

The Design Team Operating Handbook

A complete operating manual: what design maturity means, who owns what, the process, the documentation, and the index of everything else. Built to be adapted to your own team, not copied wholesale.

1 Start Here: What This Is

Design is not just how something looks. It is how it works, how it is understood, and how it scales. This handbook is the engine behind a design team operating with clarity, consistency, and impact, not just intention.

It is a living system: practices, roles, a process, and an index of templates that help a team do its best work together, instead of five people quietly doing it five different ways.

1.1 What This Is and Why It Matters

A design operating system is the orchestration of people, process, and tools to enable high-quality design work at scale. It matters most in a fast-moving, cross-functional environment, where design influences not just pixels but growth, trust, and operational reality. Without a strong foundation underneath it, creativity becomes chaotic, design debt piles up, and collaboration suffers.

Done well, it helps a team:

- Build faster without breaking standards.
- Stay consistent across teams, markets, and squads.
- Scale impact as a design function without burning out.
- Move from reactive firefighting to proactive strategy.
- Communicate design's value across the org in terms other functions actually understand.

In short: this is what buys a team more time designing, and less time managing chaos.

1.2 Defining Design Maturity

Design maturity is not headcount, and it is not visual polish. It is measured by four things:

- How deeply design is embedded in product and business strategy, not just how something looks.
- Whether the process is repeatable, measurable, and user-centred, rather than dependent on who happens to be running it.
- The level of autonomy and clarity each designer has in their own decision-making.
- Whether design work can be connected to a business outcome, not just to a shipped screen.

Treat maturity as a spectrum, and this handbook as the ladder. It exists to help a team climb it, one rung at a time, not to hand down a score.

1.3 Who This Is For

- Designers at every level who want clarity, growth, and impact.
- New joiners navigating their first few weeks.
- Squad partners (PMs, POs, engineers) who want to understand how to collaborate with design.
- Cross-functional partners who want to support better design outcomes.

If you touch design in any way, this is your guide.

1.4 Your North Star

A north star is one sentence that settles arguments before they start: what you point to when a decision comes down to a judgment call. It should say what design is *for* at your company, not just what design *does*.

Example: “Design is a strategic advantage, not a support function” commits a team to being in the room for market-entry and distribution decisions, not just brought in to polish a screen after the decisions are already made. Treating design as a strategic advantage means advocating for the user at every step of the product lifecycle, bringing clarity where there is chaos, and owning how the company is experienced end to end, not just inside one product.

Write yours — one sentence naming what design is for at this company:

1.5 How to Use This Handbook

This is a living document. Not a rulebook, a toolbox.

- Start with the section that applies to you: onboarding, QA, growth, or process.
- Use the templates in this set to move faster, not to reinvent the wheel.
- Add to it. Flag gaps. It evolves with the team, not on a fixed schedule.
- Bookmark it. It is the reference point for doing great design work here.
- If it doesn't have the answer, that's a sign to write the answer, not to work around it.

2 Design Team Foundations

Clarifying roles, ownership, and the principles that shape the work. Whether you're new to the team or a seasoned contributor, this is the map to how the team is structured, how people grow, and how decisions about level and scope get made.

2.1 Team Structure & Roles

Good design is a team sport. Each member of the design org plays a distinct role in building meaningful, scalable, and measurable user experiences, and a role ladder only works if every level is evaluated against the same criteria.

2.2 Core Roles

Role	What It Owns
Design Intern	Early-career contributor learning design foundations while supporting discovery, execution, and QA.
Junior Designer	Owens clearly scoped tasks with support. Focus: execution quality, consistency, delivery discipline.
Mid-Level Designer	Works independently across full design phases. Contributes to strategy, facilitates alignment, tracks impact.
Senior Designer	Owens complex product areas, drives cross-functional collaboration, mentors juniors, connects work to business impact.
Design Lead	Manages a team of designers. Ensures high-quality output, team growth, and alignment with squad and business goals.
Principal Designer	Leads high-impact, cross-squad design strategy. Systems thinking and craft excellence across the org.
Collaborators	PMS, engineers, CX, research, field ops, and business analysts. Design is most powerful embedded across functions.

Every role is evaluated along the same six dimensions:

Impact	Design Thinking	Execution
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Collaboration	Growth	Leadership
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See the Designer Growth Plan Template (3 of 5 in this set) for the full expectations framework behind each dimension.

3 Workflows & Standards

What gets done and how. These workflows aren't just process for its own sake, they're how a team reduces friction, scales craft, and delivers consistently. Shared standards eliminate ambiguity, increase autonomy, and make design a trusted, high-quality partner to business, engineering, product, and CX.

3.1 Design Process

A flexible but intentional process that adapts to squad priorities and project scope, fixed into five phases so progress can be read at a glance instead of guessed at in standup:

Discover → Define → Design → Deliver → Measure

Phase	Purpose	Key Activities	Core Outputs
Discover	Understand the problem space, user context, and operational reality.	Field visits and interviews, review of support tickets or logs, desk research, stakeholder alignment.	Research brief, journey maps, opportunity areas.
Define	Frame the problem, align on goals, scope the opportunity.	Problem framing, KPI definition, feature scoping with PM and engineering, constraints mapping.	Problem statement, prioritised use cases, aligned metrics, internal sign-off.
Design	Explore solutions, validate ideas, iterate fast.	Ideation, wireframing flows and edge cases, prototyping, design crits, pilot testing.	Final UI designs, prototype links, annotated flows, design rationale.
Deliver	Ship high-quality work that matches design intent.	Developer handoff sessions, design QA, cross-functional testing.	Final files in dev mode, design QA report.
Measure	Learn what worked, what didn't, and what's next.	Review metrics, field feedback, A/B tests or surveys, team retro.	Case study write-up, before/after analysis, documented learnings.

One mindset per phase, worth keeping on the wall:

Discover — Design starts with immersion, not assumptions.

Define — Clarity here prevents wasted effort later.

Design — Design is thinking made visible.

Deliver — Design isn't done until the user touches it.

Measure — The best designers are relentless learners.

3.2 Documentation & Tools

Process is only as strong as its documentation. Document for clarity, alignment, and repeatability, not bureaucracy: what goes where should be obvious to anyone on the team, not tribal knowledge held by whoever has been here longest.

Tool Category	What Lives There
Design tool (e.g. Figma)	Working files, component libraries, the design system, dev-mode handoff.
Docs / wiki (e.g. Confluence, Notion)	This handbook, process documentation, retros, design learnings.
Project tracker (e.g. Jira)	Tickets linked to every QA report and every shipped feature.
Whiteboard tool (e.g. Miro)	Workshops, journey maps, service blueprints, discovery artefacts.

3.3 Templates & Resource Library

A single index of where everything design-related lives, organised by what question it answers. This toolkit fills two of these categories directly:

01 Design Research & Insights

Research briefs, journey maps, and the insight repository. Where the “why” behind a decision is kept, not just the decision itself.

02 Experiments & Design Impact

A/B test logs, before/after case studies, and the retro outputs from the Measure phase.

03 CX Alignment

The shared space with support and CX: known issues, ticket trends, where design debt is creating downstream cost.

04 Onboarding & Growth

The Design Onboarding Quest and the Designer Growth Plan Template (5 and 3 in this set) live here.

05 Templates & Resources Library

The Design QA Report Template and Designer Handover Template (2 and 4 in this set), plus your own component and pattern libraries.

06 Maintenance Plan

Who owns keeping this handbook current, and how often it gets reviewed. A handbook nobody updates becomes fiction within two quarters.