

You Are Not Your User

How to create successful digital products

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Word Of Introduction

We all use digital products every day. It makes us think of ourselves as of experts and lets us believe that we know what solutions the world is missing and how we would fill this gap with our great product. And that's probably all true. The problem appears when the real needs of people are not properly tested and there is neither a strategy nor a business model prepared for our revolutionary idea.

The aim of this guide is to make you aware that creating a digital product does not consist mainly of beautiful images and designs, it is much more. As we all perceive the world differently, it is worth to engage users in the product design process from the very beginning. Our goal is to encourage you to do so.

User-Centered Design - Canvas Of Digital Product Design

User-Centered Design is the approach used by successful startups and renowned companies, who knows that building digital products is much more than just graphic design and coding. If you want to win the battle on the market, you need a solid strategy, preparation and effective tools.

User-Centered Design - History

The concept of **designing products or services based on users needs** was introduced in 1986 in the book “User-Centered System Design: New Perspectives on Human-Computer Interaction” by Donald A. Norman and Stephen W. Draper. In this approach, the user perspective should be in the main focus of the whole development process. Why is it so important? Are “UCD,” “UX,” “Design Thinking” just buzzwords? Research and examples of many success and failure stories prove that they are not only popular keywords used to attract customers and investors. This is **a way of working on a product that can bring real benefits.**

The theory behind the **User-Centered Design** (UCD) says that **people will use just two kinds of things: painkillers and that which give them pleasure.** It means that they will be more motivated to pay for the product if:

- it helps them solve a problem (kill a pain) or
- will make them feel good.

Of course, painkillers are more critical than gain creators so clients will reach for them first. Now, let’s do some exercise. Look at all things you have in your home and try

to recall how often you use them. You can do the same task on your mobile phone and look at the applications downloaded to the phone. You will find apps that you use very often and that you have even forgotten about. As a product or business owner, you don't want your product to be fallen between the cracks. The most used and downloaded mobile apps are those which help us in daily tasks such as communication (Messenger, Gmail), transportation (Uber) or searching for information (Google search), etc. All of them can be classified as painkillers. Among popular apps, there are also gain creators such as apps created for entertainment (games, youtube) or support of self-complacency (ex. social media). If you want to create a product that will be successful, you need to address the right need. Do research and find how you can help people and make money on this. If you do this right, they will pay for it.

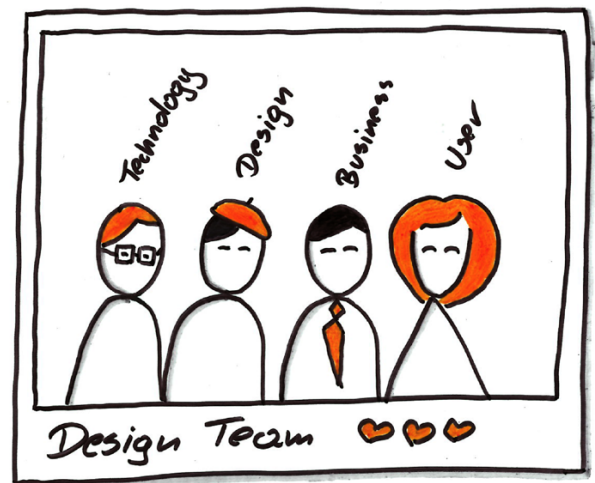
Learn From The Best: Examples Of Products With Great User-Centered Design

Let's look at Apple products as an example. Steve Jobs had a vision where everyone could be beneficent of the technological revolution. He wanted to make computers that could be used by everyone, not only geeks and programmers. That was the origin of personal computers we all use these days. He understood that most people are not tech-savvy and they won't use computers unless technology is more easy to use. In 1984 the Macintosh computer was the very first one that used a graphical user interface and a mouse. It was a real innovation in the world where to operate on a computer you should use textual commands. This was a huge advantage. Another big change was in 1998 when Apple introduced iMacs, fresh, colorful versions of personal computers. Since then the look and feel of technological objects matters. **The success of Apple products was possible because of Jobs understanding of users pains (using a computer was too complicated) and gains (people like to express themselves by the look and possessed artifacts).**

Design Thinking: A Structured Method To Think Outside The Box

Fundamental in the Design Process is **criticism and looking at the problems and solutions from different perspectives**. To achieve this, the right team is needed. IDEO, well-known product development firm, hired people from different disciplines such as design, education, anthropology, engineering, business strategy, psychology, marketing or healthcare. Creation of multidisciplinary teams and introducing Human-Centered Design as well as Design Thinking methodology was their key become the most influential company in the design area.

Design Thinking mentioned above is a creative way of working with projects. It is an approach which focuses on users needs and a collection of workshop tools and methods used to discover solutions. The term was mentioned in 1992 by Richard Buchanan in the book “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking.”



User Experience: When Good Design Pays Off

There is another popular term **The User Experience**. It used to be more and more popular after the publication of “The Design of Everyday Things” by Donald A. Norman. It suggests that design is something more than just creating a form. Designers decisions have an impact on user satisfaction or frustration. This means that **the way the product is designed is one of the product success factors**.

The study conducted by the Design Management Institute revealed that **“Design-driven companies outperform the S&P 500 by 219%”**. Another research, conducted by McKinsey a global management consulting firm proves “a strong correlation between high MDI scores* (*McKinsey Design Index, which rates companies by how strong they are at design) and superior business performance. Top-quartile MDI scorers increased their revenues and total returns to shareholders (TRS) substantially faster than their industry counterparts did over a five-year period—**32 percentage points higher revenue growth and 56 percentage points higher TRS growth** for the period as a whole.”

The impact of the design on the business goals is a fact and the more and more companies that specialized in research, and User Experience design appeared. For many years the importance of hiring agencies or UX specialists was well known, and big companies started to create their UX (Design) Departments or even acquire Design Agencies. According to NEA Future of Design Survey 2017, over 80% of companies reported that they plan to grow their design teams. Eventually, **designers are engaged in strategic planning which proves their significant role in the business**.

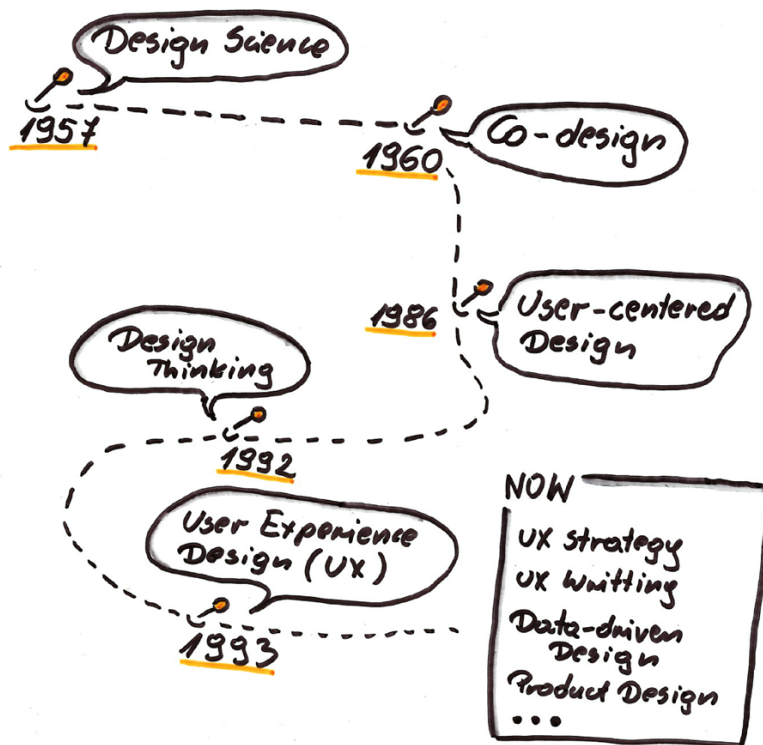
New Trends in User-Centered Design: Cooperation First

Recently, there has been a trend of **close cooperation between designers and engineers**. Why is it so important for project success? When these two are separated, the project and the final result might be very different, and the core solutions might be changed. In the outcome, the product does not comply with expectations.

Formerly, the problem occurred when one company was responsible for the research and design and the other for the development. What we can observe now is the increasing number of product designers in the software houses and even mergers between UX agencies and software houses. This is good news for entrepreneurs because of the lower cost of the whole development from the initial stage of the project — **the better communication between the designers and developers the fewer changes and misunderstandings in the entire process.**

User-Centred Design Helps You Win The Battle

Twenty years ago it was easier to gain users attention — most solutions on the internet were new. If you are the only one who sells water on the desert, people can forgive you the bad taste of it, but when you need to compete with other water sellers, it is essential to create service that will have a competitive advantage that fulfills users needs. To imagine the scale let's look at the numbers. According to Statista.com, there are 2.6 million apps available in the Google Play Store. That is why **launching your new online business, app or just webpage you shouldn't forget about a User-Centred Design because users will choose the winner of that battle.**



Product Design Begins With Business Strategy

The design makes a significant difference in fields such as sales, customer engagement, user retention, brand awareness, company valuation. Hence management consulting and strategy services firms are acquiring design agencies, and big companies increase the number of recruited designers. Have you thought about hiring a designer at the initial phase of product development? If not, this could be your biggest mistake. Let's dig into this topic.

One of the most exciting moments of the interview with a potential client is to hear the story behind the business idea. Sometimes what we hear is: "Our competitors do this, so we need to do this as well," "My boss told me that we need to implement this," "I saw something like this, and I liked it." Fortunately, most of the people can say something more convincing. They talk with passion about their work or hobby and describe how they come up with the idea for a new product or service. But that is not enough to be sure that clients will be so enthusiastic too.

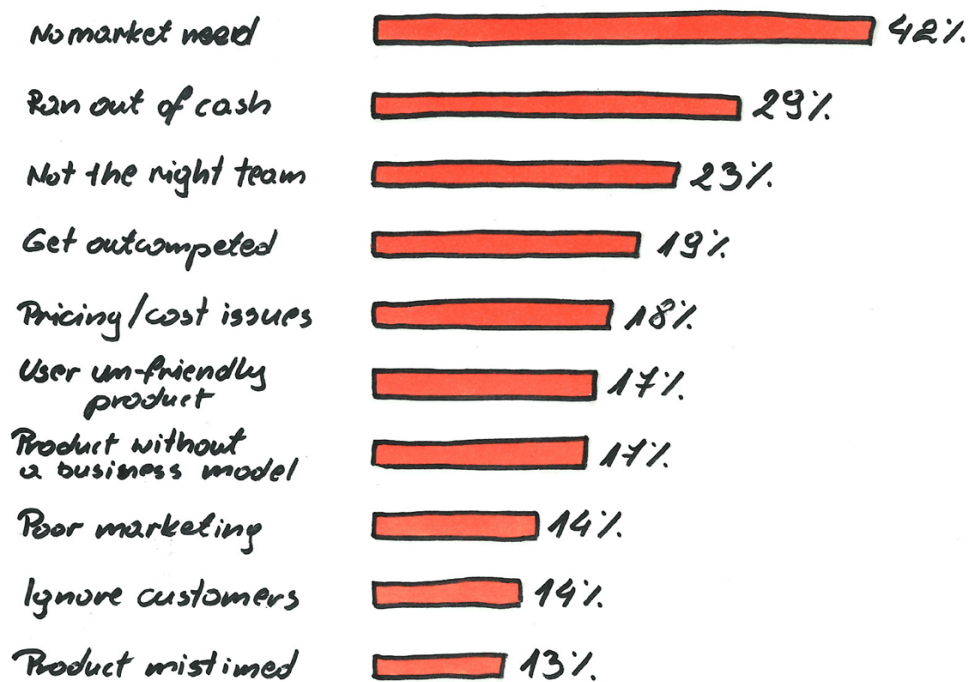
How To Start Designing Your Successful Products?

Got a great idea for an invention but not sure what to do with it? Turn your dream into a marketable product with these crucial factors in mind:

- Target users defined and their needs analyzed
- Product or service is an answer to users problems
- The idea of the product validated with target users
- User experience: Usability of the solution
- Quality of the product is the key (no errors)
- Marketing and sales strategy prepared based on users insight
- Competitive advantage/unique value proposition
- The right time to launch

As an entrepreneur, you should prepare a solid foundation for the project based on an analysis of the product's environment and users. According to CB Insights, the first reason for startup failure is "no market needed" (42%). Next are mentioned "Run out of cash" (29%), "Not the right team" (23%), "Got outcompeted" (19%), "Pricing/Cost Issues" (18%), "Poor Product" (17%), "Need/Lack Business Model" (17%), "Poor Marketing" (14%), "Ignore Customers" (14%). All of them can be eliminated by good preparation and the proper product design process. You should start with a UX strategy, and the User-Centered Design approach implemented from the very beginning of the project.

Top 10 reasons startup fails



Why startups fails?

source: Top 20 Reasons Why Startups Fail, CBINSIGHTS

The very first step is the research and validation of the main idea. This must be done with the target users. You can ask your friends for the opinion, but you can't set up your business based on the polite feedback from people who wish you the best. You need to confront it with those who might use your product or service because your business depends on their choices. The common mistake is the lack of criticism. Usually, entrepreneurs believe that they already know the context and users although they never talked to them and verify their assumptions.

Next, you should investigate competitors and search for other inspiring solutions to find good benchmarks. If you are convinced that there is no competition in the market think

about your potential customers How do they solve their problems now? How could you convince them to change their behavior? Do you plan to compete with other companies or rather find the niche? Each product is developed in different circumstances, that is why you can't just copy solutions from others. You need to tailor the solution to your particular users, time, regulations and other factors related to the location. Your product will be born in a different environment than competitors.

How To Create A Unique Value Proposition That Works?

When you are sure about the whole idea, you can start working on the Business Model. The core element of such Business Model is the Unique Value Proposition. You should be able to give answers to questions such as:

- What value your product will provide to clients?
- Why should they pay for the product?

When you conduct research and do a proper analysis, establishing the Unique Value Proposition will be a piece of cake. When it is defined take care of all the other aspects of your business like costs, revenues, resources, etc. which strongly affect product success.

Successful Product: What Does It Mean?

'The favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors', 'the accomplishment of one's goals', 'The gaining of fame or prosperity' - a lot has been said about success itself. But what? There is no universal answer. In fact, all entrepreneurs should ask themselves such a question before the product is designed.

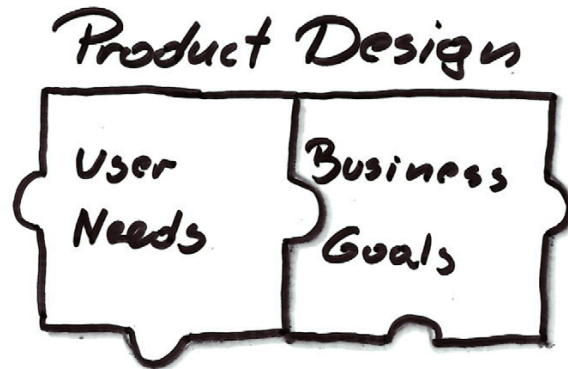
The success should be able to prove, so you will need to establish measurable goals and deadlines possible to reach. For example: after one year from the launch of the beta version, the product will reach 10000 of active users. Having such goals established you will be able to verify the performance of the product after implementation. For all people involved in product creation, this should be a guideline to follow.

Product Design Helps Achieve Business Goals

And here is the crucial point - the product design has to support business goals. Many entrepreneurs confuse The User Experience Design with User Interface Design (graphics). Both are elements of the Product Design but before the final look and feel are created your product needs a good plan and execution. This is a job of User Experience Designers (UX Strategists, UX Architects, etc.). Beside creating prototypes and wireframes designers are responsible for conducting research, making analysis

and usability tests to validate if the current project supports users and business goals. Their decisions have an impact on conversion, site statistics, and user satisfaction. UX is not only about making user-friendly websites, but most of all is about making the products that do their job.

To sum up. **Instead of making a list of functionalities for your product, start with the User-Centered strategy.** Hire the right people who will guide you through the steps of the process. It will make a profit and reduce the risk you take starting a new project.



What Is UX Research And Why It Matters?

Lots of entrepreneurs who plan to design and develop a digital product that will fulfill the true needs of their future customers seem to be convinced of the success of their business idea before they check it on potential users. They sound skeptical when asked about conducting in-depth UX research for two reasons: either they are sure that their product will steal customers hearts, or they claim user experience research is an additional cost on the top of all that important spendings they have to bear.

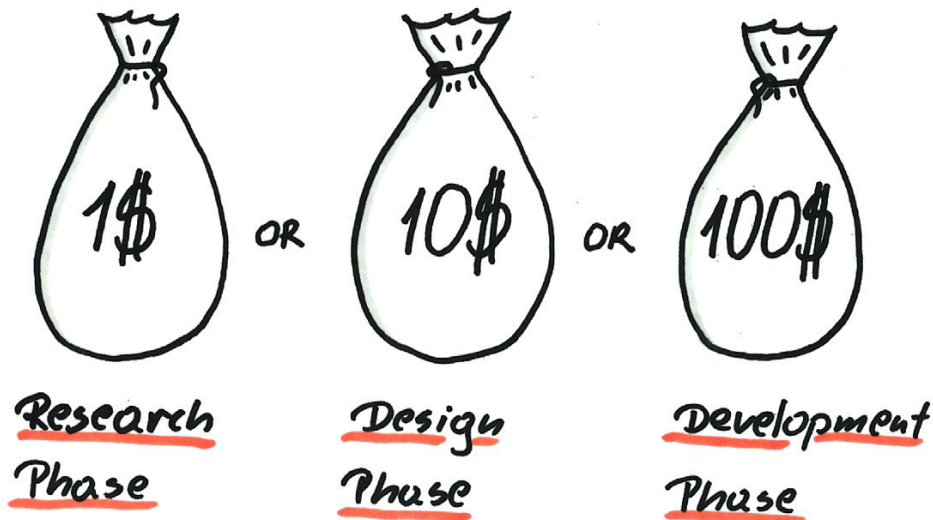
What if the idea for the product itself is wonderful, but it should be organised differently? What if the result of work is not going to be a gem as there are three other, already launched apps similar to our innovation? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to know it before we spend the whole project budget on developing a hair-brained product the improvement of which will generate higher costs than in the beginning?

Building Digital Product: A Magic Rule

There is a 1:10:100 rule in creating a digital product: spend \$1 on research or \$10 to change design or \$100 to change something in development. Prevention is always better than correction not only in terms of money but also tonnes of work done and wasted.

According to IBM studies “the cost to fix an error found after product release was four to five times as much as one uncovered during design, and up to 100 times more than one identified in the maintenance phase.”

Cost of CHANGE\$



IT Project: Cost of Changes

source: Defect Prevention: Reducing Costs And Enhancing Quality, Mukesh Soni

The conclusion of this study is evident: **research is crucial when it comes to discovering real customer needs** and/or pain points as only delivering a product that gives pleasure or helps release pain will make people want it and pay for it.

You Are Not Your User: Learn What Your Users Really Want

Sometimes it is hard to believe how much we all differ as of the internet and applications users. Some of us prefer filtering and sorting, others enjoy fishing out of chaos. Some people like pictures and movies, the others would rather read the plain text. **Do not assume there is one ideal solution to satisfy all humans**; better check the context they would use your product.

A few years ago Samsung¹ conducted in-depth research on their users' preferences. While being focused on perfect sound and high-quality picture in their RD labs, they decided to check how people behave in front of their TVs at home (through ethnographic user studies conducted wide world). Surprisingly they discovered that what their initial assumptions were wrong. It occurred that people accepted decent tv parameters

¹ Interaction Design Foundation: User Research: What It Is and Why You Should Do It, Ditte Mortensen

but above all, they desired TV that fits their furniture and is not a primary item seen when they enter the room. Having this research outcome in mind, Samsung decided to work on flat TVs we are all familiar with. So definitely even having a long history behind the brand does not allow you to claim you know all about the users.

Different Research Methods - How To Choose On Appropriate Design?

It is impossible to point out one good method of how to conduct decent research. It all depends on the project phase and budget, but **even small talk with potential users around you can make a significant difference**. Among plenty of activities the most fruitful will be:

- IDIs (in-depth interview) with users - they take lots of time and effort but questioning those for whom you build your product is essential to your success, especially at the very beginning of the product design process
- Card sorting with users will give you a hint on how to make a map of your website/application
- Field studies will show a real user's behavior in particular situations
- Concept testing - going outside the office, even with a paper prototype, will collide very first ideas with real life.

Regardless of the chosen method, according to our experience, research helps us make fewer mistakes as people probably will behave the opposite of what has been expected.

6 Extraordinary Benefits Of User Research

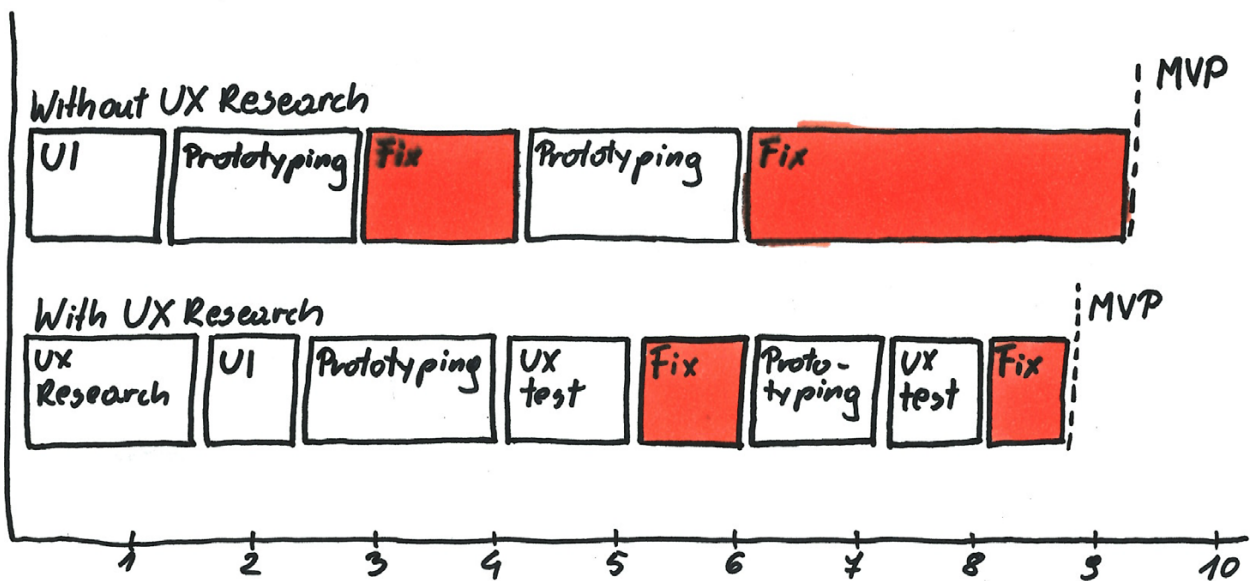
There is no weak point in doing any research. The more information you gather the more deliberate decisions will be taken. Below you will find a list of a few really good outcomes you can expect after investing your time in product discovery.

- A verification if your idea is actually a real need of the potential users or if it creates an undiscovered demand - it is a way of challenging your idea in the real world
- Help in identifying the real users - a target audience
- A chance to figure out functionalities that are really important to customers and for which they are willing to pay
- Getting to know possible weak points and start working on the solutions before they become a huge problem
- A preparation for pitching investors - you will be ready to answer all the questions and doubts that will appear
- Receiving first flow suggestion - you will be aware of how people use your product and feel about it.

Further tests on users during the whole process can give additional input like:

- Catching bugs and badly defined content (Architecture Information)
- Discovering extra flows
- Further verification of the idea
- Fresh insights and input from potential users
- Verifying the assumptions as you may miss the key point
- About the design - if suggested colors are acceptable for users

UX Research Saves Your Time And Money



A simple calculation can be done:

Let's assume that decision about developing a product has been made. There is no UX research taken into consideration. The product will be developed by 4 developers in 4 months, each cost around 5000 EUR monthly, meaning 80000 EUR for MVP. What can go wrong?

1. If the idea is not challenged with users, it may be absolutely useless for them. There are millions of applications in the world but most of them don't succeed and that 80k EUR never comes back to the pocket of the investor. Mainly because there was no real demand for such a product or it did not solve any problem.
2. If a project is actually needed on the market there is always a possibility, for example,
 - it is too complicated to use it in several situations,
 - it is badly designed,
 - it does not show real value for customers.

Sometimes a small change of an icon, a feature or layout on the page can make a significant difference for its users.

In first cases having a UX designer on board, which costs around 3000 EUR monthly, will give you savings of 77000 EUR because there is no need to develop the product at the end. In the second issue, a **UX designer will be able to discover real user needs, help to implement them into the project and later test the solution with people** to see all bugs and inaccuracies and remove them before an application is launched. There is no need to mention a loss of credibility when a delivered product contains errors and half-baked solutions.

Respect Your Users

You should remember that no matter how you will market your solution it is the user who holds the mouse. Disregarding his needs from the very beginning or not investing enough time in research can lead to serious consequences including application failure and substantial loss of money.

Building Digital Product: Stages Of The Project

User research, as well as preparing strategy and business model, are a solid base for creating a digital solution. When we finish working on these parts of the product design process, here comes the moment it starts to shape into something visible. Based on the information obtained during workshops we should be ready to proceed with the next phases which begin with user flows, wireframes, and low fidelity mockups.

Designing

Prior to creating beautiful designs, there are a few steps to get things done. First of all, there is information architecture to be planned. The most common questions are:

- where should we put each button and other elements and why there,
- how a user gets to the point in the least number of steps,
- how to make navigation easy and understood by the user,
- how we want to lead him to reach the goal and so on.

The answers will lead us to make wireframes which will be later transformed into mockups. The continuous work on the project is of deep significance. Starting from simple drawings on the paper, through diagrams, flows, to detailed mockups, it is more likely that new doubts will arise. Our vast experience shows that **it is simply not possible that a very first view will be the final one**. During the creative process, lots of fresh, innovative ideas appear which usually replace the previous ones.

But before UX and UI designers start working on the project, they need to get a few things from a client.

From a UI perspective, a font, colors and general look and feel of a product are key to preparing a solid design. There are two most common cases:

- when UI designers can create a product from scratch, using their own imagination and skills
- when they are limited to the client's brand identity.

Whichever case we are dealing with, it is worth working as partners and discuss all the important issues.

When it comes to UX designers, they try to develop an application as close as possible to your vision, so be prepared for tight cooperation. To provide a client with a detailed solution, a designer should receive at least a sample of copy - texts that will be visible (for a relevant paragraph). This will help to organize and distribute components in correct places on the website or on mobile devices.

Prototyping & Testing

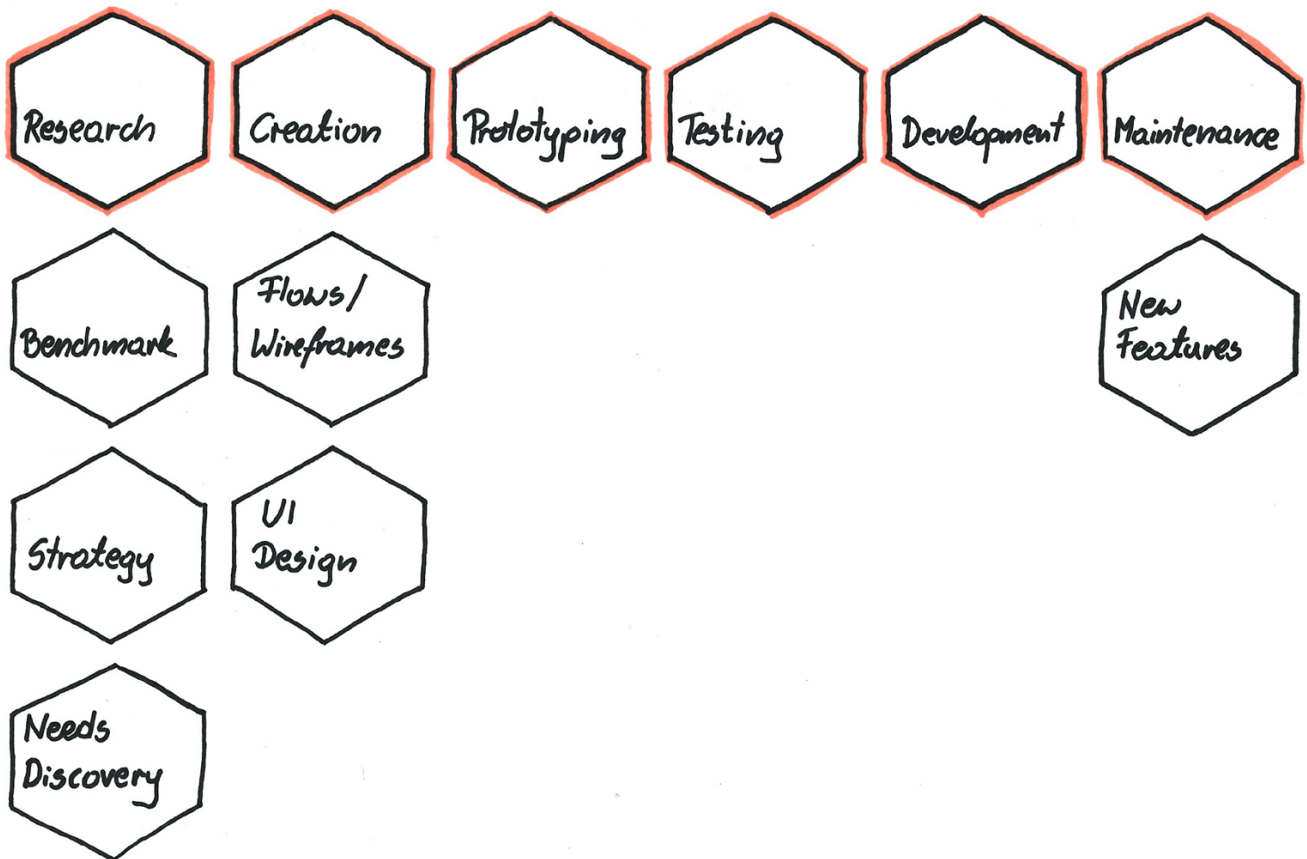
One of the most valuable phases of design is prototyping. The importance of creating a prototype, either made with paper or using a fancy tool like Axure or Adobe XD should not be underestimated, as **this is the very first moment when a design faces reality.**

Even if everything seems so obvious for all who are involved in creating the solution, a fresh look at people testing your prototype can be a true awakening. Not only will they question the idea behind the product, but they will certainly notice most of the pain points and discover inconsistencies in a design. **This is the perfect time to validate assumptions around the product before lots of money and work is put into development.**

Deployment And Next Steps

Deployment of the product should not be considered as the final and last moment of contact with the software house. If a project is treated like a child, **it will grow and be easily adapted to new circumstances, which, needless to say, change quite often nowadays.**

It is worth considering the implementation of new features or running A / B tests to compare which new ideas are perceived better. UX designers are able to provide you with new, up-to-date solutions that enrich your product, and developers will evaluate their technical aspects. So do not break up with a software house just after you have a valuable product working, think about maintenance and support as an added value to your long-term relationship. Software houses that work with many projects and clients are easily able to prompt you with current trends and technicalities, thus refreshing your initial idea.



What To Expect During The Product Design & Development Process?

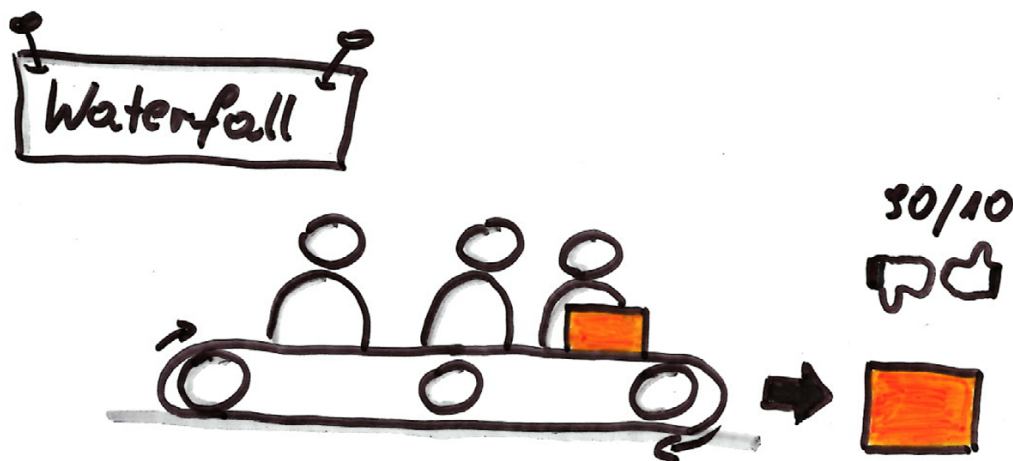
No matter whether your project is a website or a huge and complex digital tool, the stages of creation look very similar. From workshops revealing the true essence of the idea and client needs, through research, business model and strategy, to designing, deployment up to post-implementation support afterward, get ready for an interesting adventure and partnership with designers and developers.

Design methodologies

In this chapter, we will focus on the way of creating digital products, current trends, and methods used in software development. The process itself has a big impact on product success and - of course - on its budget. Methodologies have changed through the last couple of years. This evolution was triggered by rapid changes in technologies. Let's look closer at them.

Famous Waterfall

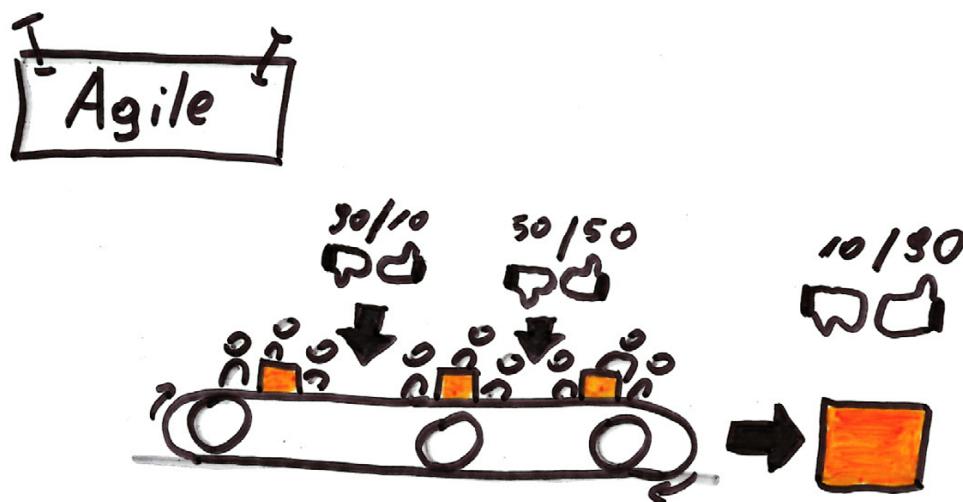
For many years digital projects were designed and developed in the **waterfall methodology**. In this approach, each stage of the process takes place when the previous one is finished. The waterfall process starts with deep analysis, then it's time to design, develop, and conduct QA tests, and after all, you go live, fix bugs after the release and... the job is done. This sounds logic and for some projects, this might be the most accurate way of project execution. But for others, it might not. Especially for big, complex ones.



The waterfall approach is associated with a step by step activities in the project, a more formal way of organising the workflow and a lot of bureaucracy. A characteristic aspect of this approach is the fixed scope in the form of documentation that is approved by decision makers. This can work in a stable market, but there is always a risk that the longer a product is developed the more the surrounding environment is changed. The problem appears when you revise your project and decide to make some modifications. It requires taking a step back and making changes both to the project documentation and in the code, what is not a budget-friendly option. Moreover, the time of development is significantly prolonged. As a result, you end with a digital product that is coherent with documentation but is out of date and needs more adjustment work is already doomed to fail.

Fabulous Agile

The remarkable disadvantages of the waterfall approach were the main trigger to take a closer look at different methodologies to deliver digital products. There are more flexible ways to craft and launch new apps efficiently - there are called **Agile methodologies**. In this approach, teams are more cross-functional and self-organized. There is less “paperwork” and the decision-making process is much faster. When it comes to the development phase, it is done in an evolutionary way as the product is not built at once. The process of building the app is divided into smaller parts - iterations. After each iteration (called sprint), both the client and the team can see not only the progress of work but also the result of efforts. Such a check-up helps to plan the tasks for the next iteration. What’s important if any solution or feature needs to be changed, it will be also included in sprint planning. Moreover, a client can react to what is happening on the market and make necessary modifications with less severe consequences for his budget. This is how Agile methodologies “tame the change” and make it is less costly than in a waterfall fixed scope.



This change in software development had an impact on the design process too. Designers and software engineers started to work more closely. Exchanging ideas and knowledge among team members has become more fluent and less formal. This way of cooperation in multidisciplinary teams is more effective and creative. When you gather people who represent different fields and who have diverse knowledge and background they will look at the problem from different perspectives. This new approach assumes that this group of people collaborate through the whole process - in contrary to the waterfall where designers after their work weren't included in further steps. Their job was done. In reality, there is no strict phases of the product development and input of designers, developers, testers and other team members is crucial through the whole process.

Fascinating Lean Startup

Another popular way of organising and managing workflow is **lean startup methodology**. A key element of it is **MVP (Minimal Viable Product)**. The main idea behind it is prioritising functionalities that you want to put into your product. You should ask yourself whether all of them are necessary for satisfying users and reaching business goals. Of course, there are features you can't remove because otherwise you won't make money or your product simply won't work properly. These core functionalities are called MVP. In other words, it's your basic product that should be built at first.

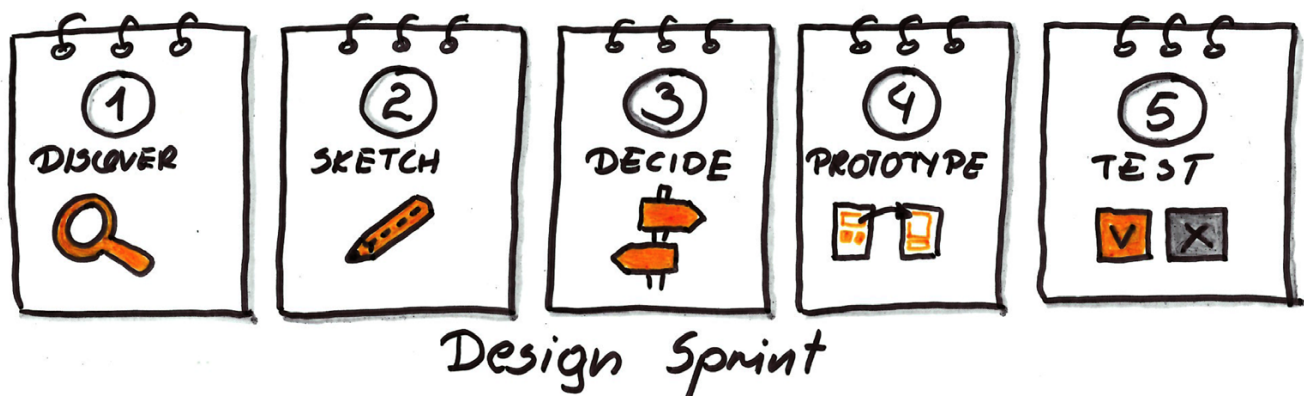
Why is it not reasonable to devote a lot of time and money to develop a fully-fledged product at once? In the ever-changing environment, you need to react fast on what is happening on the market. By doing so you will validate if your idea for the product makes sense and get valuable insight on the next steps and future product improvements. MVP is important for at least two reasons: it saves time and money as you focus on building only the most beneficial part of your product, instead of crafting it all.

Fancy Design Sprint

Validation is another very vital keyword here. The product design process should be done in small iterations so that all ideas are checked regularly and changed if necessary. That approach leads to instant improvement of the product. It should start with the research to test if there is a real market need for your project and then be continued in the design and development phase.

Here with help comes the Design Sprint methodology. It's a framework that uses design thinking methodology to help validate the ideas, solve product challenges, align team vision of a product while setting clear goals and objectives. It is one week sprint during which the design challenge (the goal, the problem to be solved) is worked through, solutions are generated, the prototype is constructed and checked with target users.

Reached conclusions are the foundation of the final solution which will be tested again - in the real world. To hit this one-week deadline, you need to set a clear goal and have a deep knowledge of functionalities you want to implement in the MVP version of your product.



The Design Sprint is a framework, not a strict rule hence it could (and should) be adjusted to the particular project and its conditions. It can be done in more or less days, various workshops techniques can be used and the different participants can be engaged into it but the structure must always be the same: discover, sketch, decide, prototype, test. If there is no testing phase, it is not a Design Sprint.

Which Design Methodology Should You Choose?

The common truth in the digital world: what was true yesterday might be not true today. Hence the product needs to be crafted and launched in a very flexible and fast way. However, the methodology of development should be matched to the circumstances and specifics of the project.

Final Thoughts

Discover What It Takes To Forge A Successful Product And Drive Positive Experience With The User-Centred Design

We are aware that UI design is not the goal itself but it is rather a powerful tool. Therefore, creating your product with Merixstudio means that you get much more than just smooth graphic design. We create powerful and intuitive interfaces that drive positive user experience and growth of your business.

Our skilled and experienced designers lead you through the whole process of digital products creation, from the idea to its implementation, whether you're working on a new business concept or reinventing your existing product.

Merixstudio's design team is in step with you on each stage of development. The design is a continuous and iterative process of invention, verification, and improvement of the product. That's why except for creating a UX/UI design, conducting UX audits, we offer long-term support over your software-related KPIs so that you can react fast to trends on the app/product and remain competitive.

Product discovery and scoping:

- Product Discovery
- Brand Identity
- Scoping Session
- MVP Definition
- Design Sprint
- Design Thinking

Product design:

- UX audits
- Lo-fi and Hi-fi prototyping
- Information Architecture
- Usability testing
- Web Application & Mobile UI Design
- Product and Service UX support
- User-Centred Design

**Need to design a successful digital product?
We're experienced Design Team that you can trust.
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