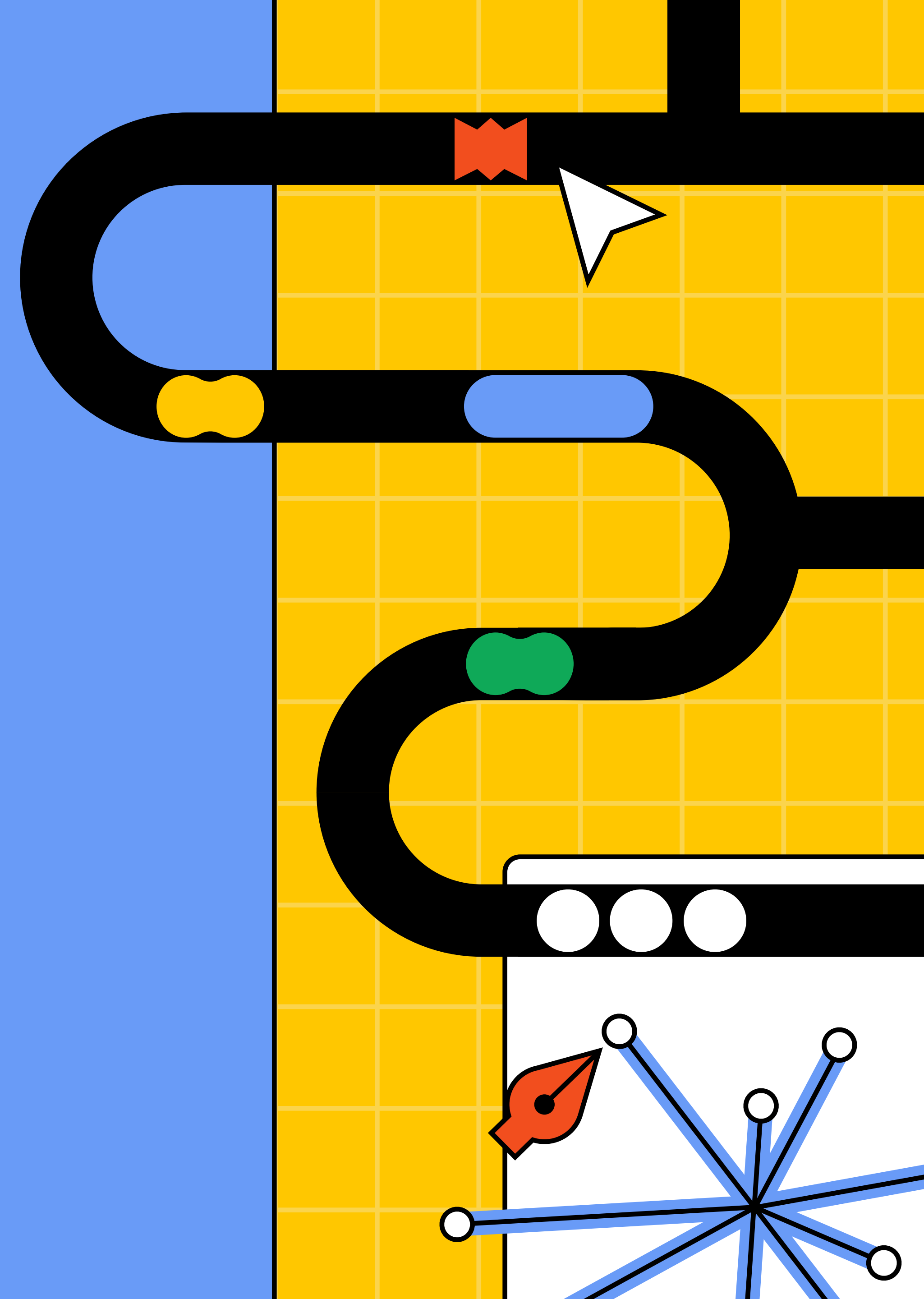


The Business Leader's Guide to Design

Organizations have begun to recognize that design is more than a service. It could actually be their secret weapon. That's why many are embedding it as a core competency, even at the executive level.

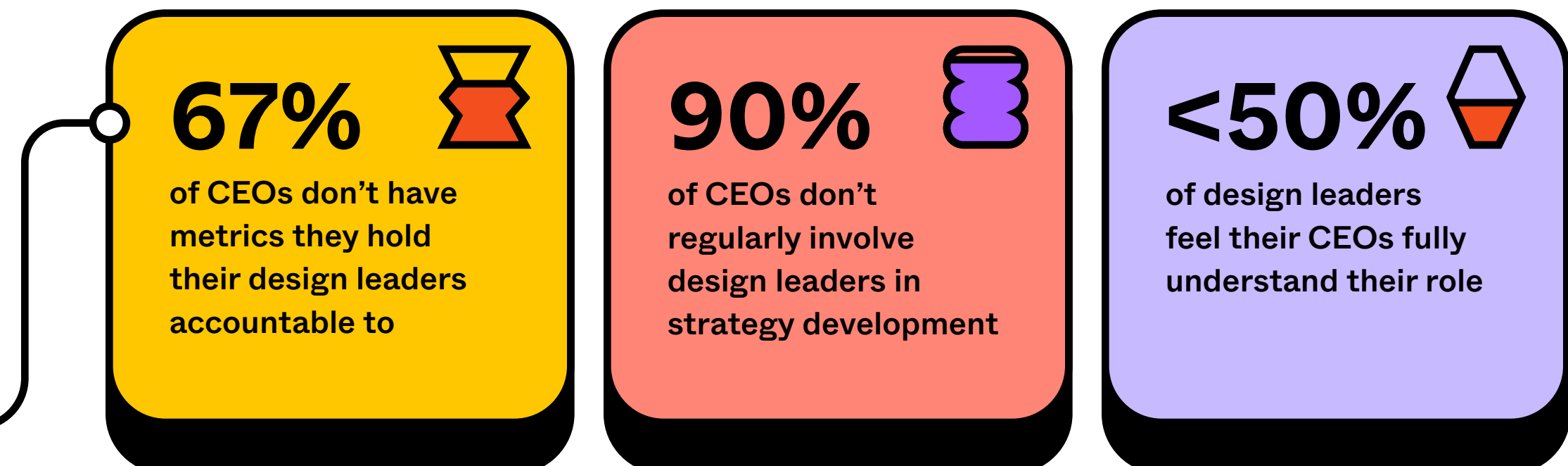


In *Org Design for Design Orgs*, authors Kristin Skinner and Peter Merholz write, “There’s a sense that design makes things ‘better,’ by making [companies] more attractive, more desirable, and easier to use.” Prominent design recruiter Judy Wert says “More and more leaders care about design and feel that there’s something about design that’s going to be important to the success of their business.”

Critically, [research conducted by McKinsey & Company](#) found that companies with high-performing design practices have as much as doubled their performance compared to their competitors.

But how well do business leaders really understand it? What do they know about how design works, how teams are structured, and what drives the designers who have aspirations to become part of their company’s leadership? Not very well, according to McKinsey & Company.

The management consultancy reported in 2020 that;



Perhaps part of the reason is that design as a formal discipline is newer to many organizations than many other core business functions like sales and marketing, and even technology. In many ways, designers have had to design their own way forward, testing and iterating to carve their space in an organization. In other words, they’ve had to learn by doing. But through this process of experimentation, norms and best practices have emerged that can guide leaders who are looking for direction on how to build their own high-performing design organizations.

In this ebook, we’ll help business leaders understand how design works at scale, from team structures and roles to practices and processes and in cross-functional collaboration with business stakeholders. In short, we’ll pull back and look at how design is actually *designed* in an organization.

Chapter

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The true power of design

In many organizations, there remains a misconception about what design is, and what designers actually do. Perhaps there's a tendency to think of design as primarily focused on aesthetics, or even if it's more than that then maybe it's a discipline that's only engaged at the end of the process when the time comes to refine the end product.

However, as Kevin Bethune, author of *Reimagining Design: Unlocking Strategic Innovation*, says in a [Ted presentation](#), the reality is that designers can and do solve problems beyond the physical product. They are capable of shaping how we do business and how we see the world.

"If I were to ask early cell phone users what they wanted in a phone before the release of the iPhone, they would have asked for bigger thumb keypads," he said. "This is where designers' X-ray vision comes in handy."

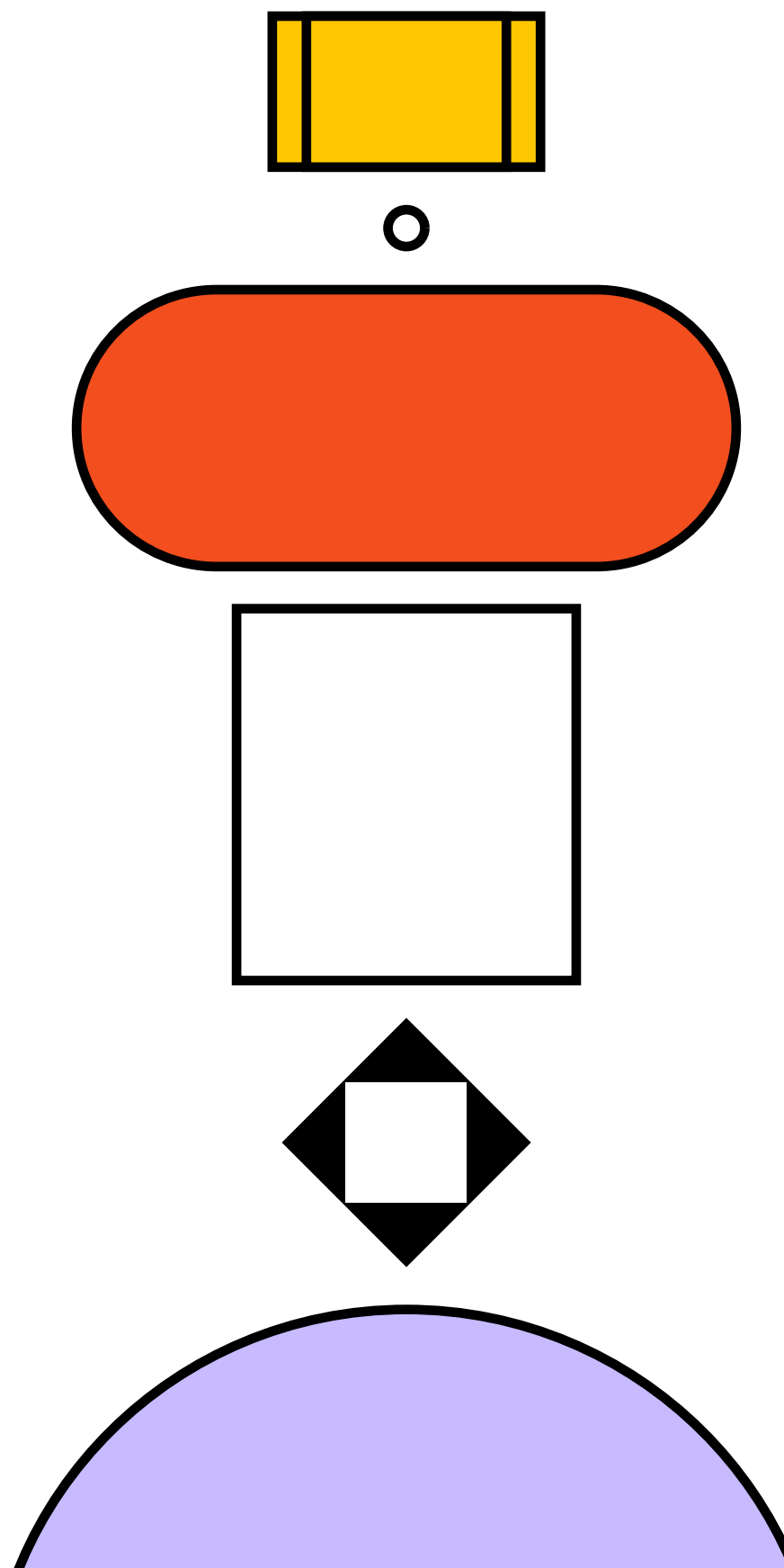
X-ray vision: the ability to see through what people say to what people actually feel and need - is one of four "superpowers" Bethune attributes to designers. The others are;

Shape-Shifting: the ability to not only observe but to become the user to understand their journey

Empower others' potential: the ability to understand what gets in the way and would be needed for others to be at their best

Extrasensory perception: the ability to look at the user experience in a holistic way and consider all the senses - in other words ensure the product keeps us human

"If you want to succeed in business, you must - I mean you must - connect your product, your service, your digital platform, to your audience," says Bethune. "It's really about mapping to their needs, and it's a personal relationship they've come to expect. Design plays a huge role in shaping those emotional connections."



Chapter **2**^I

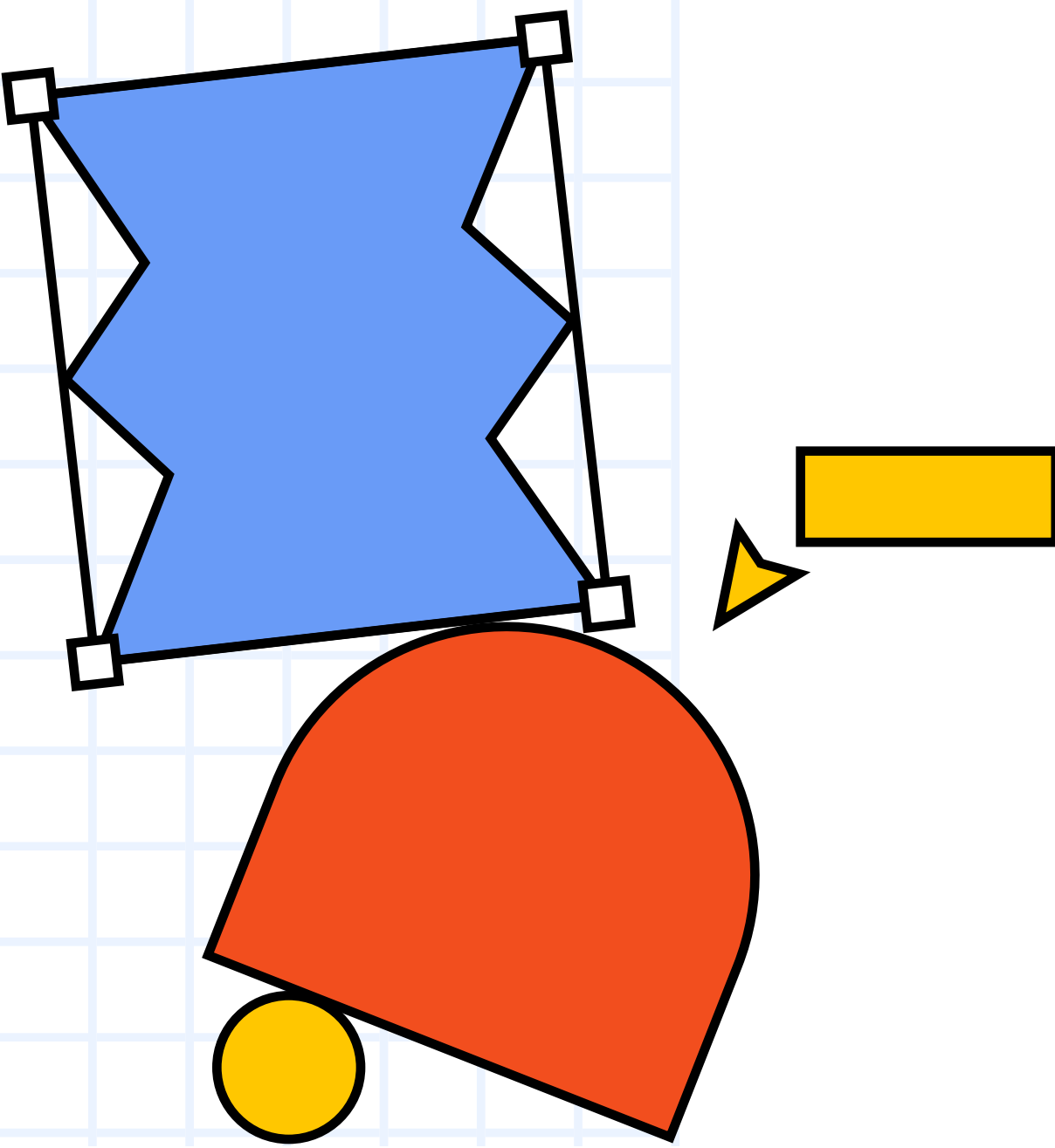
Core capabilities of designers

Designers are renowned for their ability to notice things others overlook, to elevate others through facilitation, to imagine what could be and to visualize potential solutions. The Stanford d.school and IDEO have tried to capture some of these intangibles into a design thinking process you're likely familiar with, but when you hire designers, you aren't hiring them for design thinking, you hire them for their craft. Six big areas of craft:

01 Product Design

Product design can describe the set of capabilities that support the end-to-end creation of digital products. It encompasses the hybridized skills—UX (User Experience), (UI) User Interface, and prototyping—that most of today's well-rounded digital designers possess.

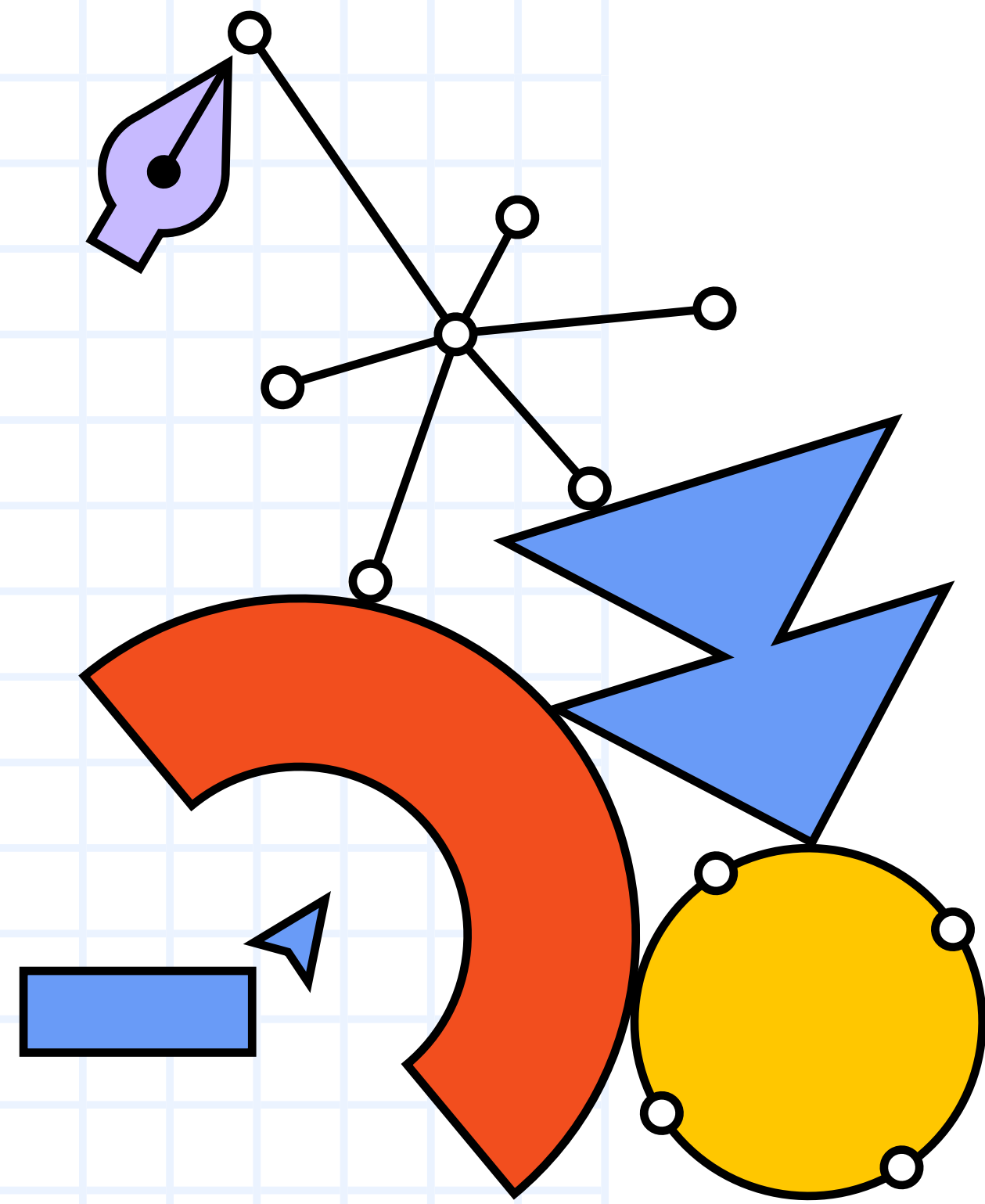
Of course, product design can also apply to the creation of physical products. This ambiguity can actually be useful when there may be some overlap between digital and physical experiences, such as in the creation of interactive displays, smart devices, and wearables. Service design, which considers the multifaceted relationships in an end-to-end user experience, is a sort of twin to the product design capability.



02 Communication and Brand Design

Communication design may be more generally referred to as visual design or creative direction. Designers develop brand and identity systems and the accompanying style guidelines and specifications around layout, color, and typography. But it's about more than aesthetics - communication design is deeply grounded in semiotics: the understanding of symbols, their meaning, and how that meaning is interpreted through different contextual lenses.

Communication design also includes the specialized skills of information and data design. These designers are responsible for rendering accessible, understandable, and elegant (not to mention interactive) visualizations that communicate complex, data-derived insights. Think, for example, of the graphics we interact with in news media, whose designers' work helps us to make sense of complex stories.



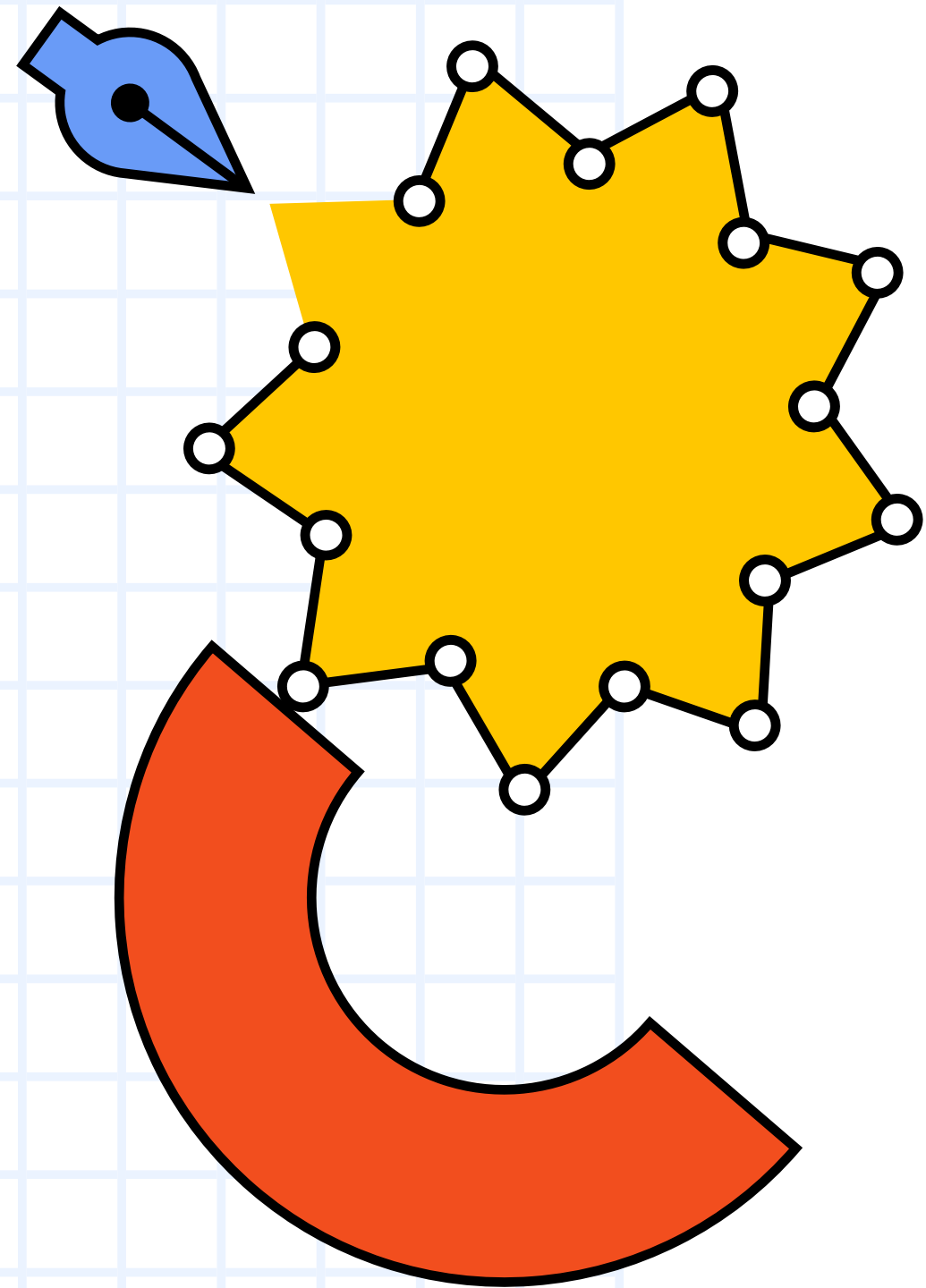
03 Design Research

Design research capabilities range from conducting interviews to facilitating workshops to observing behaviors in the field. Design researchers must also be able to recognize patterns, interpret data, and synthesize insights in order to strategically frame a design problem or solution.

Design research also extends past the “fuzzy front end” of the design process to focus on functional user testing. This specifically considers the usability and accessibility of a design and how people are able to interact with it.

Karel Vredenburg, global vice president of client insights and research at IBM, **says** doing design without design research is ineffective, wasting time and money, and gives design a bad name. He believes the discipline is so critical, organizations must consider a ratio of design researcher to designer to be in the range of 1 to 5-8.

“If we don’t have sufficient design researchers on a project, designers will be flying blind and will need to just make things up,” says Vredenburg. “They will also be giving designs to developers without the basic hygiene of user input and evaluation.”



04 Content Design

Content design is a critical layer to any interface, from labeling navigation and sign-posting calls to action to creating an identifiable tone of voice across a brand's platforms. Thought leadership, blogging, and occasionally social media, also fall under this category.

Content design capabilities can range from traditional brand copywriting to the more interface-driven form of UX writing and multimedia storytelling, like video production. It can also extend to technical writing, e.g., for producing robust instruction manuals and user guides, as well as FAQs and customer service scripts. The importance of clear and compelling writing skills is critical in any aspect of the design process.

05 Design management and ops

The emergence of design ops as a core capability reflects the significant level of investment in cultivating design excellence at scale. Design ops functions like a movie producer, managing increasingly complex workflows as design becomes more deeply embedded in an organization.

Design ops is purpose-built for creating a kind of support squad around the design org so that designers can actually focus on design. Some common responsibilities include managing the

suite of design tools, establishing a design system, managing the flow of traffic in terms of requests for resources and project allocations, standardizing processes and creating resource-sharing systems and designing an interviewing protocol, team onboarding flow, and training curriculum. In some organizations, design ops also supports career progression and growth for designers.

06 Strategic design

Strategic design is the art of applying design principles to solve broader, systems-level challenges. That system may be simply at the organizational or business level, or it may be even more abstracted to looking at a whole territory, like healthcare or education.

In essence, strategic design emphasizes framing problems and identifying opportunities over creating discrete solutions. It looks at the whole picture: what's desirable for customers, what's viable for the business, and what's technologically feasible. That's not to say that strategic designers don't actually *make* things; of course they do. Co-creation, experimentation, and prototyping are integral to strategic design practices, but the scope of what's being prototyped is more than an interface or feature set. It might be a program, a method, or a framework. Strategic designers are fundamentally facilitators who are able to guide decision-making through designed processes.

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How design teams are structured

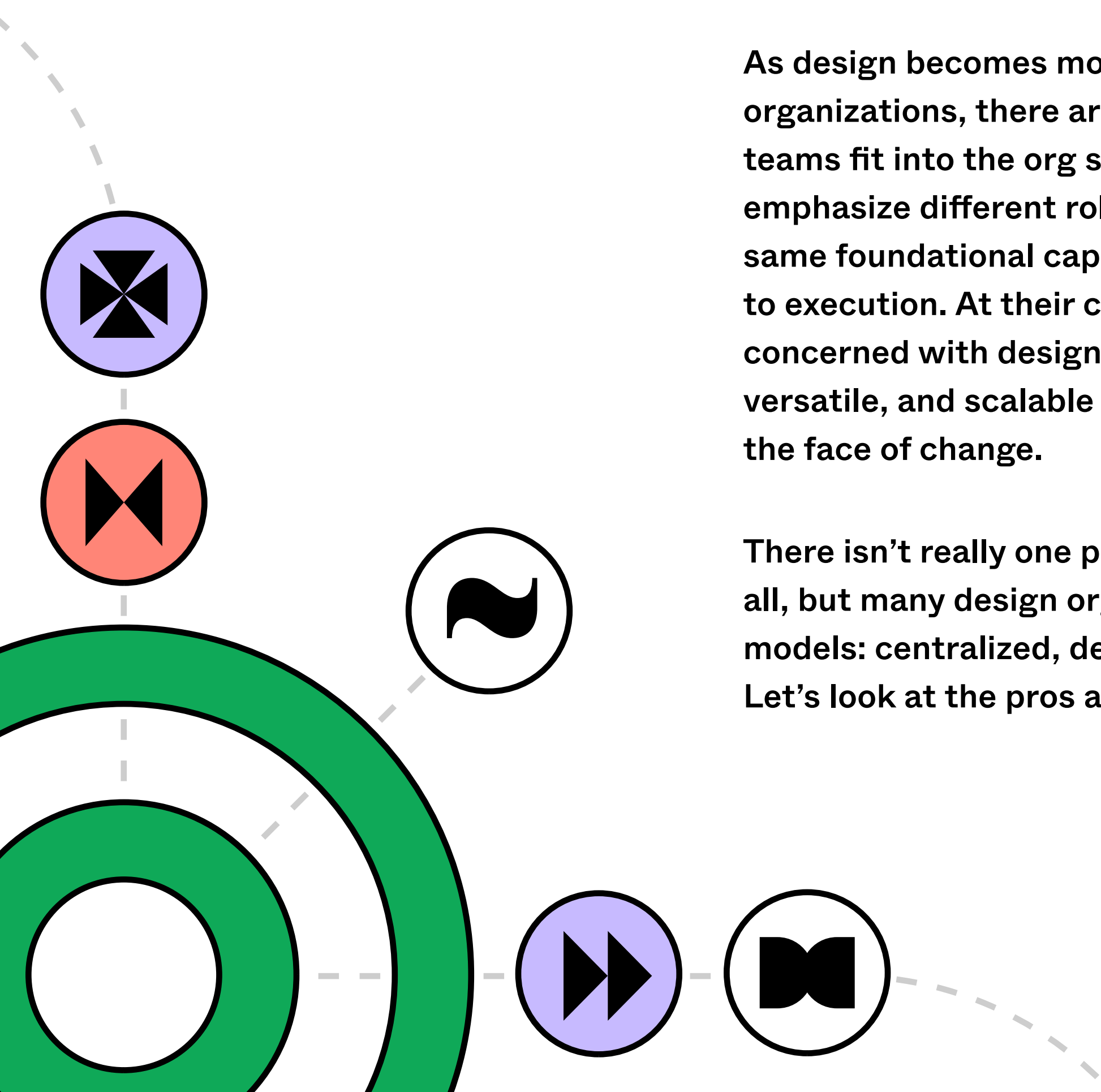
As design becomes more deeply embedded in organizations, there are a few key models for how teams fit into the org structure. Different structures emphasize different roles and skills, but all share the same foundational capabilities ranging from strategy to execution. At their core, leaders today are most concerned with designing teams that are flexible, versatile, and scalable in order to be more resilient in the face of change.

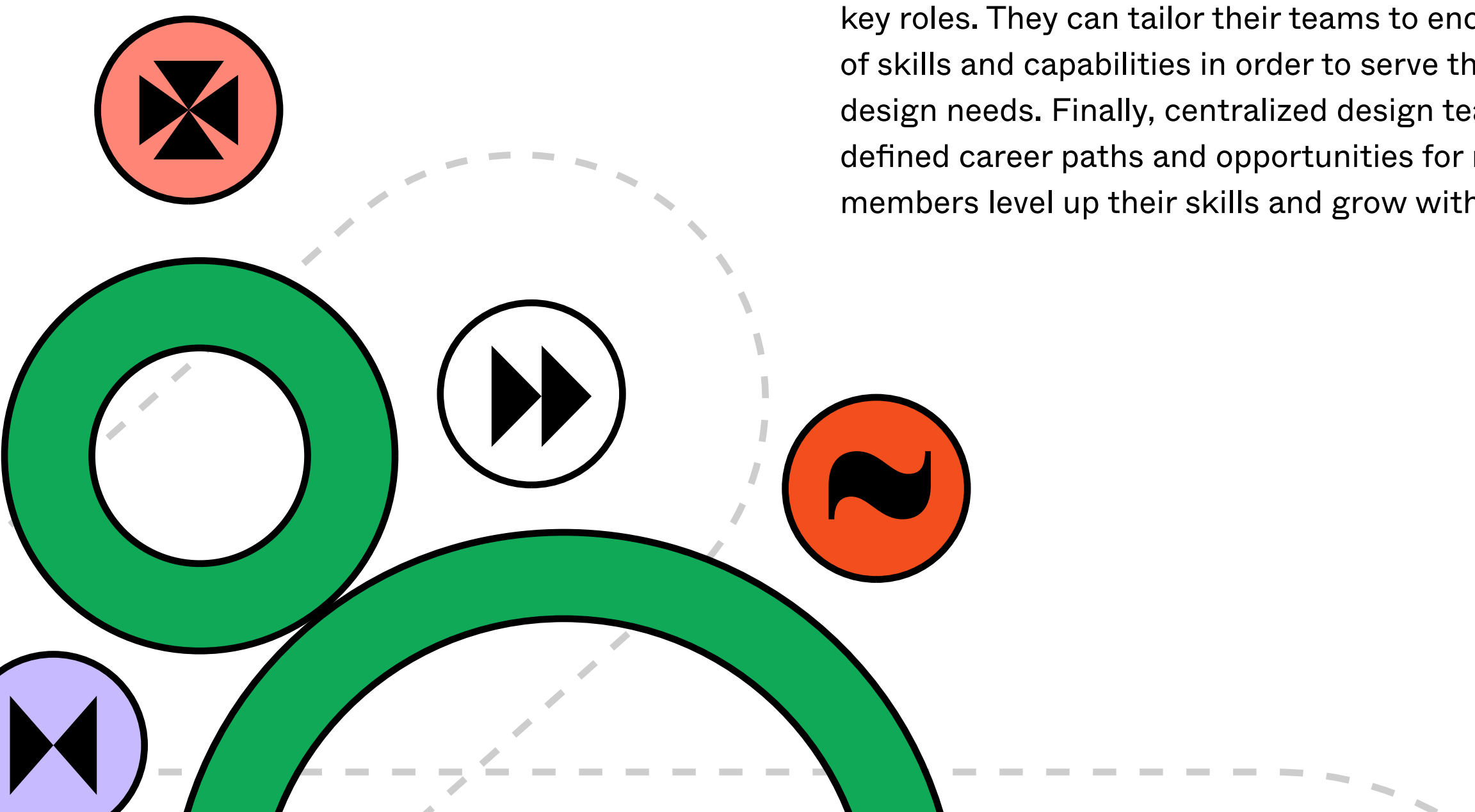
There isn't really one perfect structure to rule them all, but many design organizations fit into one of three models: centralized, decentralized, and hybrid teams. Let's look at the pros and cons of each of them.

01 Centralized design teams

A centralized design team does exactly what it says on the tin. There's a core team that reports to a single design manager, usually someone with the title Head of Design or Head of UX. Depending on the size of the team, there may be an additional level or two of hierarchy, with senior design leads each managing and mentoring a small number of junior team members.

In the centralized model, the design team acts as a group of consultants to the organization, like an internal agency. Designers are resourced to different projects in different business units. One of the key responsibilities (and main challenges) of the design manager is coordinating their team's allocation, looking across multiple project timelines, and projecting gaps and overages of availability.





Because centralised design teams offer a service to the organization, they operate as a cost center, which means that the various business-sponsored projects must determine a budget for design. In this respect, project managers are keen to run a tight ship, making sure every budgeted design hour is tracked for efficiency. This might mean that exploratory strategic design processes are curtailed to focus on executing the project plan's pre-defined outcomes. In turn, this can inhibit a team's ability to develop multiple design iterations, driving them to narrow down to a solution before they have time to properly validate their ideas.

However, centralized design teams do have their advantages, which is why they've tended to be the standard for most large organizations with in-house design capabilities. First, they benefit from clear leadership. Design team managers are responsible for shaping and implementing their vision for how the team works: curating the toolkit, formalizing the design process, and defining key roles. They can tailor their teams to encompass a wide range of skills and capabilities in order to serve the organization's diverse design needs. Finally, centralized design teams have more well-defined career paths and opportunities for mentorship to help team members level up their skills and grow with the company.

02 Decentralized design teams

A decentralized design team distributes and embeds designers in different workstreams, which might align around a specific product, feature set, business unit, or even phase of the customer journey. Essentially, the emphasis of a decentralized design team is on cross-functional collaboration, and it can be an effective way to infuse design skillsets and mindsets across an organization.

Designers form a trifecta with product managers and tech leads to guide strategy and decision-making at every step of the product development cycle. In this model, designers report directly to their team lead (usually a product owner or business lead) rather than to a design manager.

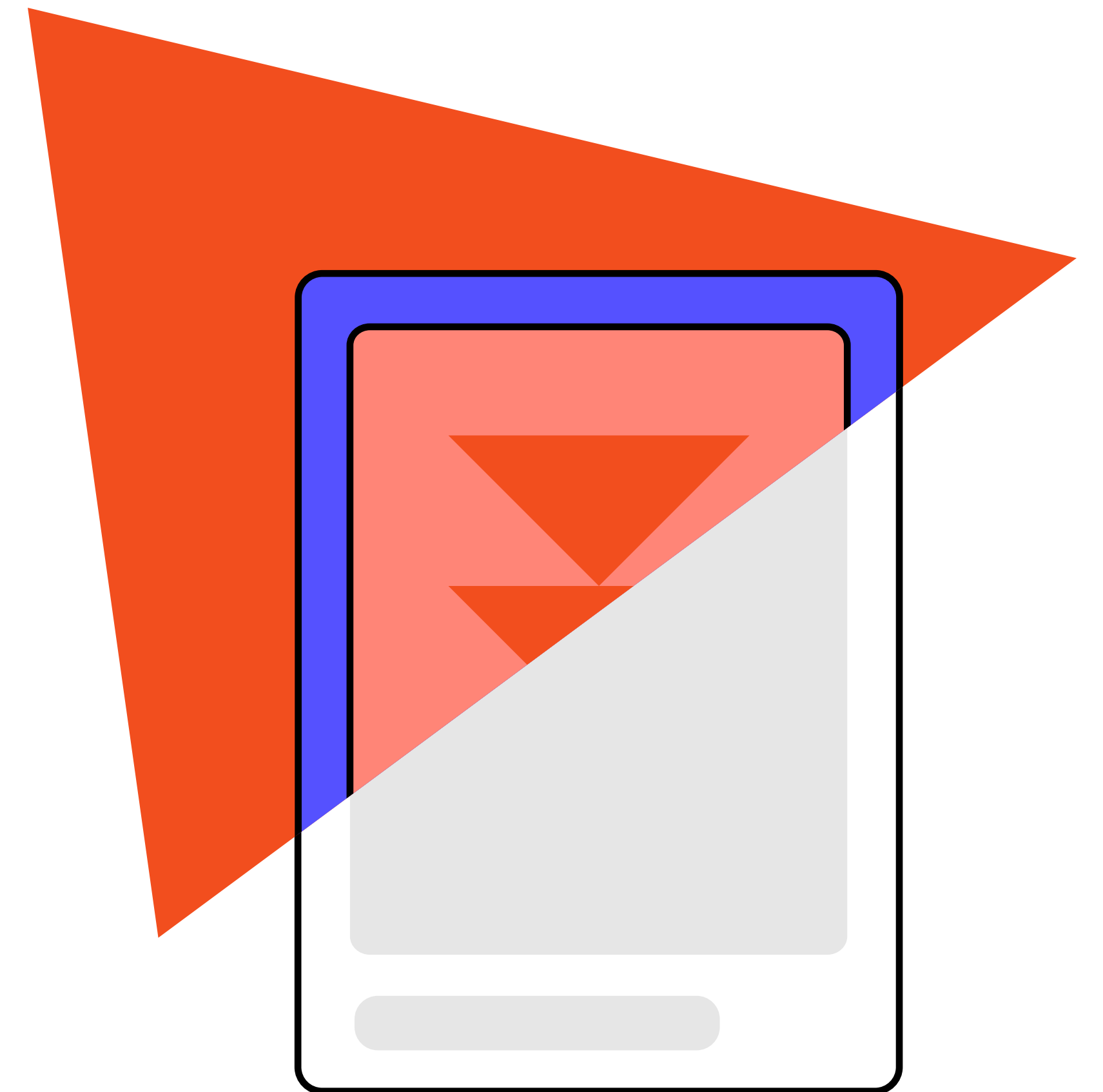
While the clear advantage of a decentralized design team is the consistency of design direction and guidance, the equally clear disadvantage is the lack of a shared practice. Distributed designers sometimes feel isolated, disconnected from a sense of community. To create a unified ethos across different teams, decentralized designers often self-organize. This helps minimize redundancies and maximize the sharing of resources. Similarly, they also have to be self-starters in terms of carving out opportunities for their career growth and mentorship.

03 Hybrid design teams

Hybrid design teams cross-report to both individual product or business teams as well as to a central design organization. Team leads tend to provide day-to-day oversight of project work and rituals like reviews and check-ins, while design managers provide leadership and organization around a design community of practice.

Design managers—who generally occupy high-level or executive roles—are responsible for developing the practice, recruiting talent, and overall design governance. The design team members will come together regularly to share work and spin up collaborative and co-creative initiatives, like developing a design system or establishing a set of design principles.

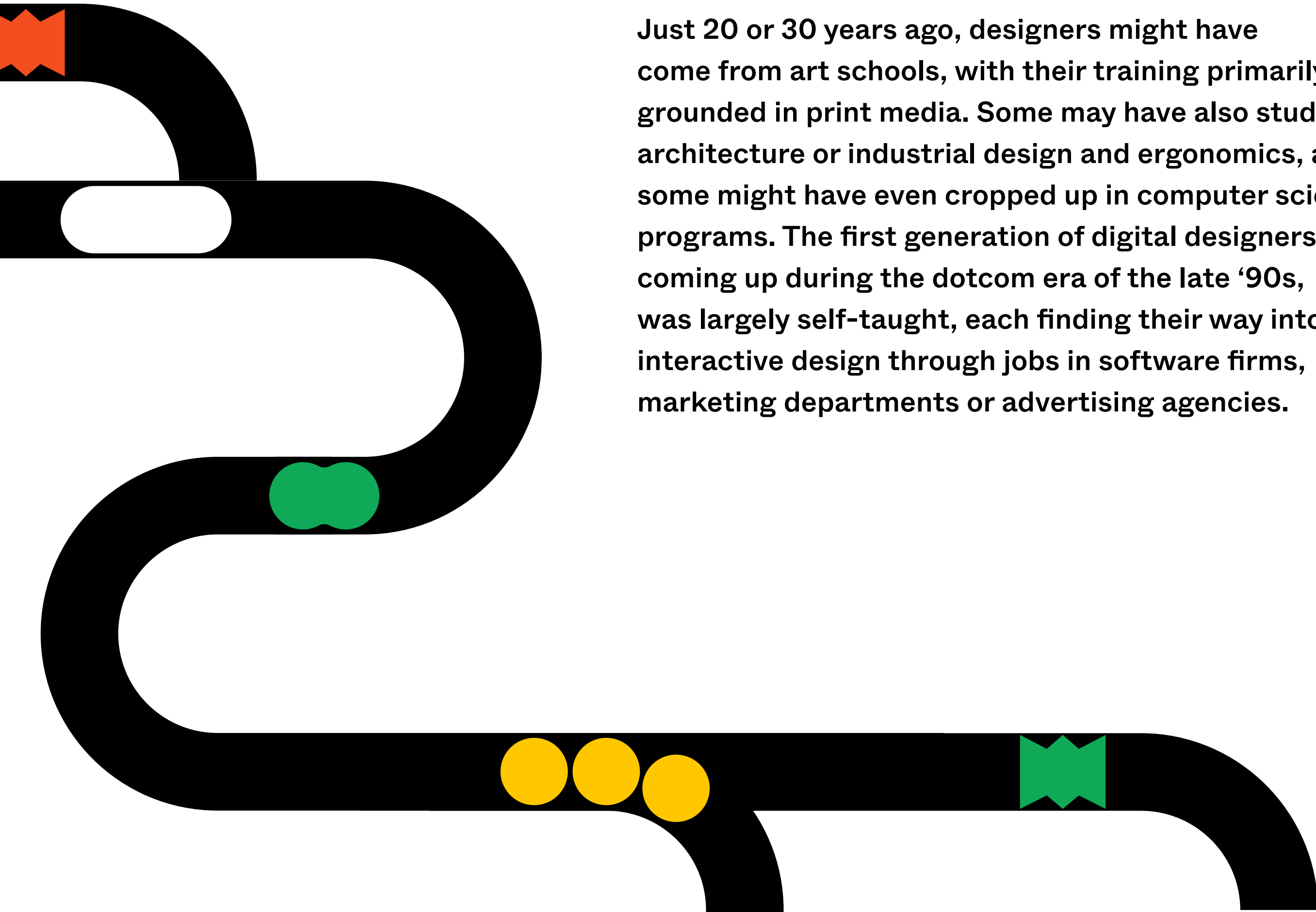
The only real pitfall can be the push-pull designers may feel between the priorities and visions of their two managers. But this can be mitigated with some coordination and greater organizational alignment around skill development and career paths. For example, a designer might set measurable OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) that track their project responsibilities but establish higher-order goals for professional growth with their practice manager.



Chapter

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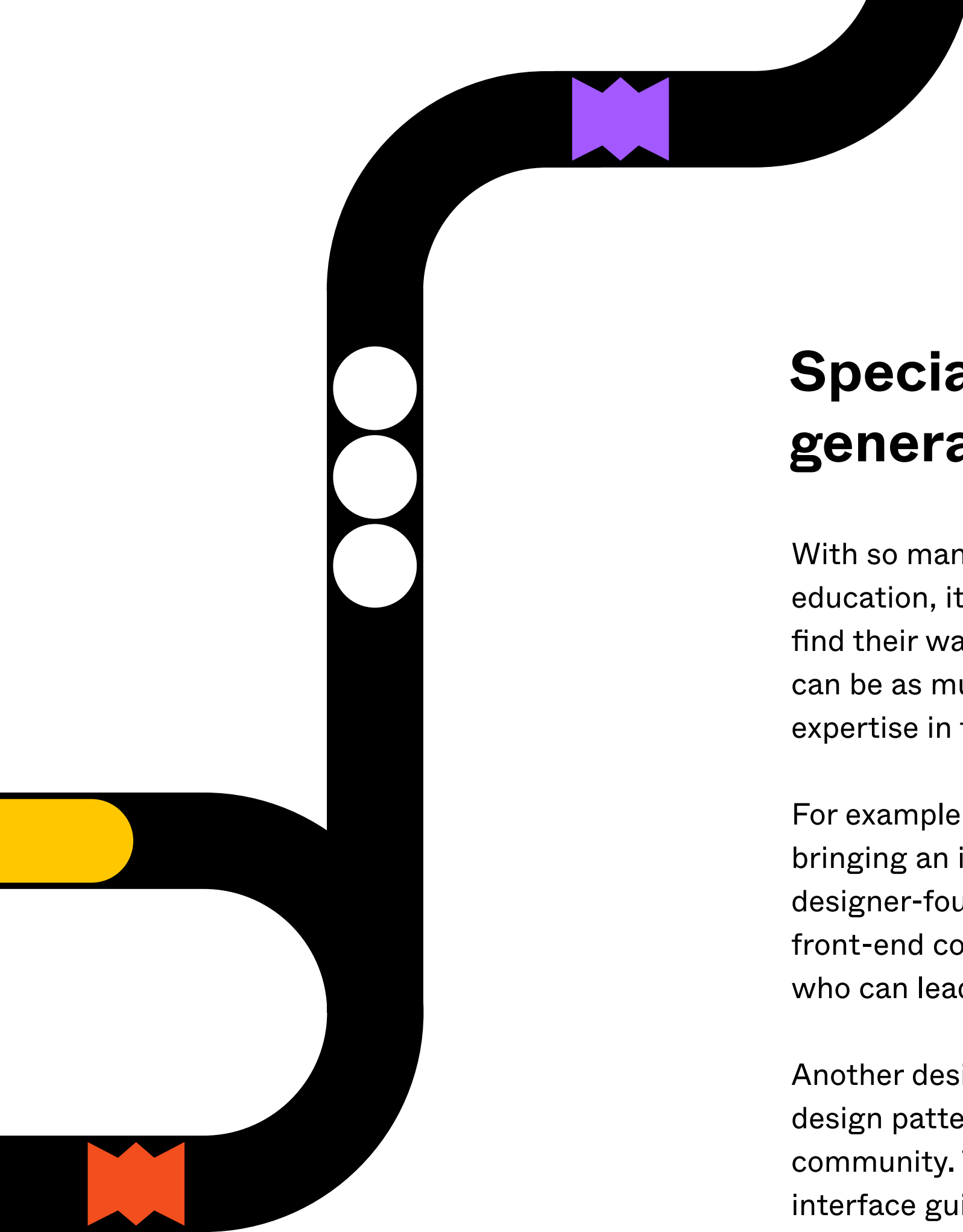
The many paths designers take



Just 20 or 30 years ago, designers might have come from art schools, with their training primarily grounded in print media. Some may have also studied architecture or industrial design and ergonomics, and some might have even cropped up in computer science programs. The first generation of digital designers, coming up during the dotcom era of the late '90s, was largely self-taught, each finding their way into interactive design through jobs in software firms, marketing departments or advertising agencies.

Today, there are more educational opportunities than ever before, with a whole host of formal programs, training, and certifications to help launch design careers. The days of a designer's role being limited to form and function are also long gone. With new fields evolving and emerging, there are innumerable on-ramps to becoming a designer and nearly as many paths and detours to explore along one's career path.

In developing their design organization, business leaders will want to have a grasp on the levels of expertise needed to build a balanced team, and the markers of growth that offer opportunities for individual advancement. So, where to start in understanding a designer's trajectory and how an organization can help to guide it forward? Let's take a look at the most basic question faced by a beginning designer: to become a specialist or a generalist?



Specialization versus generalization

With so many possible starting points in terms of background and education, it's not totally unreasonable to think that anyone could find their way to a career in design. In fact, diversity and flexibility can be as much of a competitive advantage as deep subject-matter expertise in the design jobs market.

For example, a designer might imagine defining their career by bringing an iconic product to market. Their path to becoming a designer-founder would be spent honing skills in UX, UI, and even front-end coding, with the goal of becoming a jack-of-all-trades who can lead a bootstrapped startup.

Another designer might dream of architecting a system of design patterns that becomes a standard-bearer for the design community. They might get their start through rigorous study of interface guidelines, focus deeply on producing detailed design specifications, and perhaps work on positioning themselves as an industry thought leader.

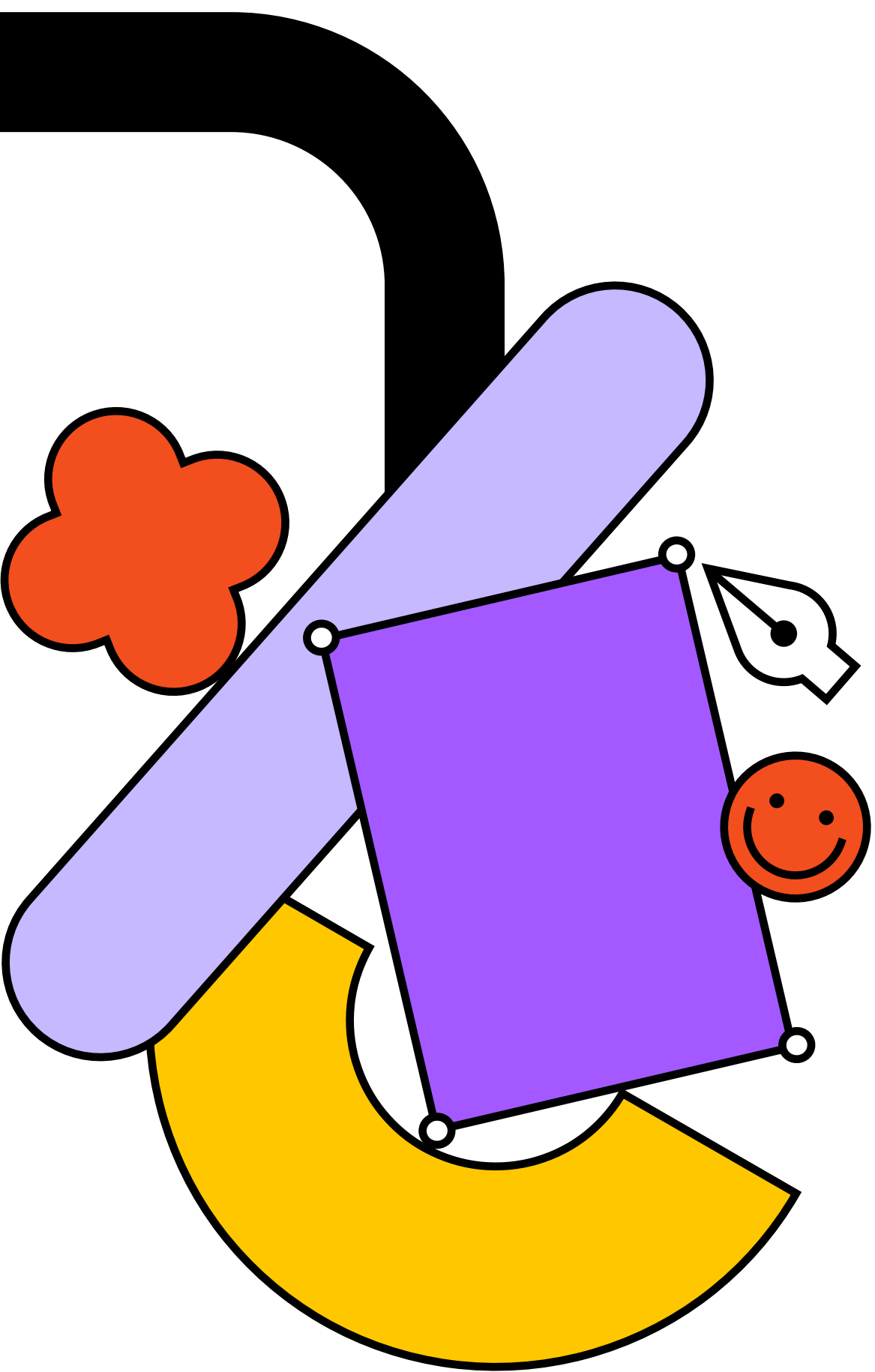
Career paths from maker to mentor

In building out design teams, leaders can think about how they might strike a balance between makers, managers, and leaders, with consideration for the designers' own aspirations for structuring their career path.

The maker path

Most designers start out as makers - sometimes called individual contributors - learning the craft from the ground up under the guidance and direction of more experienced team members. The focus at this stage, or in this role, is on developing one's technical acumen or craft.

The maker path is about forging one's identity as an individual contributor and is ideal for someone who is very craft oriented. The maker loves to roll up their sleeves and be actively *designing* every day. A maker can grow by continuing to level up their seniority in a specialized category and may be a mentor or practice lead without committing to people-management duties. Makers have a tremendous propensity to shape and elevate design discourse as thought leaders.



The manager path

With more experience, designers will be asked to step into leading projects and training junior team members. Though not everyone wants to be a people manager, senior designers will invariably take on more ownership of their work and accountability for their decision-making. The management path is perhaps the most traditional way of leveling up one's design career.

Management responsibilities (such as participation in the hiring process, performance evaluation, and direct mentorship of individuals) require the cultivation of soft skills that the maker path may not. Managers must learn how to listen actively, communicate clearly, and gracefully defuse conflict. In effect, managers must learn to become coaches who understand their team members' unique strengths and weaknesses in order to help them train, grow, and thrive.

In the design process, managers are also accountable, if not directly responsible, for how a project is run. They will likely play a role in defining the project's scope, timeline, approach, and resource allocation. Design managers will often be the primary point of contact for a project's clients and stakeholders.

The leader path

More and more, designers are gaining seats at the executive table. Not only are they in a position to steer a company's strategic direction from a human-centered point of view, but they must also benchmark the ROI of design against the business' key performance indicators. Design leadership is, in short, also business leadership.

Becoming a design leader could be seen as a natural extension of the management path, and indeed it may be the pinnacle of a designer's career aspirations. But not all managers are meant to, or even desire to, become design leaders. For a lot of individuals, the leadership path may stray too far from the practice of design. Though a design leader occupies a visionary, often evangelical realm, they're equally pulled down to earth with budgets and timelines and resourcing challenges.

As Rachel Kobe, design leader at Expedia, [points out](#), this path means being a company leader, not just a functional leader. It means driving transformation across the company, connecting the dots between departments and influencing upwards as well as downwards.

Conclusion

Designers are in a position to influence how ideas are formed, circulated, cultivated, and ultimately executed at every level. Fundamentally, they are culture creators and agents of change, and business leaders would be wise to tap into their potential as organizational catalysts.

As McKinsey and Company puts it, “Farsighted CEOs... empower their design leaders to be catalysts for broad strategic transformation, not only for end-to-end experience improvement for users but also for the organization as a whole.”

For companies looking to enjoy the growth and performance of their design-led peers, the journey begins at the top.

