About this document

In front of you is a template for creating Career levels for a small to mid-sized Design team.

Once created, **the document shouldn't be used as a checklist** but as a starting point or a guideline to help one think of where and how they demonstrate skills in their work. I've found it helpful to also use this document in setting personal quarterly goals to help designers grow intentionally.

If you want more details about how I've approached this process, go to my [Blog, where I've written about it](#).

Feel free to download or copy the document and make it your own. I'll appreciate a shoutout or a share if you find the document valuable. Good luck!

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Career levels for a Design team

On all levels, designers will work on the same projects, use the same tools and methods but in a different scope and with a different level of support.

Soft skills

Soft skills apply to all levels. These are personal attributes that influence how well one can interact with others. Unlike hard skills, soft skills are harder to measure objectively. Most of the time, we can best understand the level of development of our soft skills by eliciting feedback from people we work with daily.

Depending on the frequency of how often one demonstrates the use of soft skills, we distinguish between:

- Never demonstrates
- Sometimes demonstrates
- Often demonstrates
- Always demonstrates

These skills need context and can instead be evaluated in relation to the number of opportunities in which they could be demonstrated. If, for example, one had only a few opportunities to demonstrate a particular skill and they have demonstrated the skill on every occasion, we evaluate it as "always demonstrates." If they've failed to demonstrate it on a few of the presented opportunities but still demonstrated it on more than half of them, we evaluate it as "often demonstrates," etc.

To determine which soft skills are essential for your team, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the company's culture like? What are the values that the company has?
- How does my team interact and collaborate with other teams?
- What are the desired personal qualities of team members?
- What are some of the team's strengths and challenges of my team, and how can we improve them?
- What kind of communication style is required for my team to be able to influence decisions and create good solutions?
- How should my team handle stress and pressure?
- What level of flexibility and adaptability is required for the team?
- How do team members handle conflicts and disagreements in and with other teams?
- How essential are teamwork and collaboration with others?
- How should team members handle feedback and criticism?
- How does the team handle and prioritize multiple tasks and responsibilities simultaneously?
- Which interpersonal skills are essential for team members to have?
- ...

Once you have a list of soft skills, make sure you also give an explanation or examples of how people can demonstrate the skills. See the example in the table below.

We chose these soft skills: Empathy, quality standards, feedback, listening and communication, collaboration and facilitation, problem-solving, value delivery, and leadership.

Skill	Explanation/Example
Empathy	- Understands user context and behaviors using any available data and UX research methods. - Understands the impact of their actions on others. - Understands and foresees stakeholders' needs.
Quality standards	...

Hard skills

These skills, compared to soft skills, are easier to quantify and present the abilities that let you tackle job-specific duties and responsibilities. These skills apply on all levels but differ based on the role. If your team has a mix of different profiles, this is where they would diverge. For us, that meant specifying differences between the Product designer and the Visual designer. Each would have their own set of hard skills that were expected of them but with the same scale to assess them.

Skills are assessed on a 6-level scale:

0: Does not understand this competence and/or it is non-existent
1: I have a basic understanding of this competence
2: I can demonstrate this competence under supervision
3: I can demonstrate this competence independently
4: I can supervise other people in this competence
5: I develop new ways of applying this competence

Where junior designers can focus on only one skill, and mid-level designers start building the T-shaped skill set on levels 2 and 3, senior designers are expected to operate on levels 3, 4, and 5 in multiple areas.

To determine which hard skills are essential for your team, ask yourself these questions:

- What kind of design projects does the team handle regularly?
- What design software and tools do we use and are proficient in?
- What is the desired level of proficiency in design tools and approaches?
- What design methodologies are essential for the team?
- Which and how important are design artifacts for the team?
- How important are skills in UX, UI, and Research?
- How important is knowing and following design standards and guidelines vs. exploring and pushing for innovation?
- How necessary is specialized knowledge like Design system, Illustration, Motion …
- …

Below are our examples of the skills and the table:

Hard skills for Product designers: Strategy, UX Research, Ideation, Information architecture, Interaction design, UX testing, Visual design, Microcopy, and Data.

Hard skills for Visual designers: Strategy, Design Research, Ideation, Visual design, Brand design, Interaction design, Evaluation and Validation, Specialised knowledge (Illustration, motion, Icons…)

Skill	Explanation/Example
Empathy	- Understands user context and behaviors using any available data and UX research methods. - Understands the impact of their actions on others. - Understands and foresees stakeholders' needs.
Quality standards	...

Level differentiators

Although there is no differentiation between hard and soft skills per se between the levels, there is a difference in experience, impact, independence, and level of demonstration of hard and soft skills.

Each level has 4 mastery levels that help people continuously progress on their career ladder:

1: Learning - Recently promoted or new to the role. Needs a lot of guidance from the manager with the majority of tasks to understand the role's requirements.
2: Growing - Understands most of what is expected for deliverables, but needs some guidance with understanding the role.
3: Thriving - Understands all aspects of the role, needs limited guidance.
4: Expert - Understands all aspects of the role with no guidance. Once a team member becomes an expert within their current level, the next step may be a promotion if a role at the next level is needed at the company.

Differentiators for us considered soft skills, hard skills, impact, and independence.

Example of differentiators in a table:

Skill/Lvl	Lvl 1	Lvl 2	Lvl 3	Lvl 4
Title	Junior Product Designer Junior Visual Designer	Product Designer Visual Designer	Senior Product Designer Senior Visual designer	Staff Product Designer Staff Visual Designer
Experience	0-2 years	2-5 years	5-10 years	10+ years
Hard Skills	Basic understanding of all hard skills.	Ability to demonstrate interaction / visual design (depending on the role) independently and at least two other skills under minimal supervision.	Can supervise and/or develop new ways of applying Interaction / visual design (depending on the role) and at least one other skill. Additionally, demonstrates independent work in most of the other skills.	Master of the craft, raising the bar of design excellence. Excels and takes ownership in at least one specialty (visual design, design system, data, research, copy...). Mentors and leads others to grow in their craft. Works alongside Product manager and Tech lead to help inform and shape project vision

				and strategy, ensuring research and design efforts are well aligned with strategic objectives.
Soft Skills	...	...	...	...

That's it!

Once you have all the tables filled and provide all the descriptions of Soft skills, Hard skills, and Differentiators, you should have a complex document that can serve you as a key, conversation starter, and guideline. But don't forget, this is not a one-off document, nor should it be created in a management bubble.

I encourage you to involve your team and stakeholders in this, as this will help you create a document that truly holds value on the company level.

Feel free to contact me anytime and send me feedback, questions, maybe even your example, or schedule a coffee for a chat.

Well done!

Pia