

### **2.1.6 Design Leadership today**

This section is about the design profession in the US, the impact of digitalization, and the state of design leadership at the executive level and overall leadership.

On the topic of design as a profession, the Design Census 2019, focused on  
'understanding the state of design and the people who make it' is published by AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts, now the Professional Association for Design), Google and Accurat. Because AIGA has a much stronger community focused on what was traditionally called Graphic/ Visual design areas, the census

is strongly skewed towards this type of design “after communication/ graphic design—which far exceeds every other industry—most designers work in business and the arts, including fine art, art history, and design history” p.16, and though these professionals have strongly evolved towards digital design (UX/UI) it has not entirely encompassed it. Industrial designers also started in 1965 their own association, the IDSA Industrial Designers Society of America. The image below from John Maeda’s CX 2020 report ‘Figure 9’ describes the reality of design associations serving the design community, where AIGA despite being the oldest association has not stopped digital designers from grouping themselves around specifically targeted associations (CXPA, ISDA, UXDA).

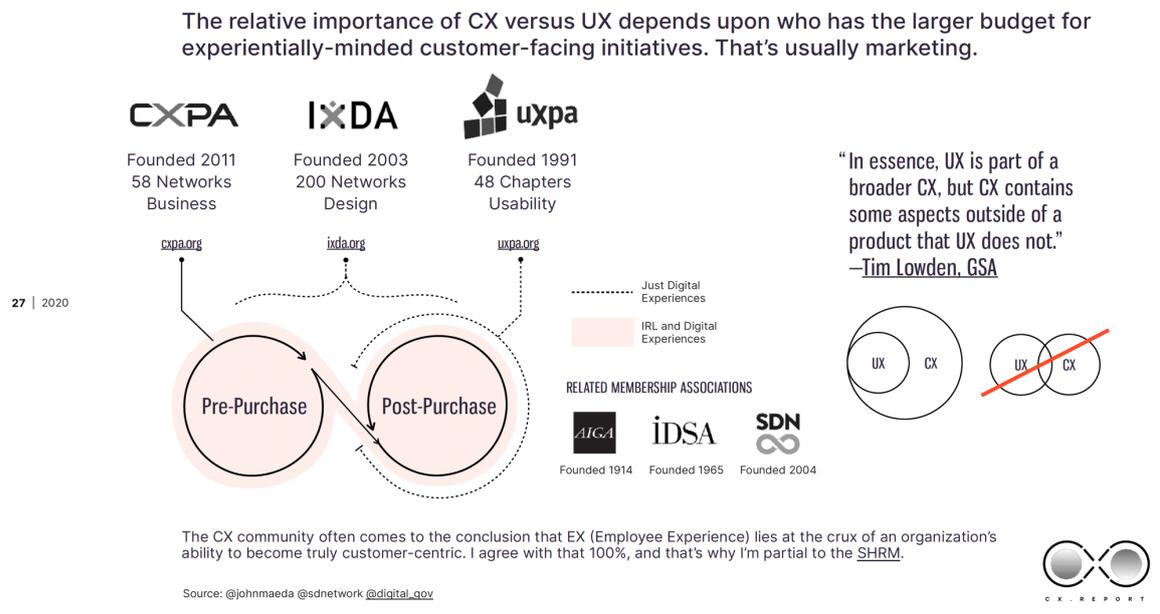


Figure 9 - The Design Community and its organizations, Maeda 2020

In a volume dedicated to ‘Design Leadership and Leadership by Design’, the authors argue that “design leadership and ‘leadership by design’ might be portrayed as representing two countervailing trends in leadership development, as distinguished by their use (or abuse) of empathy”, claiming that “one can succeed to some extent in the world of design in three parallel ways: (1) by giving people exactly the designs and products they say they want; (2) by giving people something that serves the higher, broadened understanding of their own needs; or (3) by delivering services and products that change, enlarge or revolutionize –

perhaps in some culture-changing way – the people’s sense of what they want or how they live” (Muratovski, G., 2018, p.5).

McKinsey in 2018 did some research into the topic of the business value of design, they interviewed 200 senior design leaders and 100 top executives <sup>4</sup> using their McKinsey Design Index (MDI), and what they found was that, while in the past five years companies that added senior design roles doubled, 90 percent of these companies were not reaching the full potential of design, only 10 percent of respondents had reached the highest level of design-leadership maturity by performing in the top quartile across four key areas (design leadership, cross-functional talent, iterative processes, and end-to-end user experiences). Later, in 2020 they published a follow-up to that research, entitled ‘Are you Asking Enough From Your design Leaders’ state that from 4 areas that identified in a previous study that were tied directly to improved revenue growth and shareholder return (design leadership, cross-functional talent, iterative processes, end-to-end user experiences), CEO’s would have to address design leadership as their top priority, they concluded that there was a “a lack of clarity about where and how senior design leaders can contribute, and uncertainty about how much to expect of them in their role” (Dalrymple et al, 2020, p.1). They also suggest three interventions (p.2):

- Embrace user-centric strategies, improving not only products and services but also the full user experience and, in some cases, the organization itself.
- Embed your senior designer into the C-suite while cultivating a collaborative top-team environment in which your design leader
- Make the most of user data through a balance of quantitative and qualitative design metrics and incentives that enhance user satisfaction and business performance.

When diving deeper into bullet point two on embedding the designers into the C-suite, they gathered data from the interviewees and clustered the answers into 5 types of design leadership, five role archetypes for design ‘Figure 10’.

They argue specifically that “although companies can employ any of these archetypal models successfully, the ones that best position design leaders to

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<sup>4</sup> Though there is not definition or characterization of what a ‘senior design leader’ is, for the purpose of the research we assume these are trained designers, and therefore all conclusion and recommendations are applicable to our definition of designers.

deliver on the full business value of design are the C-level roles with direct CEO sponsorship, such as “the executive” or a senior “community leader.” These archetypes provide a platform for design leaders to address organization-wide issues, while positioning them as a senior-level peer with the clout necessary to unblock problems for their teams quickly” (p.5).

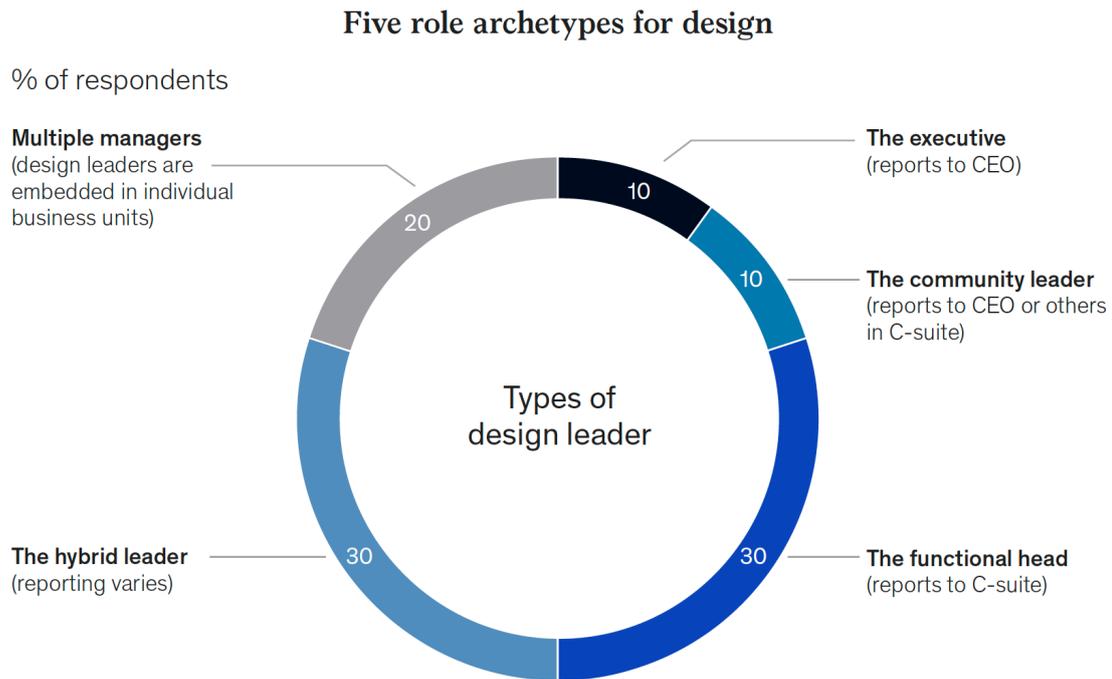


Figure 10 - 5 role archetypes for design, Dalrymple et al, 2020

The team at McKinsey then attempt to describe what a particular Chief Design Officer would do, responsibilities and interactions, divided into 3 areas (user experience, organization, design team) ‘Figure 11’ and provide a number of questions that allow understanding if the organization is managing design poorly, under delivering on what design could achieve. They end their report clearly stating the importance of the CDO working hand-in-hand with design leadership to achieve organizational transformation beyond end-to-end user experience improvement “for companies looking to enjoy the growth and performance of their design-led peers, the journey begins at the top, with senior design leadership. This crucial role often languishes too far down in the organization to have its needed impact. At other times, CEOs set the bar too low for what designers—and design—can deliver. Farsighted CEOs instead empower their design leaders to be

catalysts for broad strategic transformation, not only for end-to-end experience improvement for users but also for the organization as a whole” (Dalrymple et al, 2020, p.4), this description of the ‘farsighted CEO’ driving expectations was the basis for number one insight defined for later research with senior designers and executives, **Design CEO**.

In the 2018 report published by Harvard Business Publishing on the state of leadership development in the executive summary the publishers write that “we found that effective leadership development programs are a major driving finding in organizations’ ability to successfully transform. Simply put, organizations that make Leadership & Development a true strategic partner have higher success rates with their transformation efforts than those that do not. Still, when we compared findings from the 2016 and 2018 studies, we saw that while many organizations have intended to give L&D a more strategic role, that objective hasn’t necessarily been achieved.” (Beer et al, 2016, p.2.).

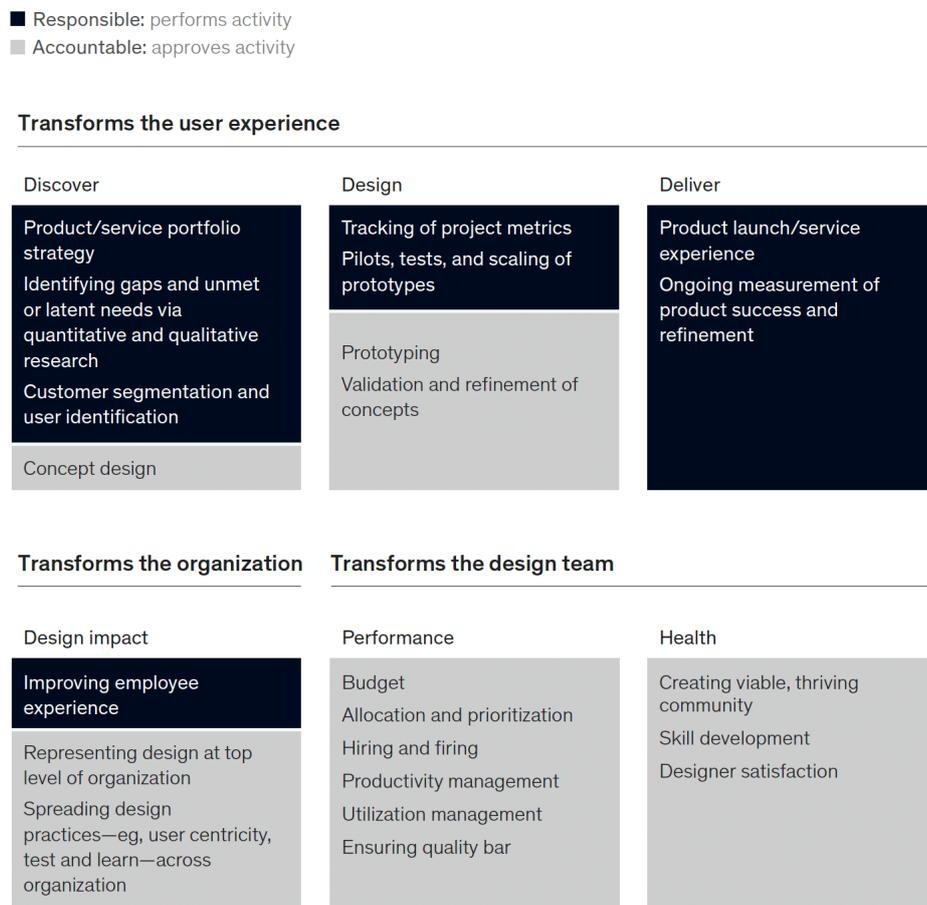


Figure 11 - Chief Design Officer responsibilities and interactions, Dalrymple 2020

This is a by-annual effort from the publishers, and I expect the 2020 report will be severely impacted by the current Covid-19 crisis, nevertheless the seeds to what is impacting design leadership might already be palpable in the 2018 report. All industries represented in the F50 are in the midst or completed in the last three years a huge transformation, and their survey findings suggest that all too many leadership development programs today are not hitting the mark, citing 1. Insufficient Innovation, 2. Not enough Support from the Top, and 3. Questionable Program Effectiveness as the major obstacles. Millennials are much more critical of leadership development programs than Boomers, and this researcher thinks that is a great thing, provides a fertile ground for more improvement in this sector. The three areas of focus suggested by the report are an important element for setting strategy for design leadership in the future.

But even with the introduction of concepts like Emotional Intelligence and the identification of different types of leadership that attempts to connect personal temperament with context (Goleman, 2000), or even Curiosity Quotient which the London Business School portrays as a sense of curiosity that drives new habits (Dore, 2009), we have to acknowledge what many have said about the so called 'Leadership Industry', probably none so incisive as Jeffrey Pfeffer in his 'Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time', "decades of writing, books, conferences, TED talks, blogs, speeches, and so forth have had no (let me emphasize that again) no effect in the aggregate on employee engagement, job satisfaction, leader tenure, leader performance, or the availability of leaders to fill positions. The leadership industry has completely failed" (Pfeffer, J., 2015). He follows up by saying that the biggest problems arise from the confusion between how leaders "should" be versus how they are, and the reasons why they are the way they are. When listing reasons why leadership is failing, he mentions:

- No expertise or experience required to be a "leadership expert"
- No, or even worse, misleading and misguided measures of program, book, and talk effectiveness
- Divergent interests between leaders and those led, and even differences in measures of leader well-being and organizational success

- Conceptual imprecision about leadership concepts and ideas (which is *not* just an academic issue)

In 2019 the IIT Institute of Design published a report titled 'Lead with Purpose', among other research findings and results, the editorial team provided four design roles to chart the organizations' future (Executive Vision Partner, Vision Interpreter, Action Aligner, Producers), issued instructions to design organizations (embrace the Flywheel of design which has 4 parts: design Leadership, Problem-driven Pathway, generalized design Competency, Specialized design Competency) and spoke directly to designers regarding behaviours and competencies (Clarify Language, Understand the Business, Assess Impact). The report delivers a final message to all readers, that design must be held accountable for themselves if they are to stop the repeated cycle of having to defend their worth and value (IIT Institute of Design, 2015).

Though design leadership does not necessarily manifest itself simply by assuming the title of Chief Design Officer, in the context of the current exploration we are interested in defining what leadership means at this level. We scanned a few thought leaders and summarize their definitions of what makes a great CDO.

The Design Council published in 2018 an article entitled 'The Secrets of the Chief Design Officer' (Pallister, J., 2018), introducing the new era for design based on 'making things people want'. The article asks this same question, and several high-profile people state their opinion, ranging from ability to balance between left-right brain, ability to recognize different types of design problems, ability to help the whole company be more creative, ability to perceive market changes, all this enjoying a certain degree of freedom. The article evolves into recommendations and recruiting tips for Board members looking to appoint a CDO, as well as generic definitions of what makes a great CDO, stretching from the need to conform (cultural fit, alignment with CEO and shareholders, diplomacy and patience) to the need to disrupt (be bold, hire misfits, empathy with people), and maps the CDO as someone that has to show a high level of versatility and flexibility, able to think big and to engage in storytelling. One can't help but wonder how different would this advice be if it was aimed at other C-suite hires (Chief Marketing Officer, Chief Innovation Officer, or even Chief Information Officer).

Kevin McCullagh from Plan describes a chief design officer as someone capable of working on different planes, at the strategic, visionary level but also executional when necessary (McCullagh, K., 2016). In another take, Dave Benton from Adobe 99U in an article titled 'How designers get a seat at the CEO table' 2014 states designers at this level need to understand how the business is run at the same as they helps the organization appreciate what design can do for them (Benton, D. 2014). CDO's will have to embrace many of the characteristics of any executive in that position, and like Neil Irwin summarizes it in his article in the New York Times (Irwin, N., 2016) as balancing the paradoxes of leadership while inspiring trust.

Giudice, a stout advocate of the existence of the Design Executive Officer (DEO), describes her as having the following qualities:

- **Change Agents:** DEOs aren't troubled by change; in fact, they openly promote and encourage it. They understand traditional approaches, but are not dominated by them. As a result, they are comfortable disrupting the status quo if it stands in the way of their dream. They try to think and act differently than others. They recognize this ability as a competitive advantage.
- **Socially Intelligent:** DEOs have high social intelligence. They instinctively connect with others and integrate them into well-defined and heavily accessed networks. They prefer spending time with employees, customers, and strangers rather than equipment, plants, or spreadsheets. "Everyday people" are a source of strength, renewal, and new ideas.
- **System Thinkers:** Despite their desire to disrupt and take risks, DEOs are systems thinkers who understand the interconnectedness of their world. They know that each part of their organization overlaps and influences another. They know unseen connections surround what's visible. This helps to give their disruptions intended, rather than chaotic, impact and makes their risk taking more conscious.
- **Intuitive:** DEOs are highly intuitive, either by nature or through experience. They have the ability to feel what's right, by using their intense perceptual and observational skills or through deep expertise. This doesn't mean they

have a fear of numbers. They know that intuitively enhanced decision making doesn't preclude rational or logical analysis. They use both—and consider each valid and powerful.

- Risk takers: DEOs embrace risk as an inherent part of life and a key ingredient of creativity. Rather than avoiding or mitigating it, they seek greater ease and command of it as one of the levers they can control. They recast it as experimentation and invite collaborators. A failed risk still produces learning.
- GSD: Finally, DEOs can be defined by a new set of initials: GSD—short for “gets shit done.” They feel an urgency to get personally involved, to understand details through their own interaction, and to lead by example. DEOs make things happen.