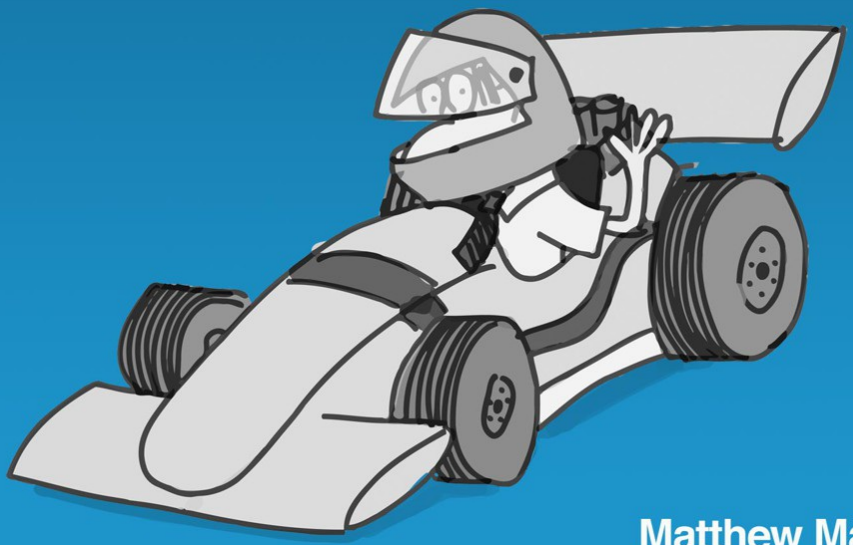
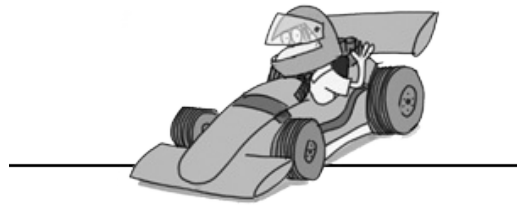
GET STARTED IN UX

The complete guide to launching a career in user experience design



Matthew Magain
& Luke Chambers

UXmastery



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The complete guide to launching a career in user experience design

Matthew Magain & Luke Chambers

UXmastery
USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN
TIPS, TOOLS AND TRAINING

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***Your present circumstances don't determine where you can go; they merely determine where you start.* - Nido Qubein**

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Preface

More than ever, executives and managers are realising that a user's experience of their company's products and services is crucial to the bottom line, and *that experience can be designed*.**User Experience (UX)** has emerged as the poster child to capture this alignment of design and business strategy.

However, the term is also used in other ways. Ask ten different people what User Experience means and you'll get ten different answers. For example:

- UX is an umbrella term.
- UX is a movement.
- UX is a process.
- UX is a role.
- UX is a discipline.
- UX is an industry.
- UX is a philosophy.
- UX is a collection of techniques.

All of these statements are true to some degree, so it’s no wonder the UX community has such a hard time defining what we do to the outside world!

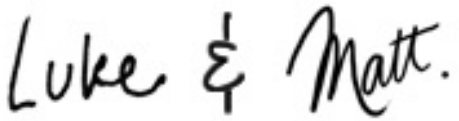
However, there's one I'd like to add to that list:

- **UX is a career.**

The fact you're reading this book means you've probably decided that UX is the career for you, but perhaps you're overwhelmed by where to start. Maybe you took a course, read a book, or have a small amount of experience through your current role, but are unsure what to do next.

We hope this book helps you find the answers to these questions and more, and that you use the information on these pages to launch and shape a successful and prosperous career.

Welcome to the world of User Experience.



Who is this Book For?

This is a book for **newcomers to the field of UX**, although senior practitioners who are looking for a new role will find much of the content useful.

That said, "newcomers to UX" aren't always newcomers to the world of work. In fact, most UX Designers I know began their careers in other roles—industrial design, computer science, graphic design, even filmmaking! If it's a career change you're looking for, this is the book for you.

We'll help you determine:

- What is required to succeed, and how to perform a self-assessment of these skills
- Which path is right for you—academia, online course, short course, conference, or self-study
- How to find valuable experience that you can then leverage when applying for positions
- How to leverage and expand your contacts within the industry, to become aware of opportunities before they're even advertised!
- How to find and engage a mentor to supercharge your career
- How to prepare for an interview, including what should go into your portfolio

You'll also get some insights from students, instructors, recruiters and

important industry figures. The aim of the book is to provide a roadmap for entering UX by aligning your intellect, communication skills, professional contacts and enthusiasm for design—specifically to find an employed position. We don't really touch on the topic of freelancing—that's for a whole other book.

Sound good? Great! Let's get started.

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New to UX Mastery? Join our free fortnightly newsletter for more interviews, tips and UX news:

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GET STARTED IN UX

What Is UX?

Is it even possible to define User Experience?

There have been plenty of attempts to define UX. New definitions appear online all the time, and many of them have merit.

We offer up this: **user experience is the what, where, when, why, and how someone uses a product, as well as who that person is.**

The reason I like this definition is because:

- **It is technology-agnostic.** We might specialise in web, or mobile, or hardware devices, but UX principles apply across the board.
- **It provides a summary definition, but allows us to dig deeper.** We'll explore each of the what, where, when, why, how, and who later in this book.
- **It explicitly mentions *why*.** Understanding the *reasons* behind user behaviour differentiates UX from other adjacent fields such as marketing, visual design, and computer science.

You may have your own view of what UX means, based on your experiences—and that's cool. But for the remainder of this book, let's agree on this one definition. It'll make the conversation we're about to have a lot easier.

UX ≠ UI

User Experience (UX) and User Interface (UI) are, understandably, two terms that are commonly confused. The distinction is subtle but important.

One way to think of the difference is to say that a product's **UI** is **how it looks**, and that the product's **UX** is **how it makes you feel**. This comes close to capturing the differences, but what about products that engage other senses, such as the VoiceOver feature in your iPod, or the gestures you use to play games on your Xbox Kinect? Surely UI is more than aesthetics?

Everett McKay, in his excellent book UI is Communication, defines UI as **what connects users to a product's underlying technology**, and UX as **the entire experience users have with a product**. This makes sense to me—the UI is just one part of that entire experience. There are other elements, however, like the feeling that the product's branding evokes in you, the sensation in your fingers when you hold it, and your conversation with the sales staff that leads to your purchase decision.

DOING UX

OK, so we've covered *what* UX is. Now let's talk about *how to do* UX.

Unfortunately there's no checklist that I can give you that will guarantee you'll design a wonderful experience for your users every time. And as much as I'd love to, it would be impossible to break down in step-by-step format the ins and outs of every UX technique. But I can spell out a process to follow, and list a range of techniques for you to experiment with and explore (these techniques are covered well in other books).

Jargon Watch

Note: As with any industry, the UX world comes with its own jargon. There are many techniques, deliverables and

tools with unusual names—they may even be concepts that you are familiar with, but are called different things in other industries. To help, we've included a glossary at the back of this book. If you spot a phrase that you're not familiar with, click on the phrase to look up the definition. We do our best to keep this glossary updated at uxmastery.com/glossary.

UX Process

Without a process, it's impossible to make deliberate design decisions. Intuition and judgment calls will only get you so far before you realise that you've missed something critical or made a false assumption that has the potential to change everything. UX designers follow a user-centred design process. Here's what that looks like:

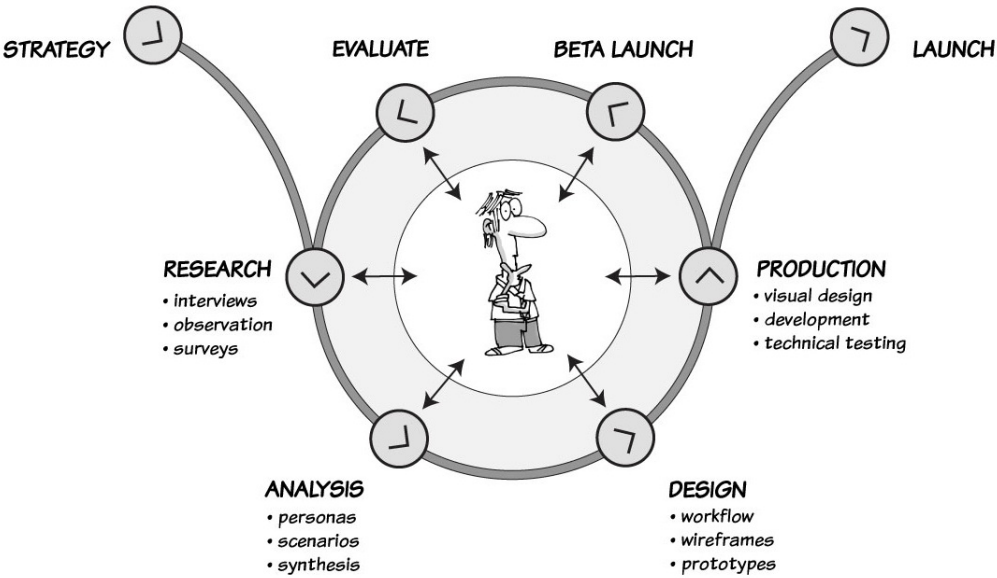


Figure: A visualisation of an iterative user-centred design process.

At its core, every UX process should consist of the following key phases.

1. **Strategy**

   Strategy is important from the outset because it articulates the brand, guiding principles, and long-term vision of an organisation. The strategy underpinning a UX project will shape the goals of the project—what the organisation is hoping to achieve with the project, how its success should be measured, and what priority it should have in the grand scheme of things.

2. **Research**

   Often referred to as the Discovery phase, the Research phase is probably the most variable between projects. Complex projects will comprise significant user and competitor research activities, while small startup websites may skip all research activities other than some informal interviews and a survey. In many people's eyes, the Research phase is key to creating an informed user experience, however it is also the phase most often skipped.

3. **Analysis**

   The aim of the Analysis phase is to draw insights from data collected during the Research phase. Capturing, organising

and making inferences from the “what” can help UX Designers begin to understand the “why”. Communicating the designer’s understanding back to end-users helps to confirm that any assumptions being made are valid.

4. **Design**

   The Design phase of a UX project is collaborative (involving input and ideas from different people) and iterative (meaning that it cycles back upon itself to validate ideas and assumptions). Building on the user feedback loop established in previous phases, the premise of the Design phase is to put ideas in front of users, get their feedback, refine them, and repeat. These ideas may be represented by paper prototypes, interactive wireframes, or semi-functioning prototypes, all deliberately created in low-fidelity to delay any conversation relating to graphic identity, branding or visual details.

5. **Production**

   The Production phase is where the high-fidelity design is fleshed out, content and digital assets are created, and a high-fidelity version of the product is validated with stakeholders and end-users through user testing sessions. The role of the UX Designer shifts from creating and validating ideas to collaborating with developers to guide and champion the vision.

But wait!

Hold up! I hear you cry. This isn't user-centred at all—that's a waterfall right there! And everyone knows that the waterfall model for software development is out-dated, right? We're agile, baby!

Let me explain.

The bullet points above don't tell the full story.

- For one, these phases often have considerable overlap—there's a lot of back-and-forth. As the UX Designer learns more about the problem being solved, the audience, the stakeholders and the constraints he or she is operating under, it may be necessary to revisit some of the research undertaken, get additional user feedback, or try out new ideas.
- As mentioned above, this process is very iterative, which may explain why there are many synergies between UX Design, Agile development principles, and the Lean Startup movement. It turns out that regular user feedback is at the heart of all of these approaches to product development.

One aspect not captured in the above bullet points is the importance of communication throughout a project. While doing great design is one thing, communicating great design is equally as important, as even the best concepts will fail if they don't have buy-in from the right stakeholders. The best UX Designers are great communicators.

UX Techniques

As a UX professional, you have a range of techniques available to

you, and it's up to you to choose which of these techniques are appropriate. Mastering when and how best to use these techniques should be the goal of every UX Designer. This is not a skill I can teach you in this book—it takes time and experience to get right, as every project is different. However, I can nudge you in the right direction.

Technique	When to use it	What it is
Contextual Enquiry	Research	Interviewing and observing users in the location that they use the website/app, to understand their tasks and challenges. This information feeds our understanding of **why** users might behave as they do.
Personas	Analysis	A fictitious identity that reflects one of the user groups for whom you are designing. This technique captures the **who** of our definition of UX.
Scenarios	Analysis	A narrative describing "a day in the life of" one of your personas and how your product fits into their lives. This usually covers the **what, when** and **where**

		from our definition.
Wireframes	Design	A rough guide for the layout of a website or app. It could be **low-fidelity**, communicating rough layout information, or **high-fidelity**, with visual polish. It could be **static** images or sketches, or an **interactive prototype**, with clickable elements that simulate the product in use. Wireframes and prototypes explore **how** someone will use the product.
User Testing	Research, Analysis, Design, Production	Observing people while they attempt to complete tasks using your product or prototype, and thinking out loud while they do so. These sessions may validate design decisions, or (more likely) reveal additional information about **why** users behave as they do. Processing these learnings will influence future iterations of the product.

Table: UX Techniques and when to use them.

While far from being a complete list, these are some of the staple techniques that I find myself using over and over again, and are a good place to start your journey. As you master these techniques, you

can add more to your repertoire.

Useful Link: For a more thorough list of UX techniques, check out our online UX Techniques Bank. We're regularly updating it with new techniques as we discover and document them.

Chapter Summary: What is UX?

- User Experience (UX) is the what, when, where, why, and how someone uses a product, as well as who that person is.
- A UX Process is one that moves through the five stages—Strategy, Research, Analysis, Design, and Production—while incorporating user feedback at each stage of the product lifecycle.
- There are hundreds of UX techniques available to utilise on a project, but start out by focussing on contextual enquiry, personas, scenarios, wireframes, and user testing.

Self-Assessment

OK, now you know where you're going … but where are you coming from?

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

By now your head may be spinning, either because you're overwhelmed—or excited—by the prospect of what lies ahead.

Before we continue any further, it's worth taking a few moments to

reflect on *why* you want to begin a career in UX. As you'll soon come to understand, the sheer amount of information that you'll need to absorb is potentially overwhelming (although I'll give you some strategies for dealing with this later). And there's no shortcut in gaining project experience—that comes with time. This is a journey you'll want to be embarking upon for the right reasons.

Personally, I get excited by the variety that UX offers me: the breadth of design challenges, and the range of activities that I get to engage in—with other people and on my own. I've learned over the years that I need that variety for job satisfaction. A job where I can apply my visual skills, my technical skills, and my people skills is one that I find incredibly rewarding. The fact that the outcomes of my work—websites, mobile apps, user interfaces—often empower the people using them is the icing on the cake.

What is it about UX that you are drawn to?

If the answer is "it's a hot industry right now, and I'm not finding enough work as a graphic designer" then I'd encourage you to reflect a little more on this before proceeding. While the demand is there, a career in UX is not for everyone. There's a lot to learn, and I'm not just talking about the theory. Crafting a successful UX career will require a commitment to push yourself away from your screen and out of your comfort zone, into the realms of public speaking, group facilitation, stakeholder management and visual communication.

Whatever your personal motivation to succeed in the field of UX, it needs to be more than the cash or the glory. Work out *your* why, and

the challenges ahead will feel less daunting.

It might feel a bit contrived, but I have an exercise for you to try your hand at. I want you to put this ebook reader down (or minimise the window on your computer), pick up a pen and paper, and complete this sentence for me. Try to avoid referencing salary or recognition in your statement.

> I want to become a UX designer because ...

Write it down. Seriously, I'll wait!

Oh, you're back! Great. How did you find that exercise? If you found it particularly difficult, you may want to mull over the topic some more and refine it when you've crystallized in your mind what's driving you. Having a sense of purpose equips you with the stamina you'll need to navigate the inevitable difficulties that come with any career.

Video: Knowing your Why

Simon Sinek's TED talk, Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Action, is an inspiring reminder of how acting with purpose in our personal and professional lives can lead to success, regardless of the field.

PERFORMING A SELF-ASSESSMENT

If you were redesigning a shopping cart, with the goal being to

increase the number of sales the site processes, the first thing you'd need to know is how many sales it's currently making.

Deciding how best to tackle your entry into User Experience is a lot like tackling a UX project itself—you need to have a **baseline**. Understanding where your skills are at *now* is a prerequisite to charting where you want to go.

There is no one "best" way to perform this self-assessment. We humans and the skills we possess are complicated! However, there are a few different approaches that have been devised specifically for thinking about a career in UX. Let's look at a few:

Knowledge

Elizabeth Bacon's sundial of User Experience fields is a wonderful model for looking at the big picture and how your knowledge stacks up. To progress towards operating at a strategic, big-picture level—arguably the ultimate goal for all practitioners—one needs to be able to understand, define, and communicate a vast range of fields.

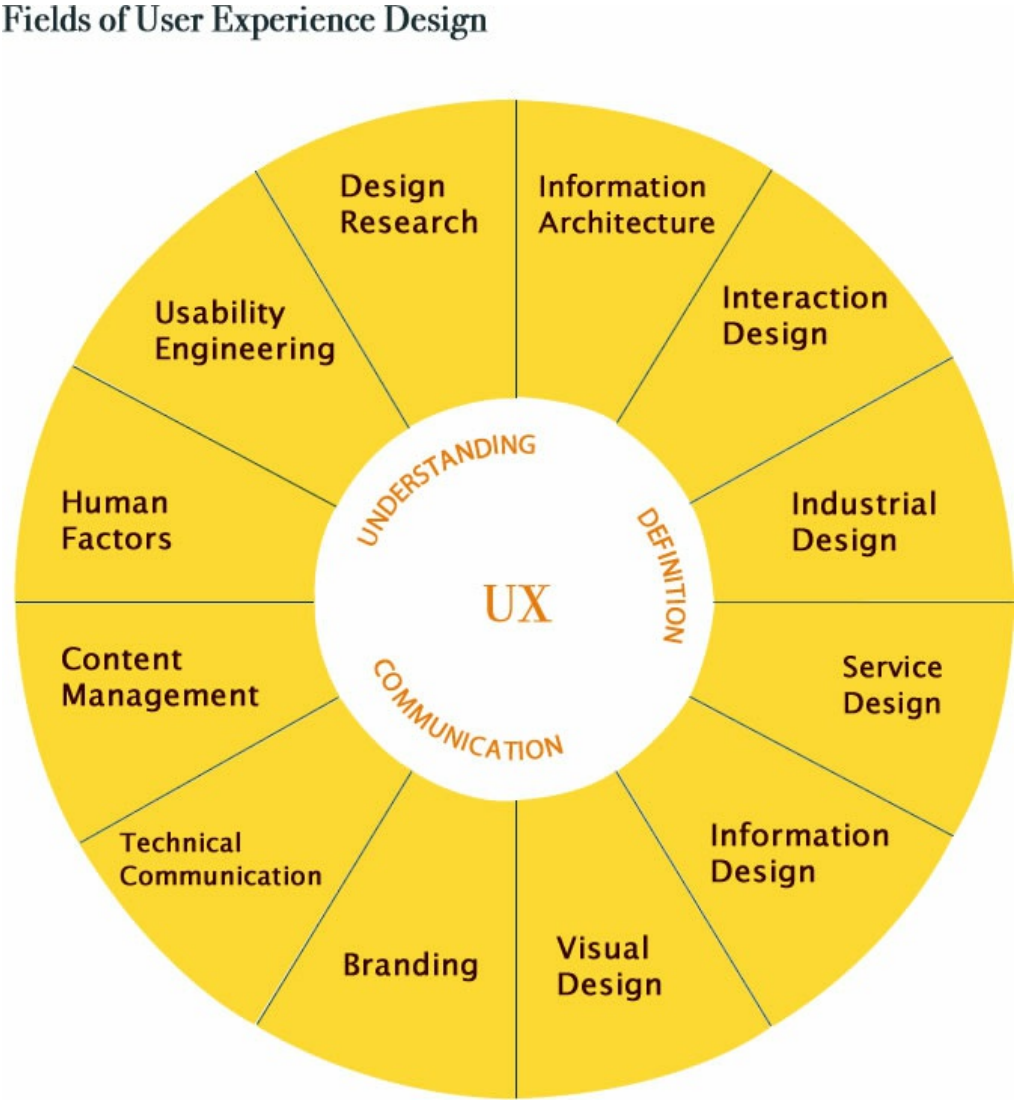


Figure: Elizabeth Bacon's UX Sundial, reprinted with permission.

Of course, no one person can be expected to have in-depth knowledge of all of these subject areas. One of your career goals should be to become an expert in one or two of them, but maintain a

balance across the entire spectrum. Here's what Elizabeth's self-assessment looks like:

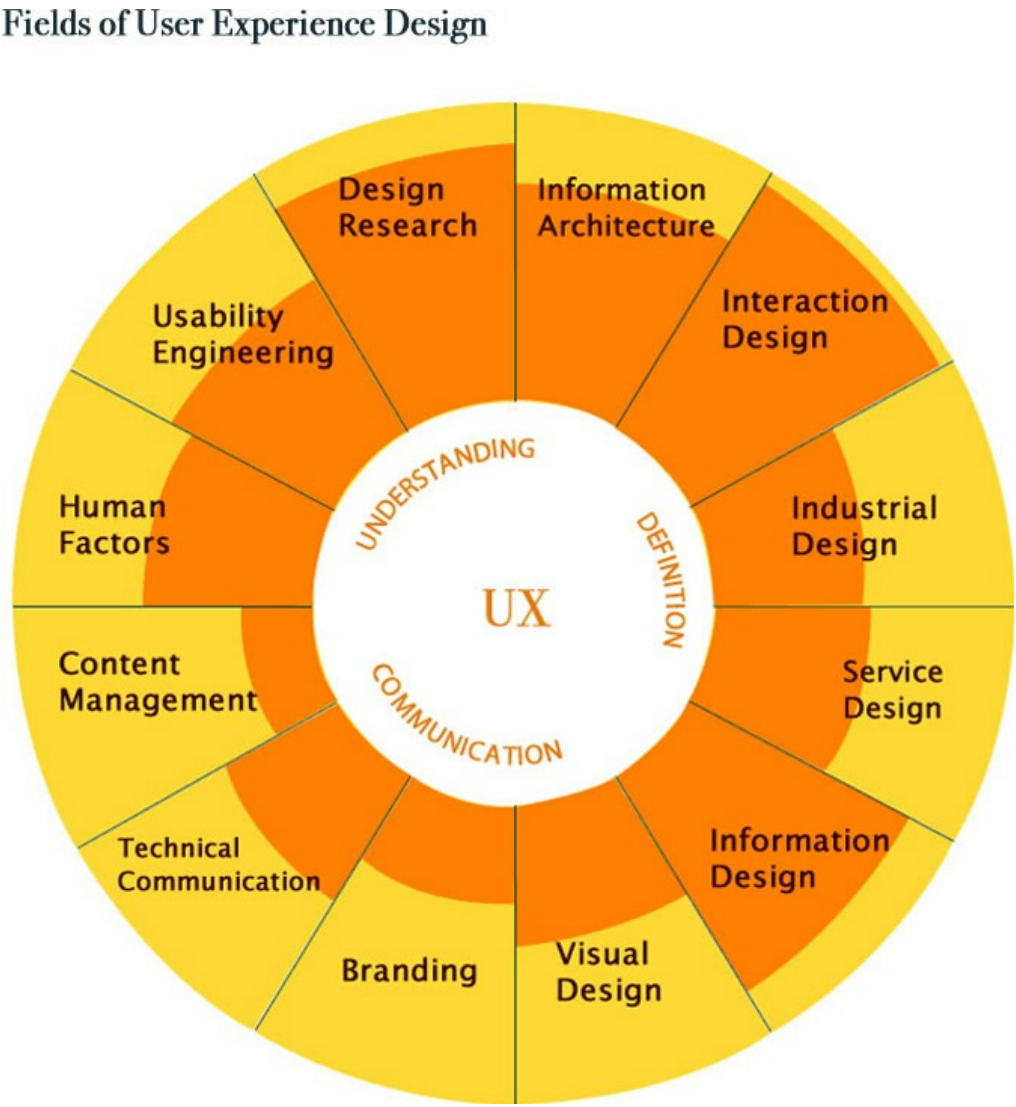


Figure: Elizabeth Bacon's self-assessment, reprinted with permission

This paints an holistic picture of Elizabeth's experience. As a senior designer, Elizabeth is clearly strong in interaction design and several closely related fields. She also has a good understanding of other areas, and this balance no doubt serves her well as she interacts with developers, business owners, users, content producers, and other team members involved in her project.

The fact that all of these skills contribute to making a successful UX designer is an overwhelming prospect. However, the intent here is not to suggest that you should strive to become an expert in each one of these areas—more to give an indication of just how vast the UX umbrella really is.

For now, suffice to say that no matter how skilled you become in one area, there is always more to learn.

Assess Yourself Now

Bundled with this ebook is your UX self-assessment kit. Print out the sundial and use it to perform your own self-assessment. There's no need to get fancy with graphics software—just colour in the wedges using a marker. Pin your self-assessment poster up in your cubicle or at home so you have it on-hand as a reminder of the areas that you hope to develop.

Try it now: rate yourself in each of the following categories from 1 to 10, with 1 meaning “I’m a complete beginner” and 10 meaning “I’m an expert.” Answer honestly!

Soft Skills

Knowledge about a particular field is all well and good, but being able to apply that knowledge is another thing altogether. Jared Spool, founder of User Interface Engineering, deduced from studying a number of expert UX professionals that the five indispensable skills for UX mastery were the softer skills of:

1. sketching
2. storytelling
3. critiquing
4. presenting, and
5. facilitating

You'll notice that all of these skills are quite independent of the fields we just looked at. They're not the type of thing you take a class in and master over the course of a semester; they're life skills, and you work on them throughout your career.

In the fields in the previous section, in-depth knowledge of all fields is practically unattainable. However, it's entirely within the realm of possibility that someone could potentially master all five of these soft skills. When visualised, your goal should therefore be to achieve maximum coverage, rather than an even balance across the spectrum.

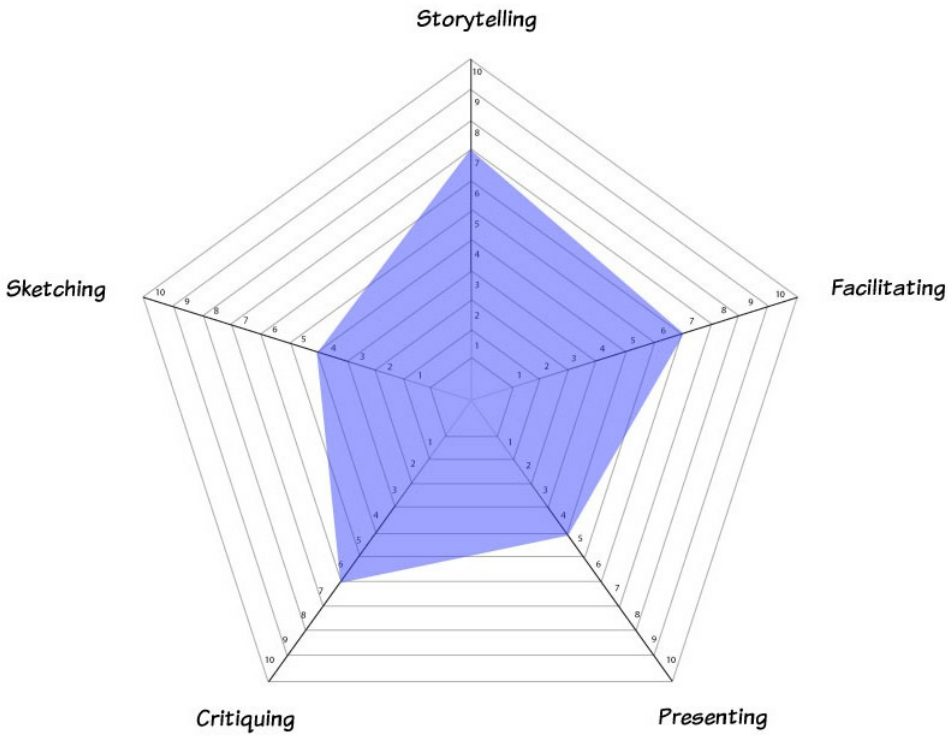


Fig 3: Luke's self-assessment of soft skills

Environmental Experience

If you're coming to UX from a career in a different field, another lens through which to view any relevant experience you may have accumulated is to consider the environments under which you've operated. UX is a pretty broad umbrella, so while some of your previous roles may not be directly related to UX, you may have performed them in environments that allowed you to develop

business and workplace skills that you can still leverage in future roles.

There are basically four types of work environments within which UX Designers operate:

- **In-house.** You are working as an employee in a company, on a product or service that the company sells. You may be working in isolation, or as part of a team.
- **Agency-side.** You are working as an employee in an agency, providing consulting or other professional services to a range of clients.
- **Freelance/Contractor/Consultant.** You are working independently for a company, providing consulting or other professional services to them or their clients.
- **Business owner.** You are the owner, or part owner, of a product or service business. You may get hands-on with product development, consulting, sales or other activities, but a large amount of your tasks also include planning and making strategic decisions about your own business.

You can chart your career in a way that demonstrates in which environments your experience was attained. Here's a chart of Matt's career (not including part-time jobs throughout high school or university). This is obviously a simplification of the nuances of different employment circumstances, but even if only for your own reference, it's a useful technique for reflecting on your journey and the direction you may wish to head next.

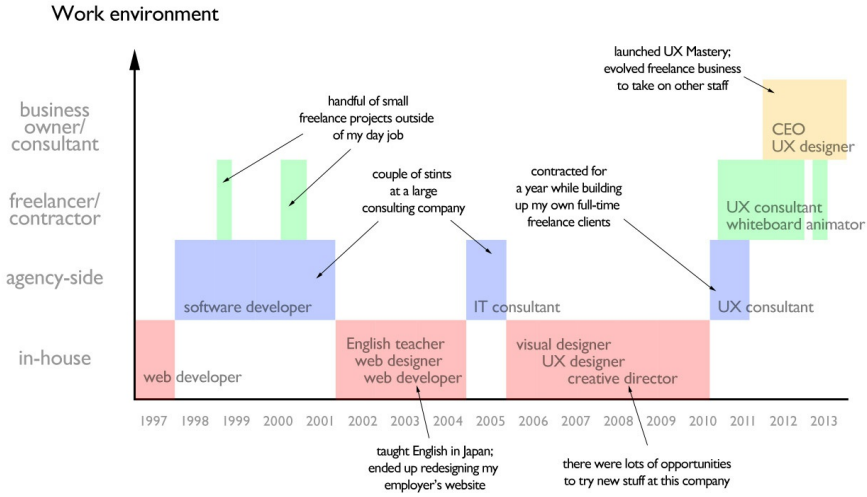


Fig 4: Matt's career, showing a variety of roles in different work environments

Contrast this with Luke's career, which is wildly different and tells the story of someone who was far more entrepreneurial in the early stages of his career.

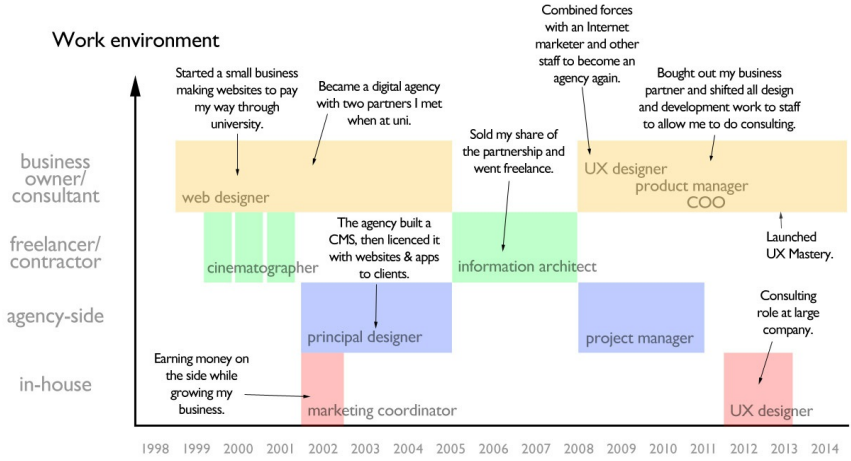


Fig 5: Luke demonstrated a leaning towards entrepreneurship early in his career.

Strategic Thinking

Many of the UX techniques we discuss are strictly operational. These are important, but different roles allow you to have differing levels of input on a business's strategy. While the challenges of directing a business strategy of a one-person startup are wildly different from making strategic decisions within a large corporation, it's still useful to visualise at what stages you've had the opportunity to apply strategic thinking. Here's what that visualisation looks like for Matt:

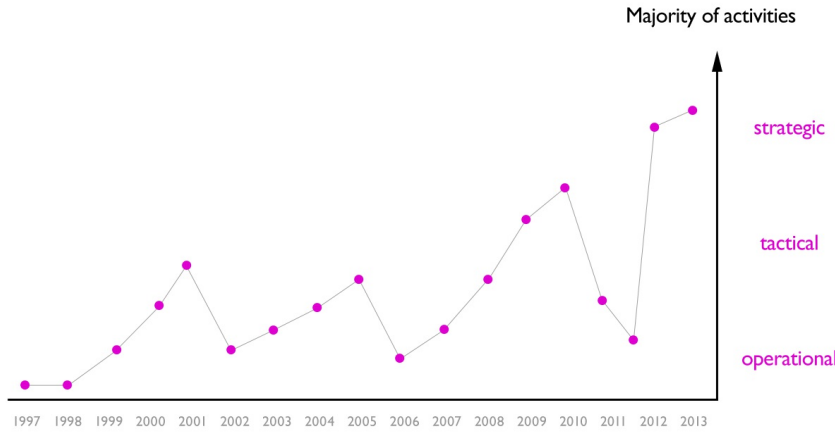


Fig 5: Matt's career mapped into a range of different roles

It can be interesting to compare these two graphs by placing one on top of the other. Here's how that looks for Matt's career.

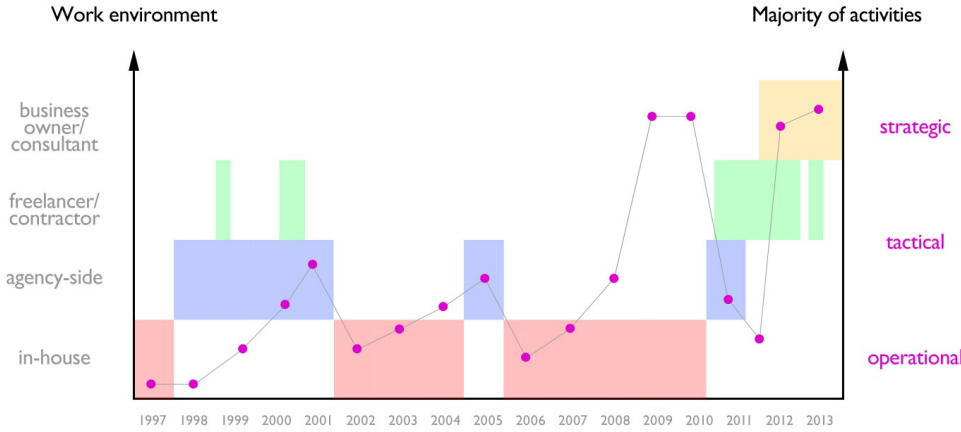


Fig 6: The relationship between Matt's various work opportunities and degrees of strategic thinking

While there's not necessarily a one-to-one correlation between the environment one works in and the degree of strategic thinking that one engages in, understanding this data can help you make decisions about how to direct your career. It can also be a very effective instrument for communicating that experience to a recruiter or prospective employer.

Walk Before you Run

If you're just starting out, don't jump straight to the strategy stuff without logging some hours "in the trenches". Strategy is important to strive for, but a good understanding of and experience in user-centred design is invaluable for being able to give authoritative strategic advice.

Get Reflective

Your UX self-assessment kit also includes templates for soft skills, work environment, and strategic thinking, which you can print out, colour in and post somewhere to remind yourself of. Remember to be honest with yourself—you should view the self-assessment exercise as an opportunity to identify areas that you can focus on to one day become world-class in that skill, not as a means to impress

someone.

A ROADMAP FOR SUCCESS

OK. Up to this point, I've given you a handful of starters and side dishes, but you're probably still hungry for more information. Here's the main course—the steps you need to take to launch a successful career as a UX designer. There are just six of them.

1. **Get educated.**
2. **Get the right tools.**
3. **Get some experience.**
4. **Get connected.**
5. **Get a mentor.**
6. **Get hired.**

For the rest of this book, we'll be exploring each of these steps in turn.

Questions to ask yourself:

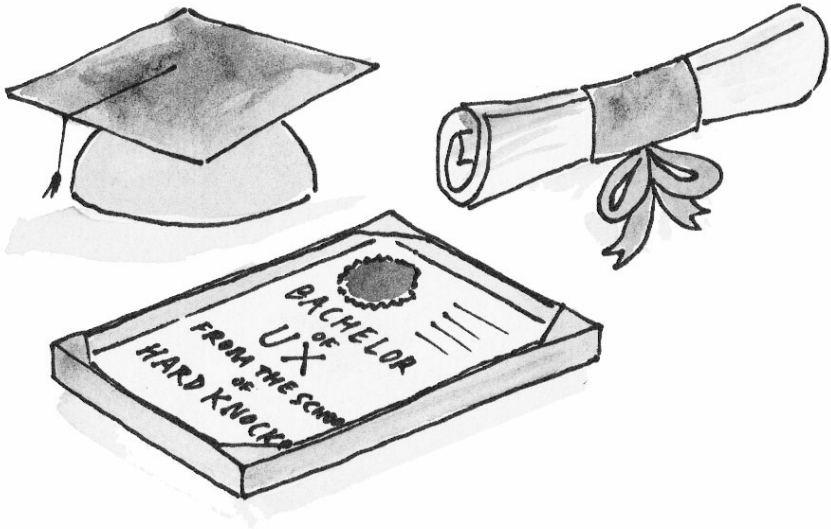
1. *Why do you want to get a job in user experience?* If you're just chasing a salary, you're unlikely to be fulfilled, or successful.
2. *In which fields do you have the most knowledge and experience?* If you've worked in other industries, there's a good chance you have existing skills and experience that you can leverage in a UX role. An honest self-assessment will help you determine which areas to

expand your knowledge of.

3. *In which of the five soft skills are you strongest? Which of these skills need the most work? What opportunities can you seek to further develop these blind spots?*
4. *In which environments do you have the most experience operating?* Staying within familiar territory may be comfortable, but the different dynamics of work environments encourages professional growth.
5. *At what level on the strategic plane has the majority of your experience?* Seek opportunities to get exposure to more strategic planning and decision making roles.

Chapter Summary: Self-assessment

- Know your "why"—basing your decision purely upon the expectation of an increased salary is not good grounds for changing your career.
- User Experience is a vast umbrella. A self-assessment will reveal the fields that you're most knowledgeable about, and those that you may need to focus on.
- Analyse your soft skills, and make it a goal to seek out opportunities that allow you to further develop those skills that you are weak in.
- Reflect upon the types of environments that you have experience working in. Consider opportunities that give you exposure to different environments.
- Throughout your career, seek opportunities to learn about and understand how business strategy and UX influence each other. Your goal should be to develop a core competency in the strategic planning, advice and direction of a product, service or business.



Step 1: Get Educated

"Which course should I take to learn about UX Design?" is one of the most common questions we receive from UX Mastery readers.

In this chapter:

- Tertiary Education
- Vocational Courses
- Online Courses
- Conferences & Workshops
- Self-study

Whether to enrol in a university program, a vocational course, an online course, a two-day conference, or to just piece together your own study program based on a handful of books and online articles—these are all potentially legitimate pathways. The right choice for you depends upon your unique situation: your prior experience, the time you have available, your financial position, and your optimal learning style. I can't give you one true answer, I'm afraid—each path comes with its pros and cons. However, by exploring these I can hopefully make the decision easier for you.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Wouldn't it be great if there was a well-regarded *Bachelor of User Experience Design* offered at your local university? Unfortunately, we're a long way from that. Some tertiary institutions offer degrees in Human-Computer Interaction or Interaction Design, but you'll find most practitioners have made their way to UX from a different field, or have a degree in a slightly adjacent area, such as Computer Science or Psychology. Others that you meet may have been educated in a completely unrelated field! Anecdotally, many practitioners I've spoken to have said that they would choose to study HCI or Psychology if they were to return to study, as they view it as a point of difference.

Here are the pros and cons of launching your UX career by enrolling in a university degree or similar.

Pros

- **Deeper understanding of theory.** Studying any topic at university will always result in a thorough understanding of the subject matter.
- **Increased credibility.** Although rare, a formal qualification in an area related to UX (computer science, graphic design, human-computer interaction, human behaviour) may be a requirement for some roles. It's not *always* true that a degree in one of these related fields buys you credibility in the eyes of a potential employer, but it rarely hurts, and in some industries, a postgraduate qualification certainly helps.

Student Perspective: Irith William, Masters student

"I don't think having a Masters has had much of an impact [on my job prospects]. I think that in the health industry, it's a cultural advantage more than a practical or logical one to have a postgraduate qualification."

Our complete interview with Irith Williams can be found in Appendix A: Interviews.

Cons

- **High cost investment.** While a handful of countries (mostly in Europe) offer free university tuition, in most cases you'll be faced with a serious financial outlay to get your degree.

- **Large time commitment.** I studied engineering at university, and have fond memories of the years I spent there. However, now that I'm working, with a mortgage and family commitments there's no way I'd entertain the thought of going back to full-time study.
- **More theory, less practice.** Theory is important, but in my opinion, the best way to learn UX is to do it. Some tertiary programs may include an industry placement, but most courses that I'm aware of do an inadequate job of preparing graduates with real work. The newly conceived, crowd-funded (and curiously named) Unicorn Institute in Tennessee is one possible exception to the rule. If you're diligent, you may find others, but they're few and far between.
- **Dated curriculum.** As with any field that involves technology, the principles, techniques and processes taught at university are often several years behind what is happening in industry.
- **Geography-specific.** If the tertiary institutions within commuting distance of where you live don't offer anything satisfactory, then your only choice is to relocate, which isn't an option for everyone.

VOCATIONAL COURSES

Vocational schools (commonly referred to as "hack schools") offer intensive programs, usually between 8 and 12 weeks long. Many of

the hack schools appearing on the scene are focussed on coding, and come with over the top promises—taglines such as *Learn how to code iOS apps in 8 weeks and land a $100K job, guaranteed!* are not uncommon.

There are a handful of schools, however, that deliver quality education and are a viable option for launching a career in UX Design. One such school is General Assembly, who have a global presence.

Instructor Perspective: Karen Callaghan, General Assembly

As an instructor who is also a practitioner, the value-add I'm lending to the course material is my collection of experiences and that of the current state of the market.

Students get to hear, and often laugh, about some of the lessons I've learned over the years. I think these real-world examples are a real benefit.

Read our complete interview with Karen in Appendix A: Interviews.

Pros

- **Real-world project experience.** Most vocational schools in operation understand that the best way to learn UX Design is by doing it. Consequently much of the curriculum is designed around project work, with students working in teams to

complete.

- **Industry-aligned content.** Most vocational schools source their staff from industry, not academia. Learning from folks who have worked on large projects with real clients can give you the kind of insight that is so often lacking in tertiary programs. Not every vocational school will hire instructors with that kind of experience, but it's certainly true that the curriculum of these schools is likely to be more practical than what you'll find at your local university.
- **Up-to-date.** A direct result of being more industry-focussed is that a vocational school program is likely to teach processes, techniques and philosophies that are more up-to-date than those taught at university. There are always going to be exceptions, but overall, it's true.
- **Networking opportunities.** One metric to gauge the success or failure of a vocational school is its placement rate. If every student achieves full-time employment in the field of their choice within a few months of graduating, that's a 100% placement rate. These placements happen because of connections to industry, and as a graduate of a vocational school, you'll be able to benefit from meeting potential employers and mentors through this program—not to mention the network of classmates that you'll also form.

Cons

- **High cost investment.** Enrolling in a hack school intensive

program can cost anything from $8,000 to as much as $17,000. While cheaper than most tertiary courses, that's still a serious investment, and not one that everyone is in a position to be able to make.

- **Medium time commitment.** While 8-12 weeks of full-time commitment is much shorter than enrolling in a tertiary institution, not everyone can just take three months off work because they're curious about user experience design.
- **Practitioners, not teachers.** One common criticism of vocational schools is that the lecturers, while accomplished practitioners, are not necessarily effective teachers. Not to say that all of the lecturers I had when I attended university years ago were exceptional teachers either, but be wary of schools who may rope in industry figures who have no experience in teaching.
- **Geography-specific.** Like tertiary institutions, vocational schools like General Assembly have set up in major cities, but there are plenty of places where they don't operate.

Not all Hack Schools are Created Equal

There have been wide range of experiences with hack schools, causing much debate of late. The topic was covered well in the Fast Company article, "Become an iOS Developer in 8 Weeks": The Truth About Hack Schools.

ONLINE COURSES

The recent explosion in online learning is no hype, and its growth shows no sign of abating. If your preference is for a high quality, structured learning environment, but logistics make it difficult to travel to a classroom to participate in-person, and you'd rather proceed at your own pace rather than be left behind, then platforms such as Lynda, Learnable, Coursera and Udemy are all good options.

While most courses consist of a series of video lectures, more and more platforms are incorporating quizzes, live-streamed Q&A sessions, chat boards, downloadable summary sheets and more.

The Ultimate Guide to Usability

As regular visitors to our blog will be aware, the online course that we usually recommend to newcomers is User Experience: The Ultimate Guide to Usability, run by David Travis, who runs a UX consultancy and training company in London. We like it because the course is comprehensive, up-to-date, and peppered with humour and case studies to keep things interesting. Read our full review of the course on uxmastery.com.

Pros

- **Low cost investment.** While a handful of online courses are free, a typical online course will cost between about US $50 and $200. Compared to in-person training, this is dirt cheap.
- **Convenience of time.** If you're already working full-time, or have other commitments that prevent you from attending in-person lectures or workshops, an online course may be your only option. You can work your way through at a time that suits you—during your lunch break, after dinner, or during the wee hours of the morning when insomnia strikes.
- **Convenience of location.** The other beauty of an online course is that you can take it from just about anywhere, so long as you have a computer, tablet, or smartphone. I've watched training courses on my train ride to work, and while lounging

on a deck chair at the beach. I've listened to audio lectures while riding my mountain bike through the bush and lifting weights at the gym. There's no need to restrict the locations that you learn to a classroom.

- **Indefinite access.** Most online courses make their material available indefinitely. That means you can always come back for a refresher one, two, even five years down the track or more.

Cons

- **No in-person interaction.** Occasionally an online course will encourage you to find a handful of friends to sign up for the course together, so that you can meet regularly for study sessions or project work. However, most online courses assume you're operating on your own. If you're the type of extrovert who thrives on being around other people, you may find it difficult to work through an online course.
- **Less explicit motivation.** While some online courses have an explicit start and end date, most allow you to work through at your own pace. This can be ideal if you're busy, and are sneaking windows of time to work through the material between work and family life. However, for some students, an online course runs the risk of becoming out-of-sight, out-of-find. If you're serious about completing an online course, you'll need to be disciplined about it, including scheduling time for yourself to work through the material.

- **Harder to get questions answered.** While some platforms include a Question & Answer component, others merely consist of a series of video lectures, with little opportunity to ask questions of the instructor or the rest of the class. Even in courses for which a community is core to the experience, it depends on the instructor and the size of the classroom as to whether your question is going to receive a satisfactory answer or not.

Form a Study Group

If you decide to enrol in an online course, why not rope one of your friends in? Having someone to catch up with in-person to review material, answer each other's questions, and keep each other accountable may be just what you need to get to the end—and it's more fun when you have someone to share your successes with!

CONFERENCES & WORKSHOPS

Any time there's a new "thing", you'll see a bunch of conferences spring up around that "thing".

UX is a "thing" now, which means that, luckily for you, a ton of great regular conferences are popping up all over the world. A usual one- or two-day conference usually includes some additional

workshops—practical full-day sessions held with an instructor in a classroom setting.

UX Australia, UX London, UX Week, UX New Zealand, UX Lisbon, UIE's UI conference series ... the list goes on. In addition to these specific UX conferences, many web or mobile conferences may have a design or UX stream. Web Directions, Webstock, An Event Apart—as far as learning goes, we're spoiled for choice in many countries. Be sure to keep an eye on UX Mastery for an up-to-date list.

Pros

- **High quality thinkers.** Some of the conferences listed above attract the brightest minds and the most inspiring presenters that you'll ever see. You may even get the opportunity to mingle with these rock stars of the UX world. If you do, you'll soon discover that they're just regular people too—they may be just as excited about meeting you!
- **Networking opportunities.** Beyond hobnobbing with keynote speakers, conferences are prime opportunities to meet future employers, employees, partners, clients, and friends. We'll cover more about how to network like a pro in a later chapter.
- **Compressed time frame.** It's amazing how much you can cram into a one- or two-day conference. Having a dedicated couple of days away from your usual routine is great for catching up on the latest thinking without taking a sabbatical from your usual routine.
- **Enthusiasm boost.** I've come away from conferences buzzing

with ideas, excitement, and renewed passion for my craft. Don't discount the importance of this jolt of enthusiasm for your own productivity.

- **Guided tuition.** Many conferences piggy back day-long workshops before or after the main conference. These workshops will cover a range of topics, and are a unique opportunity to apply new skills under the guidance of an expert.

Cons

- **Cost.** If you can't convince your employer to foot the bill for a ticket to a major conference, the price of paying your own way may feel prohibitive. That said, weighing up the cost per hour is a short-sighted way of thinking about conferences. If you knew that attending a specific conference would guarantee to inspire you, help you make some valuable contacts, and open your eyes to a new development in your field, the ticket price may feel relatively cheap!
- **Geographically restricted.** It's more difficult, and expensive, to attend a conference if it's on the other side of the country—or the world. Many conferences do record audio and/or video of their sessions though, and some even publish them online for free. There are a handful of online conferences that may be worth checking out, such as UX Web Summit, UX Movement and the Rosenfeld Media Summit.
- **Depth.** While great for getting inspired and connected with

your peers, it's difficult to go into much depth during the one or two days that a conference runs for. You're going to have to look elsewhere to really sink your teeth into a topic.

SELF-STUDY

I get it—some people just aren't into the whole 'course' thing. Or perhaps you're UX-curious, and would rather just read a couple of books to wet your whistle before committing to something more?

While I'd still recommend that a structured course—online or in-person—is the best way to grasp the 'big picture' view necessary to launch your career, here's a selection of books that should form a good starting point. Rather than just listing our own favourites, we asked 10 experts for their favourite books while writing *Everyday UX*, and have included a selection of their favourites here:

- The Elements of User Experience Design by Jesse James Garrett
- The Design of Everyday Things, by Donald Norman
- Don't Make Me Think by Steve Krug
- Designing for Interaction by Dan Saffer
- The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity by Alan Cooper
- Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research by Elizabeth Goodman, Mike Kuniavsky, and Andrea

Mood

- Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo
- Simple and Usable: Web, Mobile, and Interaction Design by Giles Colborne
- Measuring the User Experience: Collecting, Analyzing, and Presenting Usability Metrics, by William Albert and Thomas Tullis

Recommended Reading

The UX Mastery list of recommended reading contains even more great books, grouped by category. We're constantly updating it with new titles as they become available.

Whether you choose to study in-person or online, tackling material at your own pace or diving in with an intensive course, this knowledge only becomes useful once you've applied it to a real project. Conveniently, how to get some experience under your belt is the subject of the next chapter.

Questions to ask yourself:

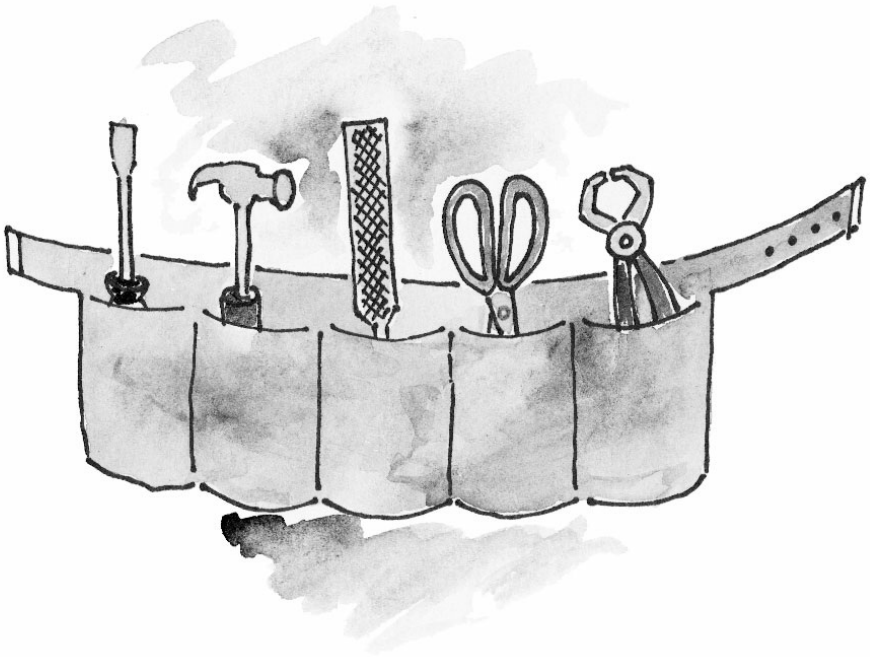
1. *Are you a diligent self-starter?* Have you enrolled in other online courses in the past? If so, did you stick at them? Why or why not? Are you likely to persist with an online

course, or do you need other external motivators, such as an in-person instructor?

2. *How much can you afford to spend?* Education is often a good investment, but if you don't have the cash to invest then it's well worth investigating less expensive options and getting as much as you can out of them.
3. *How much time do you have to dedicate to this?* Some extra things and explanation to help think about it.
4. *Who else can you learn from?* In later chapters we'll discuss the value of networking and finding mentors who can assist your learning. When supplemented by the guidance of others, your learning will compound, regardless of the format you decide upon.

Chapter Summary: Get Educated

- Choosing the right course is a decision that is uniquely yours to make, as it depends upon your available funds, free time, and learning styles.
- Conferences are a good way to "dip your toes" and get inspired, as well as meet new people in your industry.
- If you enrol in an online course, consider reaching out to a study partner, to motivate each other and answer each other's questions.



Step 2: Get The Right Tools

Good tools are crucial for achieving mastery as a UX designer, but there's a lot more to it than just wireframing software! While it's certainly possible to design a usable, useful, delightful web or mobile app for someone using only a pen and paper, having the right UX tools can aid that process by making it more fun, more convenient, more collaborative—or just plain quicker.

In this chapter:

- Core tasks of UX design
- How to choose the right tool

- Recommended tools

CORE TASKS

Before we get into recommending any tools, let's take a look at the key tasks almost all UXers do:

- **Capture** a thinking process.
- **Analyse** research data.
- **Create** interactive wireframes or prototypes.
- **Record** user feedback (e.g. through guerrilla usability testing sessions).
- **Communicate** findings to the team.

It's possible to perform nearly all of these tasks with just a pencil and paper. However, the right tools will speed up the process, while making it easier for you to make changes along the way.

The major attraction of a pencil and paper is the flexibility you have when sketching—you're not restricted by the features of any particular software; you don't even need to stay inside the lines! Choosing a software package that complements this flexibility is not a task to be taken lightly.

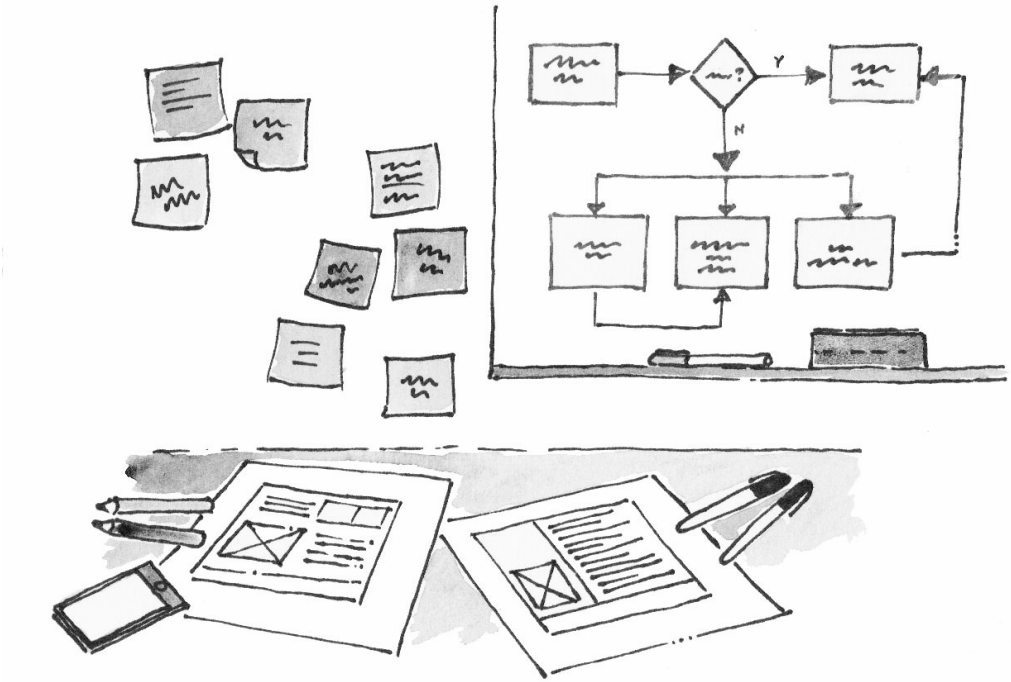
Killing the Wireframing Machine

There's no denying that the task of creating wireframes and prototypes is an important part of UX design, so yes—you'll need a

wireframing/prototyping tool. However, newcomers to UX often get hung up on using the software, and forget about those other activities listed above.

You'll need more than just a wireframing tool.

It's also worth mentioning that the best tools for a task are not always digital. When I first started I was reluctant to use too much stationery. Part of my reservation came down to my desire to be environmentally responsible—and I'm certainly not advocating you be wasteful at all. However, you also shouldn't be afraid to make a mess in order to perform your job effectively. If the most effective technique for arranging an enormous collection of disparate comments on a user feedback session is to write each comment on a post-it note and arrange them on a wall, then that's what you should do. Post-it notes, paper, markers, screenshots printed out on poster-sized sheets of paper and stuck on the wall in strategic locations around the office … there's often no effective digital substitute for these tools.



Process First, Tools Second

At one time or another, every UX designer has made the mistake of launching into a particular digital tool without really knowing what to do with it.

The excitement of learning to use something new and shiny is great for motivation, but such an approach can be problematic. Being tool-centric has the potential to waste time, distract you from your tasks, and compromise your design process by defining a workflow around how the tool works.

> ***"Computers are magnificent tools for the realization of our dreams, but no machine can replace the human spark of spirit, compassion, love, and understanding."*** *- Louis Gerstner*

A better approach is to choose the right set of techniques for the project at hand—based on budget, timeframes, availability of users, stakeholders and analytics data—than to let a particular tool dictate your approach. Learning which techniques to use in which situations is a skill that comes with experience.

Which Techniques When?

Jesmond Allen and James Chudley's excellent Smashing Magazine article, Effectively Planning UX Design Projects, includes a great example of how different techniques can be chosen based on available time and budget.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT TOOL

There are a bunch of factors to consider when choosing a software package, including:

1. Whether it's **available** on your platform;
2. The **price**—unless your employer is paying, of course!
3. **Recommendations** from a colleague that you trust (or from a

source like UX Mastery!);
4. The **time and effort** it takes you to complete a task;
5. Whether the tool supports **collaborative workflow** and remote access;
6. How big the tool's **learning curve** is;
7. The ability to **customise** the tool to your way of working; and
8. The tool's ability to **export data**, for you to utilise later in the project.

Consider *all* of these factors into account when evaluating a new software package. At the end of the day, it's important you choose what works well for you—don't fall into the trap of using a particular tool simply because it's the flavour of the month. Every UXer is unique, as is every team, and every project.

Get Away From your Desk

UX Design is more about working with people than working on your own in front of a screen.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS

As we've seen, the choice of tools can be very personal. However, I often get the request, "Just tell me what I should use to get started!"

So that's what I'm going to do. Keeping in mind the caveat that there is

a huge world of alternatives out there, here's my definitive list of UX tools—hardware, software, and analogue—for getting your feet wet as a user experience designer. I've grouped them by the tasks they're most useful for.

Hardware Tools

Tool	Useful for …
Laptop computer: Working from a desktop machine comes with a serious disadvantage; having a laptop computer empowers you to be mobile, freeing you up to take your office to the people you need to interact with, rather than forcing them to come to you. Even better, if your laptop comes with an in-built camera and microphone, you can use it as a portable usability testing lab. Now's the time to discuss an upgrade with your boss, or invest in your own equipment.	Document preparation; team communication; user testing …
Voice recorder: Is it safe to assume that most people have a smartphone these days? If so, you have a voice recorder in your pocket. I use the *Voice Memos* app on my iPhone all the time for recording interviews with stakeholders.	Interviewing users & stakeholders
Digital camera: Once again, your smartphone probably includes a digital camera, which means there's no need to go	Capturing whiteboards & post-it notes;

and purchase a dedicated camera—the one in your pocket will suffice for taking snaps of whiteboards, notes, and other artefacts.	post-it notes; observing user behaviour

Table: Hardware tools useful for UX.

Software Tools

Tool	Useful for ...
Wireframing software: **Balsamiq Mockups** is a desktop wireframing tool that runs on both Windows and Mac. A single-user license costs $79, and it's very easy-to-use. I've found the ability to export clickable PDFs to be a very powerful way of creating portable interactive prototypes that can be emailed to stakeholders and other team members. **Axure** is a slicker, more feature-packed alternative that is fast-becoming the industry standard, although the additional features can be intimidating for beginners.	Creating low-fidelity wireframes & interactive prototypes
Screen recording software: This is the magical missing ingredient that can turn your humble laptop into a portable usability testing lab. My usability testing app of choice is **Silverback**. It's a very simple tool that costs around US $70, but it works well and is easy to use. Unfortunately, it's only available on the Mac. Windows users shouldn't fear though —**Camtasia Studio** is a good option. It costs a little bit more, but that's because it's more than	Conducting usability testing sessions

just a screen recorder—you can also use it to create and edit professional-looking screencasts.	
Diagramming software: Omnigraffle is my tool of choice when it comes to creating diagrams (sorry, it's Mac-only). Microsoft Visio, bundle with the Office suite, is an adequate tool for diagramming; at a PowerPoint.	Creating workflow diagrams, sitemaps, and other visualisations
Analytics software: If you're working on a web redesign project, there's a 90% chance that Google Analytics has already been installed for you. And for good reason—there are other analytics packages that do some things better, but there's no question that Google Analytics is a seriously powerful tool for gaining anonymous insights about visitors to a website. Plus, it's free!	Creating workflow diagrams, sitemaps, and other visualisations
Text editor: Sublime Text or TextEdit on the Mac, BBEdit Notepad on Windows.	Writing and editing simple prototyping code;
Standard office software: Whether you choose the Microsoft suite (Outlook, Word, Excel, PowerPoint), the Apple suite (Mail, Pages, Numbers, Keynote) or one of the free or open source alternatives out there, what's important is that they don't get in the way of doing your job. If you're having a hard time exchanging documents with your team members because they're all using Microsoft Excel and you're using Numbers, it may be	Document preparation; Data analysis; Presenting findings

easiest to just bite the bullet and switch across.	

Table: Software tools useful for UX.

Analogue Tools

Tool	Useful for ...
Pen + notepad: Included for completeness, there are plenty of occasions when I wish I'd brought my pen and paper to a meeting, interview, or usability test. Perhaps one day I'll be as quick at jotting down ideas, comments, or observations on a phone, computer or tablet, but at this point in time, pen and paper still wins.	Capturing ideas, observations, and notes from meetings, interviews, and usability tests
Butcher paper + markers: I don't have any affiliation with the brand, but it's certainly true that UXers love their Sharpies. It doesn't really matter what brand you use, but there's something about the simple marker that draws people to want to scribble their ideas, and that's exactly what we're aiming for. While you're at the newsagent, be sure to grab a few different colours, and stock up on highlighters highlighters.	Collaborative design workshops
Whiteboard + markers: Some note-	Facilitating

taking/writing/sketching tools: pencil, marker, highlighter, paper (A4 or grid paper).	group sessions
Post-it notes: One caveat to using post-it notes is to have a wall to place them on.	Organising disparate concepts
Index cards: They may no longer be used in libraries, but small cards are super handy for allowing users to group information written on them—known as a card sort.	Performing card sorts
Grid paper: If you're designing for a specific device, or exploring how your web app will display in at different resolutions, grid paper can be handy for keeping things lined up and consistent. Check out our big list of **UX Templates** for a list of downloadable resources to help your sketching process.	Conducting user testing sessions
Card + scissors: Depending on the project, the best technique may be to create a paper prototype. Paper prototypes are handy	Creating paper prototypes

Table: Hands-on tools useful for UX.

That's quite the list, although you'll have many of the items above lying around already. If you find yourself having to move between rooms (or buildings) a lot, then a bag to store your warchest of stationery weaponry is also worth considering.

I've listed these items as a reminder that they're available for you to use; it's all very well to aim for a paperless office—admirable, even. But sometimes keeping everything digital means it stays hidden. Communicating what we do to our clients and team members really is just as important as the work itself.

With your portable usability testing lab and a bag of stationery ready to go, it's time for us to put these tools to use!

Chapter Summary: Get The Right Tools

- Having the right tools doesn't make you a UX designer, but it's hard to be one without them.
- Investing in user testing recording software for your laptop will arm you with a portable usability testing lab, empowering you to run user testing sessions anywhere, any time!
- Decide upon your process before choosing your tool.
- Raid the stationery cupboard so that you have plenty of options for capturing, analysing, creating communicating, and recording.

Step 3: Get Experience

Your next step is to find a way to put some of this newfound knowledge into practice. Luckily, it's possible to do so without having to bluff your way into a job only to discover you're out of your depth.

In this chapter:

- Practical Opportunities
- Ways to Add Value
- Volunteering Tips

PRACTICAL OPPORTUNITIES

Here are a few approaches you can use to gain relevant experience, which you can then talk about with authority in your next interview (we'll explore specific strategies for how to excel at interviews in a later chapter).

Move Sideways

This is the most common pathway that UXers follow. If you're already working with a digital team in some capacity, perhaps as a project manager, front-end developer, visual designer, or something else, you're sitting in the front seat—it's up to you to take the bull by the horns.

Usually the most obvious choice would be to take the initiative to conduct some user testing sessions. These need not take an entire day out of your time—once I ran some "guerilla testing" sessions at the cafe across the road from my work! Observing people using a product will not only provide you with insight into how that product could be improved, but it will give you an opportunity to refine your facilitation skills at the same time.

Once you feel comfortable conducting user testing sessions, you can begin branching out and developing other skills. And if there's already a UXer on the project, see if you can arrange some time to shadow them as they complete their tasks.

Create a Hypothetical Project

Ever wished you had the opportunity to work for Nike? Been frustrated by your city's train timetable website, and wished you could redesign it? You can!

Setting yourself a hypothetical project gives you the freedom to work for your dream client, or on a project that you're passionate about. What you'll lack in information on business or technology goals, you can make up for with the freedom to conduct the project the way you'd like to. You can interview customers or users of the product, run some user testing sessions of the their website, create wireframes and

interactive prototypes, and gain experience by presenting your findings to a group of supportive friends. You can even include all of your findings in your portfolio, while being transparent about it being a hypothetical project, of course (see the later chapter on Getting Hired for more portfolio tips like this).

Help out a Friend

Everyone has a friend who is trying to launch a startup—simply mention at a party that you're interested in UX, and you're bound to hear someone pitch their mobile app concept to you, and ask whether you'd work for "sweat equity."

While you should be justifiably wary of launching into every hair-brained idea that comes your way, there are dozens of legitimate opportunities to help small businesses improve, while learning and refining your skills at the same time. And these opportunities needn't be the Next Big Thing™ to be a good learning opportunity—it could be the local pizza shop, your child's school, or your brother's plumbing business that you turn your attention to.

Approach a Company or Not-for-profit

Cold calling is not everyone's cup of tea. Sure, if you're feeling bold and are unfazed by the thought of contacting strangers and requesting a coffee meeting, by all means, try your luck. However, it's more likely that you'll see success through your existing personal and professional networks.

Take advantage of the fact that you have these valuable contacts! Approach organisations where you know someone, and volunteer your time to conduct some usability testing sessions or perform user interviews there. While it may go against the grain to work for free after you've had an established career doing something else, if your peers can see that you're adding value then you may be in a good position to negotiate (if not, then take what you've learned and move on to somewhere else that recognises the value you're adding).

Launch a Personal Project

Rather than donate your time to others, perhaps you have your own product idea that you've been milling over. What better opportunity to validate your concept than to put it through the process of user research and prototyping?

If it's an idea that you're particularly excited about, there's a good chance that you'll have difficulties being objective about the product. Your bias to want the idea to succeed will colour your judgment, even if you try hard not to let it. However, the experience will still be worthwhile, and the research you do may shed new light or perspectives on its potential (or, in some cases, its lack thereof). To minimise that bias, pitch your idea to a handful of colleagues or friends whose opinions you trust—this will give you presentation and facilitation experience as well.

WAYS TO ADD VALUE

Conduct User Testing

Becoming a confident, competent UX designer isn't something that can be taught in 10 minutes.

However, there is one activity in particular that you can pick up in little to no time, which will add enormous value to your client, and that is to **conduct a user testing session**. User testing is one of those activities that always delivers useful information about how usable a web or mobile app is (or isn't). The user testing could be on a prototype, a completed product, or even a competitor's website or app.

And the best part? Anyone can conduct a user test, **without any experience at all**. Here's a true story that proves it.

An employee at one of my consulting clients—let's call her Sarah—called me up recently, asking for help.

> "An agency is building us an app, and they've given us a prototype to test for usability. I have three days, starting today. Can you help?"

Now normally I'd volunteer to conduct the user testing for the client. But in this instance I had immediate obligations to other clients, so wasn't able to help. Instead, I told her I would pen some instructions, and sent the following email (the details have been changed to protect client confidentiality).

What happened as a result of her reading this one email was amazing.

Here's the exact email that I sent Sarah.

From: Matthew Magain

To: Sarah
Subject: Re: testing the app

Hi Sarah

Thanks for your message. It's great that you guys have got the opportunity to do some usability testing of the app that DigitalAgencyCo are building. Obviously if I had a little more notice I could probably come in and give you guys a hand, but I can't really juggle things at this late notice.

The good news though is that usability testing is not super difficult. Not to go putting myself out of a job or anything, but the ability to conduct a user testing session is something that is easily learned, and it's also a handy skill to have under your belt!

If you've got three days, here's what I'd recommend you do:

First, go watch this video by user testing guru Steve Krug. It's only 24 minutes, but worth sitting through. It's an example usability test—something that you can certainly run yourself.

You'll notice a few things:

- Steve **puts the participant at ease** by

stressing that they're testing the software, not her.

- He **sets the scene** with a couple of questions relating to the tasks ahead (you might ask them when they last bought the product you're selling, whether the transaction occurred online, and what they remember of the experience)
- He does this without having the website pre-loaded, to **avoid distracting them**. You might load the BigCompany home page at the start, for instance.
- He assigns the participant a couple of **tasks** (you might do the same—say, one to choose a specific model, and a second task to buy a different product that meets certain criteria (sorry, just making this up as I don't know the specific inventory)
- He **facilitates**, but doesn't actually guide or show the user what to do.
- He encourages the participant to **think out loud**, in order to "get inside their head". This provides you with qualitative data to help you understand why a user is behaving the way they do. This is important—without this narrative, you're just guessing why they

do something.

- He asks **What are you thinking?** a lot. It's a useful prompt to get someone who forgets that they are supposed to be thinking out loud.

Once you've digested all that, you're ready to plan your own usability test sessions! Here's what I'd do.

1. **Line up at least 6 participants for a 30 minute session, over a couple of days.** Ideally you'd run more than this, but you'll be pushing it given the time you have available. These participants should be from the target group that you think will be using the app, and cover a range of demographics within that group. For instance, if your marketing data tells you that your target customers are between 18 and 35, male and female, then get 3 x males aged roughly 18, 24, and 35, and 3 x females with the same age spread. Oh, ideally they should be people who are actually in the market for buying a mobile phone (or, next best, have recently bought one).

   The beauty of working at BigCompany is

that you probably have candidates that fit these criteria working in the office, and are willing to help out. I know you haven't been at BigCompany for too long, so ask someone who has (I recommend reaching out to Kevin Dooly, who originally hired me a few years ago—he has been there for 13 years, is super helpful and knows everyone—tell him I sent you!). I would suggest that you line up a few fallback options, as in general people are flaky and you'll probably have a couple pull out due to last minute meetings and what have you.

You might want to also do a practice session (e.g. with your boss as the participant) in advance, to rehearse.

2. **Schedule these participants in for a 30 minute session.** You can use the template email I've copied below if you like. Allow for at least 30 minutes between sessions, to give yourself a break and to gather your notes. If your three days of testing start tomorrow, see if you can line one or two up for tomorrow afternoon, and the rest on Monday and Tuesday. I recommend calling them first, to line it up, before

emailing them the invitation.

Place the computer running the app in a room where you can close the door.

3. **Recording a video of the screen while the participants use it is definitely recommended.** There are two reasons why this is a good idea, and depending on how important they are will influence whether you bother to do so or not. The first reason is because it means the pressure is off you to take notes-the participant's actions and the app's responses are all there should you need to refer to them. The second reason is political—if you were to have hurdles convincing someone from DigitalAgencyCo or from upper management about your recommendations, this can be a useful tool (by saying, hey look, it's not my opinion, it's a random user's!).

   If you don't envisage there being any political reasons to record the screen (or it's just too difficult to organise a video camera pointing at the screen) then I would recommend you at least record the audio of each session (either with your phone or your computer). It means you'll still have

to take notes if you notice the user hitting difficulties with specific parts of the app, but you'll still have material to listen to afterwards when looking for common problems.

4. **In advance, plan a couple of tasks for the candidates to perform.** Write these tasks down on a card that you will give to them. These tasks should be written as scenarios that the reader can read themselves, or you read out to them.
5. **Print out a permissions slip (to get the participants OK to record them) and a script to read for each session** (I've attached templates that I use when I conduct usability testing sessions, which you're welcome to use or modify).
6. **Run the sessions.** It can be useful to have a second observer in the room with you for some of the sessions. They should take their own notes. Sometimes they'll notice something that you don't!
7. **Review your notes and recordings from all of the sessions.** You'll hopefully notice some recurring themes. e.g. if 4 out of the 6 people got stuck with one aspect of one of the tasks, then that's

definitely something you should get the DigitalAgencyCo guys to address. You should prioritise the list of recommended changes based on how much it impacted the user's ability to complete the task. So if it was only a minor annoyance and didn't really get in the way, it may not be as big a deal as something that was a showstopper. Common sense, right? :) This list is what you give back to DigitalAgencyCo as a to-do for them to tackle.

That's about it!

I'll be in the office on Tuesday for another project. I can't stick around, but I'm happy to chat about the usability tests you've done by then (if you're able to schedule them at such late notice).

Hope this is all helpful—feel free to email or call if you have any questions.

Cheers
Matt

Attached:

- sample email invite
- sample test script (Word)
- sample permission form (Word)

When I visited the client the following Tuesday, Sarah was sitting at her desk, looking relaxed. What I'd suggested to her was an ambitious timeframe, so I wondered whether she'd abandoned my advice. I asked how it went.

"Oh, I'm all finished. The sessions went well, and I'm just writing up my findings now. It was kind of fun!"

Awesome stuff. Not only had she scheduled, conducted, and reported on the user testing sessions by herself, she had enjoyed it and is now likely to become an evangelist for involving users in projects at her company. Sure, there were a heap of assumptions made about the target demographic, the participants were staff members with a possibly skewed attitude towards the company and its app, and ideally the project would be structured differently in order to get user involvement throughout every stage and instil a more user-centric culture into the organisation.

However, given the timeframes—what a great outcome! I think this was a perfect example of making the most of a time-poor, small-budget approach to UX. It also demonstrates that there's really no excuse not to do at least some basic user testing of your websites and apps.

Ask Lots of Questions

Another way that you can add value is to simply ask lots of questions. In the first chapter, we defined UX as "the what, when, where, why, and how someone uses a product, as well as who that person is." You

can use this definition as a framework to determine just how well an organisation understands its user base, or how well a product is likely to fit its intended audience.

VOLUNTEERING TIPS

When volunteering your time, it's important to ensure that you and your "client" will get the most out of the experience—and that the project doesn't end up becoming a millstone that drags our and becomes something you resent having been involved with in the first place. Here are some tips to prevent that from happening:

1. **Define the scope in a contract.** Write down ahead of time exactly what it is you're offering your client, in the form of a contract, and have both of you sign it. Include key deliverables, milestones, due dates, and be explicit about what you're not being engaged to do. You're donating your valuable time for free here, and without something formal in place, you run the risk of being taken advantage of.
2. **Don't aim for the sky.** It's easy to get excited about working on a real project, and you're probably eager to impress. However, be careful not to over-promise, or your little project could become a major time suck.
3. **Send an invoice.** Even if you're not charging the client, send an invoice which lists your hourly rate, and include a discount of 100%. That way, the client at least understands the dollar

value of what it is they're getting when they engage you. It also makes the conversation about extending you on the project (in a paid capacity) much easier.

4. **Get permission to include it in your portfolio.** You're not getting paid here, so you need to make sure you derive value in other ways. It would be devastating to arrive at the end of the engagement and be told that the project is moving to "stealth" mode and can't be shared publicly. Write it into your contract that you'll be including this piece of work in an online portfolio for the explicit purpose of showing to potential employers.
5. **Seek a testimonial and a referral.** If you feel like you've done outstanding work, and you know the client is happy with it, hit them up for a public statement that says as much. Connect with them on LinkedIn, and politely request that they verify your performance by declaring to the world that you are awesome at what you do. As you can see, there are myriad ways to gain experience in many aspects of user experience design work. Shrugging your shoulders at the fact that this experience is not forthcoming in your current role won't get you anywhere. Set aside some time to deliberately seek out the experience you need, and you'll be surprised at the doors that open for you.

The best way to learn UX is to do it. Plus, it sounds far more convincing in an interview if you say "I've done this" rather than "I've studied this".

As we've seen in this chapter, there are plenty of ways to get some

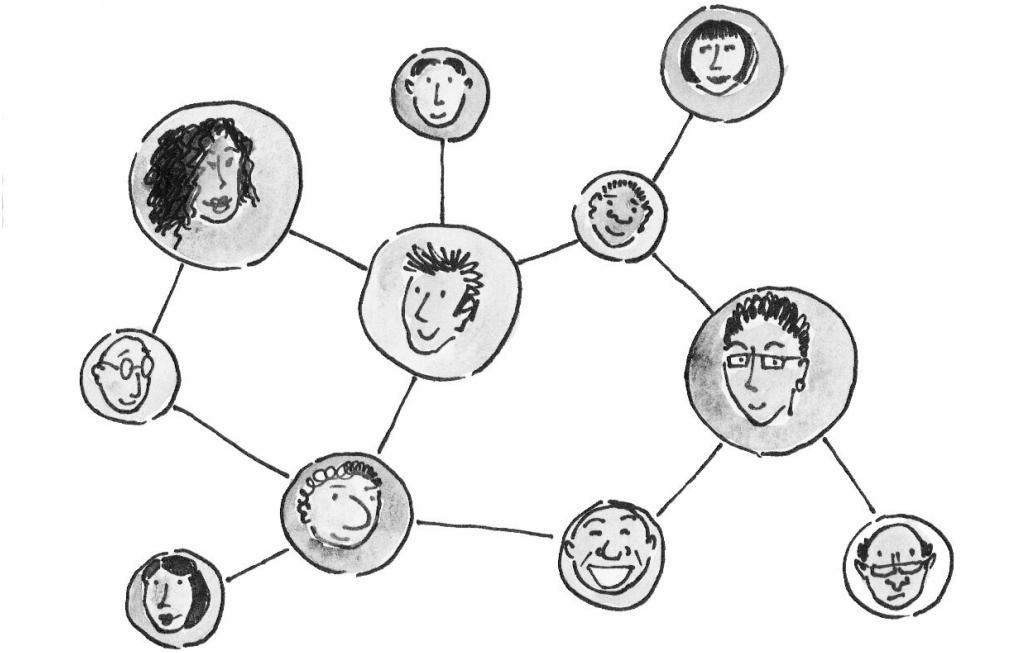
experience under your belt—and you may even explore all of them. Even if a project doesn't go to plan or you prepare some research findings for a client that they choose to ignore, it's all experience. The more of it you attain, the better your chance at taking your step into a full-time UX role. In the next chapter, we'll look at ways you can connect with other UXers, in an attempt to expand your network of people to learn from and, possibly, gain experience through.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. *Where can you add value in your current role?* If you're not working in an environment that creates digital products, you may need to look somewhere external to your current job. But if you are, be sure that everyone knows that you're keen to run some user tests and get involved in other UX-related activities, even if they're small.
2. *What organisations would you **love** to work with?* If you need to look outside of your current organisation, and you're going to donate your time for free, it might as well be for a cause or an organisation that you are excited about or believe in. Which brands resonate with your values and ambitions?
3. *Which of your contacts are doing the kind of work that intrigues you?* Take a look through your social media connections, and see if there are any folks who you might be excited to reconnect with, as an opportunity to ask about donating your time for a few days.

Chapter Summary: Get Experience

- Experience is the most valuable component of your journey to success as a UXer.
- The more you can attain of it, whether on personal projects, pro bono, or by shadowing others, the better you'll become at talking about and doing UX.
- Start by offering to run user testing sessions, and writing a report on your findings.
- When volunteering, be sure to confine the scope of your involvement so that you don't end up over-committing.



Step 4: Get Connected

A big part of establishing yourself in the UX field is getting connected with folks who will keep you passionate, help to develop your professional skills, and lead to new work and career opportunities.

In this chapter:

- Network to connect
- Value your relationships
- Make yourself visible
- Maintain your connections

- A checklist for your next networking event

NETWORK TO CONNECT

The best UX jobs aren't advertised.

Read that sentence again and allow it to sink in. It's true—and not just in the UX world.

However, there are plenty of amazing opportunities if you know how and where to look. The best way to find these opportunities is **not** through Google, the classifieds or an employment agency—it's by relating directly with the people around you, through networks such as LinkedIn, Twitter, local event meetups and personal referrals. Networking may sound intimidating, but it can be very rewarding, even if you're introverted or don't think you know many people.

Networking is the best way to find a job because:

- Most people in the UX field ultimately **prefer to do business with people they know** and like. It's more difficult to convince an employer that they should hire you based on an impersonal resume and a cover letter.
- Publicly advertised **UX job listings tend to attract large numbers** of poorly thought-out applications. Even if you stand out, the numbers still mean you face stiff competition for a popular job type. Networking pre-qualifies you as a member of

a much smaller pool, and in some cases may even mean a position is created to accommodate you.
- At the end of the day, **your dream job may never be advertised at all**. Networking gives you access to the right people, information and job leads even before a job description gets written up.

The good news is, *you're probably already doing it.*

Whether you recognise it or not, you're already networking every day and everywhere you go—when you chat over the fence with a neighbour, start a conversation with someone next to you at the checkout, meet a friend of a friend for the first time, or catch up with someone you used to work with. Effective networking isn't about exploiting other people or aggressively promoting yourself—it's about **building relationships**.

People Want to Help you

It took me a few years to realise that networking isn't a selfish endeavour. I used to be awkward about reaching out because I felt uncomfortable asking for favours, and was nervous about what people would think. After a while I realised I had the wrong end of the stick; networking benefits others too. Here's how:

- **Taking the first step** by offering to help, or by involving others in your opportunities, is appreciated as a gesture of friendship.
- **It feels good to help others**, and most people will gladly lend a hand if they can.

- **People enjoy giving advice** when it means they're recognised for their expertise.
- Other people get **encouragement, fellowship and moral support** from connecting too.
- It turns out **the UX field is a very supportive bunch**. Other UXers remember when they were in similar situations, and you'll find that most will be eager to assist when you initiate a connection.

Be a hub

If a colleague, client, or friend asks "Do you know someone?", make an effort to refer someone from within your network. Doing so not only makes you look good in their eyes, you're likely to be kept in the loop about future opportunities as a result. And, when the time comes, they'll be more likely to return the favour!

Build Trust

For many organisations, handing the ownership of a product's user experience to somebody not yet inside their circle of trust is akin to handing their newborn baby to a stranger. There are a ton of questions and doubts, and building trust is key.

The well-appreciated journalist and author Neil Gaiman once observed:

> ***You get work however you get work, but people keep working in a freelance world because their work is good, because they are easy to get along with and because they deliver the work on time. And you don't even need all three! Two out of three is fine.***

The secret to better networking is to **develop your professional integrity** and develop trust with the people immediately around you. Building trust with one person helps it pass to the next; if you're personally referred for a UX position as the result of someone you've met, then you automatically have a headstart in the trust stakes before you've even started the job.

Of course it's all very well for me to say "build some trust", but how do we actually go about doing this? Well, the first step is to value your relationships.

VALUE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Networking is sometimes seen as the realm of entrepreneurs and salespeople, and comes with connotations of being pushy or self-serving. It needn't be the case. In reality, networking is nothing more than **getting to know people**—an ebb-and-flow process of making connections, sharing what you know, and asking questions.

Networking is a way of relating to others, not a technique for getting

what you want.

You don’t have to hand out your business cards on street corners, cold-call everyone in your address book, or work a room of strangers. All you have to do is reach out. Here are some tips for becoming an effective networker.

1. **Be genuine.** Hiding who you are or suppressing your own interests will only hurt you in the end. Being true to your goals (and not simply what you think others will like) will ultimately be more fulfilling.
2. **Be considerate.** If you’re catching up with an old friend or colleague, take the time to reconnect before you hit them with your request for a favour. Or, if you're meeting with someone you don’t know well, be considerate of their time by getting to the point without too much fuss.
3. **Ask for advice, not a job.** Your aim in building a network is to gain additional eyes on the ground, but asking directly for a job is likely to leave your contacts feeling ambushed and in the uncomfortable position of saying they can't help. Rather than creating a dead end, ask for information or insights instead. If your contact is able to help they probably will, by offering you something or referring you to someone who can.
4. **Be specific about what you're asking.** Before you attack your address book, take the time to prepare. Articulate what you’re looking for. Are you needing a reference? The perspective of someone in a particular role? An introduction or referral to a

contact you'd like to meet?

5. **Say "thank you".** It may sound obvious, but be sure to thank anyone in your network who gives you their time—even if the conversation doesn't necessarily lead to anything. Those two words may be the difference between whether that person chooses to help or refer you again in the future!

Don't hit-and-run!

People dislike hit-and-run networkers. You know the ones—they're friendly but assertive, then disappear once they get what they want, never to be heard from until the next time they need something. Stick with your network *beyond* the times when you need help yourself. And even when you've received a favour, don't make it all about you—get back to people to let them know how you went, thank them for their referral, and give positive feedback to people who took the time to help.

Working with Recruiters

Some UXers I know squirm in their seat when they hear the word "recruiter". Recruiters can be a real mixed bag, but not all recruiters are time-wasters. If you find the right one they'll take good care of you and help accelerate your career. Here are some tips:

- Only **work with recruiters who specialise in UX**. Recruiters who focus on the "digital" or "creative" market may be casting their net too wide to really understand what UX is.
- Remember that some recruiters are national or international in scope. Others are locally-based.
- Understand that some focus on a particular **job level**—e.g. only entry-level or mid-level roles.
- Most operate on a **contingency** basis—they only get paid if they successfully place a candidate. Others may perform **retained searches** where they get paid for presenting a certain number of fully-qualified candidates, even if none are hired,
- A company's first impressions of your resume will be influenced by your recruiter's reputation and what the recruiter tells them about you. Only deal with those who operate in a **highly professional manner**.
- You don't want a hiring manager to receive your resume from too many sources, as it sends the wrong signals. Be sure that your recruiter is **keeping you informed** about every position they intend to recommend you for —if a recruiter puts you forward for a role that isn't a good match, this reflects poorly on you.
- **Send your resume to other UX colleagues** or people with similar skillsets, and give them permission to forward your resume if a recruiter reaches out to them. I

regularly pass on resumes when (good) recruiters touch base with me—it helps both the job seeker and the recruiter.

- Many recruiters will also want to do an **initial screening** by interviewing you, and you should take this as seriously as a job interview. The better job you do of presenting yourself, the greater the chance and more effective they will be at pre-selling you to a hiring manager.
- **Ask your network** for referrals of a good recruiter who understands UX (many don't). Many recruiters will appreciate being contacted by someone with good UX skills, and may have roles that they are currently looking to fill.
- **Stay in touch** with your recruiter, and consider them your "friend on the inside". Keep them updated with your work interests and experience and they'll be better able to advocate for you about suitable positions.
- **Trust your recruiter** when they ask you to resupply your portfolio or resume in a different format. They know what their clients are looking for.

MAKE YOURSELF VISIBLE

You can build your profile by getting out there and mixing with your

network in-person, online, and via professional associations. Here are some tips for getting on people's radar.

Be Visible Offline

- **UX Book Club** is a growing, global movement of UXers who meet regularly to discuss a specific UX-related book. Book clubs operate in many cities, but there's no single up-to-date list, so try performing a Google search for your area.
- Offer to **be a speaker** at UX events or user groups if you genuinely have something to share. Groups like this are always looking for new speakers.
- Tickets can be expensive, but some of the large UX conferences are not only inspiring because of the content they provide, but they offer a wealth of networking opportunities. Whether it's Web Directions, UX Australia, UX London, UX Week, or something else, if you're lucky enough to attend one of these excellent conferences, be sure to **mingle and meet some new people**.
- **Search meetup.com** for UX groups in your local area. Because UX is a broad field, search for UX-related terms, such as *information architecture*, *usability*, *design thinking*, or *HCI (Human Computer Interaction)*.
- **Introduce yourself** to a UX agency in your area. The first step to becoming trusted is to become known.
- **Talk about your side projects** with people you meet (especially if those side projects are UX-related).

- If you've volunteered your services for a friend's business or local not-for-profit, **make sure they know** you're on the lookout for further opportunities.
- **Create a group** that champions UX if you work in a large company and no group exists there yet.

Be Visible Online

1. **Start a blog** to demonstrate your skills as a thought leader in your area of passion or speciality—even if it is simply to document what you're learning as a new UXer.
2. Use social media to **broadcast** the fact that you're looking for a UX role to your friends and followers (unless you're doing it in secret).
3. **Engage** with people on Twitter—not just UX thought leaders, but with other people asking questions about UX.
4. **Ask questions** or **provide answers** on active forums like community.uxmastery.com or ux.stackexchange.com.
5. **Join discussion lists** in your professional communities, such as the IA institute mailing list or IxDa discussion list.
6. Keep your LinkedIn and Facebook **profiles up to date** with your professional details.
7. Join and participate in one of the thousands of active **UX groups** on LinkedIn, Facebook or Google Plus.
8. Use social media to **connect to organizations** you want to work for, such as “liking” their Facebook page or following them on Twitter or LinkedIn. Many organisations will post job

announcements to their pages.

Join a Professional Association

In addition to sharing good and bad experiences and sharing best practices, a community of like-minded people is very useful to help you learn, grow and stay passionate. Professional communities are particularly focussed on advancing the cause of their particular field, and often formalise advantages and opportunities as member benefits, such as notifications about job opportunities, discounted rates, or mentoring.

The most popular UX-related associations are:

- **Interaction Design Association (IxDA)**, which has 152 groups around the world: ixda.org
- The **User Experience Professionals Association (UXPA)** has 50 chapters around the world: uxpa.org
- In Australia, the **Human Factors & Ergonomics Society of Australia (HFESA)** has a special interest group called CHISIG that focuses on computer-human interaction: ergonomics.org.au/chisig.aspx
- The **Information Architecture Institute**: iainstitute.org
- AIGA (previously the **American Institute of Graphic Arts**) is beginning to express interest in UX for its existing members: aiga.org

If no group exists in your area for your preferred professional association, they'll often support you in starting a local chapter.

Google yourself!

Let's face it—people are going to Google you before they refer you or invite you to an interview. Perform an audit of your Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn, blog, and any other online presence that you've accumulated over the years, to ensure that what people find when searching for your name is what you want them to see.

Don't trawl online job boards

Job postings are the tip of the iceberg for openings, and they're the least effective way to apply for a job because of their method of advertising. They deserve to be near the bottom of your list of UX job sources.

Many UX job ads, offline and online, insist on specific skills or experience without the ad writer being fully aware of what user experience design is about, and quite a few confuse the roles of UI and UX designers, or want an unrealistic combination of the two.

4 Tips for Making Yourself Referrable

- **Have integrity**. Be reliable and trustworthy. Under promise, over deliver—or simply do what you say you'll do. Show up on time. Return calls, provide impeccable

service, and help solve problems rather than pass them on.

- **Be likeable**. Apply a "customer service" approach to your personal identity, so the user experience of "you" is a good one for others. This means being interested in what others do, rather than viewing them as a gateway to a new opportunity; having a positive attitude; and saying *please* and *thank you.*
- **Offer before being asked**. In a healthy relationship, good things flow both ways. Rather than just taking what you need, get the ball rolling by being helpful—without expecting a reciprocal action.
- **Stay in touch with people**. You know the expression: out of sight, out of mind. Schedule catchups with folks who you haven't seen for a while, and send an email update to your contacts when your details change significantly. Rather than making it a dry "here are my new details" message, put some effort into making this email humorous and interesting—it's much more likely that it will be read!

MAINTAIN YOUR NETWORK

Having invested so much energy into building connections and getting on people's radar, you'll want to maintain that valuable

network of yours. Avoid the impulse to collect as many new people as possible—think quality, not quantity.

Here are four tips for maintaining your network:

1. **Prioritise your contacts.** You can't, and shouldn't, meet continuously with everyone you've ever met before. I recommend keeping a list of people whose perspective you value, who you'd like to get to know better, or whose skills and company you enjoy. Prioritise them into a list and start making your way through them, scheduling contacts into your calendar to remind yourself to touch base. Balance longevity of relationships through good and bad patches with the need to grow your network to match your own career changes.
2. **Book regular catchups.** Reserving the time and actually scheduling a regular catchup with people makes it far more realistic that it will happen. Reconnect with important contacts by getting in touch and arranging a meeting or phone call. You don't always need a reason to get in touch and see how they are going.
3. **Remind yourself why someone is important to you.** Keep notes in your address book or on the back of business cards about each individual's families, jobs, hobbies and their needs. Unless you have a photographic memory, having this kind of information is a good way of keeping the important things about these people in mind, to help conversations flow when you next meet.

4. **Look for ways to pay it forward.** Invest your own time and effort into nurturing relationships—tell people about leads and connect people with compatible needs. Forward relevant articles to individuals, ask after them and their family, send a thank you message, and ensure you're available when they need your help. This will grow your connections into a strong network that you can rely on into the future for support, ideas and advice.

Need help networking?

Start by joining the UX Mastery community forum at community.uxmastery.com. The UX Mastery team check in daily, and the community includes a bunch of helpful UXers, senior designers, and newcomers to the field.

Mistakes to Avoid when Networking

1. **Taking and never giving**. Ruthlessly exploiting your contacts but not listening or returning favours will see your network dry up.
2. **Confusing people about what you want**. It's difficult for someone to help you if you're unclear what it is you're asking. If you're looking for work, explain the type of role, sector, company size, and location you're looking for.
3. **Waffling**. Many people have short attention spans, so if

you're lucky to have the ears of someone, make an impact quickly and don't waffle on with unimportant or easily forgotten details. Prepare a few sentences that give a clear, concise account of who you are, with some nuggets that might be interesting to others. Aim to have a mutual conversation rather than giving a speech.

4. **Not asking for help**. It's normal to feel embarrassed about asking for help—perhaps because you're worried about being rejected. My experience is that most people are often happy to help, either by referring you to someone else, or by giving you advice themselves.

Improve your communication skills

As simple as communication may seem, a lot of what we try to communicate gets misunderstood. You'll do a lot better if you've developed your active listening and body language skills, and practiced articulating your thoughts clearly. A great book on the craft of modern discourse is The Art of Conversation by Catherine Blythe.

Networking Event Checklist

☐ **Pack your business cards.** Yes, business cards are

still culturally relevant, at least in my circles. I have one for UX Mastery, one for the consultancy I work in, and I've often considered getting some personal cards with just my mobile number and name on them. If you don't have any business cards, get some professionally printed—there are many affordable online services that will deliver to your house within a week!

- [ ] **Set a goal.**If you show me a room full of strangers, my natural inclination is to run away and find something better to do. To stop myself from doing this I find it useful to take along a set number of those beautiful, professionally printed business cards of mine—10 is a good number—and I don't let myself leave until they're all given out.

- [ ] **Refine your networking pitch** A networking pitch is like an elevator pitch, but even shorter: a concise snapshot of who you are, what you do, and why you're at the event. Work on getting your pitch down to under 10 seconds. Here's one of mine: *"Hi, I'm Luke. I run a website called UX Mastery, which provides tips, tools and training for user experience designers. I'm giving a talk later on how to get started in UX."* Keep it simple, so you don't mess it up in the heat of the moment.

- [ ] **Be interested in the people you meet.** Everyone you meet will have done something interesting in their lives,

and most people will have done something fascinating in the last week but don't think to mention it. Ask some polite questions and see what you can learn—people will appreciate your interest.

- [ ] **Find someone else's story to get excited about.** If you get so caught up in talking about someone else's idea that you forget to tell them all about yourself, it doesn't matter. Getting excited about an interesting idea trumps talking about yourself. Saying less isn't always a bad thing—sometimes people find it intriguing if you don't blurt everything out at the first opportunity. Besides, you'll usually get a second chance to explain what you do and what your interests are. Enjoy the ride and see where your conversation leads.

- [ ] **Stay in touch.**Don't assume that you'll hear from someone just because you handed over your card. If you're especially keen to keep in touch, find out if the person prefers phone or email, and follow up using the 24/7/30 rule: reintroduce yourself within 24 hours, connect again within 7 days (perhaps by sending a link to an article they might be interested in) and then organise a quick catchup within a month.

If you forget someone's name...

This works not just for networking, but for any social situation too. Use the phrase, "I'm sure you don't remember me, but I'm [name]". Nine times out of 10, they will respond with their own name and you'll be out of your fix.

Rocking it on LinkedIn

Don't neglect your LinkedIn profile and still expect it to keep working in your favour. Present yourself professionally by:

- Making sure you have a **current photo of yourself** with good posture, open eyes and a smile. People care less about your looks and more about the energy you radiate.
- Consider making use of **LinkedIn's status updates**—changing your status every few days with news about a colleague getting promoted, or a link to a great article you've read shows you're active and engaged.
- **Connect with people**, but think quality not quantity. Having 500+ connections is less useful than being connected to the right people; although being connected to the right people without any meaningful relationship in place is equally useless.
- Make sure you've written a **summary on your profile**. List all your work, even volunteer work.
- **Join some LinkedIn groups related to UX** and other personal

interests.

Being connected, both online and offline, is crucial to becoming aware of the best opportunities, both at the start of your UX career and beyond. It's also the best way to find a mentor, which is the final piece of the puzzle that we'll explore.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. *In what ways are you already networking without having realised it?*
2. *Is your portfolio shipshape, and linked with your resume, online portfolio and LinkedIn profile?*
3. *Who do you know that can help get the word out that you're looking for UX work?*

Chapter Summary: Get Connected

- Networking is the best way to find a job.
- Build your profile and make yourself referrable.
- Build your network.
- Maintain your network.
- Be active at events and on platforms such as LinkedIn.

Step 5: Get A Mentor

Arming yourself with knowledge, experience, tools and a thriving network gives you an enormous leg-up, but how should you best harness this potential? The objective, encouraging voice of a senior practitioner who has trodden a similar path to the one that lies ahead of you is essential for your career.

In this chapter:

- The importance of a mentor in UX

- Finding a mentor
- Working with your mentor
- Knowing when to call it a day

THE IMPORTANCE OF A MENTOR IN UX

Here are five strong reasons why a mentor is important for developing your UX career.

1. It's hard to develop soft skills by reading a book.

As we discussed in the chapter on self-assessment, much of working in UX requires soft skills—your ability to communicate, collaborate, listen and persuade effectively with co-workers and customers. These skills are broadly applicable both in and outside the workplace, but you can't learn them from a book. And while our first attempts to create a benchmark are a starting point, it's very difficult to reliably self-diagnose and adapt.

Your mentor will understand the soft skills best applied in certain situations, and can coach you in developing and improving them.

2. A mentor can save you from reinventing the wheel.

Over time, exposure to several projects will give you valuable experience, but if you attempt to develop your skills purely based on experience, you run the risk of re-inventing the wheel. Rather than learning in a vacuum, seek personal feedback from a mentor who knows you, has more experience and higher level of expertise, and

can see what you're doing.

3. A mentor provides an objective voice.

Mentors can provide a valuable sounding board and reality check. By explaining a problem you're faced with, they can guide you in the right direction by being honest with advice and feedback—be it about your work, decisions, ideas, management, leadership or other business skills.

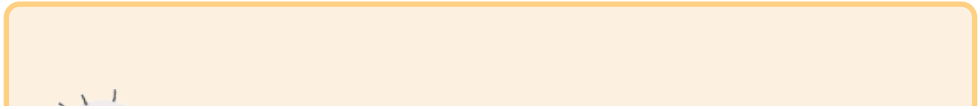
4. A mentor can provide introductions to key players.

A good mentor will know the key players in the field, and can be valuable in terms of making introductions; both for jobs, or for clients if you're freelancing. I've had small amounts of work come through my mentor, and I've sent him some too, so it's another valuable connection that goes both ways. It's also great to have someone to attend conferences and debrief with.

5. A mentor can give advice on your career.

A good mentor will be someone who has "made it" in your field. This means they're positioned better than anyone to get you off to a good start and headed in the right direction.

This can give you an amazing confidence you might otherwise miss out on. In particular, they can encourage you to step out of your comfort zone to achieve a milestone, to avoid becoming complacent about the easy options.



How much for Mentorship?

The best mentors will help you at no charge. Why the generosity? Well actually, they get plenty of payback and gratification from seeing you thrive with their help, and may introduce you onto projects if there's a gap and you're a good fit.

The impetus for the sort of caring a mentor has for a protégée isn't for sale; it's a gift to those in whom a mentor sees the potential to excel. With this goes a sense of serenity born of knowing that they helped to make the world a better place.

Setting your Mentoring Goals

Revisit your goals with your mentor and make course adjustments if you're not heading in the right direction. They'll help you identify and remove obstacles and interference before laying the groundwork. They can help you overcome a lack of knowledge, lack of skills, and lack of confidence.

The Difference Between Mentoring and Teaching

In a teaching relationship, the teacher drives the agenda, whereas in a mentoring relationship you are the one who sets the direction you want to go. You can have more than one mentor, to benefit from learning different skillsets, but remember that mentoring is hard work for both parties and will require attention.

> ***I'm always ready to learn, but I don't always like to be taught.*** *- Winston Churchill*

FINDING A MENTOR

In almost all cases, it's up to you to initiate the relationship. You'll need to understand what your personal goals are, and how these determine the kind of experience you'd like your mentor to have.

Don't expect the first person you contact to be a perfect fit. A good mentor will have the following attributes:

1. Experience
2. Confidence in their own abilities
3. A willingness to share skills, knowledge and experience
4. An interest in helping others grow and provide direction
5. Ability to provide constructive feedback, encouraging
6. Good listening skills—they'll be happy to let you do the work
7. A preparedness to push you out of your comfort zone without pushing you too far

If you meet people with the right skills and an approach that suits you, and the potential for being mentored begins to form, there is no real reason not to

have several people fulfilling the role of a mentor. Be careful of the time and energy needed to sustain more than one relationship of this sort, but also remember that you don't need to be overly concerned with finding "the one".

Places to Begin your Search

Your next ideal mentor may be right under your nose, or on the other side of the world. Here are some ideas for where to start a relationship-building conversations.

- In your **workplace**.
- At a **conference**
- At a local **meetup**.
- Some chapters of the IxDA have formal mentorship program. Check the IxDA website to see whether there's a local chapter near you, and whether they may be running mentorship events.
- The IA Institute run a formal mentoring program.

- The UXPA, recently renamed from the UPA, is putting efforts into growing as an association, including expanding mentoring efforts.
- Talk to others in the community on Twitter, Facebook, Meetup, LinkedIn, or other online communities, or seek out local practitioners you know. Most of these groups have a few newbies excited to have ongoing support as they get started in their careers, or others that just want to support one another.
- At a s**peed mentoring** night. This is like speed dating for UXers; you sit down and talk with someone for 5 minutes to get a sense of who they are and how they work, and at the end of the night the organisers match potential mentees and mentors with the people they nominated.

Meredith Noble on Speed Mentoring

When researching this book, we spoke with Meredith Noble,

who has hosted "Speed Mentoring" nights for UXers in Toronto, Canada (you can read our full conversation with her in Appendix A).

"I realize now that for a mentorship arrangement, the people involved need to really click. They need to *like* each other, and need to appreciate the way each other thinks about things. You can't force it, and I think the structure I was eager to put around a relationship for a long time, through an organization like the IxDA, isn't very productive.

"That isn't to say that Speed Mentorship nights aren't good events. They are great ways to meet others in the field, learn about their perspectives, and possibly strike up a relationship. But I'm not sure that I would expect or want people to strike some kind of agreement coming straight out of that event. I think it has to be much more organic to be long-lasting—both people need to find the relationship valuable for their own reasons, and genuinely enjoy the other person's company. That's the only way to develop long-lasting mentorships that can go really deep."

Cheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, speaks of a very similar approach to mentorship in her book Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead. She says:

> ***"If someone has to ask the question "Are you my***

> ***mentor?" then the answer is probably no. When someone finds the right mentor, it is obvious. ... chasing or forcing the connection rarely works, and yet I see women attempt this all the time."***

Should your boss be your Mentor?

If your mentor is your boss, your objectives may not match up. Their limited worldview may not extend to you because of company goals (for example, performance-based objectives may introduce a conflict of interest). There is also the potential for things to get awkward when you need advice about moving on to your next job!

A Formal Approach

Mentoring arrangements through the professional associations tend to be more formal. In these cases it is worth setting up a “contract” between the mentor and the mentee to ensure it is productive and to guide the relationship in an attitude of mutual respect. Elements of a mentoring contract should contain:

1. Set the **context of use**: who, what, and where.
2. Discuss your **hopes and fears**: both for the mentor and mentee.
3. Decide on **how, when and where** to communicate.
4. Discuss **availability**, **frequency**, and **length of time** for

catchups.
5. Set your **boundaries**, both for mentor and mentee
6. Decide on the **process** and **rules**
7. Discuss the mentee's objectives both general, and specific
8. Decide how the objectives will be reviewed.

Remember:

- **Things the mentor should do**: support; advise; meet when agreed; listen; ask hard questions; give feedback.
- **Things the mentor shouldn't do**: be available 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week; chase you; answer all your questions; guarantee that you will like the feedback they give.
- **Things the mentor can do**: offer a range of solutions; provide introductions to subjects and pointers; help you learn; help you identify goals.
- **Things the mentor can't do**: resolve issues for you; teach you everything; force you to do something; do your learning for you

The UK UXPA has a handy template, if you decide to pursue a formal mentoring arrangement.

Step-by-step Mentor Hunting

Meredith Noble's excellent post Will You Be My Mentor? provides practical advice for UXers navigating the early stages of a mentor-mentee relationship. She has been lovely enough to allow us to re-publish a portion here for your benefit (thanks Meredith!):

> **My recommendation is this:** consider starting — and keeping — things casual, until they potentially evolve into something more. If you're interested in learning from someone, great! Approach them and ask them:
>
> > *Would you be willing to go for coffee with me (or meet online) to discuss X topic?*
>
> It's as easy as that. It's best to give a specific topic so that the potential mentor can decide whether they have something of value to share.
>
> Once you meet and start getting to know each other, that's when you can start deciding whether this is someone whose opinion you'd like to call on again. But stop — this doesn't mean you ask them to be your mentor at the end of the meeting! This is just where you gauge your mentor's reaction. Ask them if they might be willing to do this again sometime. If the answer is yes, fantastic. This means that you

should just file away a note in your brain that says, “Hrm, that was really helpful advice. Perhaps I will call on _____ to help me out next time I need assistance.”

Really, there is no need to formalize at this point. In fact, I would argue that there might never be a need to formalize. As long as you’re clear about whether the person you’re asking advice of isn’t feeling imposed upon, and is willing to continue giving their time, that’s all that matters.

The fact is that if you start calling on this person for advice periodically as you move through your career, and over time you develop a professional closeness and investment in one another: that person is your **de facto mentor** anyway. The more close you become, the more time the person will be willing to invest. There’s no need to ever even call them a mentor, necessarily. Doing so might put unnecessary pressure on a fragile human relationship.

Simply reach out to people you think you can learn from, whether they are ‘peers’ or people more senior to you, and see where the relationships evolve. I think you’ll be happy with

the results!

You can read more of Meredith's thoughts on UX, mentorship and leadership at her blog meredi.com

Remote Mentoring

Video-conferencing technology has changed the way that we connect with people, and there's really no excuse to not put yourself out there and connect with someone. Remote mentoring does make it alittle more difficult to develop the critical soft skills, but it can still have massive payoffs, especially if you find the right person but they live far away.

WORKING WITH YOUR MENTOR

How to be a Good Mentee

- **Use your mentor.** They are a valuable person to have!
- **It's give and take.** Share your insights and findings too—and say thank you.
- **Listen.** Mentor meetings are not a place to inflate your experience or skills to try and impress your mentor.
- **Don't expect immediate results**. Getting to know people takes

time before things get up to speed.

- Stones are hard to mentor, so don't act like one. You must be able to ask for advice. You must be willing to learn. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Take control of the dialogue.
- **Be honest and transparent.** Looking like you have things under control won't help anyone. Your mentor will be judging you on how you develop, much more than where you started.
- **Don't always agree.** Engage in a real conversation. Push back when you don't understand something, or if you think your mentor doesn't get your question. This will help keep things interesting and you'll be able to dig deeper, expose any flaws or assumptions, discover gaps of your own and explore unconsidered opportunities. It is your career - that makes you the person responsible for the results.
- **Be brave.** Mentoring should help you develop confidence.
- **Be self-aware.** Your mentor can come to know you more quickly if you're honest about your strengths and weaknesses.
- **Don't expect your mentor to get you a job.** Some relationships can lead to paid work, but expecting your mentor to make you a job offer is beyond the boundaries.

Suggested Activities

Even if you don't have your own UX project yet, you can run some simulation sessions with your mentor. Rich Buttiglieri presented an Ignite talk full of ideas for mentoring new UX practitioners. Here's a summary:

1. Focus on the two most important skills your mentor can help with: **soft skills for facilitating**, and **data analysis skills**.
2. **Run a user testing session** on a website you've chosen, with your mentor sitting in as the participant. They should start easy, and then throw some challenges at you by becoming sidetracked, by being a "cold fish", or by becoming a "self-blamer". Make sure you **record the session** so you can debrief—look for missed opportunities, and identify any leading questions you may have asked.
3. Try running a heuristic review, to get feedback on your **analysis and report writing skills**. You could work together initially to set the context, and then work on your own for a few hours. You can then run a debrief meeting with your mentor as a stakeholder, giving feedback on when you're being too nitpicky.
4. Get some career counselling by participating in some **mock job interviews**. Your mentor will be able to give feedback afterwards.

KNOWING WHEN TO CALL IT A DAY

It is equally important to recognise when a mentoring relationship should end. Ideally this will be once the mentee has achieved their

goals. However, it may also end due to:

- The mentee outgrowing the mentor;
- A conflict of interest between a mentor boss and their mentee employee;
- A personality clash; or
- Inappropriate behaviour by either party—e.g. a mentor exploiting a mentee by having them work for free, or a mentee making the mentor do all the work.

Regardless of whether your mentoring relationship comes to a formal ending, or just fizzles out, remember to not burn your bridges. For a field that covers a vast spectrum of industries and disciplines, it really is a small world!

Paying it forward

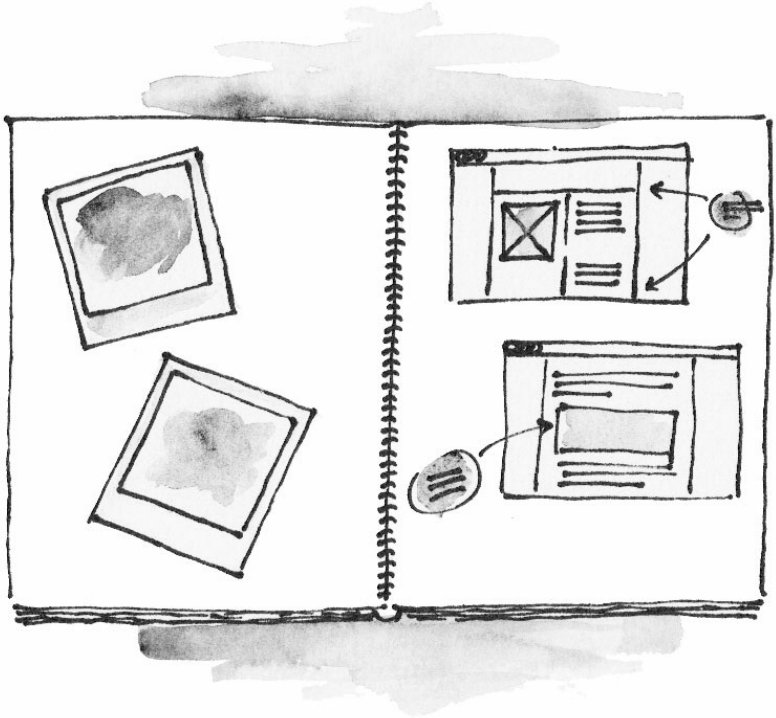
One day you might consider becoming a mentor yourself. You don't need to be a thought leader, but you should have some experience and the willingness and patience to help people get started.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. *Who do I look up to within my network?*
2. *Who do I already confide in?*
3. *Who is working at the level that I hope to be in 5 years?*
4. *Who do I know that possesses skills that I struggle with?*

Chapter Summary: Get a Mentor

- There's no need to formalise a mentor relationship—it may be happening naturally already.
- Find multiple mentors. Different people have different strengths, and can help you in different ways.
- Avoid conflicts of interest—seek out a mentor
- Apply the techniques learned in the Get Connected chapter to harness a healthy relationship with your mentor(s).
- Consider becoming a mentor yourself one day. You may not consider yourself to be an expert, but you may be an expert compared to a newcomer to the field.



Step 6: Get Hired

With those ducks all lined up, you're now in the best possible place to land your dream job—or at least one that is a step in the right direction. In this chapter we'll focus on tips for UXers looking for a full-time position.

In this chapter:

- Things to look for in your first UX job
- The hiring process

- Constructing your portfolio
- The interview
- After the interview

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN YOUR FIRST UX JOB

Which Environment?

As we discussed at the start of this book, agencies, freelance gigs, contracts, and in-house roles all present unique environments, benefits and challenges. Let's flesh this idea out a little more, to determine which environment you should focus on for your next role:

- **Product company**: a design role at a product company can give you the opportunity to develop deep understanding of one product and its audience. Often this means you have time to perform iterations and build relationships with the customer base.
- **Agency and freelance**: Consulting, whether as part of an agency or freelance, will provide you with a range of projects with different clients. It's almost always fast-paced, and working long hours to meet a deadline is pretty standard. The exposure you get to good UX processes can be hit-and-miss, as budgets are defined by the client, and come with a heavy focus on results. On the upside, the variety of projects will allow you to explore different industries.

- **In-house**: An in-house designer role at a large organisation (where UX is not traditionally recognised or well implemented) can be an opportunity to help establish best practices and foster a user-centred culture. You may have the opportunity to work on a variety of projects, and budgets are often not the primary hurdle. However, if the culture of the organisation is so ingrained that UX is not well understood, then the likelihood of transforming your team's processes and attitudes may be next to zero without a large organisational change project that has management support.

Seek Experience Across the Spectrum

Ideally, you should try and work towards a role where you will be performing lots of different UX tasks, rather than one narrowly-defined role. Additionally, you'll get more hands-on experience if you're operating in an organisation where usability has some amount of recognition, budget, and management support (i.e. not somewhere that you're fighting to justify running user test sessions).

When you're more confident in your range of skills, you'll be better placed to take on a role that includes some adversity—but don't start off in such a company. Look for companies that have workable processes and UX roles in place, so you can be effective from the get-go.

Job Titles and Descriptions

A 2013 survey of 1,000 UX professionals conducted by the Nielsen Norman Group found that the most popular title that UXers used to describe themselves was "user experience designer." However, only 6% of survey respondents used that particular title. The remaining ninety-four percent describe ourselves with over 200 other different titles—that's quite a lot of variation! Here are some titles you may not have expected to be "UX" roles:

- 3D Artist
- Communications Manager
- Information Developer
- Intranet Project Manager
- eLearning Consultant
- Digital Producer
- Product Manager
- Business Analyst
- Research Assistant
- Ideation Instructor
- SEO/Search Expert
- Web Content Manager

It goes to show that UX jobs often hide under non-UX names, and that UX can be applied to many different roles.

Unfortunately there is also a trend, especially in web design, for people to re-badge themselves as UX designers in order to exploit the

title and get more work or additional profit without embracing the fundamentals of a UX approach. It's good to be mindful of how you can accurately describe your real role using your job title.

UX = UI for Some People

Some employers advertise for a UX position, but are actually wanting to fill a UI design role without any support for a user-centred design process. Not to say that UI designers can't or don't do UX, but many employers don't understand the difference. Also beware the "slash"—a job listing that advertises for a **UX/UI designer** betrays a lack of appreciation for the value of UX, and suggests that the organisation is probably actually looking for a UI designer.

THE HIRING PROCESS

The Typical Recruiting Process

Here's the process that an employer (recruiter, hiring manager, or HR manager) usually goes through to fill a UX role.

1. A ton of portfolios and resumes are received—sometimes hundreds.
2. Resumes are sorted into **Yes/No** piles based on a brief examination (this is sometimes automated, with non-standard formats and portfolios often being culled for not being

compatible with the system),

3. The recruiter will examine the **Yes** pile more closely, performing some initial research based on information sources such as your LinkedIn profile or other online presence.
4. Worthy candidates are passed to the hiring manager.
5. Hiring manager performs some further screening, often by phone.
6. Around 3-8 candidates are invited to on-site interviews.
7. An offer is made to the preferred candidate(s).

With that said, there are obviously exceptions—in fact, because you've been so proactive in developing your network, you're likely to be bypassing this typical process already. However, it's useful to understand that this.

What About Freelancers?

Firstly, congratulations! If you're already freelancing then you're living the dream! There is a large exodus in the workforce away from agencies and in-house work and towards freelance, consulting, and contract positions. People see the attraction of being your own boss.

However, you'll need to be careful about working in UX as a freelancer with little or no experience. I would suggest it's not the best place to begin; let your self-assessment and your mentor be your guide.

If you're already working in a related position (visual designer,

front-end coder) then you're in a great position to include UX techniques as part of your job. Doing so will help you chalk up some experience, and may pave the way for you to create your own UX position in the future.

Companies Hire to Solve a Problem

You're not the solution to every problem, and you can't be the Mr or Ms Right for every team! Don't take it personally if you aren't selected for a position, but do ask for feedback about what you can work on to improve your chances next time.

What your Interviewer Wants to See

Lynn Teo's excellent presentation Portfolios Matter: Building the Portfolio to Win the Job identifies traits that individuals in a particular role look for in a UX interview:

- **UX Lead:** methods; independence; whether you're a team player; work quality
- **Project Manager:** process; whether your work is delivered on-time or on-budget; communication skills
- **Front-end developer:** prototyping skills; iterative design; ability to work in an agile environment
- **Creative director:** conceptual thought; ability to define the

problem; effectiveness of your solution

Trying to communicate everything to all of the above roles at the same time is going to be pretty difficult, so understand your audience, and prepare accordingly.

> ***"I just spent four hours sorting through applications for a role and there were two things that helped me most in deciding whether to engage in a phone screen interview: 1) an online portfolio, and 2) a complete LinkedIn profile."*** *-- Troy Parke, UX How*

There is no one-size-fits-all with UX roles. Many employers are looking to employ UX generalists with deep specialist skills in a particular area, but others are specifically looking for beginners with the right qualities. The kind of role you pursue depends on your own abilities and the particular job you're applying for.

That same Nielsen-Norman Group survey that we referenced earlier revealed other nuggets of gold: potential UX employees are also evaluated on quite a few non-academic attributes, such as the people skills we discussed in the Self-assessment chapter. The top soft skills that hiring managers looked for in 2013 were more than just solid execution of UX techniques:

- Being curious about what makes people tick, how systems work, why things happen.
- A passion for your UX work

- A humble and open-minded attitude
- A service-oriented track record
- Insightful problem solving
- Adaptability and how you react to unexpected situations
- Excellent written and communication skills
- Structured and logical lines of thought
- Attention to details in people's behaviour
- Not being afraid of large data sets
- Having an ability to "sell" ideas

Online Portfolios

When a hiring manager has hundreds of applicants, they will often use an application management system. However, it's still possible they'll lose or forget to attach your PDF portfolio. A URL to an online version of your portfolio helps avoid this, and has the added benefit of being able to track visitors through unique links. Wouldn't you like to know for sure whether someone looked at your portfolio or not?

CONSTRUCTING YOUR UX PORTFOLIO

Design portfolios have long been used by graphic designers and photographers to display the results of their work. But what about UXers? We work in a world of field recordings, paper scribblings and

Excel spreadsheets. We design for good experiences and thus have critical input into the end results, but we don't necessarily create the final visuals. So what should we do when a prospective employer asks to see a portfolio?

Here are eleven steps that will help build a UX portfolio that gets you through to an interview.

1. Don't Pretend to be a Visual Designer if you're Not

UX portfolios should be documents expressing the story you want to tell, project research insights and your design problem-solving abilities. Having competent visual communication skills will certainly give you additional credibility, but don't confuse this with your "design-behind-the-visuals" UX role.

UXers are held under a critical microscope for many soft skills or process-related abilities— communication, collaboration, analytical thinking, active listening, persuasion, planning—however, these skills don't necessarily speak for themselves in the final results. If you focus primarily on visual design it will be difficult to convince people of these other skills, so don't misrepresent yourself.

2. Find your Inner T-shaped Renaissance Professional

It's tempting to be competitive and present yourself as a freakish who is good at everything. There's even a name for this: the **UX unicorn** is someone who is equal parts talented visual designer, usability specialist and developer. However, this approach risks raising the eyebrows of recruiters or hiring managers who may be skeptical that

such a candidate actually exists, and it can be refreshing to meet a job seeker who doesn't pretend to be a unicorn. Be upfront about your particular skills, and use your process and experience to communicate clearly how you work.

The **T-shaped professional** concept implies that there are certain skills you must have some understanding of to call yourself a UXer (the crossbar), and other skills that you can specialise in and have a deeper understanding about (the stem). You should aim to use your generalist skills to learn on the job and develop additional deep skills.

To do this in your portfolio, pay attention to:

- **Showing your level of experience**; this is more about the types of projects you've worked on and your roles within these projects, and less about the number of years or projects you've worked;
- **Illustrating the particular skills you'll be bringing to a project**, especially your abilities to derive insights from research and conduct successful problem solving;
- **Representing the quality of your UX work**—the experiences you've fostered in users, innovations you've made, the mature design restraint you've shown in implementing proven interactions rather than the latest fads; and
- **Depicting your work style and personality**, i.e. your typical design process and artefacts from this and other techniques you draw on, showing details about exactly what that looks like.

3. Speak to the Locals in their own Language

Understanding who you're presenting your folio to, and therefore what they're looking for, is absolutely critical. Recruiters, employers, UX leads, project managers, developers and creative directors each have their own priorities and interests that will affect their selection agendas. Even the type of company will make a significant difference.

> ***"Everyone hears only what (s)he understands."*** - ***Johann Wolfgang von Goethe***

4. Take a Modular Approach

Include and exclude projects based on who you're showing your portfolio to, and communicate quality, not quantity.

I have a full master copy of my portfolio in Adobe InDesign, and as a printed A3 document in plastic sleeves. This makes it easy to shuffle the pages or leave some out depending on who I'm showing it to. I sometimes show my full portfolio once I'm asked in for a detailed interview, or when actually working with colleagues on a project.

5. Decide how you'll Handle NDA Work

You'll need to show some examples your work, but this can be tricky you've signed an agreement that prevents you from talking about a particular project.

Work protected by a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) should stay confidential—you're legally obliged to uphold the NDA you signed,

and you're risking your reputation by not respecting it. If you divulge the secrets of a previous employer, the person wanting to hire you will assume you'll betray their trust too.

However, put yourself in the shoes of your potential employer. Would you really hire someone without any evidence of their skills, process and experience? That's an unjustifiable risk even for referred or recommended candidates.

Employers genuinely want to see your work, but understand confidentiality and won't expect you to give up your secrets. What should you do? Well, you'll need to gain some experience on other projects that you *can* talk about. But your NDA clients needn't fall by the wayside completely:

> ***"Allude to your experience on NDA work with a list of project clients instead of showing the actual work. This way you get the value of having worked on a brand without betraying their confidence." --****Troy Parke, in the article The UX Portfolio: Top 10 Questions for UX, UI & Visual Designers*

If you're still stuck, then another option is to anonymise the work by rebranding and obfuscating any identifying content.

6. Include Hypothetical Projects

One of the biggest hurdles for new UXers is finding enough good

material for their portfolio. Often there will be large gaps where you might have an understanding but no work to prove it. In these cases I recommend plugging any critical gaps with a hypothetical project. Sounds dodgy? Not really.

You're being hired for your potential, not because you've done great work in the past. Show your potential any way you can. You can demonstrate it by donating your time to a local not-for-profit or friend's business, or you can simply make up case studies of what you might have done if a particular company had hired you. This allows you to gain some experience and build your portfolio, and most importantly it gives you artefacts to use when discussing your skills and process.

7. … but Stay Real

Please don't pass it off as real work, and do replace artefacts with actual project work as soon as you can. In the future, when you have more experience, you'll do well to remember that you're still only being hired for your potential – so don't rest on your laurels just because you have some good work under your belt!

Honesty and a personal approach will go a long, long way to helping your prospective employer get to know you. Reveal your work style and your process, and above all, don't lie. This also includes being specific about your role in collaborative projects.

8. Show your Thought Process

The difference between a UX portfolio and other visual portfolios is the importance of showing the journey that lead to the final results, not

the destination itself.

A good way to do this is to tell the story behind the project, your process of connecting research findings with new designs, and how you surmounted the various design challenges you came across. Like your maths teacher used to say: show your thinking. For example, link your insights from contextual enquiries to patterns you've found during affinity diagramming, and through to design concepts that arose from your consideration of personas or mental models. The connections don't have to be innovative, or even always correct – showing your ability to learn from mistakes is a useful bonus.

Your portfolio could include wireframes you've created, example personas and scenarios you've developed, photos of walls covered in post-it notes from affinity diagramming exercises, photos of you conducting a workshop … whatever you need to tell a story about the process you follow, and to help you talk about that process during an interview.

9. Use the 60-second Test

The initial stages of selection are pretty ruthless. A recruiter or employer may need to wade through dozens (or hundreds!) of portfolios and resumes. No wonder then that they often make decisions in under a minute. That's 60 seconds you have to convince them that you're worth a deeper look.

Make sure that you make it to the 'yes' pile by giving them a concise insight to your skills and style by remembering these tips:

- **The medium is the message**. Use your UX skills to make sure your most essential information is communicated clearly.
- **Don't rely on text descriptions to make your points**. Use annotated diagrams, screenshots and images—images used in conjunction with limited text will be more efficient than only text or only images.
- **Structure your document clearly**, with sections, sub-headings and captions.
- **Cut out everything that isn't your best work**, and try to avoid more than one example of each technique or approach
- **Include a summary or content listing** at the front or back, and if your portfolio is large, consider a mini-summary or content listing at the beginning of each section.
- **Consider user-testing your portfolio** with friends or family to make sure your points are coming across how you intend.

10. Don't Let your Portfolio get Lonely

Remember that your portfolio won't reach its potential if it is left in isolation. For it to really work you should introduce it in person whenever possible, although many people find it useful to provide a downloadable version (perhaps PDF) on their folio website for hirers or recruiters that want to view it offline. Keeping a resume with your portfolio will also provide a concise record of your skills and experience. And make sure your LinkedIn profile stays up to date! Together these things are as much a personal chart of your professional development as a tool for getting new work.

Of the hundreds of portfolios I've ever looked through, less than 1 in every 10 was even close to achieving all of the above points. By following these steps, you'll be taken seriously, rising quickly to the top of the 'yes' pile, and be well on your way to being asked in for an interview.

11. Focus on Results

Metrics such as conversion rate, task completion time, and online revenue are important for demonstrating measurable success in a project. However, they serve a second purpose—they prove to a future employer that you can make a real difference, using a process that works. This is a powerful message, but being able to communicate it requires that you have the data to back it up.

Record this data on each new project you start—not just for the project, but for your own career. If a project has finished and you've moved on to a different organisation, it's almost impossible to go back and ask your former team-mates for this information. Update your portfolio regularly with the data that backs up your statements about being good at what you do.

Online Portfolio Design for Non-designers

Use a hosted portfolio service when you're getting started, such as Behance, Coroflot, or Cargo Collective. Even though these services are designed to showcase visual design, they can also be an excellent tool for archiving your work

history—including sketches, wireframes, workflow diagrams, or photographs of your design wall or workspace. Doing so means the hiring manager is free to focus on the content, rather than judging you based on the quality of your personal website or chosen WordPress theme.

THE INTERVIEW

You've made it to the interview stage. Fantastic! Here are 10 tips to help you make a great first impression.

1. Get the basics sorted. Find out how long the interview will take, and anything you need to bring. There's also nothing wrong with asking how you should dress for the interview. Some companies may not be impressed if you wear a suit.
2. Find out as much as you can about the people interviewing you. **Know the company**—read their website, try their products, get familiar with their approach. If possible, **do some online research on the interviewer**—read up on their blog, browse their Twitter feed.
3. Take a **printed copy** of your portfolio, your resume and the job description.
4. **Know your lines.** Be prepared to answer some canned questions.
5. Be prepared to do a **test project or activity** on the spot.

6. Come up with **three questions of your own** about the company or product that dig deeper than the marketing copy on their website reveals.
7. Come up with some **questions you'd like them to ask you**, and declare these at the end of the interview if they haven't been asked.
8. **Communicate your passion.** This comes back to *knowing your why*, which we discussed at the very start of this book. Let your interviewer know what it is about user experience that gets you excited.

> ***"I should be able to look into your eye and see your passion for what you do. I want to work with people that are as excited about what we do as I am. And you should be working with people that have the same passion, so you can learn. Not everyone has passion for what they do, but great hiring managers want only that so that they can build great teams."*** *-- Patrick Neeman, in the article How to Get Started in User Experience for People I Want to Hire*

Questions you May be Asked at your Interview

We've include a list of common interview questions in Appendix B: Common Interview Questions, grouped by type. While this is not an exhaustive list, if you can easily answer all of these questions the first time you read them then you're in the infinitesimally small minority

who don't need to do any preparation for your interview.

If, like everyone else, you come across a few questions that throw you a bit, then take a step back and do some soul searching. Ask yourself:

1. What type of question is this? Why is it that I'm struggling to answer it?
2. Where does it show the broader gaps I need to fill with learning? With self-examination? With experience?
3. What other questions like this are possible or likely? How could I improve myself so as to feel comfortable answering similar ones?

Don't Let the Curveballs Rattle You

Often the purpose of questions from left-field is to see how you cope with the unexpected, not whether you get the answer correct. The very hairiest questions we've seen could not be anticipated by the most experienced UXers, and some may not even have a right or wrong answer. Instead, don't stress, do some practice, and (most-of-all) just trust yourself; you'll be hired for the job that is right for you.

Ask your own Questions

Going to a job interview is about matching yourself with the business and people you'll be working with. That means the decision about whether you work there isn't solely up to the employer—you have part

of the choice too! You'll need to do your own digging to determine whether the organisation is a good match for you. Here are some sample questions that you can ask:

- How would you describe a typical work day for this position?
- What do you like about working here? What don't you like about working here and what might you change?
- What is the team structure? Who will I be working for and with?
- What are the talents of the other team members?
- Is this a new position? If not, what did the previous employee go on to do?
- How does one advance in the company?
- What level of support is there for UX in this company?
- Is there an opportunity for mentorship and other forms of professional development?
- Would you like a list of my references?

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Congratulations on making it through the hiring process and through the interview!

If you've been offered a position after the interview, that is nothing to be sneezed at. However, be sure to weigh up the information you gleaned from the interview. A brave but wise person will turn down an offer if it isn't right.

- Were there any warning signs? Unenthusiastic interviewers or other staff? A particularly disorganised office? A dedication to work quality that is different from your own?
- Money isn't everything, but will the money you're being offered match what you believe you're worth?
- Is the work challenging enough without putting you out of your depth? Is there potential to learn rapidly, or does it involve too many menial tasks?
- Is there someone who can guide you, push you outside your comfort zone, and assist in your professional development?
- Do you like the people you'll be working with? Will they be able to help you grow? Are they passionate about what they do?
- Is it geographically desirable/realistic for you to commute to?
- Will you be more employable by having worked here?

If the answers to these questions suggest that this is your dream job, go for it! If there are only one or two sticking points, be sure to flag them with your interviewer. Most positions will have some room to negotiate if it's the right the candidate. However, remember that if you're asking your employer to compromise, you should be prepared to do the same.

We both wish you all the best with your UX career. Now get to work!

Chapter Summary: Get Hired

- Apply for jobs that will give you a range of experiences, in different working environments.

- Remember that many jobs may not have the letters "UX" in them, but may still include a large UX component.
- Create an online and a printed version of your portfolio, using the template that came bundled with this ebook.
- Prepare for your interview using the list of common questions in the appendix at the back of this book.
- Be sure to inquire about the job and the organisation, to be sure it is a right fit for you.

Interview: Irith Williams, UX Academic

Irith works as a User Experience Researcher at HealthMap, a chronic disease self-management project for people living with HIV, and is completing a Masters in Interaction Design. Irith organizes the Melbourne UX Book Club, talks about behaviour change and offers advice for user experience designers interested in healthcare.

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Can you tell us your story?

I am currently completing a Masters in Interaction Design through

QUT in Brisbane. At first, I didn't want to do a Masters but the HealthMap project, where I currently work, is an Australian National Medical Health and Research Council funded project and was able to fund their design intern position with a Masters scholarship.

The internship was presented to me as regular design work that I could use to write the two or three research papers that would constitute my Masters. It sounded easy at the time, but of course, it's a lot more complicated and bureaucratic than that!

How did you hear about this opportunity?

I was looking around for any kind of internship, when a web designer contact let me know of a design intern opportunity at HealthMap, based at the Infectious Diseases Unit of the Alfred Hospital. HealthMap supports self-management for the chronic conditions of ageing within the HIV position population. The team was organising an 8-week design intensive with a designer from the U.S. and it needed someone to generate design data, conduct an analysis of the research and do some scoping prior to the intensive. HealthMap had formal social qualitative data but it wasn't clear how that would feed the design.

The scope of HealthMap is ambitious and potentially encompasses a clinic-based web app, mobile platforms, a patient portal and phone-based health coaches. When I started, the data the team had was 30 hours of interviews with HIV positive patients and about 14 hours of interviews with case-workers. That was it. There was no design

research done. As a designer, I planned to talk to some end users, but I wasn't allowed to talk to patients without official ethics approval, which was a bureaucratic and political process.

Given I was unable to talk to end-users, I had to find a work-around, so I put together some design exercises for the team. Although the patients are the primary end users, we also had to factor in use by clinicians, so one of the exercises I conducted was an empathy map. I knew we didn't have any data from the doctors, so I conducted user research within the team, considering the system from a doctor's point of view.

In a Masters program there is generally some guidance and theory that you can apply in the field. What kind of guidance and theory did you have for that internship?

Academically, the design intensive was classed as fieldwork, so the guidance didn't come until later when I had to analyse my data. I encountered a lot of unexpected roadblocks, so I learned to be nimble and design my role on the team.

My Masters supervisor doesn't have much experience in health research *per se*—her specialty is more with technology to support the ageing population. However, her area of interest is working within a stigmatised and sensitive context—which was the environment I was working in—so that was helpful to some degree.

Do you think university qualifications in interaction design work in

your favour with regard to your UX job prospects?

I don't think having a Masters has had much of an impact. I think that in the health industry, it's a cultural advantage more than a practical or logical one to have a postgraduate qualification.

How relevant is your university study to getting a job in UX?

My research colleagues ask me for advice about how to get user experience work. Design researchers traditionally have little idea about current design practice in the field. When universities need to create technology for their programs, it's to a "proof of concept" prototype stage. If the technology isn't successful, it's not a failure because that's an interesting result in and of itself. It's rare for design researchers to build technology to make it scale to the real world for real people. It's more about having an idea, coming up with a way of testing it, and then reflecting on the process and evaluating what happened.

Design research is very different to practising design. Research is useful for design strategy or if you have a particular area of interest that you want to pursue, but not particularly relevant for a practitioner. I think service designers like to go into academia for a while because there's a lot of big picture thinking. Academia allows you to reflect on that big picture and also think about its complexity.

Universities are all about research—they are not vocational courses like General Assembly. Many Masters and PHD graduates feel quite intimidated by the thought of having to work as a practising designer

because they suddenly realize that a lot of what they have been doing at university doesn't seem to be directly applicable.

Would you recommend doing a Masters if you are new to UX, or would doing a vocational Bachelors degree in, say, Interaction Design be more beneficial?

I would definitely recommend doing a Masters for personal and professional development. If you are bored with corporate clients, then research may suit you—you get some remarkable projects in research.

I've met postgraduate researchers who have a decent history as design practitioners and they're bored with the humdrum of getting the next corporate client, the next retainer. They want to look at something that's more innovative, something for the social good or something interesting academically; they just want to be more stimulated. This is a very common story at postgraduate level.

If you were looking at doing a vocational course, I would advise you to make sure it has a lot of work placements and internships. My bachelor degree was a vocational degree and it was poorly run and out of date. If you're going to choose a course, choose one that has very strong ties to industry and practice.

What format does your portfolio take?

I created my portfolio after reading an article about the essential soft skills a UXer should have—one of those soft skills was storytelling,

another was sketching. I figured that because I had no hard UX experience, I would focus on my soft skills. I could demonstrate in my portfolio the soft skills I had and develop the ones I didn't. I didn't need to be working on a digital project to demonstrate these soft skills. I had zero sketching skills, so I decided to practice my sketching by doing a sketched story for my portfolio (specifically the story of how the Surf Rescue Book was published). That was one of my presentations.

My other portfolio piece was a 5-page case study about the contextual enquiry I did for my undergraduate Honours degree. I took my 40-page dissertation and cut it down to something much shorter with some visual treatment. I wanted to show my analytical skills—that I could take this big dense piece of research and turn it into something easily digestible, accessible and clear.

I don't think you need to be able to produce good visual design in a portfolio. I certainly will never be that person, and I know successful designers who are not visual designers. But you need to understand visual design, you need to be able to critique it and you need to be able to brief visual designers. I understand how to do that from my time in textbook publishing when I was commissioning graphic design. I know how to critique design, but I can't produce it.

Interview: Karen Callaghan, Immersive Course Instructor

Karen has over ten years experience as a user-centred interaction designer, information architect and business analyst. Her experience spans research, strategy, building and managing teams, through to hands on design to support the customer experience. Karen is the instructor of the course “User Experience Design Immersive” at General Assembly—the first course of its kind in Australia.

@kcallaghans | General Assembly Instructor Profile | LinkedIn

What do you do at General Assembly?

I'm the instructor for the User Experience Design Immersive Course, an eight-week full-time immersive, designed for people who don't have experience in UX. The course is structured to introduce students into all the areas and activities that comprise the UX field.

What is your background?

I got my start at The Hiser Group about twelve years ago. Since then I've worked across all aspects of UX, including research, design and team management through in-house, consulting and digital agency engagements.

My motivation for teaching at General Assembly was the realisation of how hard it was for me getting started. I love the UX industry and want to see it develop in Australia.

General Assembly is putting some structure around the activities that UX actually does—what we can produce, what we are and what we are not. I think UX is very misunderstood. I believe that helping people who want to break into the industry and showing them the right way to go about it, is a really good opportunity to proactively support the growth of UX.

What structure does the immersive course take?

The course takes students through all the phases of a project. We introduce them to the different activities, tools and research methods that UX professionals use in real-life settings.

Most importantly, we broach things that are not usually taught, such as

stakeholder management, visual communication and techniques to present your design to a stakeholder. We look at the pitfalls you can fall into—like going too high fidelity into a prototype—and how stakeholders may assume that development has already commenced. Students get to hear, and often laugh, about some of the lessons I've learned over the years, I think that's a real benefit of this course.

The instructors have to be practitioners. We are not academics. The value add that I'm lending to the course material is my own experiences.

That sounds like an ambitious collection of material to communicate in 8 weeks. What can someone expect from such a course? What is the split between theory and practice?

There is a lot to cover. The course curriculum is very full but the idea is to always circle back to the primary goal— to introduce students to the reality of the industry and the activities that we use that will enable them to get a job in UX. The course gives them enough information to get a job but it also helps them understand how to build on that information.

Is there a project that the students work on in the course to get practice at applying the theory?

Yes, each student works across four projects for the duration of the course and each project increases in complexity over the eight weeks. The projects get progressively more difficult in terms of the deliverables, with more stakeholders, more users and more

technology. The first project is only one week in duration with one user. We introduce more users with varying needs to the second project, so it's a bit longer. In the third project, the students need to build and design for multiple personas.

We are focusing on commercial viability so we target tools that are requested in the field at the moment—for example, Axure for prototyping and Omnigraffle for click-throughs and wireframe decks. We take the students right through to interaction specifications and user testing.

The last project each student works on is the real project. It runs for three weeks and we engage with a client. The students do real-life business requirements gathering—stakeholder presentations and negotiations, testing their design and making sure they've identified the problem before the solution. They get to understand how to iterate the design and how to convert business requirements into a design solution. They also come to appreciate that the stakeholders don't always understand how to articulate the problem and how they can interpret stakeholder requirements.

It's one thing to dip your toes and get some real experience in a compressed period of time, but what are the realistic prospects for jobs coming out of your course? What kind of roles does the course prepare students for?

Often clients want the 'mythical unicorn' and then get frustrated when someone is a Jack-of-all-Trades and Master of None. The industry is growing and there is a huge demand for UX, but most of the roles are

mid to senior level. The situation is symptomatic of the fact that there are not many experienced people around but there is a lot of work.

Furthermore, UX is also a fairly new and not overly understood industry. Many companies and agencies that I work with are starting to realise that they do need to open up to more junior staff and start developing them. I've had teams where I've brought juniors in and structured the team so it has a Lead Consultant guiding the junior staff. That can be a successful approach because juniors are working in a brand team for a longer amount of time and therefore have a deeper understanding of both the client and their customers.

I think breaking into any new industry is difficult, and this is an industry where a lot of the projects that you work on cross all of the phases. To a degree you need to be a generalist in your first few years.

During the course, we talk about knowing your limitations and setting up a network so you know with whom you can talk. We discuss designing for content and how to work with content strategists. We cover how to connect and collaborate with visual designers, copywriters, digital strategists, brand strategists and research specialists. We encourage students to get out and identify some of the really good networking events.

I don't know if this is unique to UX but I find the people in the field to be very giving. Everyone you meet in UX seems to want to help one another.

Does a student need a particular background to make the most out of the course?

If you come from a visual design, coding or psychology background, the course is going to be easier, compared to someone who's coming from a trade, for example.

All students go through an interview process before they're brought into the course and they do a lot of pre-work. Online tutorials are available for the students, so if they're not from a coding background they can get some exposure to HTML, JavaScript and CSS. They don't need to know how to code, but a level of exposure helps.

If you have a visual design background and understand visual design, the course may be easier, but you can have brilliant skills as a visual designer, but not be a very good listener, have empathy or have objectivity. Those are the attributes that every UX person must have and some of those skills can't actually be taught. It's a very personal thing—we're dealing with human behaviours and emotion. Learning to use tools is easy, the soft skills are often more important than the hard skills.

Do you get many high school leavers or students with little or no industry experience at all, and how do they fare?

General Assembly doesn't get many school leavers—students are more likely to be career changers. Generally, students have at least 3-5 years commercial experience, but it's difficult to get a clear sense as this is the first time the course has been run in Australia. I'm getting the word out to my colleagues—people in influential management roles, Head of UX departments for example—and working with them

so they understand what the course is about. They're encouraging about the course and excited that people will be coming into the industry with exposure to most of the techniques.

Even if you've been in UX for two years you may never have had to conduct a Contextual Inquiry or been exposed to designing for Accessibility (vision or physically impaired users). In this course, you at least have exposure to these practices and you can always refer back to the course notes.

I think as an industry UX is still experimenting with different techniques and tools, which is great fun. When I first started I was called a Usability Consultant and since then I've been called a UX Strategist, UX Architect, UX Designer—we're still defining our identity as an industry. I'm quite clear on where we are at the moment and excited about where we can go.

General Assembly is looking at what the industry is doing globally. I think UX skills are internationally transferable. We work around understanding people, primarily on the Internet but across any technology or service—they're all international!

What support do you offer your graduates when they finish your course?

There's an apprenticeship program for graduates. As the Course Instructor, my objective is to conduct the lessons, to make sure the curriculum meets the Australian market and to adapt to that market. A lot of the projects have been web based in the past but due to the increase in mobile I'm skewing things to touch on optimised design

with learnings across iOS, Android and mobile web. This approach will help students prepare for the projects they'll be working on when out in the market. That's a fast moving change, so the course has to be able to adapt.

What advice would you give someone who is weighing up their academic options when they've got schools like General Assembly, university and on-the-job options in front of them.

Entering the industry by getting on the job training as a junior is difficult. I consider myself extremely lucky that I got in at a time when the industry was so new that I got to develop along with it. If you can get on the job training, that's great but I think you can potentially end up somewhere like a start-up where you don't have a team to help you navigate the tools that are available. If you can get a job as a junior with one of the big banks or insurance companies, say, within a team of 5+, then that's a great opportunity but I think it's extraordinarily rare.

University obviously has its benefits—you have a longer time to learn things and digest the material and you're around a bigger group of people with more resources, but it's a much longer commitment. Universities have accreditation to meet so you're learning things that are theory-heavy. At General Assembly, we're looking at what will actually happen in the workplace and how to adjust to things like difficult stakeholders and difficult design problems.

I really wish something like General Assembly was around when I was first getting into the field. I was studying Multimedia and learnt

things like Cold Fusion, which I've never used. I think the General Assembly course is a lot more practical—it's short, it's very sharp and intense. It's also tiring. At the end of the first week everyone went home and slept the whole weekend to recharge their brains. Being an eight-week course, there is a lot packed in but the idea is that you're introduced to things and given a lot of tools that you can go away and self-develop on later.

University is a little bit different in that they go through the full topic—it's a completely different framework.

Are there any other aspects of the course you want to mention?

I really didn't know what to expect going into this course. I'm in week three and what I've noticed is the level of engagement from everybody and the peer support they give to each other. It is intense but everybody is coming from a different point of view with different backgrounds and I've found that they all work really well together.

The level of quality that has come out in only the first project is amazing—we were really impressed. The course content provides a great level of understanding and then really pushes them to practice the theory to ensure understanding.

Many students don't realise how wide the breadth of tools is that the UX community use. They come in thinking that UX is a nice-to-have, something they would bolt onto their digital design skills. But after being here for the first week they're saying to me, "This is fantastic, this is what I want to do". They're seeing UX as an actual career

change as opposed to just a bolt on, which is really exciting. I was really surprised but enormously encouraged by those epiphanies.

Interview: Adam Schilling, UX Practitioner

Adam Schilling is Experience Design Director at creative technology agency DT. He is the father of two. Designer. Illustrator. Developer. Retro Gamer. Gadget geek.

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Adam online:

- dt.com.au
- tractor.edu.au

Tell us about your current role.

I'm the Experience Design Director at DT, a creative technology agency with offices in Melbourne, Sydney and Auckland. I oversee our visual design and user experience design teams and steer the ship in terms of the direction and future of these disciplines at DT. I'm ultimately responsible for the quality of our design thinking and output.

I spend the majority of my time working closely with new and existing clients on current projects and pitching for new business. I involve myself in research, roll my sleeves up creatively, think big and collaborate with great teams with wonderful skills and ideas.

What was your first real job?

During high school, I got a part-time gig at a company called Futurekids, teaching kids from ages 3–12 how to use computers in a classroom. I was probably 16 at the time. I did that until I was 18 or 19.

At the time there wasn't a lot of computer software developed specifically for kids. There was Kid Pix and a few other titles, but the kids first had to learn how to find and launch these apps—it was challenging just getting them to navigate the system. Facilitating their learning was something we really needed to tackle and it made me question how things were designed. Computer software wasn't intuitive—kids couldn't just pick it up and figure it out—they needed to be taught.

Later, I got a job working on the IT helpdesk at the South Australian Tourism Commission. There, I supported 200 or more adults trying to

deal with their computers, telephones and photocopiers. We discovered that they were having the same issues as the kids! They couldn't figure out their information technology either. On the helpdesk, we'd politely smile and close their support requests with the code, "PEBKAC", or "Problem Exists Between Keyboard And Chair" (which I realize in retrospect wasn't particularly empathetic of us). That said, we knew the software was letting us all down. When I ultimately made the move into design, the discipline I'd been training in, I was already thinking about doing something in the digital space.

Tell us about your design training.

It all started with a visual communication course at the University of South Australia. I've always loved drawing, so I specifically set out to study illustration design. I didn't see the course through but I got a lot out of it, picking up graphic design principles and sharpening my illustration skills. In my spare time, however, I was stepping out and exercising my web design and development skills for friends (for free), knowing that was probably what I wanted to do.

I was at a crossroads. My folks were saying, "You're basically in an arts course, is that what you want to be doing?" They were doubtful there was any future in drawing and suggested convincingly that I should study Information Technology. I went on to study Information Systems through Spherion—a broad IT Certificate IV course. I learnt about networking, programming principles (oh, COBOL), and a few things I was already familiar with, such as HTML and CSS. This set the stage for landing the helpdesk job at SA Tourism.

My formal education armed me with some OK design skills, a good understanding of marketing (another Certificate IV), excellent illustration skills and the knowledge for how to network things up. It was great for LAN gaming parties with friends, and it helped me secure my first job in IT.

How did you make the move into more of a design role?

In 2002, I transitioned from the helpdesk to the web team at SA Tourism. The IT Projects team, as we were known, was responsible for southaustralia.com, the state's portal for tourist information and bookings. This was my first exposure to a high-trafficked site with many stakeholders. I worked most closely with the internal marketing and creative teams. In terms of design, the creative team increasingly left the smaller design tasks to me—banner design, template adjustment and data entry—while they worked on the next big campaign or rebrand. Every now and again I was able to design and develop a microsite, which was a lot fun. And every month I'd pull log files down and study the web traffic.

At the same time, I signed up for a couple of enlightening road trips where we visited regional tourism operators (sole traders, bed and breakfast operators, etc.). The goal was to promote southaustralia.com and enable properties to be booked online. The tourism operators were struggling with the basics—they couldn't use a computer let alone use a website through a web browser.

The road trip opened my eyes—the site was not just about tourists, it was also about the tourism operators and many others. I started to

really think about whom the site affected and what they each needed. This is obvious today, but back then it felt like the mother of all light bulb moments.

Back in the office, a young, brash and naive version of myself applied several times to transfer into the creative team. I wasn't successful. I thought I was ready when I still had years of learning ahead of me. I had a huge amount of respect for the creatives responsible for the internal interview process and their rejection stung. In hindsight, it stung just the right amount for me to reevaluate my skills and perspective. If they hadn't pushed me back I wouldn't have gone freelance/start-up or hit the books as hard as I did.

What particular skills do you think were holding you back then?

I think I was too opinionated and locked into my own aesthetic. I wasn't able to see the bigger picture at that time. I would make a snap decision on how I wanted a design and I would barrel on and dive into Photoshop and make it. Also, my views on user-centred design were still percolating and unclear to me, so I defaulted to whatever felt safe.

So it wasn't about technical skills…

No, I had the technical skills. I just hadn't developed much in the way of creative vision—my focus was too narrow. I was also yet to consider design as a flexible process. Realising these things ultimately made me a better UX designer (and developer, for that matter), being able to step back and ask, "What does this mean for this particular person, as opposed to that person?" Looking back, all these little experiences, that seemed isolated at the time, have all come together to inform the

way I work today.

When did you first hear the term *user experience*?

I first heard the term in about 2003. It would have been closely tied to Jesse James Garrett's classic diagram from his book, "The Elements of User Experience". By that stage it felt like another way of describing something I was beginning to do at SA Tourism.

You mentioned hitting the books. Are books important to you? How did you learn this stuff?

When I started my journey in Adelaide, there wasn't much in the way of resources or local community to turn to. As a result, I found myself searching for information online and turned to people like Steve Krug, Jeffrey Zeldman, Liz Danzico, Jason Santa Maria, Jon Hicks and Molly Holzschlag. Within Australia, but interstate, I was also heavily influenced by John Allsopp, Russ Weakley, Cameron Adams, Lisa Herrod, Benson Low and Matt Magain. From here I was connected to the pioneers of the past, in terms of human computer interaction and industrial design. Whether they know it or not, these people and their blogs inspired me and influenced me on topics such as research, interaction design, accessibility and the future of all this.

While the web industry was largely happening overseas, predominantly in the US and UK, at home I was building up my own self-taught HTML, CSS and JavaScript skills. I looked around for an educational institution that could teach me these skills, but every time I spoke to a tutor or lecturer, I didn't come away with confidence in their

ability to teach me what I thought I needed to know.

How have you found your jobs and how have you prepared for interviews?

There's always been an element of leap of faith. There have only been two jobs where I've felt highly confident going in because I had friends who gave me good advice.

I've always used Seek—the online job board. At one point, in the early days, I thought the only way to get a job was to live overseas, so I was looking at Cameron Moll's "Authentic Jobs" job site. Sometimes jobs didn't even hit sites like Seek. I'd find out about them by reaching out to friends and colleagues for upcoming opportunities.

Ideally, you would know someone who can tell you about your prospective employer's culture. Failing that, I think you need to look for a particular type of language in the job ad—something that speaks to the personality of the employer rather than specifically what it is that you'll be doing. With the DT job ad I responded to a few years ago (for a UX Designer role), the hook was, "We're not looking for someone to bang out some wireframes and send them down the line…" There was something about the informal language in this sentence; coupled with the needs-based message that had me thinking I'd enjoy the role and the people I'd be working with.

Have you ever used a recruiter?

Once. For me it didn't really work out. I'd prefer to know I've been hired because of my own research and recommendations. I've

spoken to other people who swear by recruiters, though.

In terms of preparation for interviews, I believe it's better to take in your dirty laundry, so I bring in all of my sketches, all of my thinking. I'd be really worried if someone hired me based on seeing the finished product alone. I'm pretty good at the technical craft aspect but if an employer is not interested in how I got to that, I am probably not that interested in the job. I like to lay it all out.

In a way I'm interviewing them as well. I want them to poke holes in my process, to question how I did things—it's usually a good gauge of whether or not I'm going to grow in that role. During an interview, if an employer asks me how I got to a particular result and I can justify my reasoning, then it is a good response for them. If I can't justify it and don't get the job, then I've ideally come away from that interview with knowledge of how I can improve next time.

It sounds like UX is the career you were born to do because you have a visual design and technical background. What would you say to people who have one or the other or neither but are really keen and excited to get into UX?

When I think back over my career, I've been user-centred for a good decade or more. I've worked with brilliant user-centred designers and user-centered developers. In each case, these are people who have thought really hard about how things should function. Yet they're also thinking broadly—not just about how the product or service is going to affect users, but also about how it's going to affect the people who may inherit their work.

If you're a developer or designer and you're thinking about getting into user experience, I don't think it needs to be a yes or no decision. You can add aspects of the user experience discipline to your toolkit and keep doing what you're doing. I often describe myself as a designer, rather than a visual designer or user experience designer. Same goes for developers. I think everybody on a project team should be across user research—it's hugely beneficial, irrespective of your role.

You don't need to write test plans or test scripts but you should be an observer. Get out of the office and shadow users in their own environment for a day or two. It'll re-shape your whole perspective. For example, if I've got stakeholder who's a bit of a UX naysayer and who isn't "buying into" user-centred thinking, the first thing I do is try and get them in front of their customers—it's eye-opening.

The bottom line is this: you don't have to make a sudden change; you can grow into it and see what works for you. UX is a diverse set of skills that fall across a broad spectrum. Pick your strength and go for it.

More courses in interaction design and user experience are popping up—what are your thoughts on where UX as a university discipline is going?

It's actually really good right now. A bunch of them have sprung up in the past 4 years and they're worth a look. You've got some great HCI courses—I know Swinburne has a few and they're quite compelling. At DT we're looking at setting up a graduate program with one or more of those institutions, because we can see signs of academic

maturity. There are also compressed specialised courses and what I'd describe as "top-up" courses popping up. It's a great time to learn about our craft—so much easier than it was 10 years ago. The online stuff is incredible, particularly the amount of free content.

This is ultimately something I'm really passionate about and will be playing more of a role with at Tractor Design School, tractor.edu.au. I've recently joined their industry advisory group and am currently working on course material. OK, that was a shameless plug. Stay tuned.

Interview: Meredith Noble, UX Mentor

Meredith is the Director of Interaction Design at Catalyst Group. She is the co-founder of the Toronto chapter of the IxDA and ran successful speed-mentoring sessions in Toronto. She is passionate about community building and about recognizing the personal side of the professional experience.
@meredi | Meredith's Blog | LinkedIn

You organized some speed mentoring in Toronto. Could you tell me about that?

A few years ago, Kim Goodwin from Cooper gave a talk called, “Each

One, Teach One". The talk was essentially a call to action for the whole UX community. She recognized that we had become quite successful at selling ourselves as a field, and it is now our responsibility to fill the burgeoning demand for UXers by training newcomers. She explained that there is a real risk with not doing that: if people enter the field, claiming to be UX designers and they aren't properly trained and mentored, but present themselves that way, people could start losing faith in UX design.

Kim considered this training fairly urgent. She mentioned a number of ways to boost training practices—including getting local chapters involved with mentorship initiatives.

I was really affected by her talk and took it as my own personal call to action. We started brainstorming in Toronto around what we could practically do about mentorship. We asked the IxDA Toronto members what was important to them in a mentoring relationship and how they thought we could foster a culture of mentorship in our community. We got great feedback and decided to start with speed mentoring sessions.

There was clearly an appetite for mentorship and the sessions would fill up almost instantly. The difficult part was getting people interested in becoming a mentor. I think many people were interested but didn't have the confidence to mentor or didn't think they had enough to offer potential mentees. There was a lot of arm-twisting, convincing people that they would get value out of mentoring and that they were capable of doing it.

We ran the sessions a few times and they were very popular.

Tell me about the pairing process at the speed mentoring sessions.

Basically, people had 5 minutes with each other, rotating around like conventional speed dating. Each participant then checked off who they were either interested in mentoring or who they would like to have as a mentor. If there was a match we would tell them and leave them to it.

We weren't ready to provide a lot of structure around mentoring at that time, so we advised the pairs that the mentorship relationship could be anything both parties agreed to. Each pair decided what they needed and what they were willing to give. We encouraged them to have a discussion about expectations and commitment and let them see for themselves how the relationship grew.

The one part that we fell down on was follow-up, so I don't know how successful we were in creating long-term relationships. I don't think many lasted, but I think it was a valuable activity regardless. Even without the official mentor/mentee relationships, the speed mentoring was an effective way to build our community. It gave people who were shy or introverted that social framework to break the ice with people.

What do you think makes for a good mentor/mentee relationship?

I think intellectual and personality compatibility are both critical. In the past I have encountered people who I thought were really cool and I would think; "Maybe they'll be my mentor". Then I'd ask them to have

coffee and realize that I didn't really like them very much!

I think if it's going to be a meaningful relationship, you really have to hit it off. You don't necessarily have to be best friends but I think that kind of connection is ideal. When a professional and personal relationship grows, you get this amazing dynamic where you're really sharing with each other. My philosophy towards mentorship is that it doesn't have to be formal. Everyone has something they can teach to others. Mentoring can be about people with different backgrounds or experience levels just deciding they want to share ideas and advice.

I still think the speed mentoring we did had benefits from a community-building perspective, but I'm glad we didn't go that step further and get people to sign a formal mentorship agreement. I don't think the mentoring relationship is sustainable unless there's that genuine connection, and that shouldn't be forced.

How, with all your hindsight, would you advise people to go about finding a mentor?

I think there are two kinds of mentors—a workplace mentor and a mentor outside of the workplace. If you're going about it less formally, you should have mentors everywhere. You can have more than one¬—you likely won't get everything you need from one person anyway.

In terms of finding a mentor in the workplace, anyone you interact with on projects is a candidate, particularly if they have more experience than you and you think there's something of value you can learn from them. Ask them questions like, "I'm having this issue, do you mind if we chat about it? Maybe you can help me". It's about identifying the

people who have a temperament you like and who have the right experience to help you fill your knowledge gaps.

Outside the workplace, I recommend getting involved in local communities. Even if you're shy, try to reach out and push yourself over the hump. Work out who scratches your intellectual itch and with whom you could potentially develop a long-term relationship. I co-founded IxDA Toronto because I firmly believed in the value of local communities. I think that everyone has something to share and that we can all learn form each other. Local communities are one of the best places to make connections with others.

There's also an online community now. I follow many people on Twitter and I always suggest that UXers get involved in that community, too. You can get a sense of the zeitgeist and who you may be interested in getting to know better.

Do you think a purely online mentorship agreement is sustainable or valuable?

In this age, I don't see why not. Personally, I get the most value from in-person relationships, and I tend to make more time for face-to-face meetings. But to each their own and if an online relationship works for you, why not?

One of the key messages is that there's not one type of mentor relationship. Like any other messy relationship in the world, it's whatever works for you.

Given the scarcity of ready mentors, what's in it for a mentor and

why should someone volunteer to help others?

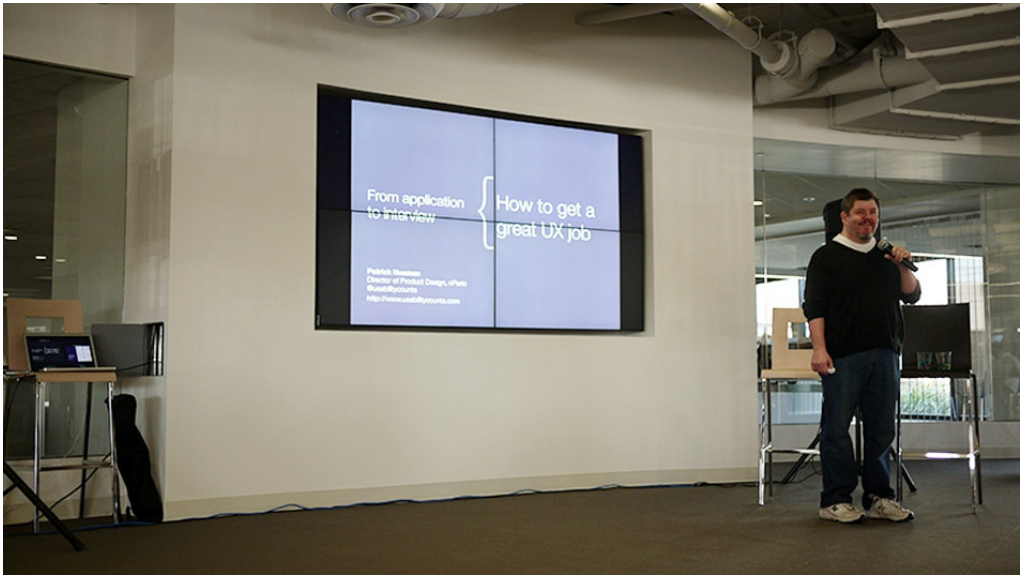
There are two key reasons.

As the senior person in a senior/junior dynamic, it can be very satisfying to give back to someone who is in the position that you were once in.

It's also a confidence booster to think, "I have navigated this too, and now I have some advice for someone".

Additionally, I used to think it was a cliché when people said, "You can learn a lot from your mentee, too!" At first I didn't really buy into that idea, but having had that relationship, I am convinced that it's 100% true.

People, no matter how experienced they are in the community, all come from different backgrounds. This is one of the cool things about UX that everyone knows something unique, regardless of whether they're younger than you or less experienced in the field. Even if they're new to the field and you teach them about UX, maybe they can teach you about project management or engineering. I'm firmly convinced that the mentoring relationship becomes two-way, even if it starts out as one-way.



Interview: Patrick Neeman, UX Hirer

Patrick Neeman is the Director of Product Design at Apptio, an IT Spend Management Platform. Previously, he was Director of User Experience at Jobvite, a leading application tracking platform for companies like Twitter, LinkedIn and Square. He runs the UX Drinking Game and usabilitycounts.com.

@usabilitycounts | Usability Counts | LinkedIn

What do you find most frustrating about designers during the recruitment process?

Many applicants think they have to turn their résumé into an infographic to impress a recruiter who has no idea what they're even

looking for in terms of design. There is this impression that the rest of the world understands what design is and they don't.

Isn't there validity in feeling like you should have a résumé that speaks to being a designer?

To a point, but it's not the résumé where you show off your design skills—you show them off in your portfolio. Your résumé is basically a listing of all your qualifications and the projects you are working on or have worked on. Nobody's ever remarked, "Oh my god, this person has a really good résumé."

Additionally, most applicant tracking systems (i.e. the system that holds your resume when you apply for a position) kill good-looking resumes (for example, those in an InDesign file or a PDF) and create text-based versions of them.

Your resume on these systems is similar to any web document where the most important information is at the top and the least important information is at the bottom. Most of these applicant-tracking systems have index technology built into them but it's not at the same level as Google.

If you format your resume to be fancy, you run the risk of the least important experience in your résumé getting indexed. It's like SEO: if they can't find it, it's not there.

So a résumé is not there to establish your credibility as a designer but to cut through reams of other candidates?

Yes. Basically, what you're trying to do is communicate the most

important information, remembering that an applicant-tracking system is SEO for résumés. If your résumé is anything out of the ordinary, you will be at a disadvantage.

I wouldn't bother with infographics on your resume either. If you don't knock an infographic out of the park, the recruiter or hirer is just going to look at it and think, "Well, you really missed the boat there".

What are your tips for somebody who's trying to get started and wants to have a résumé that speaks to their user experience activities?

I direct them to the template that I have and ask them what projects they've worked on and what they have accomplished. You don't necessarily have to have the metrics of the project, but you could say, "We completed wireframes for the developers" or, "We were able to do some user research and we found that users did 'X'".

Oftentimes, user experience designers don't know for whom they're designing, and that's something that should be reflected in the résumé. If they don't have any metrics to back up the design, they should still be able to tell me, "We were designing for this target audience" in the résumé.

How does the process actually work for getting a job in UX?

If you decide to apply for a job at IBM, or a similar company, through a job board, a Jobvite study showed that 0.41% of people who applied through those listings would get hired. On the other hand, if a personal referral or recruiter is pushing your résumé into the

company, your odds went up to 11%.

The amazing thing is you can package your résumé and do all these fancy things, however if you're only going through a job board, you're pretty much not going to get hired. Very infrequently have I landed a job through a job listing. I've always gotten into companies by having a recruiter call me and say, "I have this position".

I think that networking for a job is more important than the actual process of having a résumé and applying through a job board. Within our social group we're always asking, "Hey, here's a job. Is anybody looking for something"? I have referred friends to three or four different positions and that seems to be the way recruitment works—for most of the better jobs anyway. By the time a recruiter has posted on a job board, they've pretty much exhausted every other avenue they have at their disposal for finding somebody.

Talk to me about portfolios and what you think they should look like.

I'm not looking for anything too cute in a portfolio. One designer I met in a training session put cartoon characters on her portfolio and I thought, "I don't care." What I really want to do is see how you think and I want your portfolio to be very consistent and orderly.

Possibly the best portfolio I've ever seen is from a girl who set up a really basic portfolio, which included every single project that she had worked on. She saved all the screenshots and all the whiteboards and sketches and processes and it told an amazing story.

I was able to understand how she thought, just by reading her portfolio. She has a better portfolio than most of the people I know with five or ten years of experience. That's what I'm looking for. I want somebody that can tell the story of how they went from A to B on a particular project.

You don't even have to tell the complete story. As a UXer, we often get dumped into projects that don't have any money for research so they want us only to apply best practice. On the Disney Shopping project, all I did was apply best practice on shopping cart experiences and their revenue went up $7 million a year. When I tell that story, the hiring manager thinks, "Wow! This person knows how to improve revenue". If a hirer can readily see that you are going to improve their bottom line, then they are more like to employ you.

For folks who might have a development, visual design, production or project manager background that are keen to get some UX experience, what advice would you give?

That's really tough. If you are a web producer who is working in an agency for example, you should raise your hand and ask to help on the user experience side of a particular project.

If you are a web producer and suddenly start to apply for user experience jobs without wireframes to show, there's no way you're going to get hired. If you do get hired, it's a tremendous leap of faith for the organisation.

There was one woman I knew who was a web producer and she

wanted to break into user experience in the mobile space. Instead of hiring a UX designer, she did the wireframes herself. Her first set of wireframes were really awful, but over time with practice, she got better and pretty soon she was able to pick up work in user experience.

I tell people that there's always a way to sneak in some guerilla user testing. If you're the one running user tests it can be a great launchpad to get into some other user experience activities.

That's a good point. When you talk about user experience in the States, they almost forget about the whole user research part and get straight to the wireframes and mock-ups. The very first thing most hirers look for in a potential employee is whether they can do wireframes. Whether they can do user research is secondary. Research, to be quite honest, is something that can be learnt fairly quickly.

What advice would you give someone who has managed to land an interview to help them prepare?

When I'm preparing for an interview, what I do is select one story from my portfolio and focus on that.

I may start with, "I currently work for Microsoft, I've also done work for Blackberry and Disney Shopping, but there's this one website that I did for a friend that I'm most proud of, called 'bobthechiropractor.com'." We go to the website and I tell the story. I pull up Google Analytics and show the interviewer that the site has had a 12% conversion rate for five years. That's a really engaging

story because I haven't had to show them wireframes or anything beyond the analytics. The analytics sells itself.

At one of my interviews, I used the story of the process we went through at Jobvite—how we did 100 user interviews and usability tests, ethnographic research, and testing, and the story leads to a great outcome: Jobvite winning a Webby.

If you go through all the steps and keep practicing them, it becomes a story-telling routine during an interview. It's much easier to answer any question the interviewer may have.

How important is it to have visual design skills as a UX designer? Can you succeed without being a Photoshop wizard?

It depends on the environment. If you're a fantastic front-end developer I think you can, because you know you can build prototypes and a company can outsource the actual design. If your only skillset is research and writing, however, with little experience with wireframes, then that really limits the number of organisations you can work for.

Some of the larger places in the US, where they have people who just do interaction design, might employ these people, but not having design skills as a UXer makes you less attractive to hire.

Do you need to have development skills?

The way I describe my front-end skills, is that I can cook but I'm not a gourmet chef. I can get in there and build some of the jQuery interactions and make it look fairly believable, however, my JavaScript

doesn't scale.

I've got a visual design background. I can write, do research and the back-end code, but JavaScript is the skill that I have the least confidence in, which is ironic because it's the most basic.

My visual design skills aren't great but they're better than many designers out there. What it comes down to is this—it's one thing to have all these design skills but is that really the best use for a user experience designer? From the perspective of an organisation, the question they should be asking is, "Do you want me doing front-end development or do you want me making your company another $7 million a year?" If you want me to make you $7 million a year, I'm better off doing research. I think there's a higher Return on Investment there.

Do you have any parting advice for beginner UXers?

In my experience, someone will say, "Hey, I've got this résumé, I don't know where to get started and need some advice". I often point them to my articles on Usability Counts, but at the end of the day, much of it is common sense.

Interview: Georgie Carpenter, UX Recruiter

Georgie Carpenter is the founder of 10collective—a recruitment agency specialising in IT Recruitment, including the recruitment of UX professionals.

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Can you tell us about 10collective?

10collective was a company that I started by accident in 2008. I walked out the door of my previous company, an IT recruitment agency, and received a call from a client who said, “Can you find me a

developer"? I said, "Okay" and on autopilot I found one and made a placement.

At the time, it was just a bit of fun and I assumed I would spend my newfound free-time painting or writing books, but it snowballed from there. In the end, I needed to hire an additional employee, and soon after that we moved into an office in Fitzroy.

At that point I'd been recruiting user experience people for a number of years. There is some debate about whether the position should even be called "User Experience" anymore, because it's really "experience design" to some of the more established UXers.

You've been recruiting UX professionals for quite a while. What changes have you seen in the industry since 10collective started?

Clients certainly want UX professionals more now than they did five years ago. Employers understand that UX is important and that consumers want a better "user experience" for their public-facing website.

I'm not convinced that all employers actually understand what user experience means yet, although it's definitely more prevalent. The first school of UXers that I worked with sought to evangelise UX as important and essential, but now it is less of a fight. There is still some education to be done around what a UXer actually does, but the term "user experience" has changed, or evolved, quite substantially. If you were to ask some job hunters or employers, the difference between "user experience" and "usability", they can't always tell you.

Nowadays, different types of organisations want UXers, not just organisations with immense budgets. Employers don't necessarily want what I was looking for 5 years ago—hardcore UXers that understand interaction design and contextual enquiry—they just want a UXer to use their common sense, which is not entirely unreasonable.

The first school of UXers were very much user and research-centric. That isn't something that a lot of my clients can even do given their budget limitations. UXers are now being sought for their established expertise rather than what they can discover by research. Many user experience people still want to be involved with the user, though. It is frustrating that many organisations are offering user experience services and user experience expertise, but they don't have much exposure to the actual user.

Are those who are getting into user experience coming from a visual background? Is that the general path?

Yes—if you have a visual background and a good foundation of the basic principles of user experience and usability, then that's an effective avenue for you to get a job with the title, "User Experience Designer". Whether you can truly be a UX Designer at that point is debatable.

Do you think that you're on the back foot if you're not coming from a visual design background?

I think so, yes. Many agencies, for example, don't need just

“researchers” anymore— they do require you to have visual design skills as well. You need to be able to get a piece of paper and a pen and throw together some sketches. You would need to have a basic understanding of user experience or usability in order to satisfy the job briefs that we’re getting from clients, on the whole.

What skillsets are clients looking for in UX roles? Does the client say they need a user experience person when what they really want is a visual designer who’s going to use their brain?

Commonly, a client such as a digital or advertising agency will want someone in-house who is a visual designer with agency experience, but who also understands the principles of user experience. What that means is they need someone to do wireframing and prototyping, interview stakeholders and users and be able to expertly review the application or site.

There isn’t a decent understanding of the need for the individual to lead focus groups or use eye-tracking equipment or do card sorting. In many cases, it’s unlikely that those activities are going to happen in a small to medium agency, unless their clients agree to pay a reasonable amount of money. The Account Services team also needs to be able to sell those services—which is another debate entirely!

Skills-wise, a UXer would ideally have experience with Axure and Balsamiq, have some exposure to Visio and be able to use the Adobe Creative suite. UXers need to be able to defend their designs and engage in conceptualisation and ideation. Importantly, they need to have worked on robust and meaty applications. They also need to

know how to talk to people, obviously!

Nowadays, are UXers being employed in-house or as contractors?

A lot of people are doing contract work at the moment because they get better money contracting. Freelance projects are common. If you are a career UXer, you will probably end up contracting to say, three to five extremely loyal clients that use you repeatedly and pay you excellent money. Essentially, we have had many top UXers wiped from the market which is a tragedy for smaller businesses who really could use the expertise of those people.

I advise UXers to do contract work as much as they possibly can now, but start looking for a permanent or good long-term contract within the next six to twelve months.

How do you determine whether an applicant truly understands what UX is?

I start by asking the applicant a basic and disarming question, “What is User Experience”? Oftentimes they just tell me what usability is and I might prod them until I get a better answer. Having a robust opinion about the field you engage in is compelling in job interviews. I know that UXers have to be pragmatic and maybe educate users, but users are supposed to inform your design. It’s a fairly good sign when I hear that a UXer is not attempting to change the user. Many applicants don’t even mention the user and that’s a black mark most of the time. User experience is not just the experience the user has with your product.

Would you say having a process and being able to talk about it is important?

I think so. I love it when I ask an applicant to take me through their process and the first thing they do is grab a piece of paper and a pen and take me through their process with some decent narrative.

Storytelling is a critical component of UX on the job, so I like to see evidence of that in an interview. A candidate must also have experience with the activities and practises that fall under the user experience umbrella.

What advice would you give a candidate coming into UX from another area, such as business analysis, creative production or development?

I'd advise against calling yourself a user experience designer if you're not comfortable doing so—simply say you're a producer with UX skills or a project manager with UX skills, or focus on the research side of things if that is how you are inclined.

The word "designer" is misleading to many companies. If a company is hiring, an applicant's first gateway is an HR person who usually doesn't know what user experience designers do. They see the word "designer" and they imagine someone creative for the job. You actually don't need to be particularly creative to be a fabulous user experience researcher, in the traditional sense, although the UX discipline firmly belongs in the creative sphere.

I would advise job seekers to get into the UX community. Start reading

some old school HCI usability UX blogs—for example Jakob Nielsen—but also get into some new blogs. Attend a UX Book Club and network. Simply being around UX people will give you some context around what you do and how that's relevant to the user experience process. Doing so also gives you an idea of the language inside the UX and Design world—using relevant terminology is always useful in an interview!

Take a Business Analyst for example. What a Business Analyst does is so relevant to UX—how they interview and observe people, create specifications and evaluate scenarios. The thought process they go through is key for a UXer, but a Business Analyst needs to know how to describe what they do in UX terms.

How should a candidate prepare for an interview if they get to that stage? Would you recommend a portfolio for someone who doesn't have a substantial visual background?

Absolutely. A user experience folio is not a design folio—it's a case study folio and a dissection of all the activities it took to get to whatever outcome you've reached. What I recommend with UX folios is that once you've determined that a particular activity pertains to the UX discipline, you need to dissect it.

An infographic or something visual is a good idea to illustrate what you've done. It doesn't need to be a band poster; it needs to be something like a screenshot of your wireframe or an infographic to show how you got to the end result.

Opinions don't hurt, either. For example, saying, "These are the

results—they were surprising for such and such reason" is pertinent for both user experience professionals and those who want to get into user experience. Giving your opinion demonstrates that you understand that those analytical skills are transferable to the discipline.

Having a folio to kick-off the discussion can be a difficult concept for many job seekers. Some UXers I know, who are absolutely amazing, have never landed a job with a folio or a CV because everyone knows their reputation so they get jobs via word of mouth. However, I still think that they should have a beautiful folio—a dissection of their ideas, their opinions and their assumptions and then how they've backed those things up with actual data, research and design expertise.

Do you have some general tips on how to make the most out of an interview?

Firstly, when running through your work history, ensure that your timeline actually makes sense. If you've been fired a bunch of times, you just need to come clean and admit it.

Most interviews will have a behavioural interview component. The philosophy behind behavioural interviewing is that how you have acted in certain situations in the past can predict how you would act in similar situations in the future. I think it's a flawed philosophy as nothing can predict any of those things, but behavioural interviewing is generally believed to give an indication.

I think job seekers need to learn how to handle behavioural interviews. Most questions in this format start with, “Describe a time when…”. You need to think of a specific example in your past where you addressed the question and answer along the STAR format.

You should then analyse what you did wrong in the example you chose and also what you learned from it. If you can apply that way of answering to every behavioural question you are asked, you’re laughing.

It’s OK to use a personal scenario if you can’t apply the question to a work one. If you are changing fields, all people need to know is that you can learn and adapt to the new position that you’re applying for.

That’s where behavioral interviewing can be very useful. It assesses your aptitude, emotional intelligence, commercial maturity, self-awareness and your ability to learn. If you have the skillset that is required but cannot demonstrate the key competencies in the role via a behavioural interview, then a client is unlikely to hire you.

The other piece of advice I would give is to practice your ability to decide which questions require a long answer and which ones require a short answer. It is fairly essential not to bore the interviewer.

There is some debate about how long your CV should be. What are your thoughts on that?

It depends on the client. Some clients need to be educated around what your experience is, in which case a four or five page CV can be helpful for them. There are also clients that are savvy enough to read

between the lines and can draw what they need in a one to two pager. Your CV shouldn't go any longer than four or five pages.

Your CV needs to compel a client to read on within the first five seconds of looking at it. If it does, they'll spend the time to read the rest. If it doesn't, it makes no difference whether your CV was one, four or thirty pages—it won't get read.

Some of the most talented people I know don't have good CVs. They have one page that says, "I've done this". That's good enough for them because they know people, but it's not good enough for all of my clients.

For UXers, when you write your CV, you need to be prepared to answer the question, "How do you use your understanding of the UX discipline in the design of your CV?" Many people in the UX field do not use their skills in designing this very important piece of paper.

Your expertise has a Melbourne bent. Do you have a sense for whether there are hotspots for UX in the rest of the country, or globally?

I have many English and American people approach me for roles in Australia. Their understanding of user experience, and how it's used practically, is quite different to ours. One of the criticisms I commonly hear, from British people especially, is that nothing gets done in UX in Australia—we spend too much time in concept, too much time in research and not enough time doing.

The other piece of positive feedback that I get is that Australians are

very detail oriented and we do get UX right. When I went to London last year, a mobile director for a very large and well-known digital agency remarked that Australia's user experience for mobile applications was second to none. I've also heard—and I don't know if this is true—that there is an amazing user experience scene in South America. I've not done any recruitment there, but I have had some people with South American roots come to me.

Considering there is a demand for UX, is it fair to say a UXer can be choosy about which jobs they take and what they do on them?

Yes and no. There was definitely a time I was getting frustrated at the UX community for being princesses in all kinds of areas— wage, working hours, the stage of UX and design maturity—but the community is coming out of that now. Frankly, as any kind of job seeker, you should be picky about your job choice.

I think work cultures are very institutionalised in some organisations. Even though the organisation is saying they need a UX person, in fact, there may not be a place for them there culturally.

If you have to evangelise and educate, it's a 24/7 job. It's a very rare person who could do the job part-time. You have to be constantly showing the client that you are not only good at your job but that you are actually adding value. The issue is that what you provide isn't necessarily something you can hold in your hand and show someone.

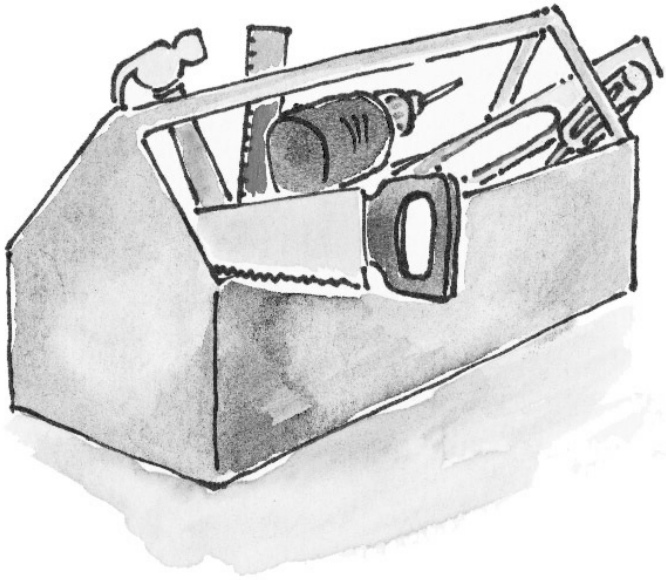
When you're not proving to the client that you're adding value, you're being an entrepreneur, validating tests or doing experiments. Do you think the client values that learning?

Not always—and that's a fairly dangerous position to be in if there's a recession imminent. Ultimately, if you're not providing tangible deliverables and a return on investment right here and now, you might get relegated to middle management status, and I think we can all agree that middle management people always go first in the lay off rounds.

Is there a seasonal demand for UX work?

UX work is seasonal, absolutely. UXers are always involved during production, even though they should probably by around before the idea even happens.

January is not a great time to find a UX job compared to the rest of the year, but then January is not a good time to find a job for anybody!



Appendix: Common Interview Questions

Below is a collection of common interview questions. If you're able to answer all of these questions easily, you'll have no problem in your next interview!

"GETTING TO KNOW YOU" QUESTIONS:

- How long have you been in your field?
- What is your interest in user experience design?
- What other things have you done in your life that influence how you do UX?
- How do you stay up to date in UX?
- Where do you look for inspiration?
- What five words would you use to describe yourself?
- What do you find is the most difficult thing about doing UX?
- What do you love most about UX?
- Which websites or products do you most like or dislike, and why?
- Are there any usability experts you follow? Who? What do you think are their strengths and weaknesses?

QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED FROM PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

- What were the surprises in this project, and how did you deal with them? What examples do you have of an idea that failed, and how did you deal with that?
- Tell me about a UX project where you've had to use different types of techniques to fully find the story.
- Show us your portfolio and tell us the story of how one of the designs was created.
- Describe a time when you had to admit you were out of your depth and needed help. What would you change about the

next time you found yourself in such a situation?

- What was the most enjoyable research project you've ever worked on?
- Show us an example of your work, and defend your design decisions by explicitly referencing your research.

QUESTIONS ABOUT HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS

These questions are designed to reveal how you work and think.

- Under what circumstances will you intervene in a usability test? Do you have an example? What happened to the data in that instance?
- How would you react when a design is criticised by stakeholders for reasons that don't make sense?
- What would you do if a project is about to launch and you're asked to do a heuristic review, but you see usability problems that would interfere with the project plans?
- You find a fortune in diamonds in a bag and nobody claims it. What do you do?
- What are your methods of investigation when you're faced with completely unfamiliar topics or subjects?

POSSIBLE INTERVIEW ACTIVITIES

These activities are designed to allow you to demonstrate how you

work and think.

- The interviewer describes an idea for a product and asks you what approaches you might take to design the concept. They'll be looking for people who do research before beginning any sketching of the UI.
- The interviewer gives you a problem in the form of a scenario and asks you to solve it on paper while thinking aloud. They'll be watching for your problem-solving process, your types and quantity of ideas, and how you articulate yourself.
- The interviewer gives you a design problem and sends you to a whiteboard in front of some developers. They'll be looking at how you go about solving the problem and how you make yourself understood.
- The interviewer may simulate a stressful situation to see how easily you can adapt to changes and unexpected situations under pressure.
- The interviewer may be noting how well you get along with someone you'll be working with, or how at ease you are with users you'll be trying to understand.
- The interviewer may ask you to do an impromptu heuristic review of a few screens or workflows from a product. They're not looking for right or wrong answers. Instead, they're trying to see what questions you ask and what information you want about the user or the task.
- The interviewer may ask you to perform an unexpected activity, such as writing down twenty-five ways to use a brick. They'll be

looking to see if you can free yourself from reining conventions and let your mind explore new and novel ways to do something. They may also be assessing your level of persistence when charged with a difficult task.

QUESTIONS ASSESSING YOUR SPECIFIC SKILLS

- How do you collect data? What kind of notes do you take, and can you quantify and objectify the results?
- How do you map research questions/goals to a methodology choice?
- When you create a task, what are you looking to observe about a user's behaviour?
- How would you measure the usability of a website or application?

QUESTIONS TO ASSESS YOUR AWARENESS OF UX PRINCIPLES:

- What is the difference between market research and usability research?
- Why is it okay to use small sample sizes in UX research?
- Do you prefer working in a waterfall or agile development process? Why?
- How do you recruit users for your user testing?

- How do you balance business and customer goals?
- How do you know when a design is complete?
- How do you measure return on investment for UX?
- What is the difference between usability and accessibility?

Glossary

Below is a list of terms that newcomers to the field often find confusing. We maintain a version of this glossary at uxmastery.com/resources/glossary.

A

Affinity diagramming

A business tool used to organize a large number of ideas, sorting them into groups based on their natural relationships, for review and analysis.

Agile software development methodology

A methodology fundamentally incorporating iteration and continuous feedback to refine and deliver a software system. It involves continuous planning, testing, integration, and other forms of continuous evolution of both the project and the software.

Analysis stage

The stage of the UX process where insights are drawn from data collecting during the earlier Research stage. Capturing, organising and making inferences from the “what” can help UX designers begin to understand the “why”.

Analytics

A broad term that encompasses a variety of tools, techniques and processes used for extracting useful information or meaningful patterns from data.

Axure

A wireframing and interactive prototyping tool, available for both Windows and Mac.

B

Balsamiq Mockups

A wireframing and interactive prototyping tool, available for both Windows and Mac.

Beta launch

The limited launch of a software product with the goal of finding bugs before final launch.

Branding

The process of creating and marketing a consistent idea or image of a

product, so that it is recognisable by the public.

C

Card sorting

A technique using either actual cards or software, whereby users generate an information hierarchy that can then form the basis of an information architecture or navigation menu.

CMS

Content Management System: Software that allows publishing, editing and maintaining content from a central interface. *See also: Content management*

Collaborative design

Inviting input from users, stakeholders and other project members.

Competitor analysis

Performing an audit or conducting user testing of competing websites and apps; writing a report that summarises the competitive landscape.

Comparative analysis

Performing an item by item comparison of two or more websites or apps to determine trends or patterns.

Content management

The process of creating and marketing a consistent idea or image of a product, so that it is recognisable by the public.

Contextual enquiry

Interviewing users in the location that they use the website or app, in order to understand their tasks and challenges.

Content audit

Reviewing and cataloguing a client's existing repository of content.

D

Design Research

See User Research

Design stage

A collaborative and iterative (meaning that it cycles back upon itself to validate ideas and assumptions) process which is based on user feedback. The premise is to put ideas in front of users, get their feedback, refine them, and repeat.

Diary Study

Asking users to record their experiences and thoughts about a product or task in a journal over a set period of time.

E

Experience Map

An experience map is an holistic, visual representation of your users' interactions with your organisation when zoomed right out (usually captured on a large canvas).

F

G

Guerrilla testing

<definition goes here>

H

Heuristic review

Evaluating a website or app and documenting usability flaws and other areas for improvement.

HCI

Human Computer Interaction involves the study, planning, and design of the interaction between people (users) and computers.

High-fidelity prototype

A prototype which is quite close to the final product, with lots of detail and functionality.

Human factor

Also called ergonomics. The scientific discipline of studying interactions between humans and external systems, including human-computer interaction. When applied to design, the study of human factors seeks to optimise both human well-being and system performance.

I

Industrial design

The application of art and science to a product, in order to improve its aesthetics, ergonomics, functionality, and usability.

Information architecture (IA)

The art and science of organizing and labeling websites, intranets, online communities and software to support usability.

Interaction design (IxD)

Sometimes referred to as IxD, interaction design strives to create meaningful relationships between people and the products and services that they use

Interaction model

A design model that binds an application together in a way that supports the conceptual models of its target users. It defines how all of the objects and actions that are part of an application interrelate, in ways that mirror and support real-life user interactions.

Iterate

The act of repeating a process with the aim of approaching a desired goal, target or result. Each repetition of the process is also called an iteration.

Iterative design

A methodology based on a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining a product or process. Based on the results of testing the most recent iteration of a design, changes are made. This process is intended to ultimately improve the quality and functionality of a design.

J

K

L

Lean UX

Inspired by Lean and Agile development theories, Lean UX speeds up the UX process by putting less emphasis on deliverables and greater focus on the actual experience being designed.

Low-fidelity prototype

A quick and easy translation of high-level design concepts into tangible and testable artefacts, giving an indication of the direction that the product is heading.

M

Mood Board

A collage, either physical or digital, which is intended to communicate

the visual style a direction is heading.

N

O

P

Paper prototype

A rough, often hand-sketched, drawing of a user interface, used in a usability test to gather feedback. Participants point to locations on the page that they would click, and screens are manually presented to the user based on the interactions they indicate.

Personas

A fictitious identity that reflects one of the user groups for whom you are designing.

Production stage

The stage at which the high-fidelity design is fleshed out, content and digital assets are created, and a high-fidelity version of the product is validated with stakeholders and end-users through user testing sessions. The role of the UX Designer shifts from creating and

validating ideas to collaborating with developers to guide and champion the vision.

Project Kickoff

The formally recognised start of a project.

Prototype

A rough guide for the layout of a website or app, giving an indication of the direction that the product is heading.

Q

Questionnaires

A research instrument consisting of a series of questions and other prompts for the purpose of gathering information from respondents.

R

Red route

The frequent and critical activities that users will perform on your site. They are complete activities, not single tasks, and will probably

require several pages to execute. Defining the red routes for your site means that you'll be able to identify and eliminate any usability obstacles on the key user journeys.

(Important roads in London are known as 'red routes' and Transport for London do everything in their power to make sure passenger journeys on these routes are completed as smoothly and quickly as possible.)

Research stage

Often referred to as the Discovery stage. Complex projects will comprise significant user and competitor research activities, while small projects may require nothing more than some informal interviews and a survey. This stage is often skipped, especially by designers adopting the Lean UX approach.

Responsive design

A design approach that responds to the user's behavior and environment based on screen size, platform and orientation. The practice consists of a mix of flexible grids and layouts, images and an intelligent use of CSS media queries.

S

Scenario

A narrative describing “a day in the life of” one of your personas, and probably includes how your website or app fits into their lives.

Service design

The practice of designing a service according to the needs of users, so that the service is user-friendly, competitive and relevant to the users.

Silverback app

Usability testing software (Mac only)

Sitemap

A complete list of all the pages available on a website.

Strategy stage

The stage during which the brand, guiding principles, and long-term vision of an organisation are articulated. The strategy underpinning a UX project will shape the goals of the project—what the organisation

is hoping to achieve with the project, how its success should be measured, and what priority it should have in the grand scheme of things.

Storyboard

A tool inspired by the filmmaking industry, where a visual sequence of events is used to capture a user's interactions with a product. Depending on the audience, it may be an extremely rough sketch, purely for crystallizing your own ideas.

Survey

An online survey designed to solicit feedback from current or potential users.

Stakeholder Interviews

Conversations with the key contacts in the client organisation funding, selling, or driving the product.

T

Technical communication

The practice of creating information that is easy to

understand for a specific audience.

U

Usability

The ease of use and learnability of an object, such as a book, software application, website, machine, tool or any object that a human interacts with.

Usability engineering

The practice of assessing and making recommendations to improve the usability of a product.

User-centred design

A design process during which the needs of the user is considered at all times. Designers consider how a user is likely to use the product,

and they then test the validity of their assumptions in real world tests with actual users.

User feedback loop

Ideas are put in front of users, who provide their feedback, which is used to refine the design, and then the process repeats.

User journey

The step by step journey that a user takes to reach their goal.

User interview

Used for understanding the tasks and motivations of the user group for whom you are designing, user interviews may be formally scheduled, or just informal chats.

User research

Observation techniques, task analysis, and other feedback methodologies which are used to focus on understanding user behaviours, needs, and motivations.

User test

A user sits in front of your website or app and you have them perform tasks and think out loud while doing so.

UXPin

A collaborative app that includes stencils for creating wireframes and low-fidelity prototypes.

V

Visual design

Also called communication design. A discipline which combines design and information development in order to develop and communicate a media message to a target audience.

W

Waterfall model of software development

A sequential design process where progress is seen as flowing steadily downwards through the phases of Conception, Initiation, Analysis, Design, Construction, Testing, Implementation, and Maintenance.

Wireframe

A rough guide for the layout of a website or app, either done with pen and paper or with wireframing software.

Workflow diagram

A graphical representation of activities and actions conducted by users of a system. (Sometimes called an activity diagram.)

X

Y

Z

About UX Mastery

UX Mastery is an online resource for aspiring user experience designers.

Founders Luke Chambers and Matthew Magain are passionate about teaching others how to design websites, mobile apps and desktop apps that are both usable and delightful.

Luke Chambers

General tinkerer, web tailor, user-centred design soldier, tall-ship sailor and biscuit thief, Luke runs a user experience agency called Experia Digital. Throughout his day he tells stories and explains to people the “why” of the design that happens behind the visuals.

Matthew Magain

Based in Melbourne, Matt works as a freelance designer, illustrator and entrepreneur under the name of Useractive. He enjoys sketchnoting at conferences and spends his spare time writing and illustrating children’s books.

Get Involved

Looking for more? Join the UX Mastery online community:

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