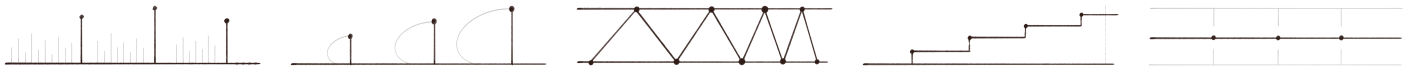
Rethink Product Development

Product development has digitised faster than it has transformed.

AUTHORS

Matthew Harrison · Jonathan Geffen · Nick Lieven



01 — DIRECTION 02 — JUDGEMENT 03 — EVIDENCE 04 — DEMAND 05 — GLUE

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN SEYMOURPOWELL AND AUTODESK

AUTODESK

Everything's changing, but what does it mean?

What a moment we live in. As product developers, it's exciting – also scary – to see the future being shaped by AI. It's also crystallised something for us beyond AI. That is, **our tools have advanced so rapidly and now the way we work needs to catch up.**

At Autodesk and Seymourpowell, we've been having the same conversations with practitioners across our networks: comparing notes on how we're using AI, exploring new capabilities, sharing hopes, bemoaning fears, building a picture of what it all means. We decided those conversations would be most useful out in the open, so over the past 18 months we've been hosting a series of round tables with physical product developers to discuss and reshape **what best practice now means.**

The observations and insights presented here aim to make those conversations broader. **We want to spark discussion across the physical product development industry and build a critical mass of practitioners** – a space where we can discuss in real terms how we're shaping the future of product development.

We're starting by sharing five mindsets that have emerged from our conversations so far. These are ways of thinking that we've observed across companies like Amazon, Google, Samsung, PepsiCo, Gozney, Brompton, Polaroid, Alessi, Gibson and many more, speaking to physical product practitioners running the gamut from product managers to designers, engineers, manufacturers and marketers.

We hope (nothing is safe with the current rate of change!) these mindsets are bigger than just AI – they tap into deeper truths about what product development work requires and what we can do as practitioners to structure and nurture this beyond the latest AI models.

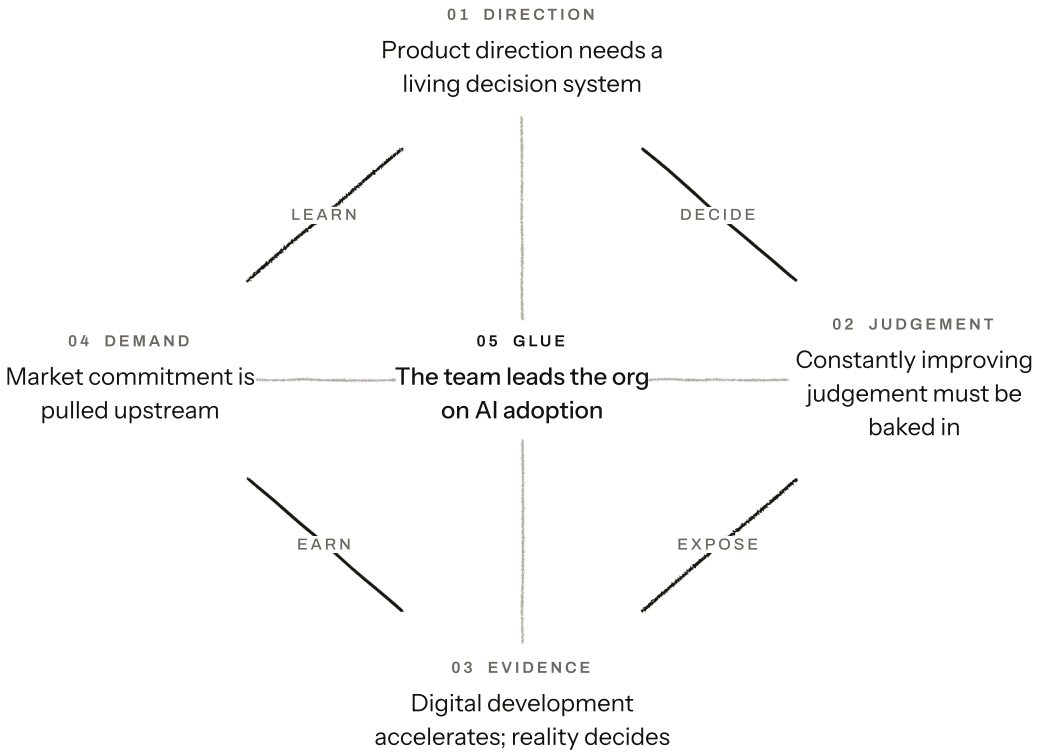
Each mindset is expressed as the challenges we're dealing with today, a vision and framework for the future and practical examples of what we can do now.

We hope it's useful, but more importantly we hope that together it can be a foundation to establish new ways of working. In short, join in. Tell us what you think, share your own experience and push us where there's more to say.

JOIN IN

Join the conversation on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/groups/29290003

Five new ways of thinking set the tone for future best practice



Why "mindsets"? These are fresh ways of approaching work and the new challenges and opportunities that tech is lobbing into the conversation. Rather than just behaviours – the literal response of practitioners – mindsets work a level up. They're the operating principles that define behaviours.

With these mindsets, we saw developers equipped to meet the future. Our conversations went into behaviours too, of course, but behaviours age faster. So think of this not as a 'how to' guide for implementing AI, which would already be out of date, but instead a way to think that can frame where you take your workflows next. AI is the trigger for change, but it isn't the whole scope of it.

Together these mindsets form a system: direction clarifies what we need; judgement determines what's worth pursuing; evidence forges those choices through contact with reality; commitment builds an audience that bolsters our confidence to invest; and in the middle, the glue influences the entire system by changing how humans and AI work together.

Let's dig into them.

MINDSET

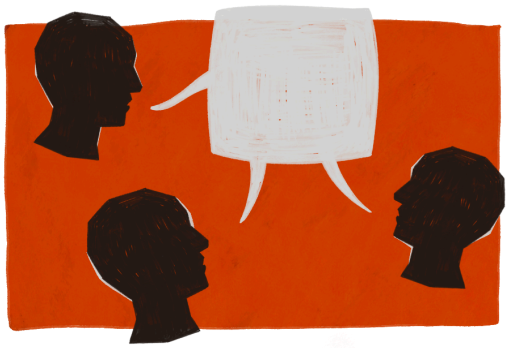
01 Product direction needs a living decision system

Our mindsets start where projects start: with the process of defining what needs to be designed. The way teams set the brief is changing. Here's how...



TODAY

Product definition is becoming more dynamic, making it harder to stay on top of.



FUTURE

Product definition becomes a living reference for making real-time choices, which sharpens through a project – AI makes the complexity controllable.

TODAY'S REALITY

"PRDs are like a war zone! AI has weaponized every stakeholder."

ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANT

Perhaps there was an ideal once that the brief and product requirements were fixed points of reference – the goal to aim for. For the product leaders in our conversations, that's clearly not the case. The goal posts move, yet our systems often aren't designed for this.

> ## "A requirements doc is our best thinking on day one, not our final answer."
>
> YALE SHAW, VERKADA

Product definition is becoming bigger, more complex, more time-pressured and more dynamic:

01 **More perspectives and voices** now feed into a noisier process as product success depends on a more complex set of factors. There are more subsystems to integrate in smarter products. More stakeholders collaborate across the organisation with faster tools to communicate and multiple channels where their voice is heard (and sometimes hard to find again!). As markets mature, there is also more to get right to cut through, so stand out products must be multidimensional. Those that make a lasting impact reflect nuance and substance.

02 **AI multiplies the volume of information and competing concepts.** "People can produce 50 pages of research in a second or two," our product leaders point out. Stakeholders from every team can bring superficially complete AI visuals to the start of a project. We have more information and more choice, but bloat creates indecision.

03 **Accelerating markets** can change the brief faster than product development can meet it. As Andrea Pedulli of Alessi says, "the market is going very, very fast and we are slower. We take a couple of years to develop something that maybe in a couple of years is already old. But we need to protect the time to make something good." As hardware, software, business and culture move at different speeds, it's hard to cater to them all with the same development timelines.

04 **Better ways to learn** help us crunch through implications faster, bringing clarity earlier, when it can have a bigger influence. Whereas a bill of materials or a lifecycle assessment might have come late in a process before, when changes are expensive, modern tools help pull this information sooner. As more areas of information are automated, the potential is to know much more, sooner.

THE TENSION

The problem is not that product definition changes as it responds to more information, but changes make it harder to govern – particularly if our systems treat the brief as a fixed point. **Product definition must become more open to learning without becoming less capable of deciding.**

We need new ways to manage a fluid process with clear authority.

FUTURE VISION

The future of product definition is neither a fixed brief nor an endlessly editable document.

Product definition becomes a **sharpening, living reference for making real-time choices** as the challenge is clarified. AI makes the complexity controllable.

Imagine making decisions, fully furnished with the relevant context. Or being able to weigh up the implications of different choices in an instant. Instead of change becoming more expensive as a project evolves, the truth is brought to light earlier.

FUTURE FRAMEWORK

In this vision of a living decision system that's front-loaded with rich information, there are three key roles to support decision makers:

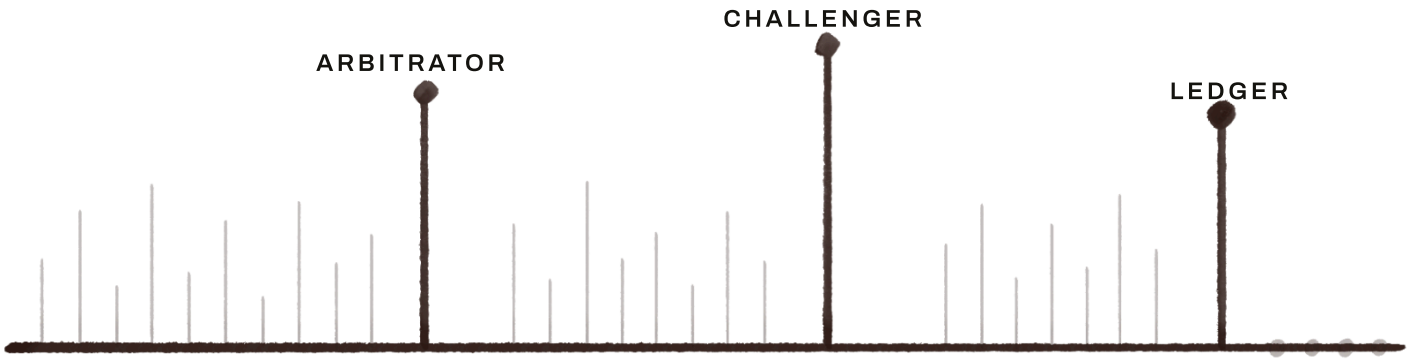


Fig. 01 — Expanding inputs, tightening decisions. Three system roles resolve a noisier field of information into explicit, recorded choices.

ARBITRATOR	The system as arbitrator compresses requirements to their simplest form and turns competing ideals into explicit choices. More voices can be heard without the price being confusion.
CHALLENGER	The system as challenger identifies gaps, pushes for sharper definition, ensures brand consistency and keeps requirements fresh by pulling in the latest market information.
LEDGER	The system as ledger tracks decisions and progress so that: choices are supported with their backstory of logic, expertise and evidence; knock-on effects are made visible and communicated to those they affect; and progress is shown in real-time as requirements are met. Contributors have a clear sense of what has been achieved and what is still to do.

Working with this system, a streamlined body of decision-makers takes the final call. As clear options are presented, they balance logic, expertise, evidence, time and cost to decide. While inputs expand, the system helps tighten decision-making.

> **"We've completely changed the processes from a stage-gate process to one that's more fluid with less people involved in the decision making."**
>
> TRISTIAN THORNHILL, ROBERTS RADIO

NEXT

Ask

- What systems, processes and documents do we currently use to track product requirements? Are they rigid or dynamic?
- How do our systems ensure the chain of thought behind decisions doesn't get lost?
- How do we keep product requirements ahead of market changes?
- How are we tracking progress against the brief?
- How do we resolve conflicts and trade-offs early?
- When requirements update how do we know who's affected and how are team mates informed?
- How do we balance responsiveness with clear commitment? Can well-informed decisions be made quickly?

Try

Ensure decision-making cut through. Make explicit who can contribute and who ultimately decides so that broader participation does not become decision-by-committee.

> PepsiCo does this with a biweekly DreamCo session where decisions are made. Bravery and openness are encouraged. One pod openly said it had selected the wrong job-to-be-done and was given permission to go backwards and recalibrate rather than force the project through the gate. Early decisiveness and quick escalation saves later pain.

Trial AI as an arbitrator. Use it to consolidate requirements and manage coherence. Task it with streamlining requirements and exposing contradictions, which decision-makers can then discuss and settle.

Use AI as a challenger. Ask it to stress test requirements, connect them to evidence, highlight key assumptions and suggest where requirements could evolve to deliver a more modern product that achieves your goals.

> Many of us have wished we could help our organisations see the value they're missing. Virgil Abloh was a new style of collaboration for Alessi. The impact he could have stretched their usual ways of thinking about who to partner with. But the collaboration had a huge cultural impact, changing how a younger streetwear audience perceived Alessi and leading a broader brand renewal. Set up well, the challenger role should help the sense in new thinking shine through.

Organise the information that will underpin an AI-enabled ledger. For each requirement, start to maintain a history and summary that eventually grows to include its logic, evidence, assumptions, owners, dependencies and commitments. Lay the foundations for moving to a smarter, adaptive decision system.

> Ring/Blink track their decision history in Confluence. Functions review Product Requirement Documents weekly, vote yes/no and record why; the reasoning remains attached as the programme progresses.

MINDSET

02 Constantly improving judgement must be baked in

If the decision system described in our first mindset gives developers a clear framework to guide a project, then good judgement is needed to navigate it in our second mindset.



TODAY

Our tools are becoming so good that they're making us passive – judgement isn't sharpened as it was before.



FUTURE

Judgement becomes a capability and an energy that organisations actively develop.

TODAY'S REALITY

"An output might take 20 seconds to generate, but recognising if it's good takes 20 years to learn."

ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANT

Roles are shifting from production to curation. In the old model, the process of thinking through and working out a problem helped us build our picture of 'good'. Released from the hard work of development, our judgement isn't sharpened as before. Yet as output increases, evaluation is now the game.

Our tools are becoming so good that they're making us passive. Things find us, rather than us finding things. AI gives us the 'truth', rather than us discovering our own. Details are generated rather than considered. Everything is better but all the same.

Developers recognise the threat of atrophy and worry about the learning mechanisms that we're losing, but this needs a wide-ranging response to correct and few have yet cracked it.

> **"I'm still leaning on the foundations of my education to make informed decisions about whether something that's come out of AI is any good. Is it usable? Is it going to help me move this thing forward? Even the simple act of doing a sketch gives us context about how that product might be constructed. AI can wipe out context very, very quickly."**
>
> GUY NEWSOM, NUSO PRODUCT CONSULTING

At the same time, increasingly polished presentation makes it harder to discern true quality. Outputs produced without expertise can be hypnotic. They just look so good! We need judgement now more than ever.

> **"With a lot of the AI, you churn and churn and churn because you can and it's so easy… you've created something that looks good, but it's shallow."**
>
> RYAN TATE, RYAN TATE DESIGN

THE TENSION

An abundance of choice scrambles our conviction. At the same time, it creates more need for it. But how do we continue to sharpen judgement when our tools make us more passive? As AI offers more answers, it's on us to ask better questions.

We need to keep energy, curiosity and genius alive.

FUTURE VISION

If today's paradigm is to retain critical thinking, the future is about reinforcing it. Judgement becomes a capability and an energy that organisations actively develop.

In a world of ballooning choice, judgement is our point of control.

By sharpening judgement, we make better decisions again and again, compounding our edge.

FUTURE FRAMEWORK

Imagine moving from a process where judgement is developed through production, to one where it comes alive through critique. You're probably already on this journey. There are three stages in particular where good judgement must be cultivated.

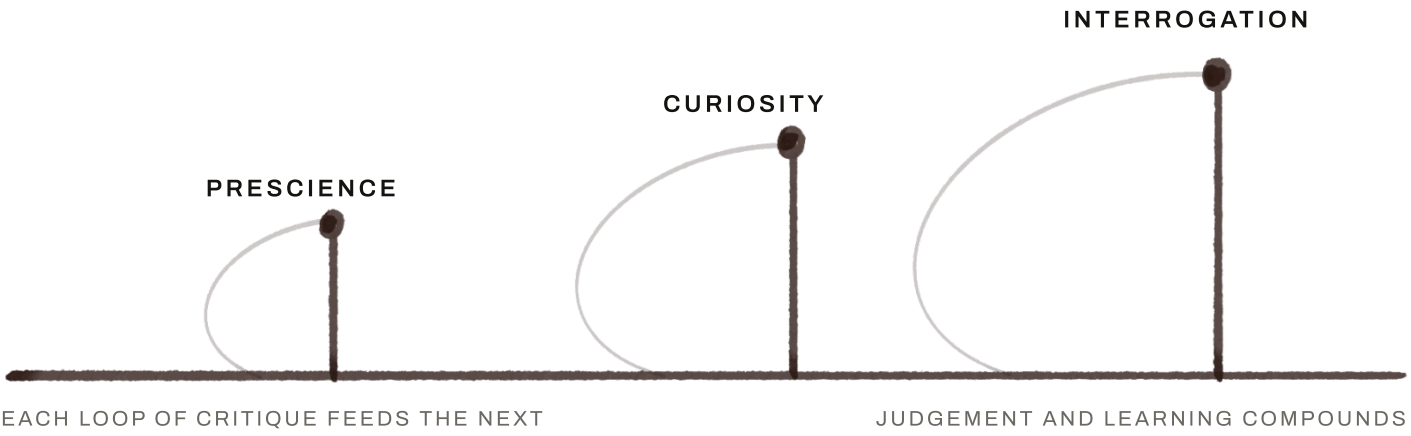


Fig. 02 — Judgement as a rising line. Three stages, each returning what it learns to the process behind it.

PRESCIENCE	Preloading and prompting the process with a sense of good. By stating what we think and feel 'good' looks like, we can compare expectations with results and learn from the difference.
CURIOSITY	Submitting to challenge, seeking out difference and expertise, listening and self-critiquing, trying another way. This is how we grow. As Richard Walzer of PepsiCo puts it, "You can have too much experience. 'We've done that, we've tried that, it doesn't work' - that approach can stifle new thinking. Having that little bit of naivety is really critical."
INTERROGATION	Gathering as a team to stress-test outputs alongside other experts, sorting substance from slop. Pushing at the strengths and weaknesses of an idea reveals the edges of 'good' to us. By doing it with others, we can see what they see too.

Across all three of these stages, our understanding of quality becomes tuned through feedback loops of critique. By surfacing expertise throughout the process and creating shared moments, we can learn from others and socialise good judgement. The goal is a system that evaluates while also improving our ability to evaluate.

> **"Our main mission is to defend the capacity to judge… use AI as a companion, tool, agent, but with judgement. Do not outsource your mind."**
>
> ANDREA PEDULLI, ALESSI

NEXT

Ask

- How are we improving our judgement? What deliberate action are we taking?
- How do younger team members hone their judgement differently? What can we learn from each other?
- Are we creating feedback loops and social moments for judgement at all three stages (prescience, curiosity and interrogation)?
- How do we treat decision-making and critique as a learning opportunity?
- Where in particular is judgement suffering? Are we relying on judgement that was formed from tasks we no longer do?
- What are we happy to outsource and what must we retain?

Try

Define quality before generating outputs. Agree what good looks like, the criteria that matter, the references to draw from and the trade-offs the team is willing to make before producing. Keep track of this thinking too. By making this a deliberate act, it can become more of a learning opportunity: it's easier to share with others; and it gives us a reference point we can come back to and see how thinking changed and why.

Protect exposure loops. Ensure developing practitioners still encounter users, materials, manufacturing, prototypes, critique and failure rather than learning only through digital or AI-generated outputs.

> At Roberts Radio, pure acoustic clarity is not the brand's target, they're looking for a warmer sound. Experienced colleagues – the 'Golden Ears' – are used to discriminate nuances in audio that less experienced colleagues cannot reliably hear. The sensation they're looking for is contextual and human, understood through years of listening. We all have 'Golden Ears' equivalents in our organisations who we can learn from.

Make expert reasoning visible. When experienced people approve or reject an option, capture why. Use critique as a mechanism for transferring judgement rather than only reaching a decision.

> Team interrogation sessions can be a good way to expose critique and transfer judgement. At Energy Company, the team use multiple loops of agents to generate and advance ideas. They then come together as a team in interrogation sessions to pool expertise from different functions and drill into which ideas have merit, what can and can't work and why.

Make consequential decisions learnable. Record what the team expected when making an important choice and revisit it once real evidence arrives.

MINDSET

03 Digital development accelerates; reality decides

If the previous mindset emphasises that information without judgement is bloat, this mindset acknowledges that judgement without lived evidence is merely opinion.



TODAY

Development is shifting into increasingly capable digital environments, but pushing us further from the ultimate truth of reality.



FUTURE

Development is not digital or physical, but a faster, more continuous exchange between the two.

TODAY'S REALITY

"If AI has no way to hold a prototype and understand what it's like to physically use, I don't think I'd trust that."

ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANT

As digital environments become increasingly capable and frictionless, it's easier to stay inside them – and harder to justify the messier real-world work of making, handling, observing and testing.

But so much of reality is unencoded. Materials vary. Users behave differently. Suppliers and operators know things that never appear in the model.

The border between real and virtual is shifting. Digital worlds are quickly becoming more realistic. And making is becoming easier, turning digital designs into physical products in garages, not just factories. But there are still major barriers and skill gaps.

One of our developers gave the example of a friend, a relative novice, using AI and a newly purchased CNC machine. They pushed the geometry close to a finished visual, but couldn't get the machine to produce it. The design wasn't feasible without more advanced multi-axis machinery and ultimately an expert had to redesign it.

We also heard the example of a sportswear company using CLO to eliminate garment prototypes. Digital patterns went directly from the model to production. After six months the experiment was stopped because the standard avatar couldn't capture the dynamic differences between real bodies in motion.

> **"Nine out of ten times… there's a huge gap between where the client or design agency thinks the product is and how mature the manufacturer thinks the product is."**
>
> FELIX RIOS, INTRETECH

The danger we heard repeatedly in our conversations is the impression of reality taking the place of reality. We're more easily led to think a thing is more finished than it is and we miss the intricacies and oddities of real human use.

It's not all about the end point either. Reality is more than a final exam for a design to pass. It's the core of how opportunities can be understood and products exist. At Alessi, they refer to designers as "sensors of reality". Immersion in the real world of our users and our products lets us see and feel things that haven't yet been expressed. It hones our instincts and loads us with inspiration.

THE TENSION

Digital development's speed and reach is pushing us further from reality's ultimate truth, but it should bring us closer.

If designers are sensors of reality, how do we stay deeply connected to it?

FUTURE VISION

Imagine a future that is not digital or physical development, but a faster, more continuous exchange between the two.

Together they achieve more. Digital development gives speed and breadth, fast tracking us to the most promising options. Physical development gives nuance and depth, finding inspiration in the quirks of reality and ultimately defining what works.

FUTURE FRAMEWORK

We will go further and faster digitally than ever before – but use that acceleration to spend more time in reality – sooner, more deliberately and more often. The relationships between real and virtual development spaces will grow and merge. But reality will be our gravity.

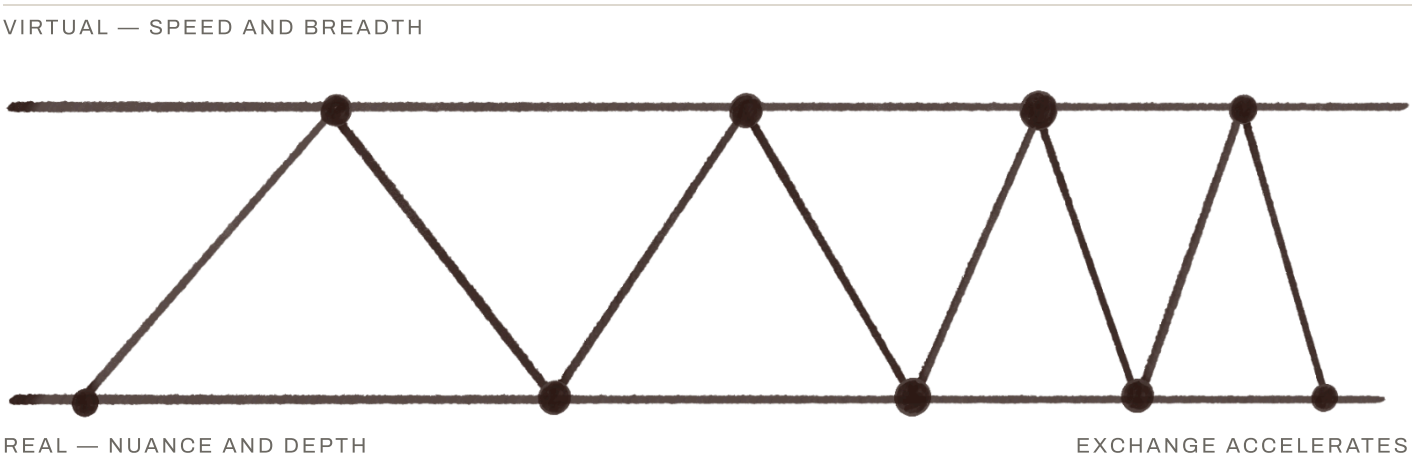


Fig. 03 — Two worlds, one rhythm. Every loop begins and ends in reality; as barriers fall, the crossings come closer together.

01 **Build confidence in reality,** making deliberate effort to accumulate experience and pull in those who have it. There are three elements of reality in particular to stay connected to. User reality – how real human behaviour shapes what we use and love. Manufacturing reality – the processes that make concepts real, their opportunities, limitations and costs. Material reality – how a product exists in space and over time, what it looks and feels like.

02 **Accelerate virtually,** building more realistic visualisations, simulations and rehearsals. We will run these faster, taking us back to reality sooner and wiser. What we learn in the virtual space will help us work better in reality by showing more clearly what to look for and what to avoid. Mapping our hypotheses to real and virtual tests will help us understand this rhythm.

03 **Smooth transition between the two,** moving from sequential phases to parallel worlds, which tasks can flow between. The barriers to production will come down as making catches up with the generative world of AI. Moving the other way, products, forms, experiments and discoveries we make in the real world will be easier to encode to our virtual spaces. As these barriers come down, work will change and iteration will accelerate. Instead of being led by which world we are in, we can be led by the questions we're answering.

At Seymourpowell we've always made fast reality a feature of how we work. That concept has now gone hyper. The future is both digital-first and prototype-first. It is an evidence-led flow, moving seamlessly between worlds to address the next most important uncertainty.

In this system, digital capability accelerates and reality keeps the system honest – while also enriching it. Direct contact with users, materials, manufacturing and environments reveals subtleties that were never encoded in the model and creates the unexpected discoveries and "happy accidents" from which better products emerge.

NEXT

Ask

When and where is reality most valuable? Do we experience this enough?
Do we bring enough reality into our process soon enough? Where have we become overly dependent on digital development?
How can we make engagement with reality more productive?
Where could more realism in virtual development spaces help us? And at what point do virtual spaces come up short?
What new relationships between virtual and real can we play with?

Try

Replace the prototype plan with an uncertainty map. Identify the uncertainties most capable of changing the product direction. Review them at major commitments rather than asking simply whether the next prototype is on schedule.

> As Kemal Dervish of Intretech says, "I think it's going to work – I've got to build and test it and learn something. It cannot be automated theoretically without that happening." The point of the prototype is the learning.

Create reality checkpoints around consequential decisions. Establish recurring encounters with the three forms of reality: user, manufacturing and material. Put something in front of users, expose the product to manufacturers and place the product in a realistic environment.

> Kemal's colleague at Intretech has a theory. "Manufacturing… now I'm starting to see it as a feature, not a bug of the system where product development has to slow down because it takes three months to validate." While we should aim for the lowest-cost encounter with reality capable of resolving the uncertainty at hand, there is a richness to reality checkpoints that often reveals more.

Make prediction versus outcome part of the development record. Compare expectations with outcomes and feed what actually happened directly back into the product definition and digital model to improve its accuracy.

MINDSET

04 Market commitment is pulled upstream

Direction, judgement and evidence can get us to the right product, but 'right' is often not enough. The next mindset stacks the market in our favour by baking in demand.



TODAY

Product development and marketing are merging as products look for new ways to stand out and manage risk.



FUTURE

Developers go beyond just building evidence of interest to building a committed audience.

TODAY'S REALITY

"You can only really protect a product anymore through your brand and loyalty. Companies that are able to generate a community are the strongest."

ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANT

In an age of attention overload, it's hard for any product to standout. Product development and marketing are merging as a result and community-building is now a core foundation that's front-loaded into the approach.

The longer an assumption stays inside an organisation, the more expensive it gets. This doesn't mean we need focus groups, which developers have learnt don't translate to product success. Instead, practitioners are looking for better ways to build user demand into products and establish what will work.

"Sell before you build" has emerged as a way to manage the risk of product cycles groaning to keep up with markets. But leaders in this space are going further – managing risk not just with cash, but with love. When Daisy launched their new headphones, they did it with a small pre-order deposit – not to generate cash, but to find their people and build a committed audience around the product. The implication is bigger than better market research. A strong community and social growth engine are increasingly integral parts of products.

When Gozney gave a glimpse of some new accessories in the background of a pizza-party video, the comments immediately filled with people asking when they could buy them. The products barely existed, but the community did.

> **"We are very community-based. Our biggest sales technique is word of mouth still."**
>
> REBECCA SMART, GOZNEY

THE TENSION

Building evidence is not the same as building an audience.

The opportunity is to build commitment, not just confidence. Confidence comes from having the research 'proof' of interest. Commitment is firmer. It's the fully loaded waitlist, the pre-order book or the community ready to pounce on the next release.

FUTURE VISION

In the future model, our audience is our greatest asset not just a target. The user's role evolves from truth teller to task force, adding social weight to products. The process shifts from closed to open, building in public with our community. Downstream loops with upstream.

The developer's job shifts from "prove this will work" to "get enough people committed that it can't not work."

Rather than balance risk with evidence, we balance internal commitment with market commitment.

FUTURE FRAMEWORK

Commitment is a bigger idea than just co-creation – it doesn't mean handing the development keys over to community. We will earn our audiences' commitment by inspiring them, not extracting from them. The smartest processes will be targeted about when and how to build commitment with four key flavours:

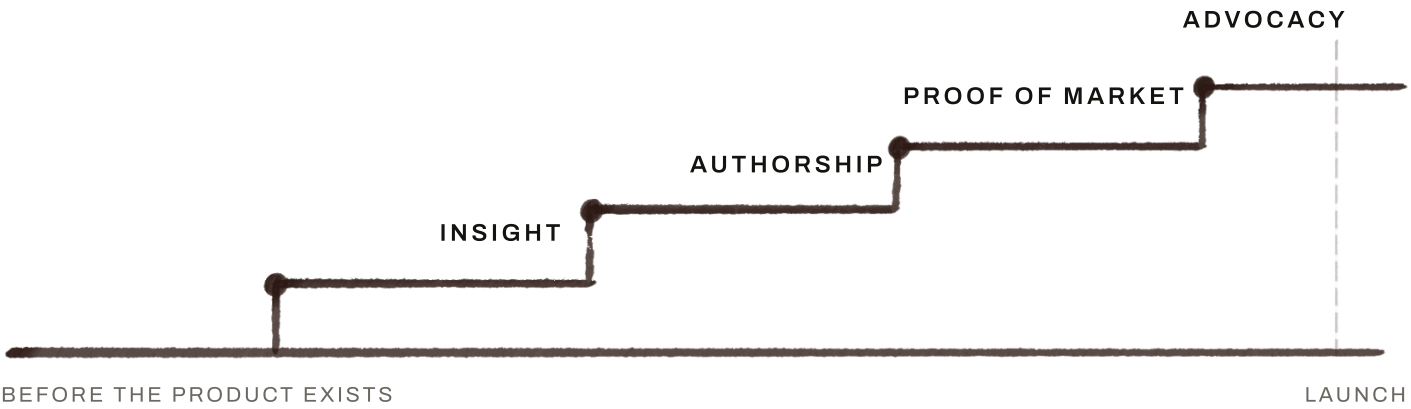


Fig. 04 — Commitment as a rising step. Each flavour is firmer than the last, and the whole staircase is built before launch, not after it.

INSIGHT	Engaging with an audience deeply, being of the culture and knowing what's needed. Commitment cuts both ways and committing ourselves to an audience means we know them inside out.
AUTHORSHIP	Giving community a stake in the product. Building the product together takes the prediction out of development. It also earns the commitment and pride of a partner, not just a customer. The best co-creation models remove guesswork, invite ideas, fold in real usage data and time with products, while still providing leadership and adding delight.
PROOF OF MARKET	Growing a committed audience around the product. Eventually the audience is already there, as with the earlier example we heard from Gozney. The full pre-order book is perhaps the ultimate signal of this.
ADVOCACY	Earning recommendation and support that lifts a product beyond loved to fought-for. Your community's visible passion for the product inspires passion from others too.

The question teams face is when to use each approach. Often this depends on whether it's a new innovation growing with its tribe or an established product reaching a broader audience. The sequence can be increasingly upside down or in parallel, but the pattern is consistent: to build commitment early and to add to the momentum with each product cycle.

NEXT

Ask

- How are we going beyond research into community-building? Are we being real about this or are we just extracting?
- Beyond signals of interest, how do we secure genuine commitment?
- When we work with our community, are we intentional about building commitment, not just engagement?
- What motivation and friction is there for users to commit to our product and community? How can we smooth that?
- What channels are there for a product community, not just a marketing community?

Try

Move one assumption outside the organisation. Identify the biggest commercial assumptions (who will buy, why they will care, what they may pay, how the product reaches them and which behaviours have to change) and highlight one to engage an audience around, replacing internal debate with a real proposition.

> PepsiCo will spin up 'phantom tests' using public ads to build traffic and gauge consumer response to a proposition (comms, branding, flavours, pricing, etc.) ahead of investment, often before product development even starts, to learn about desirability and viability; successful tests then create the proof to move quickly!

Ask for progressively stronger commitment. Move beyond survey preference toward actual behaviour, trialling reservations, deposits, paid pilots, pre-orders or retailer commitments.

> For Sephora's collaboration with Roblox, users participated digitally in designing and voting for a lip-gloss variant. Sephora then quickly manufactured the winner and it became a strong seller.

Start to build twin communities. Build two audiences: your real evangelists, committed to the success of your product; and a digital twin of your customer base who can lighten the load on your evangelists, getting you to sharper questions, ideas and points of engagement. Building each of these communities is the precursor to a blended approach, where each supports the other and commitment goes further.

> Phil Sage shared PepsiCo's experience of trialing synthetic consumers. Virtual communities are built from substantial in-person research and used to explore future scenarios. Where they've proved most useful is as a first step to prime the real user engagement, making it richer.

MINDSET

05 The team leads the org on AI adoption

Our final mindset is the glue between the other four. Each mindset paints a future of an AI-enhanced organisation, but most organisations aren't built to keep up with the pace of change being unleashed.



TODAY

AI adoption is arriving bottom-up, solving personal use cases first. Organisations are struggling to keep up.



FUTURE

The unit of AI adoption is the team, where group productivity gains meet the agility to act.

TODAY'S REALITY

"Everyone in your organisation is already using AI. Nobody can tell you what anyone is actually doing with it."

ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANT

AI is evolving too quickly to be fully prescribed from the top. Instead, adoption is arriving bottom-up and solving personal use cases first.

> ## "Every month, this conversation changes completely."
>
> KYLE EBELING, ORIGIN ACOUSTICS

Inside one company in one week: a designer uses AI to write the brief they were given, an engineer pastes a specification into a personal account because the sanctioned tool is blocked for design data and in a review someone presents work that looks finished and cannot be traced to a person.

Adoption is here, but visibility is missing. Companies describe a shadow AI situation, where individuals use their own tools and subscriptions, often against company policy. Colleagues do not know what others are using AI for, so good practice does not spread and mistakes are not caught.

Individual experimentation alone will never transform product development.

Much of the current adoption effort goes into personal efficiency, but this can come at a cost to others. Too much stuff, too little thought. A 50-page research report is produced faster, but for a receiving colleague it's bloat. A well-detailed report is summarised and consumed quickly, but the nuance is lost. A polished visual is produced with nothing behind it and a colleague loses time resetting expectations and explaining why it can't be done.

> **"It seems wrong at the moment to have it on an individual basis. That's a risky situation. If it's just on an individual basis, things can easily be lost completely."**
>
> TRISTIAN THORNHILL, ROBERTS RADIO

Where organisations respond, it's usually with a rulebook. Cast iron, one-size-fits-all legal positions hold back bigger productivity gains. The technologies and use cases update faster than policy can.

THE TENSION

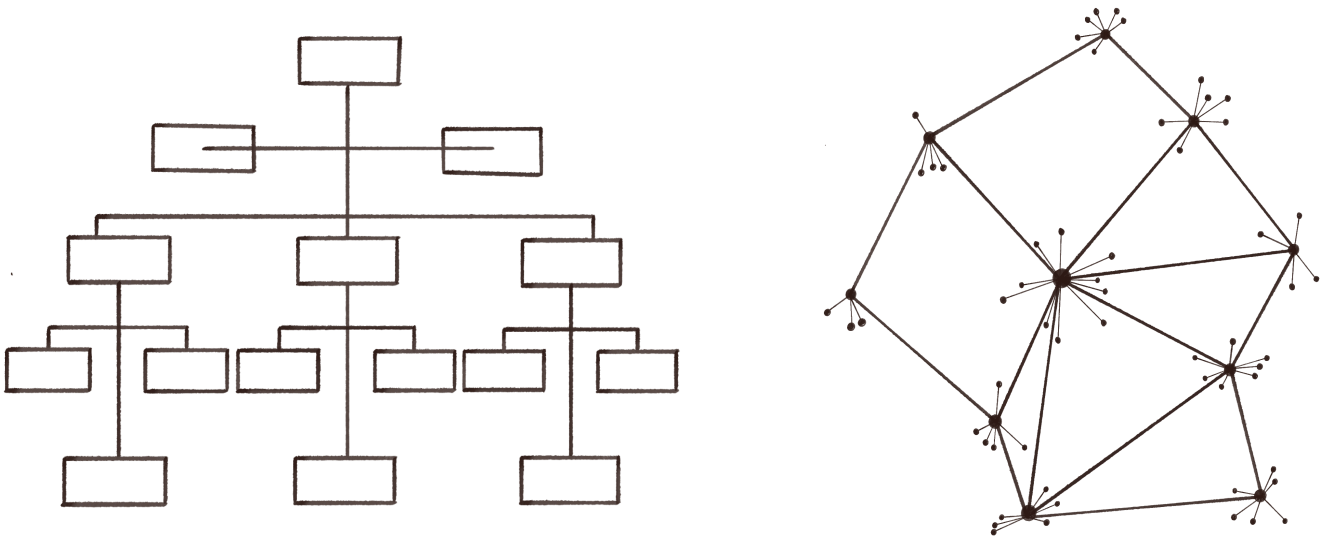
Bottom-up individual adoption and top-down governance both make sense, but neither tells a team how to work. Speed and safety fight against each other, leaving real productivity gains unmade. Teams need to move faster than organisations can keep up and need to have more impact than individuals acting alone.

The leading unit of AI adoption is the team. This is where agility and group productivity come together to have a practical impact. On top of a common foundation of approved infrastructure, data access, security and clear accountability, each team decides which of its own tasks are now machine work and which stay human. The most effective new practices then scale through the organisation.

Treated at the level of the team, AI is more than a personal tool. It becomes part of how the team is staffed and part of its infrastructure. Compared to the organisation, teams are more curious, faster and closer to the work.

We started these conversations with the observation that product development has digitised faster than it has transformed. A team-led approach tackles this fundamental challenge of transformation at pace.

Organisations provide the platform. Individuals raise challenges and ideas. Teams pioneer new practices. A unified AI strategy follows, scaling the ideas that work best.



TODAY — FIXED HIERARCHY
LAYERED, DEPARTMENTAL, SLOW TO REDRAW

FUTURE — NETWORK OF INTELLIGENCE
TEAMS AS HUBS, REDRAWN AS CAPABILITY MOVES

Fig. 05 — From fixed hierarchies to networked intelligence.

Team-led adoption is built on three key components:

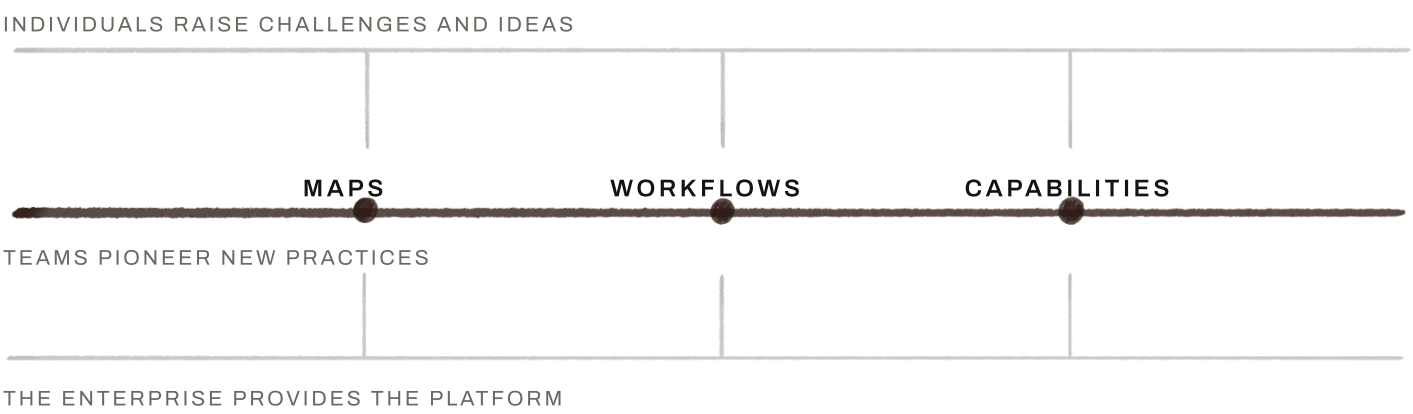


Fig. 06 — The team as the working layer. Three components sit where individual initiative and enterprise platform meet.

RESPONSIBILITY MAPS

Teams show, on one page, how work is divided between people and machines. A new joiner reads that page on day one. As AI capability moves, a team updates its own page rather than waiting for a company-wide process change.

WORKFLOWS

The map redraws the workflow: people and machines working together in loops, not isolated tasks handed back and forth.

CAPABILITIES

The workflow names the capabilities the team actually needs. New tools power up teams led by need, not company diktat; built close to the point of use, they stay shaped by their impact.

None of this needs a reorganisation. One product team, one workflow, one toolkit, frequent reviews. The organisation's role is support.

Many of the product leaders in our organisations have central AI teams, where department leads meet regularly to compare practices and needs. Supported by data scientists and engineers these teams build the infrastructure and shared AI capabilities needed for change.

The enterprise enables. Teams operationalize.

NEXT

Ask

Are we addressing AI at a personal level, team level or organizational level?
Do we have people focused on leading team adoption?
How well are we equipping ourselves with tools and capabilities that make us more productive as a whole, not just as individuals?
Is it clear when we should turn to AI and when tasks should remain our own?
How are we treating AI – is it a tool, a teammate, an entire team...?

Try

Appoint an AI Adoption Lead for one team. That person owns how the team works, not what it ships. They take the lead on mapping responsibilities and developing workflows and capabilities.

> The design team at Taiga is supported by one designer with a particular focus on AI. "In our team, we have a guy very skilled in AI. He works with our IT team to simplify routine and bridge gaps between design and engineering," says Mariia Pokataeva. Together they automate routine parts of the team's workflow. Examples include tracking revisions and automatically updating files in product databases. Or node coding to automate production files in the handover from design to engineering. He's helped dramatically accelerate both the team and the organisation.

Commission one map, for one workflow, in one team. Choose the workflow that team repeats every week, and let the map first record what is already happening. What does the team do and what does AI do? What makes it a discipline is the weekly re-read.

> This is something we do ourselves at Autodesk. In one of the teams we spoke to, the map began as a plain record of one weekly workflow, showing what the machine prepares and what the person decides to do with it. It turned into the agenda for that team's weekly coaching conversation, which is not what anyone set out to build. It spread by use. The map was iterated until it was useful, used until it was habit, and the habit became how the team works. Other teams asked for it once the first had proved it. The manager still re-reads the map every Friday, even in weeks when nothing has changed. "I need people to build the muscle on using that tool," says the manager. One team's experiment is now simply expected, and expected daily by many. None of that is new. Practice has always spread by being proven small and then expanded further. What is new is that a team can build that proof itself, without waiting on another team or on new plumbing.

Ask one question in your next design review: what part of this did AI do? Asked every time and without consequence, the answers tell you more than a survey will, and they belong in the map.

What's next?

The revolution in how we work doesn't stop.

Tech capabilities will race ahead. We need to make them work for the human and use our new powers to develop ever better products that the world needs.

As we each figure things out, there's more value than ever in talking and sharing. Our LinkedIn group is one place to do that. If these notes from our industry have stirred ideas or raised questions then please join in.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

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