



The 3 Development Pillars of the UX Designer-Employee

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Traits of an Effective Employee

In the UX community, we spend a lot of time and energy discussing our design work and how to improve it. A huge amount of digital ink is spilled analyzing new patterns and products. We like to rant about the merits or lack thereof of parallax scrolling. We like to ooh and aah over the newest cool gadget, or salivate at some eye candy on Dribbble. But do we engage in a multi-threaded conversation on Twitter about professional development?

On a personal level, have you thought about the factors that will make you a valued employee? If you care about money or seniority, do you know how you can get more of it? More generally, the question I pose in this article is: as designer-employees, what are the areas in which we need to improve?

I've been managing employees in the UX discipline for over ten years. Over this time I have accumulated an inventory of what makes a valued designer-employee. As you might expect, design chops are highly relevant, but by no means do they tell the whole story.

I propose that there are three Pillars of development for the UX-employee: technical skills, soft skills, and business skills. Early in one's career, the dominant Pillar is technical, but as we mature, the second and third Pillars take on more

importance. In some cases, the first Pillar might even take a back seat to the others as an individual contributor transitions to become a manager.

The Pillars are organized serially in time—as time moves on, an employee becomes more senior, mastery of the earlier Pillars is attained, and he or she moves on to the later Pillars.

Pillar 1: Technical Skills

This is the Pillar that we typically think of when we just think about what it means to be good designer. If you are a ‘rock star,’ then you would probably score highly on technical skill. The whole idea of breaking down what makes a good designer may seem counter-intuitive and possibly wrong-headed. However, in order for designers to improve at their core technical abilities, we need to understand what dimensions come together to form those abilities.

There is a long list of factors that go into technical skill, but they can be roughly condensed into three main areas.

Productivity

Productivity refers to your total impact and the speed with which you produce deliverables. Productivity may be achieved by working rapidly, or it can be achieved by working more hours. A lot can be said about the validity of productivity, especially as a stand-alone measure, but there is no doubt that productivity, or the amount of work produced, is a key factor in measuring an employee’s performance.

Quality

Quality is probably the single most important sub-dimension in the entire three Pillars model, which explains why it is the focus of conferences and blogs. In general, quality is a subjective measurement (although it sometimes can be measured by usability testing, NPS, or user adoption). In essence, it refers to how good your work is. Quality involves attention to detail, using effective patterns, mature trade-off analyses, clear articulation of design rationale, a high level of understanding of product requirements, the ability to fulfill product requirements in a pleasurable fashion, and effective use of UX process.

Creativity

Productivity and quality, though essential, are really boring. The light – the spark – that drives us is the ability to create new things. This can involve solving old problems in new ways, developing new UX patterns, or synthesizing a set of dry requirements into a novel concept. Creativity is also the ability to come up with multiple ways to solve the same problem, and take the best of different solutions and meld them together. Much has been written in the public and academic sphere about the nature of creativity, but whatever it is, it is crucial for excellence in UX design.

Pillar 2: Soft Skills

In this Pillar, we encounter the needs of your employer head-on. Many of these characteristics will determine how other, non-designers view you, as often they cannot evaluate how you perform in your core discipline. The higher up someone is on the food chain, the more likely their opinion of you will be formed by your skills in this Pillar. As a result, these abilities can factor in highly when it comes to promotions and salary adjustments.

Another important point here is that someone who excels exclusively in the Technical Pillar but has poor soft skills will have a ceiling in terms of how far they can develop. Development in soft skills, except for the rare super-geniuses, is mandatory for a designer to be viewed as a mature, senior employee. That's you, too, rock stars.

Communication

Communication is the touchstone of professional skills in the workplace. Many designers early in their career are very weak at communication. Some designers are reluctant to think about their communication styles, and they hate talking about it. Good communication involves the appropriate timing and content of ideas, to the right people, using the right medium. Communication is exquisitely difficult to get right and it takes years to master. Each factor is dependent on the other, so if one changes, then all the others change. Here some examples of communication gone awry:

- Using IM to communicate the status of an important project to your boss' boss
- Under-communicating the status of your work to your team
- Sending a lengthy, unsolicited, passionate e-mail on the subject of your office seating to your manager or facilities group (I know someone who lost a contract because of his overzealous pursuit of a better office)
- Hitting the 'reply all' button to an e-mail sent to your entire company of 1000+ people by the CEO
- Failing to pick up the phone in an ongoing, multi-threaded email chain hinging on multiple complex and nuanced issues
- Send out five versions of the same document without using any method of version control, either formal or informal (such as updating the document's name)
- Sending a nasty three word e-mail to a developer who is implementing your work. Or a nasty 1000 word e-mail. Or a nasty e-mail full stop

Conflict

Conflict happens all the time in the workplace, especially a place with employees passionate about their work (like us). However, we are also heavily reliant on others to deliver a good UX: our product managers who write our underlying requirements, our engineers who implement and test our work, and our management, who needs to support our ideas or none of them will see the light of day. It is inevitable that not everyone in your immediate circle will agree with every design you ever comp up. Therefore, developing the skills to defray tensions when people criticize your work is imperative. Skills of influence and negotiation take front and center. It simply will not do to fall into a designer-ly snit whenever you run into obstacles (and likely you will run into them every day).

Successful designers come up with great experiences, but successful employees have the conflict management skills to develop strong working relationships and to work in a cooperative manner to get those experiences implemented. Coming up with ideas is only half the battle—convincing our stakeholders to build it properly is the other half.

Expectation Management

It is one thing to know what you are doing—it is another for other people to know what you are doing. We live in a business world, to deliver business results, and therefore our teams and management must understand what we are working on and when.

For example, if, as a creative lead, we decide to take a project in a new direction, then it's critical for our stakeholders to understand what that direction is, and what impact it might have on a delivery timetable, effort, or cost. If you work at an agency, you probably have a project manager whose full-time job is to communicate expectations to the client, and to figure out how to ask for more money when a project expands. But for those of us without a project manager, inside an agency and out, this crucial need exists.

No discussion about expectation management can be complete without mentioning that managing the expectations of your boss is paramount. Your relationship with your boss is the single most important factor determining whether you succeed or fail in your position, including seniority and pay. Make sure that your manager is in the loop about your activities, and that his or her expectations about what you are delivering are aligned to what you actually are delivering. Better to communicate bad news about project status early on, when course corrections can be made, than to miss a deadline out of the blue.

Pillar 3: Business Skills

The third Pillar is perhaps also the third rail for designers. Many designers – and employees of all sorts – really do not want to get into this area. This is actually okay: you can go pretty far just by mastering the first two skills. However, to realize the full potential of any employee, that person must tie his or her abilities into the fundamental needs of the business: to make the most money at the least cost.

Clearly I am not the first person to identify that business thinking is an important skill in the UX discipline. However, one trend that really bothers me is the idea that to make this leap, all you have to do is start talking the language of the business person. I see lots of LinkedIn profiles of senior designers that refer to YoY and CAGR and I feel that perhaps they have lost their way. Design is still about design, not about figures. To assume that what you need to do to talk to “business people” is simply switch to using the jargon of the financial world, is to assume that they are idiots. Business ideas change how you think about design.

To begin your voyage into the void, there are three fundamental questions you need to ask: How does your company (or your customer) make money? What is the cost of making that money (known as cost of revenue)? And finally, how does design tie in to the money-making engine?

Some other areas you may wish to understand:

- Do you understand what relevance costs have to design decision making?
- Do you understand what factors other than design will affect the success of your product?
- Do you understand your company's (or your clients') competitive landscape, and where user experience fits in to that landscape?
- Do you understand your company's (or client's) business strategy, and how UX fits into that?

- Are you able to tie design decisions to the context of your company’s business goals and bottom line? Are you able to see when your design colleagues make decisions that are not aligned?

Here is a design analogy that can help explain what part of business thinking informs design—when you are designing something, you know that all functionality in the design can’t have equal salience. Some features will be front and center, some will be buried, and some will be axed.

It is no different for every part of the design process. We designers are a fixed resource, we can only do so much in a certain amount of time (i.e. we have a cost). You can’t do the full soup-to-nuts design process on every single thing you ever design in most companies. You can’t put your fullest amount of attention into every single feature on every single product. So, as designers, we need to make trade-off analyses about what to focus on. What is your guide to making that analysis? You need to translate the cost of the design work with an expected return.

Conclusion

To repeat my central thesis, as a seasoned manager of design professionals, I feel that we often do not concentrate in public discourse in matters that truly increase our value as employees. As a corollary to that, it seems to me that we do not teach our designers the things that are of the most value either. We tend to focus on what we love: design. However, even simple things like productivity are infrequently discussed and measured.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not by any means saying that the practice of design shouldn’t be carefully sculpted and cultivated. But I think we often give short shrift to other elements that are central to producing value, and I have tried to outline those elements by proposing a 3 Pillar model of professional development for design.

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Sam Horodezky is Director of Product Management and UX at Teradata Corp. He holds an MS in Cognitive Science from UC San Diego. Born in Canada, he currently resides in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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