6 STEPS TO CLIMB THE UX MATURITY LADDER

The UX Design Crash Course for Product Owners

eleken®

Contents

User Experience Matters

A cautionary tale of Google +

Google+ was a social network owned and operated by Google. The network was launched in 2011 and shut down in 2019.

Google killed its product not because it was a late entrant. Not because Facebook was unbeatable. Not because it had inferior technology or a weak team. And definitely not because it lacked sales and or marketing powers.

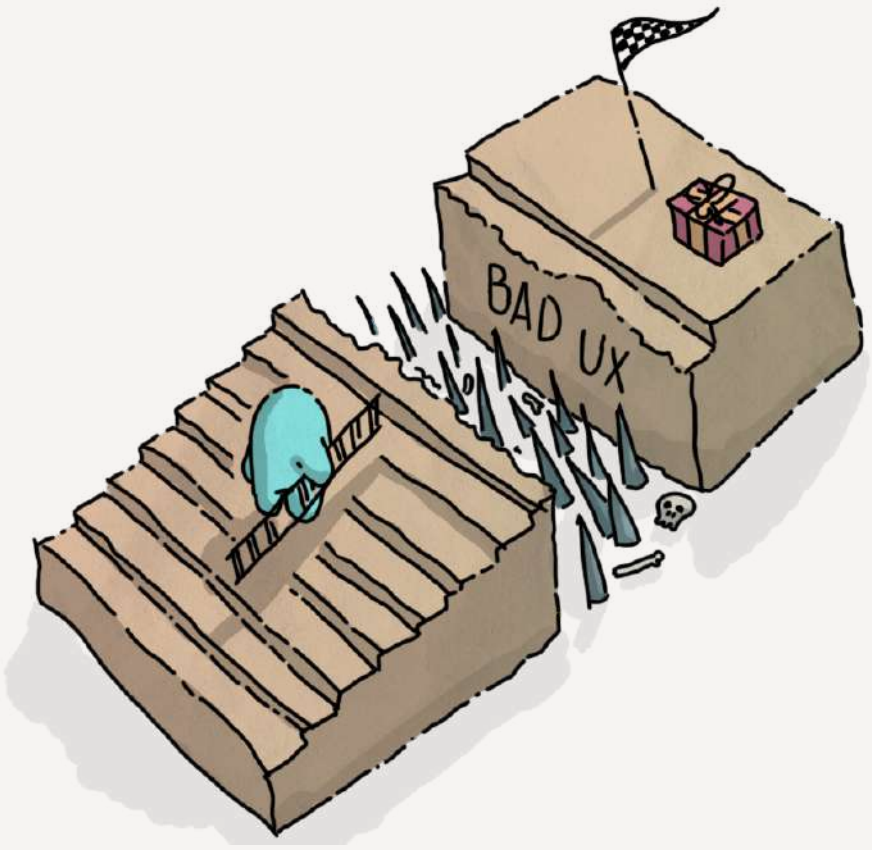
> The failure happened because Google's product vision of Google+ was not based on creating a meaningful experience for users. **It was based on their fear of losing the race for all of the world's data to Facebook.**

Google had to kill its product due to its poor user experience. "What is in it for me?" users asked themselves. They found no answer and they left. 90 percent of Google+ user sessions were less than five seconds.

User experience can be defined as one thing that startups most often ignore.

Partly because they lack awareness about UX and its benefits for business. Partly because they live under pressure. **Dozens of critical processes run simultaneously in a startup and need attention:**

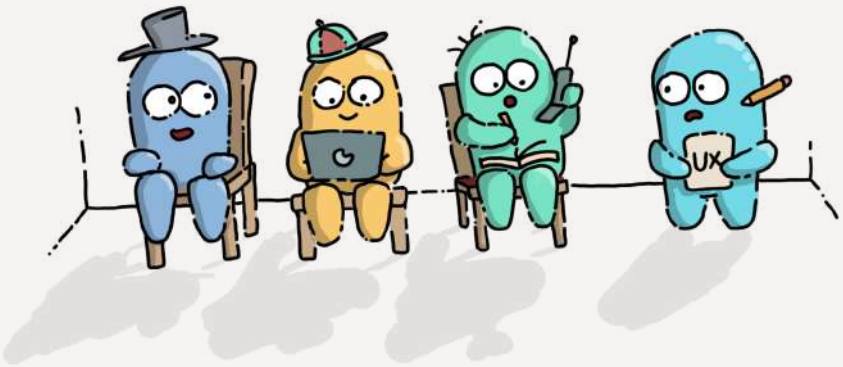
- To raise capital
- Satisfy investors
- Not to forget about stakeholders
- Some urgent legal stuff to do
- And to handle competitors that are getting ahead...



Sorry, UX

With too many tasks and too few resources, the game for startups is musical chairs.

- You can't get rid of development — otherwise, the product will never see the light of day.
- The place for marketing is reserved. No marketing = no business.
- Someone for sales and business development is essential.



But user experience?

Leaving UX behind the game looks harmless enough. You can think of the users and their experience later. In the beginning, it seems that you can cover the UX gap on your own.

- Frontend development
- Backend engineering
- Marketing
- Sales
- Legal
- Finance
- Management

You can ignore your users in plenty of ways

You can work on the logic behind the product by themselves. Make low-fidelity wireframes that coders would have to implement. I'm just like my customers, you think. I can easily put myself in customers' place.

You are not like your users. You know every hidden corner of your app, unlike one who is seeing it for the first time.

You may tell coders the general idea of what you want. To start coding, they would have no other way than to think of some logic beyond the app.

User experience **won't disappear from your app if you pretend it doesn't exist**. It just would be a poor user experience.

You may work on the logic behind the app on your own and then involve a graphic designer to make things pop.

Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. **Design is how it works**. If it looks good but works badly, users know it is a bad design.

Ignoring users' experience may work for some time. But sooner or later, it turns out that...

People ignore design that ignores people!

We are Eleken, a UI/UX agency that has been helping SaaS startups get their user experience right since 2015.

The ideas we present here are not new, or innovative, or revolutionary in any way. But they are underestimated by nearly every startup we know. Yet these ideas hold growth potential so fierce they can rocket your business to the stratosphere.

Because it's not marketing, or a stellar technology, or a rapid scaling that makes today's SaaS successful. **In most cases, a competitive advantage boils down to a user experience obsession. Take Airbnb.**

In 2009, Airbnb was close to going bust. Like so many startups, they had launched but barely anyone noticed.

Trying to figure out what wasn't working in the product, the team found out that all the listed photos of rooms sucked. They traveled to New York, rented a camera, spent some time with customers listing properties, and replaced amateur pictures with high-resolution images.

Improving the pictures doubled the weekly revenue to $400 per week and allowed Airbnb to climb out of what they called the 'trough of sorrow.' **Creating not a bigger, but a better product turned out to be a gold mine.**

Fine, now how do you make your product better?

On one hand, UX design seems to be so easy. You make way for empathy for users and decide to make a not a bigger, but a better product for them.

On the other hand, **what's behind that vague, generalized word "better?"**. There are discovery research, wireframes, journey maps, and more scary unknown words and processes. Every product has its own "better", and if you're ready to find yours, now the hard work starts.

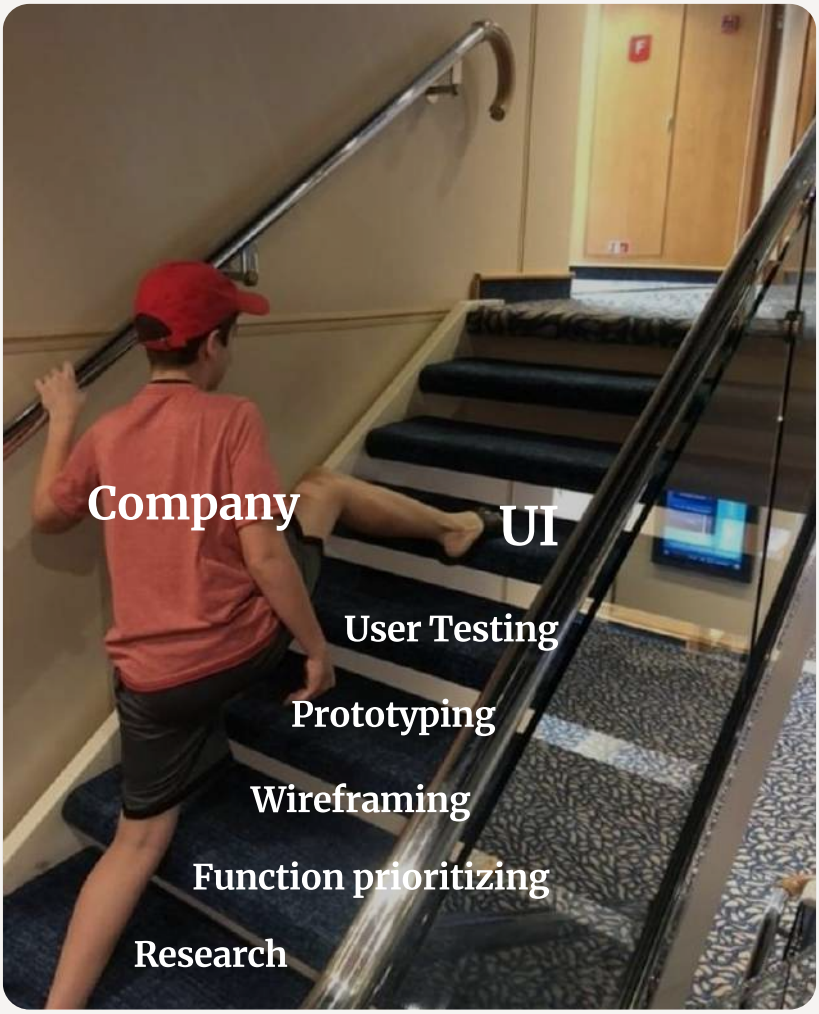
How to climb UX maturity ladder?

You may think "I know how to make a good design! I need a design system, a design strategy, and a UX team of 15 people." But depending on where you are in the design maturity of your product it may be no sense in having all those things now.

Meet the concept of UX maturity stages. It puts all the companies on a scale depending on their desire and ability to successfully deliver user-centered design. At the bottom are organizations that have no UX at all. At the top are those that embedded UX design into the fiber of their companies. Most of the companies fluctuate somewhere in between those UX maturity extremes.

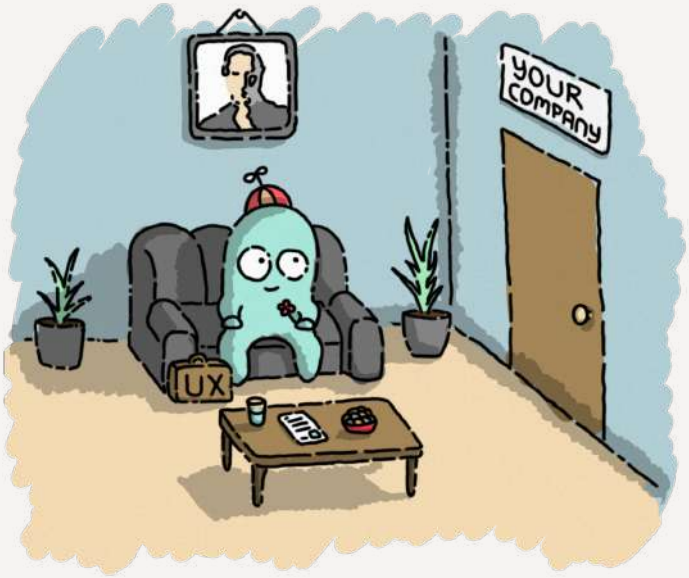
The UX maturity ladder helps, first of all, to self-diagnose the quality and consistency of your company's design processes. Next, it helps to focus your efforts on what exactly is needed to grow your practice to the next level. Because **it's impossible to move from stage one to stage six in one huge leap, leaving other stairs behind.**

We're going to consider all six levels of UX maturity in greater detail, as well as the work a company has to do to move upstairs.



Level 1: UX Design is absent

The absent level of UX maturity means nobody understands UX and nobody wants it. It might be a young startup short in resources or an older, development-driven organization — one thing they have in common is ignorance of user experience design.



Signs to diagnose you're on Level 1:

- It's hard for your team to explain what UX design means.
- They can't tell the difference between UI and UX — design for them is about "making things pretty."
- There's no idea inside the team of what benefits good UX may bring that make it worth the effort.

To get to the next level, you need to focus on building UX awareness in the team. Let's get some awareness right now.

What is UX?

☝️ **UX design** is the process used to create meaningful and relevant experiences for users that will interact with your product.

Let's explore that definition.

- **Process** — UX design is not a one-off event.
- **Create** — a UX designer is a full member of the product team, that works together with the product manager and developers.
- **Users** — UX design is called to ensure that products match the needs and capabilities of people for whom they are created.
- **Experiences** — It's not about beautiful interfaces.

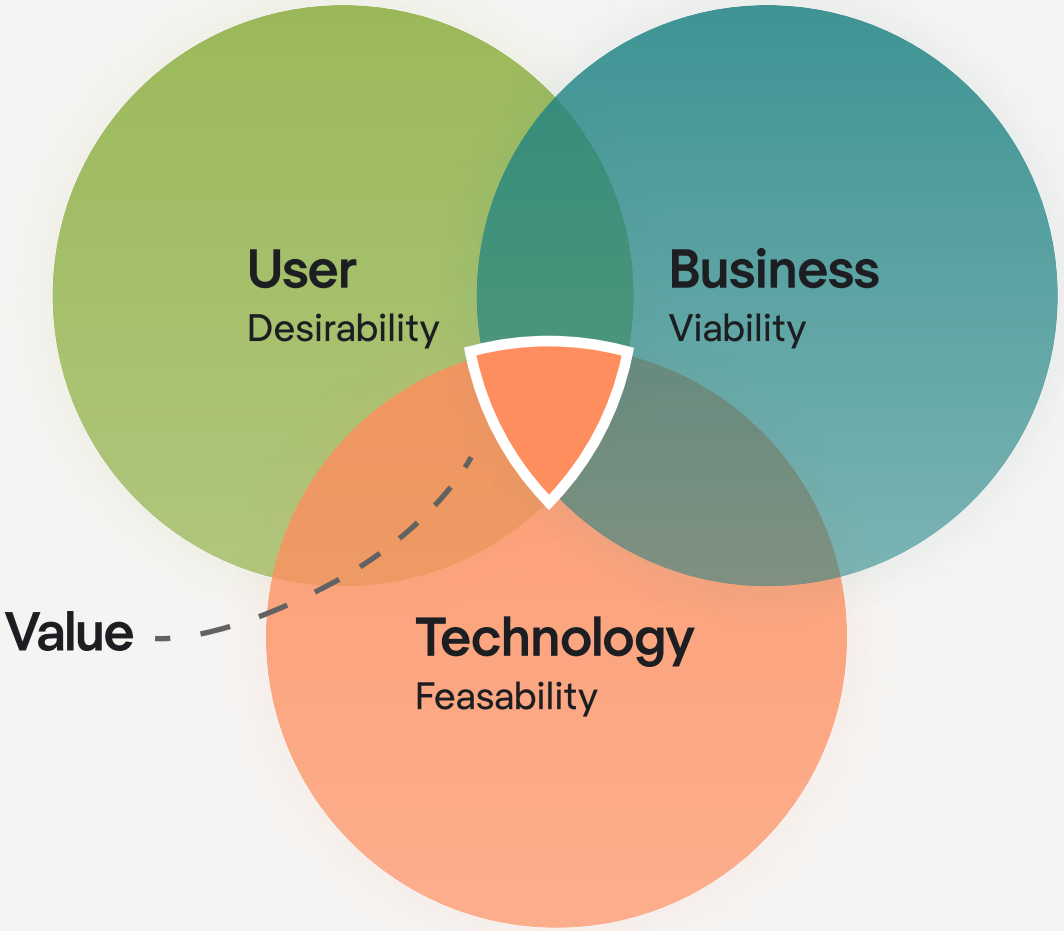
What is UX about, beyond beautiful interfaces?

- UX is about how users would discover a new product and its features.
- It's about showing the product's value in the most convincing way.
- It's about how a product is going to compete for users' attention with similar products.
- UX can figure out how to remove pain points from users' journeys inside the product.
- And to turn those journeys into a pleasure.

What value does UX possess for a company?

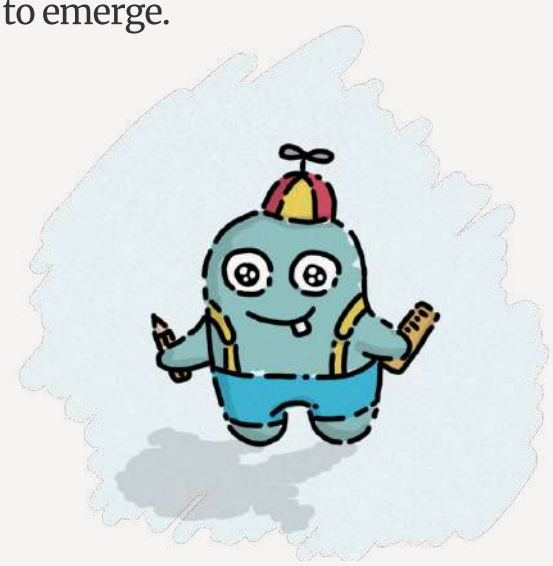
Without UX, a company produces experiences conceived by business and built by developers. It doesn't take users into account, which leads to creating a product that is hard to use, difficult to learn and not useful at all.

User experience design makes both business and technology look at their product through the lens of users' needs. **Taking users into account helps both business and technology to solve the right problem in the right way and produce the true value.**



Level 2: Limited UX Design

The second stage assumes that people who are interested in UX design make random UX efforts. Someone is proactive — a leader who believes it's time for user-centered design or a product team that tries using UX methods, or some dedicated UX specialists who start to emerge.



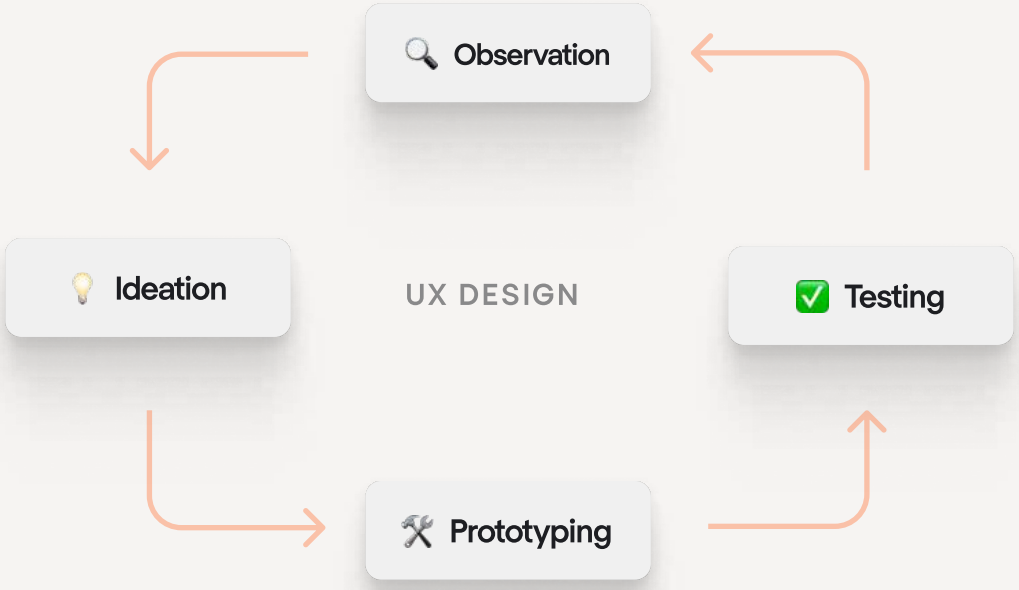
Signs to tell you're on Level 2:

- Design is tactical and non-routine.
- Somebody gets some little funding for research but is not quite sure how to use it.
- UX is positioned as an advisory or consultant role: "We need to build it now, we will UX it later."

To get to the next level, focus on building UX processes. Your aim here is to **support the private UX initiative with some applied knowledge and work on making design deliverables more routine.**

Four stages of UX design

UX design process consists of **four stages: observation, ideation, prototyping testing.** Those four stages are iterative, the cycle repeats over and over bringing you closer to the desired outcome with every cycle. Now let's examine each activity separately.



Stage 1: Observation 🔍

The observation phase is a way to deal with the uncertainty that is inevitable at the onset of any project. To beat the uncertainty, you're googling, doing field studies and qualitative interviews to collect and analyze information about the audience and intended market. The result of this step is determining design requirements.

Note that traditional measures of people such as age, education, and income are not always important. What matters here are the activities people perform, and how those activities are influenced by environment and culture.

Methods that come into play at the stage of observation:

- Requirement gathering
- Field study
- Diary study
- User interview
- Stakeholder interview
- Persona building
- User journey mapping

Stage 2: Idea generation 💡

Once design requirements are ready, the next step for a design team is to brainstorm potential solutions. The idea of brainstorming is simple yet genius: to avoid the fear of a blank page, we just start throwing random ideas to generate something new out of the boiling pot.

Note that traditional measures of people such as age, education, and income are not always important. What matters here are the activities people perform, and how those activities are influenced by environment and culture.

Brainstorming principles:

- Everyone has to be heard, not only the ones who speak louder
- There are no “silly” ideas — be creative with no regard to constraints.
- There are no “silly” questions — questioning obvious things you can find hidden imperfections (and fix them)
- The more ideas, the better
- The more diverse the ideas are, the better

Stage 3: Prototyping 🛠️

Time to turn ideas into prototypes! Prototypes are a quick way to test your assumptions with real people.

Turn each potential solution into a prototype. At the early stage of a design process, prototypes can be pencil sketches, PowerPoint slides, cardboard models, or whatever can simulate the user experience of the big powerful system you're going to build.

Stage 4: Testing ✅

If your ideas make you do the wrong thing or a right thing but in the wrong way, this stage is your chance to figure things out. Testing gives the feedback you need to iterate on the prototype. Then you'll test it again, and then again, and then...you get it.

You only need up to five people to participate in a test — that's enough to give major findings. Study each person individually, ask them to operate the prototype, and comment on their actions aloud.

Methods useful at the testing stage:

- Usability testing
- Accessibility evaluation
- Benchmark testing

Level 3: Emergent UX Design

In stage three, UX is still pretty tactical and often considered an advisory function, but design routines start to emerge. The danger here is to get stuck thinking “we are doing enough UX work” when you are doing occasional user interviews or a usability test once a year. UX processes are very fragile, and not the companies’ priority.

Signs to tell you’re on Level 3:

- UX processes are not viable or automatic. Take away your best UX person, and everything will fall apart.
- As soon as that’s time to tighten belts, UX is the first department to suffer.
- The design capabilities are disproportionate to engineers: "We have 5 tech teams ready to build. We know you haven’t done discovery yet, but we need them to work on something.”

To get to the next level, grow up your UX team to cement up design successes and build them on.

Define what you expect each team member to do

To get the product design team structure right, you must understand what tasks and deliverables you expect them to deliver.

Think about the product or service you are developing and the skills needed to successfully build the product. Create a list of needs and prioritize them.

Then it becomes clear who you'd need to hire to solve some specific issues.

Possible roles in a design team

UX designer

Provides a consistent and intuitive user experience across all products.

Product designer

The duties of product designers are quite similar to UX designers, but except for user experience, product designers also make the great focus on the company's business goals.

Copywriter/UX copywriter

With the help of their writing skills, they help the user easily reach their goal, find a solution to their issue, and quickly navigate through the app.

🎨

Visual (UI) designer

They develop visual concepts based on the creative brief and turn them into layouts (choose and order images, colors, typography, and so on) of design projects.

🔭

UX researcher

Identifying users' needs, design objectives, create a plan on how to reach them, conduct research (user interviews, usability testing, A/B testing), and analyze the results.

✊

UX lead

Mentors other designers communication with the whole team, presents their thoughts and ideas to the company's leaders, and makes sure the project moves in the right direction.

A strategy for those who don't like waiting

Everything we've discussed above works great, but such a strategy is suitable for those who are ready to patiently and steadily adhere to a long-term plan. But what if you have a limited time frame or it's not profitable for you to hire an in-house team and train them?

In such a situation, think of an alternative like hiring Eleken UI/UX design agency. Our working model is nothing like you know about design agencies. We have cut out project managers, intermediaries, and other hurdles in the way of effective communication. You hire designers, and designers take roots in your product team as if they've always been there.

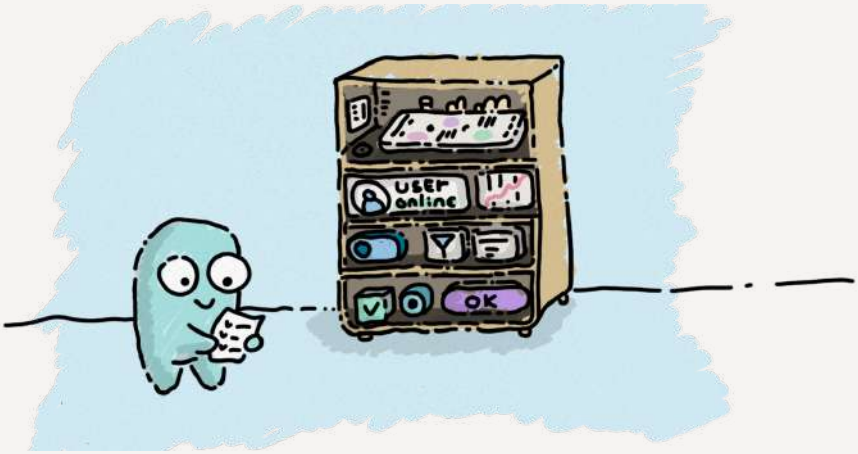
Opting for Eleken you:

- Won't have to take care of the hiring process, as we've already got the best talents in our team.
- Will be able to change the number of designers when needed.
- Will communicate directly with designers without paying additionally for the manager's hours.
- Won't have to pay sick leaves, insurance, and so on.

Level 4: Structured UX

The design mechanism has been set in motion. UX specialists are doing usability testing, engineers see the value of testing, and ask researchers for more. UX team grows to fill the designer to engineer gap.

Designers get embedded in product teams. The role of UX design finally moves from an advisory to "oh, it makes sense to have a designer involved from the beginning till the end."



Signs to tell you're on Level 4:

- The need for greater UX specialization emerges
- A growing product's inconsistencies trigger conversations about creating a design system
- UX is still about research and validation of what a product team does, not about identifying new problems to be solved

To get to the next level, grow up your UX team to cement up design successes and build them on.

Bring your design mess to control

A UX design system is a collection of standards to manage scaling companies' design. The design system reduces redundancy by creating a shared visual language across different pages and channels.

Design systems offer two major advantages that are worth your efforts. Those are velocity and quality.

First, building a design system, you get a unique opportunity to solve each design challenge once (instead of every time it comes up) and make the solution available to anyone in the team.

Second, a pattern library that a design system possesses enables a better user experience — especially for large companies. Usability and learnability improve when similar interface components look and function in a similar way.

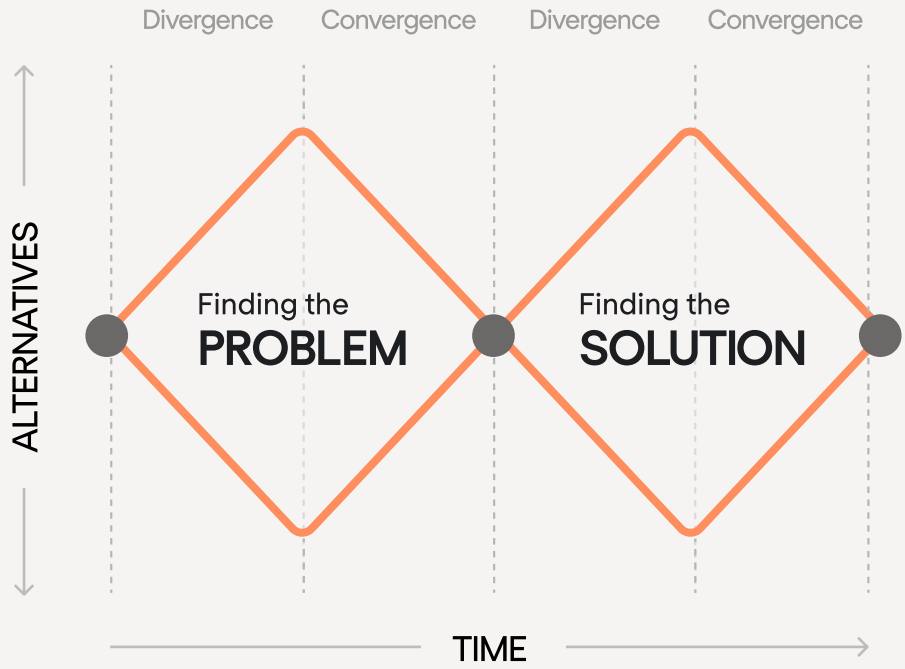
How to build a design system

To design system architecture for UX, we recommend moving from the simplest reusable UI components to complex design system patterns:

 Atoms	In interface design, it's the smallest building blocks like labels, inputs, or buttons.
 Molecules	Here we speak about groups of UI elements that work together as a unit. For instance, an input plus a button make up a search form molecule.
 Organisms	Those are more complex design structures that consist of atoms and molecules. Like, a website header that includes our search form, plus brand identifier and navigation links.
 Templates	Here we come to page-level objects that incorporate all the previous levels into a skeletal layout, for example, a wireframe of a homepage.
 Pages	Pages add some meat to the bones of interface templates. In the case of a homepage, it can be text and images added into a template to look at the real content in action. Pages can be used to test them or to align ideas with stakeholders, for instance.

Discover UX design's strategic function

UX design is capable of more than validating your assumptions. It has tools to break through the fog of uncertainty at the frontier of knowledge. In other words, designers are people who can find innovations and pave the company's development path. **The double-diamond design model shows how it works.**

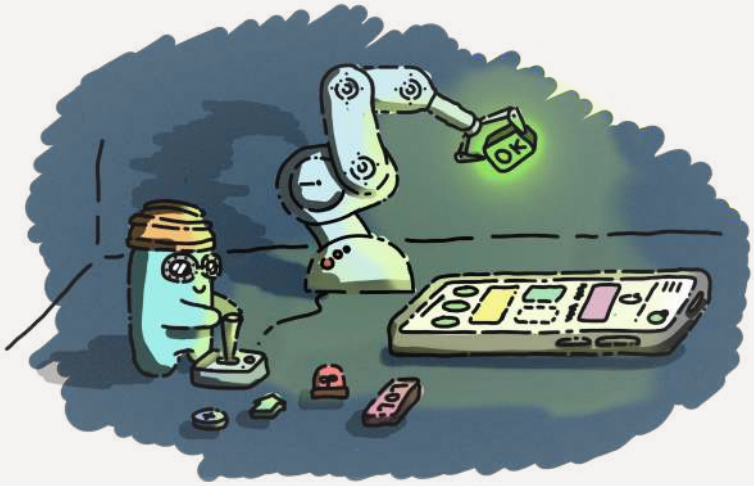


The **first of two diamonds is about finding the right problem.** Designers apply here all their methods of generative research to discover problems the audience has. And not just one problem, but many. Then designers use their testing toolkit to narrow the list of supposed problems down to one that matters most.

That's where we enter the **second diamond, dedicated to finding the right solution** to the chosen problem. Again, designers diverge when brainstorming possible solutions and then test prototypes to determine one best solution.

Level 5: Integrated UX

It's the point when UX goes up to the strategic level. Executives say "UX team, you're invited to the big decisions table." But those new strategic functions yet messy and need formalization.



How to say you're in Level 5:

- UX is a part of a development process, schedules, goals and objectives.
- All the teams perform UX activities effectively — the organization has standard processes and tools used for research and design.
- The company may get too focused on metrics that are not user-centered.

To get to the next level, integrate UX design metrics into your company.

Main types of UX metrics

Generally, we divide design KPIs into two types: behavioral and attitudinal. Attitudinal metrics focus on what users think and say about your product, while behavioral ones focus on customers' direct interactions with your product.

Behavioral metrics

Pageviews is an engagement metric that shows the number of pages the user has viewed on your site over a time period. It shows if your users are interested in some content on the website, or vice versa have trouble finding certain information.

Time per task. Determines how long it takes for the user to complete the task. To get the average TPT score we add the results of each respondent and divide it by the total number of respondents. In most cases, the shorter it takes for the customer to succeed, the better UX your product offers.

$$\frac{User\ 1 + \ldots + User\ n}{total\ respondents}$$

Task success. Shows the percentage of customers who have successfully completed a specific task (for example, complete the profile, fill in the billing information).

$$\frac{completed\ tasks}{total\ attempts}$$

Error rate. Shows how many times users enter incorrect information (make mistakes while completing the task). It allows you to understand how user-friendly your product is.

$$\frac{errors\ number}{total\ attempts}$$

Bounce rate. Shows how many times users enter incorrect information (make mistakes while completing the task). It allows you to understand how user-friendly your product is.

Attitudinal metrics

SUS (System Usability Scale) — s based on a survey that aims at evaluating the ease of use of a site or product. The survey consists of 10 questions, which the user should answer with a score from 1 to 5 (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

The system usability scale

Standart version

	1	2	3	4	5
1. I think that i would like to use this system frequently.	○	○	○	○	○
2. I found the system unneccessary complex.	○	○	○	○	○
3. I thought the system was easy to use.	○	○	○	○	○
4. I think that i would need the support of a technical person to be able to use the system.	○	○	○	○	○
5. I found the various functions in this system were well integrated.	○	○	○	○	○
6. I thought there was too much inconsistency in this system	○	○	○	○	○
7. I would imagine that most people wold learn to use this system very quickly.	○	○	○	○	○
8. I found the system very awkward to use.	○	○	○	○	○
9. I felt very confident using the system.	○	○	○	○	○
10. I need to learn a lot of things before I could get going with this system.	○	○	○	○	○

CSAT (Customer Satisfaction) — gives you a general idea of how users feel about your product, or it can provide you with more detail on specific features or stages of the customer journey. Typically, the CSAT is based on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied) and asks a question **"How satisfied are you with the service/app?"**.

To calculate the percentage of satisfied users, **divide the total number of satisfied users (those who voted 4 or 5)** by the total number of respondents and multiply by 100.

$$\textit{Satisfied users (\%)} = \frac{\textit{Satisfied users (total)}}{\textit{Total number of respondents}} \times 100$$

NPS (Net Promoter Score) is good to find out if users tend to recommend your product, app, or website based on their experience.

To track the NPS you need to ask users only one question: **How likely are you to recommend this service/app/website to your friends and colleagues?**
Users put the score from 1 to 10, where one stands for "not at all likely" and ten means "very likely".

According to the results, we divide users into three categories: detractors (those who put from 1 to 6 points), passives (7-8), and promoters (9-10). And calculate the NPS by subtracting the percentage of detractors from promoters.

NPS = Promoters % - Detractors %

Level 6: User-driven corporation

UX is in everyone's DNA. Understanding user needs through research is the primary driver of the organization's strategy.

How to say you're in Level 6:

- You're dealing with a mature company, growing in complexity.
- You have a structured UX team that grows within clear career paths.
- UX informs product and business strategy.

To get to the next level, integrate UX design metrics into your company.

Companies on stage six should be aware that they can move downwards the maturity ladder just like they moved upwards. Focus on keeping the momentum of the UX effort to prevent the company from falling back.

Some resources for further UX investigation

Websites and blogs

- **Eleken's blog** ↗ — the book of wisdom and gags for product owners interested in UX.
- **Nielsen Norman Group website** ↗ — world leaders in research-based user experience and the guys who came up with the UX maturity model and some other iconic stuff.
- **UX Myths website** ↗ — the collection of common misconceptions about UX so that you build your product based on evidence, not false beliefs.
- **31 UX Fundamentals** ↗ — super-viral UX lessons that later became a book from O'Reilly.
- **ReallyGoodUX** ↗ — UX design best practices curated for your inspiration.

Other Stuff

- **Eleken's Instagram** ↗ — your dose of UX microlearning.
- **99% Invisible podcast** ↗ — a field guide to the hidden world of everyday design.
- **Growth.Design** ↗ — product tips in a comic book format you'll love.

Books

- **The Design of Everyday Things** by Don Norman
- **Inspired: how to create tech products customers love** by Marty Cagan
- **Don't Make Me Think** by Steve Krug
- **Change by Design: How design thinking transforms organizations and inspires innovation** by Tim Brown
- **Just enough research** by Erika Hall

By reading this eBook (or even skimming, you lazy!) you passed a crash course on how to be a perfect Eleken client.

Now we really need to talk →

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