

Designing the Product Design Team



Mamuna Oyoyo

[Follow](#)

Jul 8, 2016 · 9 min read



Fact 1: Design is fun. Fact 2: Hiring a designer is a very challenging process. Let's go ahead and focus on that second fact. I can comfortably say, it truly feels as though absolutely everyone is actively trying to recruit and hire designers. As if that weren't

challenging enough, let's go ahead and add on the fact that when you do find a potential candidate (thank goodness!) there is no well documented way to evaluate "good" design candidates.

There's no way around it, it takes time to find the designer. Each part of the hiring process presents its own set of challenges. Whether it's:

- Finding the best way to review a candidates portfolio
- Determining how to go about the interview process
- Persuading the the designer they are the right fit for your team

They each come along with their own set of challenges. Looking at this process holistically, even before you get to the point of focusing on the hiring process, you have to answer the fundamental question: What kind of designer are you looking for?

Initially, I just jumped in there hoping that the right fit would simply appear, not realizing that for that to happened I needed to define "right".

So many to-do's! To focus my efforts, I started to evaluate my search by asking myself:

What makes a product designer successful?

At its core, product design is all about communication, understanding the problem, solutions and the context. To be a great product designer, you must be a "whole mind thinker". You solve problems using both your right and left brains, which respectively excel at design and critical thinking. From the left brain you need to use analysis skills, focus on optimization and be logical and sequential in your approach. Pulling from the right brain, you need to be intuitive, visual, generative, holistic and simultaneous. Often we see the design process written out in a logical list of steps when in reality it is a lot messier. Designers have to jump forward, backward and generate lots of ideas for different stages and projects all at the same time!





Because the field of UX design is quite young and because it has grown so fast, a large number of designers have migrated over from different fields. More and more designer's backgrounds include cognitive psychology, product management, engineering, journalism, art and other disciplines. One designer can be strong in visual design while another struggles to draw a web interface, but both may be competent UX designers.

The group of people defining themselves as “designers” is very diverse.

Given this, I learned during my search it was important not to simply focus on the term “designer” but rather the type of designer.

What skills do you need?

I restarted my search by listing out all of the skills necessary to build the product.

- UI development — Building quality interfaces flexibly and quickly
- Visual design — The product look and feel
- Interaction design — Focusing on how the product behaves and is organized
- Product design — What are we building and not building? What's in the release?

- Research — Who are our customers and what do they want?

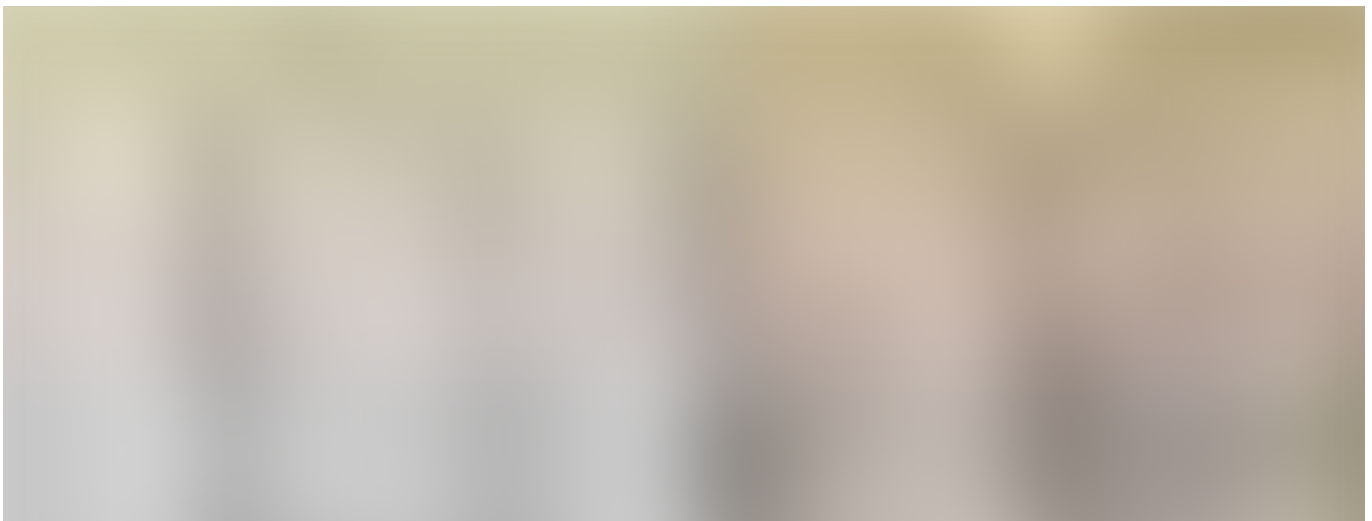
With this skills list, I was more easily able to see which skills were already covered by the existing team. I could then prioritize skills based on need and the products which needed to be built. Given the tools we have on our roadmap, we needed a person who had stronger product design skills than visual design. This thankfully helped narrow down the list.

Often times, job descriptions for product designers read as though they are searching for a unicorn — that magical, mythical designer which sadly doesn't exist... last time I checked at least.

While it is great to be aspirational, these listings will not work. No designer is an expert in all skill areas and may discourage people from applying though they may be the right fit. Designers will also realize that the job listing is probably asking of too much from a single person. Keeping this in mind, we made sure to modify our job description to reflect our needs.

Taking these points into account, we began rethinking how we were going about hiring and came to the harsh realization that there were some difficult choices to be made. The three critical questions were:

- Do we value interaction design over visual design?
- Should we hire a designer who can code?
- Do we really need a user researcher?





Do we value interaction design over visual design?

Thankfully, it was pretty common to find UX designers who were pretty good at both visual design and interaction design. Both are very important when building out great products. In speaking to candidates, they were always stronger in one over the other and so it came down to deciding which was most important for the development of the team.

Given our product has many features but needs to feel simple and supports complex tasks and flows, I decided it best we lean more heavily towards candidates with a stronger comfort with interaction design.

Should we hire a designer who can code?

Given we have a healthy team of back-end and front-end engineers, it was decided that we did not need to have designer who is both strong in design and writing code. I did however think it would be good to have a designer with a familiarity with writing code to be able to speak comfortably with developers. This however was not a deal breaker for me. If I came across a strong product design candidate who had never written a bit of code in their lives, I would still interview them.

Do we really need a user researcher?

A large part of user-centered design and lean UX is coming out from behind your desk and talking to customers. The person who during an argument about the value of a feature will say “I’ll just ask the customer!”

User research in my opinion is an indispensable part of the product design process. Anyone who is building customer-facing products should have a user research on the team from the start.

With these tough choices made, I was able to pick the granular set of skills needed on the team and then more easily able to take our existing job description and write strong job listing more in line with the desired needs of the team. It also made it easier for the team to evaluate for the right design candidate.

ON HIRING CRITERIA

Evaluating a design candidate, like evaluating design work can have its own set of unique criteria.

Communication

Presentation skills, while key, can sometimes be misleading. The real focus should be on the strength of designer's communication skills. It was important we really dug deep into how the candidate spontaneously responded to an assortment of questions. Candidates with a stronger ability to communicate their designs are more likely to collaborate well across the organization.

Problem Solving

How a candidate can deconstruct a decision and the questions they use to explore different constraints is key to the output of designers. Good design = problem solving.

Passion

A candidates ability to take on core responsibilities of the design position, ensuring they truly want the position we are hiring for. A passion or curiosity for the space we are in will be key to an effective designer.

Ownership

One of the harder qualities to measure is how an individual takes ownership or responsibility for their designs in a collaborative environment. It was important for me to understand how a candidate explains their personal impact on a project. What decisions could have been handled differently? What was the original decision made and why?

ON EVALUATING THE CANDIDATE

Having now established the criteria for evaluating a candidate, it was time to understand the different mechanisms we would be using to actually evaluate the criteria of an individual. For this I focused on: portfolio review, interview panels and design exercises.

PORTFOLIO REVIEWS

It is easily the case that the majority of designers had a portfolio even if they were not focused on the visual design of a project. It is always very interesting to see the deliverables a designer has selected to showcase and how the designer explains those deliverables when discussing the portfolio. This gives good insight as a hiring manager into how a designer thinks about a problem, their design process and what kinds of results they deliver.

I personally find it interesting to learn how a person responds to questions naturally and have found that during the portfolio review is a good time to do this. Instead of having the designer recite from their normal script, I engage with them asking questions about their work and turn this more into a conversation.

During the portfolio review, designers tend to focus on interactive work and so the ability for a designer to describe the interactivity in their work is key. In cases where the designer has selected to showcase screenshots, we often were unable to fully grasp the interaction being described the designer.

One of the more promising trends in high-quality portfolios is the use of “case studies” instead of just showing results of their work. These types of portfolios generally take

more time in explaining the process in further depth, how they reached the end results, what motivations and challenges were noted and show more than just the finished product.

INTERVIEW PANELS

A standard trend in the hiring process tends to be an in-person panel of interviewers. The panel is normally made up of a mix of different stakeholders and/or potential team members. In the case of product designers, we include product managers and product designers. The purpose being that each member of the panel will focus on questions/topics/answers which will directly impact their needs. Once you have identified the right composition of interview panelists, keeping this panel consistent will be key. It ensures that the team members who will be interacting the most directly with a candidate meet the candidate and are able to provide some input into the evaluation process. In these panels, we generally discuss:

- Portfolio details
- Collaborative Activity
- Design Thinking

Following the group panel interview session, panel members will then meet with candidates individually, time permitting, to gain a better understanding of the candidate. Whether hiring a designer, product manager, engineer or anything else, meeting with the candidate in person and talking to them about their experiences is typically the make or break moment. The right interviewing panel mix can be challenging and should definitely be top of mind for hiring managers.

DESIGN EXERCISES

Folks are pretty mixed about whether in-person design exercises are useful during the interview process or not. Arguments against design exercise are:

- Ethically wrong if the designer does spec work for the company
- Doesn't mimic the way the designer actually works

Arguments for design exercises:

- See how the candidate approaches a problem and explores solutions
- Gain a sense of what it may be like working with the candidate
- Observe how the candidate evaluates ideas, providing insight into how self-critical, analytical, etc. the candidate is.

If we felt a candidate had stronger UX chops, we would give them an exercise which lends more towards the visual design side (redesign an interface for example) and vice versa for candidates with strong visual design skills. We also understood that the task is not meant to be an easy task but should be time boxed tightly as to review what candidates prioritize.



HIRING DECISION

Next comes decision time... much easier to do when the candidate is great or awful. A simple yes or no vote will cut it. The harder decisions are for when people are mixed in their interview feedback. This normally means the interview panel should wait to extend the offer but give candidate a second chance. In some cases, the candidate may have been nervous or stressed from interviewing with the people they met with. In these

cases, trying a more a second interview in a more relaxed environment (lunch or coffee) may do the trick.

As you start thinking about the type of designer you are hoping to attract and hire, keep in mind that a designer will naturally prefer a company that treats design as a core strategy and not as a single line item to check off on a project list.

Happy Hiring!

Mamuna

Currently listening to Cliche — I'm Good

Thanks to Michael Ortali, Jessica Chung, and Katie Weissman.

[Hiring](#) [Product Design](#) [Technology](#) [Design](#) [Music](#)

[About](#) [Write](#) [Help](#) [Legal](#)

Get the Medium app

