



Unlocking the Business Impact of Design

— An Elsewhen Report

By Tadhg McCarthy
and Matt Soczywko

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Elsewhen

Unlocking The Business Impact of Design

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Introduction: The design workflow in 2021

The pandemic super charged a shift to remote working and distributed teams. Companies all over the world were forced to digitise large parts of their business processes almost overnight. These changes are expediting the process of digital transformation for businesses, including how they think about and value design.

Businesses around the world are adapting to a remote and distributed model. This is clear. What isn't yet clear is, how profound will the transformation be? What we do already know is that the process of digitisation—in tooling, processes and entire workflows—is now happening quicker than was previously imaginable. As Hemingway would have it, innovation happens "gradually and then suddenly".

Just that point alone makes it clear that design leaders must now move and act accordingly and decisively.

From the top down, organisations need to get a handle on this change, to turn a risk into an opportunity. The role for design leaders then, is to set out a clear vision for the wider leadership how the design function—with the right investment and leadership—will contribute to the broader business goals in a way that can be tracked, measured and assessed over time.

It's up to design leadership to establish the right metrics and set meaningful targets that will demonstrably accelerate the business and ensure future growth. As well as this 10,000ft view of design's place within a business, now is the time to look into the ways their teams are working - in particular to spot the inefficiencies and opportunities that may lie within.

Tooling within design has changed dramatically over the past few years, acting as a catalyst towards distributed working and improved collaboration. Running in parallel with the rapid, and necessary, adoption of new tooling for design, there has been the necessity for more sophisticated processes around the design workflow. Organisations can become more efficient, more effective, and more collaborative, both internally and with third parties.

COVID-19 expedited a trend towards better, and more distributed, workshopping and collaboration as part of the design process.

More than at any time in its history, design has a voice at the very top table, but that voice will only grow if design continues to pick up its side of the bargain, i.e. contributes meaningfully and measurably to the core goals of the business.

To do so means design leadership needs to have a deep strategic understanding of the broader business picture, and be able to meaningfully elaborate to management on design's role in achieving those business goals, supported by a detailed and measurable plan to get there. A plan which is realistic, moves the needle on the right metrics, and presents an exciting vision for the organisation to pursue.

What does this vision of success look like practically? It means having analytical leadership in place, having high performing cross-functional teams, maintaining a dedication to continuous iteration and delivery, and delivering world-class user experiences inside and out.

Fortunately, there are sophisticated practices, processes, and whole roles that have emerged to help design leadership and their teams make this shift. As we will make the case in this paper, DesignOps can be enormously effective if understood and executed in the right way, and there are many supporting parallel activities that can help to ultimately unlock the business impact of design.

Why now?

Outside of a 'new normal' brought about the pandemic, why should organisations try to improve design productivity, attempt to measure and improve the business value of design, or even start undertaking some of the first steps of DesignOps, such as building a design system?

Design as a practice is going through massive change. From the overnight switch to remote work to the business value of design gaining widespread traction and with it increased investment, impact and responsibility.

A major trend we're seeing emerge is a move from synchronous workflows to more asynchronous ways of working such as flexible work hours or real time collaborative design. In the case of collaborative design, this has been brought on by the proliferation of cloud based tooling like Figma and Miro which have real time multi-user capability at their core. This is enabling teams to explore ideas and opportunities together and make key decisions throughout the process like never before. Teams have access to design as it takes place, removing many routine steps like exporting and distributing assets, freeing up designers to spend their time on more high-value tasks.

As great and as inevitable as this shift is, it brings with it a host of new challenges and complexities because the new state of 'always on' access could easily overwhelm a design team. It's critical to assess the impact new tactical improvements could have on the overall process by looking for the opportunities and risks that could develop.

All high performing teams rely on having a common design/designer workflow and a standardised set of processes and tools that will provide measurable benefits. As you scale your team, or even if you don't, it's important that you lay down the proper foundations to ensure you maximise designer productivity and the design teams' impact on the business.

There have been numerous reports undertaken over the years, investigating organisations from different sectors, geographies and scale, and the evidence is overwhelming:

Companies that invest in design get better financial results than companies that don't.

Any company with a significant investment in design needs to be able to ask itself and answer the following questions:

- *Where* are we spending money on design and why?
- Are we delivering great design on time *and* on budget?
- Are we aligned with, and hitting business objectives?
i.e. What's the current business impact of design?
- Can we measure performance—both in terms of impact and ROI?
- Do we have the people we need to cover the existing work and the work coming up?
- How is team morale? I.e. Do people have what they need, are they able to focus on what's important and valuable, are they progressing and getting better? Or are people leaving, and if so why?

By asking and answering these questions honestly, an organisation will begin making a case for DesignOps. Following on from that, DesignOps has clear outcomes of its own: a happier team, lower team attrition/churn, higher quality design, increased efficiency, lower costs, and increased revenue.

Defining our terms

Throughout this report we will detail strategies, tactics, tools and processes using 'Design Productivity' and 'DesignOps' interchangeably, to describe a wider umbrella of activities with the same aims.

Those aims in the broadest sense can be summarised as maximising the value and impact of design as an organisation grows. Briefly:

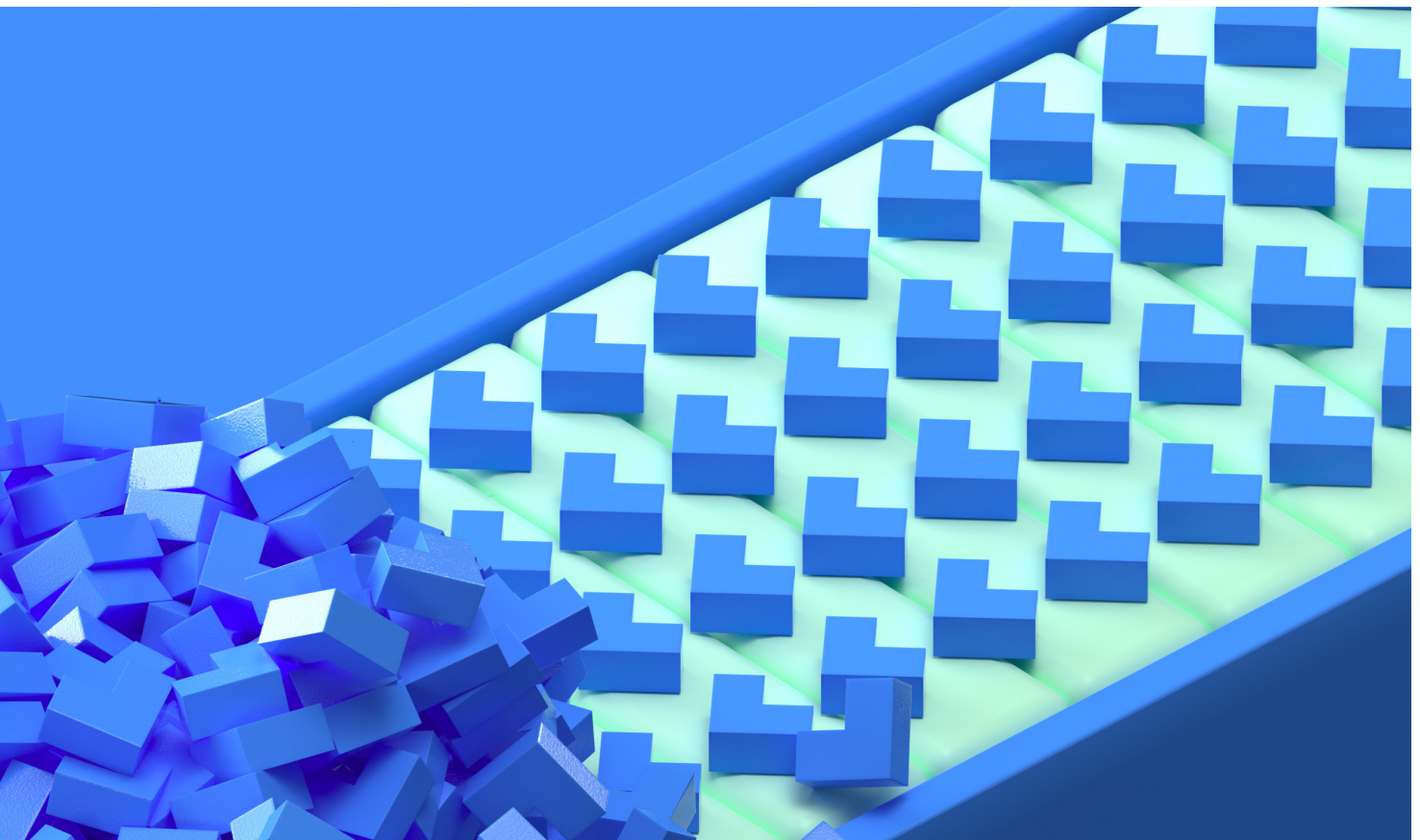
- how the design team(s) works together
- how the design team(s) (and parallel teams) get stuff done
- how design creates impact for the business

The practice of DesignOps—as a hireable role—encompasses a whole range of things, none of which are very new on their own, but combining them into a discipline and thinking about them all together is relatively recent, and still not yet widely adopted or well understood.

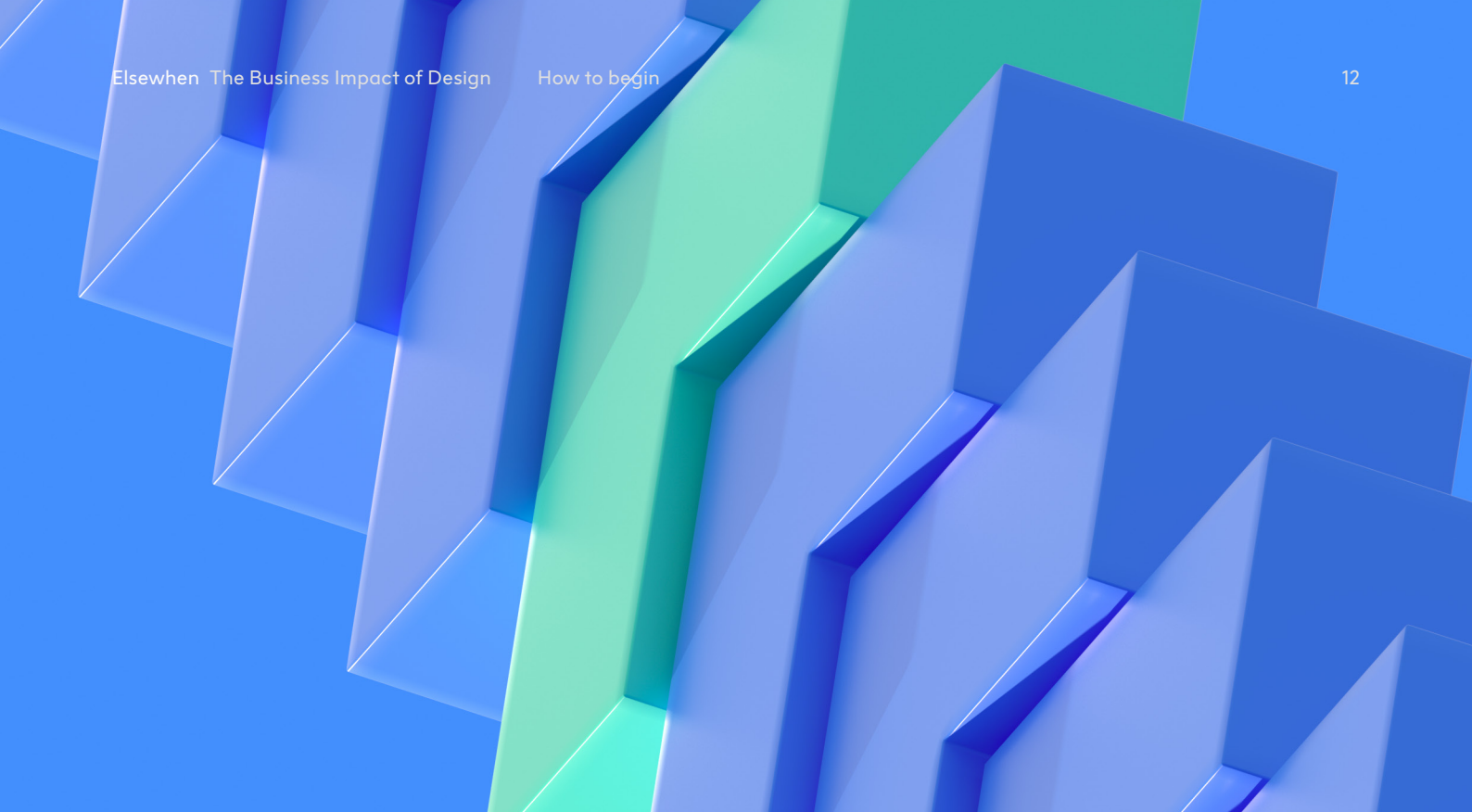
DesignOps covers a wide range of areas and responsibilities, with relative levels of importance depending on where you sit in the organisation. From setting standards and ways of working to coordinating how design interfaces with the other teams, a successful DesignOps function will encompass all of these areas - while always exploring new terrain.

It can be helpful to think about it in terms of the different levels within an organisation:

- At the organisational level, it's about managing risk and driving business efficiencies as an organisation scales and maximising the value and impact of design.
- At the team level it's about running high performance teams; streamlining collaboration across disciplines and supporting the design team to be as effective as possible.
- At the individual level it's about keeping people healthy and happy. Protecting their time and headspace so we can free designers up to stay focused on the bigger picture and spend less time on low-value tasks and more time actually designing.



How to begin



It's less about where one *begins* with DesignOps, because even at the smallest scale it's already happening—a team of one still needs tools and processes to work—so rather it's about how you begin to scale DesignOps to support the business as it also scales.

DesignOps can mean very different things depending on the size of the design practice. All design teams, regardless of size, are performing some kind of DesignOps. It is the size and complexity of the organisation which will determine if you need people in dedicated DesignOps roles.

Much larger teams, distributed or embedded teams or consultancies servicing many projects and clients will benefit greatly from a formalised DesignOps function. As we have stated already however, the work of DesignOps is happening and necessary at every scale, and therefore it is important to make sure it is being done right at every level.

Defining the need by the size of the team

If you have a team of up to 10 people, you probably don't need a formal DesignOps role or function because your team is small enough to stay efficient and effective without adding extra processes on top. At this scale, everyone on your team should be working from an agreed set of standards, workflows and tools.

For teams of this size—where there is no dedicated DesignOps function or role—these tasks usually get picked up by one or more people on the existing team to ensure the current processes and tools enable them to work effectively. Elsewhere in this paper we detail exactly what those principles and responsibilities of DesignOps should be.

If you have a design team approaching 30 people, and you haven't already formalised DesignOps, this is usually the point where the investment really starts to become worthwhile. This is where the limits of not having dedicated DesignOps begins to show, where processes start to break down, teams become stretched, and management can't keep up with the increasing operational overhead needed to run their teams effectively. A DesignOps role or function — typically one or two people is enough — becomes really valuable to help organise the new complexity, reduce friction and create an environment where designers can stay focused and be productive.

Moving up the scale, if the design practice is approaching 60 people or beyond, DesignOps really does need to be a dedicated function. At this scale, DesignOps is critical to overall business performance, and without it you are putting your business at considerable risk, and DesignOps as a practice is—at its core—built to counteract exactly this kind of risk.

Beginning DesignOps — Defining, Measuring and Improving

You need to evaluate both where your organisation is doing well and where things are instead breaking down - across people, processes, tooling, workflows and jobs to be done.

Being removed from the organisational day-to-day can help you to more objectively engage with an organisation's design team, and the need for DesignOps. This is typically where the authors of this report find ourselves. Whether we're working with a 'mature' design organisation — i.e. one with a sophisticated DesignOps approach already in place — or with a business which is thinking about DesignOps for the very first time, we follow a fairly similar approach, and it's one you can apply yourself.

A more detailed example of this approach, and with tooling to help you get started, can be found in the *Design Productivity Blueprint*¹, which we co-created with Spotify Design, but there is a simplified version of the process below.

Following this process you will identify the pains, locate possible opportunities, and identify organisational goals.

Step 1. Define productivity

- Goal: To define 'design productivity' as a group for your organisation and uncover how to measure it.

Step 2. Understand the design workflow

- Goal: To understand and map your individual designer workflows.

Step 3. Build your blueprint

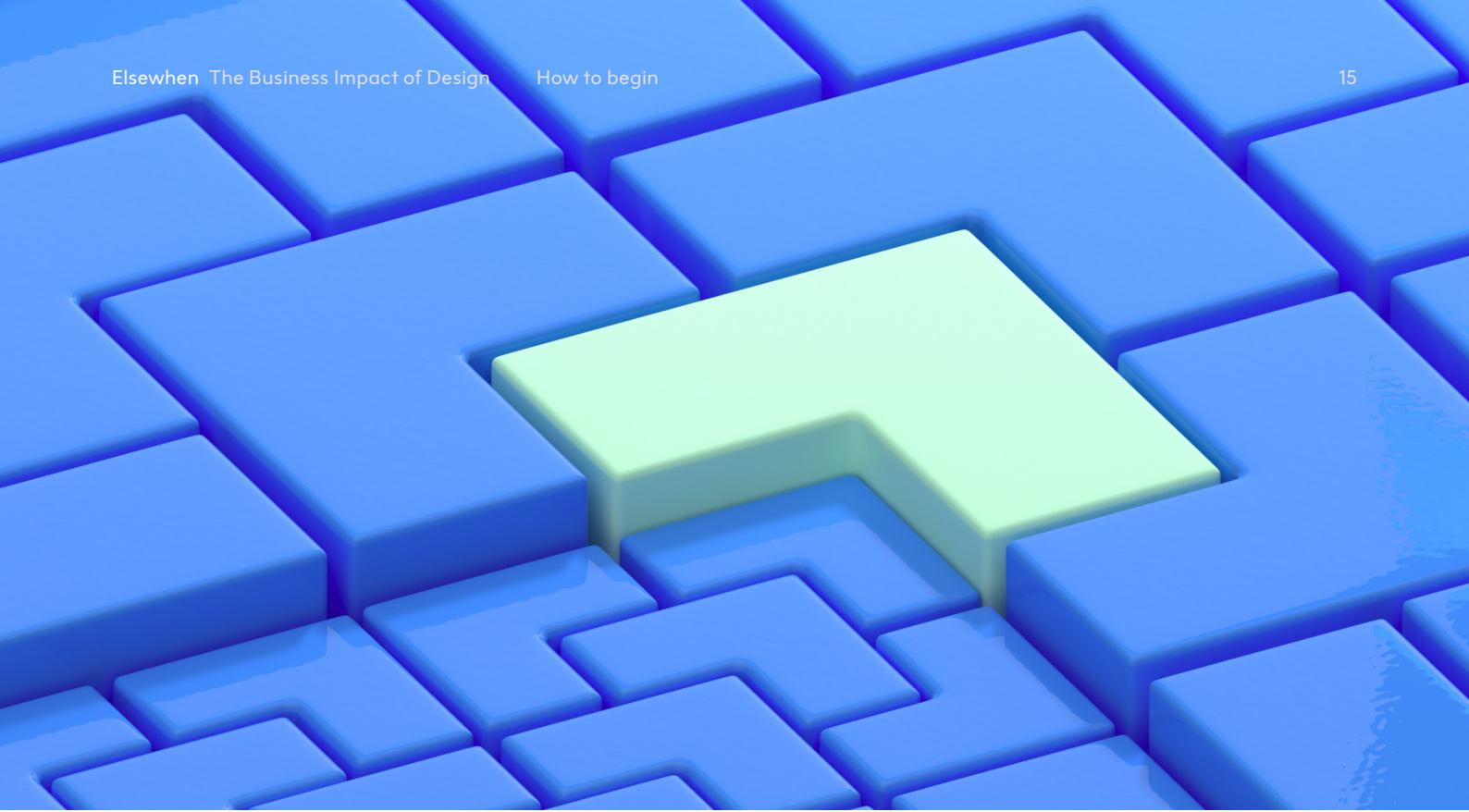
- Goal: To build a service design blueprint to describe a common designer workflow, with the most pertinent problems and opportunities identified.

Step 4. Gather feedback and iterate

- Goal: To share your productivity findings. These findings can help to kickstart a DesignOps process, or feed into your existing one.

By interviewing people working across the relevant teams, and involving senior stakeholders, you can synthesise that information down into a list of prioritised opportunities. These opportunities are then unpacked — i.e. expanded on and fleshed out — so they can be translated into initiatives that can be tested and validated, with metrics for success and failure.

¹ The tool can be found at: <https://www.figma.com/community/file/934395237081404612> with a contextual writeup at: <https://spotify.design/article/measuring-defining-and-improving-productivity-the-design-productivity>



Starting bottom up — Design Systems

When thinking about design productivity or DesignOps, perhaps the thing most companies operationalise first is their design system. Tools and workflows etc. are managed by the teams using them already, but the design system is often the first area that gets packaged up as a distinct initiative with some level of governance applied. The rationale is a solid one — it's largely under the direct control of the design team creating it and it can be self-initiated, it can start small and grow over time, and the value it delivers for the people investing time in it is immediately felt. However, a design system is only as good as the current state of adoption and documentation as it scales. It's important to lay the right foundations — especially as you begin to open the design system to more people — and as such there are many risks worth considering.

Many design systems end up as zombie graveyards containing out of date information, static resource hubs and redundant assets.

The overhead of evolving both the design system and keeping it up to date as a usable resource for others will eventually overwhelm a team without proper support. This will slowly erode trust in the design system leading to its eventual failure.

There are many tools and services which have emerged with the aim of solving these challenges through automation; making updates to the design system available in real time. One example is Figma, which puts real time co-designing and collaboration at the heart of the product. This all but removes the need for a separated system to bring outside contributors and commenters directly into a design system. These changes bring their own challenges and complexities because this level of access can easily overwhelm a team so it is by no means a perfect solution. It simply means the tools and processes underpinning design systems are maturing too, giving design systems a better route to success. But your team still needs the time, space and support to manage all of this.

Deciding internally to meaningfully tackle DesignOps doesn't, and shouldn't, end with the design system: but it can be valuable as a catalyst to start to frame the wider conversation around DesignOps. The design system is not a cure-all. In fact, the conversation could begin around determining the success, or even lack of, of the design system. For example, is your design system being used by everyone? Is it being maintained and updated? Does the required documentation exist?

The Pillars of DesignOps

DesignOps has several underlying themes or pillars running through everything it touches. At its core, DesignOps is about creating a healthy and collaborative environment for high-performing teams, fostering a culture of measuring and delivering impact to the bottom line, and championing the end user at every level of the business.

People and culture

At its most fundamental, DesignOps is about people and culture. Ultimately you want your team to be happy, fulfilled and getting better and more productive within their role. By protecting the welfare of your designers — investing in their progression and reducing the time spent on tasks that don't motivate them and offer little value to the business — you will maximise the enormous potential of design-driven growth in your organisation.

At its most fundamental, DesignOps is about people and culture.

To unpick those points slightly: You need to be able to preempt growing pains before they arise and get out of control. As teams grow, so does the level of complexity, and new tools and methods bring with them the potential for new challenges, such as adoption. This affects your designers ability to deliver, and symptoms start to present themselves: the work being produced

doesn't hit the expected standards, designers starting to make noises about becoming overwhelmed by their workload, and so on. These are the signs that designers are on the path to burnout.

It is at this point, and without a clear and well-thought out path, that people (usually the more senior designers first) start to leave. Every time this happens, you're losing all the time and money invested in that person, the brain drain of the knowledge they take with them, the hit to team culture and morale, and the added cost of trying to rehire and onboard a new designer. And if this is not brought under control it could lead to the dreaded talent death spiral, i.e. when the exodus accelerates because people see other people leaving. This can be incredibly difficult to stop.

It's important for designers to believe in what they are doing and where they are going. DesignOps should help to establish the processes that drive designer progression in a transparent and meaningful way. These processes should promote a culture of goal tracking and continuous improvement, which benefits both the organisation and the designers themselves. Organisations frequently fail to dedicate sufficient time and bandwidth to define and execute a clear plan for their designers' career paths, so DesignOps can free up the time for this and ensure that it takes place, but also introduce the right tooling to do so.

Measuring design's impact

Design has a unique 10,000ft view of how people (internal and external) move through a product or service. That vantage point means design has the potential to be enormously valuable to a business' goals. To adequately determine exactly how much value design is bringing to a business however, we need to understand how to measure it—both in terms of impact and ROI.

The challenge for DesignOps therefore, is setting teams up to be able to report on that for the wider business. Design teams need to be able to

build a comprehensive picture of how design is delivering on its targets and how they relate to value for the business. Instilling a data-driven culture in DesignOps will give teams the mandate and accountability to track and report on performance and help to maximise the investment in design, now and in the future.

To achieve this a design team needs clear, trackable KPIs which they are empowered to deliver against, and which are directly linked to the wider business objectives. These could be aligned to operational performance (e.g. productivity, employee attrition), customer feedback (e.g. NPS, CES), product/service performance (e.g. conversion, churn), financial performance (e.g. revenue, costs), or any other quantifiable metrics that are important to the business.

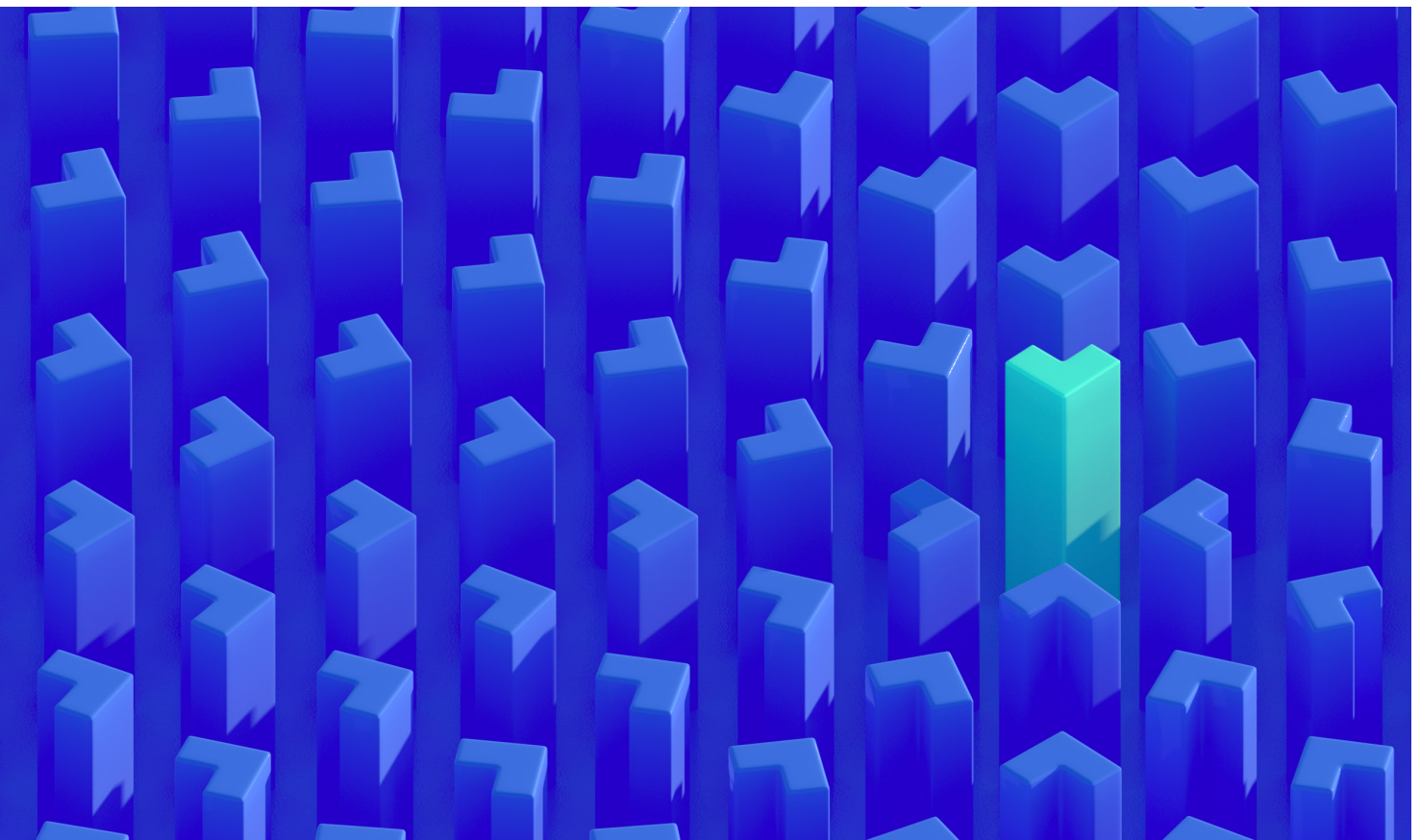
Ultimately as designers we are solving business problems, so an important aspect of DesignOps is to identify the right problems to focus on in order to contribute to the wider business goals. This is not a phase at the start, middle or end, but rather an ongoing part of your design strategy. It is a continuous feedback loop of the testing, iteration and insight generation needed to improve a product or service over time.

Tooling

A designer's toolchain is fundamental to their way of working and how effective they can be. Tools will determine how collaborative the team is able to be, as well as how quickly an idea can go from whiteboard or sketch, to pixels and prototypes, and to delivering value to customers. The right tools help to empower design teams and other disciplines to maximise the value of design, while the wrong tools can introduce new pain points and problems of their own.

We shared earlier that new tooling has emerged to accelerate and improve remote working, remote collaboration and distributed teams: Tools such as Figma and Miro. These tools don't just make remote working *possible*, they are actually fundamentally changing how group activities and collaboration work. This major shift towards real-time collaborative design lets teams co-design in the same space at the same time, from anywhere in the world. Designers and non-designers alike can collaborate on ideas together like never before.

An interesting side effect of introducing this improved tooling is that pre-existing power dynamics within teams can begin to shift. Previously quiet individuals can find their ability to influence has grown. When a group exercises are no longer about the loudest person in the room, two things happen: they become more democratic, and are distilled down into a more pure form of collaboration and co-design.



As we see more and more tools taking over what used to be handled in person, we'll see more and more companies embracing this wholesale digitisation. Going back to real post-it notes starts to look more and more archaic, meaning the remit of DesignOps will only continue to grow.

Tools like Figma and Miro don't just make remote working possible, they fundamentally change how group activities & collaboration work.

Accessibility

Hundreds of millions of people around the world have some form of disability which can affect how they interact with digital products and services.

Disabilities can affect vision, hearing or speech. They can be physical, neurological or cognitive, so the need for accessible products and services is high. By ignoring or underdelivering on accessibility companies are closing off their services to a large number of people.

Accessibility shouldn't be dismissed as a nice-to-have, it will soon be a regulatory imperative¹ and it carries a legal risk considering that the number of US accessibility lawsuits nearly tripled between 2017 and 2018².

Designing for the widest possible accessibility can be thought of as a more holistic application of user-centred design; where we are designing products and services that solve jobs and pains for our customers in the best way possible. When tackled properly, designing with improved accessibility in mind leads to a better overall user experience, not just for people with disabilities, but for everyone. It also champions a more inclusive culture and with an increasing demand for social responsibility from companies, accessibility is at the forefront of how business can address this and elevate their brand in the eyes of customers.

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1202>
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/accessibility-requirements-for-public-sector-web-sites-and-apps>

² <https://www.adatitleiii.com/2019/01/number-of-federal-website-accessibility-law-suits-nearly-triple-exceeding-2250-in-2018/>

Accessibility does not necessarily sit solely with design or DesignOps. There are many legal considerations so it touches every part of the organisation and the overall responsibility sits elsewhere. But designers, like engineers and product managers, will need to understand and adhere to accessibility best practices in everything they produce. This requires education, specific knowledge, tooling, frameworks, and access to more inclusive groups of users to test with. All of which falls within the scope of DesignOps.

Focus

A designer's ability to focus on designing has a close correlation with their overall productivity. Central to DesignOps therefore is helping designers to maintain their focus, in the hope of ultimately boosting their productivity. It's important to stress that productivity is not synonymous with efficiency in this context, but tackling efficiency (and defining what that means for your team) is still an important step in this process.

Boosting productivity is achieved by removing, or at least minimising, the outside intrusions or low value activities that pull the designer away from their core tasks and negatively affect their ability to focus. You should map out the designer's workflows, illuminating when the distractions arise, and begin to hypothesise opportunities to make improvements.

Making improvements often means automating steps, either by developing solutions yourself, or by introducing tools to do so. This could mean reducing the time taken for a specific repetitive task, or by finding ways to eliminate unnecessary steps entirely.

Automation

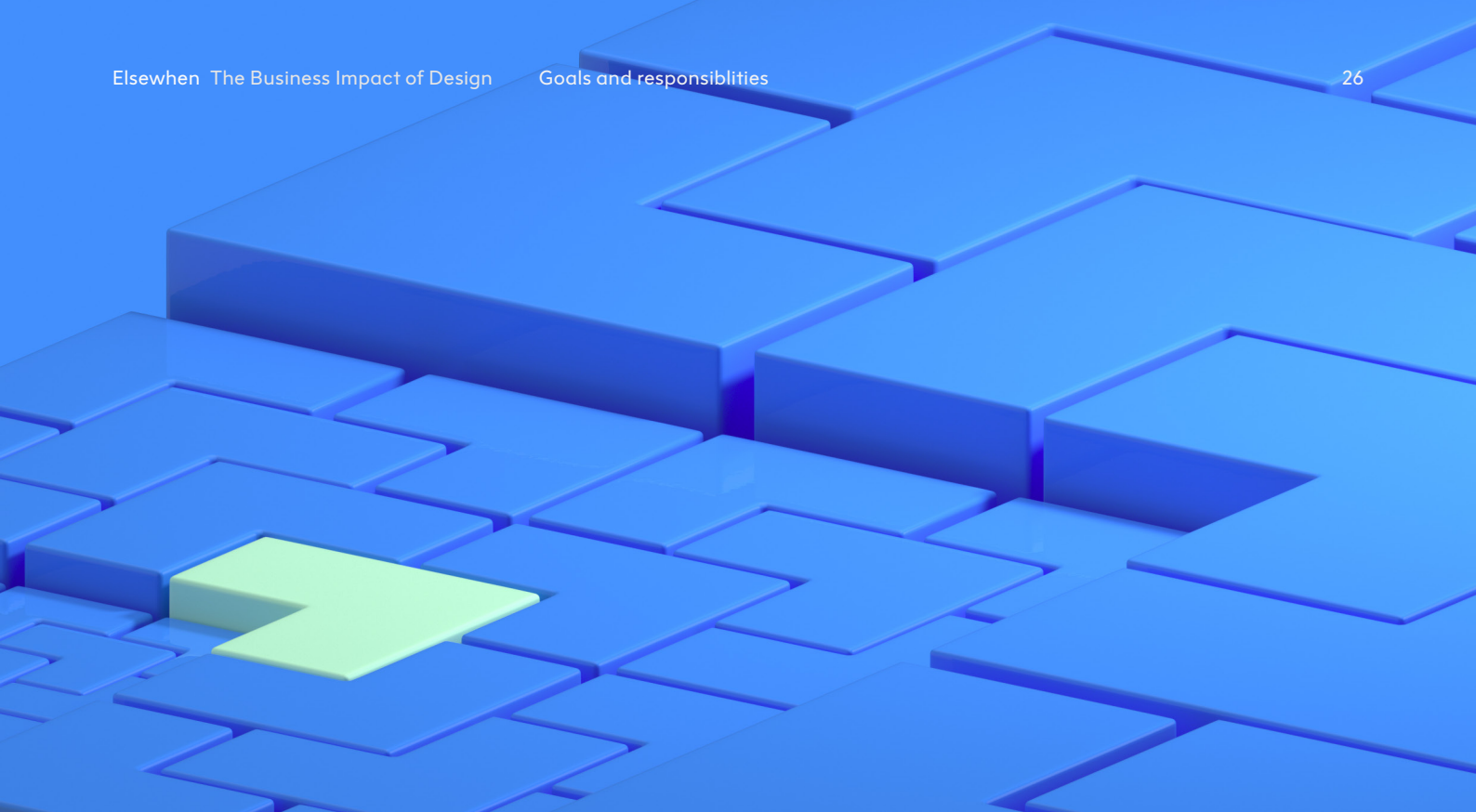
As the name would suggest, DesignOps borrowed its name from the already existing DevOps, and perhaps unsurprisingly it also shares many of the same core principles. There is a lot DesignOps can learn from DevOps – particularly in process automation. In a good DevOps process every line of code is automatically tested, built and distributed by continuous integration (CI) and continuous delivery (CD) pipelines, relieving engineers of time consuming operations.

Using automations to remove repetitive tasks helps to improve overall workflow efficiency and free engineers to stay focused on what's most important and to extract more value from each line of code. DesignOps similarly looks to identify and eliminate manual activities that are predictable and repeatable. Understanding and making use of the opportunities available in automating workflows can significantly speed up the process, meaning we ship more value to customers more often.

Many automations are available out of the box with the right tooling. For example, unifying UI design, prototyping, sharing, presentation and feedback under a single product like Figma can eliminate a huge number of manual steps. Or streamlining designer / developer hand off with tools like Zeplin to automatically generate much of the required documentation and specs. To leveraging custom plugins and API integrations (e.g. pulling real data into working designs to help visualise and test real world scenarios).

The compound effect of every automation, big or small, will turbo-charge the designer workflow. This helps teams better adapt to change while minimising waste. Whether that change comes through shifting business requirements, insights drawn from users – or anywhere else – using automation to drive a continuous improvement culture around what we deliver to customers, how we deliver it and what impact that has on the business is key to delivering value.

Goals and responsibilities



As we have already explored, unlocking the full impact design could have for a business means employing DesignOps practices. The activities and responsibilities of DesignOps vary widely depending on the size or 'maturity' of the design practice within an organisation, and so DesignOps should instead be understood in terms of the goals it will help an organisation achieve, rather than any codified set of activities.

That said, and with the further caveat that the discipline is still evolving, so any attempt at a list of the responsibilities that fall within the scope of DesignOps cannot be exhaustive, it is possible to list the core responsibilities that are attached to the discipline:

- Design metrics tracking
- Resource allocation and budgeting
- Recruitment, hiring and onboarding
- Progression tracks and career paths

- Support for project teams
- Celebrating and sharing successes
- Fostering a happy, healthy culture
- Design standards and best practices
- Design systems governance
- Asset management
- Managing resource banks and research hubs

Rather than being prescriptive, this list should instead help to illuminate how your organisation should think about making a success of the themes, projects and tasks that often get centralised and managed under the DesignOps team.

Balancing design(er) autonomy with efficiency

Achieving designer autonomy is an ideal state every organisation should strive for, but designers cannot work successfully in isolation.

Achieving design *efficiency* means maintaining smooth interfaces between designers and the parallel disciplines of product management and software development, and helping them to work towards a shared goal.

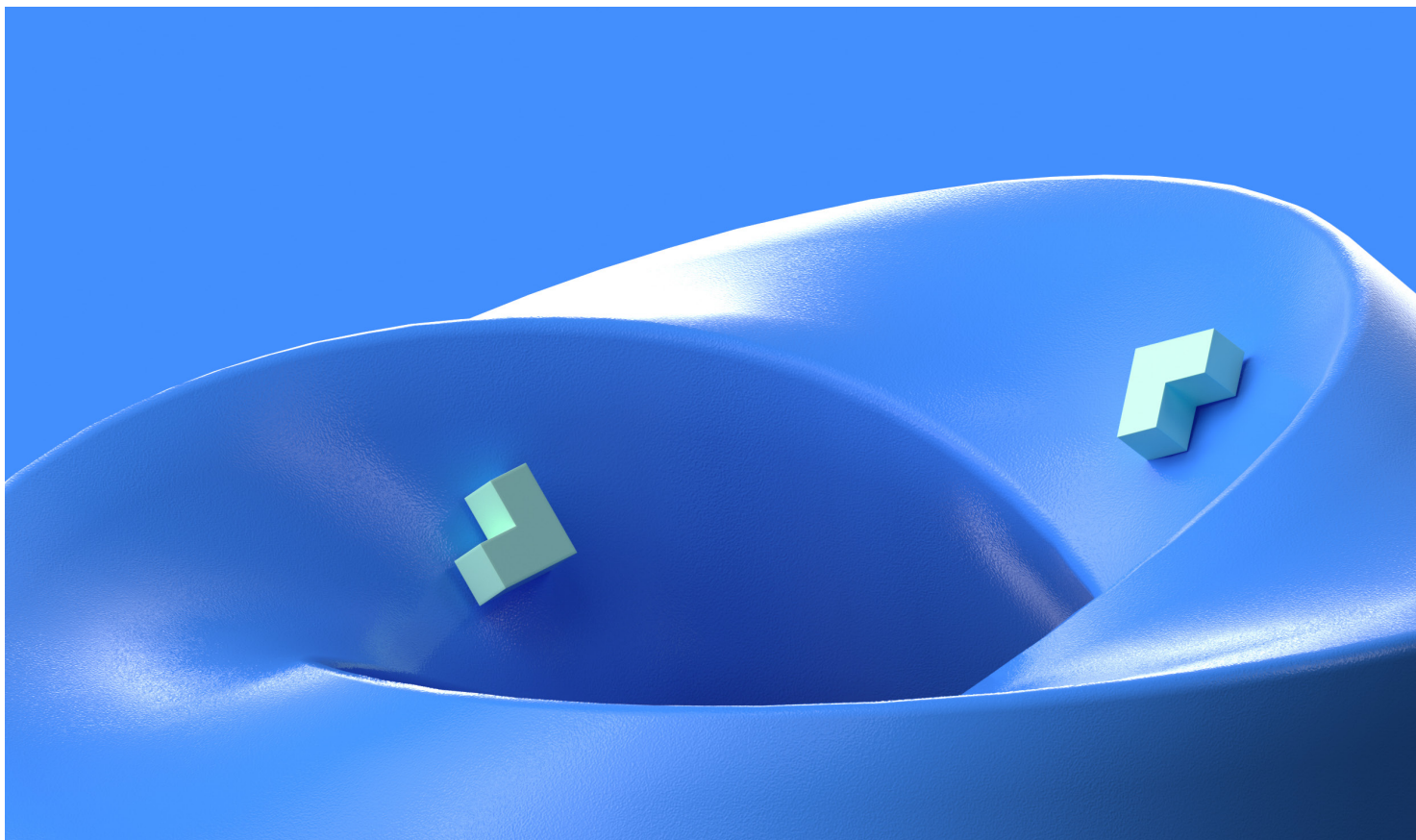
Points of friction between the disciplines or discipline teams are the enemies of efficiency. One obvious solution to this is to introduce new ways of working aimed at boosting efficiency—that could be new tools, workflows or anything else with the goal of improving how people get things done. But without some effective way to roll out and support these changes—as well as managing how they impact the wider DesignOps ecosystem—may just end up creating more problems than they solve. Coordinating and managing these issues as your team scales—for example allowing people to fix problems themselves while avoiding silos—is very challenging.

While there is no perfect solution, a better answer for managing this is to organise cross-functional working groups (or Champions in smaller teams) who own distinct horizontal domains. For example, you could employ a Figma Working Group, a Specs Working Group, a working group with the remit of the Design System, and so on. These groups take on the responsibility of defining and upholding standards, and making sure tooling scales with the organisation's needs.

The role of DesignOps is to free individuals up so they spend less time concentrating on low value tasks.

Balancing business output with creativity

Creativity and business output—or business value—need not be mutually exclusive, as both benefit when the design workflow becomes more productive. When you increase productivity, you don't just increase efficiency — and therefore the potential for greater output — you also increase the potential for creativity. Designers are given the time, space and bandwidth to think creatively. Therefore the role of DesignOps—or the person(s) given the responsibility of tackling design productivity—is to free individuals up so they spend less time concentrating on low value tasks, which could be predictable admin or repeating the same things over and over.



Removing or minimising these low value tasks from the workflow allows individuals to spend more time actually designing.

Hiring for DesignOps

As we've elaborated elsewhere, doing DesignOps effectively at scale means hiring for it. If you've made the decision to hire for DesignOps, or are pursuing a career in DesignOps yourself, you may wonder whether it's necessary to already have a career in design to make the jump. There isn't a simple answer but it is not always necessary. An alternative profile would be anyone with relevant operations experience who has worked closely with designers and understands the specifics that impact their work.

If you're reading this, you are almost certainly a design leader so you can likely find great candidates with proof of the former, and then determine for yourself in an interview process if they have the latter.

If you're building a job description, or working with the help of a recruiter, you can use this high-level profile to get started looking for a good fit. You're looking for someone likely already working in project/program/organisational operations. They have a deep appreciation for design and the tools and processes that enable it. They can hustle and negotiate - they can communicate and sell their ideas into the organisation.

DesignOps usually reports to the Design Director, the VP of Design, or equivalent. They are the main drivers that shape the process, ensuring the outcomes have a positive impact on the team and the wider business. They ensure designers always have what they need, freeing them up to do their best work.



Making the business case

To unlock the full business value of design, organisations need to invest time and money into transforming the ways they work. This requires a clear vision which is aligned to the broader business goals along with targets that can be tracked, measured and assessed over time.

There have been several reports published in recent years making the case for the business value of design: McKinsey's report on 'The Business Value of Design'¹; 'New Design Frontier' by Invision²; The Design Management Institute's 'Design Value Index'³, and so on. The common theme in all of these reports is the strong correlation between investing in design centricity and superior business performance, for example:

- Outperforming the S&P 500 by up to 211%⁴
- 32% more revenue than companies that don't⁵
- The best performing companies have promoted design to the C-suite⁶

The companies highlighted in all of these reports share certain specific characteristics: They have analytical leadership, high performing cross-functional teams, a dedication to continuous iteration and delivery, and have world-class user experiences. When combined, these characteristics start to build a convincing business case for DesignOps on their own.

At the end of the day, it's about outcomes.

We've already talked about how design is a critical component to achieving exceptional business performance, but without a clear approach to demonstrating the value of design any business case for investment is hard to make. It's important for design leaders to set the right metrics and establish good targets that will accelerate the business forward and take the organisation on the journey.

CEOs want to see tangible value from their investment so it's important to set up good processes for sharing performance metrics. As part of this you will want to be able to show exactly where investments are being used and how they're performing, e.g. expanding the reach of design leadership to help unlock latent value across the organisation and connecting the dots with other projects or initiatives that might be impacted; growing cross-functional teams to minimise silos and increase efficiency; roll out better tools and processes to drive effectiveness and productivity.

More than ever before, design has a seat at the table, but this will only continue to grow if it delivers on its promises. This will require design leaders to understand the broader business context so they can set a meaningful long term vision, backed by a concrete set of initiatives to get there, and a rigorous approach to measure progress.

¹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-design/our-insights/the-business-value-of-design>

² <https://www.invisionapp.com/design-better/design-maturity-model/>

³ <https://www.dmi.org/page/2015DVlandOTW>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-design/our-insights/the-business-value-of-design>

⁶ Ibid

Reframing the business case

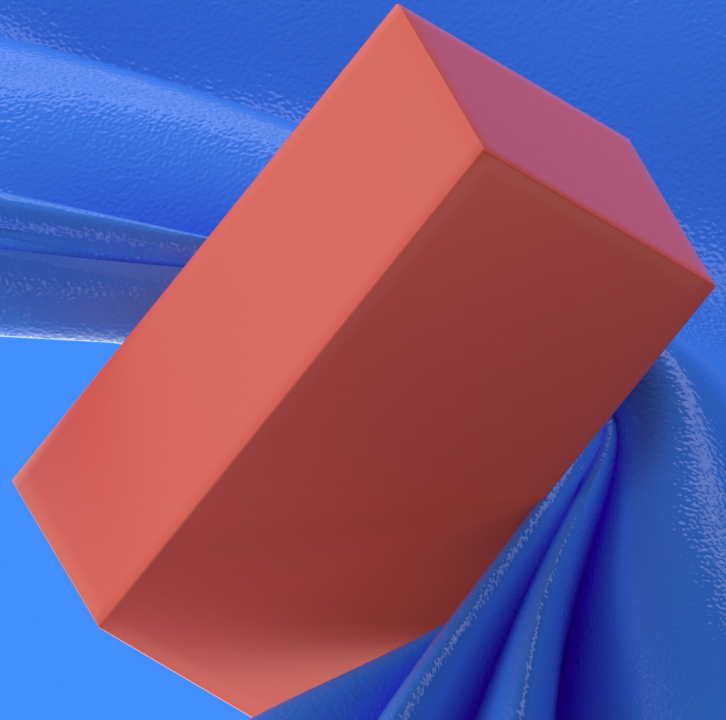
When attempting to make the business case for investing in design productivity, for example by hiring DesignOps, you need to reframe the ask, so it's not communicated purely in the terms of the cost of adding more people, but instead the impact those new hires will have across the wider team and the value they will bring to the organisation. As an example, if you have a 30-person design team, and have therefore met the threshold for hiring in specialised DesignOps, you might want to hire one or two people into that role.

If they manage to give just 2 hours back to each designer every week to spend on activities that deliver more value to the business, also boosting the overall wellbeing within the team and thus lowering attrition, then the investment more than pays off.

The point is if you can demonstrate the cost saving across the design function — just the tip of the iceberg of demonstrating potential ROI — then you have the beginnings of a business case.

When making the business case, you need to reframe the ask: so it's not communicated in terms of cost, but instead in terms of the impact it will have.

Conclusion: Where next for DesignOps and design productivity?



Where next?

You should start to operationalise DesignOps and tackle design productivity earlier than you think. In fact, you should probably start straight away, and use the pandemic as a way to force the conversation: The world is transitioning to a remote and distributed model. That is not up for discussion, what is, is whether it's a partial or complete transformation.

What's already true, is that we are digitising our workflows and processes faster than we ever thought - and that in itself is creating the need for DesignOps and parallel activities covering design productivity. Doing things 'just enough, just in time' is an excellent principle in most contexts, but with DesignOps it's hard to see that until it's already passed. When the building is already on fire, it's that bit harder introducing tools and processes to put it out.

Seeking outside help

Depending on the maturity of your organisation it can be helpful to work with a third party specialist like Elsewhen to help set up, benchmark and/or improve internal initiatives such as DesignOps.

Elsewhen often works with companies to explore new opportunities, whether that's external market opportunities or productising/operationalising internal tools and workflows. Our job is to help the organisation make sense of the opportunities available to them, to collaborate and bootstrap where needed in order to realise those opportunities, and to support our partners while they develop and mature their own capabilities. We often do this with a

focus on DesignOps and how it will be needed to support and maintain the changes we're making once we're no longer around.

Our clients are a real mix in terms of their 'design maturity'. There are those who are just starting out on this journey – perhaps their design team is too small or too early on in the process to justify adding this function internally, or perhaps they are scaling and want to experiment with this capability using an external partner.

We also work with more mature design organisations who can find it helpful for an experienced external team to hold up a mirror for them, to bring in a fresh perspective and then work with them to push things forward.

A specialist like Elsewhen comes with a wealth of pre-existing experience which can be used to test, validate and accelerate the integration and adoption of new capabilities.

Building and integrating teams is a long, costly and complex process and if the team you're building hasn't existed before, then the chances of getting things wrong is very high.

Therefore the risks to the organisation if that team fails, which can often be a protracted and painful event, can run deep and wide. This is as true for DesignOps as it is for any new team. So using an external partner to defer the initial learning curve frees up your efforts to focus on the business value and impact that team can bring, allowing companies to realise the benefits and mitigate potential issues much more quickly. All of which can lead the way to bringing these capabilities and teams in-house more successfully.

⁸ invisionapp.com/design-better/design-maturity-model/



Who are Elsewhen?

We empower leaders to harness a cutting edge approach to design and tech to deliver positive impact for their organisations.

We have spent the past decade reimagining consulting for the digital age. We are a 40-person digital product consultancy established in 2011 and based in London.

We combine strategy, design and engineering into one unified process.

We are independent and have none of the legacy technology, outdated culture, or procedural complexity that comes with being a thousand-person consultancy founded in the previous century.

We help companies tackle new market realities, pinpoint new business possibilities and surpass new customer expectations, and we lead the conversation—whether on technology, design, product or business—sharing our insights and best practices.

We work seamlessly with cutting edge organisations, or companies that aspire to be, to deliver best-in-class solutions into business-critical functions.

They understand that strategic thinking has to be deeply connected to execution experience; that achieving lasting change cannot come solely from the boardroom, but also from on-the-ground transformation.

Let's talk

Katy Heinemann
Growth, Elsewhen

katy@elsewhen.com
hello@elsewhen.com
elsewhen.com

Elsewhen

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