



From T to Pi: design skill expectations in change

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It is highly unlikely to stumble upon a unicorn. However, the

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tight collaboration with multidisciplinary professionals in a rapidly developing digital environment sets a huge load of requirements for the designer.

To cover a full stack of core design facets requires a set of strong social skills combined with both technical understanding and artistic vision. These capabilities are sometimes perceived as somewhat contradictory features that rarely occur in one person. It could even be argued that such a trait is impossible because our brain is not wired to multi-task, as some neurological studies suggest.

Then, what is this search of multitalented people all about? Is the pursuit of unicorns doomed from the beginning? The situation is difficult both for designers trying to match the intimidating expectations, and for companies trying to discover talents suitable for the current demand.

Unwrapping the buzzwords helps to understand the expectations and motives better.

The T shape

The transition from sequestered silos and hierarchic company structures to modern working methods and a transparent work culture has created a craving for “T shaped” people — creative professionals that are “great at this one thing and familiar with all this other stuff”.



The principal skill describes the stem of the letter. In comparison to people with very narrow expertise, the T shaped people are so inquisitive that they like to branch out into other skills as well. Those skills form the crossbar of the letter. For digital designers this means being functional in all core facets of the the design

Ideally a T shaped designer can offer deep expertise, combined with breadth to understand the bigger picture. A genuine, personal interest in matters affecting design (e.g. business, research, technology) can have a drastic impact on the end result.

Although a clear focus on one competence creates deeper understanding, it can be dangerous to have just one area of profound expertise since the value of any single domain within this self-renewing industry can erode rapidly. For example, research as it used to be has lately vanished from the design map as a singular entity and merged into other design areas.

The pi shape

Current attention is shifting towards people with double-stemmed skill sets. The search is out for people who are strong not in just one but two skills. Particularly a two stemmed foundation of visionary design skills with a hands-on approach to front end development seems to be the weapon of choice for many smaller scale software projects. Providing a kick of both design and development, these double agents are a perfect fit for the fast, iterative, prototype-and-learn way of working that is hailed as the way to go in software development.



The two stems of the pi can also both stand solely on the design field. People with strong interaction design skills matched with UX and visual design abilities alike are often great for a design lead role. Just as well, business oriented service designers can be great for a purely consultative design role in a project.

A certain level of seniority is often incorporated in the pi shaped skill set, as building expertise in multiple domains often happens over time. Past work experience from different fields hardly ever

more recently.

Being a pi shaped freshman isn't that uncommon either since many designers and developers take their first steps by self-learning a variety of different skills before selecting a narrower field to focus on.

It's important to realise that learning a new skill doesn't make your other skills any less important, because skills aren't mutually exclusive. Improving your skills in research methods doesn't make you forget your UI design tools. Learning new stuff might have some time costs, but it still works in favor of a multidisciplinary approach. Design is like any other craft where skills develop incrementally and sometimes painfully slowly. Mastering one design component might take a lifetime but being adequate in two or three might be conquerable in a couple of years.

Meeting the expectations

Although the pursuit of unicorn-type designers can seem futile, the challenge is real and these new generation designers play a key role in modern successful businesses. Massive IT investments are gradually turning into more iterative processes where using a multitude of tightly segmented designers is no longer cost-effective. The role of a single designer is getting more significant and the required skills must adapt to the situation.

Transforming an existing T shape into a pi shape requires a good deal of work and effort, but in the end it is a favor for both your own career and the industry. Having multiple adjacent core skills is the only way of offering only the best to the clients regardless of the scale of the project. It also ensures better access to an even wider career path in the future.

Design should always serve a greater purpose. It is an inseparable part of a larger effort to change how services and products work

implementation model in use. Even though the current model seems to prefer smaller teams, requiring skillful performance and continuous delivery from every member, the underlying purpose is eventually about reaching a common goal with solid teamwork.

Designers don't work in a vacuum with just their individual skills in use. In a supportive and transparent work culture, variations in individual skill levels become less significant and the combined expertise of employees aggregates. When people are eager to share their knowledge and are not afraid of making mistakes, the end result is often much more than any team member could achieve alone. Even when people are expected and encouraged to work independently and as multidisciplinary as possible, it doesn't mean that every individual should be able to do everything by themselves.

Growing a second stem needs both courage and an opportunity. As it is the designer's challenge to stay curious and pro-active, it is just as important that the work environment keeps the effort nourished and blossoming.

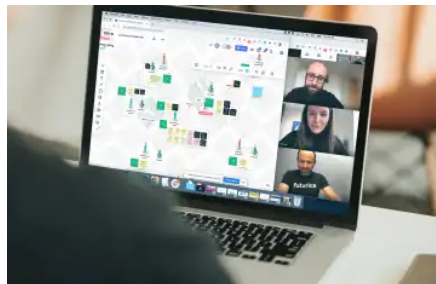
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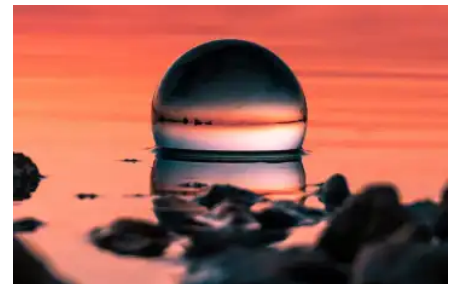
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