
The UX Landscape

What a UX career looks like in 2021




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The UX landscape

A fast-evolving landscape

The UX world is full of opportunity. But it can be tricky to navigate – even for seasoned professionals. In the last few years the industry has grown massively, and the roles of product and design teams have grown with it.

Why are these changes happening?

Because businesses understand how UX can drive their success. And where giants like Apple, Google and Amazon have led the way, the rest of the world is following.

What does it mean if you're working in UX?

You're in demand. Employers need UX expertise on their teams. Unfortunately, they don't always know how to hire for it. The result? Confusing job titles and catch-all job descriptions.

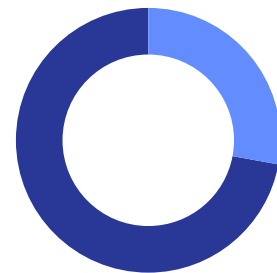
Is there clarity when it comes to UX job titles/roles?

28% Yes, I understand what's what

72% No, it's a minefield

"I understand, do recruiters and business managers?"

"They often get UX skills confused with coding or web design."



What you'll learn

- What does a career in UX look like?
- Where does the UX process come into play?
- Why does UX maturity matter?
- What's the difference between generalists and specialists?



UX terms explained

The UX process

UX is about solving problems for users. And the UX process is the structure we use to help us solve those problems. It ensures we're building products that people actually want to use. It gives the whole team a clear vision for the product.

UX maturity

UX maturity refers to how advanced UX is in an organisation. It's not about how big the team is or how long it's in place, it's about how advanced their understanding of UX is. Is UX essential or a nice-to-have?

Generalists vs specialists

A generalist works across multiple stages of the UX design process like a product designer.

A specialist works on a specific area of UX such as research or visual design. They'll have titles like UX researcher or UI designer.

Where do generalists work?

- Startups or small businesses where they don't have the resources for specialist UX skills and need an all-rounder.
- UX mature organisations where teams of specialists and generalists work together.
- UX immature organisations that don't see the value of dedicating people to niche areas.

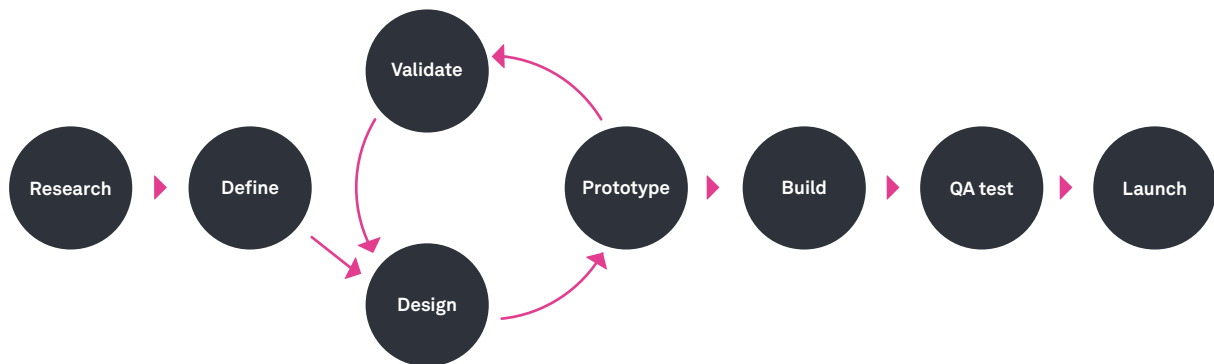
Where do specialists work?

- Specialists are most commonly found in UX mature organisations where UX is considered integral to the operation. This could range from tech companies like HubSpot to public services like the NHS.



What does the UX process look like?

To get a product to market, you need to complete a number of steps. Pictured below, these steps take you all the way from an idea to the launch of a product.



- The steps involved in developing a product

The **UX process** is everything that happens before a design is sent to developers to be built. It makes up the first few steps from research to prototyping.

At the **research and define** stages we speak with users to figure out what problems they have. This involves researching competitors and interviewing users.

At the **design** stage, we create solutions to the problems uncovered by our research.

From there, we make **prototypes** to test our designs before they go to developers.

At the **validation** stage we check how effective the designs are. It involves continuous testing.

A simplified version of the UX process looks like this:



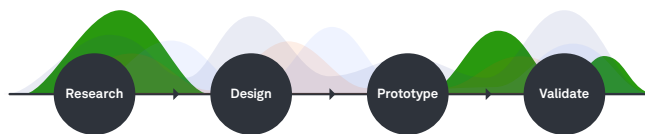
- UX process

Understanding the process is crucial for every role within UX.

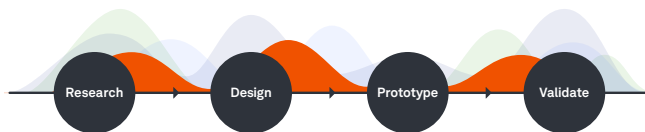


How do the different roles fit in the UX process?

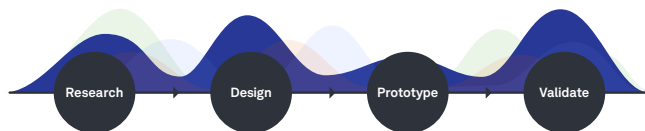
UX is a team sport and different people will be required at different stages of the UX process. It's fluid. It's collaborative. And it changes to suit the needs of the business.



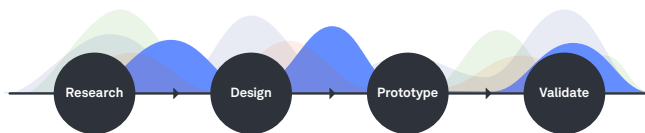
Researchers work on the Research and Validate stages.



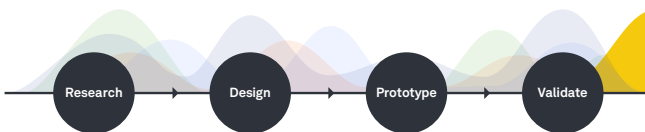
Content experts ensure the copy and design are aligned at each stage.



UX designers lead the Design and Validate stages but play an important role throughout.



UI designers will work with UX designers on the Prototype and Validate stages.



Developers come in at the Validate stage. They turn prototypes into live products.





Research Landscape

What's it like to work in UX research?

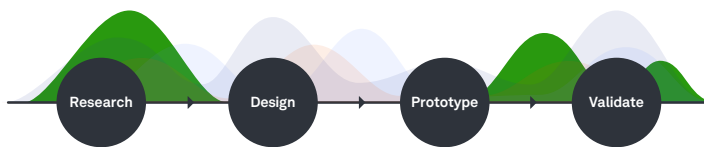
What is UX research?

Successful products solve genuine problems for users. UX research identifies the problem that our product or service needs to solve.

What do UX researchers do?

- Conduct research using methods like interviews, surveys and focus groups.
- Analyse the research data to uncover what the main problems are.
- Define the scope of the problems to make sure the right things are prioritised.
- Communicate research insights to the business.

The UX researcher is the owner of the research stage of the UX process.



What soft skills do you need as a UX researcher?

- **Collaboration:** Working well with different teams and personalities.
- **Communication:** Explaining issues and making recommendations people understand.

What technical skills do you need as a UX researcher?

UX researchers need to be skilled in both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

What do UX researchers earn?

*LinkedIn average base salary



€52,000



£40,000



\$107,000

Other names for UX researcher include:

- Product researcher
- Design researcher
- Usability researcher
- Usability analyst



What's the difference between quantitative and qualitative research?

Quantitative (quant) research focuses on numerical data. It's often represented in statistics and percentages. It gives us an overview of what is happening without telling us why.

For example, polling before an election will tell us who people are going to vote for, but not necessarily why e.g. 45% of people are going to vote for party A and 55% for party B.

Qualitative (qual) research provides more depth and insight.

It involves talking to people, gathering insights, finding problems and fixing them. There's a lot of interpretation, just like in psychology or sociology. It uses methods like interviews, surveys, focus groups, and usability tests.

It will tell us why people are voting for party A or party B.

Together, quant and qual give us a full picture.

Note:

Dedicated research teams are a sign of high UX maturity in a company. In very advanced teams, people are focused on a specific area of research like qualitative research.



Leaders' insight

Mitchell Wakefield

User Researcher at NHS Digital



Mitchell Wakefield started his career in UX research at IBM Canada in 2013 as a university intern. He worked as a UX research consultant for a number of years before moving into the healthcare space. He's been with NHS Digital since 2017.

“In the early 2010s, I think the hybridised approach to UX design was the standard where you had one person doing design and research. But as things have progressed, and the industry has matured, a lot of mature companies are understanding the value of having distinct separate roles.

Instead of having one person doing both, you'll have very specific people doing user research and others doing interaction design. I think that collaborative approach is really good because there needs to be a bit of separation between design and research.

If you're researching your own design, it can introduce a lot of bias. Also, in terms of actually having that specialism, you can't be a jack of all trades and a master of none.

Even within user research you're seeing specialisms become more defined like qualitative and quantitative UX researchers. It comes down to context and the budget of a company.”

“ It's overwhelming for one person to do the job of two or three people, working across design, content, research and project management. It might be appropriate for a small, fast-moving startup but as a firm gets bigger having one person leading across all these areas just isn't sustainable.



Leaders' insight

Melanie Polkosky

UX Consultant



Melanie Polkosky has over 20 years experience in UX research and design. A cognitive psychologist (PhD), Melanie has worked as a UX consultant for a number of Fortune 500 companies around the world.

“Specialising helps you get depth in something that’s really meaningful for you. But I would worry about becoming overly specialised and losing the forest for the trees. There has to be an overarching vision for what the experience is you’re creating, holistically.

Who holds that sort of top-level vision for what an experience is? Then, how do specialists play into that? It’s a hard question that’s facing our field. But generally, I do think it’s good that people specialise and recognise their strengths in a particular area.

As a researcher, I see lots of value in both quantitative and qualitative work. I consider myself a mixed-method researcher because what I try to do is integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods together in one study. That takes the strengths of both methods and puts them together in a way that can be really meaningful in the business world.

My advice to those starting out in the field would be to work in a team where you can have mentors. It’s important to be able to learn from the experience of others. The challenge when you’re consulting or working as a freelancer is that you’re the expert. Your clients are looking to you for that kind of answer. If you don’t know it, that’s a really stressful place to be.”

“ My advice to those starting out in the field would be to work in a team where you can have mentors.



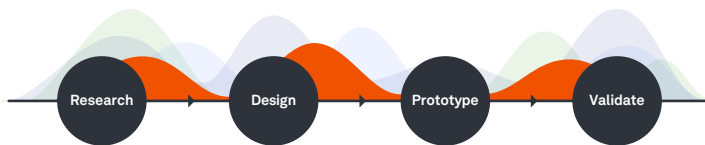
Content Landscape

What's it like to work in
content design?

What's it like to work in content design?

Like any role within UX, content design is about solving user problems. How? By ensuring the right words appear at the right time, in the right place. Content designers are the voice of the product.

Content designers are involved in each stage of the UX process.



What do content designers do?

- Plan, write, edit and test all product copy.
- Present complex information in a simple, digestible way.
- Ensure the copy serves the user and not just the business leaders.

What skills are important for content designers?

In every UX role, empathy, communication and collaboration are important. But successful content designers are also excellent writers, data-driven and design-focused.

- **Data-driven:** Content design is different from marketing copywriting because it's completely led by user insights. Content designers translate user data into clear and helpful copy. They write copy that is functional, not persuasive.
- **Design-focused:** The best content designers know that words are just one part of the job. They're not just meticulous writers, they also understand design principles such as contrast and balance.

What do content designers earn?

*LinkedIn average base salary



Insufficient salary data available



£34,500



\$81,000



Is there a difference between UX writing and content design?

Yes and no.

Specialist UX content roles are relatively new. This means that the remit and title of these roles is determined by what individual companies need rather than established industry standards.

Other names for content designer include:

- Digital content writer
- Product copywriter
- Digital content writer
- Content strategist

You might be called a content designer, a content strategist, a UX writer or a product writer but generally you'll work on two key areas: UX writing and content strategy. In UX mature companies these might be two separate roles but usually, they're combined.

UX writing focuses on creating the copy and microcopy for the whole product. This includes writing crucial content like tool tips, error messages and notifications. Good UX writing presents complex ideas simply. It helps users find what they're looking for on a website or app or interface.

Content strategy looks at the overall vision for the company and how content feeds into that. Content strategy can span multiple teams including product, marketing and customer service.

If UX writing is about creating the content that solves user problems, content strategy is about defining the problems and the overall approach to solving them.



Leaders' insight

Jen Schaefer

Head of Content Design at Netflix



Jen Schaefer began her career in journalism and publishing. She worked in content strategy on a number of key products at Google before moving to Netflix to head up the Content Design Team.

“People who have a love for language are really well positioned to transition into UX, as long as they’re passionate about getting into the mindset of the customers. My team at Netflix come from a wide variety of backgrounds such as gaming, library science, advertising and journalism.

When I came onboard, there were just four content designers. There were a lot of writers at Netflix but none within design until this team. It was a very conscious decision to call our team content design. That name, even more than content strategist or UX writer, really cemented our place in the design function, which is great. We’ve grown our team to cover many key product areas, and it’s been an amazing evolution.

As an emerging team we’ve had to educate stakeholders on when to loop us in, how to work with content designers in general, and the value we can bring at different stages of the project. The design team is really thankful to have language-focused designers working in lockstep with them. We spend a lot of time building out our style guide. Codifying language helps us sound like one unified company across our various touchpoints.”

““ *The words are so integral to the experience. But when we’re doing our jobs well, people aren’t even going to notice the words.*



Leaders' insight

Laurah Mwirichia

Product Writer at Square



Laurah Mwirichia is a product writer and user experience advocate. She spent several years working in content creation for tech startups in New York before discovering her true passion, UX writing.

“On my team there’s only one content strategist and it’s me. Content strategy is very aligned with design, very aligned with informational architecture and the research that we’re getting from users. What language do they use? What are they calling things? How are we building things in a way that it’s understandable for the person using it?”

UX writing has to be something that people can intrinsically understand, and that has to be backed up by research.

My advice for someone considering a career in UX content would be *don’t be afraid of the field*. It’s a super young field so it’s a great opportunity to get started and help shape the industry. Aside from that, always be learning, this is not a career that you can rest on your laurels. You have to be reading constantly. You have to be getting books, going to webinars, attending conferences. You have to stay in front of the technology that you’re creating.”

““ The main difference between writing for marketing versus writing for user experience, is we really, really, really have to centre the user in what we do. Everything we create is for them.”

Community Insights

68% of people say upskilling is important to stay relevant.



Leaders' insight

Jonathon Colman

Senior Group Design Manager at Intercom



Jonathon Colman leads Platform and Growth product design and the content design discipline at Intercom. He's a Webby Award-winning designer and a keynote speaker who's appeared at over 90 events in 9 countries on 5 continents.

“Content strategist, designer, UX writer - I see all of these titles as being liquid. They're liquid that you pour into a container and that container is the company. These titles or responsibilities take the shape of the container they're poured into. What I refer to as content design might be UX writing in one company or content strategy in another.

The most effective content designers are the ones who can set language aside and focus on the problems.

Being a good writer is not enough to drive success, you need to be able to understand how to move the product forward.

It's something that content designers aren't always good at so that's what I was focused on as a manager - how to help them become stronger product professionals, not just stronger writers.

Intercom sets up content designers and product designers with the same expectations and accountability. There are essentially no differences.

I love design and product and solving problems but more than that I love helping people to grow and progress in their career.

“ Many people are joining the UX field, and there's room for us all. However, the ones who get elevated tend to look a lot like me: white and male. That's a problem. We need to solve it by building inclusive, equitable spaces for everyone to succeed.



Design Landscape

The most in-demand UX design roles and what they entail.

What's it like to be a UX designer?

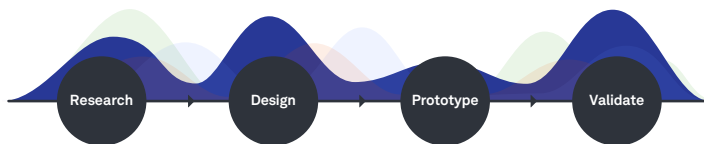
In a UX project, every team member helps solve the user problem. And UX designers are the most pivotal part of the process.

Put simply, a UX designer solves the problems that come up during research. But senior designers play a bigger role, getting involved in user research, defining the problem, and leading on designing the solution.

What do UX designers do?

- Work with stakeholders (users, researchers, business owners) to understand the problem that needs to be solved.
- Design a solution that satisfies the needs of the user and the business.
- Test the design to make sure it's solving the problem.

The UX designer is involved in the entire UX process from research to testing.



What skills do you need as a UX designer?

- **Empathy:** seeing things from the team and the user's perspective.
- **Communication:** articulating design decisions to business leaders.
- **Problem solving:** focusing on the big picture to find a solution.
- **Collaboration:** working with different teams to align the business behind the same goal, better UX.

What do UX designers earn?

*LinkedIn average base salary

🇩🇪 €45,000

🇬🇧 £34,000

🇺🇸 \$81,000

Other names for UX designer include:

- Interaction designer
- Experience designer



Leaders' insight

Krys Blackwood

Senior UX Designer at Jet Propulsion Lab, NASA



Krys Blackwood has been working in UX for over 20 years. She began her career in Silicon Valley working as both a researcher and designer. Now she works at NASA, designing the future of mission operations.

“I work on the Europa Clipper project, which is basically service design, service blueprinting and experience design for how we will run the mission once we’ve launched. I also work on Europa Lander where I’m helping to design the same thing, but so much earlier because Europa Lander is just a concept right now, we don’t have a mission to land on Europa.

I also work on the Deep Space Network, which is an infrastructure project of antennas around the world which is how we get back pictures from space. UX just spans everything.

As a company matures in its UX journey, it will have people specialise. Companies who are just beginning to accept UX as a critical part of its operating will often only hire one person. That's why you need generalists as well.

I do think you need both kinds of people, especially in large UX teams. You need people who specialise in research, in content and in UI. You can get really narrow and specialised, but then you also need generalists who understand how everything fits together. Because at that point, you have a holistic ecosystem of design.”

““ The question I would always ask is, if you get to a place that is supposedly UX mature and they don’t have any specialisation, is UX just a buzzword they’re using or are they actually doing it right?”



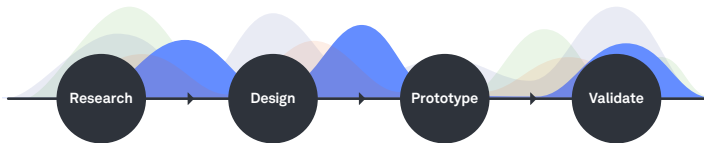
What's it like to be a UI designer?

UI designers are in charge of a product's aesthetic. They take the framework created by UX designers and turn it into a polished design.

What do UI designers do?

- Own the visual design of a product.
- Create and maintain styleguides for interfaces.
- Focus on the brand as well as the user.

UI designers continue the work created during the design phase of the UX process.



What skills do I need to work in UI design?

- **Creativity:** produce beautiful, functional interfaces.
- **Communication:** explain the rationale behind design decisions to developers and business leaders.
- **Resilience:** take creative direction and be comfortable with feedback.

What technical skills do I need?

Knowledge of design principles and techniques like typography, contrast and balance.

What do UI designers earn?

*LinkedIn average base salary



€40,000



£35,000



\$70,000

Other names for UI designer include:

UI designers can also be called visual designers. UI engineer is usually a synonym for a front-end developer.



What's the difference between UX designers and UI designers?

To understand the difference, think of architecture and interior design.

UX designers are like architects. They make a product functional by focusing on its structure and flow. UI designers are like interior designers. They make a product visually appealing by focusing on its aesthetics. To create great products both roles are critical but just like architecture, UX is more fundamental to the build.

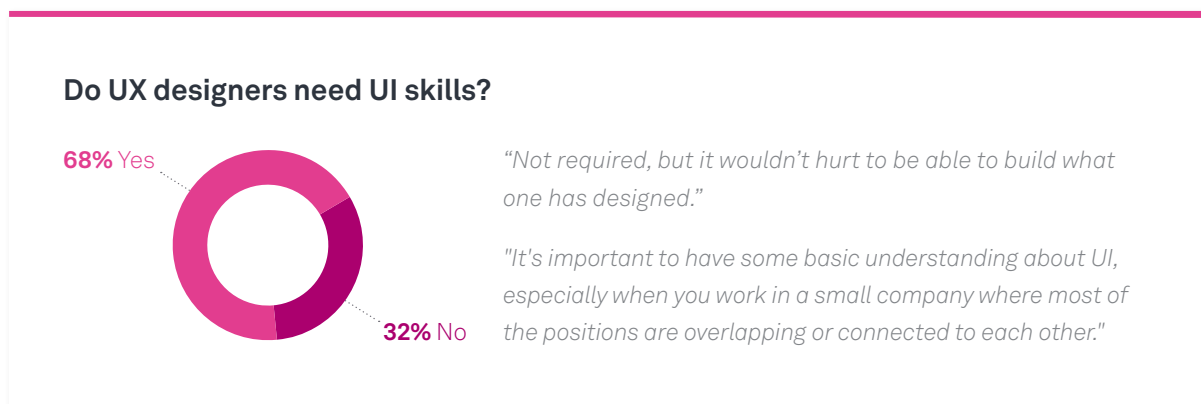
If they're different disciplines, why do we have UX/UI designers?

Some employers will combine these two roles to make the UX/UI designer. This is usually down to fewer resources or UX immaturity.

What's it like to work as a UX/UI designer?

If you're new to UX, this role can be an opportunity to work across the whole process and get hands-on experience at multiple stages. However, it can also mean a lack of UX buy-in from employers. That can be a problem for four reasons:

1. It's likely the employer will undervalue UX research.
2. If you're always having to sell UX, you're not always getting to do UX.
3. It's hard to progress without experienced UX people to learn from.
4. When you're tasked with everything, you can't focus and hone your skills on a particular area.



Leaders' insight

Ben Taylor

Product Design Lead at HubSpot

Ben Taylor has been in the UX industry for the last ten years. He has worked for software companies like SAP, Workday and Paddy Power. He is currently at HubSpot, focusing on the partner experience.

“There’s a number of different scales of maturity. In my earlier career, I’ve been in roles that have been branded as UX but were really more design production and a bit of front-end code.

Sometimes with lower maturity teams, there’s a mistake to spread design resources really thin in an effort to maximise coverage. The end goal should be to become a data-driven organisation; where UX is a partner in driving the direction of an organisation in bringing the human element to the business strategy.

I think that more specialisation is a recognition of the value that UX brings.

I’d say the UX maturity at HubSpot is very high. There’s a huge amount of collaboration and impact to be had. I get that feeling every day working with research, senior designers, content designers, and analysts.

I’d be biased about getting a generalist skill set because that’s what I did. I’m predominantly a generalist; I’ve got areas where my knowledge is deeper than others. Working in enterprise, I really wanted to level up on the strategy side. You won’t be all things to everybody, so decide your omissions.”

“ I’d say to people don’t worry about the title. A title is meaningless if you can’t back it up! Worry about the experience you’re going to get and how you want to grow your career.



What are other common UX job titles?

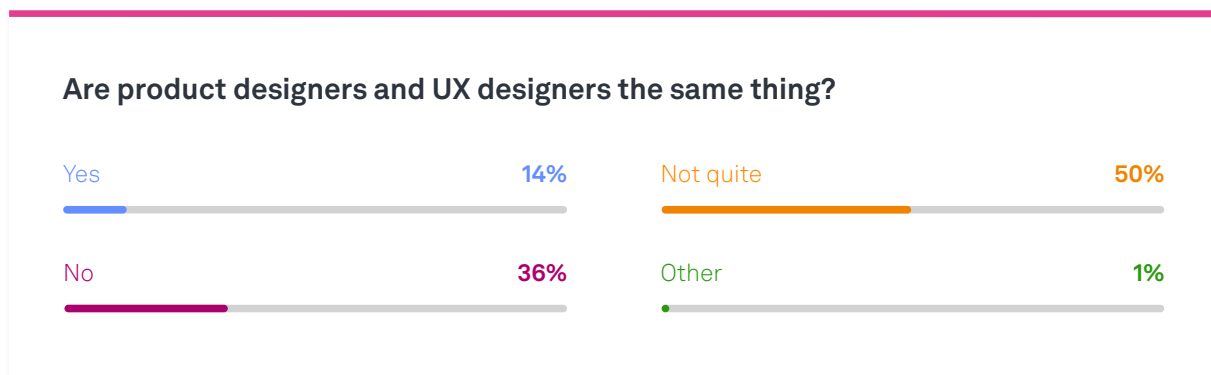
Product designer

Put simply, product designers create products that people love. They're responsible for the long-term improvement of a product.

What's the difference between a product designer and a UX designer?

It's not always 100% clear. After all, both roles help create positive user experiences (and meet business needs). Sometimes companies will use product designer and UX designer interchangeably.

But here's one real difference. Product designers only work on digital products, while UX designers can work on all kinds of user experiences - from museums to universities.



UX architect

Remember when we said that UX designers are like architects? Well, UX architect is another role within the industry. It refers to senior professionals who own the UX strategy in a company.

What's the difference between a UX architect and a UX designer?

UX architects are strategists more than practitioners. They practice UX when necessary, but their main focus is to put UX designers on the right path to complete a project. They are UX leaders.



Leaders' insight

Andrea Caporale

UX Architect at Microsoft



Andrea Caporale is part of the UX Global Practice of Microsoft Consulting. Over the last 13 years, he's worked as a design leader in organisations like the United Nations and University of the Arts London, where he teaches user experience.

“At Microsoft, the design practice is so broad and multidisciplinary across the whole company that we literally have every possible role you can think of. Even roles that you wouldn't think exist yet, they are there. It's a constant discovery and journey.

My role is to give UX direction, comprehending both development and design. I support shaping deals with customers, create relationships and drive our partnerships from a design and product perspective. I'm not a line manager but I'm an enabler for my team. I build bridges between other people in the organisation.

I'm a generalist, I think that's needed to be a UX lead. I do not necessarily know all of the answers, but I try to put the team on the right path.

As these teams evolve, I see the designer as the one connecting the dots, but many are trying to put designers into a box. Specialisation is good but there's a tendency of trying to hyper label people. Sometimes this is siloing the very thing that needs to be built. This is where we need to be smart in our industry and break the silos that are being created.”

“ *The wider UX industry still needs to mature. A classic example is that UX is still being confused with UI.*



Why are there so many different UX design job titles?

There's lots of reasons.

1. No two companies are the same.

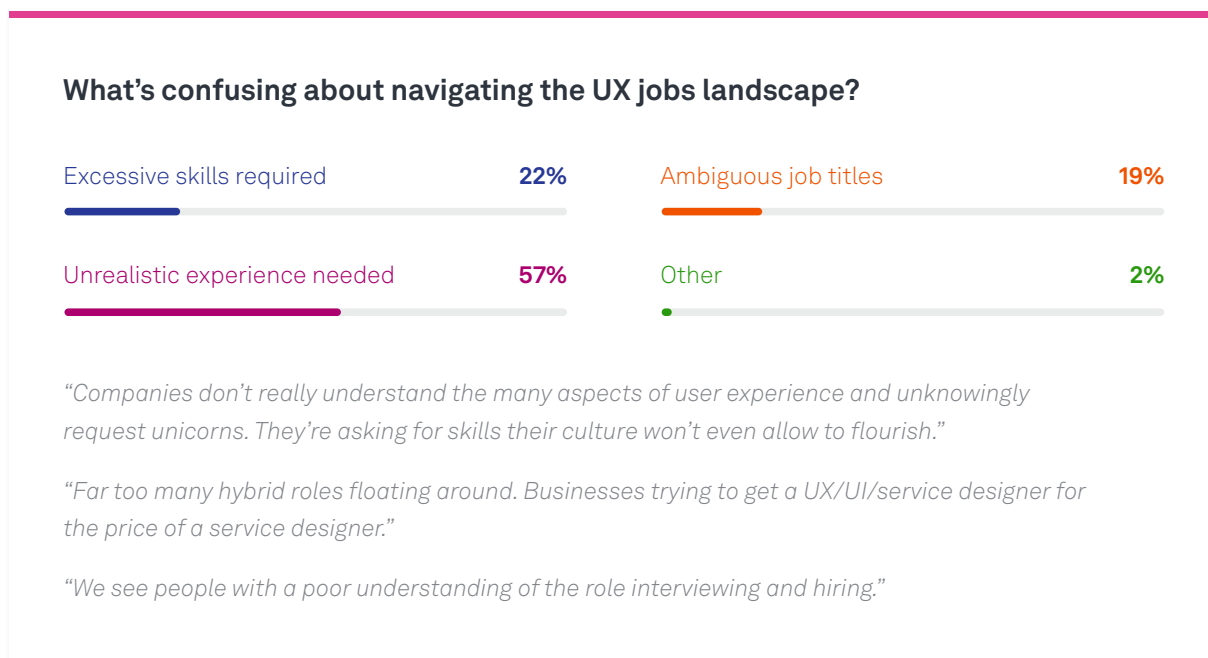
The same titles can mean different things, depending on the structure of a company. And what language they prefer to use. One company's UX designer could be another company's product expert.

2. UX maturity is a big factor.

In mature UX teams, they really understand what skills are required at each stage of the UX process. In less mature teams, they often don't. There can be unrealistic expectations of what UX designers do. Employers looking for UX designers with coding or visual design skills is a good example of this.

3. Hiring managers and designers can have different priorities.

Recruiters can have considerations that design leaders don't. The overall hiring budget for the company, for example, and the hiring gaps in other teams. This means job descriptions can look quite different to what the design lead needs in a candidate.



Leaders' insight

Tom Cunningham

Senior Product Designer at Workday



Aside from working on design systems at Workday, Tom Cunningham draws on his decade of industry experience to co-host the design podcast, 'Opacity'. He's also the course creator for the UX Design Institute's Professional Certificate in Visual Design.

"I think the landscape is changing all the time and, from talking to other designers, we find it hard to label ourselves. UX is a broad term that encompasses a lot of things.

When I worked in consultancy, sometimes the labels that we gave each other were more for the benefit of the client, to understand the different types of designers.

My current role straddles visual design, UX and systems thinking. That ticks a lot of boxes because I like variety.

You may have people who are explicitly like, 'I don't do visuals and I've no interest in that. My area of expertise is more analytical thinking, thinking about the user.' And I think that's fine once you've got enough people to round out those needs.

Visuals are needed. Otherwise you could have a strong product that's not presented very well. UI in this sense is a desirable skill. There's an immediate visual response from people when they see that something is well executed."

“ Building software is difficult and it takes a lot of expertise and diverse perspectives to do it correctly. I like being a generalist with specialist skills. But I think the fact that the industry is allowing more people to specialise is a sign of maturity.





Recruiter insights

Five things you can expect to see on the UX job hunt

Recruiter insights

We spoke to Libby Kelly, Director of Cpl Technology, and Barry Winkless, Head of the Future of Work Institute, Cpl, about what we can expect from the UX hiring landscape. Here are five key recruiter insights:

1. Demand is high



Libby: I think the future landscape looks really good. Companies are having to go online very, very quickly. There's so much stiff competition online now, it's a buyer's market. We're seeing an increasing number of our clients moving into the UX space, and expect this growth to continue for 2021. Demand will only go one way for talented UX and visual designers.

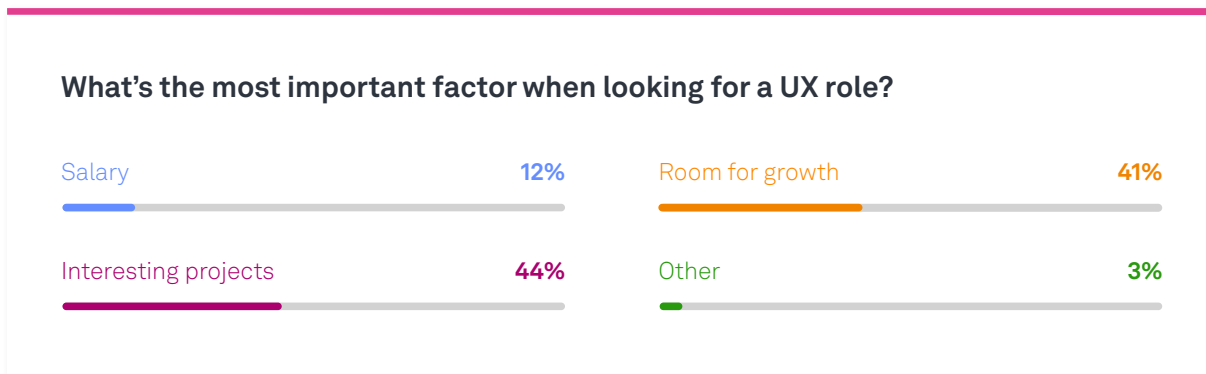


Barry: Core UX design skills are in high demand in terms of thinking styles, and the value they bring to organisations. Just because you learn UX or design skills in general, doesn't mean you're going to move into a very defined design role but the skills are still seen as really valuable to have.

2. Covid-19 will accelerate maturity



Libby: Companies have already matured around the UX space because they've had to. They know they'll be left behind if they don't have an online presence. I'm quite excited because I think there's going to be huge growth in the years beyond now as a result.



3. UX roles can be unclear



Barry: Organisations still have some work to do around understanding the value of UX. And the real difference UX skills can make to that organisation!



Libby: We are definitely seeing an increase in design-centricity in business in general. But we also often see a lack of understanding around UX skills, where employers try and put three jobs into one to save money. Budgets have been cut in some companies, so they're trying to do more with less.

4. Skills are more important than titles



Barry: In the tech space, it's less about the job title and more about these different competencies that can be brought to bear in multiple different projects. Companies are starting to ask themselves if they should have very defined roles or do they need T-shaped individuals that can deliver projects across multiple areas.

5. Salaries will rise



Libby: Thankfully, there doesn't seem to have been a drop in terms of salary rates with Covid-19. It's great to see because it can take a long time to come back around from a drop. UX salaries have stayed strong. I really do think salaries and rates will increase in time, purely because of the competition. It's still a relatively new market and it's in such a growth phase.



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