

ECOSYSTEM LEADERSHIP REPORT: DESIGN 2024

AI Integration in Design

Cross-Functional Collaboration

From Design to Business
Leadership

Measuring and Communicating
Design Impact

Sustainable and Ethical Design
Practices

Balancing Specialization and
Generalization in Design Roles

diegoNMTZ

A large, abstract graphic on the right side of the page consists of multiple overlapping, wavy bands of color. The colors transition from warm tones like orange and red on the left to cooler tones like blue and purple on the right. The bands are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement, resembling a stylized wave or a ribbon.

THE VALUE OF THE ELR

The **Ecosystem Leadership Report: Design 2024** is the first of a series of three reports. The upcoming reports will focus on Product and Engineering leadership. The **diegoNMTZ** team created the **ELR: Design 2024** as a guide for design leaders. As the industry transforms, the expectations of design leaders are changing, and staying informed about emerging trends and diverse approaches is crucial. This report sets expectations, highlights what leaders are doing in their roles, and offers fresh perspectives on design leadership.

Our goal is not only to share the voices of many talented leaders interviewed for this report but also to diversify the conversation and introduce new ideas. This is a thought starter, trend setter, and a redefinition of what it means to lead in design today. Through these insights, we seek to shape the broader discourse, offering strategies and a forward-thinking approach to leadership challenges.

This report stands out for its comprehensive approach to design leadership. By synthesizing insights from a diverse array of industry leaders, we present a multifaceted view of the challenges and opportunities facing design leaders today. More than just a source of information, this report provides actionable strategies for effective design leadership, helping leaders navigate the present and prepare for what's to come.

Looking towards the future of design leadership, this report serves as both a snapshot of the present and a guide for what's next. The insights shared here aim to equip leaders with the foresight and adaptability needed to thrive. By exploring emerging trends and innovative approaches, we help prepare design leaders for future challenges and opportunities.

We extend special thanks to the leaders and their companies who generously shared their time and insights for this report. Their contributions have significantly enriched this work. The insights in this report span the globe, drawing from interviews with leaders across North America, Latin America, Western & Eastern Europe, and Western Asia. Our multilingual approach, conducting interviews in Spanish, Portuguese, and English, ensures an international perspective. This diversity of voices and experiences offers insights that are applicable across industries and cultural contexts.

We invite you to actively engage with the content of this report. Reflect on your own leadership experiences and share your thoughts or ideas with us via email at diego@diegonmtz.com. We look forward to hearing from you.

To all the readers, thank you for taking the time to explore this content—we hope it inspires you on your own leadership journey. For continued insights on leadership and emerging trends, visit our website at www.diegonmtz.com and subscribe to our Substack at diegonmtz.substack.com, where we regularly share content on the future of leadership.

Diego Núñez
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Ecosystem Leadership Report: Design 2024** offers an exploration of the evolving responsibilities of design leaders. This report is the first in a series of three, with upcoming editions focusing on Product and Engineering. It serves both as a strategic guide and a tool for reflection, helping leaders navigate the complexities of their roles while driving meaningful outcomes for their teams and organizations.

1 AI Integration in Design:

AI is becoming an integral part of the design processes, enhancing human creativity rather than replacing it. Design leaders are now required to manage both human talent and AI agents, balancing automation with empathy to ensure AI serves as a partner.

This shift implies a need for leaders to develop new skills in AI management and ethics.

2 Cross-Functional Collaboration:

Effective design leadership requires breaking down silos and collaborating across departments, from engineering to product and beyond. Building trust and aligning design efforts with broader business goals are essential for fostering innovation and delivering impactful results. This trend suggests that future design leaders will need to be skilled facilitators and communicators across diverse teams.

3 From Design to Business Leadership:

Design leaders are increasingly expected to shift from tactical execution to strategic business leadership. This involves developing business acumen, aligning design efforts with organizational priorities, and clearly communicating how design drives measurable business outcomes. As a result, design leaders may find themselves playing a more prominent role in shaping overall business strategy.

4 Measuring and Communicating Design Impact:

The value of design extends beyond visual appeal—it must deliver tangible results for the business. Design leaders need to adopt metrics that align with business objectives and communicate those outcomes in a way that resonates with executives and stakeholders. This shift towards data-driven design leadership is likely to become a critical differentiator for successful design teams.

5 Sustainable and Ethical Design:

As sustainability becomes a core expectation for businesses, design leaders must integrate ethical principles into their processes. The report examines how leaders can create designs that are both responsible and aligned with business goals, balancing profitability with sustainability. This focus on ethical design is expected to become a key competitive advantage in the coming years.

6 Balancing Specialization and Generalization in Design Roles:

The modern design team requires a mix of deep specialization and broad generalization. Leaders must strike the right balance, ensuring teams can tackle complex problems while remaining adaptable to shifting demands and opportunities. This balance will be crucial for design teams to remain agile in the face of rapidly evolving technologies and market demands.

The **Ecosystem Leadership Report: Design 2024** stands out for its comprehensive approach to design leadership. By synthesizing insights from a diverse array of industry leaders, we present a multifaceted view of the challenges and opportunities facing design leaders today. More than just a source of information, this report provides actionable strategies for effective design leadership, helping leaders navigate the present and prepare for what's to come.

Looking towards the future of design leadership, this report serves as both a snapshot of the present and a guide for what's next. The insights shared here aim to equip leaders with the foresight and adaptability needed to thrive in an increasingly AI-driven, sustainability-focused, and business-oriented design landscape. By exploring emerging trends and innovative approaches, we help prepare design leaders for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The **Ecosystem Leadership Report: Design 2024** provides a multifaceted view of the challenges and opportunities facing design leaders today. From AI integration to business alignment and sustainability, the report highlights how leaders must evolve to meet new demands while ensuring that design continues to be a driving force in business success.

For design leaders, this report is a resource for both reflection and action—designed to challenge traditional leadership models and prepare them for the future of design. As the industry continues to evolve, the insights and strategies presented here will be crucial for those looking to lead with vision, adaptability, and impact.

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AI INTEGRATION IN DESIGN

*"We're going to be less and less on an individual contributor level. And we're all going to be managers, managing agents, managing, AI bots, for lack of a better term."
Stephanie Mencarelli, VP of Design at Adobe*

This statement may sound jarring to some, even controversial. After all, design has always been driven by individual creativity and intuition. Yet, as AI continues to transform how we work, this prediction is becoming an undeniable reality. We're moving into an era where design leaders must not only guide teams of designers but also oversee a new breed of 'co-workers', AI agents. The challenge now is not just about fostering human talent but learning how to harness AI as a creative partner.

AI'S ROLE IN ELEVATING HUMAN CREATIVITY

AI is reshaping design leadership in profound ways, moving beyond automation to become a critical partner in creativity. This shift is accelerating as AI technologies rapidly evolve, and design leaders are increasingly tasked with managing both human talent and AI systems to drive innovation. As the industry experiences this transformation, it's clear that the future of design leadership will involve not only creative direction but also strategic management of AI.

As AI takes on more repetitive tasks, design leaders must adapt, learning how to leverage AI as a powerful creative partner. The integration of AI is not just a technical challenge but a leadership opportunity that demands new skills, ethical considerations, and a human-centered approach. With AI's capabilities growing, the urgency to rethink how we design and lead in this era is more critical than ever.

AI AS A CREATIVE COLLABORATOR, NOT A REPLACEMENT

AI's role in design has evolved from automating mundane tasks to becoming a true collaborator in the creative process. AI tools now generate design variations, analyze user data, and even offer predictive insights based on patterns, allowing designers to focus on the higher-level strategic thinking that drives innovation.

Stephanie describes AI as a tool that enhances rather than replaces human creativity: "We really see AI as a tool that's something that's meant to be a support system, a sounding board, someone that up-levels who you are as a human."

This shift is already taking place in companies like Jasper, where AI is used to empower marketing and design teams. One practical example is how AI-driven systems help marketers automate content creation while designers focus on developing unique brand narratives.

Aditi Sharma, Head of Design Research & Design at AWS, reinforces the transformative role of AI: "GenAI is helping us bring insights at the right moment, right place, at the right time."

By allowing AI to handle routine work, design teams are given more freedom to dive deeper into the creative process, unlocking new levels of innovation. This partnership between AI and human creativity is reshaping how design teams operate and pushing the boundaries of what's possible in design.

At Jasper, AI tools are used to generate multiple content variations for marketing campaigns, freeing designers to focus on the creative direction of branding. By automating the repetitive work, AI enables designers to push the boundaries of creativity while ensuring consistency and efficiency across campaigns. This symbiotic relationship between human creativity and AI's efficiency showcases the future of design: one where machines empower, rather than replace, human ingenuity.

THE NEW FRONTIER: MANAGING AI AND HUMAN TALENT

As AI continues to integrate into design processes, design leaders must learn to manage both human designers and AI agents. The challenge lies not only in using AI effectively but also in ensuring seamless collaboration between AI systems and human creativity.

Shawn Johnson, Founder and President at Seichō Syndicate emphasizes this new reality: “We’re no longer just managing people. We’re managing AI agents, data systems, and automation processes that drive creativity and productivity at a scale we’ve never seen before.”

To effectively lead AI-enhanced teams, design leaders must cultivate technical fluency in AI tools. But beyond understanding the technology, leaders must also develop new frameworks for team collaboration where AI plays a complementary role to human talent.

Dawn Ta, Team Leader, Human Health at Habits for a Better World, highlights the uncertainty that comes with this shift: “There’s AI replacing tasks with the potential to significantly change jobs in the future during a time when there’s already a lot of ambiguity.”

Design leaders should foster cross-functional training, ensuring that both designers and AI specialists can collaborate effectively. Leaders can also implement regular AI workshops to keep teams updated on the latest tools and strategies, facilitating smoother integration of AI into workflows. Additionally, leveraging AI to manage workloads and timelines can free human designers to focus on more creative, high-impact projects.

HUMAN-CENTERED AI: BALANCING AUTOMATION AND CREATIVITY

AI-driven design can lead to efficiency, but without careful management, it risks overshadowing the human element that makes design impactful.

Stephanie stresses that AI should be used to solve real human problems, not just optimize processes: “It’s not about the technology. It’s what can the technology solve for your pain points?”

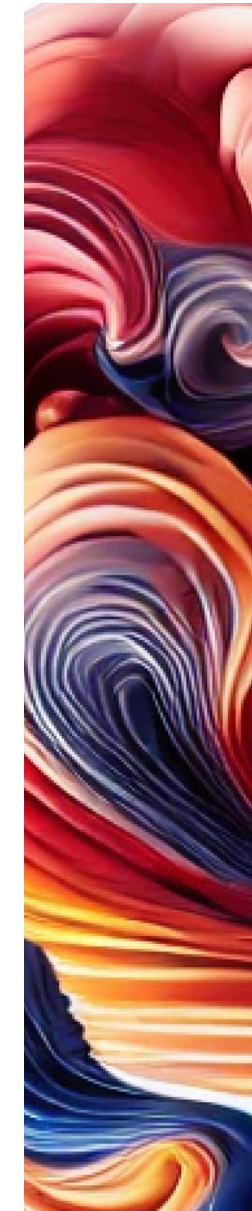
This idea is echoed by Nuno Vargas, Senior Advisor Product and Innovation at Fraunhofer Portugal, a design leader with over two decades of experience, who emphasizes empathy in design: “Start with the people. Start with the problem. AI is just a tool—if it doesn’t solve a real user problem, it’s just noise.”

Leaders must ensure that AI enhances human-centered design by creating frameworks that keep empathy and user needs at the forefront.

Nuno Vargas points out the widespread, informal use of AI tools like ChatGPT, which have been adopted without formal guidelines: “Everyone is already using GenAI. Everyone is using ChatGPT, Gemini, or Claude, optimizing a lot of things.”

To maintain this balance, design leaders can implement user-centered AI frameworks that prioritize understanding user pain points before applying AI-driven solutions. Design thinking workshops that combine AI insights with traditional empathy-driven processes can ensure that the human element remains central to the design process.

In this world increasingly driven by AI, maintaining empathy and human-centered design is essential. Technology alone can’t solve real human problems; the true power of design lies in its ability to understand and meet the needs of people.



EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES: PREPARING DESIGNERS FOR AN AI-DRIVEN WORLD

The rapid integration of AI into design presents new challenges, especially in education. As AI begins to take over tasks that once required human effort, design students must be prepared to navigate a future where AI fluency is as important as foundational design skills.

Eli Woolery, Co-founder of Design Better and lecturer at Stanford University, reflects on how AI is already reshaping design education: “AI extends students’ capabilities, speeding up the prototyping process and breaking down technical barriers. But it’s crucial to maintain a balance, ensuring that students still engage with the foundational stages of the design process.”

This acceleration in the design process brings both opportunities and risks. While AI can help designers create high-fidelity prototypes faster, there’s a concern that designers might bypass the essential stages of empathy-building and iterative thinking that are key to human-centered design. The challenge is ensuring that AI enhances creativity without overshadowing the human touch.

Some design programs are beginning to adapt by incorporating AI coursework alongside traditional design principles. These programs focus on ethical AI use, understanding algorithmic bias, and ensuring students remain skilled in empathy, storytelling, and iteration. By striking this balance, educational institutions can prepare the next generation of designers to work with AI while keeping human-centered design principles at the core of their practice.

CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN AI INTEGRATION

As AI continues to advance, ethical considerations are becoming increasingly critical. Design leaders must grapple with the potential impacts of AI on jobs, data privacy, algorithmic bias, and even the environment.

Eli Woolery raises a key concern about the future of junior designers: “If AI takes over those early design tasks, where do junior designers learn the skills they need to grow?”

This question highlights one of the main challenges of integrating AI into design: ensuring that junior talent still has room to develop and learn through hands-on experience. AI’s efficiency could inadvertently stifle opportunities for new designers to build foundational skills, potentially leading to a gap in the next generation of design leaders.

In addition to concerns about job displacement, there are broader ethical issues to consider, including data privacy and the environmental impact of AI technologies.

Stephanie stresses the importance of addressing these concerns proactively: “We need to make sure that as we integrate AI into our processes, we’re doing it in a way that’s ethical and responsible. That means being mindful of how we’re using data, making sure our algorithms aren’t biased, and thinking about the long-term impact of AI on our planet.”

Actionable Steps for Ethical AI Integration:

Algorithmic Audits

Design leaders should regularly audit AI systems for potential biases. This can involve assessing how AI makes decisions and ensuring fairness across different demographics.

Data Privacy

Implementing strict data governance policies is essential. These policies should safeguard user information and ensure AI-driven insights are used ethically.

Sustainable AI

Encouraging the use of energy-efficient AI models can help reduce the environmental impact of AI-driven design processes. Leaders can also consider the lifecycle of AI technologies, from data storage to processing energy consumption.

By embedding ethical considerations into their AI strategy, design leaders can ensure that their teams are not only more efficient but also more responsible in their use of emerging technologies.



THE FUTURE OF DESIGN LEADERSHIP IN AN AI-DRIVEN WORLD

Looking ahead, the future of design leadership will be defined by a hybrid approach. Leaders will need to balance the technical capabilities of AI with the irreplaceable qualities of human creativity and empathy. The most successful leaders will not only master AI tools but also champion human-centered design, ensuring that empathy and innovation remain at the heart of the design process.

In this new paradigm, success will come to those who can integrate AI into their teams seamlessly while fostering a culture of continuous learning and ethical responsibility. Design leaders who understand that AI is not a replacement for human creativity but a powerful ally will push the boundaries of innovation and lead their teams—and their organizations—into a future where creativity, technology, and empathy coexist harmoniously.

What Does Success Look Like?

AI Fluency

Design leaders must stay hands-on with emerging AI tools, ensuring they can effectively guide their teams and use AI to enhance creativity, not diminish it.

Human-Centered Leadership

Balancing automation with a focus on solving real human problems will differentiate the leaders who thrive in this new landscape.

Ethical Stewardship

Successful design leaders will embed ethical considerations into AI integration, safeguarding against biases, ensuring data privacy, and prioritizing sustainability.

The future of design leadership is not about choosing between technology and human creativity—it’s about integrating both to create something greater. As AI evolves, the design leaders who master this balance will not only reshape their organizations but also set the stage for a new era of innovation where creativity, technology, and empathy work in harmony. The challenge ahead is significant, but so is the potential. As we embrace this AI-empowered future, let us remember that at the heart of great design lies human vision and creativity. It is through the thoughtful integration of AI that we can amplify these uniquely human qualities, ushering in a new era of design that is more innovative, inclusive, and impactful than ever before.



CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION

DRIVING INNOVATION ACROSS TEAMS

“Success in cross-functional collaboration hinges on trust, transparency, and aligning design efforts with other departments’ goals.”

Shawn Johnson, Founder & President at Seichō Syndicate

Shawn's statement challenges conventional approaches to design leadership. Historically, designers operated in isolation, refining their craft within their own discipline. But today's business landscape demands more than design mastery—it requires seamless collaboration with engineering, product, marketing, and customer service.

The ability to navigate these intricate interdepartmental relationships proves critical for innovation, business success, and optimal user experience.

CATALYZING INNOVATION

Contemporary design leaders must engage closely with multiple functions to drive meaningful outcomes. As companies pursue innovation, departmental isolation often impedes the realization of a shared vision. Dismantling these obstacles through cross-functional collaboration enables teams to align their efforts toward common objectives.

Luis Colin, Principal Experience Lead at SAP, reflects on the challenge:

“The common denominator is the perception that I am, like, the mini-CEO, right? I make the product decisions and have the empowerment to say what is done and what is not.” This perception often leads to tension with product owners, who also see themselves as the sole decision-makers.

CULTIVATING TRUST ACROSS FUNCTIONS

Trust acts as a catalyst for effective collaboration. Its absence leads to isolated teams, knowledge hoarding, and decision-making paralysis. Design leaders can nurture trust by establishing transparent communication channels and demonstrating value from the outset.

Yan Grinshtein, Founder & CEO of NsightApp, emphasizes that the education can play a key role in improving collaboration. He shares a successful initiative: “We offered education for engineers to learn UX design and for my team to learn engineering.”

This cross-disciplinary learning approach significantly enhances teamwork and project outcomes by fostering a shared understanding of goals and processes across departments.

RECONCILING DESIGN INTEGRITY WITH BUSINESS IMPERATIVES

A pivotal challenge for design leaders lies in harmonizing design integrity with business goals. As companies expand, the urgency to meet business objectives can overshadow design principles. Successful cross-functional collaboration requires design leaders to act as interpreters, reconciling the differences between design aspirations and business realities.

Luis Colin underscores the importance of design leaders grasping core business fundamentals. He posits, “It's no longer as a design leader but as a business leader. I think the type of design you do is no longer at a product level but at an organizational level, your impact is on the entire enterprise.”

This knowledge enables design leaders align their work broader business objectives, while also articulating the value of design in business terms.

EARLY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT: A CRUCIAL STRATEGY

Involving stakeholders from various departments early in the design process proves essential for successful cross-functional collaboration. Early engagement prevents misalignment and cultivates a sense of shared ownership.

Benjamin Lee Farrow, former Design System Lead at Carta, discussed the complexities of implementing design changes across product interfaces, particularly during rebranding efforts: “Marketing hired an agency and brought them in. We had initial conversations, provided input from the product side, but after months of work, the agency revealed something that was out of sync with our needs.”

This experience underscores the criticality of involving all relevant teams in major design decisions from the outset.

SURMOUNTING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION HURDLES

Collaboration presents its own set of challenges. Aversion to new methodologies, conflicting priorities, and job security concerns can hinder effective interdepartmental cooperation.

Benjamin also discusses the intricacies of developing and maintaining a design system while balancing immediate business needs with long-term design consistency. He notes, “If we cater to every need, the design system becomes unwieldy and loses its value, with too many ways to do things.”

By adopting a problem-solving mindset and prioritizing the objectives of other departments, design leaders can navigate these complexities and forge a more unified team.

THE EVOLUTION OF CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION IN DESIGN LEADERSHIP

As organizations evolve, the need for cross-functional collaboration grows. The design leaders who succeed will embrace collaboration, foster trust, and strike a balance between business goals and design integrity. They won't just manage design teams—they'll become facilitators, uniting diverse departments around a shared vision.

Success in this new paradigm will belong to those who can seamlessly integrate design into the broader organizational strategy while maintaining open communication and building trust across teams. The future of design leadership lies in collaboration—working together to drive business outcomes and elevate user experiences.

FROM DESIGN TO BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

*"Design has outputs, but business has outcomes."
Shawn Johnson, Founder & President at Seichō Syndicate*

This insight encapsulates a critical shift happening in the design industry, where design leaders are no longer just creators but key drivers of business outcomes. Transitioning from being a designer focused on outputs to becoming a business leader concerned with outcomes is an essential evolution for modern design leaders.

The demand for business acumen, strategic thinking, and the ability to align design work with company goals is reshaping the responsibilities of design leaders. To succeed in this evolving role, design leaders must understand organizational goals, build trust across functions, and continuously communicate the tangible business impact of their work.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF BUSINESS ACUMEN IN DESIGN LEADERSHIP

As design takes on a more strategic role in organizations, it's crucial for design leaders to develop a deep understanding of business fundamentals. Designers, once seen as craftspeople responsible for creating functional and beautiful products, are now expected to align their work with larger business objectives. This shift requires design leaders to think not only about user needs but also about business goals such as profitability, scalability, and market positioning.

Radu Vucea, Senior Design Manager at Meta, underscores the importance of developing business acumen: "Becoming a business owner woke me up...you realize that everything you do has a cost, every little thing, every little decision has a cost."

Understanding the cost and impact of design decisions allows leaders to speak the language of the executive team, ensuring that design is seen as an integral part of business strategy, not just an isolated function. This is a shift in mindset—from delivering polished design outputs to driving outcomes that directly affect the company's bottom line. As design leaders begin to adopt this business-first approach, they elevate their role from creative contributors to key decision-makers.

While developing business acumen is crucial, it's just the first step. Design leaders must also shift their focus from tactical execution to strategic leadership.

FROM TACTICAL EXECUTION TO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

The transition from a hands-on designer to a strategic business leader can be both challenging and liberating. It involves stepping away from day-to-day design tasks and focusing on shaping the vision, strategy, and alignment of design efforts with business goals. This shift allows design leaders to contribute to higher-level discussions about the company's direction and to influence decisions that impact not just design, but the entire organization.

Radu Vucea reflects on his own journey from design leader to business leader: "The first thing I did when I got the title, design manager, I went to my computer, right-clicked, deleted Sketch."

This symbolic gesture illustrates the need for design leaders to step back from tactical execution and fully embrace their role as strategic business leader.

In this capacity, design leaders are responsible for empowering their teams, setting long-term goals, and ensuring that design efforts align with broader business strategies. They must think in terms of metrics, market positioning, and competitive advantages, and they must be comfortable with conversations that go beyond design to include finance, operations, and product strategy.

BUILDING TRUST ACROSS FUNCTIONS

One of the most significant challenges design leaders face as they transition into business leadership is navigating the complexities of cross-functional collaboration. This requires building trust with stakeholders across departments, including product, engineering, marketing, and sales. Trust is the cornerstone of effective collaboration, and it is particularly crucial for design leaders because design touches so many parts of the business.

Amber Lindholm, Senior Director Design at Cisco Duo, emphasizes the importance of fostering trust across teams: "Your first team is your cross-functional team focused on the product or business outcome. These peer relationships are critical to success."

By prioritizing relationships with peers in other departments, design leaders can break down silos and create a more cohesive approach to achieving business goals. It is essential for design leaders to understand the pressures and priorities of other teams and to demonstrate how design can support and enhance their efforts.

Building trust requires transparent communication, active listening, and a willingness to align design goals with the objectives of other departments. Regular check-ins, collaborative problem-solving sessions, and co-creation workshops can help design leaders build the credibility they need to influence cross-functional teams effectively.

By fostering trust across functions, design leaders can help unify teams, enabling them to work together toward shared business objectives.

Building trust lays the foundation for effective collaboration, but proactive engagement takes this step further.

EARLY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FOR BUSINESS IMPACT

Engaging stakeholders early in the design process is another key strategy for design leaders transitioning into business leadership roles. By involving decision-makers from other departments—such as product, finance, and operations—early on, design leaders can ensure that design initiatives align with broader business goals and avoid the common pitfalls of misaligned priorities.

Aditi Sharma, Head of Design Research & Design at AWS, shares how early stakeholder engagement helped her team produce meaningful business outcomes: "When we brought in finance and other key stakeholders early, we were able to align our design efforts with company-wide goals and scale innovation more effectively."

Early engagement fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability, making it easier for design leaders to secure the resources and support they need to bring their vision to life. This approach not only reduces friction between teams but also ensures that design is seen as a strategic driver of business success rather than a siloed creative function.

RECONCILING DESIGN INTEGRITY WITH BUSINESS IMPERATIVES

One of the most delicate balancing acts design leaders face is reconciling their commitment to design integrity with the need to meet business objectives. As companies grow and scale, there is often pressure to prioritize speed and profitability over user experience and design quality. However, successful design leaders find ways to maintain design integrity while delivering results that meet the company's goals.

As design leaders, you must move beyond focusing solely on product design and start thinking in terms of business impact. The role isn't limited to creating user-friendly experiences; it extends to shaping business strategy and aligning design with broader organizational objectives. The type of design you do today operates at an organizational level, influencing not just the product, but the entire enterprise.

This shift in perspective allows design leaders to advocate for the long-term value of design, even when short-term business pressures threaten to compromise quality. By demonstrating how good design can drive customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and revenue growth, design leaders can secure executive buy-in and maintain the integrity of their work.

As design leaders navigate their new roles, they often face a challenging balancing act.

Cinthy Revilla, Design Talent Manager at Banco de Crédito del Perú acknowledges this challenge, stating, "Look, it's a very difficult point, I won't deny it, but particularly within my organization, and this comes again, this 'top down', there is a concern at the culture level to be this balance between what is efficiency and experience." This highlights the ongoing struggle many design leaders face in reconciling business demands with design integrity.

Flávio Bezerra, Principal Experience Designer at BCG X echoes this sentiment, pointing out the practical constraints often faced: "We can all create the most beautiful, special, crazy design, but, hey, is it possible? Everything is possible, but is it achievable within a reasonable time frame?" His statement underscores the need for design leaders to consider feasibility and resource constraints alongside creative ambitions.





PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE: EMBRACING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET

As design leaders take on more business leadership responsibilities, they must adopt an entrepreneurial mindset. This means not only managing design teams but also identifying opportunities for innovation, driving cross-functional collaboration, and taking ownership of business outcomes. In larger organizations, this can involve spearheading initiatives that have a significant impact on the company's growth and profitability.

Radu Vucea suggests that senior design leaders are expected to take initiative and lead projects that demonstrate tangible business value: "You have to think like a business owner, identifying problems within the organization and driving solutions that improve both the user experience and the bottom line."

By adopting this entrepreneurial mindset, design leaders can position themselves as key players in their company's growth and innovation strategies.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE FOR DESIGN LEADERS IN BUSINESS

The journey from design leadership to business leadership is multifaceted and requires a shift in mindset, skillset, and strategy. Success in this role is defined by several key factors:

The evolution of design leadership into a strategic business role marks a new era in the industry. As organizations increasingly recognize design's potential to drive innovation and growth, design leaders who successfully make this transition will not only elevate their own careers but also position design as an indispensable element of business strategy. The most successful leaders will be those who fully embrace their role as business strategists, driving impact from the boardroom to the design studio. For design leaders, the time to make this shift is now, as the future of design and business becomes a single road.

Business Acumen

Understanding core business principles, metrics, and how design contributes to organizational success.

Cross-Functional Collaboration

Building trust and strong relationships across departments to align design work with broader business goals.

Measurable Impact

Continuously tracking and communicating the business outcomes driven by design, using metrics that resonate with executive leadership.

Entrepreneurial Mindset

Taking initiative, identifying opportunities for innovation, and leading cross-functional teams to drive business value.

MEASURING AND COMMUNICATION DESIGN IMPACT

*"Design doesn't stop at creating beautiful interfaces; it has to deliver business value."
Sarah Merlin, Director of UX at Curology.*



As design continues to take on a more prominent role within organizations, design leaders are expected to demonstrate how their work drives tangible business outcomes. This shift challenges traditional ways of evaluating design, as it requires leaders to connect design initiatives with key business metrics such as revenue growth, cost reduction, and customer satisfaction.

To advance beyond subjective assessments of design quality, today's design leaders need to develop a clear framework for measuring and articulating the impact of their work. This approach not only fosters stronger stakeholder support but also strengthens design's influence within business strategy.

DEFINING METRICS THAT ALIGN DESIGN AND BUSINESS GOALS

At the heart of measuring design impact is choosing the right metrics—those that bridge the gap between design outputs and business outcomes. While traditional design metrics like usability scores and aesthetic appeal still matter, they are no longer enough on their own.

Sarah Merlin explains this approach at Curology: "We are focused on driving top-line growth."

For her team, this means linking design decisions directly to business results like increased conversion rates and improved customer retention.

One of the ways design leaders can make this connection is by integrating business metrics into their design evaluations. Metrics such as Customer Satisfaction (CSAT), Net Promoter Score (NPS), or Customer Effort Score (CES) provide insight into how users interact with a product, but they also have clear implications for business performance.

As Aditi Sharma, Head of Design Research & Design at AWS notes, "What you can't measure, you can't improve."

For design to truly be part of the business conversation, it must contribute to metrics that executives care about.

By selecting business-oriented metrics and aligning them with user experience goals, design leaders can present a holistic view of their impact on both the customer journey and the company's financial health.

While selecting the right metrics is crucial, effectively communicating these insights to stakeholders is equally important for design leaders looking to demonstrate their value.

STORYTELLING THROUGH DATA: A NEW KIND OF DESIGN COMMUNICATION

Once the metrics are in place, the next challenge for design leaders is to communicate their findings effectively. This requires moving beyond technical jargon and creative terminology to deliver insights that resonate with stakeholders in finance, product, and operations. Design leaders must shift toward data-driven storytelling, using clear, compelling narratives supported by measurable results.

Aditi emphasizes that one way to do this is by using visual tools like journey maps and service blueprints. These help stakeholders see the direct link between design efforts and business outcomes. At AWS, design teams create regular progress reports, complete with metrics like CSAT and NPS, to communicate their impact in ways that the broader organization understands.

"By measuring progress against business, experience, and operational metrics, we build trust," Aditi explains.

Design leaders are increasingly using storytelling and data together to demystify the value of design and position it as a strategic advantage for the organization.

As design leaders focus on demonstrating business impact, they must also ensure that the core principles of user-centered design are not compromised in the pursuit of metrics.

BALANCING BUSINESS IMPACT WITH USER EXPERIENCE

While business outcomes are essential, maintaining a focus on user experience remains at the core of design leadership. Successful leaders find a way to balance both, ensuring that user needs are met while also delivering results that align with business priorities.

This balance is crucial, as overemphasizing one at the expense of the other can lead to either a compromised user experience or missed business opportunities.

Sarah Merlin's team at Curology serves as a good example of how to navigate this balance. While they focus heavily on top-line growth, they are equally committed to improving the user experience. *"We've built, at scale, a database of the work my team's done,"* Sarah says, noting that impact can be found in various areas, from improving onboarding experiences to enhancing conversion rates. This dual approach ensures that the customer journey is smooth and rewarding, while still achieving the company's revenue goals.

To consistently deliver results that impact the business, design leaders must foster a culture of accountability and ownership within their teams.

SETTING CLEAR ACCOUNTABILITY AND OWNERSHIP WITHIN DESIGN TEAMS

For design teams to consistently deliver results that impact the business, there must be a culture of accountability within the team itself. This means setting clear expectations, defining measurable objectives, and regularly reviewing progress against those objectives.

Design leaders play a critical role in fostering this environment.

Aditi underscores the importance of ownership: “As design teams, we must take accountability.”

When design teams take responsibility for their impact on business metrics—whether that’s improving NPS or reducing operational costs—they gain the trust and support of the organization. Aditi’s team regularly reviews their progress, aligning their metrics not only with user experience but also with broader business outcomes, ensuring that everyone is invested in delivering value.

Clear ownership also encourages collaboration across different areas of the organization. When designers know how their work impacts other departments, they can work more effectively with stakeholders in product, engineering, and beyond.

BUILDING DESIGN’S INFLUENCE THROUGH TANGIBLE RESULTS

The real strength of measuring design impact lies in its ability to build influence within the organization. By consistently tying design decisions to business outcomes, design leaders can establish themselves as key players in strategic discussions. This influence doesn’t just happen overnight—it’s built through a combination of credible metrics, consistent communication, and demonstrated results.

One example comes from Sarah Merlin’s work at Curology, where the design team tracks the long-term effects of their projects through a rolling database. This approach helps demonstrate the sustained value of design initiatives and makes it easier to communicate that value to the executive team. “We keep a record of the work we’ve done and its long-term impact on business growth,” Sarah explains, noting that this archive of success stories is crucial for keeping design at the forefront of business decision-making.

By keeping track of these results, design leaders ensure they always have data to back up their contributions, whether they’re in board meetings or regular project reviews.

DEMONSTRATING DESIGN’S STRATEGIC ROLE THROUGH IMPACT

As design continues to evolve into a key driver of business success, measuring and communicating its impact becomes a non-negotiable skill for modern design leaders. Gone are the days when beautiful interfaces and usability were enough to justify design efforts. Today, design must be shown to influence the company’s bottom line, contributing to both user satisfaction and measurable business outcomes.

To build this influence, design leaders must focus on more than just creative outputs. By choosing metrics that align with business goals, integrating user experience data, and fostering a culture of accountability within their teams, they ensure that design is seen as an indispensable part of the business strategy.

The ability to balance business impact with user-centered design is what will set successful design leaders apart. It’s no longer about proving that design matters—it’s about demonstrating how it drives real, sustainable growth for the organization. As leaders embrace data-driven storytelling and communicate design’s tangible results, they position themselves and their teams as essential partners in the company’s long-term success.

SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL DESIGN

“We designed two nudges for that e-commerce shop...we could reduce returns in certain cases by 2.6%, which is massive.”
Maximilian Speicher, Director of Product Design at BestSecret.

Max's experience highlights how small, thoughtful design decisions can drive significant business impact while promoting sustainability. Design leaders are increasingly expected to consider how their designs impact the planet and align with ethical principles. Sustainable and ethical design is no longer a niche concern—it's a strategic imperative for companies looking to remain relevant and responsible.

ALIGNING SUSTAINABILITY WITH BUSINESS GOALS

Designing for sustainability is not just about reducing waste or using eco-friendly materials—it's about rethinking the entire lifecycle of products and services. For design leaders, the challenge is to align sustainability efforts with business goals in a way that doesn't compromise profitability or the planet.

As Eli Woolery, Co-founder of Design Better and lecturer at Stanford University, mentions, “There is potential for more efficient, specialized AI models that reduce energy consumption”

While this refers to AI, it's part of a broader conversation on how innovative design can address both sustainability and business needs.

Max's project demonstrates how design can serve both business and ethical purposes. By introducing 'smart green nudging', his team reduced product returns in an e-commerce setting by making customers aware of the environmental impact of their purchases. This not only cut down on returns but also enhanced customer satisfaction, showing that sustainable design can improve both business outcomes and consumer engagement.



THE ETHICS OF DESIGN: BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is only one piece of the puzzle—ethics in design stretches far beyond environmental concerns. Ethical design addresses everything from user privacy and data protection to accessibility and inclusivity.

Eli Woolery raises important concerns regarding AI's sustainability and ethics. He points out that while AI holds great promise, it also raises significant ethical issues, including job displacement and its energy-intensive nature. “We don't know. I mean, we know that it uses a lot of energy right now,” he explains. This echoes a broader worry about the environmental cost of cutting-edge technologies and the need for designers to balance innovation with responsible practices.

Moreover, ethical considerations must also focus on the societal implications of design. Are products accessible to all users? Do they perpetuate biases or exclude certain groups? Inclusive design practices ensure that products serve a diverse user base, contributing to both ethical responsibility and better business outcomes.

Sarah Merlin, Design Director at Curology, a personalized skincare company, emphasizes the importance of ensuring diverse representation in product imagery. “We need to make sure that we're reflective of the actual audience, not just a small subset of our audience,” she notes.

THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL DESIGN

While the benefits of sustainable and ethical design are clear, implementing these principles is not without challenges. Business demands for speed and profitability can sometimes seem at odds with sustainability goals, leading to difficult trade-offs for design leaders.

One major hurdle is scalability. Introducing sustainable practices like green nudges can have a meaningful impact in one area, but scaling these initiatives across an entire organization requires more systemic change. Sustainable practices need to be integrated at every level—from the early stages of product ideation to the final stages of production and disposal.

While the benefits of sustainable and ethical design are clear, businesses may face challenges in implementation. These can include higher initial costs, longer development times, and the need for specialized expertise. Moreover, striking a balance between sustainability goals and market demands can be complex, especially in industries where rapid innovation is crucial.

However, many companies find that the long-term benefits—including improved brand reputation, customer loyalty, and operational efficiency—outweigh these initial hurdles.

Another challenge is balancing innovation with responsibility.

As Eli points out, “We should learn to understand it, learn how to use [AI], and ideally find ways that we could maybe help make it more sustainable”.

This sentiment applies beyond AI: designers must ensure that their creative processes and the technologies they use are sustainable, ethical, and aligned with their company's broader goals.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF RESPONSIBILITY

For sustainability and ethics to become integral to a company's design strategy, they need to be deeply embedded in the company culture. This requires leadership buy-in and a commitment to fostering a design culture that prioritizes responsibility.

Max emphasizes how team values can drive this shift: “We have very explicitly formulated our team values...sustainable and ethical design just naturally popped up in our team values”

By making these values explicit and central to team culture, design leaders can ensure that sustainability and ethics become part of the decision-making process across all projects.

Aditi Sharma, Head of Design Research & Design at AWS, underscores the role of leadership in building this culture. In her experience, leadership support for early stakeholder engagement is crucial in embedding sustainable and ethical practices into the design process from the start. This ensures that all teams—design, product, engineering, and marketing—are aligned on the importance of sustainability and ethics, leading to more coherent and impactful results.

MOVING FORWARD: A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL DESIGN

To succeed in embedding sustainability and ethics into their work, design leaders must adopt a structured approach that includes:



Early Integration

Engage stakeholders across the organization early in the design process. As Aditi Sharma suggests, bringing other departments, like finance and engineering, into the conversation early ensures alignment and can prevent conflicts later in the process.

Holistic Design Thinking

Consider the full lifecycle of products. Sustainability isn't just about the end product—it involves everything from sourcing materials to how products are disposed of. Implementing life cycle assessments can help design teams identify areas where they can reduce waste and improve sustainability.

Continuous Learning and Adaptation

Sustainable and ethical design is an evolving field. Design teams must stay informed about new materials, methods, and technologies that can enhance their work's sustainability and ethical integrity. Regular workshops help keep teams at the forefront of these changes.

Implement regular sustainability audits of design processes.

Create a sustainability checklist for each project.

Establish metrics to measure the environmental impact of design decisions.

Develop a training program for team members on sustainable and ethical design practices.

BEYOND COMPLIANCE

In conclusion, sustainable and ethical design is no longer optional—it's a strategic imperative. By integrating these principles into every aspect of the design process, from ideation to implementation, design leaders can drive innovation, build trust with customers, and create lasting value for their organizations. The challenges are real, but so are the opportunities. As we move forward, the most successful design leaders will be those who can balance creativity with responsibility, pushing the boundaries of what's possible while staying true to ethical principles. The future of design is not just about creating beautiful products—it's about shaping a more sustainable and equitable world.

BALANCING SPECIALIZATION AND GENERALIZATION IN DESIGN ROLES

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

“We must be both masters of our craft and versatile enough to adapt to any challenge that comes our way. It’s not a matter of choosing between specialization and generalization; it’s about knowing when to leverage each.”
Dilip Jagadeesh, Director of Product Design at Smartsheet

Dilip’s insight captures the essence of a challenge many design leaders face today: managing specialized expertise while fostering adaptability. As design roles evolve and the demands on teams grow more complex, leaders must navigate the tension between specialization and generalization to ensure both depth and versatility within their teams. The key question is how design leaders can strike this balance to meet current business needs while preparing for future challenges.

THE VALUE OF SPECIALIZATION IN DESIGN TEAMS

Specialization has become increasingly important in design as roles like UX research, interaction design, and visual design gain prominence. Specialists bring deep knowledge to their areas of focus, enabling teams to deliver high-quality solutions to complex problems. This expertise is particularly crucial when tackling intricate projects that require a deep dive into one specific aspect of design.

Dilip emphasizes the importance of specialization: “Specialists help us refine our craft at a level of detail that elevates the entire team’s output.”

By concentrating on niche tasks, specialists push the boundaries of innovation within their areas. For instance, a dedicated UX researcher conducting in-depth user studies can provide insights that lead to breakthrough design improvements.

However, while specialization allows teams to go deep in specific areas, it can also lead to silos. Team members may become too focused on their niche, limiting cross-functional collaboration and leading to fragmented projects. This is where the balance between specialization and generalization becomes critical.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENERALIZATION: BROAD SKILLS AND ADAPTABILITY

Generalists, or T-shaped designers, bring versatility and adaptability to design teams. They possess a broad understanding of design disciplines and can contribute to multiple aspects of a project, filling in gaps and supporting cross-functional collaboration.

Radu Vucea, Senior Design Manager at Meta, underscores this adaptability: "Generalization helps you become a much more effective communicator, collaborator, and creator."

In fast-paced or resource-limited environments, generalists are invaluable. They can seamlessly transition between tasks, allowing teams to adapt to changing project requirements. A generalist may take on interaction design, prototyping, and even visual design—helping ensure consistency and alignment across the board. This flexibility is particularly useful in startups or smaller teams where resources are spread thin and roles are less rigid.

For example, a generalist designer at a startup might manage the product's user experience while also contributing to branding and marketing efforts. Their broad skill set ensures that they can handle both design and business needs as they arise, creating cohesion across different customer touch-points.

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE: THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Balancing specialization and generalization within a team is a leadership challenge that requires careful planning. Too much emphasis on specialization can create silos and slow down innovation, while too much generalization can dilute expertise and lower the quality of the work. Leaders need to assess both the immediate needs of the project and the long-term goals of the team to find the right mix.

Dilip highlights the importance of maintaining balance: "The challenge with having too many specialists is that they may struggle to see beyond their niche, which can lead to fragmented designs or missed opportunities for innovation."

This underscores the need for leaders to facilitate collaboration between specialized and generalized team members, ensuring that both perspectives are considered in project decision-making.

A practical approach to achieving this balance is to encourage cross-functional learning. Generalists can benefit from specialized training or mentorship, while specialists can gain exposure to broader design challenges. In one design team, this could mean giving a UX researcher opportunities to learn more about visual design or giving a generalist time to deepen their expertise in one area, such as usability testing.

BUILDING HYBRID TEAMS FOR SUCCESS

The most effective design teams often consist of a blend of specialists and generalists who work together to achieve common goals.

Diana Mounter, Design Systems Manager at GitHub, points out the benefits of this hybrid model: "The most successful teams I've worked with have blended roles, where people are okay stepping outside of the engineering box or the design box."

In hybrid teams, specialists contribute their deep knowledge while generalists provide the broad oversight needed to keep projects aligned with larger business goals. For example, in a product redesign project, a specialist might focus solely on refining the user flow for maximum efficiency, while a generalist takes responsibility for ensuring the entire product maintains its brand identity and aligns with marketing strategies.

By creating hybrid teams, leaders can ensure that they are building both depth and breadth within their organizations. This allows for focused, high-quality design work while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to broader business needs.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN ROLE MANAGEMENT

While hybrid teams offer numerous advantages, they also come with challenges. Specialists may feel that their deep expertise is underutilized, while generalists may struggle to stay current with evolving technical skills in highly specialized areas. Additionally, role clarity can become an issue if the boundaries between specialization and generalization are not well-defined, leading to confusion and frustration.

To address these challenges, design leaders must create clear career development paths that cater to both specialists and generalists. This could involve offering cross-training, rotational programs, or professional development opportunities that allow team members to explore different aspects of design without feeling pigeonholed into one role. Furthermore, leaders should regularly evaluate team composition, ensuring the balance between specialization and generalization aligns with the company's goals and project requirements.

As Radu Vucea, Senior Design Manager at Meta puts it, "It's not just about having the skills; it's about knowing when and how to apply them in the right context."

This means that design leaders must remain flexible, continuously adjusting team structures and expectations as projects and business needs evolve.

LONG-TERM ADAPTABILITY: PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

As the design industry continues to evolve, the distinction between specialized and generalized roles will likely blur further. Tools like AI and advanced design systems are already enabling greater flexibility, allowing specialists to work across disciplines and generalists to dive deeper into specific areas when needed.

Diana comments on this trend: "The design world is evolving, and the lines between specialized and general roles are blurring."

To prepare for the future, design leaders must invest in continuous learning and foster a culture of adaptability. Offering opportunities for team members to expand their skill sets, whether through formal training or hands-on project work, will ensure that teams remain agile and ready to tackle the next wave of design challenges.



CREATING A BALANCED TEAM FOR SUCCESS

Ultimately, design leaders must find the right balance between specialization and generalization within their teams. This balance allows for the deep technical expertise needed to push design forward while ensuring the flexibility to adapt to new challenges. By fostering collaboration, promoting continuous learning, and creating clear career paths for both specialists and generalists, leaders can build teams that are equipped to thrive in the ever-changing world of design.

As Dilip wisely puts it, "It's not about choosing one over the other; it's about creating a team that can flex between deep expertise and broad collaboration, ensuring that we're ready for whatever challenges come our way."

THE FUTURE OF DESIGN LEADERSHIP IS NOW

As we conclude the **Ecosystem Leadership Report: Design 2024**, we've witnessed a profound transformation in design leadership. The role has expanded far beyond its traditional boundaries, with design leaders now shaping business strategy, integrating AI into creative processes, and championing ethical practices. This shift is not merely an evolution; it's a fundamental redefinition of what it means to lead in design.

The insights shared throughout this report reveal a field that has moved beyond aesthetics and user experience. Today's design leaders are expected to:

- Collaborate with AI, treating it as a creative partner rather than a tool
- Drive cross-functional innovation, breaking down long-standing organizational silos
- Speak the language of business, aligning design initiatives with financial outcomes
- Quantify and communicate design's impact using metrics that resonate with C-suite executives
- Advocate for sustainable and ethical design practices that consider global impact
- Expertly balance specialized skills and broad adaptability within their teams

The path forward is not without its challenges. Design leaders will need to navigate the complexities of emerging technologies, changing user expectations, business needs, market shifts. However, these challenges also present unprecedented opportunities for those willing to embrace change and lead with vision.

As we look to the future, it's clear that design leadership is no longer just about creating beautiful, functional products. It's about shaping the very fabric of how businesses operate, how users interact with technology, and how we as a society progress. The design leaders of tomorrow will be key drivers of innovation, sustainability, and ethical progress across industries.

We encourage you to take the insights from this report and apply them to your own leadership journey. Experiment with new approaches, challenge traditional thinking, and always keep the user at the heart of your decisions. The future of design leadership is yours to shape.

Remember, this report is just the beginning of a larger conversation. We invite you to continue engaging with these ideas, sharing your experiences, and contributing to the evolving dialogue on design leadership. Together, we can build a future where design not only solves problems but also creates new possibilities for businesses and society at large.

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To our readers, thank you for engaging with this content and for your commitment to advancing the field of design leadership. Your continued curiosity, innovation, and dedication are what drive our industry forward.

Lastly, I extend our appreciation to the broader design community. Your ongoing discussions, shared experiences, and collaborative spirit continue to inspire and shape the future of our field.

I invite you to actively engage with the content of this report. Reflect on your own leadership experiences and share your thoughts or ideas with me via email at diego@diegonmtz.com. I look forward to hearing from you and continuing this important conversation.

To all the readers, thank you for taking the time to explore this content—I hope it inspires you on your own leadership journey. For continued insights on leadership and emerging trends, visit our website at www.diegonmtz.com and subscribe to our Substack at diegonmtz.substack.com, where we regularly share content on the future of leadership.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Together, we can create a future where design drives meaningful change and creates lasting value for businesses and society alike.

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