

# Leading at the *Frontier*

How Council members are navigating  
AI-driven forces within business



# The *frontier* is open

A new economy is taking shape. With AI, compute has become a critical factor of production. When a company can maintain its output while fundamentally reducing the human labor required to produce it, leadership has a fiduciary obligation to act. The decoupling of organizational growth from headcount growth is not a future scenario. It is the operating condition we all already inhabit. Those who wait to be asked what to do with the capital freed by that recomposition will not be in the room when the decision gets made.

The frontier is not a metaphor. The railroads that opened the American West determined which cities would become centers of commerce and which would be bypassed entirely. Those builders were not responding to demand. They were creating the conditions that demand would follow for a hundred years. 2026 is a track-laying year. AI is being embedded across business functions, workforce models, and capital allocation decisions at every level of the enterprise. The window for design executives to be a driving force, not a responding one, will not remain open forever.

The most consequential design challenge of this moment is no longer the screen. It is shaping what AI is built to value, whose needs it is trained to serve, and how humans and intelligent systems learn to work alongside each other. We must assume much greater accountability than ever before and not shy away from it.

The executives in this report reveal a window of expanding influence. They inserted themselves before the policies were written, before the models were set, and before the budgets were allocated. AI will reshape how humans live and work regardless of whether design leads that process. The question is whether the systems that emerge are built with human understanding at their core. That is our work. It always has been. **It's our time to build this frontier.**

**Gordon Ching**, Founder and CEO, Design Executive Council

## THE EXTERNAL SIGNALS

<h3>30%</h3> <p>CEO confidence in 12-month revenue growth → a 5-year low</p> <p><a href="#">PwC 29th Global CEO Survey</a> • Jan 2026</p>	<h3>42%</h3> <p>of CEOs say their company will not be viable beyond a decade without reinvention</p> <p><a href="#">PwC</a> • 2025</p>	<h3>71%</h3> <p>performance premium captured by companies that reinvent well</p> <p><a href="#">World Economic Forum</a> • <a href="#">PwC Analysis</a></p>	<h3>34%</h3> <p>of organizations are truly reimagining the business around AI</p> <p><a href="#">Deloitte</a> • <a href="#">State of AI 2026</a></p>
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# The story *behind the report*

This Field Report is a synthesis of Council conversations across DXC events from Q4 2025 and Q1 2026 as a unique and proprietary pool of research data. It aims to capture and distill our “member intelligence” into actionable insights members can use to address their own challenges of the moment.

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## Why it was created

This report is the result of the Council’s first experiment in AI-driven synthesis of member intelligence and report writing. The aim was to create something in the style of a McKinsey report: practical, concise, and structured in a way that makes it easy to consume.

It was also a learning journey across four iterations during which we got closer to a repeatable editorial framework. While a significant portion of the writing was AI generated, we applied a copy-editor’s lens to the report and rewrote parts as needed.

## What we set out to learn

The insights within this report emerged from AI prompts aiming to uncover deeper insight into what leadership looks like in the AI era. Specific included:

- How is the shift from labor-based to compute-based cost structures changing the budget conversations design executives are part of, and who is being included or excluded?
- What changes are happening in the PDLC model and what is being replaced by?
- What happens to experience quality when the tools to build are democratized but the governance of what ships has not been reassigned?
- Where is design's value becoming harder to measure, and what new models are members experimenting with to replace time-based, headcount-based, or activity-based metrics?
- How are aptitude-based team models performing beyond controlled pilots, and what breaks when you try to replicate them inside large legacy organizations?

## What it draws from

This report synthesizes insights from thirteen source documents spanning six council events. Including the Q4 2025 and Q1 2026 Roundtables, DXC Summit 2025, and the 2026 Pulse Conversations on new opportunities for experience leadership.

## Types of insights

To address the questions, we asked the AI to look for:

- **Confirmed learnings:** Patterns that appeared consistently across multiple events and member accounts; well-evidenced and actionable now.
- **Emerging signals:** Visible patterns in the data but not yet broadly corroborated; directionally meaningful, but warrants monitoring.
- **Recurring themes** that frequently appeared across conversations.
- **New questions** to further pursue in subsequent roundtables.
- **Quotes and member stories** that demonstrate what the learnings look like in practice.

### CAVEAT AND INVITATION

As this was our first experiment with AI-generated long-form reports, there may be inaccuracies that were missed in the copy-editing cycle. Please let us know if you spot anything!

We consider this report a living document that can be expanded and enriched as we further probe emerging questions. Additionally, please let us know if you would like to contribute your own stories or personal experiences to any of the sections.

## Members cited

Thanks to the our members who attended our events and shared stories cited in this report.

**Arin Bhowmick**, SAP

**Christina Vallery**, The Cigna Group

**Dan Makoski**, Fmr. UnitedHealth Group

**Dom Propati**, Clover

**Eric Kabisch**, Deel

**Eric Wood**, Hyundai Motor Company (42dot)

**Fabricio Dore**, Itau Unibanco

**Greg Petroff**, Fmr. Cisco Secure

**Heather Cassano**, Autodesk

**Heather Winkle**, Delta Air Lines

**Heidi Munc**, Nationwide

**Issa Breibish**, Bentley Systems

**Jae Park**, Ford Motor Company

**Janaki Kumar**, JPMorgan Chase

**Jason Broughton**, LexisNexis & Elsevier

**Jennifer Darmour**, Oracle

**Kaaren Hanson**, Insulet Corporation

**Martin Granstorm**, Shipt

**Matthew Holloway**, Snaplogic

**Matthew Menz**, AWS (Amazon)

**Mary Piontkowski**, Cisco Networking

**Purvi Shah**, Target

**Rachel Been**, Expedia Group

**Richard Dalton**, Verizon

**Tom Gebauer**, Dow Jones

# What the *evidence shows*

The Q1 2026 field report captures our Council in active motion — not waiting for the disruption to settle, but making deliberate moves while the ground is still shifting.

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## 01 Accountability has moved from influence to ownership

Members across events described being held to revenue contribution, cost avoidance, support reduction, and workforce efficiency targets. The conversation is about whether design can report results in the language the CFO already reads.

## 02 Judgment is becoming design's most defensible capability

As AI raises the floor on output quality and democratizes building, the differentiating value is no longer making, it is knowing what good looks like, and owning that definition at the organizational level.

## 03 The design executive role is expanding in scope, but durability depends on formalization

A meaningful subset of members has absorbed formal accountability for functions once held by product, engineering, strategy, and operations. Expansion that rests on relationships alone is less durable.

## 04 Members are building proof rather than making arguments

The most consistent pattern across members gaining ground is methodological — customer validation, working demonstrations, embedded governance mechanisms that make the business case travel on its own authority rather than through advocacy.

# Patterns of *leading at the frontier*

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| <b>01</b> | <b>Recalibrating Business Priorities</b>        | Five priority clusters design executives are being held accountable for — and what owning them actually looks like.                       |
| <b>02</b> | <b>Influencing Enterprise AI Transformation</b> | How members are inserting themselves into AI decisions at the company, product, and team level — before the frameworks are set.           |
| <b>03</b> | <b>Repositioning Design's Value</b>             | Four observed positioning stances — Innovation Driver, Quality Governor, Efficiency Champion, Defender — with risk profiles and evidence. |
| <b>04</b> | <b>Expanding the Design Executive Role</b>      | What formal and informal role expansion looks like in practice, why its durability depends on formalization, and where the gaps are.      |

# Recalibrating *Business Priorities*

The terms of accountability for design executives have shifted. Across Q4 2025 and Q1 2026, members described a consistent pressure: to move beyond design influence and demonstrate direct contribution to enterprise outcomes — revenue, cost, reinvention, workforce. These are no longer aspirational frames. They are the business imperatives members are being held to, or are actively positioning themselves to own.

“You have to justify everything. You have to prove what you’re going to deliver and you have to deliver it with perfection — that’s a different requirement than any of us have faced.”

Christina Vallery, The Cigna Group

## Business priority overview

Five priority clusters emerged with consistent signal strength across Q4 2025 and Q1 2026. Each is mapped below with a brief rationale.

PRIORITY	WHY IT MATTERS
<b>AI-driven business reinvention</b>	This is no longer an internal design operations question. It is a boardroom-level mandate. Members who are not actively shaping their company's AI strategy risk being sidelined by it.
<b>Revenue growth and product adoption</b>	This is the clearest bridge between design investment and C-suite credibility. Members who can demonstrate a direct line to revenue have meaningfully more strategic standing.
<b>Cost efficiency and margin defense</b>	CFOs and boards are recalibrating ROI expectations. Design functions that can quantify cost avoidance, support reduction, or process efficiency gain new access and credibility.
<b>Enterprise prioritization and resource allocation</b>	This is potentially one of the highest-value and most differentiated positions for design executives — operating as integrators and decision-architects at the enterprise level. It is nascent but significant.
<b>Workforce transformation and talent redesign</b>	Members are not just managing team performance. They are being asked to lead a fundamental reset of the staff model within their function, while navigating the human cost of that transition — with direct P&L implications.

## What it looks like in practice

The shift across all five priorities is the same in structure: from influence to accountability. Members are no longer being evaluated on their ability to advocate for design. They are being measured on whether design contributes to outcomes the CFO can read. What follows are the most concrete examples of that shift in action.

## Priority 1: AI-driven business reinvention

**Arin Bhowmick** described the strategic opening inside SAP's AI reinvention: board mandates for productivity gains and cost savings, investment budgets squeezed, and a competitive moat collapsing. What changed in his favor was not build speed — it was that company leadership had become unusually open to honest diagnosis about where AI investments were and weren't working, and design's ability to produce that diagnosis had become a differentiator.

**Rachel Been** described arriving at Expedia Group with a clear mandate from the CEO and CPO: "we need to completely blow up the design team... by doing that so that we can completely reimagine and change all of the product portfolios." The business outcome expected is a "complete sea change in all of our three core brands, which is VRBO, Hotels.com and Expedia, as well as really integrating the future of AI experiences into those rebrands. Her organizing move inside the reinvention: she stood up a dedicated AI experiences team staffed with "ninja principals" who can cross verticals, while the more traditional product design teams stay within brand verticals as pillars.

**Matthew Menz** described how AI has structurally broken traditional visioning at AWS: "Anything we thought we could do in three years, we were getting done in six months. And so it broke Vision entirely. It didn't break purpose, but it broke the vision." He is operating under a new organizational mantra: "If you're thinking more than three months out, you're probably building the wrong thing, because in three months, everything that we're building from an AI perspective is going to change." He described building and tearing down "ten transformative deliveries internally" this year, throwing half of each away and rebuilding — the lived texture of reinvention-era leadership.

- **Gordon Ching** asked the harder question underneath the AI energy: "To what outcome, to what benefit to the business?" Several members pushed back on what one called a "builder frenzy" — arguing that outcome orientation, not tool adoption speed, is design's most valuable contribution right now.
- Across Q1 2026 events, members described engineering and product teams moving fast on AI tooling while the strategic question of why goes unasked. The design leaders gaining ground are the ones asking it out loud before it defaults to engineering assumptions.

### INSIGHT

Design's differentiator in AI reinvention is diagnostic, not generative. The move is from building with AI to owning the question of whether AI is actually working — and for whom.

## Priority 2: Revenue growth and product adoption

**Jason Broughton** (LexisNexis & Elsevier) shared a candid picture of the revenue paradox that he is facing: growing faster than ever in 30 years, and yet facing AI-native competitors who don't carry the organizational weight of his fragmented business silos. His 2026 priority was not revenue itself, it was the customer insights capability that could protect it. "Get better at understanding what customers actually need before the competition outpaces us" was his plain statement of the challenge.

**Kaaren Hanson** described a new structure at Insulet Corporation (a diabetes insulin-pump device company) where experience metrics are now tied to the business outcomes. The anchoring metric for Insulet's next-generation device is crisp and unusual for a field report: "We've got to get it to be on your body with confidence within 30 minutes and no follow ups for at least 85% of the population. And it has to successfully get through FDA." She also expanded the outcome ladder the company tracks, "clinical outcomes, but also quality of life outcomes and also time to benefit outcomes and also availability outcomes" — connecting each back to lifetime value and new customer starts.

- **Gordon Ching** presented board research at our Summit 2025 showing that most boards lack a direct customer perspective and that leaders who can connect the customer journey to revenue hold a meaningful advantage in board-facing conversations. It is increasingly a condition for enterprise-level positioning.
- A member surfaced the protective dimension of this priority: when product decisions optimize for quarterly metrics without CX accountability, "A quarter here, a quarter there, the board is happy, then you lose 10% of your customer base." Design's revenue contribution is sometimes most valuable when it is holding the line, not driving growth.

### INSIGHT

Revenue fluency is now the entry point for board-level relevance. The members gaining the most ground aren't claiming credit for top-line results — they're claiming ownership of the customer knowledge that makes sustainable growth possible.

## Priority 3: Cost efficiency and margin defense

**Arin Bhowmick's** cost attribution work at SAP offers a model in the discussions. His team audited prior-year support volume, traced roughly a third of support costs to fifteen to twenty addressable design issues, fixed them, and watched call volume drop. The case required no new measurement infrastructure but just a before-and-after story finance could read. His framing: "Finance is about expense reduction and efficiency. Design leaders who can speak that language and not just NPS can earn access to a new category of internal stakeholder."

- A second member reported the same pattern at sharper scale: 60% of support costs traced to experience failures, with finance tracking the delta after design fixed the underlying issues. Support cost is already tracked. Design doesn't need to build new metrics, it needs to connect to the ones finance is already watching.
- Across Q1 2026, members described a consistent pattern: once cost savings are attached to design fixes using metrics finance already tracks, support volume, ticket deflection, error rates and the nature of the internal conversation shifts. Design stops being an expense line to defend and starts being a capability finance is tracking the delta on.

### INSIGHT

The efficiency argument lands when design stops asking finance to adopt new metrics and starts working inside the ones that already exist. The risk: efficiency gains, if poorly framed, can become arguments against the team rather than for it.

## Priority 4: Enterprise prioritization and resource allocation

**Purvi Shah** described partnering with Target's head of enterprise product to document "collision points" where multiple lines of business were making simultaneous, conflicting demands on the same systems. They mapped those heat maps upward to the CEO and leadership team, making the case for what the company could realistically deliver and what would need to be dropped. "We're actually the ones in the room hashing it out," she said, "and then influencing back up." What began as a taxonomy project two years prior has since become a capital allocation and sequencing tool for the enterprise.

- **Mary Piontkowski** (Cisco Networking) shared an example that captures how design is increasingly pulled in to resolve enterprise misalignment: "An operations executive came to me and said, 'Mary, these GMs are all speaking different languages. We need you to do your thing and get them to speak the same language and align on a vision for this part of the business.'"
- **Heather Winkle** (Delta Air Lines) described running thirteen two-hour cross-divisional sessions at a logistics company, bringing together leaders with historically divergent objectives. By visualizing how different divisional priorities competed for the same infrastructure, the sessions turned prioritization conflicts into negotiated alignment. No opinions were offered — just structure.
- Across Summit 2025 sessions, members described cross-functional facilitation as among the most undervalued and the capabilities design can bring at the enterprise level, helping leadership teams see competing objectives clearly enough to make aligned decisions.

**INSIGHT**

Enterprise prioritization is the highest-leverage, least-claimed version of design's business contribution. It is built over time through relational trust — not a move that can be made quickly.

## Priority 5: Workforce transformation and talent redesign

**Jennifer Darmour** (Oracle) shared about the pilot they are experimenting with. Facing stalled delivery, multiple reorgs, two years without meaningful innovation shipped — her team scrapped the traditional model entirely. A 3-5 person group organized by aptitude, not discipline: a domain expert, a systems thinker, a voice of the customer, someone with technical acumen, and AI as a collaborator. A production-ready application in five weeks. She was aware about the limits: not every existing team has those aptitudes. But she is now treating that division as a structured pilot for what broader organizational redesign might require.

**Matthew Menz** (AWS) described the early-career-talent paradox. He surfaced a workforce tension that hits especially hard for enterprise design organizations under AI pressure: "We just go in circles on this one of we need super senior talent, and we need teams of five, and they can solve all the problems. Okay, in 5 years, there's no more people to solve the problems because no one's senior, because we haven't trained anyone." The pipeline math his team is actively debating: whether to maintain roughly 40% early-career talent per year, and what that implies for span of control and specialization over time.

- **Rachel Been** (Expedia Group) described entering a new role, enacting a 25% team reduction, and then rehiring specifically for AI-native profiles — prioritizing attitude and aptitude over traditional role definitions. The underlying logic: a subset of any existing design org will not adapt, and trying to force that adaptation costs more than a deliberate reset.
- **Heidi Munc** (Nationwide) shared that her HR team, not her direct leadership, had asked her to begin modeling what it would look like to have UX managers overseeing agents rather than designers. The request came from outside design. The implication landed inside it.

**INSIGHT**

Workforce transformation is no longer a planning topic. Members are making consequential decisions now, about team structure, talent profiles, and performance expectations — under genuine uncertainty about what the right model is. The risk is not moving too fast. It's defaulting to the old model while the window to shape the new one closes.

## Key takeaways

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**The accountability frame has moved from influence to ownership.**

Members are being measured on whether design contributes to outcomes the CFO can read.

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**Workforce transformation is the highest-stakes, least-resolved priority.**

No consensus model has emerged. Members are making real decisions under real uncertainty.

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**Finance fluency is the new prerequisite.**

The members gaining ground have started working inside the measurement systems that already exist.

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**Enterprise prioritization is an underused high-ceiling move.**

A small number of members are functioning as decision-architects at the enterprise level. For members looking to expand strategic standing, it is among the most available moves.

# *Influencing* Enterprise AI Transformation

AI-driven transformation is top of mind for company leaders. It is happening simultaneously at the board level, inside the product pipeline, and within design organizations themselves, and members are being asked to navigate all three at once.

The leaders gaining the most ground are not simply adopting AI faster. They are inserting themselves where consequential decisions are being made on workforce structure, product governance, and what quality means when anyone can ship, bringing a perspective no other function is positioned to offer.

“Successfully designing and deploying AI solutions is just a factor of X more complicated than trying to convince my team to use everyday AI tools. It has fundamentally changed the nature of our job.”

Heidi Munc, Nationwide

## Levels of influence

The pressure is not coming from one direction. Members are encountering AI adoption demands at three distinct levels, and where the heat is sharpest shapes how design's value is best positioned.

LEVEL	WHAT'S HAPPENING	DESIGN'S ROLE
<b>Company-level AI</b>	Board mandates, CFO cost-structure rethinking, OPEX-to-CAPEX shifts, agentic workforce planning, headcount-vs-compute trade-offs.	Strategic advisor on workforce design; advocate for human-centered AI governance; board-level ROI storytelling.
<b>Product development</b>	AI collapsing the PRD-to-design-to-code pipeline; engineers and PMs shipping without design involvement; vibe coding producing functional but low-quality outputs; agentic UIs requiring new design paradigms.	Discovery ownership (left side of diamond); quality governance (right side); new interaction model definition; design systems as AI training inputs.
<b>Design organizations</b>	Teams adopting AI tools at variable rates; performance expectations now include AI proficiency; design ops using AI for repetitive task reduction; new roles emerging (cognitive systems engineers, decision modeling).	Change management leadership; AI skill development; defining new talent profiles; measuring team AI adoption.

## What it looks like in practice

The following examples trace what it looks like to influence AI transformation at each of the three levels. The move is the same at every level: getting into the room where the decision is being made before someone else draws the conclusions.

## Level 1: Company-level AI

When Nationwide mandated that all eleven business units submit AI business cases with board-level accountability for return on investment within twelve months, **Heidi Munc's** response was structural. Her team built design review into the mandatory risk model: a required gate before AI solutions could receive funding. But the mandate also surfaced a capability gap she hadn't planned for.

When her team was tasked with building agentic solutions across every business unit, she found she had to hire cognitive systems engineers and decision modeling experts — skills her existing UX team simply didn't have.

- **Issa Breibish** (Bentley Systems) and **Tom Gebauer** (Dow Jones) also surfaced the same structural shift: the OPEX-to-CAPEX reclassification of AI investment had become an active board-level conversation at both companies, with FY27 planning already underway.
- **Matthew Holloway** (Snaplogic) talked about how design is inserting itself into enterprise agent architecture before it locks in. The governance insight he surfaced: "The orchestration of those agents becomes a real problem for companies... especially with MCP and the promise of self-learning agents, the potential risk of them doing something that you don't want done."
- **Dom Propati** described Clover conducting a company-wide AI assessment — cross-functional teams from every business unit, tasked with identifying where AI could close gaps, with headcount realignment as the expected output. At some companies, the strategic AI assessment is already underway.

### INSIGHT

At the company level, design's most important move is not building AI solutions — it is getting into the risk, governance, and workforce planning conversations before the frameworks are set. Once those decisions are made, design's role within them is much harder to shape.

## Level 2: Product development

**Tom Gebauer** (Dow Jones) found himself in a role he had never been asked to play before. At Dow Jones, he was preparing to demo to his entire technology organization how to connect Figma directly to code production using the company's design system — in effect, teaching the engineering organization a design-led workflow. Engineers told him directly it was "a little bit uncomfortable" — but they were open to it if it meant better collaboration. For Tom, it was a new kind of influence at the product development level: design leading on toolchain integration, rather than being downstream of it.

- **Greg Petroff** (Fmr. Cisco Secure) observed that product managers traditionally “think to make” — but designers make to think. With AI tooling accelerating the making, designers can sometimes think faster than product around what a product should be. The Figma file has become a live decision instrument, not just a handoff artifact.
- **Janaki Kumar** (JPMorgan Chase) directed her research team to convert user findings into AI-readable formats as fast as possible — ensuring that when anyone in the organization prompts their way to a design, they start from a foundation grounded in actual user context. If design doesn’t shape the inputs, someone else will.

### INSIGHT

The product development pipeline has already compressed. Members holding the ground are repositioning design as the function that owns the decision layer above the build: what to make, what quality means, and what the user actually needs.

## Level 3: Design organizations

**Purvi Shah** (Target) described a deliberate effort to keep pace with AI-driven change in how her team at Target is evaluated: updating job ladders on a quarterly basis, not annually — specifically to reflect evolving AI expectations. The underlying recognition: at the rate role requirements are changing, annual performance architecture cannot keep up.

- **Richard Dalton** (Verizon) shared: “If all of my design team are not using AI in some meaningful way every day to do their job by the end of this year, they’re probably not going to work out.” He named 2026 explicitly as the accountability year — not a transition year.
- Across Q1 events, AI proficiency moved from aspiration to performance expectation — with teams that haven’t moved running out of runway. The challenge is not only which skills to build, but how fast the definitions of those skills are themselves changing.

### INSIGHT

The challenge is less about AI adoption and more about the speed of redefinition. Members are being asked to lead teams through a performance shift whose requirements are changing faster than the systems designed to manage it.

## Key takeaways

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**Influence requires presence before the decision is made.**

At every level, the members gaining ground got into the room early. Before governance frameworks were set, before the toolchain was locked, before performance expectations were written.

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**The product development pipeline has already compressed.**

Design's role in it is being renegotiated now — whether design is in the room or not.

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**Company-level AI is a workforce and governance conversation, not just a product one.**

Members who position design only around product quality are missing the higher-leverage entry point.

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**Performance expectations are outpacing annual reviews.**

Performance expectations for design teams are changing faster than annual review cycles can accommodate. Quarterly redefinition of role requirements is emerging as the new operating rhythm.

# Repositioning Design's *Value*

The value of design is under question right now and that presents a threat. As AI compresses timelines, democratizes building, and shifts C-suite attention toward measurable ROI, the old arguments no longer land.

What the evidence across the conversations shows is that members are shifting their position. Some are claiming innovation leadership. Others are asserting governance over quality and judgment. Still others are demonstrating efficiency gains, or holding ground through leadership transitions. Each is a coherent response to a real context but they carry different risk profiles, different C-suite relationships, as well as different long-term ceilings.

“One of the things we bring to a room is real bravery and a clear message about what we believe is the path forward. When someone comes in with a bad idea, we’re willing to say so, and explain why. I’ve never been afraid to say what I think. But I always do it respectfully.”

Issa Breibish, Bentley Systems

## Four key positions

The four positions below are not archetypes or aspirations — they are observed stances, drawn directly from how members are describing their current strategic footing. Most members are not locked into one; many are navigating a combination, or actively trying to move from one to another.

POSITIONING	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
<b>Innovation driver</b>	Leading frontier product bets; new business models; future product platforms; AI-native product strategy. Design as the function that defines what's next and ensures that it's grounded in customer insight.
<b>Quality governor</b>	Owning the definition of 'good' at the organizational level. Setting standards for output quality, AI-generated experience integrity, and human-centered judgment when anyone can build. Increasingly, this extends upstream: governing the inputs (data, design system, clarity of purpose) that AI-generated experiences are built from.
<b>Efficiency champion</b>	Accelerating product development cycles; reducing time-to-market; improving team productivity through AI tooling; demonstrating measurable cost or time savings.
<b>Defender</b>	Protecting the design function's scope, budget, and headcount during restructuring or leadership transition. Maintaining visibility and relevance while rebuilding influence.

## What it looks like in practice

The following examples show what each positioning stance looks like in practice — the specific organizational context, the move the member made, and what it required. Most members are navigating more than one of these positions at once; they appear here in the position that most closely describes their current primary footing.

## Position 1: Innovation driver

At Autodesk, **Heather Cassano** holds the most structurally complete version of the ‘Innovation Driver’ stance in the dataset. She was positioned to define what the company's AI-native product experience will be before it is built — a mandate to set the frame of the product, not participate in it. The position is not a claim about design's importance; it is the structural fact of being placed where the frontier gets defined. (The formal scope behind her mandate is detailed in Chapter 4).

**Jae Park** (Ford Motor Company) described how he turned a gap between brand investment and product execution into an Innovation Driver positioning. "A manufacturing company still works like a feature factory. But we're investing in brand. We have a new design center. My job isn't to complain. My job is to say, I'm going to work with the CMO and I'll make sure the brand strategy and the experience strategy align." His CEO pitch captures the framing: "you want a new modern management system that's going to be aligned to brand, that gives you differentiated design at velocity, quality. It's music to their ears. And then all of a sudden I get another call back from them."

**Rachel Been** (Expedia Group) leads an AI-first team as an innovation vehicle inside a rebranding mandate. "I started a team specifically focused on AI experiences. And I put some of the core surfaces and features that AI is going to touch, like search, trip planning, some of these big mega things that AI is going to upend into that team. And that way that team is running is a little bit different, where you have more sort of ninja principles that can kind of flex across. And they're builders."

- **Heather Winkle (Delta)** who leads "product design and analytics" at a 100-year-old company moving through agentic and generative AI, described treating the broad product ecosystem — "not just a customer facing app. It's all the things including some of the regulatory, highly regulated constraints" — as the innovation surface.
- **Dan Makoski** (Fmr. UnitedHealth Group) working directly with CEOs on strategic product and business model questions — illustrates what ‘Innovation Driver’ looks like when decoupled from a single company. AI tooling, he observed, has made the advisory role concrete rather than conceptual: he can now deliver tangible product output that large teams used to require.
- **Jennifer Darmour** (Oracle) is working to get design into the architecture of an entirely agent-generated Health product suite before engineering decisions lock it in — framing design's role as owning the quality of vision, not just the quality of execution.

### INSIGHT

‘Innovation Driver’ is the highest-ceiling stance available — but it requires executive sponsorship and a company explicitly investing in new product bets. The influence it produces is disproportionate and material to business. So is the risk: it is often tied to a single relationship or mandate.

## Position 2: Quality governor

**Eric Kabisch** has a governance initiative already underway at Deel. He was building what he called an IPO Experience Readiness Program against a company deploying to production multiple times a day, with things breaking as a routine consequence. Three pillars: quality standards, experience coherence across 12-15 acquired companies now operating as a single product portfolio, and an incentive redesign with the COO to reframe what "quality" means in engineering performance metrics. His move was to take the conversation about quality out of design and into operations, building it into the structures the company already uses to measure and reward behavior.

- **Matthew Holloway** (Snaplogic) described quality governance on an internal agent buildout. After the first internal agent (for finance) was built without design, "On all the subsequent ones, the design team was involved in assessing to make sure that they actually informed the human operator effectively and communicated the right thing and then also looked at the nuances of the realities of how this thing is working."
- **Christina Vallery** (The Cigna Group) named the broader urgency: "We're in the middle of full slop automation". AI generating outputs at volume with no one accountable for whether those outputs are any good. The 'Quality Governor' move is not about slowing things down. It is about being the function that defines what "good" means before the organization defaults to "shipped."

### INSIGHT

'Quality Governor' is becoming more strategically important as AI democratizes building. When output volume increases exponentially, the function that owns quality judgment gains new leverage. But this position must be actively claimed — it does not arrive automatically.

## Position 3: Efficiency champion

**Martin Granstrom** (Shipt) framed efficiency around education and mindset shift. He described the play at Shipt as one of deliberately pacing tool adoption: "we're deciding now — what we're actually having this week — how we're going to use Lovable or VO. And then because for us, it's a lot of money for a year. So we're saying, well, we're not going to decide, we're going to pick one for a while and then we'll see. Because rightfully so, four weeks down the road there's something else." The efficiency pitch to his CFO was grounded: "You can actually generate something that means something for you...but again, it's going to change."

**Dom Propati** set a 20% efficiency goal for his entire design team at Clover, including researchers, content designers, product designers, and design operations, with an explicit secondary purpose: to build a documented case for HR that the team's value could not be captured by headcount reduction alone. His candid read on the risk: "I would imagine that once I have that reduction, they're going to ask me to reduce the team by an equal amount." The 'Efficiency Champion' stance, in his telling, is not just about delivering more with less. It is about controlling the narrative around what efficiency gains actually mean before someone else defines it.

- **Jennifer Darmour's** (Oracle) workforce pilot (detailed in Chapter 1) set a parallel benchmark members referenced across Q1 2026: an aptitude-organized small team delivering production-ready output in a fraction of the usual cycle time. Cited here as evidence of efficiency gain, though its real weight is as a workforce model.

### INSIGHT

'Efficiency Champion' is the most legible position to the CFO and C-suite. The risk is that efficiency becomes the ceiling. Members solely positioned here may find it harder to move into strategic conversations.

## Position 4: Defender

**Richard Dalton's** situation at Verizon is a defender case. A new CEO arrived with a customer-centricity mandate that appeared to align with design's value proposition. But Richard was direct about the gap: most product and pricing decisions were still made on financial engineering logic. His own assessment of his position was unsettling — he was not sure he had "the appropriate top cover to have those conversations safely in many rooms." His tactical response was not to push harder internally, but to work laterally: identifying external consultants who could carry the customer experience argument to the C-suite with the credibility that inside voices sometimes lack. "Our executives listen to consultants outside the company more than they listen to us sometimes. So how can we find consultants and prime them to tell these stories?"

- **Tom Gebauer** (Dow Jones) shared that his operating model is dismantling. The head of product removed three weeks prior, replaced by general managers focused narrowly on revenue targets. His move: build a machine-readable design system and prepare to demo design-led workflows to the entire engineering organization, making design indispensable before the new model solidified without them.
- **Dom Propati** (Clover) described navigating a new CEO, eight Chief Revenue Officers, and a large cohort of incoming JPMorgan Chase leaders — all with different assumptions about design's role. He described his primary job in this period as "swimming with the sharks and taking the punches" so his team could stay focused on the work. The political complexity was not a side problem. It was the main problem.

**INSIGHT**

'Defender' is a transitional posture, not a stable one. The window to move out of it is short. The members who navigate it successfully show up for the new leader's agenda before asserting their own — and they treat the disruption as a forced opening, not just a threat.

## Key takeaways

*01*

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**No single positioning stance is right.**

Each is a coherent response to a specific organizational context. Most members are navigating more than one at once.

*03*

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**Efficiency champion is legible but limiting.**

Productivity metrics are easy to communicate — and easy to turn against the team. Controlling what the numbers mean is as important as generating them.

*02*

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**Quality governor is the most available high-leverage move.**

As AI democratizes building, owning quality judgment gains new structural importance. It must be claimed — it does not arrive automatically.

*04*

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**Defender has a short window.**

Role expansion not formalized in title, reporting structure, or explicit accountability is the first casualty of leadership transition. The members who have formalized their scope are in a structurally different position from those whose influence is recognized but not institutionalized.

# Expanding the Design Executive *Role*

The design executive role is not simply evolving in how it operates, it is expanding in what it owns. Across discussions, a meaningful subset of Council members described actively absorbing responsibilities that had previously been held by product management, engineering, strategy, go-to-market, or operations.

This is not the same as having more influence. It is taking on formal or semi-formal accountability for functions that design did not previously govern. The drivers are consistent: AI is blurring the boundaries between who builds and who decides; the experience quality gap is creating a mandate for someone to hold the standard; and design executives with strong C-suite relationships are stepping into vacuums that no one else is filling. The expansion is real and underway but it is uneven, and its durability depends on whether it is formalized or remains informal.

“You have the CEO’s ear and then their successor comes in, and the whole thing collapses. What is the minimum bar that is going to be able to replace you when you decide to leave?”

Eric Wood, Hyundai Motor Company (42dot)

## Expansion vectors overview

Four expansion vectors emerged with consistent signal strength across Q4 2025 and Q1 2026.

EXPANSION VECTOR	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
<b>Owning product development, not just participating in it</b>	Taking formal accountability for product outcomes, delivery, and quality governance — not as a process input, but as a decision authority.
<b>Operating as enterprise integrator / decision architect</b>	Moving from cross-functional participant to the person who maps, sequences, and reconciles competing organizational priorities — functioning as an enterprise-level decision architect.
<b>Contributing to business strategy and scenario planning</b>	Actively participating in how the company defines its medium and long-term direction through futures work, foresight practices, and scenario modeling — not just product strategy.
<b>Engaging functions not traditionally in design's remit</b>	Design leaders directly engaging sales, finance, operations, and risk functions — not to report to them, but to shape their decisions with design-led insight.

### What it looks like in practice

The examples next page show what role expansion looks like when it is actually underway — the specific context, the move, and what remains unresolved. The consistent pattern that we observed is: expansion that begins with credibility earned in one domain, recognized at a moment when the organization needs someone to own the next one.

**Note:** These examples do not fit neatly into a single expansion vector. Each example has the potential to move across multiple expansion vector simultaneously.

CONTINUED →

**Heather Cassano's** scope at Autodesk is the current example of a design executive absorbing multiple previously separate functions into a single accountable role. In addition to her existing design organization, she holds leadership of engineering, product management, and go-to-market for Autodesk's new agentic product platform, a mandate that crosses organizational lines almost no design executive currently holds in one role. Her framing was: "It started with design, and that's why it's falling in my organization." The rationale was not abstract, it was about credibility earned in a specific domain, at a specific moment, with a specific leadership team.

**Fabricio Dore** operates at a different scale at Itaú Unibanco. He leads design, customer experience, research, and transformation for a bank of 100 million customers and 90,000 employees, with an organization of roughly 1,000 people reporting through him. His team composition tells the rest of the story: of his ten direct reports, only three are designers. The other seven are economists, advertisers, and linguistic specialists. His framing makes the expansion explicit: the work requires systems thinking and stakeholder management capabilities that trained designers bring, but that other disciplines bring as well, and "our work of design is much larger than the definition of designers as a trained designer."

**Jeff Gelfuso** at Qualtrics and **Luke Stevenson** at CBS Sports have each recently taken on Product and Design Executive roles, formally expanding their accountability into product leadership. At a moment when many design functions are contracting, both moved upstream. They are early confirmations of what we have been arguing: that product experience leadership is the growth trajectory for design executives who are willing to claim it.

- **Matthew Menz** (AWS) holds P&L on 30+ products and is driving the platform-chargeback architecture. Product-authority-adjacent at minimum.
- **Rachel Been** (Expedia Group) has product authority through a CEO/CPO-reporting rebuild mandate. Rachel's scope expansion is structural: she reports directly to the CEO and CPO, holds the rebrand mandate across VRBO, Hotels.com, and Expedia, and has decision authority over the portfolio strategy and talent composition.

## INSIGHT

Formal scope expansion is the most durable form of influence — but it requires a specific convergence: C-suite credibility, an organizational vacuum, and a moment when leadership needs someone to define the frontier. Members who have achieved it describe it less as a strategic move than as a consequence of positioning built over time.

**Christina Vallery's** expansion at Cigna moved from design execution into strategic foresight and future scenario planning. Working through a certificate program in strategic foresight, she developed a practice now embedded in Cigna's strategic planning process — producing 10-year future vision artifacts and modeling organizational scenarios before planning cycles begin. She described being called in to present future concepts to leadership teams who wanted not just the artifacts but to understand how the methodology itself worked. The expansion is subtle but consequential: she is shaping the frame of the company's strategic conversation, not just informing product decisions. Her framing added urgency: “We have to challenge what the definition of experience is going to become. We're too rooted in the things we know.”

- **Dan Makoski's** (Fmr. UnitedHealth Group) role evolution points toward a broader possibility for members inside large organizations. Having moved from a CDO role to advising two or three CEOs on business model design, he noted that before engaging with the Chief Risk Officer at a previous company, he didn't know there were seven distinct types of risk. After that conversation, he recognized that design thinking applied to strategic risk — not just product risk — was a capability leadership teams genuinely lacked.
- **Heather Winkle** (Delta Air Lines) leads product design and analytics as a combined remit with authority to define how MD-level roles split.

### INSIGHT

The members expanding into strategy, foresight, and cross-functional governance are doing so by making themselves useful to conversations that were already happening — not by asserting design's relevance in the abstract. The entry point is almost always a specific organizational need, not a general argument.

## What is not yet resolved:

The most important unresolved question in this chapter is whether role expansion is being formalized or whether it remains informal. The members best positioned to expand their scope are those with the strongest executive relationships, but those relationships are exactly what leadership transitions erase.

Role expansion not embedded in a revised title, reporting structure, or explicit accountability is the first casualty of leadership change. The members who have formalized their expansion are in a structurally different position from those whose influence is recognized but not institutionalized. That gap is worth naming, and worth closing.

## Key takeaways

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**Role expansion is happening, but its durability depends on formalization.**

Influence that rests on relationships alone does not survive leadership transition. Title, reporting structure, and explicit accountability are what make expansion stick.

*03*

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**The perimeter of the role is live.**

The show of hands at our Summit 2025 revealed a role that has already expanded well beyond product design across a meaningful portion of member organizations. The question is no longer whether expansion is possible — it is whether it is being captured and formalized.

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**The opening for expansion is almost always a specific organizational need, not a general argument.**

The members who have expanded their scope did so by being useful at a particular moment — not by making the case for design in the abstract.

*04*

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**Fluency precedes influence.**

Members expanding into functions outside design's traditional remit — risk, finance, strategy — consistently named learning the language of those functions as the prerequisite. Presence alone is not sufficient.

## Q2 2026 *follow-up* questions

The questions below are drawn from unresolved tensions and emerging signals from the Q1 2026 discussions. They are framed as inquiry prompts future member events.

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- 01 **What does quality leadership actually look like when anyone can build?**
- 02 **How are design organizations restructuring for the AI era and what is and isn't working?**
- 03 **How is the economic argument for design investment being made in an AI-era cost structure?**
- 04 **How do design executives build structural protection before the next leadership transition?**
- 05 **What is the design executive's distinct contribution to the board conversation?**
- 06 **Does the shift from "design executive" to "experience executive" framing unlock C-suite access that design framing does not?**

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