influence how your team defines success metrics • Drive adoption for your product	• Take ownership of your team reaching business outcomes • Pair with your Product Marketing Manager to influence how you bring your product to market	• Steer the group's design execution toward reaching business outcomes • Actively influence how your group brings products to market	• Actively contribute to shaping commercial goals and outcomes for the group

Figure 5.1. What a design competencies matrix often looks like. Example of some of the competencies by Intercom[25] (not a full list), licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Competencies	Associate	Mid-Level *In addition to Associate*	Senior *In addition to Mid-Level*	Staff *In addition to Senior*	Principal *In addition to Staff*
Understanding problems	• Always start design work by understanding customer and business problems	• Understand the underlying motivations for our customers • Challenge and influence your team's understanding of the problem		• Identify new problems and opportunities for your group to solve	
Research	• Use existing research to inform your solutions	• Pair with your researcher, analyst, or PM to do research • Talk to your customers regularly	• Lead quantitative and qualitative research	• Question and fill knowledge gaps for our strategic projects	
System design	• Know the fundamentals of system design • Talk to colleagues outside of your team affected by your work • Structure information coherently	• Design coherent systems, not just interfaces • Integrate your system with our broader product • Understand the technical system, work around constraints with engineers	• Solve complex system design challenges	• Design connected, modular systems that help us move faster in the future • Solve complex system design debt	• Design and rationalise our most foundational systems
Diverging & converging	• Explore different ways to solve problems • Identify pros & cons, questions, implications	• Explore a broad range of solutions in Interconcepts and detailed designs • Involve cross-functional partners in explorations • Narrow down to the best solution using strong rationale	• Diverge and converge quickly and effectively • Practice first principles thinking for larger projects or when innovation is a requirement	• Drive divergence and convergence for strategic work at the group level	
Interaction design	• Use our design system • Follow fundamentals of good UI design	• Reflect our design principles in your designs • Design holistic flows, not individual screens • Choose design patterns based on strong rationale • Reflect our content design principles in your UX writing • Contribute to our design system	• Design simple and elegant interfaces for complex systems • Refine the details of interaction design to achieve a high level of polish • Acting as a steward for our design system	• Drive improvements to our design system and tooling	
Visual design	• Use our design system • Follow fundamentals of good UI design	• Use layout, hierarchy, typography, color, and motion based on a strong rationale • When appropriate, align your designs with our brand guidelines	• Design interfaces that are functional, beautiful, and delightful • Raise the visual design bar in a way that it creates business value	• Drive improvements to our product's overall visual design	
Prototyping	• Create simple prototypes to test flows	• Create detailed prototypes to test microinteractions • Know which prototyping method best suits your situation	• Pair with an engineer to find design solutions through functional prototypes	• Create or advocate for tools and resources to help the entire design team become better at prototyping	
Shipping	• Work closely with engineers to understand and work around constraints • Do quality assurance by testing what's built and fixing bugs with your team	• Evaluate your work by what's shipped, not what's in the design file • Work closely with your PM to decide on best way to scope your project • Make smart trade-offs that balance quality, speed of delivery, and learning—shipping is only the beginning	• Improve the way your team ships product • Commit improvements directly in code		

Figure 5.1.1. What a design competencies matrix often looks like. Example of some of the competencies by Intercom[26] (not a full list), licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Competencies matrices appeared in software engineering organizations before design departments. These organizations are more mature – they've existed for longer, they employ more people, and they have more visibility and perceived importance compared to design organizations – so they've had to create more order in their internal calibration and provide engineers with clear career progression guidance. In the last few years, these documents have been adopted by design organizations as well. If the organization you work for has these documents, you'll probably know about it. Although, it's still worth asking your manager if a competencies list exists and whether it's accessible to employees.

Companies are more likely to have a document describing design levels when:

- they become bigger and have more structured HR processes.
- their design organization is more mature.
- they give more attention to design.
- a more experienced person is in charge of the design function.

Competencies matrix documents often include:

- **List of titles/levels**. For example, for Zendesk, it's product design assistant, associate product designer, product designer, senior product designer, and lead product designer.
- **List of competencies**. This might be things like craft, communication, collaboration, strategy, mentorship, etc.
- **General level description**. For example, here's a description of the junior designer role at BuzzFeed: *"Associate Product Designers work with guidance while actively seeking mentorship, focusing on learning established processes and design patterns. They take ownership of small and mid-size projects. They work frequently with their manager to receive direction on more challenging or ambiguous problems and to define growth opportunities."*
- **Competency description for each level**. For example, this is how Figma describes communications competency for level four designers: "*You're a strong storyteller and able to influence and persuade at any level of the organization (e.g. to executives). You're able to communicate candidly and kindly, and build rapport with all kinds of work partners – even difficult stakeholders. You coach other designers/writers on written, verbal, and interpersonal skills."*

Industry-average competencies

I've reviewed the competency documents of about 50 companies, including Intercom, Coursera, Figma, Etsy, Medium, Dropbox, Square, and Zendesk**.**

I analyzed them to see what most companies measure, evaluate, and promote designers on.

As you can imagine, not all competencies are of equal importance to employers. It's much more critical, as a designer, that you are proficient in design communication than advocacy, for instance. To help you better understand which competencies to focus on, I've arranged them in order of importance below, starting with those around the craft of design. I did this based on how often employers mention these competencies in their competencies documents.

These companies normally use competencies matrix documents for building growth and promotion plans for their designers. That's exactly why we want to look at them. Later in the book, we're going to build a growth plan based on what these companies require. Since we're not just going to look at the competencies matrix for a single company but an industry average, you can be confident that your growth plan will be universal and cover most companies you may want to join as a product designer.

Remember that companies don't want designers to improve because of their altruistic beliefs. Their goal is to grow their designers so they can **bring more value to their business**. Promotion and career growth is correlated with the amount of value a designer can provide an organization with.

Here is the list of design competencies:

- **Craft**
  - Visual design
  - UX design
  - Tools and processes
- **Communication**
  - Communicating design
  - Feedback
  - Written and oral communication
- **Collaboration**
  - Stakeholder management
  - Interpersonal skills

- **Ownership**
  - Shipping
  - Independence
- **Strategy**
- **Mentorship**
- **Leadership**
  - Hiring
  - People management (irrelevant for non-managers)
- **Community**
  - Culture
  - Advocacy

Now, let's talk about each of the competencies to understand why companies require them and what exact skills they include.

Craft

Sometimes called: technical skills, execution.

Design craft is the obvious skill to have to succeed as a designer. Although, many designers at the beginning of their career may falsely assume that it's the main and only competency.

As you can see from the list above, hard skills (craft) are just one category out of eight, while the rest are soft skills. No one gets promoted purely for learning every possible Figma trick. Yet, most discussions in the design industry are still around tools and craft, even though it's just a fraction of what designers are required to be proficient at.

When Mike Davidson was VP of design at Twitter, he intentionally made technical skills, empathy, and vision account for only 25% of the total employee evaluation formula[27] in order to stress how important the other elements were (in his list, three other pillars were: getting things done, creating strong relationships, and improving the team, each responsible for 25%).

Although it's impossible to progress in your design career without strong craft skills, the same is true if you lack soft skills. The tendency is for craft-led designers to be overtrained in hard skills and undertrained in soft skills.

The craft competency is the only one that is specific for product designers, while the rest are also valid for other design roles. If you're a UX researcher, in design operations, a motion designer, etc., you can still benefit from developing all the non-craft competencies we're going to discuss in this book.

Here what companies include in the craft competency:

VISUAL DESIGN

Sometimes called: technical design skills, UI design.

- Typography
- Color
- Iconography
- Layout, visual hierarchy, and composition
- Grid
- Motion
- Layout
- Composition and grid systems

UX DESIGN

Sometimes called: interaction design, product thinking.

- Prototyping
- User research
- Methodologies (user stories, storyboarding)
- Design patterns
- Defining problems
- Informational architecture
- Accessibility
- Working with data

- Technical limitations

TOOLS AND DESIGN PROCESS

Sometimes called: toolkit and techniques.

Using the right tools and processes optimizes work efficiency, quality, collaboration, scalability, and maintainability. Eventually, all of these are mostly aimed at optimizing **speed.** For startups, being slow could be lethal, therefore to ensure shorter time-to-market periods, organizations highly value these skills:

- Using the right tools
- Using tools efficiently
- Optimizing design processes
- Being aware of new tools and design processes
- Creating, maintaining, and using design systems
- Being aware of technical limitations

Communication

COMMUNICATING DESIGN

Sometimes called: presenting.

Design ideas won't be worth much if they aren't being shipped. In order for the ideas to get shipped, designers need to "sell" them to others. To do that, designers must be able to explain their solutions and decisions in a clear, effective, and compelling way. These skills are required:

- Providing the relevant and wider context
- Articulating the rationale for decisions
- Adjusting presentations based on the audience

FEEDBACK

Feedback skills in designers are valued by companies because feedback loops lead to reduced risks of shipping the wrong thing. Feedback optimizes the **quality** of their product. Designers are therefore required to constantly improve these skills:

- Providing feedback
- Receiving feedback

WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

If their employees can express themselves effectively and accurately, whether it's in speech or writing, it helps organizations to reduce errors, increase speed, and build trust and relationships within and outside of the company. This competency has become even more important in the last few years with the growth of remote or hybrid and asynchronous working, when familiar ways of communicating face-to-face are used less. To do that, these two skills are crucial:

- Communicating clearly and being considerate of the recipient
- Communicating efficiently, focusing on what's important

Collaboration

Sometimes called: creating strong relationships.

The skill of oral and written communication is tightly connected with collaboration. But if communication skills are more about *what* and *how* to communicate, collaboration is about the *who*, *when*, *where,* and *why* of communication.

STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

Stakeholder management is the ability to keep all people involved in the project informed while building and maintaining a good relationship with them.

Designers can manage stakeholders effectively on any project in these ways:

- Keeping everyone involved in the project up-to-date with the right amount of information in a timely manner

- Making sure designers themselves are informed about relevant project information by asking other people
- Building and maintaining good relationships with stakeholders

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Being the kind of person other people want to work with heavily correlates with the ability to build relationships and, as a result, collaborate effectively. Companies often mention these skills:

- Being emotionally intelligent
- Being self-aware
- Listening actively
- Being empathetic
- Treating others with respect and consideration

Ownership

Sometimes called: ***:*** *responsibility, accountability.*

SHIPPING

Sometimes called: efficiency, progress, execution, delivery, iteration.

Having the best ideas and knowing how to sell them won't be useful without the ability to ship – to ensure a designs go to production and reach customers to drive the business objectives. Companies describe the ability to ship as these specific skills:

- Getting things done
- Setting and following estimations and deadlines
- Delegating work when appropriate
- Balancing speed and quality
- General output

INDEPENDENCE

The less hand-holding and guidance employees require, the less company resources are consumed and the more potential for innovation there is. Therefore, organizations appreciate designers who have these skills:

- Dealing with ambiguity
- Initiating work
- Autonomy

Strategy

Sometimes called: understanding business, product strategy.

If we use the analogy of driving a car, the “shipping” competency is making sure you’re driving, staying on schedule, and going fast. Strategy is all about making sure the car is driving in the right direction.

Companies exist to provide returns to their shareholders by reaching their business objectives. And they hire designers to eventually help them do that. Having a good strategy as a designer means applying the next skills:

- Following, contributing to, and forming the company’s vision
- Understanding the business’s needs and objectives
- Being aware of the internal business context, i.e., organizational structure, department incentives, revenue streams, customer acquisition, the roadmap, etc.
- Being aware of the external business context i.e., the market, competition, and industry
- Knowing how to translate all of the above to design

Mentorship

Sometimes called: teaching others.

Organizations hire people not only as single units producing value, but also as multipliers of growth for their teams. The ability to actively help the people around you to grow professionally can be achieved in these ways:

- Identifying opportunities to help team members grow

- Offering and initiating mentorship and guidance
- Teaching and transferring your knowledge effectively

Leadership

To survive, organizations have to attract, retain, manage, and grow talent. Leadership skills mostly relate to managing other people and are relevant to manager positions. However, ICs are often involved in the hiring process.

HIRING

The skills that support hiring are as follows:

- Attracting talent
- Recruiting candidates successfully

PEOPLE AND WORK MANAGEMENT

These competencies are only relevant for managers, so I'll just list them here for designers who eventually want to take this path.

Becoming a manager almost always means doing no or close to no hands-on design work. While progressing though the levels, a manager's time will become more and more busy with work requiring these skills:

- Retaining employees
- Contributing to and leading organizational design
- Managing day-to-day workload, priorities, and delegation
- Creating processes
- Inspiring the team
- Rewarding and recognizing team members
- Managing underperformance and firing people where necessary

Community

Community competency means involvement in and acting according to a company's internal culture and values as well as spreading that vision and mission externally.

CULTURE

Every company and team has a set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that are applied and encouraged. They could be explicit and non-explicit. These values characterize and shape the work environment and define how employees work and interact with each other, so the competency that designers are evaluated on is: following, contributing, and shaping the company's culture and values.

ADVOCACY

Companies want their employees to spread the company's and team's mission outside of the organization. This mostly benefits the employer's branding metrics (which partially intersects with the hiring competency), but it can also be leveraged for PR and marketing purposes to attract customers, investors, and vendors. This competency is often explained as: spreading the company's mission outside the organization.

6. Levels of Competency

Now we understand what competencies companies evaluate designers on. Let's review what level of each competency is required for each title/seniority level. As I mentioned before, these definitions vary at each company depending on their size.

In the specifications below, try to ignore the specific titles and just consider them as levels. Our goal will not be to identify which title matches your competency level but rather which competencies you're falling behind on in relative terms, so you can add them to your growth plan.

The list of competency levels exists to provide you with direction, but it shouldn't be used as a strict set of parameters where you have to tick all the boxes in order to move to the next level.

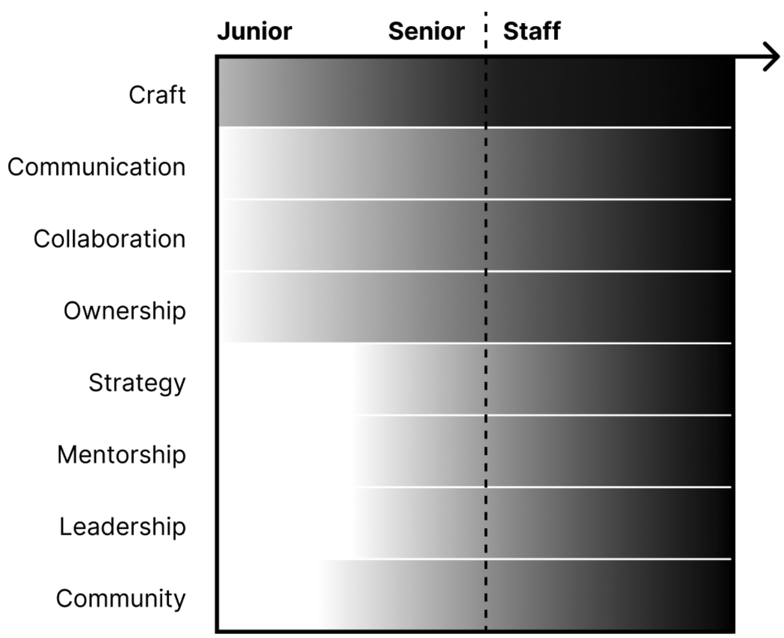


Figure 6.1. High-level overview of the strength of competencies required for an IC career path progression.

Before we dive in, here is a generic competency progression scale you can use to self-evaluate or develop any other skill that isn't mentioned in the book:

- **Aware** – The competency is being developed. The individual is aware of the skill, understands its importance, and focuses on learning. They are able to apply it in most simple ways although they require close guidance.
- **Novice** – Demonstrates limited use of the competency, but understands and can articulate the basics of the skill. Requires occasional guidance.
- **Intermediate** – Comfortable in applying the competency in somewhat difficult situations. Rarely requires guidance. Occasionally shares knowledge of the skill with others.
- **Advanced** – Has deep knowledge of the skill, and applies it in difficult situations based on their knowledge and experience. Requires close to no guidance, and teaches others to apply the competency.
- **Expert** – Uses the competency in extremely difficult situations that others often won't be able to. Guides and teaches others. Is recognized as an authority on the skill within the organization and often within the industry.

Since senior designer is a part of the IC track, from now on, to make it less overwhelming, I'll omit the manager role from my analysis and only talk about IC roles. However, I'd still like to provide you with coverage of the levels up until principal designer so that you can reference this guide even after you've reached the level of senior designer and also so you have a picture of the career paths available beyond your next career step.

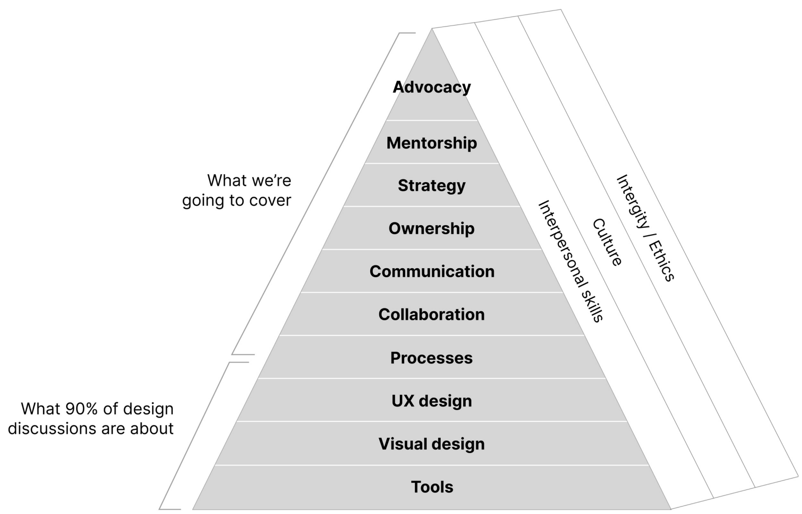


Figure 6.2. Design competencies.

Let's dive into the skills required in each core competency for every IC role. If you'd like to see only competencies level for the senior position, skip to the end of this chapter.

Craft

Visual design

Junior

- Proficient in foundational visual design skills.
- Displays knowledge of design patterns, hierarchy, grid, and Gestalt principles.
- Displays taste in visual aesthetics via good typography and layout.
- Demonstrates understanding of common design concepts.
- Successfully applies the organization's design guidelines.

- Seeks guidance from more experienced designers.
- Able to produce non-complex animations.

Mid-level

- Proficient in and consistently applies design patterns, hierarchy, grid, and Gestalt principles successfully.
- Strong taste in visual aesthetics via great typography and layout.
- Able to produce solid animations if required.
- Effortlessly applies the organization’s brand style guidelines in their designs.

Senior

- Displays an expert level in using visual design to communicate and solve complex functional and informational challenges efficiently.
- Offers assistance, feedback, and guidance to other designers in regards to typography, design patterns, hierarchy, grid, Gestalt principles, etc.
- May contribute to company’s style guidelines.
- Feels comfortable creating considerably complex design concepts using motion.

Staff

- Serves as a role model for anything that has to do with visuals. Has a taste that others look up to.
- Owns the company standards and guidelines on visual design.
- Creating highly effective UI is effortless to them. They’ve developed a natural sense for the edge cases others may overlook.
- UI is almost transparent to them on their path to solving business objectives.

Principal

- Shows a consistent history of masterful visual design skills.
- Serves as an inspiration for other designers when it comes to visual design.
- Has exceptional attention to detail.
- May have a history of contributing to the visual design trends or patterns on an industry level.
- Sees beyond the current design trends, has a vision of what is coming next, and contributes to forming upcoming trends.

UX design

Junior

- Has a mostly theoretical understanding of design methodologies.
- Displays understanding of customer needs.
- Has theoretical knowledge and often limited experience in conducting user research. Understands how to apply its results in their designs.
- Considers different states like errors and empty states when designing flows.
- Familiar with accessibility concepts and learns to apply them.
- Comfortable creating prototypes of moderate complexity.
- Aware of how working with data can benefit their design work and learns how to use such data in their work.
- Supports the team in their design needs. Their work often requires a review from another designer before it's presented to other stakeholders.

Mid-level

- Successfully incorporates design methodologies and patterns in their daily work and understands their pros and cons.
- Actively applies accessibility and informational architecture principles.

- Consistently uses data, user research, and design methodologies to solve business objectives with design.
- Contributes to conducting user research to make informed design decisions.
- Designs consistent experiences considering the design across the organization. Designs flows considering the whole user journey and not single screens.
- Consistently translates complex ideas and concepts into detailed prototypes and end-to-end cross-platform design flows.
- Constantly challenges their team and themselves to find the best solution.
- Consistently considers the different states like errors and empty states in their designs.

Senior

- Highly proficient in design methodologies, patterns, accessibility, and informational architecture principles. Contributes to shaping the organizational standards on these topics. Mentors other designers on these topics and advocates for higher design standards in the organization.
- Identifies the right data and research needed to move forward and initiates its collection if required.
- Looks beyond the surface in user research results into user's underlying motivations. Makes the research insights accessible to others to elevate the team's knowledge.
- May often talk to customers and has deep insight into their motivations and needs.
- Serves as the source of knowledge for user needs and motivations.
- Displays a history of being able to define a hypothesis and validate it with an end-to-end design solution.
- Defines problems not only on a tactical but also on a strategic level.

- Identifies and raises issues around inconsistent design patterns.

Staff

- Displays an expert level in all UX-related skills and leverages them to create holistic end-to-end cross-platform experiences that solve sophisticated problems.
- Takes ownership of organizational standards when it comes to patterns, research, accessibility, informational architecture, etc.
- Holds the team accountable for high design standards.
- Consistently designs with several steps ahead in mind, considering how the patterns, research, and methodologies applied will affect the users, the team, and the business in the long term.
- Proactively contributes to identifying knowledge and gaps in understanding users' needs and motivations.
- Contributes actively to identifying problems and opportunities.

Principal

- Shows a consistent history of having mastered UX design skills. Innovates in one or more of the design competencies and has influence on an industry level.
- Able to solve highly sophisticated and unique problems with design.
- Identifies the gaps in research, data, or design on an organizational level.
- Defines design strategy on an organizational level.

Tools and design process

Junior

- Proficient in the tools their team is using.
- Quickly learns, adopts, and follows the team's defined design process, often with support from more senior designers.

- Comfortable applying the existing design system on their work.
- Aware of technical limitations and actively learns more about them.

Mid-level

- Highly proficient in the tools the team is using.
- Raises issues with existing tooling and may suggests alternatives. Constantly learns about and experiments with new tools.
- May mentor others on using design tools.
- Consistently applies existing design processes. Contributes to the processes by raising issues and suggesting improvements.
- Incorporates the design system elements in their design effortlessly and raises potential issues.
- Understands the technical limitations well and knows how to avoid technical pitfalls in their designs.

Senior

- Masters design tools and mentors other designers and non-designers on using them.
- Has a strong design process and is consistently on the lookout for opportunities to optimize the tooling and processes.
- Takes ownership of adopting and deploying new tools and processes in their team or improving them.
- Contributes to the design system.
- Initiates and may own documentation on some of the processes and tooling.

Staff

- Demonstrates a history of maintaining, developing, and deploying processes within the team. May have built internal tools to make the organization more efficient.
- Ensures the alignment of tools and processes with the organization's long-term strategy. Takes ownership of

incorporating and deploying new tools and processes across teams.

- May have knowledge of tools and techniques that others in the organization don’t.
- Owns the team or cross-team design system.
- Defines cross-team and cross-department tools and processes.
- Oversees and owns documentation on tools and processes.

Principal

- Oversees the tooling and processes across teams and departments.
- Takes a leadership role in identifying opportunities for impactful changes in company-wide processes and implementing them.
- Advocates for the design function within the organization when it comes to organizational changes in tooling or processes.
- May take ownership of building internal tooling, with an impact on an organizational level.
- Oversees or owns the organizational design system(s).

Communication

Communicating design

Junior

- Aware of the larger project objectives and goals. Constantly learns to take into consideration the wider context.
- Shows progress in and a good ability to justify and articulate the reasoning behind design decisions.

- Familiar with the need to adjust their messaging and communication style based on audience.

Mid-level

- Considers the relevant and wider context on projects and in their work and is comfortable communicating it.
- Successfully and confidently constructs well-supported narratives to base their design decisions on. Simplifies complex concepts for clarity.
- Adjusts their message based on the audience in order to make it accessible.

Senior

- Confidently engages in presenting design work. Consistently makes the relevant and wider context an integral part of their presentations.
- Leads conversations and discussions around design work, articulating the rationale for decisions and influencing the audience's opinions. Is happy to have their work, decisions, and opinions challenged.
- Displays an expert level in adjusting presentations based on the audience.

Staff

- Makes the wider context an integral part of all of their design presentations.
- Differentiates themselves by their ability to communicate complex concepts in a simple manner. Fluent in using different contexts. Can provide the relevant and wider context for design decisions.
- Proactively contributes to the improvement of the team's ability to articulate the rationale for their design decisions.

Principal

- Provides the relevant and wider context not just for the specific task at hand, but for the purposes of making sure information flow within the team is consistent and beneficial for both designers and stakeholders outside of the design organization.
- Proactively educates the team on the broader context of design work.
- Because they work on ambiguous projects, they often put their own and the organization's time and resources into producing new insights and data in order to inform their decisions and educate the team.
- Consistently demonstrates excellence in adjusting presentations based on the audience by having a good grasp of their needs and objectives.

Feedback

Junior

- Consistently participates in design critiques and so shares work early and often.
- Frequently presents work and engages in discussions.
- Receives feedback gracefully and enthusiastically.
- Seeks feedback and knows how to apply it.
- Develops self-awareness about areas of development based on the received feedback.

Mid-level

- Applies good judgment to assess and prioritize feedback, collaborating with their manager and team peers to do so.
- Provides helpful feedback.
- Displays a positive attitude toward feedback without being defensive.

- Displays an awareness of their personal areas of development based on feedback provided in the past.

Senior

- Contributes to creating a culture of transparent and constructive feedback. Motivates peers to share work and to request feedback from different stakeholders.
- Provides both positive and negative feedback to their peers, not just for personal benefit but to improve collaboration and work toward the company's objectives.
- Anticipates feedback and addresses it proactively.
- Provides feedback that peers can easily understand, apply, and learn from.
- Demonstrates a history of acting on their areas of improvement based on the feedback received.
- Has a solid understanding of how to assess and prioritize feedback while considering different factors.

Staff

- Supports peers in getting feedback.
- Promotes transparency and feedback flow between design and other teams.
- Masterfully assesses and prioritizes feedback even when it's indirect.

Principal

- Identifies repeated feedback and creates team or company-wide initiatives to solve that at scale.

Written and oral communication

Junior

- Explains their decisions, reasoning, and solutions at a decent level in a written and oral forms.
- Understands the importance of effective communication and actively looks for opportunities to improve.
- Applies written and oral communication across different platforms and mediums.
- Obtains guidance from their manager on making their messaging clearer.
- Develops the confidence to present their ideas to larger groups.

Mid-level

- Consistently communicates complex ideas clearly and is considerate of the recipients, both in speech and writing.
- Comfortable in building a compelling narrative and backing it up with reasoning.
- Applies storytelling to create a more compelling narrative.
- Comfortable presenting to larger groups.
- Able to contribute effectively to written documentation in a clear way.

Senior

- Possesses a strong ability to present complex ideas to large groups effectively and confidently.
- Consistently considers message recipients and proactively prevents ambiguity in their messages. Foresees possible questions and provides clarification beforehand.
- Proactively creates written documentation that is easy to digest even for external stakeholders.
- Effectively employs storytelling techniques in their communication.
- Maintains written and oral communication on a level that allows them to share their knowledge outside of the organization via talks or articles.

Staff

- Able to spontaneously build a clear narrative about a complex concept and communicate it an exceptionally effectively manner.
- Masterfully simplifies and communicates complex concepts and communicates them to large groups.
- Often mentors others in improving their communication.

Principal

- Communicating anything to anyone clearly and effectively comes to them naturally.
- Communication skills are on a level that allows them to teach at universities, colleges, and workshops and influence the industry.
- Others in the organization may ask for their guidance on improving their communications.

Collaboration

Stakeholder management

Junior

- Mostly collaborates within their team.
- Shares work regularly with their managers and design peers. Learns to identify the right time to share information and updates, how much to share, and with which people.
- Has a positive attitude and enthusiasm when collaborating with others.
- Identifies when they're stuck and knows when to request help.

Mid-level

- Actively participates in meetings and accurately describes project status.
- Collaborates with their team and other stakeholders involved in the project and keeps them informed.
- Knows when to involve which stakeholders and consistently shares updates and relevant information with them through the most efficient communication channels.
- Does not hesitate to ask for help when it can benefit the project's objectives.
- Establishes relationships across teams to help projects succeed by identifying gaps and unknowns and closing them.
- Coordinates between the needs of different teams or groups.
- Understands the different objectives of each stakeholder.

Senior

- Recognizes opportunities for collaboration and acts on them.
- Guides group discussions and drives them toward action.
- Makes sure all the right stakeholders are being heard and drives them toward consensus.
- Consistently keeps all relevant people updated.
- Shares information learnings and insights across teams.
- Identifies opportunities to involve junior designers in projects.
- Recognizes and helps to bridge the gaps between different stakeholders.
- Delivers unfavorable news transparently and in a timely manner.
- Prioritizes business objectives and progress over being right.
- Builds and maintains relationships effectively and effortlessly.
- Actively leverages stakeholder's personal objectives in order to pursue them.

Staff

- Proactively engages stakeholders and organizes information flow with them and between them for large, strategic, ambiguous, cross-team, or cross-department projects with little or no guidance.
- Leads group conversations and identifies silos and collaboration gaps within the whole organization and acts on closing them.
- Successfully represents the organization with external stakeholders and partners.
- Builds deep cross-functional relationships and plays a key role in involving non-design stakeholders in the design process.
- Organizes design-related initiatives fostering collaboration, like design critiques, meetups, and workshops.

Principal

- Consistently displays excellence in collaborating across teams, disciplines, organizations, and industries. Gracefully and confidently deals with setbacks, obstacles, and failure.
- Facilitates group discussions within and across projects and masterfully extracts insights and action items while keeping all involved aligned. Effectively navigates between different perspectives.
- Displays a strong history of successfully managing stakeholders in highly challenging projects and environments. Crosses and removes organizational barriers to reaching company-wide objectives. Anticipates potential collaboration challenges and resolves them before they arise.
- Masterfully and effortlessly builds and maintains relationships and acts as a connector to build relationships between others.

Interpersonal skills

Junior

- Gains insight into their personal strengths and weaknesses.

- Dedicates significant time to self-development.
- Can identify personal emotions and starts to perceive others' feelings and viewpoints.
- May require assistance in responding properly to various situations.
- Consistently shows respect to team members. Shows consideration to team members, but might need reminders or guidance to do so consistently.

Mid-level

- Exhibits a grasp of their personal strengths and growth areas. Purposefully addresses weaknesses and leverages strengths to benefit the team. Develops strategies to address areas of improvement.
- Proficient in regulating personal emotions. Conscious of others' feelings and can react appropriately.
- Continues to grow in dealing with emotionally complex situations.
- Listens attentively and comprehends others' viewpoints.
- Regularly displays empathy toward team members, understands and respects others' perspectives, and is able to assist others in dealing with their challenges.
- Regularly shows consideration to team members, promoting a respectful environment.

Senior

- Demonstrates substantial self-awareness, proactively addressing personal growth areas, and encouraging self-awareness in others.
- Displays strong emotional intelligence. Capable of recognizing and processing the team's emotions, and uses this insight to navigate conflicts.
- Effectively practices active listening and empathy. Comprehends and respects the viewpoints of all team members, providing

consistent support.

- Encourages empathy within the team.
- Highly respectful and thoughtful, fostering an atmosphere of respect, fairness, and inclusivity within the team.

Staff

- Has a high degree of self-awareness and uses this knowledge to maximize their personal impact within the team and the organization. Promotes a culture of self-awareness within the team.
- Demonstrates advanced emotional intelligence, consistently influencing the team's emotions positively.
- Employs emotional intelligence in important decision-making.
- A master at active listening, displaying high empathy.
- Understands the needs and feelings of the team and the broader organization, using this to cultivate a supportive work environment.

Principal

- Exhibits exceptional self-awareness, perpetually learning and adapting. Serves as a model for the organization by transforming self-awareness into personal growth.
- Serves as a beacon of emotional intelligence. Has the ability to understand and positively impact the emotions of others across the organization, integrating their emotional intelligence in strategic choices.
- Exceptionally empathetic, they foster a culture of understanding, assistance, and respect across the organization, transforming their empathy into policies and decision-making.

Ownership

Shipping

Junior

- Delivers their work on time.
- Learns to break projects into smaller tasks.
- Ships fast and constantly looks to improve further.
- Positive attitude toward getting things done.
- Often seeks help to estimate and learns to set estimates accurately and independently.
- Understands the importance of balancing speed and quality and applies it often.
- Does not delegate work; work is delegated to them.

Mid-level

- Consistently meets deadlines.
- Comfortable breaking big projects into smaller tasks and estimates them correctly most of the time.
- Solid display of balancing speed and quality.
- Consistent display of doing justified trade-offs.
- Does not delegate work; work is delegated to them.

Senior

- Displays a history of consistently delivering work on time.
- Consistently sets accurate estimates.
- Has the confidence to make significant trade-offs.
- Makes conscious and effective efforts to optimize their time.
- Sometimes delegates work to junior designers.
- Consistently considers a project's goal and identifies the point when work is good enough to ship.

- Possesses a strong ability to ship fast.

Staff

- Displays an expert level in breaking large and challenging projects into smaller tasks and milestones.
- Sets estimations correctly, even for ambiguous projects; comfortable adapting to a changing scope and updating the estimation as they go.
- Helps other team members set correct estimations when overseeing a larger project.
- Delegates work to other designers when appropriate.
- Masterfully identifies the point when design is done without trying to perfect what doesn't have to be perfected. Applies this skill not just on their own work but also on the work they oversee.
- Comfortable mentoring other team members on all of the above.

Principal

- Displays a long history of excellence when it comes to getting things done, following estimations, and hitting deadlines.
- Respected by the team and serves as an example when it comes to efficiency.
- Motivates, unblocks, and coaches others to ship fast.
- Able to identify blind spots across teams in estimating or delegating work and builds processes to resolve that.
- Proactively identifies opportunities for adjusting the scope of projects to produce better value for the business, considering speed and quality. Does that on projects across teams they might be overseeing.
- Delegates work often.

Independence

Junior

- Works on well-defined and already-prioritized tasks with limited scope.
- Receives instructions and guidance on their work.
- Learns to prioritize tasks.
- Understands the importance of initiating work.

Mid-level

- Executes somewhat defined tasks and projects of moderate scope.
- Receives some instructions and guidance on their work.
- Comfortable prioritizing tasks based on what's important to the organization.
- Displays an ability to recognize when their impact is sub-optimal and notifies the manager for re-prioritization.
- Displays some ability to initiate work and identify opportunities for improvements.
- Develops an interest in owning specific areas or domains of work or already displays some ownership of small initiatives.
- Knows how to take responsibility for their failures.

Senior

- Demonstrates a strong ability to work on projects that aren't yet well-defined and which have a diverse scope.
- Possesses a strong ability to prioritize tasks considering multiple factors.
- Often suggests new initiatives through identifying opportunities to improve not just the product but also the team and processes.
- Owns some areas or domains of work of small or medium importance, often with a cross-team impact.

Staff

- Differentiate themselves by their ability to lead and implement ambiguous and cross-area projects autonomously.
- Exercises independent judgment and has a proven track record in prioritizing tasks effectively, optimizing for impact.
- Proactively takes care of the future of the product, team, and processes. Initiates high-potential and high-impact months-long projects affecting multiple teams or departments.
- Owns domains or areas of high importance for the organization. May oversee the projects of other team members.
- Motivates and coaches others to grow their independence and ownership.

Principal

- Takes a leadership role in highly strategic and often undefined or even experimental projects.
- Evaluates and defines the prioritization strategy for tasks on projects they are leading. Adjusts the strategy when the company's goals change.
- Owns some of the most strategic and significant projects at the company that may have industry-level impact.
- Proven track record of making strategic, critical, and often unpopular but necessary decisions.
- Functions almost completely autonomously.

Strategy

Junior

- Familiar with company's vision.

- Shows interest in and actively learns about business needs and objectives. Focuses mostly on understanding the objectives of tasks in hand.
- Learns about the internal business context: organizational structure, department incentives, revenue streams, customer acquisition, roadmap, etc.
- Learns about the external business context: market, competition, and industry.
- Mostly theoretical knowledge of how all of the above is translated to design.

Mid-level

- Understands the company’s vision well.
- Has a solid understanding of the business needs and objectives of products they work on and the internal and external business context.
- Comfortable applying that knowledge to contribute to the team’s short-term plans.
- Able to view their work in a broader sense considering its connection to other parts of the product, organization, business, and industry.
- Has a solid understanding of the dependencies and consequences of design decisions.

Senior

- Deeply understands the company’s vision. Potentially contributes to the vision of their product and leads the vision for initiatives they own.
- Possesses a strong knowledge of business needs and objectives. Consistently looks to leverage that knowledge to drive outcomes, not just outputs, and contributes to the team’s long-term plan.
- Consistently takes into consideration the broader context of their work and how it is interconnected with other parts of the product,

organization, business, and industry.
- Continuously follows the external business context and suggests new tangible initiatives and approaches based on how it changes.

Staff

- Forms the product vision together with the product and engineering leaders.
- Forms the vision of their own initiatives.
- Leverages their complete fluency in business needs and objectives to form long-term plans.
- Demonstrates a deep understanding of the business beyond the products they work on.
- Demonstrates a high-level ability to translate between business context (both internal and external) and design work and vice versa. Leads other members in doing the same.

Principal

- Forms the product vision together with product and engineering leaders across multiple products and teams.
- Influences the long-term, organization-wide design strategy by partnering with senior management.
- Identifies gaps and opportunities and sometimes might become involved in changing some of the internal business processes related to design (e.g., organizational structure, resource allocation, budgeting, key performance indicators (KPIs), etc.).

Mentorship

Junior

- Understands the importance of getting mentored.
- Proactively seeks opportunities to get mentored.

Mid-level

- Occasionally mentored by more senior team members.
- May offer and initiate mentoring, mostly to junior designers or interns.
- Learns how to teach and transfer knowledge effectively.

Senior

- Actively identifies opportunities to help team members grow.
- Understands the importance and impact mentorship has within the team.
- Consistently offers and initiates mentorship and guidance.
- Comfortable teaching and transferring their knowledge effectively.
- May mentor people outside of the organisation.

Staff

- Consistently identifies opportunities to help designers grow.
- Identifies mentoring opportunities not just for themselves but also for others.
- Proactively elevates the team's professional level through mentoring initiatives. Often expected to do that across teams.
- Identifies the most effective ways to transfer the knowledge and masterfully facilitates such initiatives.

Principal

- Consistently displays excellence in identifying mentorship opportunities on an individual, team and potentially organisation level.

- Takes a leadership role in growing designers and teams professionally through mentorship. May coach or mentor not only ICs but also managers.
- Displays excellence when it comes to identifying knowledge gaps across teams and solving them by mentoring, coaching, facilitating and providing mentoring opportunities to other designers.

Leadership

Hiring

Junior

- Learns about the hiring process.
- Not expected to participate in hiring.
- May submit referrals for candidates occasionally.

Mid-level

- Understands the hiring process.
- Rarely asked to help with hiring.
- Submits referrals for candidates.

Senior

- Possesses a strong understanding of the hiring process and potentially contributes to, or adjusts it.
- Might be helping with hiring via sourcing, portfolio screening, professional evaluation, or onboarding.
- Often submits referrals for candidates.

Staff

- Contributes by shaping the hiring process. Potentially takes ownership over some aspects of the hiring process in their team or across teams.
- Also proactively participates in hiring of senior candidates. Represents their team to the candidates, successfully gaining their trust.
- Has a strategic view on hiring beyond the immediate needs of the team. Potentially trains other team members on different hiring aspects.
- Consistently submits referrals for strong candidates.

Principal

- Heavily influences or shapes the hiring process of designers across teams or the whole organization.
- Takes a leadership role in relation to hiring in their team (or beyond when needed) and represents the company to the candidates. Takes an active role in the hiring process of senior candidates and managers.
- Trains and coaches others in the organization on hiring designers.
- Hires strategically by contributing to organizational design and design leveling.
- Leverages their network, charisma, and reputation to attract other strong candidates to most senior levels.

Community

Culture

Junior

- Understands and proactively looks for ways to apply the team's and company's culture and values in their day-to-day work.

Mid-level

- Has a deep understanding of the company's values and applies them often.
- Active contributor to the team's culture and to the sense of community within the team.

Senior

- Demonstrates a strong dedication to the company's values and applies them consistently.
- Contributes and shapes the team's culture. Identifies opportunities to influence and improve it.
- Serves as a role model for other designers in the team when it comes to the team's culture.
- Actively participates in, contributes to, and potentially initiates company-wide or cross-team interest groups or cultural initiatives.

Staff

- Serves as a role model for other designers when it comes to the company's culture.
- Leads and shapes team culture together with the managers. Identifies gaps in the team's culture and proactively comes up with solutions.
- Ensures the team's alignment with its values and leads by example.
- Demonstrates a history of starting and owning company-wide or cross-team cultural initiatives.

Principal

- Serves as a role model across teams when it comes to the company's culture.
- Serves as a contributor when it comes to the evolution of the company's culture and values.
- Advocates for and educates designers across the organization on the company's culture.
- Takes a leadership role when it comes to the team's culture.

Advocacy

Junior

- Understands the importance of spreading the company's mission outside of the organization.
- Actively participates in conferences, meetups, and design communities, but still solely with the goal of learning.

Mid-level

- Has a solid understanding of how the company's mission can be spread outside of the organization.
- Has some experience leveraging external activities (e.g., meetups, design communities, writing, awards, public speaking, etc.) to advocate for the company and the team.

Senior

- Identifies opportunities to spread the company's mission. Suggests new initiatives and approaches when it comes to advocacy.
- Displays a history of applying advocacy activities driving tangible results.

Staff

- Initiates and owns large advocacy projects with a long-term vision and long-lasting results while identifying quick wins and taking these opportunities successfully and independently.
- Often represents the company at external events or occasions.
- Mentors other designers on advocacy and shares advocacy opportunities (ideas for articles, calls for submissions to conferences, etc.) with them. Matches the right team members with the right opportunities.

Principal

- Proven track record of advocacy with an industry-wide influence.
- Consistently and successfully represents the company externally (events, writing, interviews).
- Together with management, defines the department-wide or company-wide design advocacy strategy.

Senior Designer Competencies

If you’re not interested in the differences between different levels but the senior level only, for your convenience I have created a full list of competencies for senior designers only below.

Craft

VISUAL DESIGN

- Displays an expert level in using visual design to communicate and solve complex functional and informational challenges efficiently.
- Offers assistance, feedback, and guidance to other designers in regards to typography, design patterns, hierarchy, grid, Gestalt principles, etc.
- May contribute to company’s style guidelines.
- Feels comfortable creating considerably complex design concepts using motion.

UX DESIGN

- Highly proficient in design methodologies, patterns, accessibility, and informational architecture principles. Contributes to shaping the organizational standards on these topics. Mentors other designers on these topics and advocates for higher design standards in the organization.
- Identifies the right data and research needed to move forward and initiates its collection if required.
- Looks beyond the surface in user research results into user’s underlying motivations. Makes the research insights accessible to others to elevate the team’s knowledge.
- May often talk to customers and has deep insight into their motivations and needs.

- Serves as the source of knowledge for user needs and motivations.
- Displays a history of being able to define a hypothesis and validate it with an end-to-end design solution.
- Defines problems not only on a tactical but also on a strategic level.
- Identifies and raises issues around inconsistent design patterns.

TOOLS AND DESIGN PROCESS

- Masters design tools and mentors other designers and non-designers on using them.
- Has a strong design process and is consistently on the lookout for opportunities to optimize the tooling and processes.
- Takes ownership of adopting and deploying new tools and processes in their team or improving them.
- Contributes to the design system.
- Initiates and may own documentation on some of the processes and tooling.

Communication

COMMUNICATING DESIGN

- Confidently engages in presenting design work. Consistently makes the relevant and wider context an integral part of their presentations.
- Leads conversations and discussions around design work, articulating the rationale for decisions and influencing the audience's opinions. Is happy to have their work, decisions, and opinions challenged.
- Displays an expert level in adjusting presentations based on the audience.

FEEDBACK

- Contributes to creating a culture of transparent and constructive feedback. Motivates peers to share work and to request feedback from different stakeholders.
- Provides both positive and negative feedback to their peers, not just for personal benefit but to improve collaboration and work toward the company's objectives.
- Anticipates feedback and addresses it proactively.
- Provides feedback that peers can easily understand, apply, and learn from.
- Demonstrates a history of acting on their areas of improvement based on the feedback received.
- Has a solid understanding of how to assess and prioritize feedback while considering different factors.

WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

- Possesses a strong ability to present complex ideas to large groups effectively and confidently.
- Consistently considers message recipients and proactively prevents ambiguity in their messages. Foresees possible questions and provides clarification beforehand.
- Proactively creates written documentation that is easy to digest even for external stakeholders.
- Effectively employs storytelling techniques in their communication.
- Maintains written and oral communication on a level that allows them to share their knowledge outside of the organization via talks or articles.

Collaboration

STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

- Recognizes opportunities for collaboration and acts on them.
- Guides group discussions and drives them toward action.

- Makes sure all the right stakeholders are being heard and drives them toward consensus.
- Consistently keeps all relevant people updated.
- Shares information learnings and insights across teams.
- Identifies opportunities to involve junior designers in projects.
- Recognizes and helps to bridge the gaps between different stakeholders.
- Delivers unfavorable news transparently and in a timely manner.
- Prioritizes business objectives and progress over being right.
- Builds and maintains relationships effectively and effortlessly.
- Actively leverages stakeholders' personal objectives in order to pursue them.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

- Demonstrates substantial self-awareness, proactively addressing personal growth areas, and encouraging self-awareness in others.
- Displays strong emotional intelligence. Capable of recognizing and processing the team's emotions, and uses this insight to navigate conflicts.
- Effectively practices active listening and empathy. Comprehends and respects the viewpoints of all team members, providing consistent support.
- Encourages empathy within the team.
- Highly respectful and thoughtful, fostering an atmosphere of respect, fairness, and inclusivity within the team.

Ownership

SHIPPING

- Displays a history of consistently delivering work on time.
- Consistently sets accurate estimates.
- Has the confidence to make significant trade-offs.

- Makes conscious and effective efforts to optimize their time.
- Sometimes delegates work to junior designers.
- Consistently considers a project’s goal and identifies the point when work is good enough to ship.
- Possesses a strong ability to ship fast.

INDEPENDENCE

- Demonstrates a strong ability to work on projects that aren’t yet well-defined and which have a diverse scope.
- Possesses a strong ability to prioritize tasks considering multiple factors.
- Often suggests new initiatives through identifying opportunities to improve not just the product but also the team and processes.
- Owns some areas or domains of work of small or medium importance, often with a cross-team impact.

Strategy

- Deeply understands the company’s vision. Potentially contributes to the vision of their product and leads the vision for initiatives they own.
- Possesses a strong knowledge of business needs and objectives. Consistently looks to leverage that knowledge to drive outcomes, not just outputs, and contributes to the team’s long-term plan.
- Consistently takes into consideration the broader context of their work and how it is interconnected with other parts of the product, organization, business, and industry.
- Continuously follows the external business context and suggests new tangible initiatives and approaches based on how it changes.

Mentorship

- Actively identifies opportunities to help team members grow.

- Understands the importance and impact mentorship has within the team.
- Consistently offers and initiates mentorship and guidance.
- Comfortable teaching and transferring their knowledge effectively.
- May mentor people outside of the organisation.

Leadership

HIRING

- Possesses a strong understanding of the hiring process and potentially contributes to or adjusts it.
- Might be helping with hiring via sourcing, portfolio screening, professional evaluation, or onboarding.
- Often submits referrals for candidates.

Community

CULTURE

- Demonstrates a strong dedication to the company's values and applies them consistently.
- Contributes and shapes the team's culture. Identifies opportunities to influence and improve it.
- Serves as a role model for other designers in the team when it comes to the team's culture.
- Actively participates in, contributes to, and potentially initiates company-wide or cross-team interest groups or cultural initiatives.

ADVOCACY

- Identifies opportunities to spread the company's mission. Suggests new initiatives and approaches when it comes to advocacy.

- Displays a history of applying advocacy activities driving tangible results.

Part III. Build Your Growth Plan

7. Assess and Prioritize Competencies

Now that you have a better sense of where you're heading with your career and what skills are crucial for reaching this goal, let's build a plan for improving them.

Even if you have a growth plan from your employer, you may benefit from exploring the technique below because you can factor in additional elements that they might not know about, like a desire to leave your current company or your interest in a future career change.

To build the growth plan, we're going to:

- assess where you stand on each of the competencies.
- prioritize which competencies to focus on.

Assess your current competencies

Typically, companies evaluate their designers based on a combination of feedback from the designer's manager and peers; this is often obtained as part of a 360-degree feedback process. If you already have an evaluation from your employer, you can skip to the "prioritize competencies to develop" section of the chapter. If not, this evaluation should ideally be conducted in collaboration with your manager. If it's impossible because you're in between jobs or you don't trust their judgment, you could try and ask some of your colleagues who know you well or an ex-manager who you're friendly with.

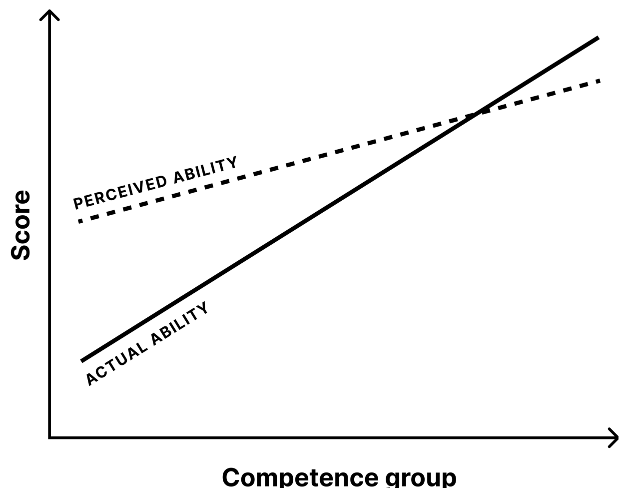


Figure 7.1. The Dunning–Kruger bias.

Having an external perspective will help you avoid the Dunning–Kruger effect. It's a cognitive bias that leads people with low ability to overestimate their ability level. This effect shows that the gap between self-evaluation and actual, objective skill level is wide for people with low competence, while this gap minimizes as the person becomes more skillful over time.

Alone or with external help, use the list of competency levels in the previous chapter to mark where you believe you stand in a table (see Figure 7.2, below, as an example).

Competencies:		Junior	Mid	Senior	Staff	Principal
Craft	**Visual design**			x		
Craft	**UX design**		x			
Craft	**Tools and processes**		x			
Communication	**Communicating design**	x				
Communication	**Feedback**			x		
Communication	**Written/oral communication**		x			
Collaboration	**Stakeholders management**				x	
Collaboration	**Interpersonal skills**			x		
Ownership	**Shipping**		x			
Ownership	**Independence**			x		
Strategy	**Strategy**	x				
Mentorship	**Mentorship**			x		
Leadership	**Hiring**		x			
Community	**Culture**		x			
Community	**Advocacy**	x				

Figure 7.2. Competency level evaluation.

Keep in mind the following:

- In order to get promoted, you need to have *already* performed most competencies at that level for a while. For instance, you would have had to consistently demonstrate most competencies at the senior level in order to get promoted from mid-level to senior level.
- Normally, companies do not require that you tick every single competency on a certain level in order to get promoted to that level, but they do require that you have the majority of them.

The added benefit of going through this evaluation is leveraging this knowledge for your job interviews. Now you have a great answer when asked about your weaknesses. You can demonstrate that you are not only aware of them but that, if you follow the framework in this book, you have a plan for improving them. That's exactly what interviewers want to hear.

Prioritize competencies to develop

The assessment you did above, especially when done with your manager, is already a good indicator of where you should focus your growth efforts.

Start with the competencies that have the biggest gaps; those in which you are the furthest from where you want to be.

To fine-tune your prioritization list and create a more precise growth strategy, you can build a spreadsheet calculating different factors:

- **Industry requirements** – This is how much importance companies give to each competency on average based on my analysis. As I mentioned earlier, not all competencies are equal. They have been placed from most critical to least critical throughout this book, and I've given each competency a score out of five in the chart below based on its importance under the column "industry average." You can use this as a reality check for what most companies, beyond the one you're part of, value. This is especially relevant if you're planning to change jobs soon as it ensures your growth plan will be relevant to the industry and not to the specific company you're about to leave. The closer you are to quitting, the higher the weight should be.

- **Future career goal** – If you're planning to switch careers, start a business, or go freelance very soon, you can't say this to your manager, so their evaluation of you won't be representative of the skills you'll need in your next position. Use the table from the *Why Become a Senior Designer?* chapter for the specific skill grades for your career option.
- **External opinion** – If you can't get an evaluation with your manager, factor in your colleagues' or ex-manager's opinions. You can provide them with a list of competencies and ask: "*What skills, in your opinion, are most critical for me to develop to become a better designer?*"

Competencies:		Industry average Priority	Weight 0.25	Self-assessment Priority	Weight 0.25	Manager's opinion Priority	Weight 0.5	Results:
Craft	**Visual design**	5	1.25	3	0.75	3	1.5	1.4
Craft	**UX design**	5	1.25	3	0.75	3	1.5	1.4
Craft	**Tools and processes**	5	1.25	3	0.75	4	2	1.9
Communication	**Communicating design**	5	1.25	3	0.75	3	1.5	1.4
Communication	**Feedback**	5	1.25	2	0.5	2	1	0.6
Communication	**Written/oral communication**	5	1.25	3	0.75	4	2	1.9
Collaboration	**Stakeholder management**	5	1.25	3	0.75	3	1.5	1.4
Collaboration	**Interpersonal skills**	4	1	2	0.5	2	1	0.5
Ownership	**Shipping**	5	1.25	2	0.5	2	1	0.6
Ownership	**Independence**	5	1.25	2	0.5	2	1	0.6
Strategy	**Strategy**	4	1	5	1.25	5	2.5	3.1
Mentorship	**Mentorship**	3	0.75	4	1	4	2	1.5
Leadership	**Hiring**	3	0.75	4	1	4	4	3.0
Community	**Culture**	3	0.75	4	1	4	2	1.5
Community	**Advocacy**	3	0.75	5	1.25	5	2.5	2.3

Figure 7.3. Competencies prioritization. The higher the number in the "results" column, the more critical this competency is to prioritize and grow.

I've created a template for this exercise that you can find here: **https://productdesigninterview.com/materials/**

Once you've prioritized your competencies, check out the next chapter to start building your growth plan.

8. Design Career Growth Canvas

Now we know what competencies to work on. In the next part of the book, I'll offer some ideas for how each of these competencies can be improved.

In this chapter, I've created a canvas you can use to write down your plan. Start by listing the top five competencies you need to work on based on the prioritization exercise from the previous chapter. For each competency, fill out the following information:

- **You current and desired level of competency** (based on guidance from the *Levels of Competency* chapter).
- **Action items** – This is about pinpointing what you are going to do to improve this competency. You can write down your own ideas, actions your manager has provided, or use the suggestions from the end of each chapter in the next part of the book.
    - **Next step** – What exactly are you going to do in the next few days in order to start implementing this plan?
    - **Timeline** – Estimate how long it will take to get to the desired level. This is hard to do and depends on a lot of factors, but it will be helpful in order to provide you with rough sense of:
        - which action items you may want to prioritize (those that take more time should be started earlier).
        - how long will it take you to be ready for a promotion.
- **Metric** – How will you know that you've successfully accomplished this action item? Identify a way of tracking your progress. Many of the action items are hard to measure. In this case, try to use regular one-on-ones with your manager to get their feedback.

Design Career Growth Canvas

Goal: Senior product designer

Competancy	Current level	Desired level	Action Items	Next step	Timeline	Metric
Communicating design	• Considers the relevant and wider context on projects and in their work and is comfortable communicating it. • Successfully and confidently constructs well-supported narratives to base their design decisions on. Simplifies complex concepts for clarity. • Adjusts their message based on the audience in order to make it accessible.	• Confidently engages in presenting design work. Consistently makes the relevant and wider context an integral part of their presentations. • Leads conversations and discussions around design work, articulating the rationale for decisions and influencing the audience's opinions. Is happy to have their work, decisions, and opinions challenged. • Displays an expert level in adjusting presentations based on the audience.	Apply the presenting framework or its elements when presenting work.	Start using it at the next design critique on September 2nd.	3 months	Reduce the amount of clarifying questions at critiques by 50%+.
			Engage in more presenting opportunities.	Consistently present at design critiques weekly.	3 months	Present at every weekly design critique.
			Start consciously asking myself the reason for my design decisions.`	Practice it while working on the new onboarding flow next week.	3 months	Have an answer for my design decisions in least 80% of cases.
			Read the book *Articulating Design Decisions* by Tom Greever and apply the learnings.	Order the book on Amazon.	2 months	Add at least one learning to my growth plan.
Communicating design	• Considers the relevant and wider context on projects and in their work and is comfortable communicating it. • Successfully and confidently constructs well-supported narratives to base their design decisions on. Simplifies complex concepts for clarity. • Adjusts their message based on the audience in order to make it accessible.	• Confidently engages in presenting design work. Consistently makes the relevant and wider context an integral part of their presentations. • Leads conversations and discussions around design work, articulating the rationale for decisions and influencing the audience's opinions. Is happy to have their work, decisions, and opinions challenged. • Displays an expert level in adjusting presentations based on the audience.	Apply the presenting framework or its elements when presenting work.	Start using it at the next design critique on September 2nd.	3 months	Reduce the amount of clarifying questions at critiques by 50%+.
			Engage in more presenting opportunities.	Consistently present at design critiques weekly.	3 months	
			Start consciously asking myself the reason for my design decisions.`	Practice it while working on the new onboarding flow next week.		
			Read the book *Articulating Design Decisions* by Tom Greever and apply the learnings.			

Figure 8.1. An example of a design career growth canvas, available at https://productdesigninterview.com/materials.

How to use the design career growth canvas

After filling out this canvas, you could notify your manager that you're working to this plan. They may then suggest adjustments that will eventually bring you closer to a promotion. Tell them: *"Here's what I'd like to improve and here's my plan. What do you think?"* Remember that it's in their interests (and it's their responsibility) to provide you with growth opportunities.

By undertaking this process, designers will educate their companies on the importance and benefits of growth plans and make organizations more likely to recognize and implement them as a part of their standard policy and structure.

If your company decides to start developing a growth plan for designers following your initiative, suggest that they implement a dedicated course for managers. Point them toward all the relevant templates and information here: https://productdesigninterview.com/

The advantage of these growth plans is that they allow you to take control of your own growth. Ideally, of course, you'd like the company to be on board and provide you with the right opportunities. But even if they don't, these skills will serve you at any future company or in any new career.

Ideally, keep this plan updated and revise it twice a year or when your context or objectives change (for instance, when you have a new career goal, feedback from a manager, when your employment status changes, etc.).

These competencies aren't meant to replace a company's objectives and key results (OKRs) or KPIs for designers. Improving these competencies will only help you to reach these company metrics easier and faster.

In the next part of the book, we're going to start learning new tools and techniques and we can start filling out this canvas with action items.

Part IV. Act on Your Growth Plan

9. Growing Your Impact

Maximizing your impact

As I said in Chapter 4, *Design Titles and Levels,* the main predictor of a designer's seniority is the impact they have which benefits the organization.

For example, at Dropbox, impact consists of three factors:[28]

- Consistency (how often you're making an impact)
- Velocity (how big that impact is)
- Accountability (taking responsibility and ownership for making an impact and delivering on it)

You may wonder what happens if you belong to a team that doesn't have much impact on the business in the first place. For example, 80% of revenue at Google is from ads. But does that mean that designers working on search and ads features are necessarily having more impact?

Well, technically speaking, yes; but at mature companies, when it comes to employee performance, impact is looked at individually and not in relation to the team. For example, at Intercom,[29] a designer who has a high impact within a less successful team (e.g., having shipped consistently, mentored designers, and contributed to the roadmap) would be evaluated more highly than a designer who has a smaller individual impact in a very successful team.

This is good news because it means that you have greater control over your own impact and, as a result, your growth.

Increasing your leverage

To increase the consistency and velocity of our impact, we either have to invest more time or focus on more impactful activities. We're going to talk about how to optimize our time in the *Shipping* chapter, but even when optimized successfully, the time improvement will be fractional. On the other hand, the return on investment (ROI) of that time can be improved many times over by doing the *right* activities – activities with a high ROI, otherwise known as high leverage.

To increase your impact, make efforts to progress toward these high-leverage activities. I'm going to list examples for each of the competencies in the next chapters, which can be used to understand towards what you should progress. In addition to that, I'd like to teach you an approach to finding a higher-leverage version of any activity in the future.

In fact, teaching you to find these opportunities alone is an example of a higher-leverage activity itself – instead of just giving you the answer, I'm going to give you a method that can be used over and over again without my support.

Here's how you can increase your leverage for most tasks:

- **Step one: Define what this activity has an impact on:**
    - Product (e.g., shipping a new feature, adjusting an existing feature)
    - Work (e.g., improving a process, affecting the roadmap)
    - People (e.g., mentoring, hiring)
- **Step two**: **Identify the level of the impact:**
    - Product
        - Task
        - Feature
        - Project
        - Product
        - Full product line
    - Work
        - Being aware of and learning about
        - Following
        - Contributing
        - Setting up and owning
        - Overseeing and managing
    - People
        - Self

- Team
- Organization
- Company
- Community/industry

- **Step three: Upgrade the impact level from step two to one of the next levels if possible.**

Let’s review three tasks you may have on your to-do list:

- Answer a DM message.
- Review the research results.
- Respond to a request from a non-designer colleague over email.

Here is an example of how you could build leverage in these three tasks:

Low leverage	**Medium leverage**	**High leverage**
Answering someone’s question in a one-to-one conversation.	Sharing the answer via a team channel so others can get that update or benefit from that knowledge.	Recognizing the opportunity and creating or updating documentation answering that question so the whole team/organization can benefit from it in the long term.
Going through the research results and applying the learnings in the design.	Sharing your learnings with the team so others can use the insights to create better work.	Organizing a research-results sharing program where designers are encouraged to share their insights and produce a monthly digest of important findings to be distributed across the company.
Helping a non-designer colleague with a design asset they need.	Teaching the colleague how they can produce this asset themselves in the future.	Recognizing that these assets are often requested. Setting up a workshop closing this gap and teaching the relevant people how to produce them independently.

Figure 9.1 Increasing the leverage of your tasks.

Treating your career like a business

Your career and a business are similar in that both have investments, marketing, branding, revenue, etc. In most cases, great inputs lead to great outcomes in both. Hiring great people, having a great product, and devising a clear strategy are all correlated with business success. Similarly, having great mentors, improving our skills, and having a robust strategy will lead to a successful career.

Invest to grow

In my own businesses, I hesitated to hire consultants and pay them $100 to $300 per hour. But, after doing it many times, I can now say it was one of the best investments I made. In one hour they can potentially save me hours of research, prevent mistakes that would cost me much more, and provide me with information I'd otherwise not even know to look for. All of that would be much more valuable than the consultation cost. I believe that the same is true for our careers.

If we look at it from a purely financial perspective, our career is probably the biggest financial asset we have, with the highest potential upside. This means that it could provide the highest ROI of any financial investment we ever make.

If you'd like to save more money, lowering your expenses can only provide so much gain before you hit your limit; increasing your income by improving your career, on the other hand, has much more potential.

For example, progressing from L3 to L4 at Google leads to an increase of almost $70,000 in total compensation (from $167,000 to $235,000) according to Levels.fyi.[30] And such career progressions affect your income not just for one year but theoretically for the rest of your life. It also means that all your future raises are computed based on this higher amount (the next level at Google – senior level – increases your total compensation by $55,000 or more).

Now, remember the last time you were unsure about getting a professional book or a mentorship consultation that seemed too expensive. When you put it into perspective, even a $200 consultation with an interview preparation coach is a great investment, assuming it could improve your chances of getting the job, let's say, by 10%.

You can also think about it in reverse. If there was an obstacle (in our case, a knowledge gap) that lowers your chances of receiving another $7,000 per year, would you pay $200 to a salary negotiation consultant to remove it? That's a no-brainer investment.

Investments with the potential to be highly beneficial for your career include educational materials (books, courses, workshops) and consultants (career planning, public speaking, tax, salary negotiation, interview prep).

Continuous improvement

Kaizen is a continuos improvement concept used in business but also applied in healthcare, psychotherapy, government, etc. It was used by Japanese businesses after the Second World War. Toyota invested decades of academic research into finding ways to improve their production principles, and they applied this principle as well. It is so universal that it can easily be applied to our careers.

The concept is very simple but powerful. In short, it says that by implementing small but continuous improvements you can produce significant results over time.

By following this principle and consistently investing in the activities mentioned above in order to improve incrementally, you could leverage the compounding effect and get ahead in your career.

For example, if you can become a better designer by only 1% a week, by doing it consistently, and considering the compounding effect, it will lead you to an overall improvement of 170% after two years (or nearly three times better as a designer).

Learning faster

I've never studied design. My education ended at high school. I've learned everything I know from the internet, books, and from applying my knowledge while building things, so I consider myself a decent learner. Here are a few insights I've had in recent years that have accelerated my learning:

- **Read books selectively**. Until a few years ago, I felt that if I started a book, I had to read it from beginning to end. This led to me reading a lot of information that I'd forget almost immediately, spending my time on knowledge that I didn't need or couldn't retain. One solution was to make notes of the main insights, but, more importantly, I began to seek out only those ideas I could apply immediately. Now I read books by opening the table of contents, going directly to the topic that I'm interested in, and skipping everything that doesn't seem relevant to my immediate needs. It saves me a lot of time, and I learn far more per reading session than I used to.
- **Avoid single-idea books.** Many books are centered around a single idea (e.g., *Start With Why, The Compound Effect*) and they could be a blog post. This means you can watch an author's TED talk or listen to a podcast featuring them to understand the message. I always prefer books that have multiple ideas, even if they all support a single message (e.g., *Factfulness, 30 Lessons for Living, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*). I know there's the potential to learn multiple things, and it's also easy to skip to the next idea once you understand the one you're reading about. These books normally have higher ROI when it comes to time.
- **Listen to podcasts for niche knowledge**. Nowadays, a lot of very niche conversations that wouldn't have been accessible publicly before are hosted on podcasts. For example, I'm currently using Spotify search to do a lot of competitive research for my businesses and learn about new markets I may want to enter. Here's how it can help your career:
    - **Employer due diligence**. If you've had a job offer, you could type in the names of executives and the head of design into Spotify search and listen to podcast episodes featuring them. It will give you a sense of the company culture and a feel for whether they are the sort of people you'd like to work with, be led by, and learn from.
    - **Exploring market challenges.** If you're working for a company which is building a ski resorts marketplace, there's

probably a lot you can learn from companies like Airbnb and Booking.com. Create a list of design leaders working in these places (you can find them on LinkedIn) and listen to podcast episodes featuring them to learn about the challenges they are having and how they have solved them.

Growing your competencies

In the next few chapters, I'm going to review each competency and suggest ways in which you can improve them. Until this point, the book content has mostly been based on research. From now onwards, it will tend to include more of my personal experiences and advice. I'll share the techniques that have helped me to grow my own career and that echo the research results about the competencies required by companies.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a list of competency-related action items:

- **Growth plan** items can be put into your growth plan and the growth canvas (see Chapter 8, *Design Career Growth Canvas*). They are techniques, frameworks, and projects you can start implementing immediately in order to provide value to your organization, gain experience, and learn. I strongly believe in growing through doing, so those will have the biggest impact on your growth.
- **Further learning** lists books, articles, and other resources that will help you to gain more in-depth knowledge on this competency. It's impossible to cover absolutely every aspect of being a great designer in one book, so I'll focus on the activities with the highest ROI and provide guidance on where to find additional information if needed. While reading the additional materials, try to convert them to action items in your growth plan which you can implement immediately.
- **Behaviors to practice** are additional specific tasks, habits, or approaches you can learn about to improve this competency. For example, presenting to large groups and growing your confidence

will make you more successful when presenting designs. Search for these behaviors on YouTube or Google to find techniques that will help you improve.

COMPETENCIES NOT COVERED

As I mentioned before, I'm not going to talk about visual and UX design since there's definitely enough information out there on hard skills. If you're at the very start of your career and you're looking to improve your craft skills, I've prepared a list of books that I normally send anyone who asks me how to start in UX. It's not a complete list, but each of these books will be highly valuable for improving your design skills:

- *Laws of UX* by Jon Yablonski
- *UX for Beginners* by Joel Marsh
- *About Face* by Alan Cooper and Robert Reimann
- *100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People* by Susan Weinschenk
- *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* by Josef Müller-Brockmann
- *Just Enough Research* by Erika Hall
- *Validating Product Ideas* by Tomer Sharon
- *HTML and CSS QuickStart Guide* by David DuRocher
- *Responsive Web Design* by Ethan Marcotte

Another competency I'm not going to cover is interpersonal skills, since I don't feel qualified to teach empathy, active listening, emotional intelligence, etc. However, you can find plenty of free materials on these topics online.

If you're still a student and feel overwhelmed by all the competencies in this book, focus on craft, communication, and collaboration competencies (in this order). They are the most critical in getting your first job.

10. Tools and Processes (Craft)

Tools are probably the most discussed topic by designers after visual and UX design. So, I'm sure that you're already staying on top of all the recent tools and design system best practices. Even if you're not, I know you won't have any problems finding them.

Knowing how to create or maintain documentation, design systems, processes, and tools is important. However, knowing how to **identify the problems and needs** of all of the above is a much more valuable skill. Someone who initiates and defines processes has more leverage and impact compared to someone who is purely following and executing them.

You can use the technique I'm going to describe below to improve your own workflow or, if you want to have a bigger impact, you can use it to improve the team's or the organization's workflow. Improving organizational processes is a highly valuable skill that will impact the rest of your career, no matter what career path, company, or career type you choose.

If you're working in a company that has a design operations team, this technique may be less powerful since the most important processes will already be reviewed and owned by them.

A framework to improve processes

In 2013, I worked as a senior designer at a startup. Sketch and Figma didn't exist yet, so we designed in Photoshop. We had products on multiple platforms – desktop, mobile, tablet, smart TVs, set-top-box, and Xbox – but most of our work was on iOS devices. Vector formats like SVGs weren't widely supported by devices and very few design elements could be created in code. So, each of the assets had to be manually exported using Photoshop in two resolutions – retina and non-retina.

One of the junior designers, whom I often guided, was responsible for doing that work. Each day he'd have to spend hours just exporting assets of the UI we designed for developers. The inefficiency of such manual work was so obvious that I decided to build a simple Photoshop action that automated the steps of the export. Once we incorporated this action, his workflow became 10 times faster. Time required per asset went from up to a minute to just a few seconds.

A few months later, I quit to start my own business, but this improvement could have been one of the things I leveraged for a promotion considering the amount of time and resources I saved the company.

Since then, both as an employee and business owner, I always look for ways to improve internal processes. You can do it intentionally by following these four steps:

1. Check if the process is already documented.
2. If not, map out the process.
3. Find inefficiencies in the process.
4. Solve these inefficiencies.

Now, let’s review each of these steps.

1. Check if process documentation already exists

Ask your manager or team mates if the team workflow process is documented. This document will often include a flowchart including the steps for shipping a feature. It also often includes a list of responsible parties and tools that are being used at each step. Here’s what you should do, depending on the answer (any of these answers are beneficial for you):

- *“We have one.”* – ask for access to this document.
- “We have one, but it isn’t updated.” – ask if you can take responsibility for updating it.
- “We don’t have one.” – ask if you can create one.

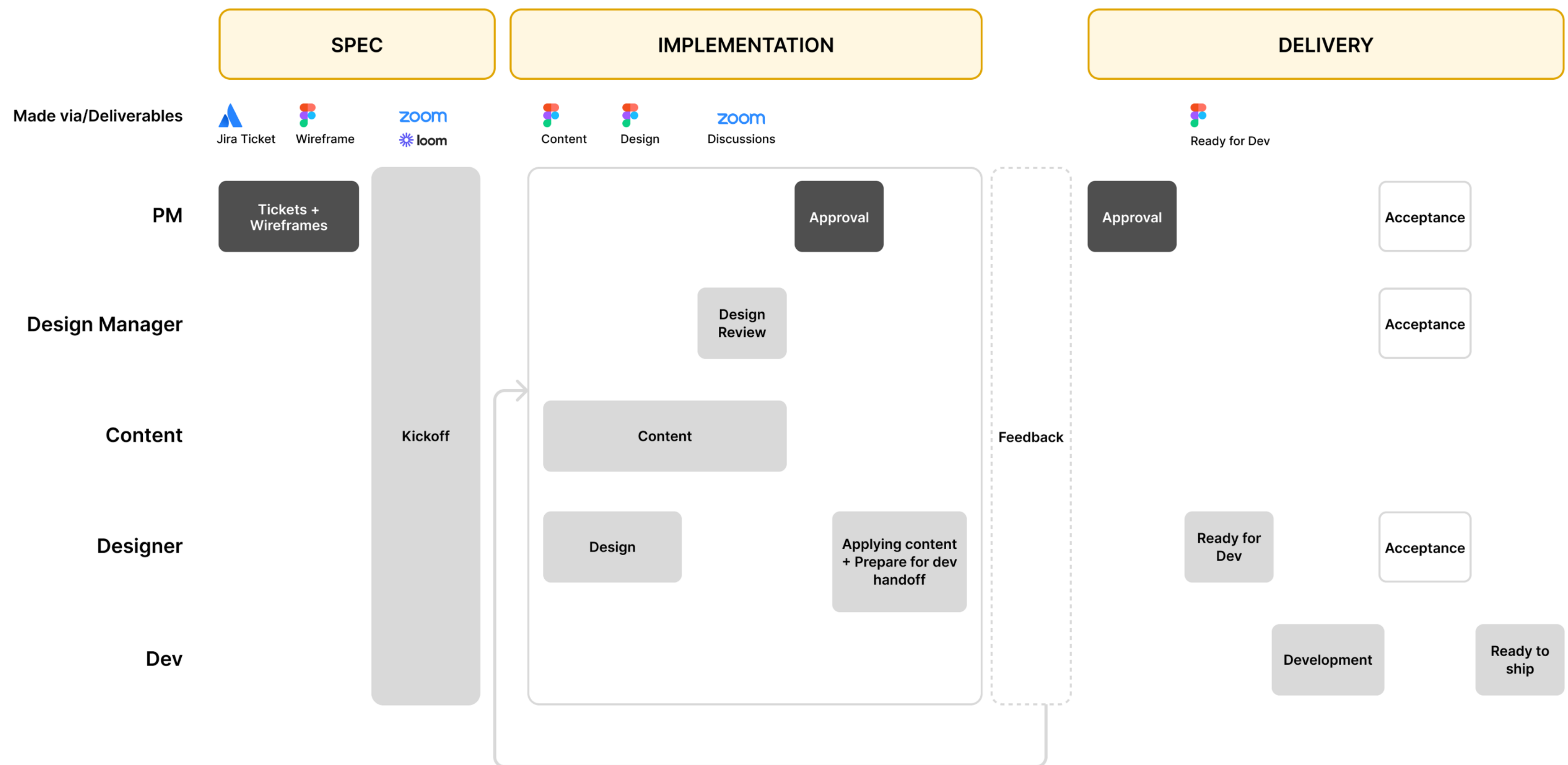
You can then explain that having this (updated) document will help in the following ways:

- It will educate you on the company process and potentially **help you to be more efficient** in producing work.
- **It will serve as a reference point** and a basis for all future process changes, making them easier to discuss and enact.
- It will become part of the standard **onboarding materials** which will help to onboard new team members more efficiently.

- It will help everyone identify **opportunities to improve collaboration and tools** to ensure you can ship better products faster.

Managers will rarely say no to any of these outcomes since they are all positive for the company.

You can approach process improvements in the same way you go about building products – identifying needs, understanding how people solve the problem today, observing them doing that, identifying room for improvement, suggesting solutions, etc. Here is some advice on how to do that.



SPEC
IMPLEMENTATION
DELIVERY
Made via/Deliverables
Jira Ticket
Wireframe
zoom
loom
Content
Design
zoom
Discussions
Ready for Dev
PM
Design Manager
Content
Designer
Dev
Tickets + Wireframes
Kickoff
Approval
Design Review
Content
Design
Applying content + Prepare for dev handoff
Feedback
Approval
Ready for Dev
Development
Acceptance
Acceptance
Acceptance
Ready to ship

Figure 10.1. Workflow process example.

2. Map out the process

To map out the work process, ask the question: *"How are we [doing this process] today?"* The missing part could be any work process: shipping a new feature, doing a hand off to development, updating design system elements, etc. The smaller a company is, the wider you want to map out the process. In a company with under 100 employees, you could map out the whole process from idea creation to development.

When mapping out processes, include steps, collaborators, and tools. To do that, answer these questions:

- What are the steps needed to successfully complete this process?
- Who is involved at each step?
- What tools are used at each step?

If you're not sure about any of the steps, ask your manager or people involved; they will normally be happy to contribute.

In Figure 10.1, I show an example of a real process map I created for a design process at a company with about 80 employees. They hired me as a contractor to do other work, but when I saw some inefficiencies that they agreed needed addressing, I suggested creating this map of the process. They were happy to do that, and they also incorporated it in their onboarding materials.

3. Find inefficiencies

Now you have the workflow in front of you, let's list the inefficiencies. I haven't met a single team that was 100% satisfied with their process. There are always challenges and opportunities for improvement.

There are two ways to find inefficiencies: issues you identify yourself and issues raised by others (both have to be validated). Start with the problems you're aware of or suspect exist.

Many times, you'll have the feeling that something isn't working well in a certain part of the process and you'll assume that it's just you. If you ask others, however, you'll very likely find that they feel the same way.

To find more problems in the process, you could send your colleagues this message:

Hey, I'm working on mapping out our team's workflow. I wanted to ask you some questions that will potentially help us improve our processes.

I know you work with a few teams, but please only answer these questions in relation to the market expansion team workflow:

- *What parts of our team workflow frustrate you the most?*
- *Which tools frustrate you the most and why?*
- *What repetitive tasks do you have to do often?*
- *Are there any company policies or procedures that create bottlenecks or delays?*
- *If you had a magic wand, what would you change about our current process?*

Thanks!

After collecting and validating these issues, you can put them on an impact/effort matrix like the one below to decide which ones to focus on.

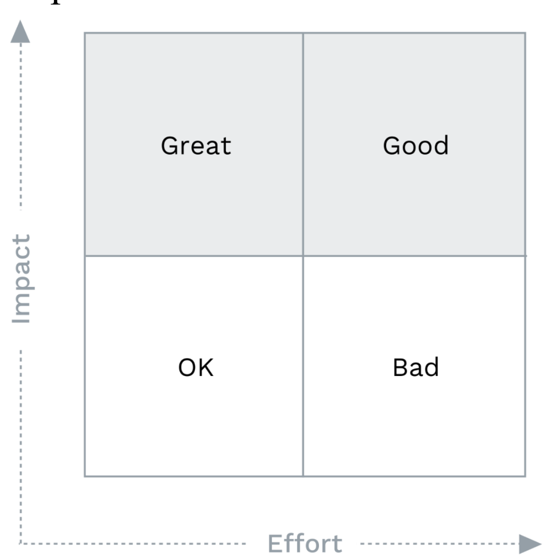


Figure 10.2. Impact/effort matrix.

4. Solve inefficiencies

The problems you've experienced yourself will often be easier to define and solve, so you can prioritize them.

After identifying these problems and making sure they are valid, you could present them to your manager in your next one-on-one and suggest taking ownership of the solution, explaining how this will benefit the company. Alternatively, you could present suggested solutions for the team to implement.

Just by making your company aware of problems and the opportunity to improve, you'll already be providing them with value. If you present a good case, your manager is likely to allow you to take the lead on resolving them.

Solutions to the problems you've identified could come in the form of tools, documentation, design systems, policies, etc. To find solutions, interview stakeholders as they are likely to have ideas for possible remedies; they can at least share what they've already tried. Beyond that, you can search for best practices online and ask for advice in your design community.

You could take this as far as building your own internal tool, similar to what I described in my own example at the beginning. Eventually, you could even leverage this experience to make resolving process issues your main responsibility, transitioning toward a design operations position.

If you don't manage to implement any improvements as a result of this process, the worst-case scenario is that you get to know the whole workflow really well and become familiar with areas of responsibility and context at each step, all of which can be helpful for you in the future.

Let's look at a couple of examples:

EXAMPLE ONE

- **The current state of things** – The marketing department creates landing pages for ad campaigns on a constant basis and requires help from designers to prepare a rough layout and assets.
- **The inefficiency** – Most landing pages reuse the design elements and assets we already have. But still, this low-level work takes resources from the design department, creates a bottleneck for the marketing department, and prolongs the shipping cycles.

- **The suggested solution** – Create a modular design file with components and variants connected to the assets library. Marketing managers can use it to build landing page mock-ups themselves in the design tool. They will then only require final sign-off from a designer.

EXAMPLE TWO

- **The current state of things** – Our new design system is only partially implemented and so, in production, we still have a lot of parts of the product that use legacy elements. I know by heart which element I should be taking from the new design system and which are from the old UI kit.
- **The inefficiency** – Since it's never been documented, none of the new designers know which UI element should be used. This month it led to developers returning to us with questions four times.
- **The suggested solution** – Spend one hour documenting the requirements to provide a clear explanation of which elements should be used from which place. It's a temporary solution since we'll eventually deploy the full version of the new design system, but this won't happen until the end of the year and two new designers are joining soon and will require guidance on this, so it's time well spent. In addition, this list could be used to keep track of all elements that still have to be added to the design system.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Implement the process improvement framework. *Next step: check if the organization already has a process diagram.*

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Discovering and experimenting with new tools.

- Discovering and learning best practice in relation to process.

11. Communicating Design (Communication)

During their studies, designers normally present their designs to other designers. When we begin working in a company, we're suddenly required to present to people without a design background and, more importantly, with completely different goals and objectives in mind. Let's look at some of those stakeholders in more detail:

- **PMs** will be looking at designs and asking themselves if it's helpful in driving business metrics, how easy it is to develop, how its success can be measured, how they can sell the idea to their boss, etc.
- **Developers** will be evaluating the complexity of a design's implementation.
- **Other organizational stakeholders**, such as data analysts, customer success representatives, senior executives, sales associates, and sometimes the founders. During my career at WeWork, I had to spontaneously present to the CEO. I didn't do very well, and it later came up as feedback from my boss on my communication skills.
- **People outside of the organization.** This happens rarely, and I wouldn't spend too much time preparing for it, but being able to do it well can be a huge advantage. I'd look at this as more of an opportunity to grow and gain more impact than a must-have requirement. For example, during my own career as a designer I had to present to:
  - **Investors** – Again, this happened spontaneously. When my boss was having a chat with our company's investor, he asked if I could present the new product concepts we were working on.
  - **Clients** – When I worked at a startup, building solutions for large enterprise clients (just a few companies, but with big contracts), I participated in meetings with clients we were

about to sign and presented our product solutions, including my designs. The same company wanted to send me to Singapore to another client's HQ for a week so I could work with the client's team.

- **Vendors** – At a different company, my team mate – another designer – was part of the collaboration with an external ad agency and had to present our new product to them.

Here is a framework I use to present designs and ideas. I made the framework flexible so you can adjust it easily for your audience and context.

A framework for presenting designs

Designers most commonly have to present to the following people for the listed reasons:

- Presenting to other designers for feedback.
- Presenting to the PM/design manager for approval.
- Presenting to developers to evaluate the technical difficulty.
- Presenting to the team or business stakeholders to show progress.

To cover these cases, follow this presentation structure:

1. Explain why you are there and ask your ask.
2. Provide project-specific context.
3. Present the solution.
4. Suggest the next steps (and ask your ask again).

Let's expand on each step.

1. Explain why you are there and ask your ask

Explain why are you presenting and what you need from your audience. Having this in mind from the beginning will help them to focus on what matters. As a result, they are more likely to help you with your request so you can leave the meeting with your goal accomplished.

Here are some common asks (listed from most to least common):

- I need your feedback on X.
- I need your approval.
- Help me decide between A and B.
- Here's the progress I've made.
- We finished working on X; here are the results and learnings.

Examples:

"Hello everyone, I'd like to present the onboarding redesign to you and get your feedback on the general user flow."

"Hi Felix, I'd like to show you the solution I came up with for the notifications screen redesign and get your sign-off."

2. Provide project context

After explaining what you need from the audience, you should provide the relevant information about the project. These are the questions that you should be answering:

- What is the problem you're trying to solve and why? *(business needs, user needs)*
- What is the timeline and scope? Where do we stand now and – if relevant – what was discussed before on this topic?
- What is the readiness level of what you're going to present? *(wireframes, high-fidelity design, prototypes, etc.)*
- What are the project's constraints? *(technical limitations, limited resources, compliance, accessibility, etc.)*
- What are the project's blindspots? *(lack of data/research on specific aspects of the project)*
- What are competitors doing in this regard? *(competitive analysis of how others solve this problem, how well they are doing that, and what can be learned from them)*

This information will help to provide the audience with a better understanding of your decision-making process and suggestions for next steps and reduce the number of additional questions.

EXAMPLE

Let's say we're working on a marketplace connecting freelancers and companies. Our task is to redesign the onboarding flow for companies. You might say something like the following:

"The goal of the company onboarding process is to make them add their first project within 24 hours of creating a new account because we know that if they do this they are more likely to remain as long-term customers.

"This quarter we've launched features like auto-matching and express delivery. They aren't mentioned in the onboarding process currently. We believe that mentioning these features in the onboarding is going to make companies more likely to add their first project right away. Currently, only 23% of companies add their first project right away and we'd like to increase this number ***(business needs and user needs)****.*

"This feature has to be ready for development for the sprint #34 starting on November 2nd, which means that I have one more week to finish the design ***(timeline)****.*

"The scope of this task is to redesign the onboarding only, without updating the landing pages entry-points messaging on these new features ***(scope)****.*

"I'm going to present wireframes today ***(readiness level)****. Helen is sick so we don't have the final copy to work with. I've used the copy from our landing pages for now, and Helen will update it once she's back* ***(constraints)****.*

"Seems like most business marketplaces and products targeting business owners have a five-step onboarding process with a similar flow, so assuming they run tests on it, it seems to be best practice ***(competitor analysis)****."*

3. Present the solution

For a deep dive into presenting design solutions, use the framework from my first book, *Solving Product Design Exercises*. I wrote that book for the purpose of solving whiteboarding and take-home exercises during job interviews. Here is a slightly adjusted version for presentation purposes.

The framework is based on the Five Ws and How (5W1H) technique. 5W1H is a set of six questions: what, when, where, who, why, and how. It's used in journalism, research, and police investigations for information gathering and problem-solving.

To present your solution, provide answers to these questions:

- **Why** are we building this?
    - Reiterate the problem we're solving from step two.
- **Who** are we building this for?
    - Explain which group of users this feature is for. If relevant, mention the properties of this audience: age, location, occupation, mobility type, etc.
- **When and where** will it be used?
    - Explain at what step of their journey users will use this. When relevant, mention the following:
        - Where are they physically?
        - Is there a trigger event causing this need?
        - How much time do they have?
        - What specific platform are they using?
        - What emotions do they experience?
- **What** should we build? If relevant, point out the specific parts you need feedback on.
    - Show how things work now (if relevant).
    - Articulate why the current solution doesn't serve the goal from step two.
    - Present your solution(s).
    - Articulate the reasoning behind the decisions leading to the solutions.
    - List pros and cons for each solution.

- **How** can we measure it?
    - Suggest how you will know that this solution was successful.

It may look like a lot, but in the example below, you'll see that some questions just require one or two sentences to answer.

EXAMPLE

Let's continue with the previous example of a marketplace.

*"As I mentioned, the goal is to make companies more likely to add a project (**why**). The audience we're serving with our onboarding are CEOs of businesses with five to 30 employees (**who**).*

*"They normally arrive from our Google Ads through high-intent ads while looking for a freelancer. Eighty-five percent of them are on desktops and they are normally short on time; they create accounts at a few marketplaces and compare between them (**when and where**).*

*"This is what the onboarding looks like now, from the sign-up to the dashboard. As I mentioned, the current onboarding doesn't mention auto-matching and express delivery features. Here are the wireframes I made with the updated steps. The possible disadvantage of this solution is that we add two additional steps which could potentially make users leave in the middle of onboarding. However, as I mentioned, a five-step onboarding seems to be the industry standard, so I feel comfortable trying it out (**what**).*

*"We will measure the completion rate before and after adding these steps, and we'll start measuring the drop-rate on each step. We should potentially run a test in the future checking if users are more likely to complete the onboarding if we condense our messaging into three steps rather than five (**how**)."*

Depending on who you're presenting to, you may want to omit some of the sections in this presenting framework. For example, if you're presenting to your team mates who are working on the same product, there's no need to explain the properties of the audience since they are very familiar with them.

4. Suggest next steps

- Reiterate your ask from step one.
- Explain what you've planned to happen next with this project (if relevant).
- Open the conversation.

EXAMPLE

"For now, I'd like to get your feedback on the general user flow ***(your ask)*** *so I can take it into consideration and move to high-fidelity designs next week and present it at our next design critique meeting before it goes to development (****what's next****). I'm happy to answer your questions and hear your feedback now (****open the conversation****)."*

This framework can also be used for internal solutions (a design system, for example). In this case, the audience would just be the company's employees.

If you'd like to get into presentation design more deeply, read *Articulating Design Decisions* by Tom Greever.

Articulating your reasoning

One of the steps of the framework above is articulating your reasoning. This skill is crucial beyond presentations. Being aware of and using reasoning tools like data, research, and business objectives rather than just relying on gut feelings or visual taste could help you:

- challenge your own decisions and find better solutions.
- appear more trustworthy.
- make your collaborations more efficient by removing unnecessary discussions and feedback cycles.

Next time you're making a design decision, ask yourself about the reasoning behind it. Try to check if the, "*I think/believe that …,"* can be replaced with, *"We know that …," "Data shows that …," or, "According to research …"* This sort of reasoning is harder to disagree with but also, in most cases, it leads to better solutions.

Here is a list of robust reasons you can base your design decisions on:

- **Data and analytics**
    - *"Our customer support representatives report that our users' number one complaint is not being able to add multiple items in one session."*
    - *"Checkout completion on mobile devices with resolution under 380px width is 67% lower than above 380px."*
- **Research**
    - *"According to research, hiding the main navigation using a 'hamburger menu' reduces its discoverability by half."*
- **Visual design, design patterns, and brand alignment**
    - *"This color is off-brand according to our updated color palette."*
    - *"These items look related because of their proximity even though they are not."*
- **Business** (objectives, competition)
    - *"The KPI of attracting more companies is more important than bringing more freelancers to our platform."*
- **Technical reasons** (feasibility, design system limitations)
    - *"Our back-end doesn't support displaying new elements on the page."*
    - *"Our design system doesn't support a timeline UI element yet."*
- **Project context** (scope, timeline, resources, roadmap)
    - *"The freelancer taking care of our brand illustrations isn't available for the next five weeks."*
    - *"It may clash with the new feature we've planned to launch in the next quarter."*
- **Other** (ethics, sustainability, legal compliance, company values, privacy and data protection, accessibility, and inclusivity)
    - *"Even though we don't have a business interest on this, displaying the car option first may make people prefer it over a bike or public transportation and lead to more pollution."*

Here are two examples of how you could use this sort of reasoning to explain your decisions:

- *"Research shows that top-aligned labels in forms improve usability, so I decided to break the consistency with other screens. This form has more than 20 fields, so I believe we should optimize for usability instead of consistency here."*
- *"There are only two weeks left until launch, so I reused this drop-down we have in the other part of the app. It is sub-optimal because it doesn't have an internal search field that we'd ideally want considering the 30-plus options. However, I'd like to move forward with it to make sure we ship on time and let the developers prioritize more crucial parts of the product."*

This list is also helpful for articulating the pros and cons of specific solutions you're presenting.

Something to keep in mind is that different people respond differently to reason types. For example, some colleagues are more likely to listen to data, while others prioritize data privacy or sustainability. Keep that in mind and adjust according to your audience, increasing the chance that you'll convince them to go with your solution.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Apply the presenting framework or its elements when presenting work. *Next step: start using it at one of the next recurring meetings (design critique meetings, approval reviews, etc.).*
- Start consciously asking yourself what the reason is for your design decisions. *Next step: practice it while working on your next design.*
- Articulate that reasoning to others. *Next step: start communicating it at one of the next recurring meetings.*

FURTHER LEARNING

- Read *Articulating Design Decisions* by Tom Greever to learn more about presenting.

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Influencing others.
- Presenting to large groups.
- Developing your confidence while presenting.
- Applying the skills of storytelling.

12. Feedback (Communication)

Feedback helps organizations ensure the alignment and quality of the solution and that the right thing is shipped.

Designers receive feedback from different people, but mostly they'll get it:

- at design critiques from fellow designers.
- from managers at approval meetings.
- from other project stakeholders via collaboration apps.

Knowing how to provide and accept feedback improves your relationships, increases your area of influence, and helps the company to ship better products. Let's explore how to work with feedback easily.

Providing non-design feedback

There are two types of non-design feedback:

- Positive (encourage and motivate someone to continue a behavior).
- Negative (discourage someone from a specific behavior).

Providing negative feedback is frightening, and you're not necessarily expected to do that as a part of your role.

However, during your career, you'll find yourself in situations when doing so can help you move forward. This is also a skill that will be crucial if you decide to take on people management positions in the future.

A study featured in *Harvard Business Review* shows that people *do* want to receive feedback, especially negative feedback. According to the study, no one likes to provide negative feedback, but everyone wants to hear it.[31]

To open a conversation when providing feedback, you can use phrases like:

- *"I'd be happy to give you some feedback; do you have time now?"*
- *"Can we talk about X? I'd like to give you some brief feedback."*

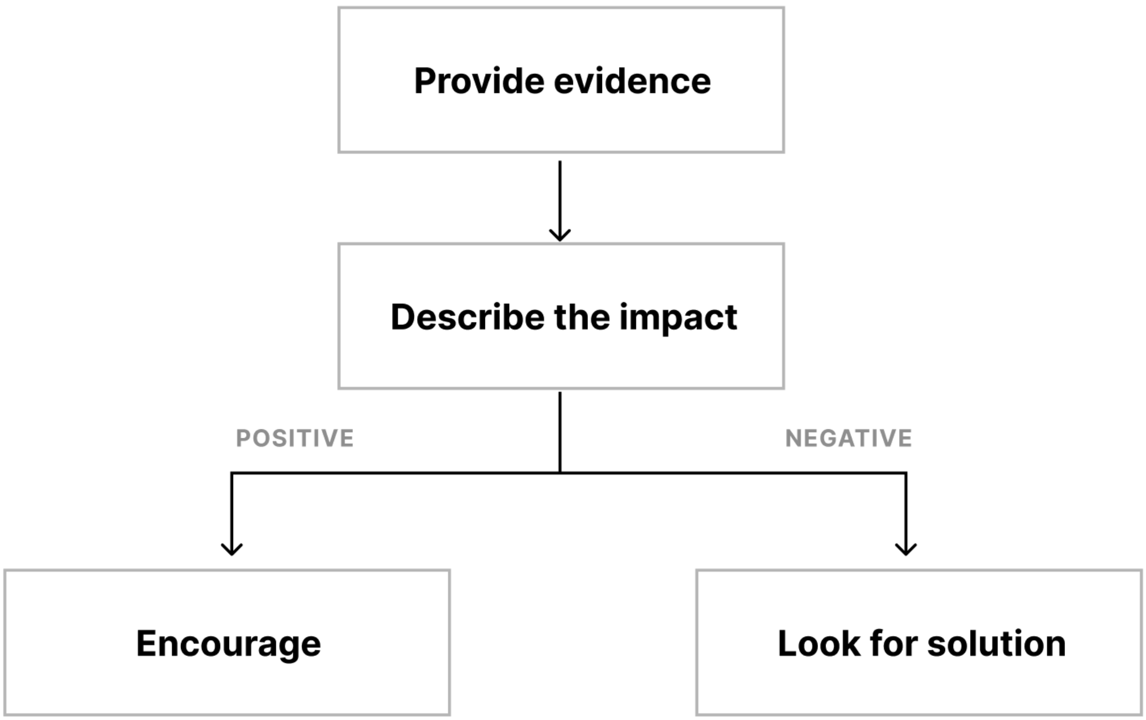


Figure 12.1. A simple framework for providing non-design feedback.

For both positive and negative feedback, you can use this framework to deliver it efficiently:

- **Step one: Provide evidence** – Explain what behavior you'd like to talk about and provide concrete examples. Make sure you do not share your opinion but only facts.
- **Step two: Describe the impact** – Articulate the effect of the behavior.
- **Step three**: **(For positive feedback) Encourage** – Conclude by encouraging the person to continue doing this.
- **Step three**: **(For negative feedback) Look for a solution** – Discuss how the behavior can be changed. Position it as a question, such as, *"How can we make sure it doesn't keep happening?"*

An example of positive feedback:

"I've noticed you often offer to share your expertise with me and other team mates, like with the basics of HTML/CSS last month or how to implement animations we design in code last week ***(evidence)****.*

"You showing us these skills and educating us on the development side of design helps us to better understand how our design deliverables can be optimized and makes the hand-off from design to development much smoother ***(impact)****.*

"I really appreciate you sharing your knowledge and your efforts to make our collaboration more efficient, so I wanted to say thank you! ***(encouragement)****.*

An example of negative feedback:

"I've noticed you're often late to our meetings; in fact, you've been late to three out of four of our recent syncs ***(evidence)****.*

"It often leads to us not having enough time to review the designs together so we either have to rush through the agenda, which sometimes makes me skip some topics, or our meetings run beyond the scheduled slot, which means I'm late for my next meeting ***(impact)****.*

"I wanted to raise this issue with you and see how can we avoid it in the future ***(encouragement).***"

Receiving design feedback

Design is easy to give feedback on. It's harder to give feedback on a products requirement document (PRD) or code than on something visual like design. Design may be the role that has to deal with the most feedback inside the organization.

When the feedback process isn't structured, designers often find themselves overwhelmed with comments, not knowing what's most important, what can be ignored, and how to respond.

Here are some general guidelines to help you process feedback before we dive in to the details:

- **Follow the framework for presenting designs** from the previous chapter when you're presenting. Providing all relevant information during the presentation leaves less room for irrelevant feedback and clarifying questions, saving all parties involved time and effort.
- **Make sure there's a facilitator** (normally the PM or the design manager) for the presentation session who can lead the conversation. If no one takes ownership of that, try and lead the conversation yourself, focusing the participants on the feedback you've requested in your presentation and driving the discussion toward those goals.
- **Never take design feedback personally** and become defensive. I've seen this happen too many times, especially with less experienced designers (it naturally improves over the years once designers gain more confidence). It helps to remember that:
    - design feedback is provided based on the work and not on you.
    - the goal of feedback is not to question your skills or tell you what to do but to improve the product.

Here is a framework for processing feedback, whether it's received at design critique meetings, on task management tools, or as a comment in a design tool.

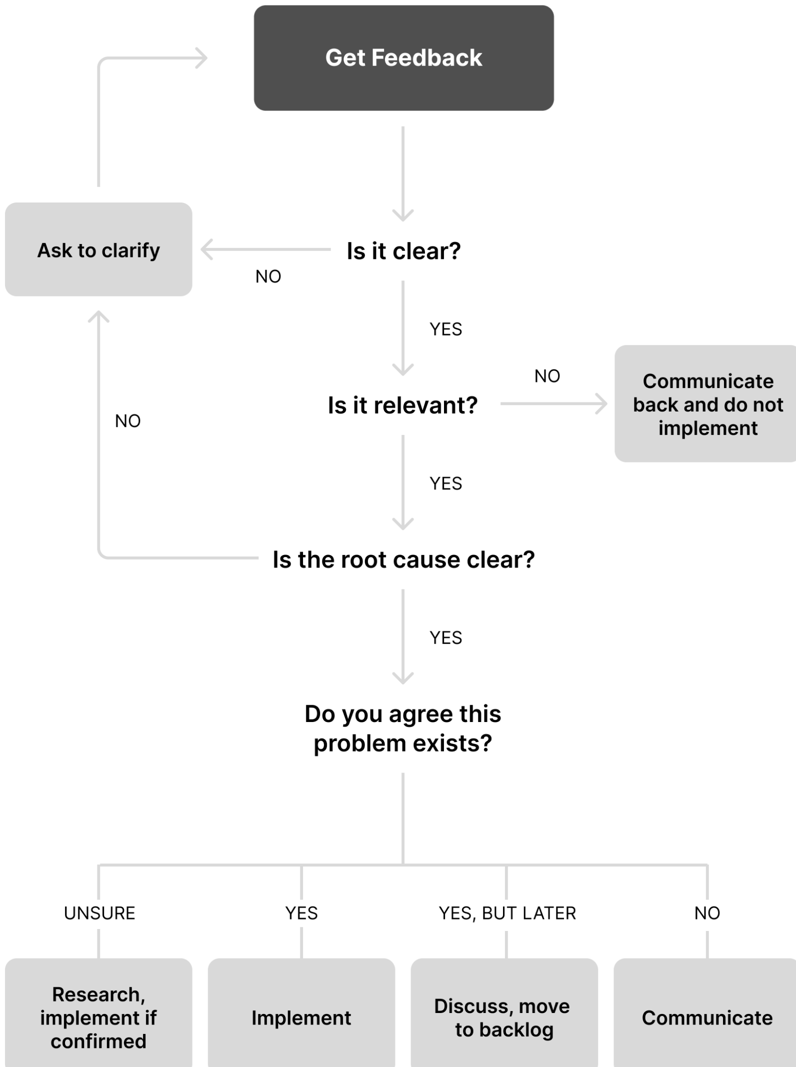


Figure 12.2. A framework for processing design feedback.

1. Understand the root cause

a. **If the feedback is unclear, ask questions until it is**. It sounds obvious, but it's impossible to process something without understanding what it means. Unfortunately, sometimes comments are added for the sake of participation and not with the goal of improving the product. In this case, the feedback provider may not have put much thought into it. Ask clarifying questions until their reasoning is clear.

b. **Clarify what problem the person is trying to solve**. Sometimes, feedback might suggest a change without explaining why. In many cases, the requested change isn't the right solution for the problem. For example, when someone asks you to make the call-to-action button bigger, it could be for numerous reasons: a) it's not visible enough, b) the current size isn't part of the design system, c) it's too small to be touched on a smartphone, etc. Depending on the reason, your response and any further actions you take could be different. So, make sure you understand what the author of the feedback is trying to resolve.

2. Evaluate relevancy

Check if their feedback is relevant considering the project context (readiness level, scope, and what feedback was requested originally).

Continuing the previous example – a request to change the button size – none of the three reasons are relevant if you're at the stage of wireframes. They are all only relevant at the stage of high-fidelity design.

You can respond to this type of feedback with: "*Thanks Angela. I'd like to focus on the general flow of the user right now and not the visual design. I'll take it into consideration when I'm working on the high-fidelity design next week."*

3. Prioritize

Getting a lot of feedback adds another layer of effort to the process – the need to prioritize. But it's not always clear *how* to prioritize feedback – by the seniority of the person who gave it, by the impact on the business, by the severity of the user problem, or something else.

However, I learned a simple technique from my ex-colleague. He would mention, when giving feedback, how strongly he felt about it to indicate the level of severity. For example, he would say, *"I don't feel strongly about it,"* or, *"I feel quite strongly that we should do that."* I found it so easy to understand and helpful in grasping how much attention the feedback should get. So, when you'd like to know how to prioritize feedback, one thing that could help is to simply ask: *"How strongly do you feel about it?"* Otherwise, you might be able to understand their strength of feeling from the context of the conversation.

To take feedback prioritization to the next level, you can apply the FlashTags technique shared by Dharmesh Shah, the co-founder of HubSpot.[32] It consists of four hashtags that you can add to communications to signal how strong you feel about it:

- **#fyi** – *I do not expect a reaction or a response.* Sometimes you get a link to an article or a talk from a colleague with no context. Now you're unsure if you're supposed to watch the whole 40 minutes, implement everything the article says, or something else. That's when the tag #fyi is useful – it tells you that something could be relevant but it can also be completely ignored.
- **#suggestion** – *This is something I'd consider doing, but I may not have all the context and data, so it's up to you if you'd like to implement it. A response would be nice but not a must.*
- **#recommendation (or #strongrecommendation)** – *I've given this a lot of thought and I believe I have all the context to feel confident that we should do this. Please do not ignore this. A reply would be appreciated.*
- #**plea** – Please do this. Let's discuss if you feel otherwise.

You could take ownership of implementing this technique inside your team as a part of your growth plan.

4. Respond

At this point, you know whether the feedback is relevant and worth responding to. Your response will belong to one of these four categories:

Your response	**Meaning**	**Next step**	**Examples of responses**
Yes	I agree that this problem exists and is worth solving now. If a solution was suggested:	Implement	• *"Good point. Thanks for the suggestion. I will fix this."* • *"I agree that this color combination has low contrast and isn't accessible. However, I wouldn't replace it with orange as I'm afraid it may look too*

	• I agree with the solution suggested. • I disagree with the suggested solution, but I'll suggest a better one.		*much like an error. I'll check some options and find a solution though."*
Yes, but later	I agree that this problem exists, but it isn't worth solving now.	Check if there's agreement. If so, add it to the backlog.	*"I agree that it's important that we mark the 'premium' badge for paid features consistently. However, we still haven't made a decision on this across the app, so I'll leave it for now and we'll have to make a global decision on this separately and update the design accordingly. If you agree, I'll add it to our upcoming team meeting agenda."*
Requires research	I'm not sure if this problem exists, but I agree that if it does, it's worth solving now. I'll research it further.	Communicate, research, and implement if confirmed.	*"Good point regarding screen sizes on mobile. I didn't check if it will fit on older smartphones. I'll check how many users we have with smaller screen sizes on this page and fix it if that's the case."*
No	I don't think this problem exists.	Communicate	*"The analytics report from May (add link) shows that users actually do scroll beyond this point on the page, so I don't think we need additional pointers to encourage users to scroll further."*

Figure 12.3. Four categories of response.

Providing design feedback

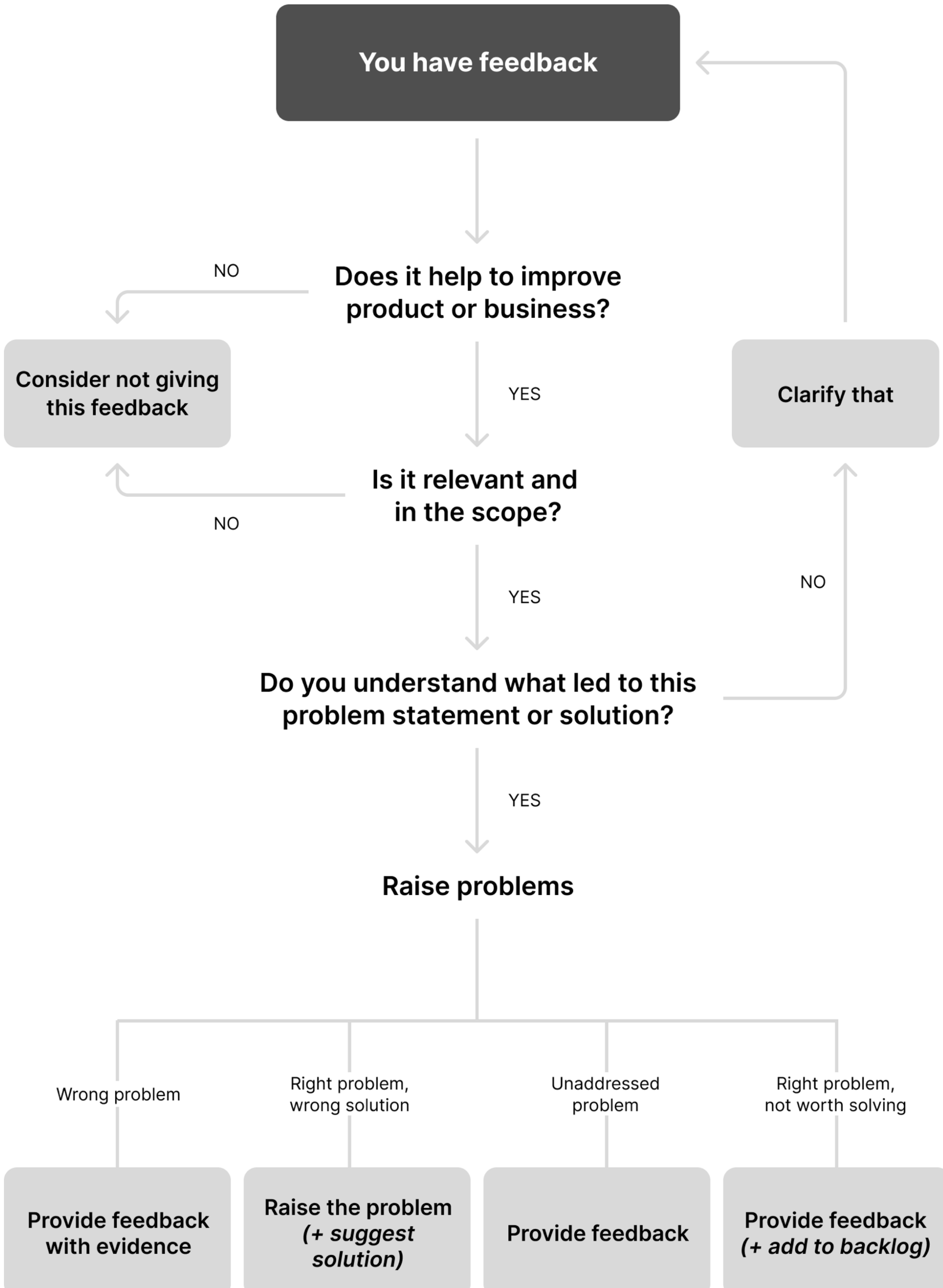


Figure 12.4. A framework for providing design feedback.

This framework consists of seven steps, which may seem like a lot of effort to leave a comment on someone's design work. However, I'm sure that you're already subconsciously going through some of them and the rest will become automatic with practice. Eventually, going through these steps will lead to you providing more effective feedback.

This framework naturally has similar steps to the process of receiving feedback, so I'll use less examples here.

1. Ensure it's valuable

Very simply, ask yourself: *Does this feedback help us improve the product or business (via people, infrastructure, processes, etc.)?* This is the goal of helpful feedback. If it doesn't help with the things above, maybe you shouldn't provide it.

2. Ensure it is relevant and in scope

Ask yourself: *Is it relevant and in scope?* If it is, go to the next step.

If the feedback isn't in scope, it will likely be added to the backlog. Now, decide if it requires discussion or can be added to the backlog by you. If this feedback requires discussion, ask yourself if this is the right audience and important enough to discuss now, taking from the time of that unrelated task.

If you decide to share it, add a disclaimer that it's out of scope or that it relates to a different issue. If you decide not to share the feedback, write it down and consider sharing later via a different medium or audience.

3. Understand what led to the current solution or problem statement

To provide helpful feedback, you have to understand what led to the current problem statement or solution.

For example, imagine a notifications icon that indicates that there are new notifications available but doesn't display the number of notifications. Before you jump in and suggest adding the notifications number, ask the designer if there's a reason why they chose not to display it. They could have a valid reason for their solution.

It is especially useful to ask these questions when providing oral feedback:

- "Could you explain the reasoning behind …?"
- "Can you clarify the part where …?"
- "Did you consider the implications of …?"
- "How would this approach work in the case of …?"
- "What's your plan for addressing the potential issue of …?"
- "How do we know that it's a problem?"

In written communication, I often use this as a shortcut to be more proactive and avoid more back and forth. When I'm quite certain that I know why this decision was made and I have a better solution in mind, I communicate the reason as an assumption, so the other person can deny it if it's wrong:

"I assume that [problem with the current solution] because [your assumption about the reason behind it]. If that's the case, what do you think about [suggested alternative solution]? I believe it's [explain why suggested solution is better]."

For example:

"I assume that this 'Add project' button is so small because that's the biggest we have in our design system? If that's the case, what do you think about asking Lora to add a bigger version? I believe it's crucial since people may easily miss it and it may affect our main KPI; plus we could reuse it on other important screens."

4. Raise problems (and suggest solutions)

If your feedback is found to be helpful, relevant, in scope, and clarified, use this table to act:

Intention	**Condition**	**Next step**	**Examples of responses**
Disagree with the problem being solved.	You have evidence that this problem doesn't need to be solved.	Provide feedback with evidence.	*"Our analytics report shows that users scroll beyond this point on the screen, so I don't think we need additional pointers to encourage users to scroll further."*
Agree with the problem being solved but disagree with the solution.	You gathered and understood the context leading to this solution, but you still believe it can be improved.	Raise the problem with the current solution. Potentially suggest an alternative.	*"I agree that it's not completely clear that this screen is scrollable. However, the floating pointers you've included look too robust and block the content. Did you explore any alternatives?"* *[In the case of suggesting another solution] "Maybe we could add a shadow to the sticky button at the bottom of the page and find a way for it to cut the content, hinting that it's not the end of the page."*
Notice an unaddressed problem	You think this new problem is worth solving now (if not now, consider if it's the right time and audience to raise it with the goal of checking if others agree that it's a problem and mark as out of scope).	Provide feedback	*"This color combination has low contrast and isn't accessible. I'm concerned that it can make it harder for our users to read this caption."*
You agree with the problem, but you don't believe it's worth solving (now).	You have evidence that this problem isn't worth solving (now).	Provide feedback. When the problem is worth solving, but not immediately, add it to the backlog.	*"I see that you've added a search box to the list of projects. It's a good idea to help users find their projects faster. However, currently 98% of our users have less than 10 projects on their projects page and all of them are visible without*

			pagination, so I don't think we should be putting much effort into solving that. Having said that, we should definitely implement it once the average number of projects becomes more than 15."

Figure 12.5. Raising problems and suggesting solutions.

Also, you can always provide positive feedback when you like a solution or if you're glad a specific problem was covered. Tell your colleague about it; they will be pleased that you're encouraging them.

5. Provide the severity status

In the framework for receiving feedback, I described a method for prioritizing feedback with severity levels to make sure the receiver of the feedback can process it more efficiently.

If a system like this isn't in place, you can use the next sentences to indicate how strongly you feel about your feedback (sorted from least to most critical):

- "It's not critical, so feel free to ignore, but …"
- "I don't feel very strongly about it …"
- "Maybe we should consider …"
- "I suggest we explore further the option of …"
- "I suggest we consider …"
- "Let's take a closer look at …"
- "I suggest we do the next …"
- "It's important we …"
- "I feel strongly that …"
- "I think it's critical we …"
- "It should be a top priority that we …"

Learning from the feedback you receive

Feedback is helpful, not just for improving a specific project, but also for understanding your areas of improvement overall.

To learn from feedback, document what you thought was the right thing to ship and what was eventually shipped, and then find the delta between the two. That delta is an indicator of what areas you could potentially improve. Keep in mind that receiving feedback doesn't mean you're necessarily making mistakes; you'll be receiving feedback at all seniority levels. However, by recognizing patterns, you can identify what you should focus on improving.

Document feedback on things that were in your control

To recognize patterns, start by documenting the feedback you receive. It might sound overwhelming to write down each comment you get. However, assuming you document the feedback you receive at design critique meetings or reviews with the manager/PM, you will have a record anyway. Use this list and tag each piece of feedback with a category and its severity.

Make sure that you document things that were in your control, but which weren't done in an optimal way. There's no point in recording issues that weren't caused by you. Here are some examples of categories you could tag your feedback with and the skill or competency that should be improved to avoid that in the future:

Feedback category	**Area of improvement (competency/skill)**
My communication wasn't clear and required clarification.	Oral/written communication
Clarifications were required in a presentation about a detail that I should have provided in the first place.	Applying the framework for presenting designs
A new problem I should have noticed.	UX skills and strategy

My solution wasn’t optimal, and the feedback led to a better solution.	UX skills
I was solving a problem that wasn’t worth solving, and I should have known that.	UX skills and strategy

Figure 12.6. Feedback categories.

You can adjust these categories according to your preferences.

Look for patterns and drill down when needed

	Instances	Total	Design Critique 02.09.23			Design Critique 09.09.23	
Unclear communication	2	4	3			1	
Not enough context	3	7	1	2		4	
New problem	2	7				2	5
Sub-optimal solution	3	5	2	2	1		
Problem not worth solving	1	1	1				

Figure 12.7. Feedback tracking table.

I’ve prepared a spreadsheet, shown in Figure 12.7, that you can use for documenting feedback (available at https://productdesigninterview.com/materials).

As you can see, you write down each instance of feedback and its severity, in your opinion, from one to five. This spreadsheet will then calculate how often this type of feedback was provided and the total severity score of that category. Already, by consciously documenting it, you’ll start noticing patterns after just a few meetings.

It’s not very scientific, but it will provide you with a sense of what areas should be improved. Keep in mind that most of the feedback will belong to the “sub-optimal solution to the right problem” category.

Once you feel that a specific area for improvement is emerging, you can potentially drill down into it and start providing more specific tags. For example, if new problems you should have noticed are often being raised, you can start tagging them with sub-categories like visual design, usability, inconsistency with brand, etc.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Take ownership of implementing a method of feedback prioritization (similar to FlashTags at HubSpot) in your team. *Next step: present the case for implementing this method in your team to your manager.*
- Provide non-design feedback. *Next step: think of a colleague who did or is doing something positive that you'd like to encourage and provide them with that feedback next time you talk to them (or initiate that conversation).*
- Apply the receiving feedback framework. *Next step: use this framework or its elements the next time you receive feedback.*
- Apply the providing feedback framework. *Next step: use it next time you provide feedback.*
- Create a routine of tracking the feedback you receive to find patterns and learn. *Next step: build a spreadsheet and track the feedback received at your next meeting.*

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Presenting work frequently.
- Asking for feedback.
- Becoming comfortable with arguing and challenging ideas.
- Avoiding being defensive when receiving feedback.

13. Written and Oral Communication (Communication)

To learn more about **what** to communicate, check out the framework for presenting designs in the *Communicating Design* chapter. This chapter is about **how** to communicate efficiently in these two contexts:

- **Written communication**: collaboration tools, feedback on design tools, emails, and documentation.
- **Oral communication**: design critiques, check-ins with managers or PMs, presentations to other stakeholders (e.g., developers).

Written communication becomes even more critical at big companies. As companies grow, the knowledge has to be shared. Text is easy to share with a lot of people and, as a result, easier to scale. Therefore, at big companies, designers work more on documentation, written status updates, presentations, etc.

In the long term, both written and oral communication skills will become more critical as remote work becomes more common. Working remotely makes non-verbal cues less accessible, so it's important to compensate with better communication. Here are some ways to improve it.

Oral communication

Practice speaking at design critique meetings

When I joined a big international company, I was the only designer outside of the New York headquarters. Once a week, we'd gather for a design critique meeting. This was the hour I was most anxious about in my entire week. While all of the other designers were in the same room in New York, I was the only one joining via video call and the only non-native speaker. Despite this, it was still absolutely clear to me that presenting each week would help me to get better at communicating design, presenting to groups, and oral communication, as well as increasing my confidence levels.

Looking back, it was one of the things that had the biggest impact on my growth there since before that I had mostly worked at companies as a solo designer. If you're already working at a company which does recurring design reviews, take full advantage of it and present at every possible occasion. This is the best way I know of practicing presentation and feedback skills.

If your company doesn't have weekly design critique meetings yet for some reason, it's a great opportunity for you to take ownership of it and start organizing them.

Solo designers should find a sparring partner to practice with

If you're a solo designer, find another solo designer in a different company with whom you can do a mutual weekly critique. I assume you're already connected to other designers through a design community or group (if you're not, check out the *Advocacy* chapter).

I believe in the value of design critique meetings so much that a few years ago I created a project called the Design Feedback Club which matches solo designers from different companies for one-to-one sessions. Unfortunately, this project was very time-consuming to operate so I decided to close it, but I'd like to provide you with the details of how I organized it so you can replicate it for your personal needs.

First of all, here are the benefits of these sessions:

- You're able to practice presenting and providing and receiving feedback.
- You can practice presenting to someone outside of your company as it requires explaining your company's vision and objectives to provide all the necessary context.
- You will get feedback from an outsider; someone with a fresh perspective on the problems and solutions you present.
- You will meet fellow designers, learn from different industries, and share your experience and advice.

How to structure your one-hour session:

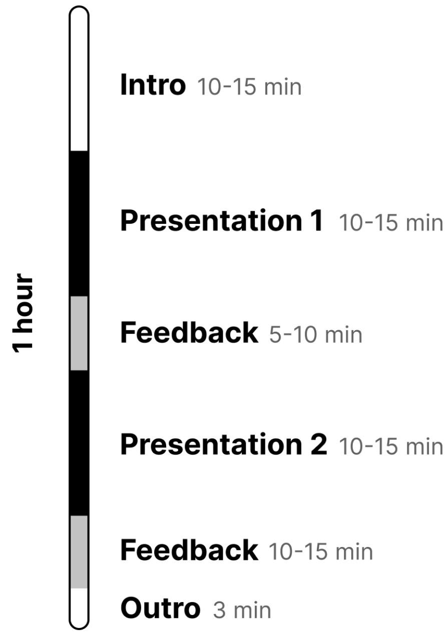


Figure 13.1. Recommended time structure for a one-to-one design critique.

To structure your presentation, use the framework for presenting designs from the *Communicating Design* chapter. Here is a simplified alternative we used at the Design Feedback Club:

1. **Explain why you designed it.**
   - What's the goal of the product/feature and what are the objectives? *(e.g., improving conversion, reducing support tickets, extending your solution to a new audience.)*
   - At what stage of the solution are you? *(e.g., a work-in-progress, lacks content, wireframes are done, etc.)*
   - Are there any critical project constraints? *(e.g., the project will be shipped in two phases, and phase one has to be shipped in two weeks.)*
2. **Tell them what feedback you are looking for.**
3. **Walk them through your solution.**
   - What are the pros and cons of your solution? Why did you choose to go with this solution?

Record yourself

The first thing that public speaking coaches advise you to do in order to improve your skills is to record yourself. You can then analyze your recording in a few ways:

- **By yourself** – Record your next video call and then review it. Just by looking at yourself from this angle, your areas for improvement will become obvious e.g., using filler words, body language, facial expressions, talking speed, voice intonation, etc.
- **Use an AI speaking coach** – Software like the Speeko app analyzes calls and provides real-time advice on intonation, pace, filler words, word choice, etc.
- **Hire a communications coach** – Search for "speaking coach" on Fiverr and you can find great professionals for affordable prices. For example, hiring a coach who presented twice at official TED conferences with two million views would cost $35 to $300 (starting with a 15-minute consultation and moving up to three 45-minute lessons). Hiring a professional actor to look at my recordings and provide feedback costed me just $25.

Improving messaging

Message structure

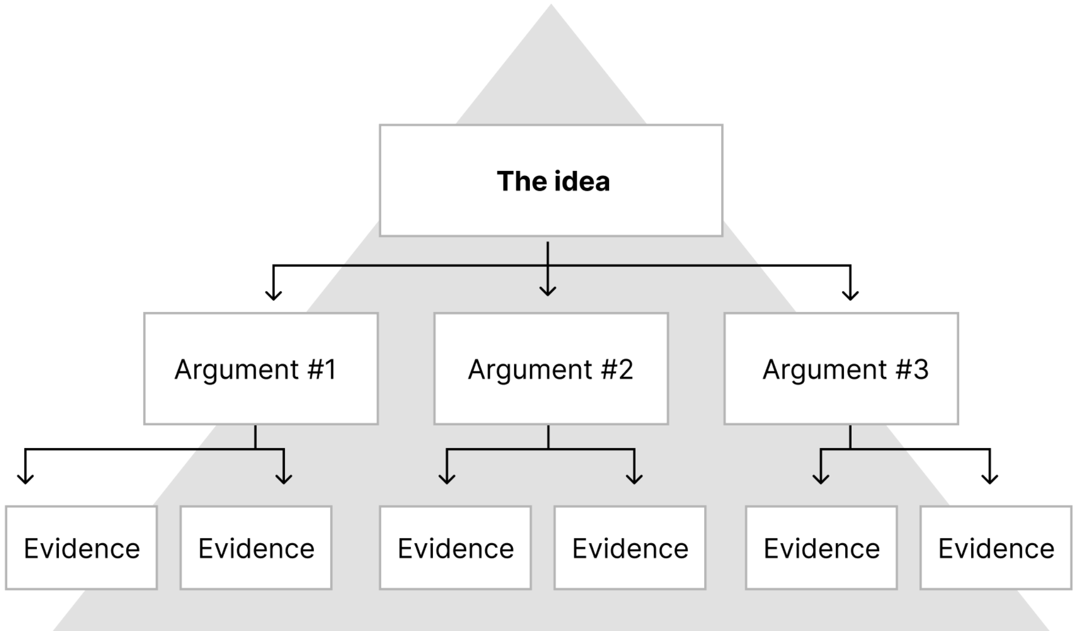


Figure 13.2. The Pyramid Principle (you can use any number of arguments and pieces of evidence in this).

Here's one principle you can immediately incorporate to make your message clearer without spending too much time thinking about how to structure it.

The Pyramid Principle is a communication method created by former McKinsey consultant Barbara Minto. It helps organize and articulate complex ideas. Originally, it was created for presentations, but you can also use it for any type of written communication.

It relies on the concept of presenting ideas in a hierarchical, top-down way:

1. Start with the key **idea** – the "answer," the conclusion, or the solution you've come up with.
2. Group and summarize key **arguments** supporting the idea you presented from step one.
3. Provide **evidence** for each of the arguments from step two (for this, you can refer to the list from the "articulating your reasoning" section of the *Communicating Design* chapter).

Let's say you'd like to articulate why we should switch the product navigation from a header, as it is currently, to a sidebar:

*"I believe we should switch from header to sidebar navigation (**idea**). Here's why:*

1. ***Better scalability of the first hierarchy level (argument)** – Currently, we have only three items. It will be challenging to fit in more than four or five and keep it visually clean and usable. I see that on our roadmap, for the next two quarters, we plan to add at least three more main sections with further plans to potentially add more later, which takes us to at least six items (**evidence**).*
2. ***Ability to expose the sub-items (argument)** – After a conversation with Sam, we've concluded that sub-items will be mostly needed for the new menu items. It's more convenient to navigate between sub-items when they are always visible and aren't hidden behind a hover, as it would be with header navigation **(evidence).***
3. ***Sidebar has better scannability and findability (argument)** – According to eye-tracking research, vertical navigation is more likely to be noticed by users, and it requires less eye fixation which makes it easier to absorb*[33] ***(evidence)**."*

You may notice that I used numbers for each argument rather than bullet points. It's a tiny thing that I do myself and often ask others to do in communications with me. It allows me to respond to a specific point with just a number and without using words.

The Pyramid Principle is a universal approach and can be used for presenting a new idea or for a response. You could also use it for its initial purpose and apply it to a presentation. Continuing our example, your presentation could have this structure:

Figure 13.3. Slide structure when using the Pyramid Principle for presentations.

Provide facts instead of qualifiers to build trust

When possible, replace qualifiers – like mostly, very, enough, or a lot, etc. – with facts. For example, instead of saying, *"A lot of users can't find how to close their ticket,"* say, "*12% of users can't find how to close their ticket*."

It may require extra effort to check the exact number, but the outcomes of this approach are likely to outweigh the effort. Here are the things that may happen as a result:

- You provide better context and appear more trustworthy and credible.
- The recipient may have a different opinion to you as to whether 12% is a lot of users or not.
- When you go to check the exact number, you may find that it's different from what you initially thought and this could change your opinion. If you hadn't made the effort, you may have unintentionally misled your colleagues and encouraged faulty decision-making.

As you can see, each of these outcomes are good for the business, so this technique should be applied as much as possible.

This technique is useful not just for internal communications but also for copywriting, for your designs, or for your portfolio. For example, when writing copy for a product, instead of saying, "*Our solution is highly effective against fraud,"* consider saying, "*Our solution reduces fraud by 86%."* This immediately makes you look more trustworthy and provides better value to your customers.

Written communication

Writing is design

This is my third book, and I've never intentionally learned how to write. I believe that what made writing relatively natural for me is being a designer.

Let's take a look at a list of principles:

- Create a hierarchy starting with the most important things and progressing toward the least important things.
- Communicate maximum information with minimum elements.
- Make it scannable and skimmable.
- Use various visual elements to communicate more efficiently.
- Tailor the message to the specific audience you're addressing.
- Start with a high-level structure, then iterate and refine, increasing the fidelity.

Does this look familiar? All these principles are true for both design and written communication. I'd argue that designers have a better starting point for being effective at written communication than other tech professionals (besides copywriters, of course).

Below, I'll show you how to apply some of these principles to writing.

Writing for clarity and impact

I'd like to show you an example of a real task description I worked on as a designer (I redacted only the names and numbers). We're going to apply the design principles you're already familiar with to improve this brief.

The person who wrote the ticket is a senior engineer who took a temporary PM role for this specific project and therefore wasn't communicating as efficiently as a PM often would. The ticket is about a payment screen in a mobile app with a freemium model. The current payment screen was split into three steps.

Let's take a look at the ticket:

Ticket name: *Payment page screen redesign*

Background

By analyzing engagement with the current pages, we can see that 20% of people who see the "time to upgrade to premium" page churn. Out of those who didn't, only 35% clicked the "start free trial" button, and only 45% of those users started their free trial.

These drops bring the conversion rate from the payment page to the trial start to 14.38%.

Goals

When I try to determine the problems our users are facing, I think that the initial 20% drop is explained by users who might not want/understand the offering since it's a bit vague – they still don't know it's a subscription, its price, its terms, etc.

The next 65% drop also helps with this thesis since we see that they don't want it even when we explain that it's a free trial – maybe because it's too pricey, maybe because they don't trust us to send a reminder, maybe they don't even know how to cancel.

The last 55% drop happens after a user has already seen the price and clicked the trial start button – they now see that it's a recurring subscription that is managed by Apple and leave.

We can all agree that our current pages lack elements that convey trust, explain the situation, and showcase our features in a way that will build up intent.

It won't be a single iteration and will require constant design+content tweaks ® – that's why we should build it as blocks that can be played with.

Also, I'm not sure if Sam mentioned it, but this time, the task includes some research (you can utilize the references we've collected) and several *options before we go into the final design.*

Do you agree that this is hard to absorb? Just from looking at it, it feels like it's going to take effort to read. Let's apply some basic design principles to this text:

- **Consistency** – The text has five numbers to describe three things. This happens because the author describes the churn numbers in two ways interchangeably – first via number of users who did churn (35%) and then those who didn't (the rest, 65%). Doing that could be confusing and makes information harder to absorb. We should only use the numbers relating to the problematic part – the churn.
- **Remove redundancy** – In addition, there's no need to mention these numbers both in the background and goals section. The numbers are relevant for background, but they do not provide value to the reader in the goals section and can be removed. (We could argue that numbers allow the reader to apply judgment on what problems are more critical, although there's no explicit mention of that so we can remove them).
- **Structure** – This text has three main sections – user churn numbers, problems, and task requirements. Each section has three points. We can mark this structure visually with bullet points to make the text more scannable.

Let's implement these three principles and look at the result. For our next iteration, I've underlined the main message in each sentence:

Background

By analyzing engagement with the current pages, we can see that:

- *<u>20% of people who see the "time to upgrade to premium" page churn.</u>*
- *Of those who didn't, <u>65% do not click the "start free trial"</u> button and churn.*
- *<u>55% do not start their free trial.</u>*

These drops bring the <u>conversion rate from the payment page to the trial start to 9.58%</u>.

Goals

I’ve tried to determine the problems our users are facing:

- *I think that the initial drop is explained by users who might <u>not want/understand the offering</u> since it’s a bit vague – they still <u>don’t know it’s a subscription, its price, its terms</u>, etc.*
- *The next drop also helps with this thesis since we see that they don't want it even when we explain that it’s a free trial – <u>maybe because it’s too pricey, maybe because they don’t trust us to send a reminder, maybe they don’t even know how to cancel</u>.*
- *The last drop happens after a user has already seen the price and clicked the trial start button. They now <u>see that it’s a recurring subscription</u> that is managed by Apple <u>and leave</u>.*

Materials and deliverables:

- *We can all agree that our current pages <u>lack elements that convey trust, explain the situation, and showcase our features</u> in a way that will build up intent.*
- *It won’t be a single iteration and will require constant design+content tweaks – that’s why <u>we should build it as blocks that can be played with</u>.*
- *Also, I’m not sure if Sam mentioned it, but this time, <u>the task includes some research</u> (you can utilize the references we’ve collected) and several options before we go into the final design.*

It looks a bit more structured, but it’s still not very scannable.

Especially when starting your career, it may seem intuitive to use more sophisticated words, longer sentences, and technical terms to seem more professional. For more effective communication, doing the opposite is often a better idea. Let’s apply the principle of **reduction** and cut what’s unneccesary:

- **Shorter and simpler words** – Simple words are easier to understand. For example, *use* instead of *utilize*, *get* instead of *obtain*, *complete* instead of *comprehensive*, *clear* instead of *apparent*, etc.

- **Fewer words** – Many words or phrases do not add value and can be removed without changing the meaning. For example, the words *actually*, *basically*, and *in fact* can often be cut. It's the same for phrases – replace *"due to the fact that"* with *"because"* or *"in the event of"* with *"if"* etc.
- **Shorter sentences** – Shorter sentences give the reader a break in between letting them absorb the information more easily.

In the same way we'd remove unnecessarily complex elements from our design, let's cut long or unnecessary words and phrases from the text:

Background

~~By analyzing the~~ engagement with the current pages~~, we can see that:~~

- *20% of people who see the "time to upgrade to premium" page churn*
- *~~Out of those who didn't,~~ 65% do not click "start free trial" button and churn*
- *55% do not start their free trial*

~~These drops bring~~ the conversion rate from the payment page to the trial start is 9.58%.

Goals

~~When I try to determine the~~ problems our users are facing:

- *~~I think I think that the initial drop is explained by~~ users ~~who~~ might not want/understand the offering ~~since it's a bit vague~~ – they still don't know it's a subscription, its price, its terms, etc.*
- *~~The next drop also helps with this thesis since we see that~~ they don't want it even when we explain that it's a free trial – maybe because it's too pricey, ~~maybe because~~ they don't trust us to send a reminder, or ~~maybe they~~ don't ~~even~~ know how to cancel.*
- *~~The last drop happens after a user has already seen the price and clicked the trial start button~~ they ~~now~~ see that it's a recurring subscription ~~that is managed by apple -~~ and leave.*

Materials and deliverables:

- *~~We can all agree that~~ our current pages lack elements that convey trust ~~explain the situation~~ and showcase our features in a way that will build up intent.*
- *It won't be a single iteration and will require constant design+content tweaks – that's why we should build it as blocks that can be played with.*
- *~~Also, I'm not sure if Sam mentioned it - but this time,~~ the task includes some research (you can utilize the references we've collected) and several options before we go into the final design.*

Now let's apply the principle of **hierarchy**. You may have noticed that the main message (underlined) tends to be toward the end of the sentences. By doing that we're forcing the reader to read until the end to understand the message. As with good design, we'd like to display the important things first.

Let's remove the unnecessary words and phrases and move the main messages to the beginning of the sentences:

Background

Engagement with the current pages:

- *20% of people who see the "time to upgrade to premium" page churn.*
- *65% do not click "start free trial" button and churn.*
- *55% do not start their free trial.*

The conversion rate from the payment page to the trial start is 9.58%.

Goals

Problems our users are facing:

- *Users might not want/understand the offering – they still don't know it's a subscription, its price, its terms, etc.*
- *Users may drop because it's too pricey, maybe because they don't trust us to send a reminder, maybe they don't even know how to*

cancel.

- *They see it's a recurring subscription and leave.*

Materials and deliverables:

- *Our current pages lack elements that convey trust and showcase our features in a way that will build up intent.*
- *We should build it as blocks that can be played with. It won't be a single iteration and will require constant design+content tweaks.*
- *The task includes some research. You can utilize the references we've collected. We'd need several design options before we ship it.*

That already looks significantly better. But it can be much better. Let's apply even more reduction and structure:

- The bullet points in the background section repeatedly explain that the number is the percentage of users who didn't churn in the previous step. Since this is true for each of the bullet points, we only need to mention it once in the first sentence.
- The goals list talks about the concerns of the ticket writer, but they don't really explain the goals. So, we can boil this text down to the things that have to be fixed and number them to make it easy to reply.
- We're going to split long sentences in two. Flesch-Kincaid readability tests found that sentence length was one of the key factors when they measured how difficult a passage in English was to understand.

Let's implement these final improvements:

Background

Churn in current steps (each percentage number relates to the number of users who didn't churn at the previous step):

- *20% – "Time to upgrade to premium" screen*
- *65% – "Start free trial" screen*

- *55% – Subscription confirmation dialog*

The total conversion rate from the payment page to the trial start is 9.58%.

Goals

Implement these design changes to reduce churn.

1. *Provide this info earlier in the funnel:*
    a. *Recurring payment*
    b. *Price*
    c. *Terms*
2. *Provide more clear info on:*
    a. *Pricing*
    b. *Reminder we set before subscription starts*
    c. *Cancellation policy*
3. *Add elements of trust.*

Deliverables

- *Modularity – the sections should be built as blocks so we can easily reorder them for testing purposes.*
- *Research – please use the references we've collected in the attached file.*
- *We'd need several design options before we ship it.*

Look how more considerate to the reader this text is compared to the original. If you come back to this ticket to check a specific detail or number, you can do it almost immediately.

If your current writing style is closer to that of the original ticket, start practicing by writing the content first and editing afterwards, applying these techniques. With time and practice, you'll learn to apply them in real time while writing. You should also apply these principles to your emails, documentation, communication in collaboration tools, comments, etc.

Action items

Growth plan

- Consistently present at design critiques. *Next step: present at the next design critique.*
- (For solo designers) Find a sparring partner to practice presenting with. *Next step: make a list of potential people you know who could be relevant or places where you could find them.*
- Record yourself and analyze your speech by yourself, with software, or with a coach. *Next step: record a meeting you're participating in.*
- Apply the Pyramid Principle in your communications. *Next step: apply it the next time you are trying to convince someone of an idea using multiple arguments.*
- Start providing facts instead of qualifiers in your communications. *Next step: start noticing every time you use qualifiers or review your recent written communications and check which qualifiers could be replaced with facts.*
- Apply these concepts in your writing communications: clarity, consistency, removing redundancy, structure, shorter words and sentences, hierarchy. *Next step: apply these in your next written communication or review a written document and improve it.*

Further learning

- To improve your marketing copywriting skills, read *The Adweek Copywriting Handbook* by Joseph Sugarman or *The Copywriter's Handbook* by Robert W. Bly.

14. Stakeholder Management (Collaboration)

Stakeholder management means managing your relationships with others involved in projects you work on. It includes managing their expectations and updating them with the right information in a timely manner. Managing stakeholders helps projects move forward and reach their goals.

Knowing how to do that can help you to:

- **lead projects**, which you'll eventually do as your career progresses.
- **improve your collaboration skills** in the projects you're involved with by becoming more aware of the dynamics and knowing when, how, and what to communicate with your partners.

If you're not leading a specific project, use the framework below to build better relationships with the people you're working with on an ongoing basis. To do that, follow the framework but skip steps three, five, and six.

Building a stakeholder management table

Stakeholder	Power	Interest	Strategy	Current sentiments	Desirable sentiments	Interests	Project interests	Engagement strategy
Design director	High	High	**Manage closely**	Positive	Positive	UX consistency across products, team performance, usability standards, strategic alignment.	Design is shipped faster, better design consistency.	- Weekly email update - Weekly 30-minute review on Fridays at 11:00am - Invited to usability testing sessions
Engineering director	High	High	**Manage closely**	Negative	Positive	Team performance, technical debt management, system architecture, strategic alignment.	Code is shipped faster.	- Weekly email update - Weekly 30-minute review on Fridays at 11:00am
Product director	High	Low	**Keep satisfied**	Neutral	Neutral	Strategic alignment and product roadmap, product portfolio performance, team performance, business goals.	Moving faster with the roadmap and future projects.	- Weekly email update
Designers	Low	High	**Keep informed**	Positive	Positive	Usability, aesthetics, consistency with brand guidelines, user satisfaction, accessibility.	Better design consistency.	- Weekly update during design critique
Engineers	Low	Low	**Monitor**	Neutral	Neutral	Clean, manageable and consistent codebase, scalability, naming conventions, optimizing for performance and efficiency, technical debt, code documentation.	Cleaner and consistent codebase, name convensions, performance and shipping time.	- Monthly email update

Figure 14.1 Stakeholder management table.

Let's say you're leading the implementation of a design system in your organization. To do that, you have to get the buy-in of multiple parties. To make sure you're effectively managing all the parties involved, and so more likely to reach the desired outcome, create a spreadsheet following the next steps:

1. List stakeholders (design, engineering, etc.)

Who is involved in the project, inside and outside of the organization? It could be specific people (e.g., head of engineering, customer success representative X, client Y, journalist Z, etc.) or groups (e.g. design team, engineering, press, clients, etc.). For a design system, for instance, it could be head of design, designers, VP of product, director of engineering, developers.

2. Prioritize

Prioritize stakeholders to see how much effort and time you need to invest in communicating with them and keeping them updated and satisfied.

To do that, mark each stakeholder as high or low on the interest and power scale. After you do that, you'll be able to determine the engagement strategy based on this matrix:

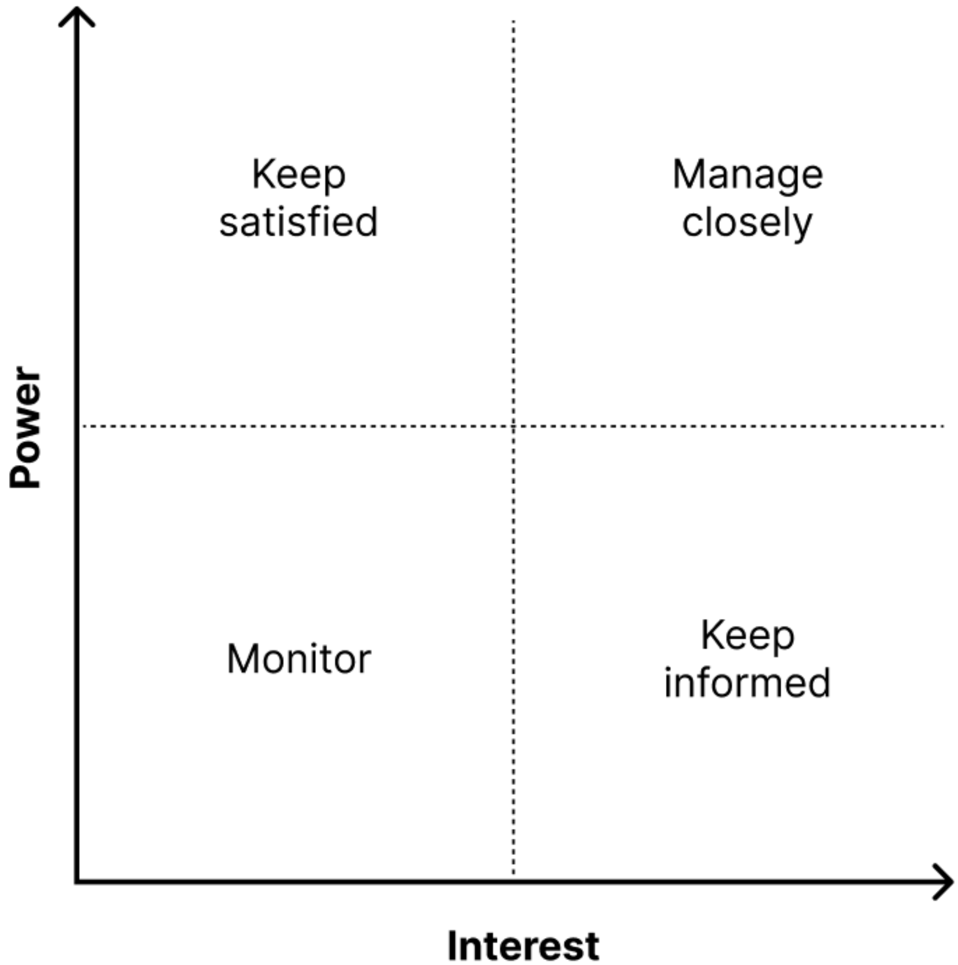


Figure 14.2 Stakeholder management prioritization.

- **Manage closely** *(high power, high interest)* – These are the makers and key players in the project who will be critical to get and keep on board. For a design system, these could be design leadership and engineering leadership.
- **Keep satisfied** *(high power, low interest)* – These are the supporters whose needs have to be met. In our industry, this could be the product leadership who understand the benefits of design system integration but don't have an active part in the project. They are rated as high on power. This is because they have significant influence over the design and engineering prioritization

and roadmap which could affect the prioritization of the design system as a project.

- **Keep informed** *(low power, high interest)* – These are the contributors whom you should show consideration. For design systems, this will often be the rest of the design team who are eager to use the system or contribute but will affect the project only on a tactical and implementation level.
- **Monitor** *(low power, low interest)* – These are the observers who require minimum effort to be managed and informed. It could be the engineers who will eventually use the design system but who are not instrumental in this step of the project.

3. Indicate their sentiments

Track the current and desirable sentiments of each stakeholder as either positive, neutral, or negative. It will help you identify when an action is required to keep this stakeholder happy and more likely to help you implement the project.

4. Define their interests

Define what's important to each stakeholder, similarly to what I described below in the "building relationships" section of this chapter. By taking into consideration the needs of the stakeholders, you'll be more able to effectively influence them, increase their positive sentiments toward the project, get them onboard, and help your team accomplish its goals.

5. Suggest how this project will satisfy their interests

This is a key insight that will help you influence stakeholders. All communication should be positioned from the perspective of how the project benefits the stakeholder to increase the chances that they get on board (the list of suggested parameters for this is in the "building relationships" section below).

For example, while working on a design system, you wouldn't focus on telling engineers how aesthetically beautiful it's going to make the product but how more efficiently they would be able to implement the front end of the design by reusing existing elements.

6. Develop an engagement strategy

Based on your prioritization of each stakeholder and the gap between their current sentiments about the project and where you want them to be, you can decide how often and in which way you're going to keep the stakeholder involved and updated. Here are some examples:

- Daily updates at standups.
- Bi-weekly sprint review meetings.
- Weekly email update.
- Weekly update via Slack group #design-system.
- Weekly 30-minute review on Fridays at 11:00am.
- Weekly update during design critique.
- Invited to usability testing sessions.
- Monthly email update.

Optionally, you could add a column with things you need from this stakeholder – for example, approval or specific deliverables – to make it easier to track project progress. Ideally, you want to keep this table updated.

After going through this framework a few times, you'll become more naturally aware of the dynamics and be able to map it out more organically without building a spreadsheet every time.

Meetings

Individual contributors don't participate in that many meetings and organize them only occasionally. In addition, many companies already have guidelines on how meetings are run within their organization. So, I'll not talk a lot about meetings here, but I'll provide you with my observations and learnings in short form. If you organize or participate in a lot of meetings, check out the *Harvard Business Review* e-book *Better Meetings* for all the best practices.[34]

As a participant

As a participant, my main learning is to **always prepare for meetings**. At the beginning of my career, I'd often show up for meetings and go with the flow. Over time, I realized that if I wanted to have a bigger impact and promote my interests, I needed to define clear goals for any meeting I participated in. I'd do this even if it just meant thinking for one minute to answer the question: *What do I want to achieve at this meeting?* Then I'd come up with the best strategy to achieve that, including working out who would be on my side in the room and who would require persuasion, what their interest were, and how I could satisfy them. You can do this using the techniques I describe in "building a stakeholder management table" and in the "persuasion" section of this chapter.

As an organizer

As a meeting organizer, here are some ways to make meetings more efficient:

- **Find a way to avoid the meeting** – Meetings are expensive for organizations. Depending on the type and amount of participants, a meeting costs a few hundred dollars of immediate costs, and even more in the long term considering the potential productivity loss. And, unfortunately, I still see countless unnecessary meetings happening when working with organizations. Dropbox have a great approach to meetings. They only organize meetings for the three Ds: (important) decisions, debates, and discussions.[35] Everything else, like status updates, getting feedback or support, sharing a proposal, and easily reversable decisions can be solved via chat, email, or by sharing documents.
- **Take ownership** – Each meeting has to have an owner. At Intercom, the internal memo goes as far as saying: "*If you walk into a meeting and it isn't clear who the owner is, feel free to leave*

and go do something more valuable for the company."[36] The owner makes sure:

- the meeting has a clear goal.
- everything that is happening at the meeting leads to the goal.
- discussions stay on topic and drives participants toward action.
- the meeting starts and ends on time.

- **Define and share an agenda** – Share the objective of that meeting with others. One of the possible outcomes of working on defining it could be that you realize that this goal could be achieved by a different medium like email, chat, or by sharing a document.
- **Provide materials in advance** – Check what can be done prior to the meeting in an async manner. When participants review materials in advance, they come to meetings with ideas and decisions and reduce the time required. While the overall time spent by each participant will stay the same, this additional cycle of thinking may lead to better decisions. What makes this approach more challenging is that to make it work, every meeting participant has to review the materials in advance, otherwise it will still require the introduction or presentation during the meeting itself. You can start practicing it in one-to-one meetings and gradually incorporate this approach within the team.
- **End meetings with a list of actions** – Each action item has to be assigned to a person who is responsible for enacting it and who has a deadline. Send it as a summary via email to all participants.

Persuading others

One of the things that designers only start to learn to do once they begin their first job is collaborating with non-designers. During their studies, designers are normally presenting, collaborating, and providing feedback to other designers. The reality of working in organizations is that designers have to constantly collaborate with people with no design background.

Throughout your career, you'll consistently need to convince them of something. It could be selling your ideas, getting their approval for something, etc. However, these people have completely different goals and objectives to designers. The most basic and important technique that the corporate world uses to convince others is **talking in terms of the other person's interests.**

Imagine getting these two messages from an engineer:

"Hey Sam, we're doing some code refactoring in the front end and I was wondering if you could join me for a session to check that nothing breaks design-wise?"

Versus:

"Hey Sam, we're doing code refactoring, partially to make our future design system integrate more easily. I was wondering if you could join me for a session to check that nothing breaks design-wise? We want to make sure that the design stays pixel perfect, just as you designed it initially, and that our users will get a consistent experience through the app."

Alternatively, imagine getting these messages from a sales representative:

"Hey Sam, do you think you could find a 15-minute slot this week to help me with the presentation?"

Versus:

"Hey Sam, do you think you could find a 15-minute slot this week to help me make sure our presentation is on-brand with the rest of our company design? It's for a new, big customer. Check out their website. It seems like their design team is really talented: (link). If we win this client, their designers are most probably going to use our product too! :)"

Which of those options would make you more enthusiastic to help? You probably prefer the second options because, like everyone else, you prefer to do things that you believe will benefit your interests.

Copywriters apply the same approach to sales copy all the time. They don't talk about the company or the offering but about the benefits for the client and how it can solve their problem:

For instance, *"We've developed an innovative method to find talent for your company,"* talks about your company while, *"Find talent before others do,"* talks about the benefits to the customer. Or, *"Our weather app uses real-time data to provide accurate forecasts,"* versus, *"Get an accurate weather forecast in real time."*

Here are examples of what is often important to different organizational roles:

Stakeholder group	**What's often important to them**
Product managers	Meeting user needs, shipping on time, contributing to and being on track with the roadmap, keeping the product competitive, maintaining product-market fit, achieving business goals.
Head of product	Strategic alignment and product roadmap, product portfolio performance, team performance, business goals.
Engineers	Clean, manageable, and consistent codebase, scalability, naming conventions, optimizing for performance and efficiency, technical debt, code documentation.
Head of engineering	Team performance, system architecture, strategic alignment, technical debt management.
UX designers	Usability, aesthetics, consistency with brand guidelines, user satisfaction, accessibility.
Head of UX design	UX consistency across products, team performance, usability standards, strategic alignment.

Quality assurance (QA)	Bug-free code, test coverage, user experience consistency, performance.
Marketing	Message clarity, brand representation, customer engagement, lead generation, conversion rates.
Sales	Clear value proposition, competitive advantage, ease of use, customer satisfaction, sales targets.
Customer support	Customer satisfaction, problem resolution, efficient communication, product knowledge.
Legal	Regulatory compliance, risk management, ethical standards, data privacy.
Finance	Cost efficiency, ROI, financial forecasting, budget adherence.
Executive management	Strategic alignment, profitability, company reputation, stakeholder satisfaction.

Figure 14.3. What is important to different organizational roles.

Using this table, the next time you need an approval from a PM, you could tell them: *"I need it by the end of the week to make sure we're on time to ship this feature and that we stay on track with the roadmap*." Or, if you need help finding some assets from a designer from a different team, you could tell them: "*I need help with this to make sure we keep a consistent experience throughout the app*."

To make your points even more convincing, combine the interests of the person with the reasoning techniques from the "articulating your reasoning" section of the *Communicating Design* chapter.

Building relationships

Helping others

I consider having access to other people in your organization as the main perk of full-time employment. Building strong relationships with them is going to help you to become more successful in your current organization, but it could be even more impactful in the long term. These people could be the key players in the defining moments of your future career and even potential future co-founders, clients, vendors, investors, or colleagues (again).

You've probably already experienced the benefits of building these relationships and how crucial they are. As the years pass, your peers will be the directors, VPs, and founders of the next generation's most interesting companies in the most interesting industries.

I have countless examples of how building relationships with my co-workers became key to my career. My first boss became an investor in my company 14 years later. My team mate became my future co-founder, and some of my ex-colleagues became the first clients of my new products. I connected an ex-team mate to the founder of a promising startup that went public a few years later, which meant he was able to buy a house.

I do not have a perfect formula for building relationships in the workplace, but the thing that's worked for me is **to be helpful to people**. You should have boundaries and make sure accepting requests won't lead to burnout; but, especially at the beginning of your career, be inclined to say yes to requests. At the time, it may not be obvious how it could benefit you, but it may become clear later on.

As a designer, you may have the chance to work with almost every function within the organization. The office manager needs advice on the T-shirt design with the company logo that they are going to order; the sales team needs help with a presentation; the head of engineering needs help with a poster for the meet-up that the engineering department is organizing, etc.

Accepting these requests has these benefits:

- It will make you more comfortable asking for their help in the future, increasing your area of influence and helping you to implement more ambitious projects.
- You'll learn more about these specific people and what it's like to work with them. If you get along, you may want to leverage this

relationship to collaborate on projects. You'll also learn more about their role, which will help you when working with other people in this profession in the future.

- You'll recognize repetitive problems they are having by observing how they work. Later on, you could take ownership of these problems and solve it for the business, increasing your influence.
- You'll get exposed to problems you'd otherwise not experience, and you can use this to brainstorm an idea for your own business.
- You'll have a broader view on how the organization is operating, so you'll be able to make decisions that take this broader context into consideration, increasing your potential impact.

This approach is also helpful outside of organizations. In 2013, I participated the local hackathon in Tel Aviv. I joined a team of people I had never met before and got to work. There were not many designers involved, and I saw that the team next to us was clearly struggling to make their product look decent. Even though technically they were our competitors, I helped them with basic design suggestions that made their product much clearer and more usable. My team's pitch was a disaster, but the team I helped got first place and with it tickets to the TechCrunch Disrupt conference and their hackathon in San Francisco, including plane tickets. They invited me to join the team and made sure I got the tickets too. A year later, I left my job and joined one of them as co-founder of a new company.

Give small gifts

This is a small trick that makes me and the people with whom I'm building a relationship happy. I learned it from the book *Giftology* by John Ruhlin. His book is mostly focused on corporate gifting, but it explains the potential of gifting for building relationships.

Giving a colleague who recently helped you out, an interviewer who provided you with valuable feedback, or a mentor or boss a small gift or a thank you card is a great way to build and maintain relationships and to feel a little bit happier.[37]

The exhausting part of gifting is having to think of an idea under time pressure. That's why I buy potential gifts in bulk. I have to admit that, as a business owner, I put more effort into this than you, as an employee, probably should, but you can definitely apply this advice:

- **Always have a set of *Thank you* cards and wrapping paper** – I've been buying beautifully designed cards and wrapping paper from Wrap Magazine[38] for many years now.
- **Have a go-to gift with an authentic story** – In my case, I always keep a stock of the best Israeli tahini. It's always well received by people in Europe since most of them are unlikely to buy something of the same quality.
- **Get vintage products for more authenticity** – It requires more effort because you can't just get it on Amazon, but it's also more fun to gift and receive. For example, I got a dozen boxes of matches from the '70s with beautiful Hebrew typography at a flea market in Israel and knew I could give them to smokers back in Berlin and they would appreciate it.
- **Leverage your taste** –As a designer, you probably have a better-than-average taste in aesthetics and others will appreciate most things you'd gift. Some great places to find beautiful products (don't forget to get them in bulk) are omoionline.com, presentandcorrect.com, parklifestore-webstore.com, theschooloflife.com and Etsy.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Manage the stakeholders involved in the current or upcoming project you have most ownership over. *Next step: map out the stakeholders, following the framework.*
- Prepare for meetings as a participant. *Next step: define your goals for your next meeting.*

- Apply the list of rules to have better meetings as an organizer. *Next step: apply them to the next meeting you organize.*
- Start persuading others by talking about something in relation to their own interests. *Next step: apply it next time you need something from someone.*
- Consider accepting requests to help build your relationships. *Next step: be inclined to say yes next time someone asks for help.*
- Show gratitude every three months (with a physical gift or with words) to someone who helped you the most professionally. *Next step: identify the person who helped you the most in the last three-month period.*

FURTHER LEARNING

- To learn more about influence and persuasion, read these two books:
  - *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie.
  - *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert B. Cialdini.
- If you organize or participate in a lot of meetings, check out the *Harvard Business Review* e-book *Better Meetings.*[39]
- To learn about the power of gifting, read *Giftology* by John Ruhlin.

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Making sure everyone has a voice in discussions.
- Directing discussions toward outcomes.
- Defusing conflict.
- Communicating negative news.
- Avoiding blame and providing credit.

15. Shipping (Ownership)

In the *Growing Your Impact* chapter, we explored a more strategic view of shipping – how to use leverage to ship more impactful things. On a more tactical level, to ship more we can optimize the time we spend on each unit of work. To do that we can either make more time for shipping or increase our efficiency per unit of time. Let's review these two tactics.

Making more time

The amount of hours in a day are limited, and increasing the hours you work per day will start to negatively affect your overall output at some point. For example, according to a study by John Pencavel, of Stanford University, productivity falls sharply above 50 work hours and any additional hour worked above 55 hours does not contribute at all to overall productivity.[40]

So we need to find a way to make time for shipping without increasing the overall amount of work hours we dedicate to it.

To do that, you have to be highly protective of your most productive time. Time is the only non-renewable resource of your career, so spending it on low-impact activities means time not spent on activities that will grow your career.

One of the biggest productivity killers is meetings. They can make you less productive in two ways: by taking time from your schedule and by interrupting the rest of your schedule through their placement in your calendar. Here are three techniques that will help to solve these issues.

Do a time audit

Since time is finite, making more time for shipping will have to come at the expense of other activities. To identify what they are, you can do a time audit of your work week and review all your upcoming meetings:

- **Step one**: List the activities you're normally doing during your work week, and write down how you *believe* you split your time between them. For example:

- Designing new features: 40%
- Maintaining existing features: 20%
- Recurring meetings: 10%
- One-off meetings: 10%
- Company-related activities (all-hands, happy hour): 5%
- Mentoring: 5%
- Learning: 10%

- **Step two**: Define how you'd ideally spend your time.
- **Step three:** For a few weeks, in your calendar, track how you actually spend each hour of your workday.
- **Step four:** Reallocate time from how you spend it today (step three) to how you'd ideally spend it (step two) where possible. Create a plan for minimizing the time you spend on things you'd rather spend less time on (using the techniques below).

Recurring meetings are often a good target for this since it frees your time at scale with only one decision.

Decline unnecessary meetings

When I get a request for a meeting between just me and the participant that doesn't have an agenda or a clear goal, I often ask, via email: *What would you like to discuss?* After they tell me what they need, I can often resolve it via email and the meeting isn't necessary.

Other ways to politely avoid a meeting are:

- *Thanks for inviting me! I'm wondering if we could do it over email and save us both some time?*
- *I'm happy to provide feedback! I was wondering if there's a document I could review in advance and leave my feedback there?*
- *Thank you for the invitation. I was wondering if 30 minutes would be enough to take a decision on this, so we can use that extra 30 minutes to ship more stuff? :)*

- I've reviewed the agenda and I believe that my presence isn't critical for making this decision, so I'd prefer not to attend and use that time to work on our new onboarding flow :) Let me know if you think otherwise.*
- *I see that you've invited both me and Sam. I think just one of us would be enough to represent the design team at this meeting. I just spoke with her and she's happy to participate so I'm going to decline.*

Maximize uninterrupted work time

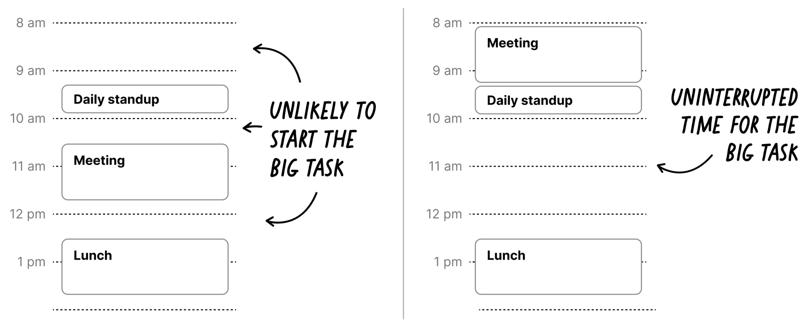


Figure 15.1. The impact of interrupting focused work time.

Paul Graham explains well why meetings cost ICs more than they do managers in his essay *Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule.*[41] Managers spend most of their day at meetings, so their schedule consists of one-hour slots. Makers (engineers, designers, writers), on the other hand, need half-day slots to make significant progress. That's why meetings can be extremely harmful for an IC's progress.

If you start working at 8:30am, with a daily standup at 9:30am, a meeting at 10:45am, and lunch break at 12:30pm, it's hard to make significant progress. You're also less likely to start a new and significant task when you know that you'll have to stop in one hour.

If there's a meeting you have to participate in, try to schedule it at the very beginning or end of your working sprint so you'll have as much uninterrupted time in one sitting as possible.

Optimizing your efficiency

Productivity can be affected by sleep, caffeine intake, mental health, supplements, air quality, etc. Some of these things are universal and some depend on the person, so the important thing is to put effort into finding out what improves *your* efficiency. Remember that most of your discoveries will affect not just a few days of work but the rest of your career.

There is a lot written about productivity improvements, so I'll give you just a few tactics that work for me, with examples.

Protect the time when you're most productive

Any given hour has a different output depending on when it's taking place during the day. Find out when your peaks and lows are during your typical workday. Protect the most productive hours by not scheduling anything else during that time. Normally, I use these hours when I'm working on the most challenging tasks. Similarly, do the small and less important tasks (or take a rest) during your least productive hours. Here are two things that could help you protect that time:

- **Remove distractions** – For me, like for many others, the main source of distraction is my phone. I personally take it quite far thanks to the fact that I don't usually have anything that requires my immediate attention during the day or which can't wait an hour or two. My phone is on Do Not Disturb mode 24/7, so I can't see or hear notifications or phone calls until I finish my work and look at the phone intentionally.
- **Create expectations about your availabilit**y – Requests that can't wait one or two hours are extremely rare, but if you get distracted by them they could significantly affect your most productive time. Create healthy expectations with your co-workers about how quickly you will reply to their request and when.

Find which intervals work best for you

You might have heard of one of these time management and productivity techniques:

- **The Pomodoro Technique** – This is the concept of working in intervals of 25 minutes (a pomodoro). A five-minute rest follows before you start the next 25-minute interval, and there is a longer pause of 20 to 30 minutes after finishing four of these cycles.
- **52/17 rul**e – Working for 52 minutes followed by a 17-minute rest.
- **Following your ultradian rhythms**[42] – These are the natural cycles that our bodies undergo during 24 hours. These cycles include sleep and wakefulness, and they impact our levels of alertness and cognitive ability throughout the day. To leverage these cycles, it's recommended to work 90 minutes or less and to take a 10-minute mental break after each sprint.

All of these techniques are based on the idea that our brains can function in a high-focus mode for a limited time before losing concentration and that they require rest to return to this level of focus afterwards.

My personal schedule is closest to the ultradian rhythm approach. I work in four sprints, each of 90 minutes – two between 9:00am and 12:00pm and two between 3:00pm and 6:00pm. Between 12:00pm and 3:00pm, I'm having an energy dip like most people, so I use that time to have food, rest, and sleep. After that break, I'm completely refreshed for the second part of the day. If I do client work, I go as far as writing it in my contract that I do not work between 12:00pm and 3:00pm.

However, what works for me won't necessarily work for you, so the idea is to experiment with these techniques to find what works best in terms of improving *your* productivity.

Balancing quality and speed

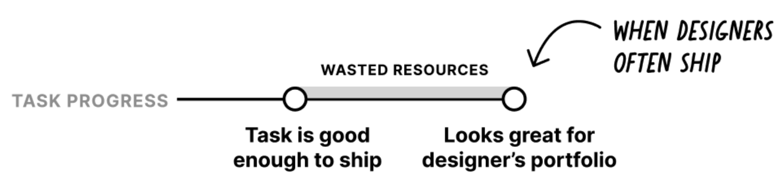


Figure 15.2. Shipping work too late.

"Done is better than perfect" said one of the posters in the Facebook headquarters in the early days of the company. The more I design and build businesses myself, the more I realize how true that is. This realization becomes crystal clear when you design for your own business. You start to focus on whether a product is worth the investment when you're the one paying to develop it and taking time away from developing your business.

Often, the point at which a design is good enough to achieve its goal comes before designers are satisfied with the result. Everything that happens between these two points is work with a low ROI which could be invested somewhere else.

This perfectionism is often the result of not understanding the business side, but also due to our egos taking over our work. We let thoughts in like, *Will they think I'm not a good designer if it doesn't look perfect?* But being a good designer is knowing when design is good enough to ship.

It's difficult to define a precise framework for finding the perfect point of balance between quality and speed. However, what can be helpful is to start by asking yourself these two questions more often:

- Does it achieve its goal already?
- Am I doing this because it helps me achieve the project's goal or because it will make me look like a better designer?

You can improve your understanding of when an outcome is good enough to achieve its goal by learning and practicing the techniques I'll describe in the *Strategy* chapter and in the "focusing on the business impact of design" section of the *Getting Promoted* chapter.

A technique you can use to further understand the balance of quality and speed is describing what you would do if you had more time when you're presenting work for sign-off: "*If I had more time, I'd …[add or improve something*]." This will train you in the skill of prioritization. In addition, it will show your manager that you're making conscious trade-offs in order to ship a product faster.

Making decisions faster

A trick I use to make faster decisions is to consider the cost of mistakes or, in other words, to weigh up how bad the consequences are if I make the wrong decision. A lot of decisions have a very low error cost or they're easy to fix. In these cases, the time and effort spent on making the choice often isn't worth the potential cost of a wrong decision.

And it goes beyond work. For example, sometimes it takes me a long time to decide between my lunch options when I know none of them are going to be highly disappointing, especially as I'm choosing between already familiar options (which happens 90% of the time). Once I remind myself of this, I just pick any of the options and go with it. Never regretted it yet.

Estimations

Estimating projects is hard. Hofstadter's law says: It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's law.

So, you might think you can just estimate projects based on a longer schedule, with an option to finish before the deadline. Although here comes Parkinson's law. It says that work expands to fill the time allocated to it. This means that if you estimate that a project will take two weeks, it will likely take two weeks even if there's only one week of work needed. So, if you estimate on a longer range, you're likely to waste time and resources.

Two takeaways from that are:

- It's rare that work will take you less time than you plan.
- When you estimate a project without external stakeholders or with little to no negative consequences for being late, set a deadline with an earlier date to avoid work expanding according to Parkinson's law. Worst case scenario is that you can extend the deadline.

Track time spent on projects to estimate future projects

Now, here's what you can do for projects with external stakeholders and deadlines that affect others.

During my work as a consultant and freelancer, I had to track the time I spent on each problem to bill my clients hourly. After a while, I noticed that this information actually had a huge value that was unrelated to billing. It provided me with the best way to evaluate how long projects would take me in the future. After creating a few projects of the same type (e.g., landing pages, onboarding flows, a new mobile app) you'll get a sense of how long it takes you, including the external factors like revisions, feedback, meetings, etc.

Tracking their time by project or task is something full-time employees wouldn't normally think to do, but it could have a huge potential value. In fact, full-time employees could create more precise estimations from this information than freelancers since they work with the same people and the same processes, so they know how many revisions and meetings are normally required.

I've found it so useful that I keep tracking my time even on my own, personal projects. For example, I know that it has taken me a total of 266 hours to write this book up to this point and that it takes 10 to 15 hours to complete a chapter. I know that I have 10 chapters left, which means that I can schedule project hand off with my editor in about a month.

You can use one of the time tracking apps like Toggl to track your time on everything you do. It may also help you to do a time audit, the technique I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, to evaluate what you're spending your time on during your work week. The earlier you start doing that, the more data you'll have, and the more precise your estimations will be. This data and your ability to estimate work will serve you at every future organization and beyond on your career path. It will also likely put you ahead of other designers since most people are unlikely to do it.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Make a time audit. *Next step: map out the activities you're doing and how you split your time between them.*

- Start practicing declining unnecessary meetings. *Next step: respectfully decline meetings or move them toward email discussions when you believe your participation is unnecessary.*
- Start scheduling your meetings to maximize uninterrupted time. *Next step: suggest changing the time of the next meeting you're invited to so it's closer to the beginning or end of your work sprint.*
- Apply the techniques of protecting your time. *Next step: switch your phone to Do Not Disturb during work sessions or put it in a drawer or another room.*
- Identify what working interval works best for your workday. *Next step: learn more about ultradian rhythms or the Pomodoro Technique and implement them for a week to see what results you get.*
- Start shipping before a product is perfect. *Next step: put a sticky note on your desk to remind you, with a question: "Does it achieve its goal already?"*
- Start tracking time spent on projects. *Next step: install and set up time-tracking software.*

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Proactively unblocking others.
- Being decisive.
- Being aware of dependencies and resolving them proactively.
- Following through on responsibilities.
- Applying first principles in your work.

16. Independence (Ownership)

Taking ownership

We discussed high-leverage activities in the *Growing Your Impact* chapter. But what if there's just not enough significant projects assigned to you and the tasks you undertake do not allow you to affect the business in a meaningful way? In this instance, you should try to take on more responsibilities. You may get offered more opportunities by your manager in time, but we want to take control of our growth and not wait for it passively.

If you want to be an owner of areas of work, act like one. Take responsibility and be accountable (the last of the three ingredients of impact at Dropbox, after velocity and consistency, that we discussed in the *Growing Your Impact* chapter).

Here are some techniques to expand your ownership:

- **Look for projects with no owner**. Recall where your help was needed recently. Consider if working more in this area and taking ownership of it would lead to significant improvements in terms of business objectives (I'll talk more about business objectives in the *Getting Promoted* chapter).
    - Example: the PM working on a product's billing features asks for your help once in a while. Ask them if they believe they could move the needle for the company by working with you more closely. If so, initiate taking ownership over the design aspect of the billing design tasks.
- **Take on others' responsibilities:**
    - Take a look at the responsibilities that PMs have but which they are happy to transfer to someone else. Which of these are you interested in? Ask them if there are any responsibilities they would like to transfer to you (check out Figure 16.1 for ideas).

- Example: at my last full-time job I wanted to do more PM work even though my role was designer. I asked my boss if I could lead as a PM on some of the features I was already designing, and she was happy for someone to take them off her plate so she could work on more high-leverage tasks. You could do the same with areas such as research, testing, and documentation.

- Another option is to take hands-on work from design managers. Some of them are happy to do hands-on work, but sometimes they do it because of lack of resources. You could check if they are happy to delegate ownership to you.
- When people leave the team or company, their responsibilities have to be transferred to someone else. Consider which ones you are interested in and see if they can be moved to your role.

Other events that could create new opportunities for taking ownership are acquisition of another company or being acquired, organizational restructuring, layoffs, new product lines, entering new markets, etc. Proactively look out for such events, and ask your manager if you could take ownership of these new initiatives.

Try to take on projects that will benefit you even if they fail, considering factors beyond their likely impact such as:

- Learning opportunities
- Project visibility (better visibility for you inside and outside the organization may bring future opportunities)
- Work-life balance
- How likely this project is to be successful (it will become easier to evaluate if you improve your strategy competency)

Another reason why it’s good to expand your ownership is job security. Replacing a designer who owns several domains (e.g., design systems, documentation, billing design, onboarding new designers, etc.) is much harder for organizations.

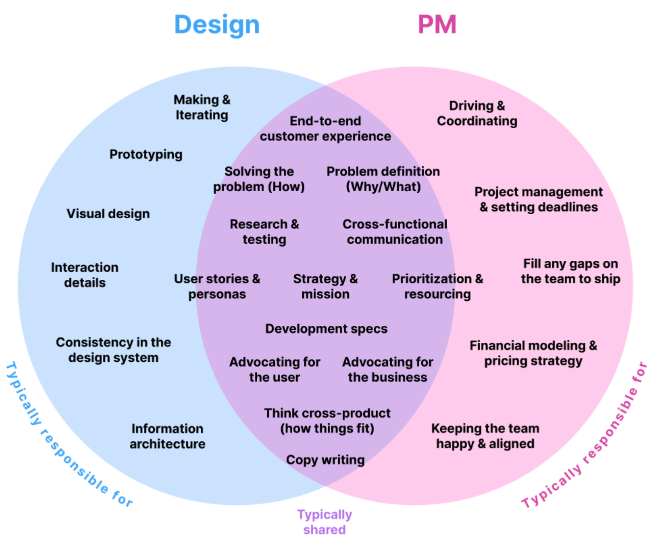


Figure 16.1. Designers and PMs responsibilities (Made by Noah Levin, VP of Design at Figma[43]). License: CC BY 4.0[44]

Prioritizing work

To become more independent, start prioritizing your tasks rather than waiting for someone else to do it for you. It will also improve your productivity and your shipping competency.

Doing the right task is more important than doing it fast. You can use this exercise to help you prioritize tasks and make sure you work on the most important and urgent things:

- **Step one**: List your current tasks and rate them 1-10 on both importance and urgency, with 1 being the least important and urgent:

Task	Urgency	Importance	Priority
a. Review research results.	7	8	1
b. Read the PRD for the upcoming feature.	8	9	1
c. Write the weekly	3	7	2

progress update on the new design system design.			
d. Write a blog post for company website about the redesign of our cancellation flow.	2	3	4

- **Step two**: Place them on the urgency/importance matrix to determine their priority from one to four (this is based on the Eisenhower matrix, although I've made slight adjustments):

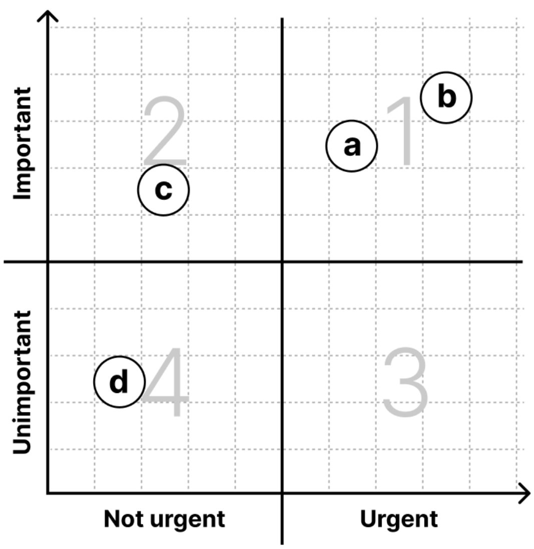


Figure 16.3. The urgency/importance matrix.

Have you noticed that some of the tasks in your to-do list, after sitting there for a while, just become irrelevant by themselves? They are often the tasks in category four (not urgent and not important), so before starting a task like that, consider eliminating it. After a while, this system will become embedded in your thinking process and you won't even have to rate your tasks or use this matrix.

What I often do at the beginning of the day is identify the most important task (MIT) of the day and do it right away. I know that mornings are my most productive time so I start my days by asking myself: *If I could accomplish only one task today, what would it be?* Once I have the answer, I start working on it right away. Besides making sure the most important thing is accomplished, it also makes me feel much better during the day about my work progress. Once I'm done with the MIT, the rest of the work I accomplish feels like a bonus.

Initiating work

Approaching your manager with ideas for what you should work on instead of passively waiting for tasks to be defined could be a big step toward independence, ownership, leadership, and eventually promotion.

Once you know what work you'd like to initiate, here is a framework that will help you to build a case you can present to your manager or other stakeholders to get approval. This includes a few tools I've already discussed, so it will reference other chapters:

1. **Present the problem or opportunity.** Explain the business problem you're trying to solve. Read more about this in the "focusing on the business impact of design" section of the *Getting Promoted* chapter. Here are some examples of how to position a design improvement as a solution to a business problem:
    - Improve website content architecture = increase traffic or improve user acquisition.
    - Redesign the pricing page = improve conversion.
    - Redesign the cancellation flow = reduce churn.
    - Add notifications feature = improve retention.
2. **Explain your solution.**
    - Include a few alternative solutions and not just your suggested solution. Articulate the pros and cons of each and explain why you picked that one (use the impact/effort matrix from the *Tools and Processes* chapter).
    - Support your argument using data and analytics, technical reasons, business objectives, etc. (There's a full list of these in the "articulating your reasoning" section of the *Communicating Design* chapter).

- Explain how you are going to measure the success of your solution. Here are some example metrics you could use:
  - Task success rate – the percentage of correctly completed tasks by users.
  - Task completion time – the time it takes for the user to complete the task.
  - Retention – how often a desirable action is taken by users.
  - Conversion – the percentage of users who take a desired action.
  - Net promoter score (NPS) – customer satisfaction measured through their willingness to recommend the company's products to others.

3. **Explain why now (and, optionally, why you).** At most companies, the to-do list is infinite. Every task that is done comes at the expense of other tasks not being done. Use the list in the "articulating your reasoning" section of the *Communicating Design* chapter to explain why this work should be done now.
4. **What's your ask and what's the next step**? Make it easy for the decision maker to give you a green light. Think your case through and be proactive in not adding work for your manager. Identify what next steps are necessary to make it happen (e.g., opening a new ticket or talking to the engineering lead and checking the complexity of the task) and suggest doing it yourself.

EXAMPLE

Hi Sam, I wanted to suggest a change to our mobile app. I know we've seen a reduction in the number of chat conversations initiated by users and, eventually, this has negatively affected our user retention. I assume it's because the chat entry point is hidden behind a «hamburger menu». ***(problem)***

I know that the number of conversations initiated by users is an important KPI for us. I believe that we can improve that metric by showing the entry point to the messaging section more prominently. ***(solution)*** *We could do it either by:*

- *displaying a floating button across the app; or*
- *switching from a hamburger menu to a navigation bar at the bottom of the screen.*

I think we should do the latter because it will help us to make other sections more visible too, like Categories and Orders. The downside is that it will steal from the real estate of the screen, but I believe it's a worthwhile trade-off. ***(solution pros and cons)*** *I've already spoken with Helen, and she's estimated it will take two to three days of engineering effort. Eventually, we'll be able to measure the success of this change by tracking the change in engagement with the menu items we're currently hiding.* ***(how to measure success)***

I think it's a good time to ship it since:

- *my other upcoming tasks seem to be less critical; and*
- *there is new research by Nielsen Group that proves my assumption that hidden navigation like ours hurts UX metrics.* ***(why now)***

I shipped a similar change in my previous position, so I believe it will take me two to four days to prototype and design it end-to-end. ***(why you)*** *If that works for you, I'll go ahead and open a ticket with all the relevant specifications I described above and I'll send it to you for review.* ***(next steps)***

Initiating work should, of course, take into consideration the existing product roadmap (more about that in the *Strategy* chapter). If it's a big feature, it might be added to the roadmap to be implemented in the future, so even if your initiative is approved, you might not work on it immediately or it could be even assigned to someone else.

Outsourcing

Outsourcing is a high-stakes, high-reward initiative that fits more experienced designers. Your first reaction could be that by outsourcing you're putting yourself out of job. However, most likely you're going to outsource work you wouldn't do anyway (for the reasons described below).

Also, there's a chance you'll be the one managing this process, which in fact only adds to your level of responsibility and ownership.

Companies often outsource due to lack of the following:

- **Resources (e.g., development of the company's marketing website)** – Companies that are growing always want to do more. Often, their desire to build more outpaces their ability to hire talent fast enough. I myself was hired multiple times by companies to do freelance design work until they managed to hire someone full time. From my experience, companies are often happy to hire external development teams to work on non-core products like their marketing websites because it would be a waste of their in-house engineers' time.
- **Skills** – It wouldn't make sense for companies to have in-house illustrators or video editors if they only needed these services once in a while. In these cases, outsourcing makes perfect sense.

During your career, you're very likely to work on projects where part of it will be outsourced to external vendors. For example, someone will have to develop the new marketing website you've designed or create illustrations for the app you're designing.

I have a friend I've worked with on various personal projects who is an excellent front-end developer. When I worked as a full-time employee at startups, I'd often bring him in as a vendor to build the landing pages I designed. And guess who was assigned to own the relationship with this vendor? It was an easy decision for the company to let me manage him – I was the one who did the hand-off and approved his work anyway, I'd worked with him before, and I'd brought him onboard. The companies would normally let me own this relationship end-to-end. This way, by outsourcing, I increased my ownership and brought value to these companies beyond my design expertise.

Here is a framework you can follow to do the same:

- **Step one**. Identify opportunities to outsource work in the projects you're involved with. Think of all the work that will be required to make this project whole or what will have to be done after your work is complete. For example:
    - Illustrations

- Custom icons
- Website development
- Content writing
- Branding
- Video production
- 3D modeling
- Motion

- **Step two**: Present your case to the decision maker (normally the PM) as to why this service is needed. In some cases, it will already be clear to the company why they need it. Otherwise, explain how this service will either increase the company's revenue or reduce costs. Here are some examples:

Outsourced service	**Business impact**
Video production	- Videos could increase trust in our product and, as a result, increase conversion. - Video explainers could increase conversion by clarifying a product's value proposition. - Better explanations could save costs on support tickets.
Custom illustrations	- Increases sales by enhancing brand recognition and boosting trust.
Content writing	- Improves conversion by having more persuasive copy. - Improves SEO ranking which brings more leads.

Figure 16.4. Examples of services outsourced and how they can impact a business.

- **Step three:** Find a vendor. Your tactics here will differ depending on whether you or the company already has a vendor in mind:

- If you have a specific vendor in mind, present them as part of your case. If you already have someone you've worked with before and you were happy with, it makes the decision much easier for the company.
- If the company already has a vendor in this role, this is one less decision they need to make. Many companies, especially big ones, have a list of pre-approved vendors in different roles who have already worked with the company. They may want to use someone from this list.
- If neither you nor the company has a vendor in mind, suggest that you scout a vendor. This is more complex, especially if you've never done it before. You could ask your network if they know someone. If they don't, find one at freelancer marketplaces like UpWork, Fiverr, or others.

- **Step four**: Suggest to the company that you own this project. This step is optional, but it brings high rewards if approved. Even if you only complete steps one to three, you'll already position yourself as someone who provides value beyond design. But if you feel confident managing the relationship with the vendor, it's worth asking. Always clarify that you're going to provide updates about the process of working with them to the person who gives you sign-off. If you're unsure as to whether it's something you can do, keep in mind that you'll always be able to get advice from your boss as you go.

If you manage to take ownership for a project like this, you will increase your leverage and learn about management and leadership.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- ▸ Take ownership over a project or initiative. *Next step: map out ownership opportunities, such as projects with no owner, responsibilities others would be happy to delegate, etc.*

- Start prioritizing your work independently. *Next step: apply the prioritization framework in your to-do list.*
- Initiate a new feature or project. *Next step: build a case for your idea following the initiating work framework.*
- Initiate outsourcing work. *Next step: Map out opportunities for outsourcing following the outsourcing framework.*

LEARNING MATERIALS

- *The Complete Guide to Product Prioritization*[45] by Roadmunk is a good review of different approaches to prioritization if you'd like to do a deep dive into this topic.

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Tracking project success.
- Not requiring your work to be overseen.
- Doing work proactively.
- Reducing ambiguity.
- Taking responsibility for failures.

17. Strategy

Strategy is one of those key competencies that will help you to make the leap from a tactical player to a strategic one, especially for roles beyond senior designer or as a freelancer or business owner.

In order to make more strategic decisions, you have to understand the business you want to help. This is a very large topic, and since strategy isn't specific to design, there's a lot of great learning materials out there.

In this chapter, I'll provide an overview of the internal (objectives, vision, roadmap, and people) and external (competition) factors that are important for making more strategic decisions and recognizing opportunities. Connecting the dots between business factors and design will take time and practice, but, in the long run, I guarantee it will make you a better designer.

Be more like a PM

Your impact inside an organization is correlated with how likely you are to increase revenue or reduce costs for the company. That's one of the reasons a PM, who can initiate a new feature, or a sales associate, who can close a significant enterprise customer and move the needle for the company, will, on average, earn more than a copywriter or a support representative.

Being able to influence strategic decisions, like what to build next, increases your ability to affect the revenue and, as a result, your impact. One of the tricks you can apply in your career and when developing your skill set to grow your impact is to **be more like a PM**. It means learning the skills they have, doing the work they do, and making decisions they make. You're likely to have direct access to PMs, communicating and interacting with them on a daily basis, making it easier to learn from them.

As we discussed at the beginning of the book, PMs share some competencies with designers, but they have much more responsibility and impact because they have skills designers normally don't (financial modeling, developing go-to-market strategies, building and managing the roadmap, etc.). However, these are not skills we want to take on as designers. We instead need to focus on the skills that are often shared between designers and PMs: what to build next, advocating for the business and users, thinking of the end-to-end customer experience, etc.

What I believe made me a good designer is getting my craft to a good enough level that I could redirect my learnings toward non-design skills that eventually made me a more valuable designer. For example, let's consider two designers:

a. The first one designs a really good solution to a problem. They produce what they were asked for originally.
b. The second one tells the company how it can adjust the design task to reduce development effort but maintain the same business impact and eventually designs a solution.

The second designer provides much more value to the company and will grow faster. This mindset is something that can be learned by becoming more like a PM.

Understanding the business

Objectives

The next thing I'm going to say may sound obvious to you, but it has to be said because it's fundamental to understanding how your organization functions.

To become a better designer, you have to understand how your company makes money and how it spends money to bring in customers (most probably via ads from Google, Facebook, an app store, or sales outreach). The delta between how much it costs to bring in a customer (customer acquisition cost) and how much the company makes from a customer (revenue per customer) will likely determine how successful the company is. Most of the tasks you're doing today as a designer are probably related to one of these two goals.

Helping companies to optimize this equation will always have high impact. Remember that every time the CEO looks at your design, the main thing they are asking themselves is, *How does it help me to increase revenue or reduce costs?*

In order to help your company achieve these goals, you can contribute to specific metrics that the company knows will help them make more money or reduce costs. For example, a conversion rate metric could measure how many people arriving on your website end up signing up. The higher the conversion rate, the more revenue the company has.

Luckily, companies define and communicate internally the beneficial metrics for them, so you don't have to do it on your own. To understand all these metrics that you'll need to contribute to in order to have a more positive impact, ask your manager for any team or company documentation on the following:

- **KPIs (key performance indicators)** – These are the values the company is measuring in order to understand how successful they are in achieving their business goals. The whole company is working to move these numbers, and being able to do so is a big achievement. For example, some of Airbnb's KPIs could potentially be:
    - Total number of bookings (more revenue).
    - Average occupancy rate (This means more business for hosts. Happier hosts are likely to stay with Airbnb and increase the supply on the platform.)
    - Host churn (The longer hosts stay on the platform, the bigger the supply will be for guests, and the more likely they are to make bookings, which leads to more revenue.)
    - Number of new support tickets opened by guests (Less tickets means happier customers, and this saves money on support.)
    - Average stay length (Longer stays means less work for hosts and is probably correlated with higher occupancy rates).
- **OKRs (objectives and key results)** – These are the specific goals with a measurable metric companies want to achieve. For example, for Airbnb it could be:
    - Increasing the average stay length by 3% in Q4.
    - Decreasing the volume of new support tickets by 8% in Q2.

By being familiar with these OKRs, as a designer working at Airbnb you could suggest small updates:

- Adjusting the UI of the date picker, making monthly stays clearer and less hidden with the goal of increasing the average stay length.
- Adding an invoice generation flow for guests. This currently doesn't perform well and causes guests to open support tickets. The goal is to decrease support ticket volume.

Business metrics are something that might not be given much attention in design school. But as a designer working in tech, most of your work will be driven by and considered successful based on business metrics.

One of the reasons designers are less knowledgeable about business metrics is that at school, designers mostly practice designing new products from scratch, while, in reality, during most of their career, they will be focusing on making adjustments to existing products. Creating a completely new product doesn't always have such strong KPI goals compared to adjusting and optimizing an existing product.

Understanding the business can also be leveraged in your career decisions. For example, you may understand better than other designers that the revenue of the B2C product at the company is stagnating and that your competitors are pivoting to B2B markets, so the new B2B department at your company is likely to become the next biggest revenue driver. You may decide that switching to that team early on is a good idea so that you can be part of this growth as the company begins to focus their resources in this area.

Mission

In addition to the objectives and metrics, make sure you're aware of and understand the company's mission statement or vision. Mission statements define the aspirational goal that the business was built to achieve. They're often very broad:

- Airbnb: *Create a world where anyone can belong anywhere.*
- Pinterest: *Give everyone the inspiration to create a life that they love.*

… and sometimes it’s more specific:

- Udemi: *Provide flexible, effective skill development to empower organizations and individuals.*
- WeWork: *Create environments where people and companies come together and do their best work.*

It’s good to be aware of these definitions to understand the general parameters within which a company operates and within which the product strategy will be limited to (sometimes companies expand their vision when new business opportunities arise though).

Product roadmap

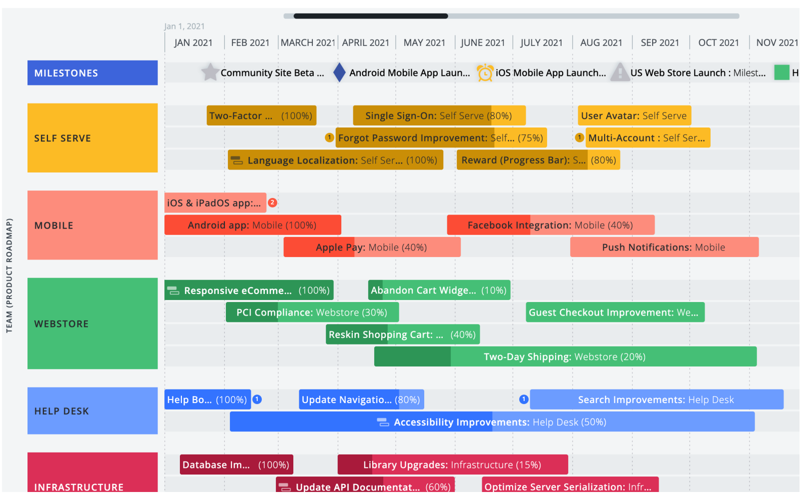


Figure 17.1. Example of a product roadmap (by roadmunk.com).

Now that we understand what the company wants to improve, let’s review how they are planning to do that. These plans are translated into features and products defined with exact timelines stretching a few months ahead. PMs are responsible for defining and managing these plans, and they form a roadmap.

There’s a good chance that you’re already familiar with the company’s and the team’s roadmap. If not, ask the PMs and they will gladly share it with you.

Exploring the roadmap will help you understand what features your team is going to work on in the near future. You can use it in a few ways:

- You will be able to check whether the design elements you're working on will clash with future new features so you can make adjustments early.
- You can make sure feature ideas you've had aren't already in the plan so you are free to suggest them.
- You can suggest how a planned feature can be simplified so as to ship it faster.

People and teams

No strategic decision is made in a silo. You'll need support, buy-in, and collaboration with others within the company. That's why you have to understand the company's structure and roles.

If you work at a big company, you may have access to an organizational chart through one of the internal HR tools like Workday. If not, ask your manager if there's a chart you can access. If it doesn't exist, start mapping it out yourself – what departments exist, who belongs to each of them, who reports to whom, and what their objectives are. You could take ownership for distributing this to others and making it part of the onboarding materials.

While mapping out the organizational chart, you'll probably get stuck at some point. For instance, you may not know who a support department reports to or what the person with the title business development executive does. That's exactly the sort of thing that's useful to learn, and your manager will likely help you with answers (they may not know themselves, but they can find out for you).

While mapping out the organizational chart, try to also list people's responsibilities and objectives. It will help you to better understand who has the authority or knowledge over specific topics. Later on, you'll be able to use that knowledge to know who to partner with and how to influence them when initiating projects or changes.

Here are some examples of the objectives of different roles:

Stakeholder group	Examples of their objectives

Product managers	Product usage metrics, feature adoption rates, customer satisfaction scores, time to market, business metrics.
Head of product	Company-wide revenue, product portfolio performance, customer satisfaction, market share.
Engineers	Code quality, bug rates, deployment frequency, system uptime.
Head of engineering	Team velocity, system uptime, code quality, technical debt.
Product designers	User engagement, usability test results, user satisfaction, accessibility compliance.
Head of product design	User satisfaction scores, completion of usability goals, design team performance.
Quality assurance (QA)	Test coverage, defect density, testing cycle time, release readiness.
Marketing	Lead generation, conversion rate, customer acquisition cost, marketing campaign ROI.
Sales	Sales targets, customer churn rate, conversion rates, average deal size.
Customer support	Customer satisfaction rates, response time, resolution time.

Figure 17.2 Examples of role objectives.

Understanding a role's objectives will help you to understand the incentives that drive people at your company and their subsequent behaviors. For example:

- Some engineers tend not to care about implementing designs perfectly because they aren't often measured on how well the design performs.

- Some PMs tend to prefer more aggressive designs with big and prominent call-to-action buttons because they belong to the growth team that's measured on increasing sales and conversion.

Understanding competitors

Understanding the competition will help you to make more strategic decisions. As an example, here are some of the things you could learn from reflecting on your competitors' tactics:

Competitor event	**Possible learning**
Launching on a new platform (e.g., Android/iOS)	Your company will possibly have to start working on bringing its product to this platform as well in order to stay competitive. Someone will have to design it, so it could be an opportunity for you to take ownership over that project.
Product update	They managed to solve a challenging UI/UX issue that your company still hasn't solved well. Learn from their solution to improve yours.
Getting negative/positive reviews on review websites like G2, Trustpilot, and Capterra.	- Find complaints about your competitors' solutions and make sure your product offers a solution to that problem. It will strengthen your company's offering. - Analyze the positive reviews to identify what is especially valuable to users. Use it as evidence to potentially add or double down on that functionality in your product.

Figure 17.3. Lessons drawn from your competitors' tactics.

Keep in mind that sometimes it will not be clear what a competitor's move means for your company. For example, if a competing company stops offering their B2B solution, it could mean two opposing things:

a. The B2B model doesn't work in this industry. If you're working on the B2B offering, it could mean that company restructuring or even layoffs could come soon.
b. They were outperformed by the competition (maybe even your company) and had to give up on this offering. In this case, the opposite is true – your department could soon get even more business.

You could always discuss these with your manager and see if they have more context or a better understanding of what it means for your company.

Competitor research

Many organizations already have a list of competitors. You may be aware of some of the competing companies already and use them for reference when designing. Ask your manager if there's a comprehensive list of competition you can access.

If not, take ownership over creating this list and sharing it with the rest of the team or even make it part of the onboarding documentation. Follow all of your competitors and share important updates (new features, new markets, new business offerings, pivots) with your team.

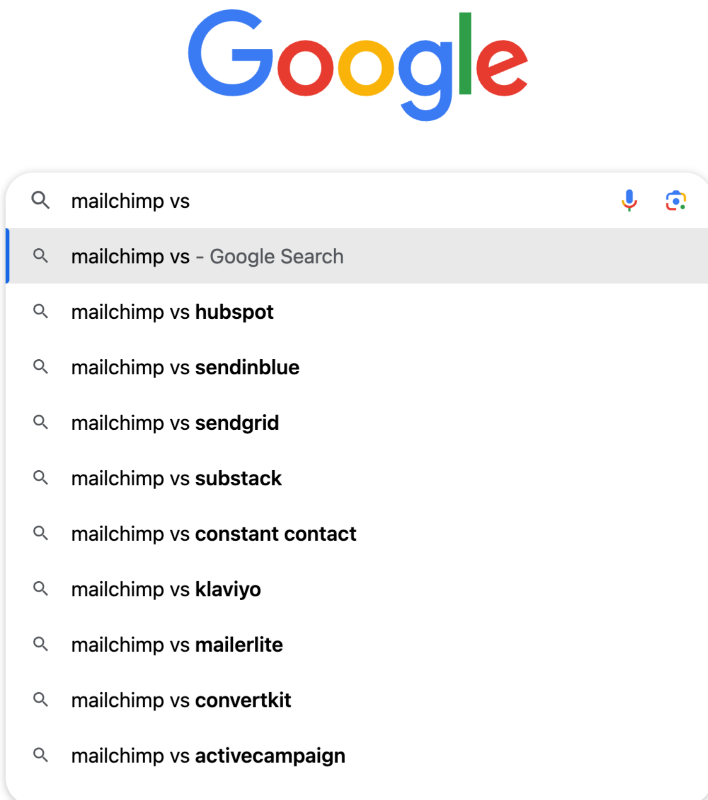


Figure 17.4. A quick competitor search

You can find competitors easily using a search engine, but you can also use websites like G2, Capterra, Product Hunt (assuming you're working in a software business). Another trick is to type into Google: "[name of your company] vs" and see which company names show up in the auto-complete. This normally works well for bigger companies, and it'll show you who consumers consider to be your competitors.

Competition

Table

Name	Website	Booking type	Spots	Markets	Busines...	Spaces	Comments
Third Place	https://third-place.org/		314 UK, 787 Australia	Australia, UK	B2C, B2B	Coffee shops, Hotels	Focused on Meetings. Started as a place for students to book spac libraries, during COVIC pivoted and removed c shops.
Independesk	https://independesk.com/?lang=en	Per hour	~1000	Germany	B2B, B2C	Coffee shops, Hotels, Offices, Co-working	Also rent out hotel roo podcast recording spa etc. Raised from "Shar Tank" investors in Gerr
LiquidSpace	https://liquidspace.com/	Per hour, Per day	2170, in NYC — 800, SFO - 360	USA, Worldwide	B2B	Co-working, Conference rooms, Offices	Very slick product
UpFlex	https://www.upflex.com/	Per day, Per hour	5500	Worldwide	B2B	Co-working, Conference rooms	Acq. by WeWork
Hubble		Per day		UK, Worldwide	B2B	Conference rooms, Co-working	Pivoted from co-worki spaces aggregator
Drop Desk	https://drop-desk.com/	Per hour	370 in USA	USA	B2B, B2C	Offices, Conference rooms, Co-working	
Anywell	https://www.any-where.com/	Per hour		Israel, New York	B2B	Coffee shops, Co-working	
DeskPass	deskpass.com	Per hour, Per day	1000+, 250 in NYC	USA	B2B, B2C	Conference rooms, Co-working	Slick product

Figure 17.5. Example of a competitor research spreadsheet

In Figure 17.5 above, you can see an example of a competitor research spreadsheet I created for one of my own businesses. We offered companies flexible workspace on demand for their employees for meetings, work sessions, and team offsites. We partnered with co-working spaces, hotel lobbies, restaurants, etc., and enabled company employees to book these spaces via our app. Here are the details I gathered about our competitors and how you could leverage them:

- Company name
- Company website URL (explore their website and visit once a month)
- Apps link for each platform (install and test them on your phone)
- Business properties (helps you to find out who is a direct competitor) For example:
  - Market (countries, cities)
  - Business model and target audience (B2B/B2C)
  - Offering type (In our case, it was what type of spaces they offer – co-working spaces, vacant office desks, hotels, coffee shops, etc.)

  - Size (In our case, it was the number of spots the company had. You can use any other number that could provide a sense of how significant this company is compared to other competitors.)
- LinkedIn page (follow all of them)
- CEO's LinkedIn/Twitter (follow all of them)

Learning

To actively learn from competitors and about your industry, use the technique I shared in the *Growing Your Impact* chapter – listen to podcasts on Spotify. These should feature the following:

- CEOs of companies you mapped out in the competitor research to understand their business and the industry.
- design leaders at these companies (you can find their names on LinkedIn).
- CEOs and design leaders of successful companies with a business similar to your company. These similarities could be:
  - Business model – If you work on a marketplace, you could learn from Airbnb, Uber, Booking.com, Etsy, or DoorDash. If you're building a B2C consumer subscription product, you could learn from Spotify or Netflix. For B2B, it might be Mailchimp, Salesforce, etc.
  - Audience – If you're targeting developers, you could follow companies like GitHub, Twilio, Stripe, etc.
  - Unique platforms (e.g., TVs).
  - Unique markets (e.g., China).

The advantage of learning about business in general is that there are a lot of great materials available. Even though it's not a must, if you're curious about the business model of your company, you can easily find a book dedicated to it. For example, when I created Swag Fair, my marketplace for sustainable and unique corporate gifts made by small businesses, I read *The Lean Marketplace* (by Juho Makkonen and Cristóbal

Gracia) to understand the marketplace business model better. For subscription models, read *Subscribed* by Tien Tzuo and Gabe Weisert.

Leveraging business knowledge in the long term

Every new language I learned (three languages on top of my two native languages) was easier than the last one, even if they weren't similar. After learning the first new language, I think my brain developed a framework for the concept of a language – the necessary building blocks and what works best in terms of memorization and comprehension.

Understanding businesses is similar. Businesses have different properties, but once you've analyzed one of them and understood the concepts I described above, understanding the next business will come more easily.

You might not be able to reuse all of that knowledge at your next company as is. But going through this learning process once will create a framework for understanding how a business works and what the important parts are that you should be aware of.

So, at your next company, you'll be able to learn the business faster, but also, after a while, you'll be able to apply the lessons of what worked or didn't work at one company to another. This sort of knowledge and experience has a huge value by itself as it increases your potential impact at the company. It's also one of the reasons companies like hiring people who have experience working within similar business models or within the same industry.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Learn how your company makes and spends money and about their objectives (KPIs and OKRs). *Next step: ask your manager during your next one-on-one if there's any documentation on these metrics.*

- Make sure you understand your company's vision and mission. *Next step: check your company's website or internal documentation to find it. If it's not there, ask your manager at your next one-on-one.*
- Get familiar with the product roadmap. *Next step: ask your manager for access to the company and product roadmaps.*
- Get familiar with the organizational chart. If it doesn't exist, take ownership over creating one. *Next step: ask your manager for access to the company and product roadmaps.*
- Get familiar with your competitors. If a competitor analysis document doesn't exist, take ownership for creating it. *Next step: ask your manager if there's a competitor analysis document you can access.*
- Follow competing companies and their leadership on social media and review their products. *Next step: get access to or create a list of competing companies' websites, leadership profiles, and apps.*
- Learn more about the industry from industry-leading companies which aren't competitors. *Next step: make a list of successful companies with similar business parameters.*

LEARNING MATERIALS

- *UX Strategy* by Jaime Levy is an excellent book that covers many business-related topics that should be applied in UX design.
- *Swipe to Unlock* is a book written by ex-PMs at Google and Microsoft. It explains how different technologies, businesses, and markets work in an easy-to-understand format, using questions such as: *Why did Microsoft acquire LinkedIn?* or *How does Spotify recommend songs to you?*
- *Lenny's Podcast* is hosted by Lenny Rachitsky, an ex-PM at Airbnb. It's one of the best PM podcasts, and it's packed with information about strategy and business.
- *Product Management's Sacred Seven* is a book from the same authors as *Swipe to Unlock* which helps PMs prepare for interviews. It covers all the important aspects of the PM position,

including marketing and growth, data science, law and policy, economics, and psychology.

- nfng.pro/books is a list of books for PMs split into levels (beginner, junior, mid-level, and senior/director) by Anna Buldakova, an ex-PM at Meta and Intercom.

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Zooming out and considering the bigger picture of the business and the industry context for your work.
- Translating design to business impact and vice versa.

18. Mentorship

The mentorship competency is all about your ability to actively help the people around you to grow. It can be done by providing feedback or sharing knowledge with a single person or a group of people.

Some companies have a structured mentorship program. If that's the case at your company, you may not need this chapter since these programs may already include guidelines, formats, and best practices.

Mentorship can have different formats and audiences. It could be a one-time, one-to-one session with a colleague, helping them to learn a new design tool, or it could be a recurring monthly event where you teach the rest of the team about a skill you've mastered (e.g., typography, accessibility, public speaking).

In the description of design competencies earlier in this book, you may have noticed that I mentioned coaching. These two approaches have the same intention of helping someone to grow, but in a different way:

- Mentorship is focused on sharing knowledge and experience.
- Coaching is a more advanced form of mentorship and teaches a mindset that encourages someone to come up with the solution themselves.

Coaching becomes more relevant in more senior positions like staff and manager. So, in this chapter, we're going to focus on mentorship.

Added benefits of mentorship

Besides providing a company with more value by leveraging and multiplying the knowledge of its employees, mentorship has these benefits for the mentor:

- Teaching a subject forces you to understand it really well yourself.
- Teaching allows you to practice communication skills and improve your communication competency as a by-product.

- Mentoring is the first step in building your leadership competency and it helps to put you on the path to management.
- Mentorship increases your visibility (I explain more about why it's important in the *Getting Promoted* chapter).

Identifying mentorship opportunities

Here are five techniques for identifying opportunities to mentor someone.

Skills-based

1. Create a list of skills, tools, and techniques your team uses at work (e.g., the Principle app, development handoff, documentation writing). You can find skills listed in the *Design Competencies* chapter (e.g., user research, motion, stakeholder management, etc.) From this, make a list of *your* top three to five skills/tools/techniques. Ideally, these should be ones that others recognize your expertise in.
2. Rate each of your team mates on the same competencies that you excel in, using a scale from one to five.
3. See who is rated the lowest on each skill. Identify if there's a skill that the whole team is rated low on (this creates an opportunity to mentor not just one person but a few and so increase your impact).
4. If there are a few instances of equally low results and you need to prioritize, pick the skill that is most critical for the team and the company (ask your manager if you're unsure).

Skill	Xan	Sam	Alex
Typography	3	5	5
Getting things done	5	2	4
Understanding business	4	5	2

objectives			

Figure 18.1 Rating people's skills competencies.

In this example, there are two clear mentorship opportunities – Sam on getting things done and Alex on understanding business objectives.

Opportunity-based

Here is how you can recognize mentorship opportunities:

- **When a team mate asks for your help**, especially if it's recurring. It validates the mentorship need by signaling that they: a) need help; and b) recognize you as someone who has the skills to help. Turning this into a mentoring opportunity could be as easy as suggesting you teach them about this skill rather than just solving their problem. For instance, instead of replying, "Sure" you could say: "Sure, would you like to sit with me while I'm doing it? I can show you the basics of the Principle app I'm using for prototyping interactions."
- **When other departments request help** with something they could realistically do themselves if taught how. For example, a sales associate may ask you to update a visual asset to include the logo of a new, big potential client they have a meeting with (I've done this far too many times during my stretch at a B2B startup). With a little bit of training, you could teach them how to do that and other simple skills to improve their presentations. This could help your team save resources and improve the sales team's chances of closing deals by enabling them to create better visuals.
- **When you see a team mate hitting the wall**. It happens to everyone at some point. After a few cycles of feedback, the results are still not there and you're not sure how to move forward. This could be an opportunity to pair up with that person so you can try to solve it together. They would appreciate it personally and you'll help the team move forward faster.

Building a mentorship program

This is a more advanced and high-effort technique but it has a high return. Instead of or in addition to mentoring, develop a mentorship program within your organization.

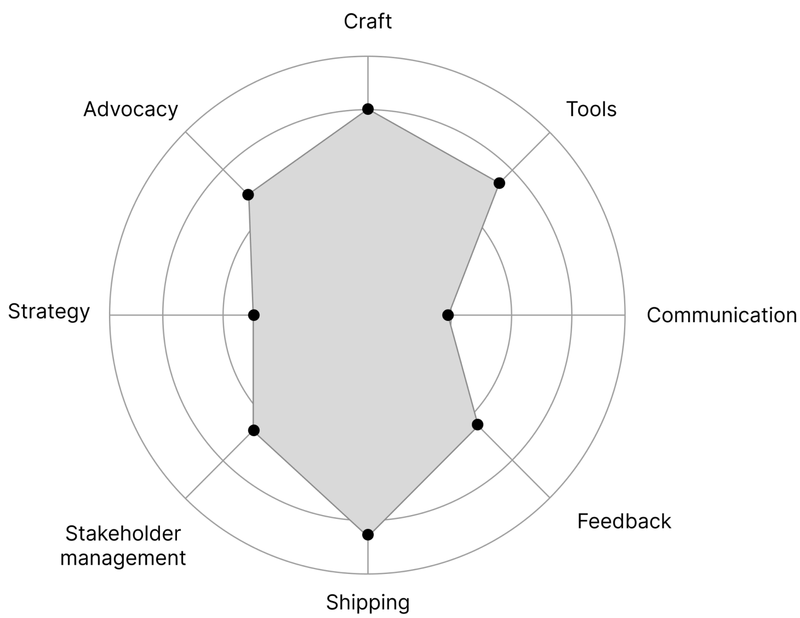


Figure 18.2 Mapping the skills gaps in your team.

To identify opportunities and topics for a program like this, partner with your manager and conduct a skill-mapping exercise. Skill mapping allows you to evaluate the team's skills in a similar way to what we did earlier in this chapter but at scale. By mapping out all skills against all team mates, you can identify a list of which skills each team mate could improve and who the most competent person to teach each one is. To do this exercise, search for the free skill-mapping[46] template by Nielsen Norman Group.

Skill mapping is often done by managers to identify the existing skill set of the team and determine which skills a team is lacking. This way they know which skills the next designer they hire should have in order to complement the team. So, there's a chance that your manager has this evaluation already. If they don't, it could provide them with huge value.

Once you have the data on what skills a team lacks the most, you can identify the right person to teach them. In fact, since you have a strong case for improving the whole team, it's likely that you'll get a budget to bring in external coaches or consultants, as growing these competencies will be important for the organization as a whole.

Making mentorship a success

Setting goals

Setting goals for mentorship is important as it helps you understand two things:

- Have you mentored the person successfully?
- How valuable is this mentorship for the company?

Compare these two mentoring goals:

a. Teach David the basics of the Principle app.
b. Enable David, within three weeks, to ship interactive prototypes independently and reduce the developer's handoff time.

When you set specific goals, like the second one, that are focused on the outcome and not the output, it will simplify the process. That's because they will help you to:

- get the person to agree to be mentored.
- get manager approval, if needed, to put your time into that mentorship session.
- utilize your mentorship results more effectively for your future performance reviews and promotions (more about this in the *Getting Promoted* chapter).

To set these goals, use the SMART framework. According to this model, goals have to be: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based.

Alternative mentorship formats

- **Documentation** (e.g., outlining how weekly design critiques are run in your team or what the process is for running usability testing at your company). Creating process documentation is often an overlooked skill and format for mentorship. Its advantages are that it's accessible to anyone at any time and it lasts forever. It could also be a good choice for more introverted designers (like myself) who may prefer not to mentor a group of people face-to-face.
- **Education hub.** You can create a shared document that includes links to all the educational resources that your company has purchased or free resources (articles, talks, tutorials, etc.) that are relevant to your company's work. Chances are that the company has an education/development budget for purchasing books, courses, and conference tickets to help their employees grow professionally and perform better. One thing to avoid here – and something I've seen happen many times – is creating a shared folder where employees upload e-books and courses. In most cases, this is illegal as these materials normally have a one-person license for personal use. In addition, they forbid any distribution, so creating a library like this could expose both you and the company to a lawsuit.

Partnering with your manager

Taking on formal mentorship often requires your manager to give approval or at least to be aware of it, so it's a good idea to involve them early on and leverage their knowledge for your mentorship plans. Part of a manager's work is to identify skills gaps and areas of development for team members, so **they may already have ideas in relation to who should be mentored and on which topic** and happily share it with you. They can also help you with the practicalities and logistics of mentorship.

Do not be shy in asking your managers for help. They have an interest in helping you make your mentorship a success because you will help them to grow their team members at scale (both you and the mentees); this is part of their job and what they are measured on.

A framework for teaching skills

Being great at a particular skill doesn't mean that you can teach it successfully. Here are two approaches to help you do that.

Teaching hard skills

If you'd like to teach a hard skill (a tool or a technique), you can use the EDIP framework. This model is used by extreme sports and military instructors:

- **Explain** the skill, why it's important, how they will benefit from it, and what you are going to do during the lesson.
- **Demonstrate** how this skill is performed, step by step, while answering questions.
- **Imitate.** Once they have seen you demonstrate the skill, let the mentee try performing it and correct their mistakes if needed.
- **Practice**. Let the mentee practice the skill until they are comfortable, encouraging them with positive feedback when it's done correctly.

Teaching soft skills

Teaching a soft skill (e.g., providing feedback, writing skills, stakeholder management) requires more effort and preparation because they are often more wide-ranging and they can evolve depending on the context. Below, I outline an approach you can use. It may not be a perfect fit for every type of skill, so feel free to adjust it to your needs. In fact, this is a simplified version of how I wrote this book and transferred my knowledge to you.

- **Intro** – Explain why this skill is important and how the mentee will benefit from improving it.
- **Step one (Inputs)** – Explain the context of the scenarios in which these skills are needed using 5W1H questions (what, when, where, who, why, how). These are the inputs. You can use examples from your own life as a template.
- **Step two (Outputs)** – Explain what you do in these scenarios.

- **Step three (Thinking process)** – Explain your thinking process when making those decisions.

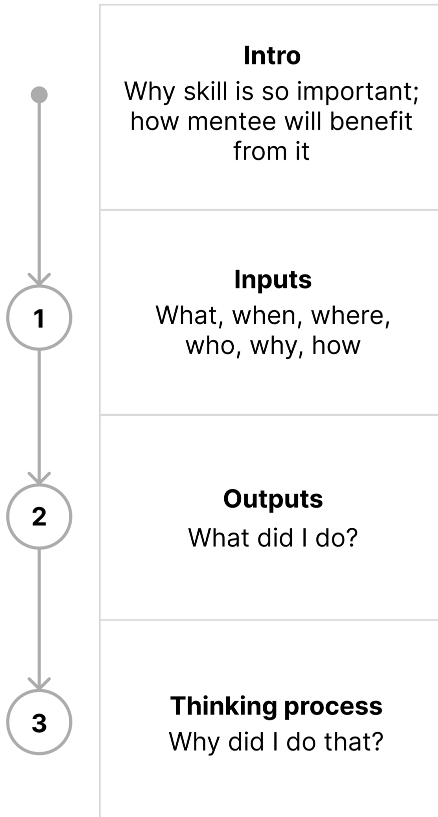


Figure 18.3. A framework for teaching soft skills

Let's say you'd like to teach someone the skill of processing feedback. As a starting point, you'll need to reflect on your own experiences so you can reverse engineer how you approach that skill yourself. For the sake of simplicity, I'll just list two examples here, while, in reality, more will be needed to enable you to teach this skill properly:

- A PM left comments on my design via a design tool because the solution wasn't good enough.
- A design peer provided verbal feedback during a design review about a new problem I didn't consider.

Now apply the framework I mentioned above to pinpoint the inputs and outputs and identify your thinking process.

- **1. Map out the context of these examples, or the inputs,** and look for commonalities using 5W1H questions so that you can draw conclusions about your approach. Following our example, the inputs are:
    - Where? (A. design tool, B. a weekly design review)
    - Who? (A. PM, B. design peers)
    - Why? (A. solution isn't good enough, B. new problem found)
- **2. Map out the outputs.** Write down the answer to: *What did I do?* These are the outputs of applying this skill:
    - a. Implemented the feedback.
    - b. Decided not to implement it immediately and added the problem to the backlog.
- **3. Analyze your thinking process**. Ask yourself: *Why did I do that?* Establish reasoning patterns and connections between the inputs and outputs. For example:
    - a. I implemented the feature because I agreed that this problem existed and solving it would help me to accomplish my task more successfully.
    - b. I added this issue to the backlog because it was out of scope for this task and wasn't worth solving now.

Based on this analysis, you can create a lesson plan for teaching your mentee how to process feedback. For example:

Guidance on Processing Feedback

Why is it important? *Feedback loops reduce the risk of shipping the wrong thing and improve product quality.*

How will they benefit from it? *Having a consistent mental model for processing feedback can save you the time and mental effort of making a decision on how to process each piece of feedback individually.*

Inputs: *We get feedback via design tool comments and during design weekly reviews. People who leave feedback are PMs and design peers. Feedback is left for two reasons: the solution isn't good enough or they've found a new problem.*

Outputs: *The result of me processing the feedback is either implementing the request or adding it to the backlog.*

Thinking process: *Here is how I decide how to process the feedback. When I receive feedback and agree that the problem exists, I implement the request. If I agree that the problem exists but I believe it isn't worth solving now, I discuss it with the person providing the feedback. If they agree that it's not critical at that moment, I add this request to the backlog.*

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Actively identify mentorship opportunities. *Next step: evaluate your and your team mates' skills.*
- Passively observe for mentorship opportunities. *Next step: notice when you next receive help requests from your team mates or other departments, and consider which of these can be leveraged toward a mentorship opportunity.*
- Build a mentorship program. *Next step: initiate a team-skills evaluation with your manager.*
- Create a structure for your mentorship lesson. *Next step: reverse engineer how you perform that skill yourself.*

LEARNING MATERIALS

- Search for "skill mapping"[47] by Nielsen Norman Group.

BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

- Identifying and sharing growth opportunities with team mates.

19. Hiring (Leadership)

To survive, organizations have to attract, retain, manage, and grow talent. These competencies are mostly relevant for and owned by managers, but as an IC, you can help with some hiring aspects that could increase your impact.

Let's map out the process for hiring designers so we can take a look at which parts we can help with. This hiring process is different at every company, but here is a list of the common steps:

1. **Sourcing** – This is finding talent that could be a good fit for the company. Normally, names are referred by the internal network (employees, founders, or their connections) or found by company recruiters.
2. **Portfolio screening** – The portfolio is the most important predictor of whether a company will decide to reach out or not. Normally, the hiring manager reviews portfolios.
3. **Screening call** – This usually takes between 10 and 20 minutes and is done by a recruiter or HR person. If the company is small and has no HR staff yet, it could be done by the hiring manager. The main goal of this call is to understand if there is a basic match between the candidate and the hiring company. The company explains in more depth about the position and ask about the candidate's current employment status, past experience, and what they are currently looking for in the role.
4. **Professional interview** – This is a deep dive into the candidate's process, tools, and their dynamics with teams they have worked with. It's normally performed by the hiring manager. Often, this interview includes behavioral questions like: *"Tell me about a time when you disagreed with a product decision. What happened?"* It's also the time when more details about the position are discussed.
5. **Professional evaluation** – Depending on the company's process, this will include a combination of these options:
    - Portfolio presentation.

    - Whiteboarding session.
    - Take-home exercise.
6. **Senior management interview** (Director/VP/CEO) – This is an interview to get the approval of the senior management to issue an offer. Often, these interviews will be used to test the company's concerns that have been raised during the previous steps i.e., cultural fit, specific aspects of their experience or skills that are missing.
7. **Offer**
8. **Onboarding** – This is the process of integrating the new hire into the workspace.

As an IC, you can help the company with the very beginning and the very end of the hiring process – sourcing and onboarding. If you're more senior, you could also take ownership over the steps that require design-specific knowledge – the portfolio screening, professional interview, and professional evaluation.

Let's take a look at each of these steps. Please keep in mind that hiring is a huge topic and there are thousands of books written about it. I can't teach every aspect of it in one chapter, but I'll provide direction toward the areas you should be looking into.

Sourcing talent

For more scalable ways to attract talent, check out the Advocacy *chapter.*

To make sure this step is even relevant, ask your HR team or your manager if your company is currently hiring. Finding great people is hard, so often, even if your company isn't officially hiring, they may be opportunistic about it and respond along the lines of: *"We're not currently hiring designers, but if you have someone great we would consider them."*

Check with your manager or HR team what should happen once you find someone relevant. Whom are you supposed to notify and what information do they need?

My perception of talent recruiters (normally part of the HR department) was always of well-connected people who knew about methods of finding the right people at the right time that others didn't. Maybe some of them do have these special skills. The reality, however, is that an average recruiter's job is to browse LinkedIn and message people on there until someone answers. I do not want to belittle the recruiter role; I just want to make the point that, as a designer, you are likely to have better access to design talent than recruiters because you are embedded in the design community, you have connections with designers you studied with, and you take part in design meetups.

Here are some examples of opportunities to bring talent into the company's hiring pipeline:

- **Layoffs** – If you hear from one of your friends that they're about to experience layoffs, ask their permission to connect them with your HR team or hiring manager. If the layoffs happen, they will minimize their unemployment time and your company will have fresh talent. That could be a win-win-win situation for you, your friend, and your company.
- **Someone is unhappy at their current company** – If someone in your network is unhappy in their current role, they're more likely to share it with you first than with recruiters. Use that opportunity to find out if they're interested in hearing whether your company could be a better place for them.
- **Collecting great portfolios** – If you're like me, sometimes you check out other designer's portfolios that you see online. When you find someone who you'd like to work with, write their details down. Keep a list of these designers and update it constantly so that you can gradually or in one batch share with the HR recruiter one day. It's a great asset you can take with you to your next company or even use yourself if you become a manager, open your own agency, or start your own business in the future.

Participating in hiring

Being active in hiring is probably one of the best ways to build your impact at an organization. Here are some more advantages:

- Hiring is normally something managers are heavily involved in, so it’s also a great way to get a taste of the management role.
- It sets you up for the management track in case you decide to do that one day.
- It better prepares you as an interview candidate in the future since you’ll understand what goes on behind the scenes when interviewing and hiring.

The main disadvantage is how much time and effort hiring takes. For many designers, it will be surprising how much of their manager’s work is hiring. When I was hiring, I had to review tens of portfolios every week, do interviews with new candidates, manage whiteboarding challenges with advanced candidates, communicate with them via email, provide feedback to some, and manage the pipeline of candidates. Half of my week could be taken up with hiring. Having said that, I’ve learned a lot through that process.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, this is relevant for more senior designers and especially when there’s no design manager (for example, if your manager is a PM). If your company doesn’t have a hiring process for designers yet, you could get involved in building one or take complete ownership over it.

This is exactly what I did during my time at WeWork in 2016. I was the first employee after senior management at a new R&D center in Israel, so I took ownership over setting up the process of hiring designers in that location. Our HQ in New York had hundreds of people, so their hiring methods couldn’t be copied in our team of five people in Israel (we grew to 80 after two years) as we had a different mentality and strategy.

Below, I’ll share my experience of owning different steps of the hiring process at WeWork and other companies I worked at.

Portfolio screening

When working as a solo designer at small startups, I’d often get emails from companies’ CEOs with a portfolio link asking, *“What do you think?”* Designers who work at companies without design leadership might be the ones with the highest ability to identify good or bad design candidates by their portfolio.

To get more involved in hiring, you could set yourself a goal to become *the* person who does the initial portfolio evaluation and decides who is worth pursuing. Ideally, in this scenario, the HR team and other employees should know that they must send you any potential candidates so you can do the portfolio screening. Then you'll start owning the very beginning of the hiring pipeline. From that point on, it will be easier to increase your ownership over the hiring process toward other aspects.

If you don't know how to achieve this goal, here are two things you can do. First, if HR ask for your opinion by sending you occasional portfolios to review, take your time to do some additional research about the candidate and check out their profiles on Dribbble and Behance, the case studies on their website, etc. This way you can provide more thoughtful feedback that will be more comprehensive than if it were only based on their portfolio. In other words, provide more value than expected.

Another technique is to start bringing candidates to the hiring pipeline yourself and providing the hiring team with your opinion on their portfolio. This way you can start demonstrating your ability to review portfolios, and next time someone needs feedback on a new candidate they will be more likely to ask for your review.

Following the method described above in the "sourcing talent" section of this chapter, send the hiring manager (and potentially the HR team) a weekly email with candidates you've sourced:

Hi Sam and Eden,

I know we're looking for another designer, so I wanted to add some potential candidates to our pipeline:

- *Kai Lopez – I worked with him at SuperMedia and he was a great designer and person to work with. He was responsible for the company-wide design system. I learned most of what I know about developer handoff from Kai. He said that he's not looking for something new but would be happy to hear about what we're doing (I gave him the general context on our company). Portfolio:*

link. He is more on the technical side of design and more passionate about design operations.

- *Navpreet Lee – I met her at the UX meetup last week and she mentioned that her current company may have to close their department, so it could be a good time to reach out (let me know if you want me to send the initial email). I've never worked with her, but her portfolio looks solid: link. She seems to be very talented when it comes to visual design, but her portfolio doesn't show much of her product work, so I'd double check regarding her experience with that.*

Let me know if you'd like me to keep sending these.
Thanks!

Most probably, their answer will be, *"Sure."* Next time you send them candidates, ask them if they need help going through the portfolios of other candidates.

If you're working at a small company that is just starting to hire designers, reply with a spreadsheet that includes all of your suggested candidates:

Great, I'm planning to send you a couple more next week, so I went ahead and created a spreadsheet with potential candidates including their portfolios, LinkedIn profile, current position, and how long they have been at their current company: link. Let me know if I should add them somewhere else.

With this spreadsheet, you're proactively creating a future design candidates' CRM that you can own or at least contribute to. It should include progress tracking for each candidate – what steps they've completed in the hiring process, when your last contact with them was, what the next step is, etc. There's a chance that something like this already exists. In that case, you should try and get access to it so you can offer to update it with your additions and in that way start contributing to the hiring process.

However, vetting portfolios and deciding who is going to be added to this list is a great start.

Professional interview

The goal of professional interviews is to evaluate if a candidate has the right type of experience and could be a fit for the company. This is often the first meeting with the candidate or the one after a short call with the HR person. It often lasts for about an hour.

Unfortunately, I can't teach every aspect of interviewing in this one chapter, but you can easily find a list of questions to ask at these interviews online. Here, I'll show you how I structure my interviews.

All of my professional interviews took place face to face. After greeting the candidate, I'd offer them something to drink and bring them into the room. Our WeWork offices were based in our WeWork co-working space, next to members (our customers), so the easy conversation starter was to ask if they'd ever worked in a WeWork building before. Co-working was a relatively new concept back then, so they often had some interesting experiences or impressions to share. After we got to a room, I'd follow these steps:

- **Explain the structure of our meeting**: I wanted to be the first to talk to let them settle down and feel more comfortable. I'd often say something like, *"I'd love to tell you more about our company and the team first, then I'd be curious to hear more about you, and then we can see if we should do something together. Does that work?"*
- **Explain about the company** *(10-15 min)*. Here I'd go from big to small – I'd pitch the mission of the company, then I'd talk about our R&D center's mission and then about our specific team.
- **Answer their questions** *(10-15 min)* – This was an opportunity to:
    a. Learn from the questions they asked and improve my pitch for the next candidate if I felt I'd left important information out.

b. See what they are interested in specifically (company's business model, team's structure, work-life balance, growth or relocation opportunities, travel requirements, etc.) and how thoughtful their questions are.

- **Listen to them talk about themselves and ask questions** *(15-25 min)*.
  a. Let them talk freely about themselves. If they don't cover the areas you wanted to hear about, ask them questions.
  b. Ask questions that might have arisen when you reviewed their portfolio/CV.
  c. You want to hear how they approach design, work, and their career. Listen to how they talk about their previous employers, their teams, their work, their goals, etc.
- **Summarize** *(5-10 min)* – If they seem relevant, explain the hiring process and suggest next steps (normally this is professional evaluation).

Professional evaluation

I've written everything I know on this topic in my first book, *Solving Product Design Exercises*. Here is a short overview of professional evaluation methods.

Normally, the professional level of designers is evaluated via one of these three options, although they're sometimes combined (for example, I used a take-home exercise when I wasn't sure about the visual abilities of a candidate and a whiteboarding exercise when I wasn't sure about their product and UX thinking):

- **Whiteboard challenge** *(15-40 min)* – The candidate is asked to perform the exercise live with the interviewer, explaining their thinking and decisions while solving the task (for example, the task might be "redesign the train ticket machine interface"). I used a non-live version, so candidates had one hour to prepare their solution by themselves in a comfortable quiet room and then 10 to 15 minutes to present it to me and a PM using a whiteboard, followed by a Q&A session on their solution and process.

- **Take-home exercise** *(eight hours to a week)* – The candidate must deliver a high-fidelity design with a guideline on how much time they are supposed to put into it (usually four to eight hours). Deliverables will include a presentation and sometimes development-ready source files. Some companies compensate candidates for the time spent on this exercise.
- **Portfolio review** – Candidates are asked to present their work to the design or product lead or to a broader team of three to five people. They are expected to walk the audience through their projects, explain the objectives, how they contributed, and what decisions they took and why.

Your goal here is to get your foot in the door. This means you should start being involved in some way in the activity that your company is using to evaluate candidates and potentially expand your involvement and ownership from there. Here are some ideas of how you could start contributing:

- **Coming up with ideas for the exercises**. These are rarely changed unless there is a good reason to do so, but it's still worth a try. You can find a list of suggested exercises in my first book.
- **Being the contact person** for the candidates performing the take-home exercises. You can answer their questions and also find out what the common questions are. Using this information, you can prepare an FAQ document that you send each new candidate with their task.
- **Providing feedback to candidates**. Companies rarely do this and because of that, those who do often get a lot of respect from the candidates. This could be helpful for the company's reputation, and it builds your relationship with the candidate in case you decide to reach out to them in the future.

The end goal of this step is to be the person reviewing the results and providing evaluation. To have the highest impact in the hiring process, you need to be the one making the decision on whether the person is a good fit or not.

Onboarding

At WeWork, when we'd lease a new building (the company does''t own any buildings but rather signs long-term leases), one of the important KPIs was the time between the day the lease was signed and the day we could open it to the members. This was critical because we were losing money during this gap as we were already paying for it but not profiting from it.

You can look at new candidates starting their job in a similar way. A candidate who has just started is unable to provide value yet they are still getting paid a salary. The business cannot yet profit from their investment during this first period. The goal of onboarding is to minimize this gap and get the candidate to reach their peak performance ASAP.

Every company has some sort of onboarding process. So, your ability to improve or own onboarding will depend on how developed it is already. Here are a few ways in which you can contribute to the onboarding of new designers.

Onboarding buddy

Often companies assign a "buddy" to a new hire – an employee from the same team who will help them acclimatize at the new company and answer any of their questions. They will usually do a 15-minute daily check-in for the first one or two weeks to make sure the new hire has everything they need.

If this isn't yet a practice at your company, consider offering to develop it. If it is practiced already, volunteer to be a buddy for two reasons:

- You'll create a relationship with the new hire that will benefit you both in the future (see the "relationship building" section of the *Collaboration* chapter).
- During that process, observe what questions they ask you. If they weren't covered by the current onboarding process, you could take ownership over finding solutions for that.

Identify gaps

Often, during onboarding, new hires are either not getting enough information or being bombarded with too much information in a short time. Not having enough information or it being unclear is probably a bigger problem, so let's focus on that.

Here's how you can do research to identify gaps in the current onboarding process. Ask these questions of anyone at the company who joined in the last six months (including yourself, if relevant):

- What was the thing you were most confused about during your onboarding?
- What was the thing you struggled the most with during onboarding?
- If you had a magic wand, what is one thing you would change about the onboarding process?
- What information did you feel you were lacking after completing the onboarding?
- *(For employees who have a few months' or years' service)* What do you wish you knew on your first day at the company that you know now?

Keep in mind that answers may vary between people who have just joined and those who have been at the company for a while. The fresh hires might not even know about important aspects that they weren't told about, while people who have been at the company for a while know in retrospect that some details were important to know.

It's also worth asking your manager what parts of the onboarding process they believe could be improved and what you could take ownership for.

It's likely that no one is doing this research and asking these questions, especially if you work at a small company; but, just in case, check with your manager first to see if it's something that's already being done so you don't waste your time.

Documentation

Onboarding will cover HR-related topics (how to get into the building, how to report your vacation days, etc.) that we most probably don't have much to contribute to. Instead, we’re going to focus on the professional areas.

Here are some areas of onboarding documentation you can contribute to:

- **Getting to know the team** – Use the organizational chart you’ve created (in the *Strategy* chapter) to explain the company structure, rituals, projects, and stakeholders. Make introductions to other team members.
- **Getting to know the process** – Use the process you’ve mapped out in the *Tools and Processes* chapter. Besides the general workflow, you can also go into detail about how each of these processes work in your team:
    - Development handoff
    - File structure
    - File sharing
    - Design systems
    - Documentation
- **Getting to know the product and competition** – This will likely be covered by their manager. If it’s not, prepare documentation on this topic using the frameworks in the *Strategy* chapter.
- **Getting to know the customers** – Present what you know about company customers and share user research insights from the company and the team.

You can also connect the new hire with colleagues who are domain experts on each of these topics. For example, the UX researcher or PM can talk more about users, those in design operations can talk about the company’s design systems, etc. It is also a great way for new hires to get to know the team.

You can also add non-design related topics that aren’t covered by HR to the onboarding. For example, a list of lunch places. Having this information as a new hire means one less thing to think about and research while already overwhelmed and potentially stressed in their first few weeks. You can also outsource that effort and do a quick poll using your team collaboration software asking, *"What is your favorite lunch place?"* This way, you'll also have a list that is not based solely on your opinion and preferences.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Source a few potential candidates for an open design position at your company. *Next step: go through your LinkedIn connections looking for who could be relevant.*
- Create a list of designers whose work you like. *Next step: create a list with a few designers you've met or seen online recently and with whom you'd like to work.*
- Contribute to portfolio screenings at your company. *Next step: send two potential candidates' portfolios to the hiring manager.*
- Start participating in professional evaluations (i.e., whiteboard challenges, take-home exercises, and portfolio reviews). *Next step: suggest to your manager a list of things you could help with in the evaluation process.*
- Volunteer to be an onboarding buddy for the next hire. *Next step: notify your manager that you want to be the onboarding buddy for the next designer who joins.*
- Identify improvement areas for the current onboarding process. *Next step: create a research questionnaire about the onboarding process.*
- Contribute to the documentation of the onboarding process. *Next step: collect the research results and identify what documentation is lacking.*

LEARNING MATERIALS

- Search for *Revamping Our Onboarding Process for Product Designers*[48] by Gerren Lamson, previously chief design officer at Creative Market, for a comprehensive list covering the onboarding process for a new designer.

20. Culture (Community)

Every company and team has a set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that are applied and encouraged. These values characterize and shape the work environment and define how employees work and interact with each other. Big companies may even have awards given yearly or quarterly to people who excel in specific values.

Amazon's mission statement is *"to be Earth's most customer-centric company."* It's so important to the founder, Jeff Bezos, that he still occasionally reads emails from customers. And when there's a problem that catches his attention, he famously forwards this complaint to the responsible executive with a question mark. An email like this means that they should investigate this issue immediately and report back as to why Amazon failed to provide a good experience to this customer.

Companies often define their values in a way that may sound generic, like this:

- *"Integrity: We are honest, ethical, and trustworthy."* (Microsoft)
- *"Collaboration: We believe the best work is done together."* (GitHub)
- *"We're optimistic and positive."* (Intercom)

While others translate more to specific behaviors:

- *"Move Fast – We believe that it's better to move fast and make mistakes than to move slowly and miss opportunities. Doing so enables us to build more things and learn faster."* (Facebook/Meta)
- *"Focus on impact – To make the most impact, we need to solve the most important problems. We expect Facebook employees to avoid wasting time on minor issues and focus on truly big challenges."* (Facebook/Meta)
- *"Avoid rules."* (Netflix)
- *"Keep only our highly effective people."* (Netflix)

You can get a sense of what type of behaviors companies would encourage based on their values. For example, Microsoft's values are respect, integrity, and accountability, while at Meta they use phrases like: "*Be bold,*" *"Focus on impact,"* and, *"Move fast."* From that you can sense that at Meta you would probably be encouraged to take risks and design experimental and bold solutions, while Microsoft might prioritize stability and using proven solutions (I haven't worked at either of these companies, but this is how I would interpret their values as a designer).

Understanding a company's values can give you an understanding of what type of behavior will be valued. Alignment with a company's values will help you to succeed within the organization.

Here are some examples of how company values could be translated to specific behaviors:

Company	**Value**	**Behavior example**
Facebook/Meta	*"Focus on impact"*	When prioritizing your tasks, be ruthless –constantly make sure you're working on the issues with the highest impact.
Facebook/Meta	*"Move fast"*	Master your prototyping skills so you can test your ideas quickly.
Microsoft	*"Respect – We recognize that the thoughts, feelings, and backgrounds of others are as important as our own."*	If someone who is more introverted doesn't have the chance to express their opinions during a meeting, gently ask if they would like to share their thoughts as well.

Figure 20.1. Examples of behaviors that align to company values.

Besides the company's values, teams often have their own culture which is commonly defined by their rituals. Initiating or owning these rituals (design critiques, a weekly huddle, achievement celebrations, brown bags, etc.) is a good way to begin increasing your influence and improving on your culture competency.

Improving your alignment with company values

Here is a framework for how you could improve your alignment with your company's values.

Step one – Prioritize values

Make a table with a list of your company's values and mark which of them:

- **are important to the company** – After working for a while at a company, you'll notice that some of the values are taken more seriously than others.
- **are personally important to you** – Which company values strongly align with your personal values? (They may intersect with the values that you mapped out in Part I of this book when defining your career goals.)
- **will advance your career** – Which values align with your growth plan from Part III? For example, the mentorship competency correlates with the value Wolt has called the "will to teach," and the ownership competency matches the "own it" value that Dropbox has.

Value examples	**Important to the company**	**Personally important**	**Advances my career**
Own it *(Dropbox)*	X	X	X
Will to teach *(Wolt)*	X		X
Bias for action *(Airtable)*	X	X	X
Diversity, inclusion, and belonging *(LinkedIn)*			

Build social value *(Meta)*		X	

Figure 20.2. Sorting the importance of values.

Step two – Find opportunities

Now look only for the values that are important to the company *and* have the highest number of combined Xs. Following the example above, it will be “bias for action” and “own it” with three Xs and “will to teach” with two. We only want to work on the values that are important for the company, otherwise improving them won’t be helpful for your growth there.

After this sorting process, pick two or three values and create a new table adding these columns for each value:

- **Competencies** – What are the competencies listed in this book that are relevant to this value?
- **Existing projects and activities** – What projects or initiatives are you already working on that are aligned with this value?
- **New initiatives** – What are new initiatives you could take on that are aligned with this value?

Value	**Competencies**	**Existing activities and projects**	**New initiatives**
Own it *(Dropbox)*	Independence	Owning the design system	Outsourcing the motion design work
Bias for action *(Airtable)*	Shipping	Having a prioritization system applied in daily to-do list	Making calendar audit to increase time to ship
Will to teach *(Wolt)*	Mentoring	Mentoring Sam	Building a team mentorship program

Figure 20.3 Creating an action plan for value development.

This table shows you a few ways in which you can improve your alignment with the values you prioritized:

- **Competencies** – Some of these might already be in your growth plan, so by following it, you will naturally improve your culture alignment.
- **Activities and projects** – There's a good chance that you're already doing something that is aligned with this value. These are immediate wins since no new action is required. You can leverage them by communicating these activities in your next performance review and noting that they are aligned with the company's values (more about this in the *Getting Promoted* chapter).
- **New initiatives** – What new projects could you take on to improve on this value? These require effort, so only go ahead if both of these statements are true, otherwise it might not be worth the effort:
    - The value is critical to the company.
    - You must significantly improve your culture competency (as a result of your evaluation or direct feedback from your manager).

Interest groups and initiatives

Company culture isn't just top-down. It is also shaped by employees.

If you work at a small company and some of your cultural initiatives (volunteer work, birthday rituals, sports teams, etc.) get deep adoption on a company-wide scale, there's a good chance you can impact the company culture.

Here are two examples of cultural initiatives from my own career. At one of the companies I worked for, together with another colleague who was passionate about staying physically active, we organized a running group. We set a goal to participate in an upcoming Tel Aviv mini-marathon, and the company agreed to cover the participation fee. We trained any employee who wanted to join us once a week at the end of the workday for a few months until the marathon. The company founders joined our group to set an example, and overall it became a great bonding experience for the whole team.

During my time at WeWork, I was donating my old clothes to a youth shelter. At some point, I realized that I could increase my impact by suggesting that others at the office do the same. My strategy was to make it easy for them, to increase the chances of them participating. I just asked them to bring their old clothes to the office, and I took them to the shelter myself at the end of the work day.

Companies from neighboring offices saw this and asked what it was all about, ultimately asking if they could join in. Eventually, it became a building-wide initiative. We prepared posters to put all over the building and expanded beyond clothes to food; some people even donated money. As a beneficial side effect, other companies in the building would have seen that we were doing socially-important projects, which would have definitely improved our brand perception and benefited the company.

If you work for a big company, one of the ways to contribute to the culture is being active in or starting a company interest group. These groups are often based on shared interests (book clubs, gardening, music, etc.) or identity (people of color, LGBT+, military veterans, etc.) They're are often accessible via internal company collaboration software like Facebook Workplace, Slack, Microsoft Teams, etc.

Participating in these groups could positively impact your overall experience at work, but it could also improve your visibility (more about this in the *Getting Promoted* chapter) and help you to build relationships.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Improve your alignment with your company's values. *Next step: go through the values alignment exercise.*
- Join or start an interest group or non-work related initiative in the workplace. *Next step: check what interest groups your company already has.*

21. Advocacy (Community)

Advocacy means helping to spread the company's and design team's message outside of the company. Medium calls this competency "evangelism" and defines it as: "*Promoting Medium to the outside world and establishing it as an attractive and thoughtful place to work. […] We strive to create a healthy, balanced, and mindful workplace, build exceptional products […] We want our people to be communicating these efforts externally, representing Medium well, building partnerships with other organisations, and encouraging people to get to know us more."*[49]

Advocacy helps a company to become more attractive as an employer and perceived better by customers, investors, vendors, etc. So it partially intersects with the hiring competency.

Advocacy is one of the least critical competencies, **but**, as a by-product, it does a crucial thing for your career: it builds your personal brand. A strong personal brand could have a bigger impact on your career by itself than excelling in advocacy competency at any specific company. Many elements of advocacy (writing, public speaking, etc.) will expose not just the company's name but also your name to the outside world and bring new opportunities to you (more about this at the end of this chapter).

So the advocacy skills we're going to discuss can be equally applied to promote your company or yourself.

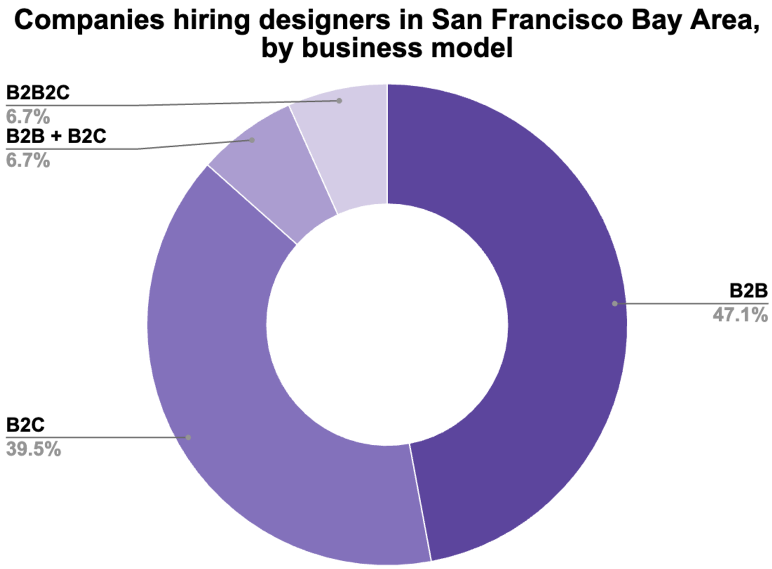


Figure 21.1. Open positions for product designers (analyzed in February 2023)

If you're working for a B2B company, know that attracting design talent to B2B companies is harder compared to B2C for two reasons:

- In their studies, designers practice designing consumer products much more often, and so they become biased toward believing this is what their job will entail. It means that while looking for a job, they are likely to ignore or deprioritize B2B companies.
- Designers are much more likely to be exposed to the products of B2C companies as opposed to B2B as they are more likely to be B2C customers. For example, every designers knows Airbnb but most will struggle to explain what Salesforce does, even though the latter employs more designers than Airbnb and has more than double its market cap.

If this sounds familiar, try to adjust your perspective. The reality is that you are much more likely to work on B2B products than B2C. As you can see in Figure 21.1 above, I analyzed 120 companies with open positions for product designers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The majority of them were in B2B companies. Keep in mind that San Francisco is probably where most consumer products are being worked on. It means that everywhere else the numbers are likely to be even more dramatically in favor of B2B (this is true for Israel, for example). There are two takeaways here:

- If you're only looking for B2C companies during your next job hunt, you're ignoring *most* of the relevant companies out there.
- Unless you're determined to work for a B2C company, you should showcase more of your B2B work in your portfolio so it's relevant for more hiring managers.

In terms of the advocacy competency, this insight means that if you're working at a B2B company, hiring designers is going to be much harder. As I said, advocacy is mostly about promoting your company as an employer, so let's review some ideas of how you can advocate externally with that goal.

Advocating channels

Public speaking

Having employees speaking at professional conferences positions the employer as a thought leader in the industry and increases brand awareness.

Normally, before speaking at conferences, people practice presenting at internal company events, then at small meetups. If you'd like to speak at conferences, this is a good place to start.

Once you've done that, here are two ways to get a speaking slot at conferences:

- **Being scouted by the conference organizers** *(rare)*. They will only approach you if they're already aware of your expertise, which means you'd need an established public presence – most often via speaking at smaller events or through your writing. For example, I was invited to give a talk at a design conference in Switzerland because they'd seen my article about how designers should consider sustainability while building digital products. Sustainability was one of the topics they wanted to cover, so it was a good fit for them. Conferences normally cover your travel and accommodation and pay an honorarium (my offered honorarium was $1,000 for a 30-minute talk, for instance).

- **Submitting your talk** – If you're just entering the design industry, you might assume that most conference slots are filled through the scouting process described above. However, speakers initiating contact with the conference organizers is much more common. It's done via a process called a "call for papers." Shortly after a conference is announced, they publish a form on their website that anyone can fill out to submit their talk for consideration. This is a more realistic and active approach to booking public speaking engagements if you decide to do so, instead of waiting for conferences to reach out.

If you aren't sure what you could talk about, I've prepared a list of techniques that will help you to generate ideas at the end of this chapter.

To practice, you could give your talk to your colleagues first and for a small local meetup. As I mentioned in the *Written and Oral Communication* chapter, to help you train, you could also get a public speaking coach. For example, a consultation from someone who presented twice at official TED conferences, with two million views, would cost $35 to $300 (starting with a 15-minute consultation and moving up to three 45-minute lessons). They could help you with the presentation content flow as well as your public speaking skills.

For more information on public speaking, check out *Demystifying Public Speaking* by Lara Callender Hogan.[50]

Writing

The 2017 *Future of Design in Start-Ups*[51] report listed the most admired startups among designers. The results included companies like Dropbox, Mailchimp, WeWork, Medium, Square, etc. The top five companies were Airbnb, Stripe, Slack, Intercom, and Spotify. The one that stands out is number four – Intercom. It is a B2B company with a product for support representatives that designers wouldn't even normally know about. However, by consistently publishing high-quality articles and e-books targeting product managers and designers, they've positioned themselves as thought leaders in the space and gotten their attention.

This approach seems to work. The VP of design at Figma also admits[52] that publishing articles sharing their internal design work process brings design candidates to their door.

Your company may already have a blog to which you could contribute. If not, consider starting one. Writing for the company's blog is appropriate and useful during work hours. In your personal time, however, I'd recommend writing your personal blog as this will have a bigger upside for your personal brand in the long term, since you'll have full ownership and control over it.

The design team's website

Some companies create a dedicated public website for their design teams:

- Zendesk – design.zendesk.com
- Airbnb – airbnb.design
- Intercom – intercom.design
- Wise – wise.design

If your company doesn't have one, you could initiate building one and include:

- A blog/articles (including case studies and interviews with team members or other designers)
- Design team values
- Public events organized by the team
- Careers information
- Company brand guidelines
- Design systems
- Documentation
- A patents list
- A team page with information about each team member and photos from team events

Each design candidate in the future could receive a link to this website. They will appreciate the opportunity to learn more about the design team and the culture at your company. Also, you'll be able to measure if the response rate from potential candidates is higher when they get a link to the design team's website.

A public mentorship program

Create a way for any designer to book a mentorship call with one of the designers at your company. It could be a great addition to your design team website or a stand-alone project.

On these calls, your design colleagues could offer portfolio reviews, guidance on interview preparation, career advice, etc. To make this program more effective and attract a more relevant audience, you could provide mentorship on topics that will attract exactly the type of designers you're interested in hiring.

This approach has three advantages:

- It gives back to the design community and positions your company as one that cares about doing so. Most people who will see your program will not book a call, but they will still appreciate your company's efforts.
- It makes the person who booked the mentorship call more likely to apply for a role in the future. They will already know about your company, and hopefully they'll be impressed by the designers there and want to work with them.
- It provides you with an idea of what topics designers are most interested in. You can leverage this information later to create scalable content via writing, speaking, or videos.

Design awards

Most design awards are not what they seem to be. Most young designers think that scouts are just looking for the best designs out there so they can award them for great work. The reality is that juries *only* consider designers who apply and pay somewhere between $60 and $2,250 to be reviewed. It's a paid-for marketing tool.

It might be obvious to people who have been in the industry for a while, but those who are just entering (and clients) often have the wrong perception, which benefits the awards process.

Here's a list of approximate costs for entering some popular design awards (physical trophies often cost extra):

- Awwwards: $60-$150
- reddot: $450-$750 (+ $4,500-$6,900 if you win)
- UX Design Awards: $320-$2,250
- FWA: $90

I'll give you another insight into the awards industry. A few years ago, a design company you'll know well wanted to give me an award (I didn't have to apply). The condition for getting the award was to promote their products and events on my social media accounts. When I refused to post their materials on my Twitter and IG, they withdrew my award.

So, an "award-winning" designer or agency for me isn't someone who is great at design; they're someone who is putting a lot of effort into marketing. There's nothing wrong with that and, in fact, most awards in other industries work this way. However, I want you to be fully aware of what "award-winning" really means.

Even though my perception of awards is negative, I believe that getting an award still works on a marketing level, and most designers perceive it as an impressive achievement. Now that you know how it works, you can consider submitting your work for an award as part of your advocacy efforts.

Generating ideas for articles and talks

I've analyzed more than a thousand of the most popular Medium articles about design published last year, and I found some patterns. I combined this with my own observations to create a few techniques you can use to generate ideas for writing talks and articles in case you're struggling:

- Think about what you have **spent significantly more time doing compared to other designers**. What makes you an expert on a topic, even if you don't feel like one, is often simply the fact that you've spent more time researching or applying it than other people. Leverage this knowledge and share your experience and insights along the way or write a deep-dive guide (e.g., *A Comprehensive Guide to [topic]*).
- What is your **insider information or unique experience?** What do you have access to that most other designers don't? It could be working on a rare type of product (e.g., plane or boat digital dashboards), company type (e.g., solar panel monitoring), or the experience of being "on the other side" (e.g., interviewing designers or going through their portfolios and sharing your observations with designers on how they could improve). A title for an article like this could be *I'm a Designer at LinkedIn. Here Are 4 Tips to Attract More Recruiters*[53] (one of the most popular design articles on Medium), or my article *Product Design Exercises We Use at WeWork Interviews,*[54] which open sources the list of whiteboard challenges we used at interviews.
- **Recognizing a pattern in the industry** and highlighting it. It could be how the way people work is changing or how they use tools and methodologies. Often, these articles become turning points for the industry when they realize that there's a new trend taking shape. These articles are also opportunities to give this pattern a name that will be adopted and used across the industry (for example, the Intercom-coined "dribbblisation of design"[55]). They could have titles like: *The Overuse of [design element/tool/methodology/other] and Its Impact on [Y]* (e.g., *The Overuse of Scroll Hijacking and Its Impact on Accessibility).*
- **Consider how a convention has fallen out of favor**. In a way, this is the opposite of the previous example. One study that had a significant impact on mobile UIs in recent years was *Hamburger Menus and Hidden Navigation Hurt UX Metrics.*[56] This article by Nielsen Norman Group almost eliminated the usage of hamburger menus in digital products. Two more examples of these sorts of

articles are *Replacing the Double Diamond*[57] and *Welcome to WIP*.[58]

- **Do a deep dive into small topics** that no one else would think to put so much effort into. *The "dark yellow problem" in design system color palettes*[59] is a great example of this. It explores finding the right shade of yellow for your color palette, balancing the aesthetics and accessibility standards for contrast. When someone invests significant research into such a small topic and has a clear solution with guidelines, it has the potential to be immediately adopted by the industry. No one else is going to invest comparable time into this topic, and most would be happy to just follow these instructions if they provide a decent solution.
- **Define your unique way of doing something**. You can write about your design philosophy or approach if it is significantly different from common methodologies. For example:
    - *The [company name] Approach to [methodology/process/etc.] (e.g., The Datapunk Approach to Design Critiques)*
    - *Why I [do something unique] in my [design process] (e.g., Why We Stopped Doing Design Critiques and What We Do Instead).*
- **Making your internal documentation public**. Designers love "behind the scenes" information because it helps them to understand whether their own process is optimal or if someone else is doing it better.

Linus Pauling, Nobel Prize laureate, said: *"The way to get good ideas is to get lots of ideas."* If you decide to start writing, use these techniques to generate as many ideas as possible so you have lots of options to pick from.

Also keep in mind that using one of these techniques doesn't guarantee your article will become popular. In fact, some of your articles will almost certainly be failures (I've had many of those myself) and no one will read them. That's inevitable and expected, but keep writing and you'll get there eventually.

Increasing the surface area of your luck

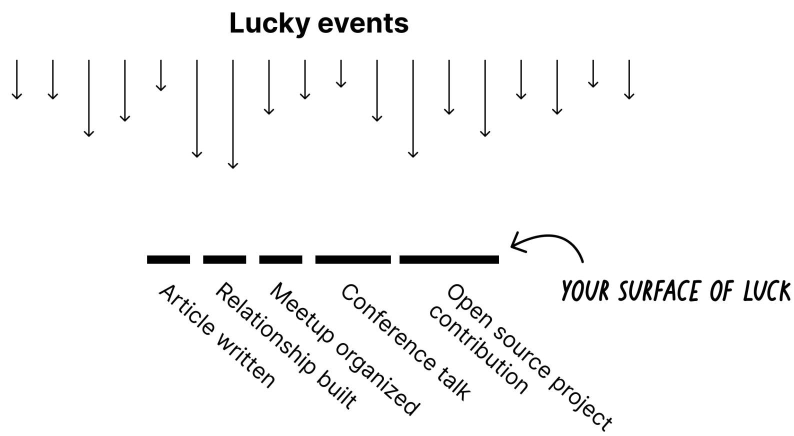


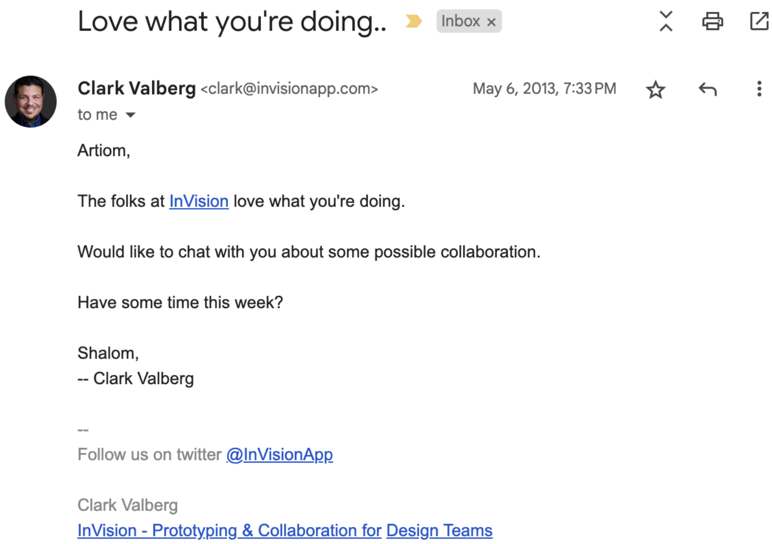
Figure 21.2. Increasing your surface area for lucky events

As I mentioned, your advocacy competency will help not just the company's brand but your personal brand as well.

Putting yourself out there attracts different opportunities like job offers, invites to podcasts, consulting gigs, book publishing deals (publishing houses often scout first-time authors based on who writes or talks on specific topics), etc.

All of the above happened to me at some point in my career. Although this can partially be attributed to luck, you can improve your chances increasing your "luck surface area."

Imagine lucky events randomly falling from the sky. Now each article you write, open source project you contribute to, and speaking gig you book increases your surface area of luck, making these random events more likely to land on your territory - as illustrated in Figure 21.2 above.



Love what you're doing.. Inbox ×

Clark Valberg <clark@invisionapp.com> May 6, 2013, 7:33 PM

to me

Artiom,

The folks at InVision love what you're doing.

Would like to chat with you about some possible collaboration.

Have some time this week?

Shalom,
-- Clark Valberg

--
Follow us on twitter @InVisionApp

Clark Valberg
InVision - Prototyping & Collaboration for Design Teams

Figure 21.3. Clark Valberg, CEO of InVision, reaching out following an article I published. This led to me doing a few projects for InVision.

Action items

GROWTH PLAN

- Give a talk (at a company event/local meetup/conference). *Next step: generate ideas for the talk.*
- Publish an article on your company's blog. *Next step: generate ideas for the article.*
- Build your design team's dedicated website. *Next step: list the content this website should include.*
- Build a public mentorship program. *Next step: build a case to present to your manager including the goal, required resources, and timeline.*
- Submit an application for a design award. *Next step: list relevant design awards and your design achievements to find matches.*

LEARNING MATERIALS

- For more information on public speaking, check out *Demystifying Public Speaking*[60] by Lara Callender Hogan.

- For improving your writing, read *Write Useful Books*[61] by Rob Fitzpatrick (even if you're writing an article and not a book).

22. Getting Promoted

Unfortunately, if you skipped right to this chapter without implementing the work I've described so far, this will not get you promoted. Below, I'll explain how to leverage and communicate all the growth activities you've performed in previous chapters so your company will formally recognize it and reward you.

Five steps for getting promoted

The promotion process may be more or less formal depending on your company's maturity. Regardless, you'll likely to go through these milestones in some form:

1. **Understand the promotion criteria** (Part II of this book). If your company doesn't have promotion criteria or clear leveling, communicate your desire for professional growth to your manager and request a plan for that. If your company is unable to provide this plan, consider looking for another team, manager, or even company that will be able to provide you with one or try presenting your own promotion plan to your manager following the next steps.
2. **Communicate to your manager your desire to work toward promotion**. To get a promotion, you need to ask for one. Ask your manager how you can provide more value to the company during one of your one-on-ones. Some small startups consider a one-on-one "too corporate" and don't do them. In this case, you could schedule dedicated time to talk about it with your manager. It might feel scary asking for a promotion. Keep in mind that at healthy organizations the desire to grow is considered a good sign. It shows that the employee is motivated and wants to grow within the organization. In fact, being proactive in your own growth is something Dropbox lists as one of the competencies employees are expected to progress (*Driving discussions with my manager about aspirational goals and seeking out opportunities to learn and grow*[62]).

3. **Build a growth plan** with your manager that enables you to reach the promotion criteria (Part III in this book). Your promotion review will be scheduled for one of your next performance reviews (this normally happens twice a year). If you work at a small company which doesn't do formal performance reviews, ask your manager to set a target date in the next six to 12 months. This will give you a goal to work toward during which you'll be implementing the growth plan so as to get promoted.
4. **Act on the growth plan** and accomplish its goals (Part IV in this book). In order to get promoted, you'll need to be performing at the level of the role you want to obtain. Square puts it this way: "*Promotions are descriptive not prescriptive [...] Promotions don't unlock new responsibilities; the new responsibilities and increased scope come first and then we recognize it with a promotion."*[63] This means you have to actively pursue opportunities for increasing your impact and do more than your current title defines in order to get promoted.
5. **Build and document a valid case for your promotion.** Consistently communicate the progress you're achieving with your growth plan to your manager. We're going to cover this in more detail later in the chapter.

At the performance review date set in step three, your promotion request will be reviewed and either approved or rejected.

Remember that a company doesn't owe anyone a promotion. Promotion is a business process that often involves multiple stakeholders and decision makers. Sometimes a promotion won't be possible for operational reasons that neither you nor your manager has control over, like budgeting or an organizational limit on how many people there can be in a team or in the organization of a certain title. For more senior positions, there just might not be enough work to justify having another person on that level.

Increasing your visibility

One competency that is important for promotion but which will not appear on any company's official competency document is self-advocacy (or visibility). Your promotion is an external validation of your impact. This means that other people knowing about you and your achievements will increase your chances of getting promoted. Your promotion has to be approved by multiple stakeholders, and it's easier for people to root for or support someone who they already know and are aware of their work.

Ray Dalio, in his book *Principles*, says: " *In most companies people are doing two jobs: their actual job and the job of managing others' impressions of how they're doing their job."*[64]

Shreyas Doshi[65] (one of the most insightful people in product management and someone you should follow), ex-PM at Stripe, Twitter, Google, and Yahoo, takes it one step further and claims that people are doing three types of work at companies:

- Producing – Creating artifacts to serve the company's external stakeholders *(wireframes, research, high-fidelity design)*.
- Organizing – Creating the necessary structures and processes for the work of producing *(mentoring, creating workflows)*.
- Self-promoting – Creating a proxy for their own competence and impact.

Previously in this book, we've discussed activities that will improve your visibility within an organization. Here is a quick recap of them. If you're an introvert like me or you feel uncomfortable with self-promotion, some of these methods will raise your visibility as a by-product of their implementation, which may feel more comfortable.

- **Mentorship and mentorship programs** *(*There's more on this in the *Mentorship* chapter*)*.
- **Documentation** – Ideally, you should contribute to long-lasting documentation. If your documentation software doesn't automatically mark contributors, add a sentence at the beginning of the document: "*This document was written by [your name and title], for any questions feel free to reach out to [your work email]*." *(Mentorship* chapter*)*.

- **Sharing knowledge across the team or organization** – Always look for opportunities to share your findings or insights with the broader team when this information could be valuable for others (for example, user research findings).
- **Initiating internal, non-work-related projects** like volunteering and interest groups *(Advocacy* chapter*)*.
- **Sharing updates** – Share a weekly progress update with your stakeholders on projects you work on *(Stakeholder Management* chapter*)*.
- **Providing helpful feedback** to design peers *(Feedback* chapter*)*.
- **Participating in job interviews and onboarding** – You'll get visibility with a lot of stakeholders who will participate in portfolio reviews or whiteboarding sessions with you. In addition, you'll be one of the first people to get to know new designer hires. *(Hiring* chapter*)*
- **External initiatives** – People inside the organization may get exposed to your persona and your work through your writing or public speaking outside of the organization *(Advocacy* chapter*)*.

Keep in mind that these visibility efforts may get partially erased if you switch teams or departments, and they could completely vanish if you switch companies. On the other hand, the skill of accumulating visibility will stay with you.

Gathering people to support you

You need to be the driving force behind your growth plan in order to hit your goals, but other people can help you increase your chance of getting promoted too:

YOUR COLLEAGUES

- Connect with a colleague who's been promoted to the role you're aiming for and ask them about their experience.

- Tell your colleagues that you’re working toward a promotion. This way they are more likely to send relevant opportunities your way – inviting you to important meetings, telling you about new projects, co-creating new initiatives, and sharing relevant internal information about promotions and leveling.
- Get a peer review in advance. If your company’s performance review includes a 360-degree review by your peers, you can create an anonymous form and ask your colleagues to share feedback with you before the official evaluation happens. This way you can get the feedback early and start working on improving on your weaknesses immediately. This should lead to a better official evaluation when the time comes.

YOUR MANAGER

Your manager is your main and best resource when it comes to promotions. They’ve likely done this process with someone else before so they understand what’s required. They could provide you with the right educational materials for improving specific competencies you’re lacking, opportunities aligned with your growth plan, and ongoing feedback.

Even though your manager is the person you’ll be working on your promotion with, they most likely aren’t able to single-handedly promote you.

At bigger companies, promotions are decided by a promotion committee (or a promotion panel) with people at or above the level at which you’d like to get promoted to. Your manager will have to present a case for your promotion in front of this committee. Even if there’s no committee, promotions are normally approved by multiple stakeholders, and that’s why one of your tasks on your way to getting promoted is to **help your manager to have a strong case for your promotion**. We’re going to cover this later in the chapter.

YOUR SPONSOR

Your sponsor is the person who is advocating on your behalf and promoting your interests behind the scenes. According to *Harvard Business Review*, people with a sponsor within the company are 21% more likely to get promoted.[66]

Sponsors make introductions to the right people to help you grow, recommend your candidacy at initiatives (e.g., suggest you represent the design team at the next company event), actively mention your name, when appropriate, at higher-level meetings, etc.

Watch the TED talk: *How to find the person who can help you get ahead at work*[67] by Carla Harris for more information about sponsors.

Focusing on the business impact of design

In each competency in Part IV, I mentioned how getting better at it benefits the company (e.g., shipping helps the company ship faster, feedback helps ensure quality work, etc.) If there's one thing you should learn from this book, it's this – designers are hired to help companies drive their business objectives, and therefore all of your work should be looked at, presented, and communicated through the prism of business impact. This mindset will help you in almost every aspect of being a successful designer, including your ability to design better products, receive approvals for your ideas, and get your achievements recognized.

Here is a framework that will help you to become fluent at understanding how your work is connected to business impact. It will help you to see the business impact of every design decision. Later in this chapter, we'll use this mindset to translate each of our tasks to a business impact and, by communicating our achievements through that prism, make our promotion more likely to happen.

As I mentioned in the *Strategy* chapter, the main ways to impact a business is to either save them money or increase their revenue. Here are some examples of how design decisions help companies do that.

Making money

Impact	How to increase impact	Examples of how designers are involved

Improve user acquisition	Gaining more customers with the company's offering	Design a referral flow, improve the website content architecture to increase traffic from search engines, design an appealing and consistent brand
Improve conversion	Increase the percentage of users who take a desired action (normally leading to purchasing goods or services)	Optimize the pricing page, landing page, freemium to premium or upgrade funnels, marketing materials, add support for more devices
Reduce churn	Reduce the amount of customers who leave	Provide better value (add new or improve existing features), optimize the cancellation flow, reduce usability friction, conduct research on why customers leave, design the website to provide clearer or more realistic expectations
Improve retention	Increase the frequency of customers taking a desirable action	Provide better value (add new or adjust existing features), add notifications or reminders, design a rewards program

Figure 22.1. Ways to make money for your company.

Saving money

Impact	**How to increase impact**	**Examples of how designers are involved**
Reduce support efforts	Reduce amount of support tickets	Design clearer interfaces, design a walk-through flow, design a

		product website with a clear value proposition
Reduce costs	Reduce one-time or ongoing costs	Design for lower external resource usage (API calls, cloud usage, SMS/voice services), adjust workflows to use less software or services, negotiate better deals with software providers, outsource work, suggest cheaper vendors
Reduce human labor required	Reduce human labor required	Introduce processes or tools to make work more efficient

Figure 22.2. Ways to save your company money.

While optimizing for impact, something to be aware of is the "promotion-driven development" trap. It's a phenomenon happening in software engineering teams in Big Tech. Engineers working at MAANG optimize their work for promotion so much that they end up working on things that look good in their performance review instead of having a positive impact on the business. These engineers pick a complex and challenging problem to solve just for the sake of its visible impact, even if it doesn't bring much value to the business.

Gergely Orosz, author of *The Pragmatic Engineer*[68] newsletter, argues that this phenomenon leads to big companies starting to develop a lot of internal tooling instead of using existing third-party solutions. Or, in some cases, they rebuild a product that didn't take off previously because it will look more "impactful" in their next performance review. That's probably why Google built[69] 20 different chat products over 16 years (often in parallel). Gergely, a former Uber and Skype engineer, noted that Uber had an internal chat system called uChat for years until they moved to Slack. Another result of product development without the foundation of business need.

I haven't seen this trend among designers yet. In fact, currently designers are under-optimizing their work for business impact and over-optimizing it for how impressive will it look in their portfolio, but things in our industry change fast, so it's something to be aware of.

Accomplishments document

In order for you to be ready for your performance review and help your manager have a strong case they can present to other decision makers on your promotion, you should start documenting all of your achievements. Make this an ongoing habit, otherwise you won't be able to remember all of it when you come closer to the performance review. These are often called "brag documents."

Your company may have a more formal document used for performance reviews, promotions, or to record achievements. Ask your manager if they have a form they would like you to use to document your growth plan progress. If there's no such document, you can use my suggested format below.

For each accomplishment, include:

- Effort – What did you do? Explain what task you were working on.
- Output – What was the output? Explain what you delivered.
- Impact – What was the outcome? Explain how it's going to benefit the business. You can learn how to do that in the "business impact of design" section of this chapter.

Include four sections of achievements in your document: projects, work, initiatives, and learnings. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Projects

Include big, overarching projects:

Effort	**Output**	**Impact**
New referral program	Designed a brand new referral program	Helped creating a new user acquisition channel for the company, bringing in about

	in two weeks which was shipped in April.	500 new users monthly (7% monthly growth).
Design system for the product's dashboard	Designed and deployed a new design system adopted by the design and engineering department.	- Average design ticket time for tasks using design system reduced by 14%. - Average development time per ticket involving tasks using design system dropped by 8%.

Work

List ongoing daily design tasks you're working on:

Effort	**Output**	**Impact**
Ticket DSG-512	Complete redesign of the onboarding flow of the mobile app.	Reduced churn on mobile by 4%.
Ticket DSG-516	Adding rewards to the referral flow on web and mobile.	Added 150-180 additional users monthly.

Initiatives

Activities that don't relate to a documented task (often the activities that no one asked you to do):

Effort	**Output**	**Impact**
Mentoring Sam Perry	Taught Sam the basics of the Principle app.	- Reduced the future hand off time between Sam and the engineering team by ~10% (estimated)

		- This demonstrated the "Will to teach" company value to the design team.
Reducing costs	Applied a coupon code for our design tool subscription that I received at a design meetup.	$190 monthly savings for the next 12 months ($2,280 in total).

Learnings

List professional learnings that you can now apply to bring more value to the company.

Effort	**Output**	**Impact**
Course: *Solving Product Design Exercises*	Learned about hiring process and professional evaluation.	I'm now prepared to provide support in whiteboarding sessions and feedback on take-home exercises during our hiring process.
Book: *Public Speaking*	Improved my presentation skills and confidence in public speaking.	Gained confidence to submit my talk to the UX Summit conference next year (Q2).

A few tips when preparing this document:

- Keep in mind that there's no strict format. Adjust it as you see fit, so long as you believe it will be more readable, well-organized, or represent your achievements better. Before you start filling out this document, show it to your manager and ask if that's a format they can use. Ultimately, this document exists to summarize your achievements for them and help them present your case to others effectively, so it has to do this well.

- If your company has an established competency matrix, they are very likely to have a promotion document format that you can request from your manager. Such a document it is often formatted to include information about current and desired levels of competency and a list of projects, tasks, and initiatives similar to those I suggested above. The goal is to support the claim that you're performing competencies at the level you're aiming to get promoted to.
- Use language that will be understood by people outside of your team since it's likely to be presented to or reviewed by people who don't have the exact context on the tasks or products you're working on.
- Documenting your achievements yourself and not relying on your manager to do so also helps you if they quit or switch teams. When this happens, managers may not have the opportunity to transfer knowledge on the performance of each member of their team.
- While writing this document, try to use the technique I explained in the *Written and Oral Communication* chapter – provide facts instead of qualifiers. For example, instead of saying "significantly increased conversion," say, "increased conversion by 6%."
- Not all of the work you'll list will have led to positive outcomes. For example, you'll design some features that will fail in testing and get removed. Be transparent about that. You can describe it as follows: "Designed and prototyped a test to validate the assumption that decreasing onboarding steps will increase conversion. The test failed (conversion dropped by 1.5%)."

Create an ongoing, two-way conversation with your manager on your growth plan. Make sure you share your accomplishments and progress on the growth plan in your one-on-ones and ask for feedback. Your goal is to make performance review a summarization of all the accomplishments your manager is already aware of.

Leveraging the document further

This document can also serve you in your CV and portfolio case studies. This document will help you talk not just about artifacts (wireframes, prototypes, design systems) but also about the business goals and outcomes behind them.

For example, instead of writing, *“Redesigned the onboarding flow,”* write, *“Redesigned the onboarding flow resulting in reduced customer churn by 4%,”* or, instead of, *“Designed the enterprise app,”* write, *"Designed from scratch and owned the design of a new business vertical responsible for 21% of company’s revenue.”*

This way, you’ll position yourself as a designer who is mindful of the business impact and become a more attractive candidate.

Final thoughts

As you can see, growing your career requires significant time and effort. But it's an effort that has a huge upside and will compound over time.

This book includes a lot of information, and you're not expected to absorb and implement it right away, especially considering that not all of it will be relevant for every single designer at every given moment in their career. Feel free to come back to this book in the future once you need to re-evaluate your career goals, build a growth plan, mentor someone, find idea for a blog post, improve your time management, start interviewing designers, etc.

With this comprehensive guide, you should be able to grow your career and improve how you feel about your daily work. By setting career goals, building a growth plan, and promoting your own interests within the organization, you're helping not just yourself but the whole industry. The more designers are conscious of growth opportunities and demand them from companies and leaders, the more likely these organizations to improve their design maturity. Which, at the end of the day, will provide us with even more opportunities to grow professionally and help organizations reach their goals.

I hope you'll use these skills to solve the most urgent problems the world is facing today, making it more sustainable, healthy, and equal.

For more design educational materials I created, please check out my website: https://productdesigninterview.com/

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THE PATH TO Senior Product Designer

An Actionable Growth Plan for a UX Design Career

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