

How To Scale: Rethinking The Product Design Career Ladder

A step-by-step process for organizing and growing your product design team

What is a Career Ladder?

- A career ladder is a general, often hierarchical, framework that outlines the structure of a team or department.
- It provides a clear depiction of all the cogs in the machine and how they work together.
- It outlines defined paths for career advancement.
- It provides opportunities for both lateral and vertical moves through learning opportunities and collaboration, and gives design a voice at multiple levels.
- It is not an indicator of team member importance, nor should it be used as a tool for micromanagement.
- It is a way to keep a pulse on the goals and skills of our team members.

What is a Team Health Monitor?

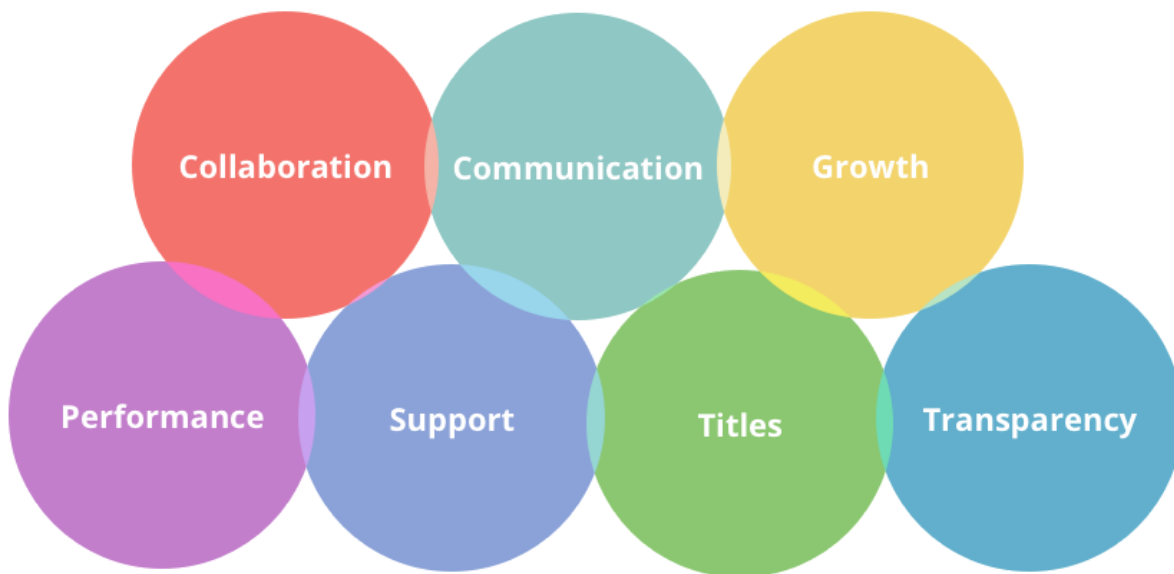
A specialized self-assessment tool designed for agile teams to measure team effectiveness and happiness.

As somewhat of a comprehensive retrospective, you can use them to measure your team's:

- Relationships
- Processes
- Morale
- Growth

Atlassian's Team Playbook

- Atlassian created a Team Playbook to guide and level-up their teams. They surveyed 1,000+ team members across different industries, and found certain behaviors lead to higher achievement.
- They found that stronger teams are created when the culture perpetuates the freedom to share ideas, opportunities to help make decisions, and the ability to form deeper connections with others.
- The questions centered around the following topics:



Sample Questions From Team Health Monitor

- Rate how well teamwork and collaboration among associates is valued by your team members/manager.
- How often do you collaborate with your team members/manager?
- How good is the communication between you and your team/your manager?
- How efficient are team meetings?
- Do you feel supported?
- Do you feel like there's a shared common vision and work ethic?
- How knowledgeable is your team about the company's goals?
- Who are the decision makers?
- How quickly are decisions acted upon?
- How well do your current job responsibilities match your strengths?

- What strengths do you have that you feel are not being utilized?
- Do you feel your job title matches your responsibilities?
- Do you feel the job titles of other members of your team match their responsibilities?
- How clear are you on your performance? What metrics are you given?
- Do you receive valuable input about your performance from your team members/manager?
- How are you rewarded for performance?
- Do you feel there is a clear, defined path for your professional growth on the team?
- Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

Capture and Chart the Responses

The easiest way to conduct this survey and capture the responses is to use a simple online form that generates a spreadsheet. From there, chart the responses to create visual representations of your perceived team health and to summarize your results.

The Trouble With Titles

- Companies with smaller Product teams mistakenly believe a list with titles and pay grades is enough. Typically, the financial commitment is assessed first, and based on that a title for the requisition is then created.
- The underlying problem with this methodology is that the team has one idea of what skills and experience they need for a role, and how they perceive that level of expertise is usually gauged differently than how it is viewed by the organization.
- Once candidates are being considered, the team wants to hire the strongest candidates of the pool, and this often does not match the resulting job title, nor does the title match the responsibilities.
- The tendency is to always bring in more senior-level designers, but pigeon-hole them into junior roles to accommodate the pay grade.
- Titles are extremely arbitrary and varied as well. What one company considers a Senior or Design Lead is considered a Principal or Director at another. There is not a universal standard so it is up to the organization to come up with their own definitions for each role.

Define Product Design Roles

Set your team up for growth by taking the time upfront to craft organizational definitions for Product Design roles. This not only provides clarity on responsibilities, but helps when structuring career paths within the team and greater org.

These role definitions are not set in stone. They should change as the needs of your team change. These are meant to be used as a basis for what results from the next step in the process, generating a Skills Matrix.

Sample Product Design Role Definitions

Use these sample role definitions as inspiration to create your own team levels framework:

Associate Product Designer

Role definition:

- A supporting-level player who is honing their craft and working to understand organizational context.
- Generally considered entry level, fresh out of school with a solid portfolio, but minimal shipped work.
- Normally receives close mentorship and detailed instructions on assigned work.
- Works on projects with a limited scope and focuses on following standard practices and processes, and building working relationships.

Junior Product Designer

Role definition:

- A developing professional working on skill-building and solving problems while maintaining working relationships.
- Has demonstrated proof of problem-framing and solving skills, and has some experience shipping work.
- Normally receives mentorship and general instructions on routine assigned work; detailed instructions on new projects.
- Works on projects with a moderate scope that require analysis of data. Exercises good judgment in following standard practices and processes to determine appropriate action.

Product Designer

Role definition:

- An established performer with strong communication skills who proactively builds relationships.
- Confident in applying best practices to common design problems with a variety of methodologies. Has shipped multiple projects.
- Normally receives mentorship and little instruction on day-to-day work; general instructions on new projects.
- Works on a diverse range of projects that require analysis of data. Exercises good judgment and confidently communicates decision-making rationale to team members.

Senior Product Designer

Role definition:

- A high-level performer with strong relationships and the ability to lead projects.
- Begins going beyond best practices, and starts uncovering novel, unexpected, but still workable solutions. Has been a main contributor to shipped work.
- Normally provides mentorship to lower-level designers and determines new processes. Works with autonomy and uses success metrics.
- Works on complex issues that require in-depth evaluation of data and methodologies. Leads the solution of a product area; connects that to broader product vision (e.g. product page and purchase experience).

Lead Product Designer

Role definition:

- A leading performer who prefers to manage projects over managing people.
- Has broad expertise and uses skills to contribute to the development of company objectives. Leads the delivery of shipped products.
- Provides consistent mentorship to lower-level designers and develops judgment for evaluation of talent; provides feedback for shape of their overall team. Acts independently to determine methods and processes. May supervise others' work.
- Works on significant issues and develops problem-framing approaches, establishing new starting points that lead to new kinds

Principal Product Designer

Role definition:

- Indispensable individual contributor who uses a combination of craft expertise and mentorship skills to elevate their team.
- Leads teams in framing and solving hard problems; has driven innovative efforts that uncovered new value with new kinds of experiences; presents company as an industry leader in design.
- Uses design methods not as a tool to solve execution problems, but to identify new opportunities for value creation.
- Demonstrates thought leadership. Develops and articulates compelling vision for the team; Working with partners and stakeholders, begins making real change in how the company approaches its business.

UX Researcher

Role definition:

- An experienced contributor who unearths human insights in order to guide the application of design to achieve business and user goals.
- Has expertise providing actionable and meaningful data-driven insights that represent the voice of multiple users.
- Collaborates across development, design, and marketing teams to evaluate current and upcoming user research needs that help to improve product definition and drive business goals.
- Manages research planning and recruitment, data collection and analysis, presentation of insights and strategy to create user-friendly products based on real user feedback, not assumptions.

Design Team Lead

Role definition:

- A leading performer who prefers to manage people over managing projects.
- Has broad expertise and uses skills to contribute to the growth of the product design team. Manages down (coach), across (diplomat) and up (champion).
- Provides consistent mentorship to lower-level designers on career matters and regularly contributes to the evaluation of talent; active in recruiting and hiring.
- Works on eliminating blockers and maintaining cross-departmental relationships to allow the product team to work efficiently and effectively.

Design Manager

Role definition:

- An organized leader and performer who pushes convention and drives change.
- Uses understanding of impact and success metrics to focus and re-prioritize their and their team's efforts. Emerging understanding of broader organizational context and goals.
- Develops basic understanding of people management practices, particularly around professional development; emerging ability to delegate work to others.
- Drives meetings. Communicates design rationale, and uses storytelling techniques, with partners and stakeholders.

UX Creative Director

Role definition:

- Leads by example; inspires the UX team to conceptualize and converge on the right solutions across all products and services, and functions as the right-hand person to the organizational leader.
- Has a deep understanding of the audience they are addressing, demonstrates creative brilliance, brings single-minded drive to making great ideas take shape, and has the ability to deliver design solutions that inspire the entire cross-functional UX team.
- Their true value is in scaling their creative talents across multiple projects and, thus, raising the level of quality across many designers at once.
- Both creates designs for their own projects and helps other members of the UX team execute their projects with excellence—through ideation and design—assisting them with their deliverables and raising the quality of all deliverables.

UX Architect

Role definition:

- A partner to a UX leader or Creative Director, carrying out that leader's vision and allowing the UX leader to focus on the organizational issues he or she needs to address.
- Embodies the competencies of the Principal, plus they inspire the whole UX team. They define experience-based product objectives that can transform markets and ensure all products and services meet these objectives.
- Responsible for mentoring researchers and designers on the Product Design team.
- Sets the bar for world-class design in all the UX disciplines. They can rapidly handle everything from high-level concepts to design details, helping their team to solve whatever problems they encounter. They have excellent communication skills and can cross-functionally evangelize design best practices and help enforce robust design for all products and services.

Director of UX

Role definition:

- Dynamic leader, focused on strategic vision, growing talent and execution.
- Leads teams in framing and solving hard problems; has driven innovative efforts that uncovered new value with new kinds of experiences.
- Articulates a new process framework for tackling design problems; involved in annual planning and works to secure necessary budget.
- Manages managers. Coaches them toward strong people management practices; drives broader organizational efforts around culture, work, and values.
- Strong delegation practices, recognizing that they cannot do the work directly and must be leveraged; integrated understanding of organizational context; develops and articulates compelling vision for the team.

Generating a Skills Matrix

Looking at the role definitions provided, the next step is to hold a collaborative workshop around generating a skills matrix.

What is a Skills Matrix?

A skills matrix is a well-articulated set of core skills a team identifies as essential to succeed.

They include skills in the design craft itself and other skills required to produce excellent work, collaborate and communicate effectively, and the skills needed to lead. Although every single individual might not, every team, collectively, should have these skills to be successful.



The Workshop Agenda:

1. Set the expectations by providing an overview of the exercise and sharing the goals, principles and framework.
2. Each participant writes a set of core skills for each of the main framework categories.
3. Review the core skill sets suggested by each participant, ask questions for any needed clarification.
4. All participants get 5 votes per category to highlight the skills they feel are most needed and valuable.
5. The team works together to generate a Top 10* list of skills across all categories. Everyone has veto power and is allowed to defend their choices.

** While 10 is the suggested goal number, the purpose of this exercise is to whittle down the core skills to an agreed upon set, so if it is more than 10 there isn't an issue as long as everyone agrees.*

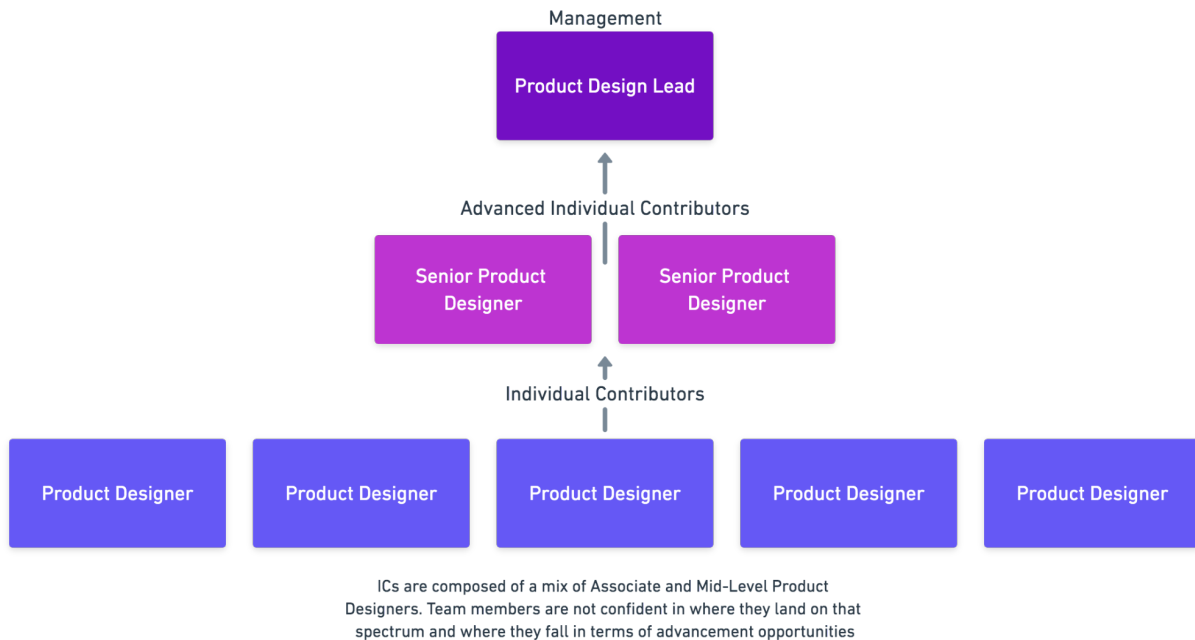
Why is the Workshop Important?

As the team begins to work through the core skills framework a few things will occur naturally:

- Common core beliefs and skills will be revealed
- New ideas about needs will surface
- Old ideas about needs will be debunked
- Leaders will organically rise to the challenge

The agreed upon set of core skills will then be used to inform which roles are vital to the team's success. This will start the process of building a career ladder that works for everyone.

Assess Your Current Team Structure



If your current team structure looks like this...you're doing it wrong. And here's why...

There are several issues with a solitary path into upper design management:

There is only upward mobility; no lateral movement.

There are no rules that say career mobility is always upward. Lateral moves offer chances to explore new areas, try your hand at leadership, or focus more heavily on the craft of design. They can be short-term or long-term assignments depending on the structure of your team and what the goals of the individuals are.

Lateral opportunities are also an alternative for when your team is feeling stuck but it's not the right time for a promotion. Designers desire to be heard and offering them the chance to try out different positions or gain new skills goes a long way in employee satisfaction.

Leaders don't always want to manage people.

People management definitely is not for everyone. Unfortunately, in the majority of companies the only way to advance is to get promoted into a position where you oversee others. The sad truth about this is that a lot of the leaders put in that role do not possess the skills necessary to lead a team, nor are they personally invested in it because that wasn't their career aspiration.

Once you become a leader, your job is to no longer worry about yourself and your contributions. You are in charge of and responsible for the development and success of every member of your team. Leaders give credit to their teams when it is due, and accept all the blame when there are issues. Design leaders know the way and show the way.

There isn't a balance of skills and responsibilities spread across the team.

A balanced and successful team is comprised of an array of talent that works to its strengths. Much like how the Avengers don't share superpowers, you don't want 8 designers on the same team who all want to do research, or only visual design. It's vital to have members willing and wanting to work on all of the parts of the process, and not all at the same time.

It's also super important to hire different levels of experience. You can't have a team of all seniors and then not understand why they're getting frustrated with the types of projects they're on and how their time is spent. Junior designers can alleviate a lot of the craft work that seniors get bogged down in, which then enables them to focus on bigger challenges and mentor junior designers in the process.

There's no opportunity for advancement when there is only a single position to move into.

How do you distribute and delegate the work evenly? How do you involve your team in the decision making process, and who gets a say? How can you foster deeper relationships when there is subconscious competition for that one promotion?

And, I cannot emphasize this enough...promote players whose actions earn game time.

There is nothing more discouraging to a team than watching someone get promoted who has not earned it. Simply having "seniority" is not a reason for promotion. Examine the results. Who delivered? Who fell short? Who goes above and beyond? Who does the bare minimum? These are all good gauges of performance when deciding who to give a boost.

There is very little delegation, making everyone feel like they have to work on everything all the time.

Unicorns are not real no matter how magical they seem.

The talent you hire may have the skills to do it all, but a good leader won't let them. Instead, a manager invested in their growth would do everything in their power to limit distractions, blockers and busy work so their designers can focus on what they were hired to do.

This may require delegation of tasks or you stepping up and taking one for the team. Your job is now to create the least stressful and most supportive environment possible so your team not only wants to work, but wants to work hard for you because they know you have their backs.

“If done well, team members will learn to appreciate the ability to remain focused on the work, instead of being sucked into the work-about-the-work that insidiously steals a surprising amount of time.”

“Much of what causes designers to stress in their work is the result of flawed operations.”

- from *Organizational Design for Teams*

It creates silos in not just the types of projects, but also in the types of roles and responsibilities assigned.

Give your employees the power to do their jobs. Welcome their ideas. Champion them up to the decision-makers. Allow them to contribute and feel like they can make a difference.

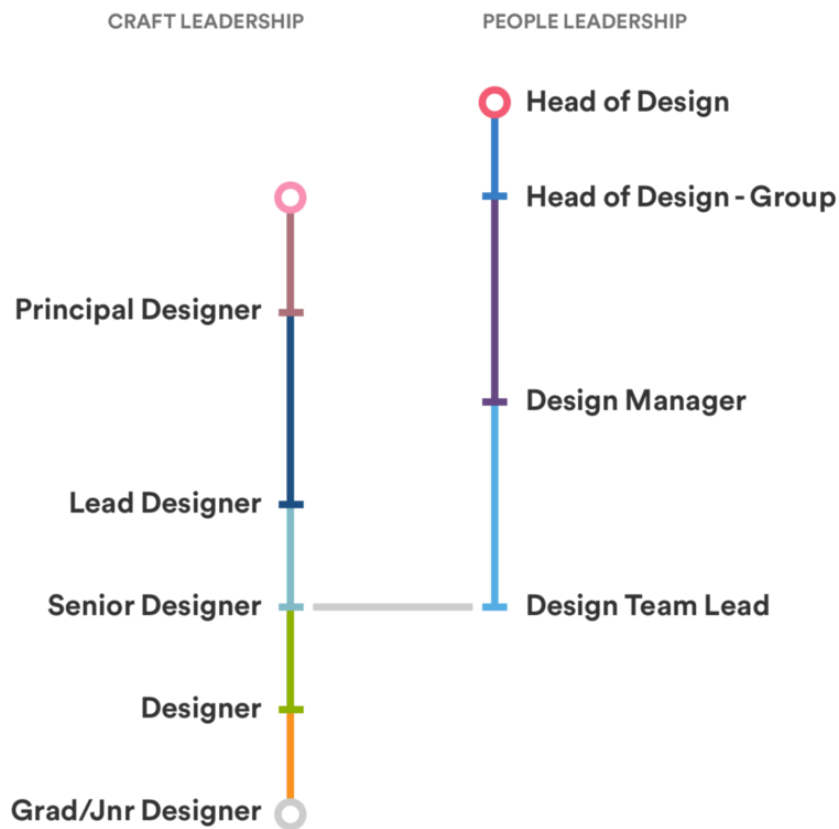
Feeling under-appreciated and left out of crucial conversations is extremely damaging to morale. Invite your designers to the decision-making table, listen and respond thoughtfully.

A Growth-Oriented Approach

The role of the designer is in continuous flux. New fields are emerging all the time and rising technologies give birth to new skillsets. Product designers, in particular, always think about flow. It's imperative to figure out how to continue to grow the roles of highly seasoned design ICs (individual contributors) without pushing them into management – or leading them to think they need to become managers to be successful.

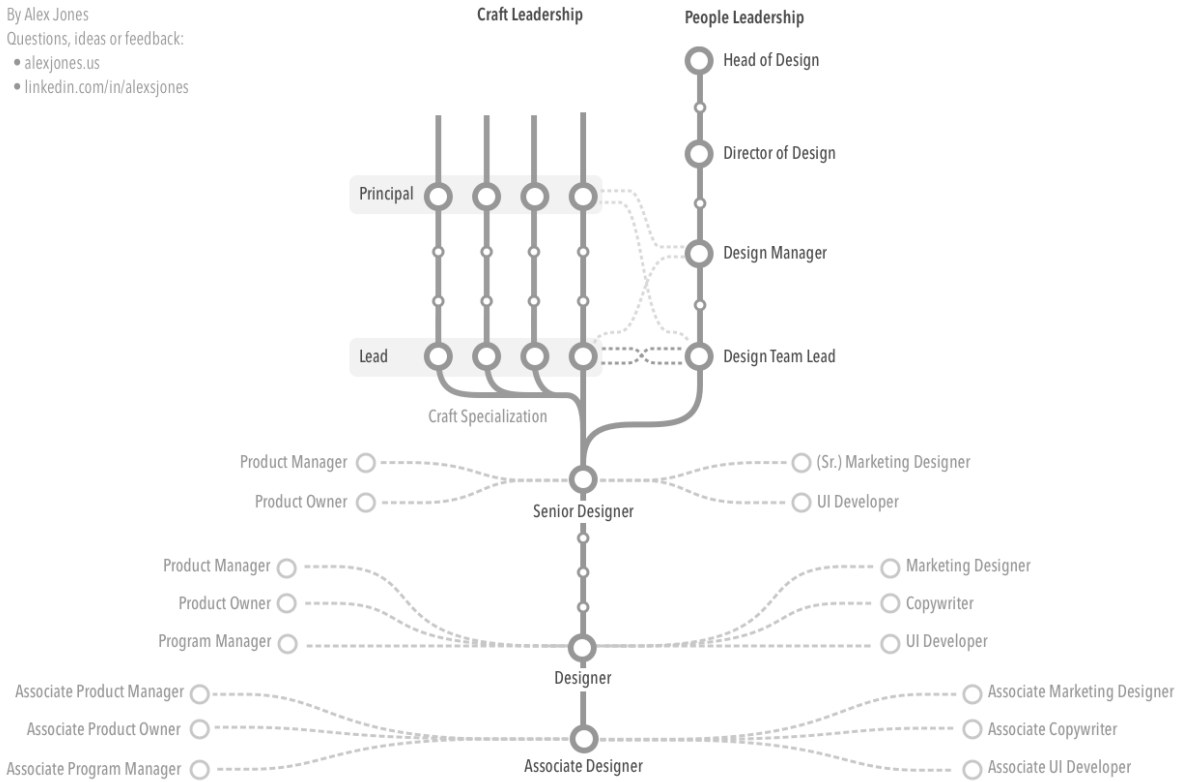
How do we achieve this?

By utilizing a multi-path career ladder approach, we can better match team members to their strengths and skills.

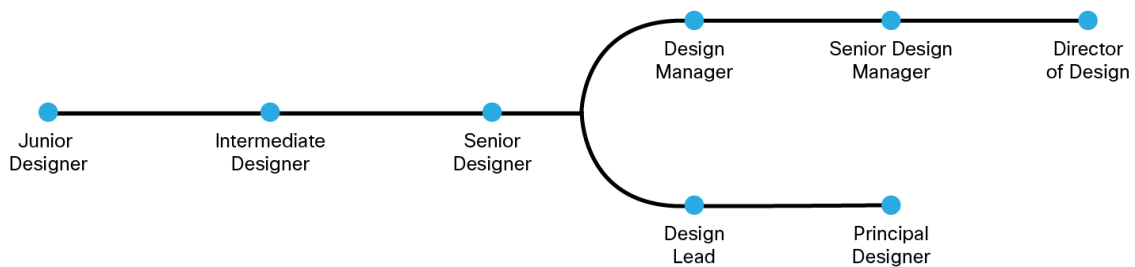


This is an example taken from Atlassian. They have a dual track ladder that splits once the designer has reached a senior level and decides whether they wish to pursue craft leadership or people leadership.

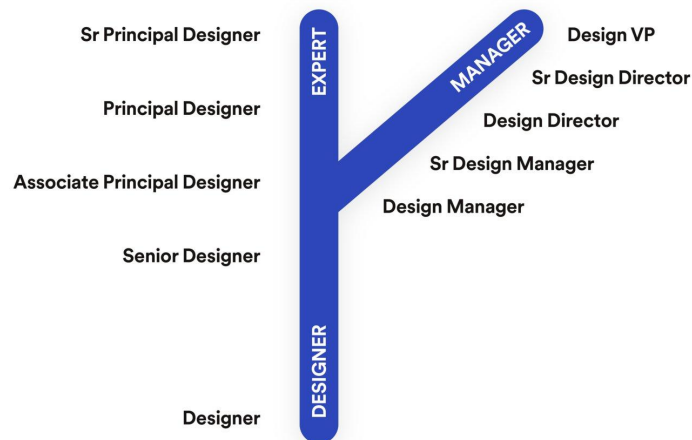
By Alex Jones
 Questions, ideas or feedback:
 • alexjones.us
 • linkedin.com/in/alexsjones



The Branching Career Path by Alex Jones from Prototypr. Again, you see that there is a split and it happens at the senior level. But there are further breakdowns into branches of craft specialization.



Claudia Love published a similar parallel career track for the design org at Cisco Umbrella.



As did the design team at Spotify. Both, once again, denoting a choice at the senior point of their career.

A 3-Prong Approach

But what about those that don't really know quite where they belong. They may love to design and deep-dive into UX, but they also get a kick out of sharing those skills with others. Why do they have to choose one or the other?

The most successful product design teams all have one thing in common:

They don't have everyone in the same type of role on the same path, and building flexibility into the structure helps guide your team without force and allows for future expansion if you want to add more “branches” later on.

With a 3-Prong Approach, the team is organized into 3 sectors:

- Craft Leadership
- People Leadership
- A Hybrid of Both

These 3 forks may intertwine at points on the career ladder, but for the most part they remain separate and denote a choice.



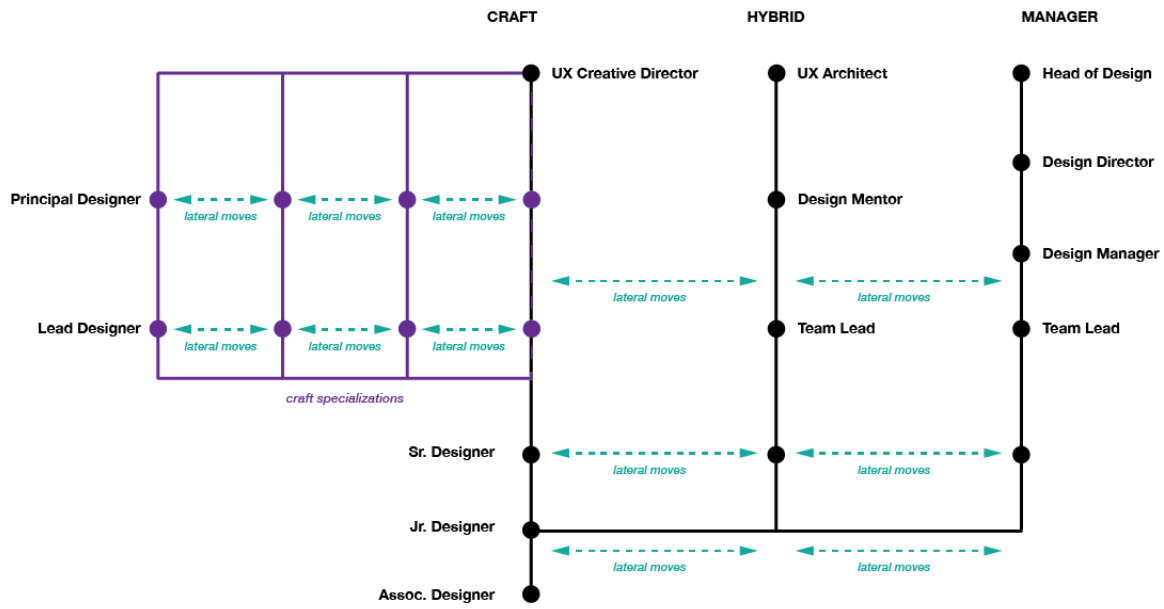
Allow your team members to choose where they feel they fit best. Of course, as their mentor you can guide them if you see something in them that you wish to foster, but remember it is their choice.

If they wish to remain focused on the hands-on design work, but want to elevate their skills, then **Craft Leadership** is most likely for them. Here as an IC they will focus on product problem-solving, roadmap influence & impact, and mentoring other designers in craft execution.

Designers drawn to helping others, creating processes and dedicated to helping things run smoothly may be suited to **People Leadership**. This is where natural-born leaders rise to the challenge. They use empathy and trust as tools for managing and building robust teams.

For those that want the best of both worlds, there is a **Hybrid** option of both Craft & People Leadership. These team members can act as both a player and a coach, are adept at context-switching, and acts as role models for both hard & soft skills.

Whichever path they choose initially, they are not locked into forever either. They may switch tracks completely or dabble. That's what lateral moves are for, remember?



Here's an example of how this 3-pronged approach could look.

You'll find that as your team grows, you may need to branch off even further into smaller squads and teams, each with their own focus.

As it expands, the structure will flatten out and the flexibility of lateral moves will allow for horizontal movement across the entire team. The once vertical ladder now more closely resembles a customer journey map where your team members develop at different points along the way.

Make It a Reality

Using these steps, the main objective to solidify and improve your team should be to craft your Product Design Career Ladder.

To make your collective vision a reality, use the steps I've outlined to craft your own Product Design Career Ladder:

1. Use the results of the Team Health Monitor to create goals for improvement.
2. Assess your team's current titles and what they really mean.
3. Generate your team skills matrix.
4. Define the product design roles needed to achieve the goals in the core skill framework.

5. Looking at the core skills framework, set aside time with each team member to go over their skills and goals. You will use this assessment for placing them on a career track.
6. Reorg into a multi-path structure that has defined growth opportunities for Craft Leadership, People Leadership and a Hybrid of Both.
7. Evaluate how the team conveys performance metrics and rewards hard work. Your team needs to know how they stack up against expectations, but it's also imperative to recognize them for their efforts. Teams that are missing either one of those guiding lights are wandering around in the dark hoping they don't stumble.

Create a Culture of Psychological Safety

One of the biggest reasons why anyone leaves a job, in any industry, at any level, is because of workplace toxicity.

The most important thing to remember is that employees are people, and people need to feel valued, respected, heard, seen and appreciated to thrive. When you embed that amount of empathy into your culture you foster more collaboration, communication, positivity, and growth.

And using this process to give your team members a seat at the decision-making table to voice their opinions and ideas without judgment, and to have a say in how their team is built, is a great place to start.

Resources

This is a compilation of all the different articles, books, documents, and videos I used to create this career ladder strategy. I hope you find my guide helpful, but please do your own research as well to grasp a better understanding of how to build solid teams that thrive as they grow.

- [The Branching Career Path](#) by Alex Jones, *Medium*, Sep 5, 2018
- [Design Team Levels Framework](#) by Peter Merholz, Originally for *Snagajob Design*, May 12, 2017
- [“Designing” a Career Ladder for Product Design](#) by Helena Seo, *Doordash Engineering*, Sep 3, 2019
- [UX Career Path: Manager or Individual Contributor](#) by Claudia Love, *Medium: Cisco Design Community*, Feb 12, 2018
- [Extreme Teams](#) by Robert Bruce Shaw, Feb 2017
- [Up Is Not the Only Way](#) by Beverly Kaye, Lindy Williams, Lynn Cowart, Sep 2017
- [Disrupt Together: How Teams Consistently Innovate](#) by Stephen Spinelli Jr., Heather McGowan, Dec 2013
- [Organizational Design for Teams, 1st Edition](#) by O’Reilly Media, Inc., May 2017
- [Building UX Teams at Scale: Inside Atlassian’s Bespoke Hiring Process](#) by Jerry Cao, *UV Pin*, Aug 25, 2019
- [How Individuals Advance at Buffer, Without Becoming Managers](#) by Hailley Griffis, *Buffer*, Jan 27, 2019
- [From Maker to Manager: How to Take the Leap](#) by Marcus Wermuth, *Buffer*, Nov 18, 2018
- [How Career Ladders Provide Clarity, Focus, and Purpose](#) by Jeff Hardison, Todd Zaki Warfel, *Invision: Inside Design*, Apr 19 2018
- [The Recipe for Developing Your Career as a Product Designer](#) by *Levels.fyi*, no date
- [Where Do IC Designers Go Once They Peak?](#) by Tanner Christensen, *tannerchristensen.com*, Dec 23, 2019
- [UX Role Grids and Individual-Contributor Career Paths](#) by Corinne Wayshak, *UX Matters*, May 22, 2019
- [Building Our Product Design Career Development Framework](#) by Jehad Affoneh, *My Name is Jehad*, Jun 24, 2019

- [Making the Band: Building Exceptional Design Teams at Spotify](#) by Nicole Burrow, *Spotify Design*, Jan 23 2020
- [Designer Confidential: How Do I Create a Healthy Team Culture When My Own Boss is Toxic?](#) by Alison Rand, *Invision: Inside Design*, Jan 17, 2020
- [Fortifying the Design Career Path at IBM](#) by Eunice, *Medium: Design at IBM*, May 28, 2019
- [Designing a Better Career Path for Designers](#) by Siva Sabaretnam, *Medium: Facebook Design: Business Tools*, Nov 29, 2018
- [What it Means to be “Senior”](#) by Alex Jones, *Medium: Prototypr.io*, Sep 21, 2018
- [In Great Company: How to Spark Peak Performance By Creating an Emotionally Connected Workplace](#) by Louis Carter, Feb 2019
- [Atlassian Team Playbook](#), *Atlassian*, no date
- [Inside Atlassian: Stopping Team Dysfunction Before it Starts](#) by Megha Narayan, *Inside Atlassian*, Dec 8, 2016
- [Building Your Team’s Skills Matrix](#) by Jehad Affoneh, *My Name is Jehad*, Apr 24, 2019
- [Compare Salaries and Career Levels Across Companies](#) by *Levels.fyi*, no date
- [Org Design for Design Orgs](#) by Kristin Skinner and Peter Merholz, Aug 2016
- [The UX Strategy of Hiring Juniors Over Seniors](#) by Jared Spool, *Medium: UX Strategy Playbook with Jared Spool*, Feb 26, 2020
- [The Atomic Unit of Design is the Team](#) session with Peter Merholz, [Remote Design Week](#) virtual conference, Apr 27, 2020
- [The Four Archetypes of the Complete Design Leader](#) session with Peter Merholz, [Design Leadership Summit](#), 2019