

Strategic Behaviors & *Mindsets of* Design Executives

Featuring case studies and impact stories
from leadership experiences at Cisco, CNN,
IBM, Target and Warner Music Group.

DESIGN
EXECUTIVE
COUNCIL

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KEY RESEARCH
QUESTION 1

What makes a strategic design executive?

KEY RESEARCH
QUESTION 2

How are design
executives
expanding the
relationship
between business
and design?

INTRODUCTION

Advancing Strategic Design Leadership

Previous research conducted by the Design Executive Council in 2023 revealed a growing trend of major companies embracing strategic design leadership. Our research found that in 2022, 5.3% of Fortune 1000 companies had a chief design executive, a 1.5% increase from 2021.

This inaugural white paper from DXC expands on the idea of more design leaders in executive roles and their specific business influence on their employers by featuring case studies and impact stories from Chief Design Officers and VPs of Design from industry leaders like Cisco, CNN, IBM, Target, and Warner Music Group. The research highlights how these executives are creating strategic impact.

It showcases diverse achievements such as generating over \$100 million in enterprise growth through design, enhancing cultures of innovation,

presenting design to boards of directors, and spearheading digital transformations. Each of these represents strategic advancements in design leadership.

By detailing examples and expanding on the leadership approaches that facilitated these successes, the white paper offers actionable references and insights for design and business leaders. It underscores the crucial role of design in strategic leadership and company effectiveness and demonstrates how design executives harmonize customer-centric approaches with competitive strategies to drive significant business value.

DESIGN EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

DXC is the premier membership-based organization that has attracted the most significant design executive voices across major public and private companies across financial services, technology, media, healthcare, consumer goods, retail, industrial, and diversified industries.

By fostering strategic design leadership, conducting groundbreaking research and fortifying the relationship between design and business, its aim is to create a global network of executives that can help expand the impact of design and amplify the benefits that design leadership brings to business success. DXC's mission is to advance strategic design leadership to the highest levels of business and society.

To learn more, visit
www.designexecutivecouncil.com

EDITOR'S NOTE

From our inception, DXC has been committed to producing insightful and credible research that showcases the value design executives are providing in high-stakes business environments. Our goal is not only to inform but to broaden available examples of how they create impact. To start, we chose leaders with design executive roles within influential public companies.

I am proud and grateful to collaborate with five founding members of DXC and their business partners, who have generously shared their stories. I also want to thank Andrew Hogan and the Figma team for their support in conducting this research. These leaders provided a vivid portrayal of the transformative power of design at strategic levels of business, and it is one of many stories to come.

For the love of design,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gordon Ching". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gordon" and last name "Ching" clearly distinguishable.

Gordon Ching
Founder & CEO
Design Executive Council



GUIDANCE FOR READING

Design Leaders

This research aims to showcase executive and strategic design leadership examples through our case studies and research insights. To assist design leaders in evolving into executives, we believe this information should serve as valuable insight into expanding their business knowledge and establishing themselves as credible partners.

View this report not as instruction, but rather as a diverse set of examples illustrating how influential design executives lead at major companies.

Business Leaders

With an increasing number of design leaders rising to executive positions, it's crucial for business leaders to develop their understanding of how to collaborate with this vital function.

While this report doesn't provide direct guidance on working with design executives, our goal is to present case studies and impact stories that demonstrate partnership, collaboration, and mutual respect-essential for harnessing the power of strategic design leadership. By enhancing understanding of this field, leaders will be better equipped to drive exceptional experiences and business success.

METHOD & APPROACH

This white paper explores the multifaceted application of strategic design leadership, emphasizing the collaborative roles between design executives, product leaders, and senior stakeholders.

Our case study and impact stories approach highlights the importance of cross-functional collaboration by incorporating insights from various team members who have worked directly alongside design executives. Our research was sourced through direct interviews with design executives and their selected stakeholders, when available. Figma provided consultation on the research synthesis process.

The findings are crafted to be highly applicable for a broad audience of digital product builders, providing actionable guidance on how to effectively leverage strategic design leadership in their own contexts.

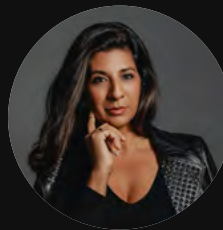
Leadership Profiles

The selection of the five design executives for our spotlight underscores their exceptional ability to tackle complex business challenges through strategic design leadership. Each leader embodies a unique blend of visionary thinking, pragmatism, and business acumen, driving innovation and delivering tangible value to their organizations.

Our spotlight aims to inspire and inform current and aspiring design leaders, providing valuable insights into essential mindsets and strategies for success in today's dynamic business landscape. They are a testament to the power of effective design leadership to navigate change and drive meaningful impact in the modern world.



Christina Goldschmidt
VP, Product Design
Warner Music Group



Purvi Shah
VP, UX Design, Research
and Accessibility
Target



Greg Petroff
VP, Chief Design Officer
Cisco Secure



Arin Bhowmick
EVP, Chief Design Officer
SAP



Alex Hsiao
VP, Product Design
CNN

Key Findings

This research, based on conversations with five design executives, highlights their impact in strategic leadership roles at the VP and Chief levels of prominent public companies. This progression enhances their ability to tackle broader business challenges through the lens of design.

We explore the distinct value that design executives bring to senior leadership teams and the entire enterprise. Their mindsets expand the opportunities designers can address, going beyond traditional areas like customer and user experience to influence how organizations function. Their integrated approach to leadership elevates their ability to apply their skills across the company, driving innovation and contributing to significant business and social outcomes.

The report emphasizes the fusion of three key mindsets—Design Intrapreneur, Design Visionary, and Strategic Unifier. This blend brings a distinct mix of behaviors and principles to strategic decision-making and business leadership. These findings underscore the identity evolution of design leaders into executives, reflecting a significant shift in operating mindsets and behaviors.

For design leaders to ascend and succeed as executives, they must grasp strategic design leadership and represent design in a way that fosters broad cross-functional investment and trust at the highest levels of corporate leadership.

Embracing Business as a Language

With increased in-house operating track records, strategic design executives have built greater confidence and fluency in the language of business, positioning themselves as equals among their business stakeholders rather than secondary contributors.

While maintaining their roots in design and craft, they recognize that being able to speak multiple languages—business, technology, and design—enhances their effectiveness and ability to resonate with broader audiences. Their ability to translate design concepts into business-relevant terms positions them for credibility and impact.

Building Broad Support for Design

Strategic design executives apply the empathy and curiosity they have for users to their peers and stakeholders, enhancing their leadership effectiveness and ability to drive outcomes.

They understand that to succeed, they must gain allies and advocates of their leadership and function at the executive peer and C-Suite level. From this position, they gain the space and influence to integrate design processes into core business areas, fostering a unified framework that ensures design contributes to achieving overall business objectives.

Creating Organizational Leverage Through Design

Design executives have evolved from roles focused solely on design to broader positions in business and corporate strategy. They drive both top and bottom-line growth by strategically utilizing their resources to create advantage within and beyond the design function.

By leveraging the design function's unique strengths, they convert underutilized assets and processes into higher-value components, enhancing organizational cohesion and scalability. Design executives act as force multipliers, generating more value per dollar and resource. These leaders go beyond intermediary roles, taking direct ownership of business outcomes. They have developed the acumen and skills to define and advance business objectives, becoming critical partners in the organization.

Increasing Design Leadership Relevance in Strategy

The convergence of the Design Intrapreneur, Design Visionary, and Strategic Unifier mindsets equips design executives to excel in strategic environments. We explore these mindsets more on the following pages.

Their fluency in the language of business and ability to relate effectively to stakeholders allows them to expand their scope of strategic design leadership across various situations and cross-functional contexts. Under these mindsets, design executives are seen as relevant, critical, and respected partners who focus not just on design but on the business as a whole. They adopt an integrated approach, blending design and business perspectives to drive strategic success.

Mindsets of Strategic Design Executives

To understand what it takes to become a strategic design executive, we aimed to identify the behaviors exhibited through the case studies and impact stories. It is important to note that any designer can be a strategic design leader, but design executives are generally expected to demonstrate these mindsets and behaviors as key characteristics of their job success.

In our research, these behaviors were then grouped into a set of mindsets observed within the case studies and further enriched by the relationships we've developed to deeply understand how our profiled design executives operate. While not exhaustive, this provides a snapshot of what we were able to observe.

Notably, there is evidence that omnipresent duality influences designers' behaviors—the ability to seamlessly toggle between strategy and execution, leader and colleague, aesthetic sensibility and utility focus, short-term and long-term, and finally, spontaneity and planning. Strategic design leaders demonstrate an innate ability to balance these dualities through sound judgment, situational awareness, and adaptable behaviors, allowing them to thrive in diverse environments and roles.

Design Intrapreneur

The “Design Intrapreneur” mindset is characterized by its proactive and tangible approach to innovation.

This mindset excels not only at spotting business opportunities, but in its unique designer behavior in visualizing, structuring and sequencing ideas into a human experience and roadmap. Design Intrapreneurs are adept at identifying and synthesizing disparate opportunities into cohesive prototypes and artifacts that accelerate decision-making.

Their approach to intrapreneurship instills customer-centricity by ensuring strategy and concepts are always rooted in a human experience. With a bias for action, these leaders navigate business roadblocks to strip away unnecessary processes. Blending business and design skills, Design Intrapreneurs ensure that innovative ideas are quickly brought to life and effectively leveraged to minimize risk and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Design Visionary

The “Design Visionary” mindset is pivotal to enhancing an organization’s strategic clarity, foresight, and readiness for transformation.

These leaders serve as catalysts for change, driving the organization forward by reframing assumptions with purposeful questions that spark curiosity and foster critical, reflective thinking. They employ storytelling, rapid ideation, visualization, and meticulous quality management to align stakeholders and steer the organization towards refined strategic objectives.

By fostering behaviors that drive a forward-looking trajectory, Design Visionaries help leaders distinguish signal from noise and achieve a culture that sustains excellence, intentional action, and overall competitiveness.

Strategic Unifier

The “Strategic Unifier” mindset unites senior leadership in a common purpose to design the optimal organization, conditions, and cross-functional processes to effectively serve a company’s mission and objectives.

Empowered by design advocates at the executive level, the Strategic Unifier collaborates with other leaders to craft intentional structures, frameworks, and processes ensuring stakeholders are fully aligned with a synthesized approach. By prioritizing values and actions that focus on customer impact, this mindset cuts through operational bloat and stagnation. It operationalizes business and design frameworks through cross-functional collaboration and is supported by a common vision, language, metrics, and rituals.

As a key champion within the senior leadership team, the Strategic Unifier drives cultural cohesion and momentum towards strategic objectives.

Mindset Fluidity

While each mindset is valuable in its own right, they are not mutually exclusive, or definitive.

Strategic design leadership requires a continuous adaptation and combination of these qualities. Therefore, rather than ranking them as “good, better, best,” it may be more productive to view them as intertwined aspects of effective design leadership that can be leveraged depending on the situation and objectives.

The key to engaging the most effective mindset is based on the situation at hand, and knowing when is the right time to lean deeper into one versus another.



Case Studies & Impact Stories

Decisive Design Leadership

Elevating Design Innovation
at Warner Music Group

FEATURING

Christina Goldschmidt
VP, Product Design
Warner Music Group

Andrea Slobodien
Product Leader
Warner Music Group



Christina Goldschmidt

VP, Product Design
Warner Music Group

THE CHALLENGE

“We’re in a really unique position — tech companies lack the deep expertise in the nuances of the music industry, and music companies often don’t understand what makes good tech.”

Christina Goldschmidt

THE CHALLENGE

From the way we consume music to how music is distributed and accessed, the entire user and artist experience has evolved. Warner Music Group identified the urgent need to modernize its user experience and technology stack. In a situation familiar to many, WMG needed to meet artists' and customers' expectations for user-friendly, cutting-edge products, and ensure a seamless customer experience. To make this happen WMG hired Christina Goldschmidt as Vice President of Product Design, in September 2023.

Christina explained, "It was a highly visible pain point: the sales department was reluctant to even demo the current music distribution platform to potential clients. We weren't proud of our current experience, and I think that's a bar that's really important to us in this organization—actually being proud of what we launch."

Christina embarked on a transformative journey that would redefine WMG's approach to design and innovation and ultimately its work culture. As Christina aptly stated, "We're in a really unique position—tech companies lack the deep expertise in the nuances of the music industry, and music companies often don't understand what makes good tech."

THE SOLUTION

“I want you to know that anything that my team designs, it’s going to be a negotiation with you. I’m not going to give you something that your team can’t build.”

Christina Goldschmidt

THE SOLUTION

The core thesis emphasized that improving the platform's functionality alongside consumer-grade design would directly contribute to securing and retaining deals in a highly competitive market, and to better meet modern consumer expectations.

However, the ambitious 3-month deadline posed challenges for the team. It included 1-month for design to be complete, and 2-months for development and go-to-market. Christina recalls she had to quickly learn the music industry, coming from a prior role as VP Product Design at Etsy. She also had to align her team of 11 (growing to 22), and adapt to a newly established leadership team and work culture. As Christina articulated, "My role is really about transformation...changing the structure of our team, how we work, how we collaborate, and also really the experience that we bring to those products to really meet our users' needs."

Christina spearheaded a bold redesign initiative, embracing design sprints to tackle multiple aspects of the distribution platform simultaneously. She shared, "The majority of my team had only been here for about two years. And a lot of them had a very different approach to design and leadership before me — a very different approach. None of them knew faster, leaner, innovative ways of working. So this was also very much a cultural shift." That discipline of the design process was instrumental for Christina and her team's success.

Andrea Slobodien, Product Leader at WMG noted, "Christina is able to quickly lean on the right design framework or toolkit." She fostered an environment where innovation flourished by effectively empowering individuals in avoiding the need to start everything from first principles every time.

Inspired by Christina's adeptness, Andrea and her team broke down into four tracks of work, tackling the four major aspects of the product. Within a week, they had developed a new design strategy, established a multi-year northstar, and devised solutions for immediate usability improvements.

THE REFLECTION

“You’re a Swiss army knife.
You can do anything, but
you’re also a great leader.”

Andrea Slobodien

THE REFLECTION

Christina's calculated approach to risk-taking proved instrumental in accelerating WMG's turnaround and also challenged her own ability to think differently, "I can do more with less: I think people assume that you need the biggest team to get all the things done. Sometimes you need the laser focus to pick off the right thing at the right time to get things done."

Andrea concurred, "Christina is really good at educating the team in small bite sizes rather than trying to boil the ocean." In the end, Christina's journey at WMG isn't about redesigning products—it is about implementing strategic design leadership at the highest levels of leadership so the company can reimagine possibilities and reshape the future of music distribution with industry-leading customer-centric experiences.

The intrapreneurial mindset and value that Christina is bringing to WMG's business is simply stated by Andrea, "You're a Swiss army knife. You can do anything, but you're also a great leader."

Designing for Joy

Evolving Target's Digital Experience

FEATURING

Purvi Shah
VP, UX Design, Research
and Accessibility
Target

Jake Krings
VP, Digital Engineering
Target



Purvi Shah

VP, UX Design, Research and Accessibility
Target

THE CHALLENGE

“Our goal is to create welcoming experiences just like a gracious host would.

We believe we are responsible for ensuring our guests feel a sense of warmth, value, joy, and ease through every interaction with our brand.”

Purvi Shah

THE CHALLENGE

Target is one of America's most well-known multi-category retailers, with ~2000 stores and broad reach. In fact, 96% of all US adults have shopped with the company. The retail giant is known for its curated, on-trend assortment, affordable prices, and ease of shopping via Same Day services and offerings. Some of the company's recent innovations: delivering Starbucks coffee (and even cake pops) directly to customer's cars along with Drive Up orders placed through the company's mobile app.

Target sets a high-bar for experience, referring to their customers as 'guests'. Purvi Shah, VP of User Experience Design, Research and Accessibility, who joined the organization in late 2022 notes "our goal is to create welcoming experiences just like a gracious host would. We believe we are responsible for ensuring our guests feel a sense of warmth, value, joy, and ease through every interaction with our brand."

Purvi shares, "When I first started working at Target and told people about my new job, there was one response I heard repeatedly: 'I LOVE Target'. And the consistent response of emotion makes sense, because in our stores, the newness, the merchandising, the value, the vibe, everything feels just right. There is this *Tar-zay* magic of discovery and affordability you just can't get anywhere else."

Target was founded in 1962 and today's retail landscape faces a challenging macroeconomic climate impeding growth, fierce competition from other retailers, break-neck technological speed, while shifting consumer behavior becomes more fluid, always-on, and increasingly digitally-oriented.

Infusing a sense of discovery, joy, value, and ease into Target's digital experience to strengthen relationships with guests wasn't just a nice to have, it was business critical. There was a clear opportunity to seamlessly bring that joy that guests feel in-stores to the digital experience and drive engagement and differentiation.

THE SOLUTION

“Purvi and I often talk about the fact that it takes the collective expertise of all the functions.

We need to each bring our critical thinking and experience—as well as directness, openness, and trust to help push each other’s thinking and work through messy moments.”

Jake Krings

THE SOLUTION

“Just as we remodel physical stores on a regular basis, we set out to remodel parts of our digital guest experience.” said Purvi. And because digital is a front door to the total enterprise it was critical to quickly define clear outcomes and determine how each distinct function and business unit would activate towards this goal.

And, like any big mission, there was a deadline: holiday, the company’s peak season.

While the group had a good deal of guest insight, strategic institutional business knowledge was not necessarily as well documented. Purvi’s approach built empathy for perspectives inside the organization: “To uncover the magic and meet the near-term business need, we realized we needed to dual-path. Our UX team ran a design spike to identify quick wins while I partnered with my peers to go deeper. I personally ran a series of stakeholder interviews with many of our C-level leaders and critical senior partners to see through their eyes and understand their most differentiated business strategies. This combined with research, data, and a co-creative approach helped us identify which of our biggest guest pain points intersected with our most vital business opportunities across multiple business units.”

Purvi’s hands-on process helped the team to be both pragmatic and bold, charting a course for a remodeled digital experience before the holiday ‘peak.’ At the same time, it was informing a vision

across multiple time horizons that the collective team, especially the triad of product, UX, and engineering, could rally around.

One of Purvi’s key partners, Jake Krings, VP Digital Engineering, shared “We refer to the triad with the addition of data science and the business working together as ‘One Team’. This highlights the value and trust we put on each other as we execute.” He continues, “Purvi and I often talk about the fact that it takes the collective expertise of all the functions. We need to each bring our critical thinking and experience—as well as directness, openness, and trust to help push each other’s thinking and work through messy moments. Because that is what happens when you are solving complex problems at speed.” An example of this complexity is ecommerce working seamlessly with in-store inventory. Many of Target’s digital orders are fulfilled from their stores, so the partnership needed between stores, supply chain and the digital experience team is critical. Additionally, the digital surface is also a key vehicle for Target Circle, as well as Roundel, the company’s retail media business.

The app redesign revealed another key role for Purvi and her team: At Target, with hundreds of UXers globally, it is an enterprise-wide function and can act as ‘the glue’ across various business units, teams, and geographies. She states, “It takes every team to work together to make magic happen for our guests.

THE SOLUTION

This means, we have an imperative to create seamless, easy to use team member and partner experiences because that is what enables the delightful experiences our guests need.”

But this isn’t easy. Purvi and Jake continued to reiterate that it requires trust, openness, and the ability to lead through change towards a shared vision in order to galvanize teams, work differently, and deliver in a short period of time.

Through partnership, insight, and a ‘one team’ mindset, the team accomplished what it set out to do: deliver a more joyful, inspiring, and seamless digital guest experience that also delivered business results.

From improved navigation and search, to more relevant and personalized offers, to increasing ease of basket building and price transparency, to delivering more shopping ease through item substitutions and Drive Up Returns, and introducing more vibrant storytelling throughout, the team increased engagement, demand sales, and even won the Top 1% in search award from Baymard Institute.

The team also achieved their goal of delivering in time for the company’s most high-traffic, high-sales time of year. With of-the season curation, delightful micro interactions, and more, guests felt the

love—and the *Tar-zay* magic in a way they never had before digitally. While this was meaningful, perhaps the most exciting opportunities are yet to come. The north star vision inspired by the stakeholder interviews and co-creation also led the team to organize around more strategic multi-horizon bodies of work.

Jake, VP Digital Engineering, states, “Our approach not only brought the best of Target to our guests digitally, but helped us inform our multi-year strategy from a tech, microservices, and architecture perspective. Having the UX team help us craft a tangible vision which enabled us to get alignment on what we want to go after a few quarters—and a few years out.” Purvi also shared, “Together as a triad, we pushed ourselves to zoom out. We thought about what makes Target truly special, and how we can serve our guests across their entire journey with us. It’s not just about deploying a new feature, but the total end-to-end experience and how we can help our guests discover the joy of everyday life in a way that only Target can.”

THE REFLECTION

“It takes every team to work together to make magic happen for our guests.

This means, we have an imperative to create seamless, easy to use team member and partner experiences because that is what enables the delightful experiences our guests need.”

Purvi Shah

THE REFLECTION

Jake's last comments were on Purvi's unique value to the team, "Purvi brings an industry perspective. She is a thought leader not only in UX design and development, but in retail and that has been incredibly valuable for us as we think about reinventing our digital experience at Target." The hallmark of Purvi's strategic design leadership may be the way she weaves human need together with business strategy to drive bold, multi-horizon thinking with her partners as 'one team' in service of Target's guests.

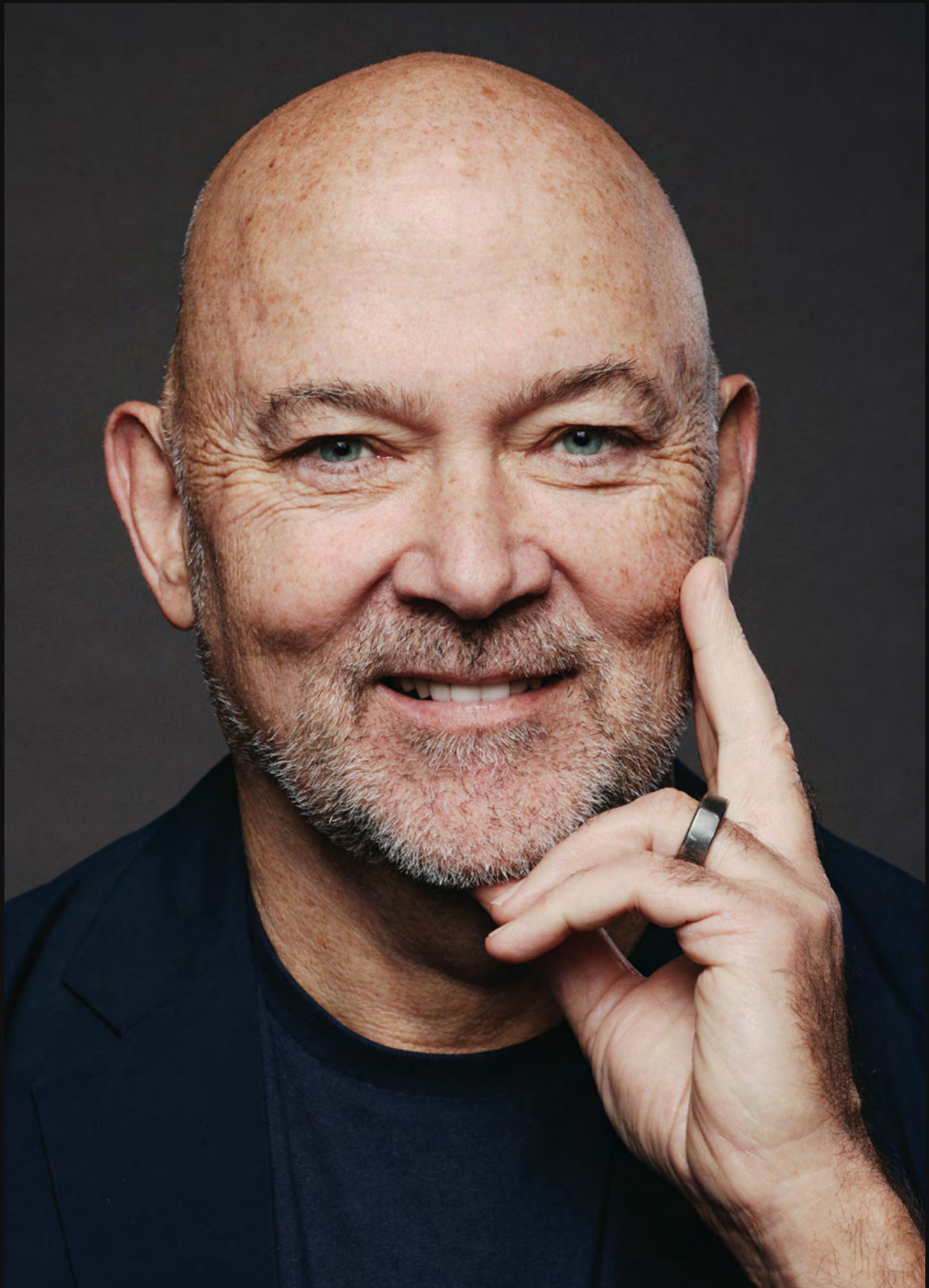
It is also clear that leaders and teams have the unique shared objective to not only anchor to empathy, but also redefine quality as the ability to elicit emotion. A core element of Target's corporate strategy is to be a favorite discovery destination for consumers—by making it easy to discover Target's products and experiences across different channels and touchpoints, including stores, the mobile app and website, and social platforms. As the ever-changing retail environment continues to evolve, and as technology hurtles consumers to more transactional exchange, it will be important to double down on this idea: well-designed experiences can create human connection and emotion. And that is magic.

Outcome-Driven Design

Cisco's Cybersecurity Product Evolution

FEATURING

Greg Petroff
VP, Chief Design Officer
Cisco Secure



Greg Petroff

VP, Chief Design Officer
Cisco Secure

THE CHALLENGE

“It’s impossible to deliver the product in our time frame.

We have 485 features, but only have the team capacity for 200, and no clarity on priorities.”

Greg Petroff

THE CHALLENGE

In 2023, Cisco saw record revenue growth, reaching \$57 billion, supported by strong demand for its networking and security solutions amid the pandemic-induced digital transformation wave.

However, Cisco faced increasing competition, especially from new entrants in cloud computing and software-defined networking (SDN). The rise of open-source technologies and greater virtualization also pressured Cisco's traditional hardware-centric business model. As the market evolved, Cisco capitalized on the shift towards remote work and the growing use of IoT devices, positioning itself as a key player in networking infrastructure and cybersecurity.

In September 2022, Greg Petroff joined Cisco Secure, tasked with enhancing the competitiveness of Cisco's security products with design. Cisco needed to build a new product in the secure service edge market to stay competitive. With fierce competition, the team faced the challenge of developing a beta product within a stringent nine-month timeline while meeting high security standards.

Upon his arrival, Petroff was confronted with significant development challenges. He recounted, "I arrived at Cisco, and I was sitting with the engineering leader, and he said, 'It's impossible to deliver the product in our time frame. We have 485 features, but only have team capacity for 200, and no clarity on priorities.'"

Inspired by *Outcomes over Output* by Josh Seiden, Petroff emphasized a customer-first approach. He explained, "I used to carry copies of it in my backpack. People buy outcomes, not features. Prioritize what's important to them."

THE SOLUTION

“Once a month, we would do a version for stakeholders. If there was something really cool in one of those videos, I would send it out to senior leadership and say, ‘Go check this out.’”

Greg Petroff

THE SOLUTION

With one stakeholder on his side, Greg seized the opportunity to follow this streamlined, outcome-based approach to transform not only an outdated product but to create an efficient design-centered culture. The existing process Greg's team worked in involved establishing milestone gates within the organization, including business commit, architecture commit, user experience commit, and engineering commit. While user experience and architecture commits were not always utilized, the business commit involved product proposals and feature sets essential for potential investment. However, there was significant work required between the business and engineering commits with a very tight timeline.

To address this, the approach was shifted towards an outcome-centric user experience commit and focusing on the deeper human understanding of how this product would be used in service to their customers' businesses. The focus was on identifying the top 20 customer outcomes the product needed to deliver and understanding how customers currently achieved them. Teams demonstrated workflows using tools like Figma, identifying areas for innovation and improvement along the customer journey before progressing to screen designs and prototypes.

Greg explained, "We built workflow diagrams in Figma that helped us to understand how a customer is solving the problem today, either with us or with

someone else's technology. And then we identified what are the opportunities where the engineering and product teams can innovate along those paths. We were always assessing whether we should just leave this alone and do it the same way as we have, or if there's an area that we need to innovate on. These conversations were happening before we got to any screens or mockups and prototypes."

The design and product teams simultaneously stack ranked the 20 outcomes while gathering customer feedback and validating those results with the user research team. Greg challenged the research team to learn from customers, "What are the most important outcomes to you that this product can satisfy - not independent features. What does it allow you to accomplish as a business and for your people to successfully be at work and we narrowed that down to ten."

Streamlining the approach, Greg's team with their cross functional peers prioritized the least number of features necessary to satisfy the identified outcomes while considering engineering capacity constraints. This involved implementing simple solutions first, deferring more complex ideas for later iterations. With the market window closing, the focus was on delivering a compelling and useful product promptly to avoid losing relevance. This approach not only guided engineering teams in their tasks but also ensured efficiency in the product development process.

THE SOLUTION

Simultaneously, a new design system, Magnetic, was being rolled out for the security products. Despite its early stage, Greg encouraged design teams to utilize it extensively, leveraging the completed components to expedite the design process. This decision facilitated rapid progress, allowing close alignment with engineering and maintaining a cadence of delivery without missing deadlines. “As we started we built a cadence where we were never more than three, three and a half weeks ahead of engineering. We never missed a deadline.”

Greg established two key rituals which helped cement a culture of design thinking within Cisco and complemented the shortened development time. “To ensure efficient progress, we implemented twice-weekly design reviews utilizing Cisco’s VidCast tool, enabling streamlined feedback loops and maintaining alignment with our design system. Once a month, we would do a version for stakeholders. If there was something really cool in one of those videos, I would send it out to senior leadership and say, ‘Go check this out.’” The flexibility of the video format meant that Greg could share unique or outstanding work to the senior leadership team allowing them to be part of the process, but also at the same time, socializing the design review format and the outcome-based process.

Despite occasional challenges, the team successfully adhered to this process, delivering a compelling product within nine months. While initial feedback suggested some desired features were missing, the focus on key outcomes ensured that the most critical functionalities were present, prioritized, and well-executed. This approach fostered trust with early customers, paving the way for iterative enhancements and continuous improvement, ensuring the product’s ongoing relevance and evolution.

The new product called Cisco Secure Access was brought to market on time and has secured several hundreds of new customers and is doing very well in the early adoption phase. The product is meeting the sales goals and exceeding the market penetration and the customer acquisition goals that Cisco defined.

THE SOLUTION

“One of the things that design can do when it’s doing its job right, and being a real partner with product, is expressing the strategic experience and getting the outcome right along the way, with less pivots along the way.”

Greg Petroff

THE SOLUTION

Notably, this process created a very strong partnership between product design and engineering based on trust and shared goals. Greg clarifies, “If anything this effort showed that we can move faster together if we had a clear understanding of customer outcomes and benefits. Historically, our product team prioritized selling features over addressing customer needs comprehensively. This shift required discipline in prioritization, focusing on the most crucial customer requirements first. The team excelled collectively in this approach, resulting in a product that not only looks impressive but also offers straightforward functionality. I’m incredibly proud of their work.”

During this project Greg’s teams worked on over 25 other products of similar size or shape, but as a new leader at Cisco this was a high profile piece of work and it was also the first project where Greg and his team were building with the Magnetic design system, and not renovating existing components. Throughout the process, Greg leaned heavily on his product development knowledge, a keen understanding of market behaviors and the SAAS industry, allowing him to empower and guide his team to make informed business decisions quickly and confidently never interrupting or overburdening the design process.

“I think design has a role to play in delineating what’s possible. Product teams often describe a feature with words but the manifestation of that is something that design can often discern more quickly because, we make artifacts” Greg adds, “It’s in the making and the dialogue we have with the design that the answers can emerge with more clarity. Designers make to think and often that is a distinct advantage in the early definition of a product.”

Reflecting on this project Greg shared the value of minimal viable product within design thinking process, “One of the things that design can do when it’s doing its job right, and being a real partner with product, is expressing the strategic experience and getting the outcome right along the way, with less pivots along the way.”

Leading Design-Driven Enterprise Growth

The \$100M Opportunity at IBM

FEATURING

Arin Bhowmick
EVP, Chief Design Officer
SAP

Former Chief Design Officer
IBM Products



Arin Bhowmick

EVP, Chief Design Officer
SAP

THE CHALLENGE

“Rob, I feel like we’ve got the parts. But the power is bringing it together and exposing it in a way that makes sense to the customers.”

Arin Bhowmick

THE CHALLENGE

IBM's rich design history boasts significant contributions to the evolution of design in the enterprise and over the years it has gone through multiple company transformations. In this case study, we expand on how IBM leveraged strategic design leadership to drive product innovation, design capabilities, and sales.

In 2018-2020, IBM was undergoing a significant transformation, with a heightened focus on hybrid cloud and AI solutions. Facing competition from cloud computing giants and pressure to innovate, IBM aimed to strengthen its position in the cloud market and expand its portfolio of AI-driven services.

Challenges included balancing legacy business lines with emerging technologies, while opportunities lay in leveraging its expertise in enterprise solutions to drive digital transformation for clients in various industries. IBM had annual revenues in the tens of billions of dollars and employed tens of thousands of employees worldwide. Despite facing challenges and undergoing transformations, IBM continues to be recognized as one of the largest and most influential technology companies globally.

After a tenure of five years at IBM, Arin Bhowmick was five months into his elevated role as Chief Design Officer for IBM Software Products, when a chance encounter in the parking lot with his boss, Rob Thomas, Senior Vice President at the time offered Arin a career defining

opportunity. "We weren't proud of our current experience, and I think that's a bar that's really important to us in this organization — actually being proud of what we launch." Arin recounts, "I remember vividly, I was in Austin at the time, and we were walking out of the building, and Rob was about to get into his car. And I needed five minutes to talk about some other transactional thing and he said, 'Arin, I was just thinking. What's your thought on how we can bring in a product that is going to be compelling' and I told him, 'Rob, I feel like we've got the parts. But the power is bringing it together and exposing it in a way that makes sense to the customers and in doing so shows the power of IBM.'" and Rob was like yeah you should think about it."

At this time, Arin had built the reputation as a trusted advisor and had a number of successful projects prior to his new role. Arin oversaw 100% of the IBM software portfolio with over 100 products across various domains such as cloud, security, automation, data, AI, BI, and applications. Product design operated under Arin's centralized model, tightly integrated with product teams on day-to-day execution, sprints, and roadmaps. While design was centralized, each product team and engineering had its own set of leaders, reflecting multiple organizational models within a global team structure. Arin's responsibilities included managing an design organization of up to 1200, focusing on end-to-end product design.

THE SOLUTION

“I spoke to the head of engineering, and the head of product management. Maybe, we could do something about putting these pieces together and showcase the power and differentiation through great UX?”

Arin Bhowmick

THE SOLUTION

Project Zen's UX journey started with a conversation between Arin and the SVP at the time, looking at the product portfolio, "We recognized the need to expand into new segments to foster growth. We were starting to see inversion in retention, and new company competitors coming in against specific parts of the portfolio. IBM had a challenging situation that some were home-grown versus acquisitions, so there was a technical debt over time" Arin explained.

Arin was able to foster a collaborative culture where strategic decisions involved heads from various departments. "We felt at ease talking to each other. And never had a feeling that I wouldn't be heard. I was involved in the strategy making of what we will do for the next year. I expected this to happen, but it actually happened in the room. Around that time, we also had the head of sales, head of marketing, R&D, product management, design, engineering, technical architects and customer success. It was very cross-functional."

During discussions, Arin proposed integrating existing product parts cohesively to showcase IBM's full capabilities, receiving encouragement from leadership to explore the idea further. There was an annual conference bringing key IBM customers together coming up in two months at Moscone Center in San Francisco. It was a huge revenue-generating event, "I spoke to the head of engineering, and the head of product management.

Maybe, we could do something about putting these pieces together and showcase the power and differentiation through great UX?"

This led to a skunkworks design project initiated by Arin, leveraging his business acumen was essential but it gave him more pride that there was strategic design tied to it. Because it was such a macro-level project, Arin as CDO, was able to manage it directly, which was uncommon but rewarding for Arin. This demonstrated the pivotal role of design in driving macro-level business initiatives, ultimately contributing to IBM's strategic vision and customer engagement. "And that's what we did in the next one and a half months, a concept with a few use cases that showed a couple of things: first that we had been taking ux seriously; second that we have a unique point of view for that domain and market; and third, we are thinking about customer journeys and problems that others haven't solved yet. So three different things, one from the business side, one from the perception side and one from the technical side."

As the person closest to the design, Arin felt confident he was best informed to demo the product direction on stage with thousands of potential customers in the audience. Throughout the process, there was tight alignment between Product Management, Engineering and Design. Arin described the entire process as amorphous as the three departments worked seamlessly and synergistically.

THE SOLUTION

Project Zen progressed from idea to market with general availability in 6-8 months. Design served as the main interface with marketing, providing assets that guided the product direction and the UX collateral that complemented the messaging. Arin's ability to balance both design and business competencies served him well, demonstrating the diversity of the design executive role in enterprise environments. His work involved collaboration with analysts, PR, marketing, and customer service to ensure effective delivery.

THE SOLUTION

“If you follow your passion and bring in the right people to do the work, and collaborate along the way, you get the results.”

Arin Bhowmick

THE SOLUTION

That product based on a skunkworks project, a 2-minute teaser video and Arin's demo generated \$100 million in qualified leads in that one conference, created \$37 million in bookings in the second quarter and \$75 million in the next. This resulted in the product team increasing headcount by 30% over two years and IBM investing \$40-60 million in design capabilities across multiple business segments.

Arin reflects on that first conversation with Rob, and the subsequent conversations with the heads of engineering and product management, "I think that's the power of great leaders. They are pretty adept at figuring out who within the circle would be driven enough to do it themselves. Of course I had to drive, but one of the things is that in the enterprise world I've learned, that it's very hard to come up with a new product, because, you have customers on it for a while and it's hard to bring about changes so when you get an opportunity I wanted to grab it with in both hands."

His candor and insights into Project Zen reveal a number of unique behaviors that strategic design leaders bring to businesses. The ability to understand and motivate cross functional teams, being strategic while also being hands on, a natural curiosity to understand the financial opportunity as well as the implications.

Arin attributes much of his future success to the moment when he and his team was able to catch lightning in a bottle, "I want to say that a lot of my success beyond that moment hinged on this moment, when I was the CDO I was around 760-700 designers. By the time I left, I had 950-1000 direct and then some indirect growth."

And finally, "If you follow your passion and bring in the right people to do the work, and collaborate along the way, you get the results." Arin continues his quest for design excellence and design impact in his current role of Chief Design Officer at SAP. "I truly learnt the meaning of good design is good business with my IBM experience, and use the learnings as a guiding light in my current job, in uplevelling design maturity, design craft and UX differentiation. Once you know what you are capable of, you yearn to go above and beyond".

Design-Driven Culture Change

Elevating CNN's Digital Experience

FEATURING

Alex Hsiao
VP, Product Design
CNN

Amanda Rottier
SVP, Head of Product
CNN



Alex Hsiao

VP, Product Design
CNN

THE CHALLENGE

As a household name and trusted global news source, CNN's legacy demanded staying relevant and embracing authenticity, digital storytelling, and reinvention, while navigating its position within a global media portfolio.

THE CHALLENGE

In an era driven by an insatiable demand for real-time news and multimedia content, the landscape of media consumption has undergone a profound shift towards digital experiences. Recognizing this seismic change, CNN, a stalwart in broadcasting and pioneer of the 24-hour news cycle, understood the imperative to strategically reassess its digital presence to maintain its dominance in the digital realm.

Since its inaugural broadcast on June 1st, 1980, CNN has been at the forefront of covering wars, natural disasters, politics, and pop culture, initially in America and later worldwide. CNN revitalized news, delivering credible, timely, and relevant information into living rooms 24/7, and bringing breaking news with real-time human experiences to global audiences.

From the live coverage of events such as the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy to groundbreaking interviews like President Clinton's from the Oval Office, CNN has been a constant presence at every significant global event over the past forty years.

In 1995, CNN launched its first website, initially called CNN Interactive. Following Turner Broadcasting System's acquisition by Time Warner in 1996, and subsequently becoming WarnerMedia, CNN is now part of Warner Bros. Discovery.

Today, CNN Digital platforms consistently rank as the #1 digital news outlet in unique users, mobile users, younger users, and politics. CNN had a monthly average of 159 million unique visitors worldwide in 2023 across mobile and desktop.

As a household name and trusted global news source, CNN's legacy demanded staying relevant and embracing authenticity, digital storytelling, and reinvention while navigating its position within a global media portfolio. To empower CNN's forward evolution, the team seized an opportunity to reimagine its future in reinforcing its position as the most trusted news source on television and digital apps.

At the heart of this transformation was a commitment to delivering breaking news, serving timely and relevant information to audiences—the cornerstone of CNN's identity—while harnessing the potential of technology to create user-centered digital experiences across diverse platforms, brands, and media properties for consumers worldwide. One of the key questions facing CNN today is how to evolve with rapidly evolving news consumption behavior in the age of digital and technological disruption.

THE SOLUTION

“We have to be able to speak together; we have to be able to have a common language and a vision that we can all aspire to.”

Amanda Rottier

THE SOLUTION

Alex Hsiao, VP of Product Design, spearheads global product design and user experience initiatives across CNN's owned and third-party platforms. Together with Amanda Rottier, SVP and Head of Product, embarked on a transformative initiative called Project Elevate, a transformative endeavor aimed at enhancing CNN's digital user experience and addressing opportunities stemming from the mass media and entertainment conglomerate formation of Warner Bros. Discovery. This was formed from WarnerMedia's spin-off by AT&T and merged from Discovery, Inc.

Alex initiated the project explaining, "I felt the need for a spark to guide us forward, and it was clear that we needed a game-changer so I initiated Project Elevate. It seemed like the perfect name for the moment we were in. It was about attracting new users and adopting a modern design approach to create a premium user experience. I wanted to paint a vivid picture of what our future could look like, to inspire and propel us forward in the face of uncertainty and rapid change."

Navigating involvement in product development presented unique challenges. Alex noted, "In media companies, there are four distinct types of designers: visual designers & editors in the newsroom, product designers focusing on user experience, and marketing designers handling branding and campaigns, and broadcast designers in the studios.

Furthermore, we had to work closely with a broad range of internal stakeholders, partners and external users. We conducted qualitative and quantitative research to inform and advise on the direction." The capability for creating cohesive end-to-end experiences meant Alex and his team had to not only bring together product design and research, but newsroom and stakeholders across the board.

With Alex's advocacy and Amanda's support, access to the executive team was secured, resulting in a significant investment in a design system by the CFO. This bolstered design capabilities and talent, instilling trust and empowerment within the product, design, and engineering teams, and fostering a belief that they could redefine the company's trajectory with an unmatched digital experience.

Project Elevate wasn't just about sophisticated interfaces, Alex emphasized. "It was about demonstrating the tangible impact of strategic design, threading the stories & data we heard from users and partners into a compelling narrative of possibility,".

THE SOLUTION

To ensure a unified customer experience, Alex implemented Connected Design Reviews (CDRs). These meetings are crucial for centralizing design decisions and fostering a shared understanding among senior product design leaders, aligning them on how to seamlessly integrate the CNN experience.

CDRs are valuable as well for designers, as they provide success metrics, and research data to help inform the design solution focused on being outcome over output driven. “If we want to innovate together, if we are serious about CNN’s digital future,” Amanda explained. “We have to be able to speak together; we have to be able to have a common language and a vision that we can all aspire to.” This was an essential part of the design journey for Alex - to unify cross-company initiatives and shift the culture towards user-centered design.

Recognizing the need for cohesive communication and shared learnings across the organization, Alex and Jessica Cherry, Head of Design Operations, which was a newly established capability, initiated the Warner Bros Discovery (WBD) Design Town Hall, drawing participation from various design teams across the global WBD organization. Alex added, “Since 6 months ago when it started, it has snowballed. “I hear from people all the time ‘Hey, we want to be a part of this!’”

A total of about 200 employees representing not only the CNN Product Design team but also design teams representing businesses across News, Sports, Streaming and Entertainment are attending now. Through a global knowledge sharing hub, it enabled teams to accelerate the way they learned and approach work via design cross-pollination and ideation.

To anticipate and meet the evolving needs and expectations of CNN’s diverse audience base, Alex’s strategy went beyond the foundational capabilities of rapid content publication of a CMS and addressed iterative UX enhancements. “There was a definitive need for us to focus on the key foundational capabilities to enable us to propel forward, as well as influencing iterative enhancements and improvements to the user experience.” Alex added, “There’s a technical foundation we need to continue to build on, which is our CMS. And then Project Elevate, which ultimately was sort of the visionary project concept, future roadmap and really our north star.”

THE SOLUTION

Amanda underscored the importance of tangible improvements in user experiences and business metrics. “Where we like to see real hard improvements is on the sort of experiences like today. Whether that’s improving video views over a period of time based on a new feature, or like mobile app usage over a period of time, some of those smaller metrics that you may not see are in the larger audience trends.”

Ultimately, success is measured not only by improved metrics but also by delivering great experiences, to CNN’s audience while effectively monetizing engagement. Amanda emphasized, “They may not like the news, so we can’t really control that. But we can make sure that people have a positive experience and a usable experience when they come so that’s always the highest bar... I’m incredibly data business driven. I’m also looking at how good we are at delivering on our business results, whether that’s ads, or different revenue models, subscriptions, affiliate revenue, whatever. Are we effectively monetizing our audience, we monetizing them in the best way possible?”

Alex highlighted the importance of balancing design with business goals: “I needed to get my design team to work towards the business goal. It’s how we steer our designers to consider their ROI.

The notional concept of ‘time’ is a key consideration that our designers focused on. The time our designers are spending on crafting an experience, and the return on the investment of their time. Keeping the top line metric in mind as they craft the user experience is an integral part of this design-driven culture change. We considered the user value exchange as part of the monetization of engagement strategy. The ‘time’ exchange is focal to our user-centered approach. So how do we put forth our distinctive journalism, in a compelling storytelling format, and an intuitive UX so that our consumers choose to come back to us time and time again? The exchange for our consumer’s time is always at the center of our approach.”

THE SOLUTION

“It was about crafting an elevated, premium user experience that would attract new audiences. It was about demonstrating the tangible impact of strategic design, threading the stories & data we heard from users and partners into a compelling narrative of possibility.”

Alex Hsiao

THE SOLUTION

Alex reflects on the profound impact that Project Elevate had on the design team as well as the entire organization stating, “Today Project Elevate is at the heart of our design ethos, transcending individual teams and shaping our company’s trajectory. It’s more than just a project; it’s a company-wide cultural shift, a testament to observation, imagination, and the relentless pursuit of excellence.”

As a result of this project, Alex shared that CNN Digital has seen a double digit percentage increase on time spent and page views, and 2x increase in video starts. He emphasizes how Project Elevate served as a masterclass in fostering collaboration and strategic design leadership across CNN and the broader WBD, extending beyond design, product, and tech teams to engage the entire enterprise. Amidst a period of change, it was about identifying opportunities and possibilities for growth. Despite the hurdles, he saw the transition towards a centralized model as a necessary step towards embracing digital transformation fully.

Regarding the evolution of news media consumption, Alex acknowledges the challenge of meeting heightened audience expectations in the digital age. Despite the plethora of information sources, CNN aims to remain relevant by continuously engaging audiences with compelling content and maintaining their trust.

Looking ahead, both Amanda and Alex are confident in CNN’s ability to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape, leveraging collaboration and innovation to drive continued growth and success.

Despite being a work in progress, Project Elevate marks a significant milestone towards achieving CNN’s digital-first future. Leaning into the new space created by the project, Alex is excited to leverage the momentum and credibility earned through this process to initiate bolder design projects within the digital space.

With respect to Alex’s contribution to the project and leadership style, Amanda commended his business acumen and people skills, “Alex is definitely a very strong people manager...dynamics are a big part of the job. He has a really good approach to that, always fighting for his people and setting them up for success. I think Alex has a really good business mind too...he’s an overall leader... he can look at a problem in different ways and is a contributor in that way.”

Mindsets in Action

The exploration of strategic design leadership through the case studies and impact stories of Cisco, CNN, IBM, Target, and Warner Music Group demonstrates the adaptable nature of design leadership mindsets in addressing unique business challenges.

While each of these leaders exemplified the core mindsets of Design Intrapreneur, Design Visionary, and Strategic Unifier, the circumstances they faced influenced which mindset was emphasized or flexed more prominently to drive impact and achieve strategic objectives.

Design Intrapreneur

Proactively driving tangible innovation.

Christina Goldschmidt identified and addressed a critical pain point in the outdated music distribution platform, emphasizing the importance of launching products that the organization can take pride in.

Purvi Shah ran stakeholder interviews with C-level leaders and partners to see through their eyes and understand the most differentiated business strategies, leading to clarity around the biggest guest pain points and most distinct business opportunities.

Greg Petroff shifted the organization towards an outcome-centric user experience approach that brought forth focus and helped streamline key customer outcome priorities.

Arin Bhowmick instinctively identified a key business opportunity to demonstrate differentiation and leveraged his design expertise to rapidly create prototypes that enabled enterprise sales and general availability in 6-8 months.

Alex Hsiao identified and initiated Project Elevate to attract new users and adopt a modern design approach that would create a premium user experience.

Design Visionary

Advancing strategic clarity, foresight, and transformation readiness.

Christina Goldschmidt implemented strategic design leadership at the highest levels of Warner Music Group to set new industry-leading standards and reshape the future of music distribution.

Purvi Shah led the team to create a north star vision was inspired by stakeholder interviews and created a tangible format that enabled cross-functional alignment on both quarterly and multi-year strategic horizons.

Greg Petroff faced the complex challenge of consolidating numerous product features into a cohesive cybersecurity solution - he integrated multiple product components under a unified vision while ensuring customer outcome focus.

Arin Bhowmick set a new standard by leading by example and demonstrated the differentiating power of great UX by demoing a new prototype on stage with thousands of potential customers in the audience, leveraging design as the main interface to drive a new product direction and vision.

Alex Hsiao created a tangible vision CNN's digital future by weaving stories and data from users and partners into a compelling narrative that was unified by a user-centered design culture.

Strategic Unifier

Unifying leaders and orchestrating optimal organizational designs.

Christina Goldschmidt's key role was about transformation in changing the structure of the team, how they work and how they collaborate to create products that meet user needs.

Purvi Shah was recognized by her technology peer as a leader who was able to instill value and trust throughout execution, and how she expertly weaves human need with business strategy to drive bold, multi-horizon thinking as 'one team.'

Greg Petroff leveraged a new design review cadence that streamlined feedback and maintained design alignment, and amplified such results to senior leadership once a month.

Arin Bhowmick fostered a cross-functional collaborative culture where strategic decisions involving multiple departments were done so in a way where people felt at ease talking to one another, and that they were always heard.

Alex Hsiao energized and streamlined the organization for digital transformation, enabling global design teams and stakeholders to embark on more ambitious design projects.

CONCLUSION

The integration of strategic design leadership is pivotal as we navigate transformative changes in the business landscape. For designers, this means bringing their natural orientation towards curiosity, empathy, care, beauty, excellence, and intentionality to the forefront of how they influence decision-making across the enterprise and in leadership teams.

Our research, highlights the significant opportunity to embed design as a core business function that has the power to not only deliver on design in a product development setting but also influence the strategy, direction, and values the organization is built upon. By actively involving design executives in strategic decision-making, businesses empower these leaders to drive innovation and influence critical business outcomes. Design executives need to rise up in their strategic leadership capabilities to become effective and trusted leaders across the business.

Integrating design leadership demands robust commitment across all organizational tiers, but it begins and ends with the leadership effectiveness of the design executive. Every level must champion the authority and inclusion

of design, ensuring these leaders are equipped to enact significant changes. It is crucial to hold design executives accountable not merely as creatives but as vital business leaders who significantly impact the company's financial health and competitive performance.

Our study emphasizes the essential balance of visionary thinking with pragmatism, efficiency with creativity, and business profit with customer benefit. Effective design leadership involves managing the tension and creating value in an environment characterized by duality and fluidity. This balance is critical in harnessing the full spectrum of design's potential to solve real-world problems and drive business success.

Looking ahead, the evolving role of design leaders into executive positions signals a promising shift. As more businesses recognize and leverage the unique value of strategic design leadership, we anticipate a future where design is embedded way of decision-making, leading, and operating. We are already observing more design executives rising into roles beyond traditional leadership, bringing their mindsets and philosophies to strategic positions in the C-suite.

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