

4 Research Findings

4.1 Framing the research findings

When we started with stage 2 of the research, there wasn't a clear indication of what might be the findings justifying the scarcity of designers in the C-Suite of the F50 companies. The expectation was that conversations with related specialists would spur a number of justifications impacting this reality, hypothesis to be explored. There are two arguments that have come up since the first time we articulated this inquiry, one is that things are a lot better than they were in the past and that these things take time, and the other that some of the design managers in N-2/3/4 that don't have the title of CDO and don't sit in the C-suite are in fact important design leaders, managing often very large teams and exhorting as much power as a CDO in these huge companies.

Among many addressing the argument that things are a lot better than they were, and that we actually seeing a strong growth of the designer in leadership position in the list five to ten years are people like Maria Giudice (Giudice and Ireland, 2014) and McKinsey (Dore et al, 2018) who recently stated that "the number of executive design leaders among the world's 100 largest companies has doubled over the past five years". It is very hard to gather robust data to compare how many designers are in positions of leadership in the F50 40 years ago, we do have an understanding of 1 N-1 and 34 N-2 in the F50 today, but looking back the best way to picture the reality is through the Corporate Design Foundation archives, kindly shared by Peter Lawrence (Founder and Chairman 1985-2014) and through the foundation's publication @Issue, and we did analysed data from a survey done by the CDF in 1985 to 87 of the largest companies in the US, and scanned through the list of companies and uses-cases published during the 13 years it was published (1995-2008). But perhaps it is not if we have seen evolution, which we have and probably more in the last 5 years as some have stated. But the reality is still that we do not seem to have evolved as much as it would perhaps be expected, especially taking into account the apparently overwhelming data on the impact of design in the bottom line and the fact that no

one disputes the importance of design. Let alone the evolution of designers in these leadership positions (of the 34 N-2 Executives in the F50, 21 are design/architecture/ art trained). The second part of this argument is focused on the statement that this, this coming of age and leadership with a seat at the table, takes time. Many mention Marketing as an example. Groysberg et al in a 2011 article entitled 'A New Path to the C-Suite' stated that during most of the twentieth century marketing and sales operated separately (Groysberg et al, 2011) but after the turn of the millennium these areas started to converge and balance each other out, mainly because of the Internet, but the lines between these two areas are still blurred and many carry the double role and title of marketing and sales (CCO Chief Commercial Officer). The journey of marketing and of the CMO has indeed not been easy, as described by articles such as 'The CMO is Dead' Forbes 2012, and "The CMO is Dead: Long Live the CMO" Forbes 2016, and the troubles marketing is facing might actually align pretty well with those of design (Heisler, S., 2020), but we have an understand, that lacks proper research and comparison, that Marketing has grown to be indispensable in the C-Suite of the Fortune 500 in the last 25 years, while Design has been advocating its indispensability for the last 40 years and we are still not at the same level, and though a large percentage if not all F500 corporations have marketing in their C-Suite, we have not done the research to state how many of those positions are held by trained marketeers.

The second argument is related to the fact that these large corporations are huge behemoths and some of the design managers have a lot of responsibility, manage a large budget and a large set of people (Albert Shum, Corporate Vice President of Design, Experiences and Devices Group, Microsoft, N-2 reporting to Executive Vice President, Experiences and Devices, reportedly manages a team of 500 designers) and just because they are N-2/3/4 does not make them less important than if they were in a N-1 position, responding directly to the CEO, like a design manager in one of the top F50 said, these people are CDO's, they just don't have the title. Though this is true, and it is nonetheless an important element to take into consideration, reality is that could be said about finance, operations, marketing, technology, legal, but these areas do have a representative in the C-suite, so the core inquiry in this thesis remains valid.

Since the conversations started with the broader question, we started to collect what the entities assumed were insights, and these started to populate a list that was clustered into several topics. For every 3 guests that mentioned the same insight, we started creating a shortlist which at a certain point had 3 main insights. As the conversations with guests proceeded, so did the literature review, and soon those justifications were 5, and then 8. In the last round of conversations, after the interviewees had some time to respond to the open question, we would present the list of the insights that were clustered and organized, and asked them to comment and rank these according to their understanding of their impact in the thesis question. At the end of the 25th conversation, and out of a list containing more than 16 clusters, we settled on the 10 insights that will be described in further detail, while using excerpts of the conversations with the entities to support the chosen list 'Table 11'. The order of this list is based on the sequence they appeared in the discourse, as they became stronger and relevant, enough for us to add them to the list. Nevertheless, a couple of the interviewees thought these insights were somehow biased against design.

Table 11 – Insights resulting from main thesis question. José dos Santos 2020

Insights impacting "Why Aren't There More Designers in the C-Suite of F50 Companies"	
Design CEO	There are not enough Design savvy CEO's/ Executives that understand the value of Design
Necessity	There is no need, design is already represented, these corporations are at the top of their game
Effectiveness	This is not the best/ right place for designers to lead design, too many distractions
Desire	Designers don't want/ aspire this role, stops them from crafting their practice
Access	Designers are not selected for the job, not invited, not mentored and groomed for it
Preparation	Designers don't have the right education and training, skillset, mindset
Scarcity	There aren't enough qualified designers with the right experience in the market
Flexibility	Designers tend to stick to design, no experience in managing other areas
Advice	Management consultancies and advisory boards don't influence CEO's positively about Design
Ethos	What makes a designer a designer is at the same time seen as an asset and a liability

These insights that came up via the research align with research by Micheli et al in 2017 on elevating design in the corporation, where they identified six practices that underpin the enhancement of design's status in corporations 'Figure 14'. They also identified tensions which "should be identified and addressed if design is to be elevated to a strategic level, since the same practice can play both positive and negative roles", and these tensions align well with what we call design **Ethos**. Status by itself might be considered important, but some could argue by

itself will not result in a seat in the C-Suite. Some could say that the main reason why there aren't more designers in the C-suite of F50 companies is that design lacks status, but we believe the problem runs deeper, the research in question failed to prove that other functions that have a seat at the highest level of the corporation have status, and if it is that what creates causation beyond correlation.

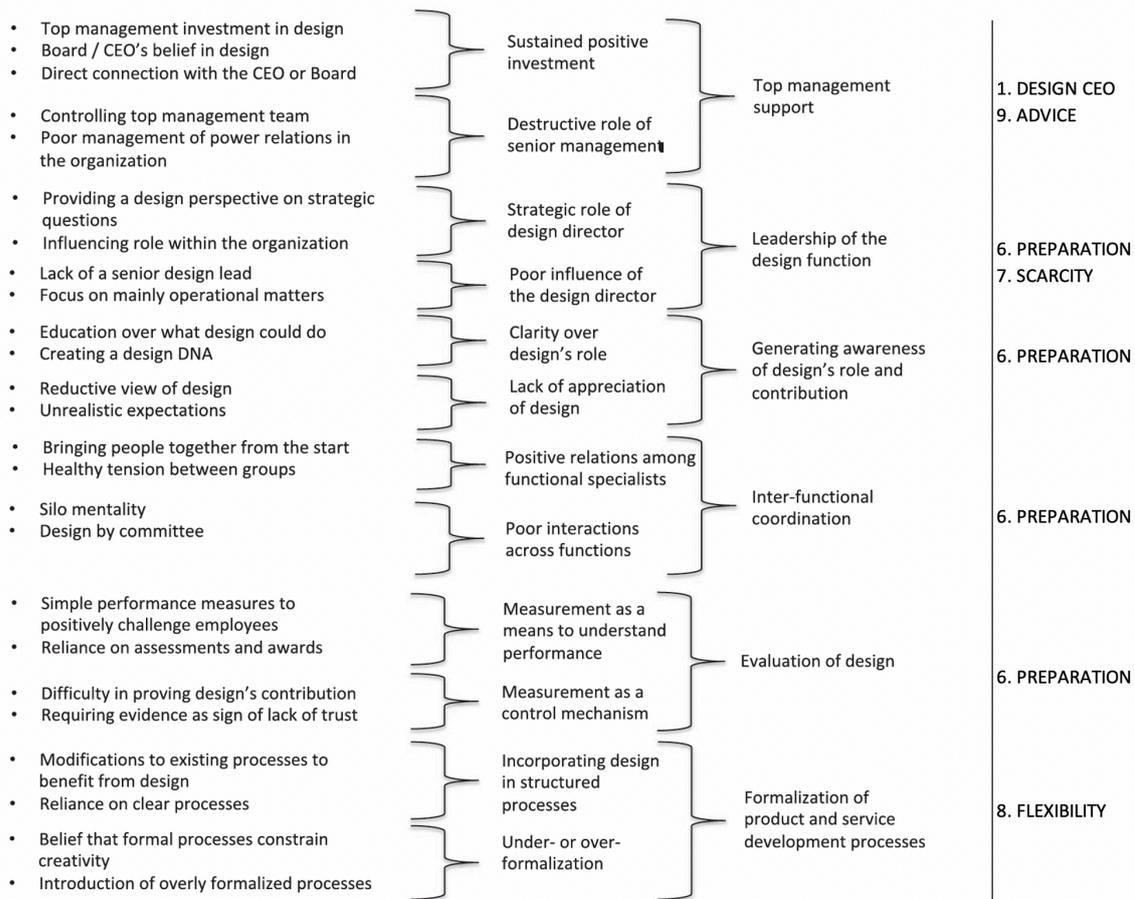


Figure 14 - Practices underpinning design practices in corporations, Micheli 2017, and alignment with inquiry insights. José dos Santos 2020

While the top management support practice the research team identified aligns perfectly with what we call **Design CEO** (Micheli et al, 2018) “this study shows that support from top management is required to trigger investment in design” (Homburg et al., 2015, p.19), and **Advice**, a lot of the practices identified in the research are connected to performance issues of the design function already in the company (Generating awareness of design’s role and contribution, Inter-functional coordination, Evaluation of design) , and that in itself might explain why design and internal designers do not get elevated to a higher position, elected to a seat in the C-Suite, would still not stop a CEO or TMT to find someone external

that could come in and solve the performance issues identified by the research team. We believe that many of these issues related to design performance results from a general lack of **Preparation** “the appointment of a design director can act as a catalyst in the design elevation process, but only if the design director is able to play a leading role, lobbying and effectively communicating design’s value” (Micheli et al, 2018, p.19). and **Flexibility**, hopefully as we explain each of the insights this will become more apparent.

The research suggests links between elevation practices and forms of legitimacy, listing three common types of legitimacy (pragmatic, moral and cognitive), defending that “the acquisition of moral legitimacy appears to be a discriminant finding between organizations where design was regarded as a service and those that were utilizing design strategically. design as dominant perspective corresponds to a high level of cognitive legitimacy, whereby design is widely utilized as the main explanation for the organization’s success” (p.32) ‘Table 12’. At the end of this research paper, we present as final considerations a way to possibly change the scenario at the centre of the question that launched this research, by presenting a meta-model for design executives with a designer scope of action and a CEO scope of action, because we do not believe that these situations can be successfully changed without change in both scopes of the equation, the designer and the leader of the organization.

Table 12 - Elevation practices and forms of legitimacy, Micheli 2017 p.646

Table 6. Links Between Elevation Practices and Forms of Legitimacy

Form of Legitimacy	Nature of Elevation Practices
Pragmatic—relates to making the business case for design	<i>Top management supports</i> the introduction and resourcing of design <i>Awareness of design’s</i> role and contribution starts to be generated The success of specific projects that involved design is <i>evaluated</i> and demonstrated
Moral—relates to design being the right thing to do	<i>Leading role of the design director</i> in championing design as a relevant but alternative way of operating Designers are part of <i>cross-functional teams</i> constituted at the beginning of projects Product and service development <i>processes are formalized</i> and design plays a salient role
Cognitive—relates to value creation through design being taken for granted	<i>Top management support</i> is always present <i>Awareness of design’s</i> role is constantly generated and reminded to employees Projects are <i>regularly evaluated</i> and evidence of success communicated within the firm Product and service development <i>processes are formalized</i> but kept flexible to allow design to play a relevant role especially in the initial phases

4.2 Research Findings

4.2.1 Interviews findings

The most important findings gathered from the 30 qualitative interviews we executed may be summarised in the following way:

- **100% of the interviewees thought the inquiry was good, needed, interesting, that made them think about possible explanations and justifications.** A few of them suggested variations of the inquiry (the presence of design and/or design thinking and not necessarily designers, executive leadership and not necessarily C-Suite, start-ups instead of large companies, etc.), but no one discounted the inquiry. One of the interviewees put it this way “the role of designers in creating and shaping society, and then how obviously large corporations are the major drivers of that, then the question of why aren't there not more designers in C-Suite positions is a fair question, absolutely”⁸. One other interviewee, a designer coach with plenty of experience in this domain stated “I think it is a relevant question. If designers were happy as they were, I could understand that they felt your question didn't make sense. But the reality is that most design leaders I know are complaining all the time about the fact that they don't have enough budget, don't have enough influence, are not involved in the strategy of the brand or the category or the company. So, if they would not complain and would be super happy about what they do and what they deliver, and it didn't matter who leads them, then I would agree with that reaction. But they don't, they are complaining, they are frustrated, they want more influence they are convinced that they have an added value to all those things”⁹.
- **When faced with the inquiry unaided, interviewees discussed their own experience and understanding suggesting several factors and hypothesis,** with a few exceptions of very personal statements they were all assembled in the 10 insights we have submitted in this thesis;
- **When faced with a list of factors (that grew larger as the conversations advanced), interviewees stated that they pretty much covered the**

⁸ Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

⁹ Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

ground in terms of possible justifications and expressed their opinion about all or specific ones that resonated more with them, they ranked them in several different ways, some of them further clustering some of the findings, some hesitating in the ranking exercise per se and just stating they were equally important;

- **The very first interview with a non-designer that is and has been an executive for many years** ¹⁰ **resulted in an opinion that, no matter what should or could be done regarding the topic, designers would find it hard to penetrate the C-Suite of large corporations** because they didn't belong to some sort of overt club whose members co-exist beyond simple demographics, education choices, career path. With some exceptions, this executive said corporate America chooses their own, and they follow unspoken rules that resemble more of a secret club than anything else. We have not done the research to support or disavow this opinion, when asked about it other interviewees shared they didn't believe in this, they think of it being much more about meritocracy and high standards and requirements, this 'theory' did not come out as strongly as with the first interviewee again;
- **Several interviewees stated at the end of our conversation, or after it, that the whole discussion made them think about themselves**, their own career choices and professional direction, with some using it to do a deep inquiry into their own motives, some saying they feel they'd like to aim for a higher position, go for a CEO job, basically entertain ideas that had possibly been dormant in their own mind. We found this stimulating, and an interesting consequence of the engagement with them;

4.2.2. Combined findings of the executive and designer surveys

Regarding the qualitative and quantitative research done via surveys, these are the combined findings:

- **Design education and training & correlation with Managers/ Executives position:** Of the respondents, 58% are Design (Art & architecture) trained, though 44% of them are Design Managers and 100% are/ were at some point Executives. Of the respondents there were no PhD's, which might

¹⁰ Qualitative Research – Interviews: 13. Large American multinational financial services company (Appendix C)

indicate lack of research in design or academic ambition in the sample this survey reached. 'Figure 15'.

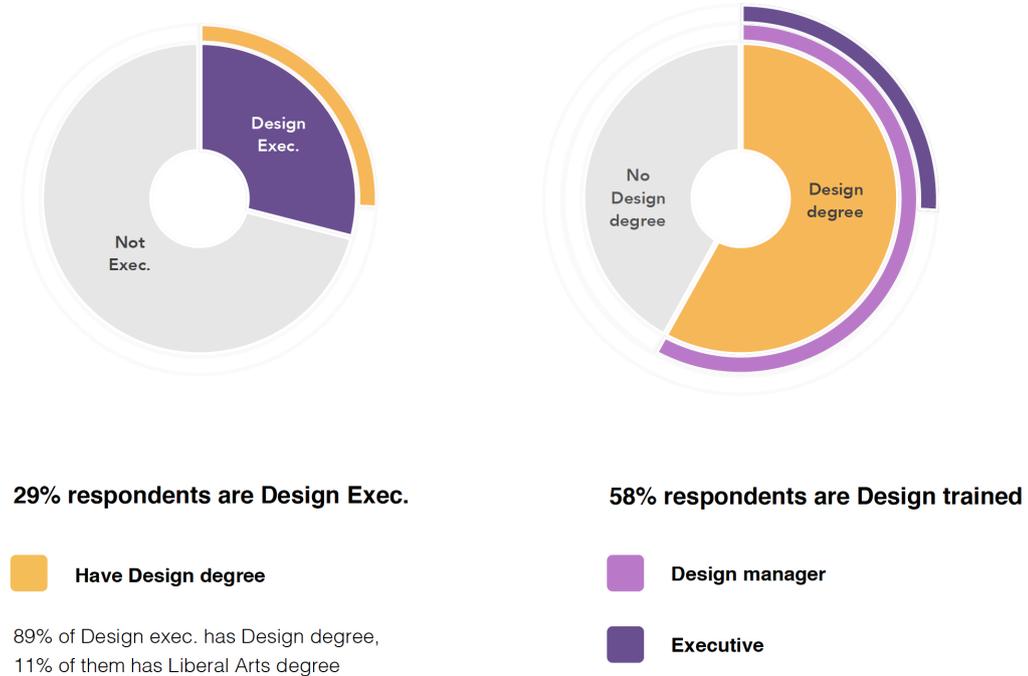
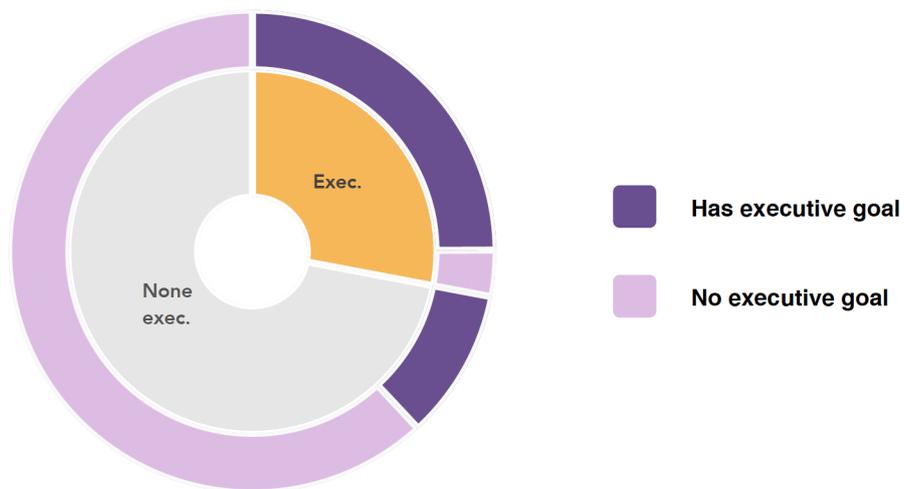


Figure 15 – Combined executive and designer survey findings, design education and training. José dos Santos 2020

- Design executive tenure & was this a career goal?** The largest majority are not in executive role (72%), but the ones that are had this as a career goal (89%). Of the ones that aren't, it seems only 14% have that as a career goal, and the main reason cited for not having it is "no desire, no aspiration, not a personal ambition", which seems to align with one of the 10 hypothesis for scarcity of trained designers in executive roles. 'Figure 16'.



Design thinking training in last 3 years?



Figure 16 - Combined executive and designer survey findings, design executive tenure. José dos Santos 2020

- **Design management & team size, team composition:** The majority of the respondents (80%) manage direct (+ indirect reports), where the majority are designers. 'Figure 17'.
- **Design team activities:** The majority of the work in the three main areas listed (Digital, Industrial, Communication design) is done by the team managed by the respondents, but there is still quite a lot of that work (71% in Communication Design and 68% in Digital Design) done either partially or not even by their teams, and an array of areas typically related to Design. 'Figure 18'.

- Design budget status & correlation with reporting distance from the CEO:** Of the respondents, and of these that manage teams, 65% manage totally or part of the design budget, while 35% do not and the data suggests the further away from the CEO the least control of the budget. Half of the budget is typically for salaries, with a 28% dedicated to external subcontracts. 'Figure 19'.

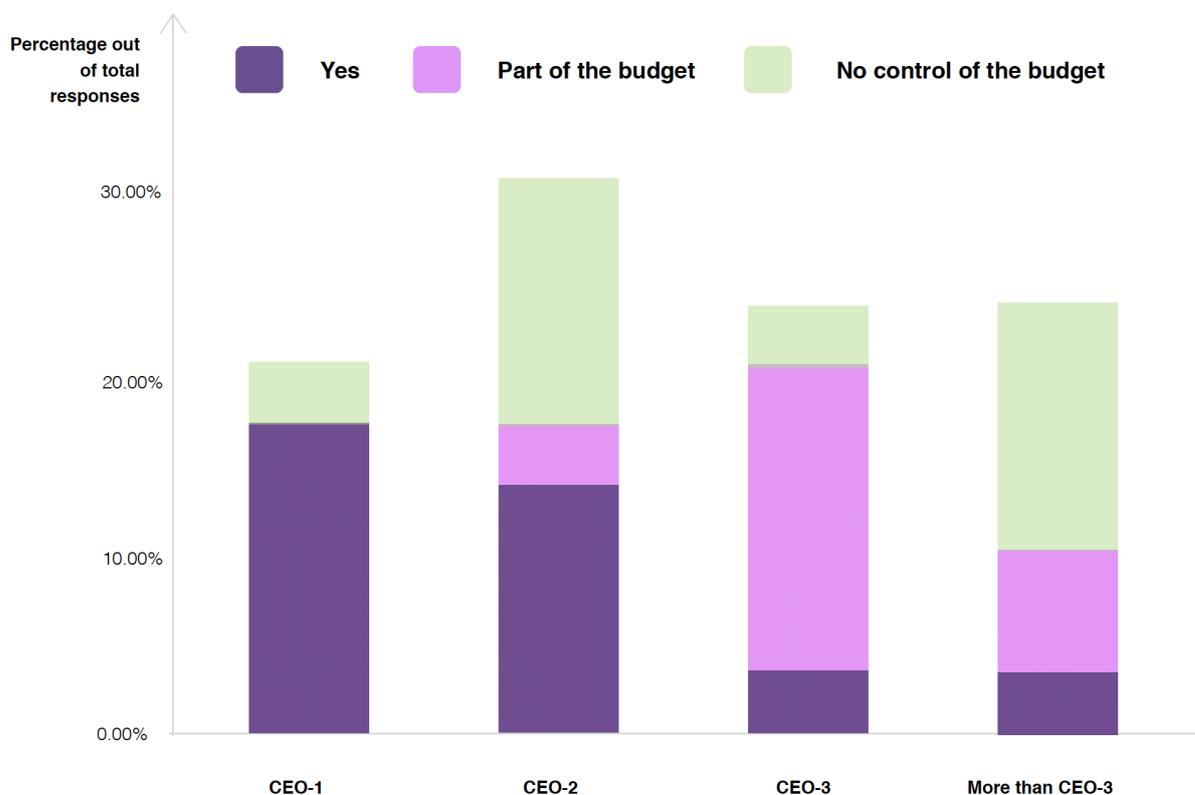


Figure 19 - Combined executive and designer survey findings, budget and distance to CEO. José dos Santos 2020

- Skills for Designers VS. designer skills for Executive role:** Thinking creatively, Design and Visualization were listed as most important for Design, while most important hard skills for a senior/ mid-level design manager were Interpersonal skills with superiors, Teamwork and Analytical thinking, and most important soft skills were Imagination, creativity and curiosity, Initiative and Integrity & maturity. This seems to suggest that the skills that are most important for design do not necessarily align with those

expected for a senior/ mid-level design manager (top three skills Executive roles: business thinking, future vision, communication). 'Figure 20'.

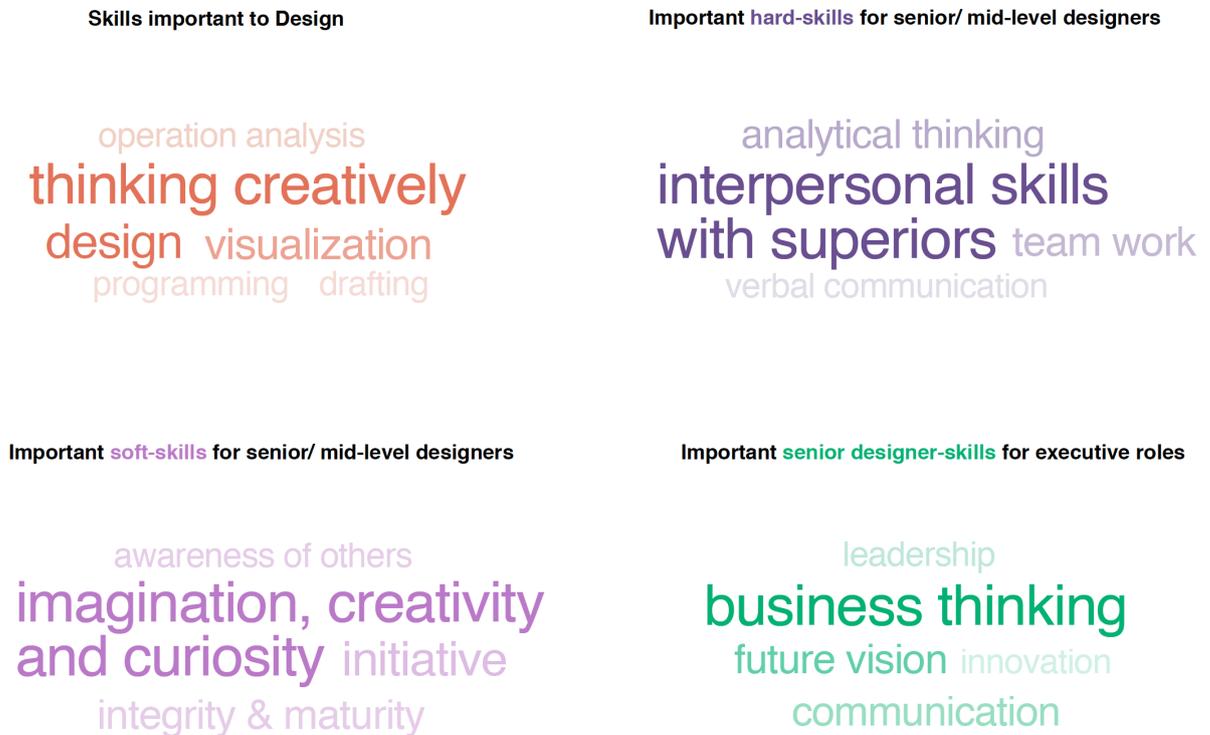


Figure 20 - Combined executive and designer survey findings, designer and executive skills. José dos Santos 2020

- **Validating statements inspired by findings from a report by the Design Council Designing the Future Economy** (Design Council, 2017): The first two statements generated general agreement (80%) the third one a little over 50% with a few (10%) disagreeing. The third statement has a slight different scale when compared with the statement in the report (p.8), which focuses in the UK. 'Figure 21'.

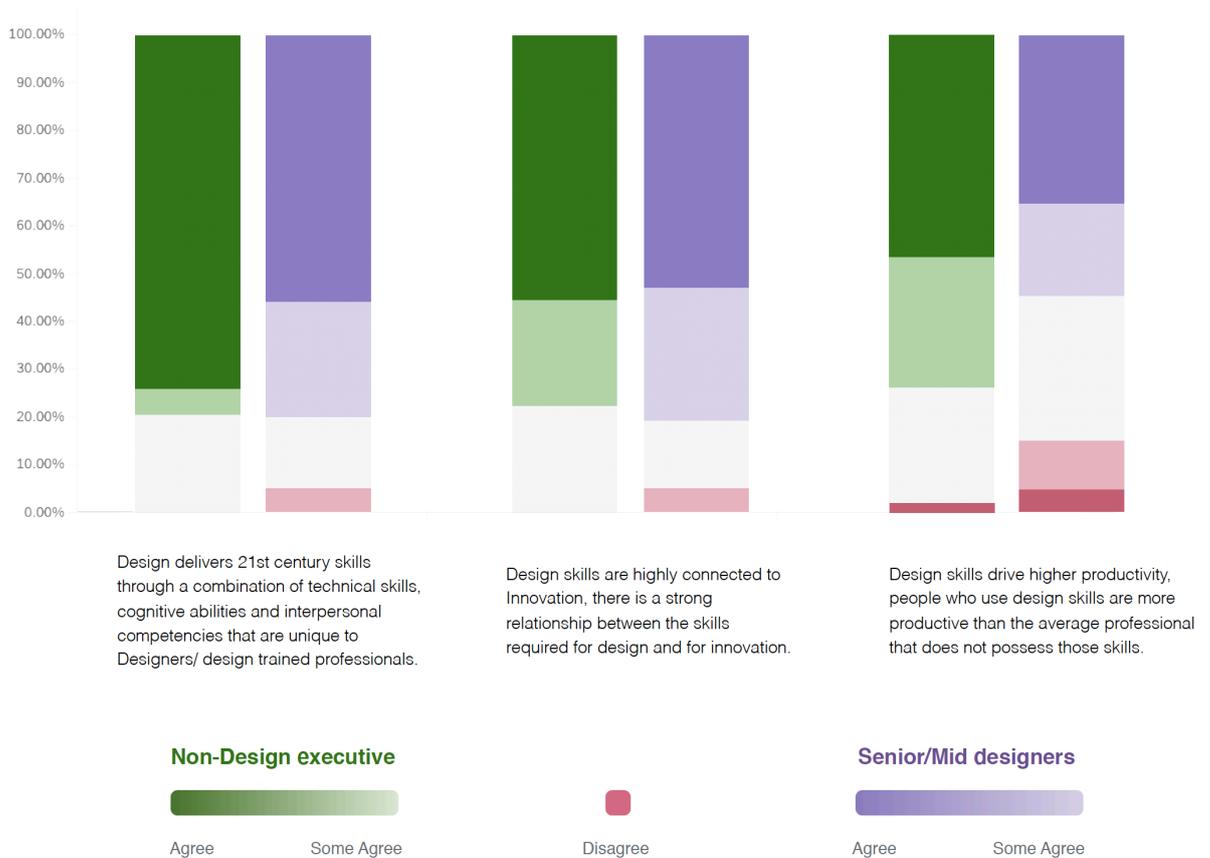


Figure 21 - Combined executive and designer survey findings, validating research statements. José dos Santos 2020

- **What are the reasons for scarcity of designers in executive-level positions:**
 - **Necessity** - executives seem to believe there is less of a need for Designers in C-level positions, that they don't contribute enough to the performance, Designers don't see that as a valid reason for them not to be at that level;
 - **Preparation** - Though there were 2 questions in the Executive survey related to Preparation (Training & Mindset), both executives and Designers seem to agree that Preparation is indeed a strong finding to explain scarcity of designers at this level;
 - **Desire** - There is a fundamental disagreement between executives and Designers on Desire, a large % of executives believe Designers are not present at the C-level because they don't want/ desire to, and this might be the most differentiating result in both surveys.

- **Scarcity** - executives believe there is a bigger scarcity of qualified designers than Designers do.
- **Flexibility** - executives think that designers having a narrow focus in terms of activity is a major reason/ finding in explaining scarcity of designers in the C- Level position, much more than designers 'Figure 22'



Figure 22 - Combined executive and designer survey findings, reasons for scarcity of designers. José dos Santos 2020

- **Would you advocate for a centralized or a distributed Design function in your company?** Of the designer respondents, majority in medium/ large companies, 68% stated that Design was represented at C-Level, and of those another 70% by a formally trained designer. For the executive respondents, almost 50% is represented on a C-level. 17% not sure might mean it isn't represented at the C-level (if these people don't know...), in this sense almost 50% say it's not. Not sure seems to align with No Design function/ Distributed/ Hybrid. Designer respondents are divided regarding an Autonomous (Yes) vs. an Integrated (No) Design function in the executive

suite, with some in the Depends category citing culture and executive stance on Design as justification. For the executive respondents, 4 out of 19 that have C-suite level representation but not fully dedicated to Design, and they think that it is a good idea. 10 out of 26 (blanks) might be saying that having a C-level that is combined with other functions is good enough for them, even though they could have said NO. It could be the response means, we already have it. The 84% of designer respondents favourable to a Centralized and hybrid model of governance is fairly equal and larger than those that favour a Distributed model. For the executive respondents, half of their companies have either centralized or some sort of mix in design function organization. This seems to say that almost 3/4 of the surveyed companies prefer a centralized/ hybrid solution to a distributed by business unit. 'Figure 23'.

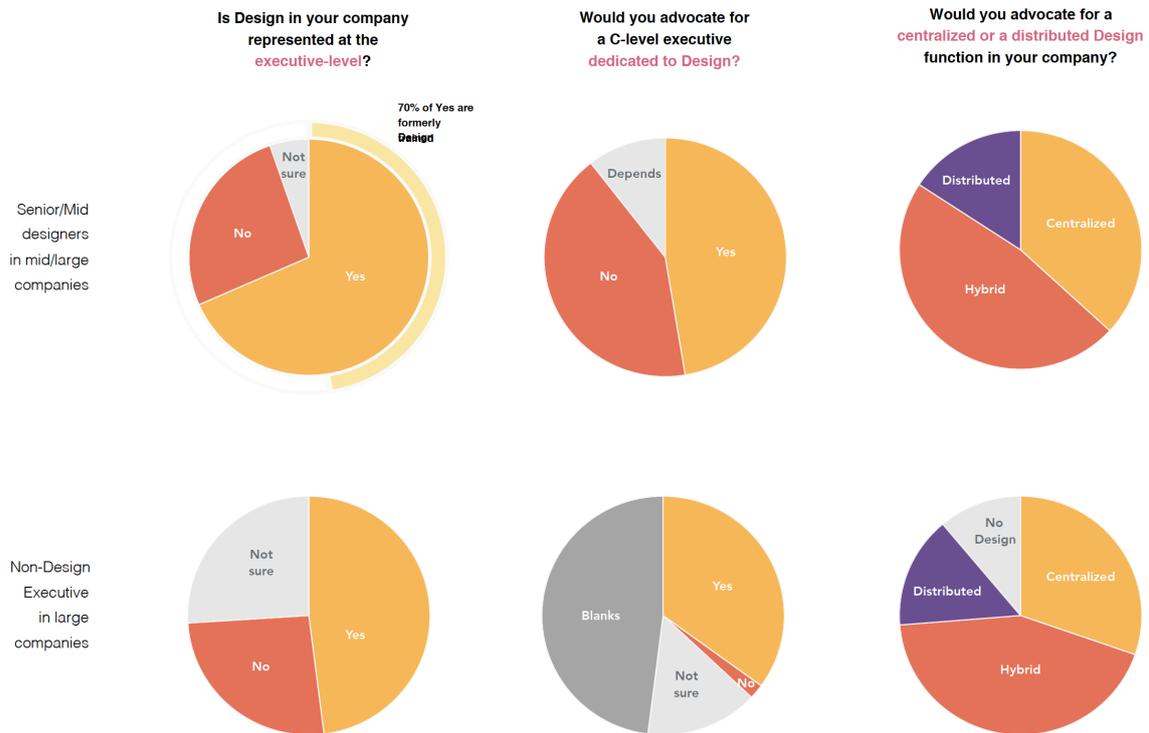


Figure 23 - Combined executive and designer survey findings, centralized or distributed function. José dos Santos 2020