



# Optimising Lean Design Teams

With tight budgets & headcount freezes, how are Design leaders upskilling & optimising teams through mentoring, development, & AI?

## GROWING SKILLS GAPS IN DESIGN TEAMS

More designers are entering the field via bootcamps or by mastering tools like Figma, but without foundational training, noticeable skills gaps are emerging across areas like:

- **BRANDING & VISUAL CRAFT** – Typography, colour theory & brand principles are becoming more rare. As AI risks 'blandifying' design, strong craft skills will differentiate teams through more thoughtful, delightful user experiences.
- **STORYTELLING** – Articulating the 'why' behind design decisions.
- **RESEARCH & OPS** – Time constraints push research & design system maintenance off the priority list.
- **PROCESS DISCIPLINE** – Teams are jumping into tools like Figma before clearly defining the problem or user needs.

## UPSKILLING WITHOUT HIRING

- **Buddy systems:** Pair designers with complementary skills for project-based knowledge sharing. Map individual 'superpowers' & connect people when those skills are needed.
- **Learning blocks:** Block regular time during quiet dev periods (e.g. code reviews) dedicated to design hygiene and skill-building.
- **Hack days/weeks:** Dedicated time to tackle specific problems & prototype solutions.
- **Go back to basics:** Use sketching, writing & whiteboarding to refocus on discovery & problem framing. Use Amazon's method & have designers write a one-pager or mock press release to clarify the user, context & value before designing.
- **Cross-functional learning:** Designers & PMs explore AI tools together to share use cases & build mutual understanding.
- **Prompting Courses:** Those who master prompting will unlock the full power of AI. Invest in training, then have your team share what they learn to upskill others.

Time-saving is the key ROI with AI right now, but over-reliance risks shortcircuiting discovery & losing sight of the real user problem.

## ← EXTEND → USING AI TO TEAM CAPACITY

### • ADMIN EFFICIENCIES

Tools like *Dovetail*, *Granola*, & *NotebookLM* reduce time spent on transcriptions, summaries, & synthesis, freeing up capacity & in some cases replacing the need for junior support.

### • AI-ENHANCED DESIGN

Figma plugins like *Builder.io* & tools like *vO* & *Lovable* are being used to accelerate early-stage design tasks by converting screenshots into mockups & auto-generating responsive layouts.

### • RESEARCH SUPPORT

Using AI to summarise research & benchmark competitors. Some teams are trialling tools like *Maze* & *Wondering* for interviews, but there are concerns over synthetic users & the risk of missing human & emotional cues.



## AI RISKS: SPEED WITHOUT SUBSTANCE

- **Loss of process:** Jumping to polished outputs too quickly & bypassing critical stages like research/problem framing/iteration.
- **Skill erosion:** Foundational design and strategic skills risk decline as AI takes on more creative work.
- **Tool bias:** People favour tools based on UX or tone, not necessarily capability or fit for purpose.
- **Platform dependence:** Heavy reliance on affordable tools could backfire if pricing spikes or platforms consolidate.

AI is bridging certain skills gaps, but what new ones is it creating?



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