

# EXPLORING DESIGN

A series of eBooks for product managers on collaborating effectively with your company's design function



PRAGMATIC  
— INSTITUTE —

As a product manager, you might have experienced challenges in engaging with your design team:

*“I don’t know **how to ask for the type of design support I need**. I’ve been assigned a range of designers with different skills but not always the right ones for the project.”*

*“My designer says they want to be included earlier in the process, but **how and when should I include them?**”*

*“What is the **difference between UX and UI design?**  
And what is UX/UI?”*

Like product managers, designers want to deliver winning products to the market. However, the design skills required for product success depend on the market problems and varies by design practice.

Learn about these practices to better identify what you need and build stronger relationships with your design colleagues.

# DESIGN PRACTICE IDENTIFICATION GUIDE



There's a broad array of design practices. Each one has its own language, tools, methods and mindsets. Within these practices there is often a variety of roles and capability levels, so it can be difficult to navigate this complexity.

# HERE'S A QUICK GUIDE TO **KEY DESIGN PRACTICES** AND THE COMMON CAPABILITIES YOU CAN EXPECT THESE DESIGNERS TO HAVE.

## User Experience (UX) Design

User experience (UX) design is employed to create products that provide meaningful, intuitive experiences to users. UX, which is rooted in empathy and user goals, intersects with practices like interaction design (IxD), visual design (VisD) and copywriting. It also depends on branding, usability and function.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Ethnographic research methods (e.g. interviewing, contextual inquiry, surveys), synthesis, modeling, insights, facilitation, ideation, prototyping, testing

## UX Design Research

UX design research is devoted specifically to understanding user behaviors, needs and attitudes, using different observation and feedback collection methods – both qualitative and quantitative. UX design researchers are observers, skilled in finding patterns and developing insights.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Ethnographic research methods – includes generative research (insights and ideas) and evaluative research (testing)

## Visual Design (VisD)

Visual design centers on the aesthetic experience of a product and aims to elicit an emotional response from the audience via graphic design. It may extend to non-digital channels like print and video. Those who work solely on digital products are sometimes called “digital designers,” and this work is described as “look and feel.”

**Key Capabilities:**  
Graphic design skills including layout, color theory, iconography, typography, photography, illustration— shares capabilities with brand design

## Information Architecture (IA)

Information architecture is a practice related to UX design that straddles both art and science. It supports the development of navigable and usable information systems, including websites, intranets, online communities and software.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Human computer interaction (HCI), research, content analysis, card sorting, tree testing, faceted classification, content strategy

## Brand Design

Brand design involves crafting a distinctive identity that reflects a brand's personality and shares its story. It's a marketing practice of creating the name, logo, design and symbolic elements that drive customers to adopt a product or service.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Research, facilitation, naming, logo design, digital and print visual design – shares capabilities with visual design

## Motion Design

Motion design is the practice of developing artwork for web, television or film that may include visual effects, animation, video and other cinematic techniques. From the hover motion of a button to time-based narrative that conveys instructions to a user, motion design tells a story and persuades.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Graphic design fluency, animation, video, 3D modeling, storytelling, storyboarding, technical mastery of animation and rendering tools

## User Interface (UI) Design

A specific subset of UX design, user interface design is about designing the elements in software or hardware that users need to accomplish a task in an easy and pleasurable way. There is a focus on the surface and overall feel of an interface. It's not just how a product "looks and feels" but how it functions.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Graphical user interfaces (GUIs), vocal user interface (VUI), gesture-based interfaces – utilizes capabilities from IxD, VisD and IA

## Service Design

Service design continuously and holistically crafts users' experiences with a brand across channels and touchpoints (like in-person and digital). Often associated with sectors like healthcare and transportation, it requires understanding both the customer journey and behind-the-scenes elements of a business' ability to deliver the intended experience.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Ethnographic research, synthesis, experience mapping and storytelling, insights, facilitation, ideation, prototyping, testing, systems design

## Usability Research

A targeted subset of UX design focused on observing and assessing how a user responds to a designed experience and learning what their preferences might be. This includes identifying pain points and uncovering opportunities to improve.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Interviewing, testing, facilitation, human factors acumen, human computer interaction (HCI)

## Customer Experience (CX) Design

Customer experience design influences how customers perceive their interactions with a brand. The definition may differ by organization, but it's usually focused on maintaining the processes by which a brand's service experience is delivered to a customer across channels and touchpoints.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Customer service, acquisition, marketing, analytics, AI, content management

## Design Systems

This specialized practice at the intersection of UX/UI and engineering focuses on creating a system of reusable components, interconnected patterns and shared guidelines for interface development. The goal is a consistent representation of a brand experience across a product portfolio.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Visual design, UI, graphic design, front-end web development and HTML/CSS skills, release management

## Business Design

Business design focuses on prototyping, developing and validating new business models. It leverages the ability to extend the customer-centric nature of design thinking to the business viability phase of the innovation process.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Quantitative and qualitative research, synthesis, business modeling/mapping, prototyping, testing



## Organization Design

Organization design is about designing (or redesigning) a company's structures and systems to support its strategy. It looks at workflow, decision-making procedures, team formations, lines of reporting, channels for communication and more.

**Key Capabilities:**  
Business strategy, change management, data analysis, synthesis, modeling, leadership, storytelling

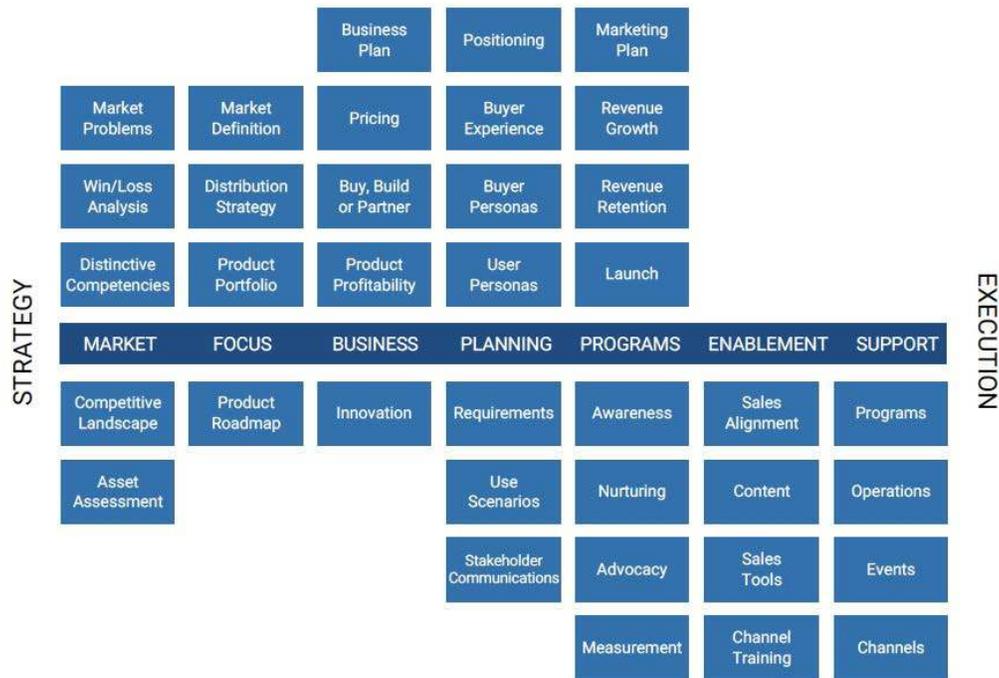
## Industrial Design

Industrial design gives form to mass-produced objects. Broadly, it's the practice of creating and developing concepts and specifications that optimize the function, value and appearance of products to benefit both the user and manufacturer.

**Key Capabilities:**  
User research, human factors, 3D modeling, 3D rendering, prototyping and testing, basic engineering and fabrication, visual storytelling

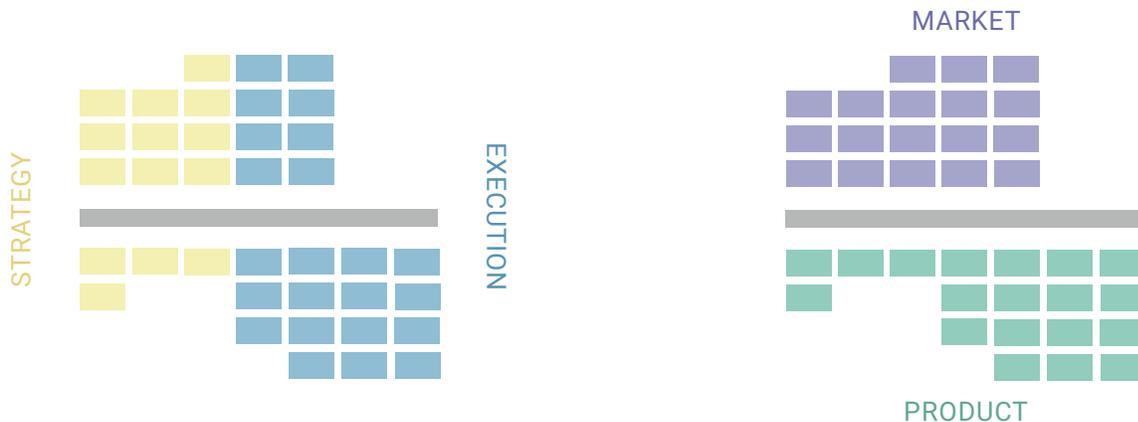
# DESIGN AND THE PRAGMATIC FRAMEWORK

The Pragmatic Framework lays out the key activities required to create and market products that people want to buy. Depending on their backgrounds and capabilities, designers can serve as partners in any number of the key activities in the Pragmatic Framework to foster innovation.



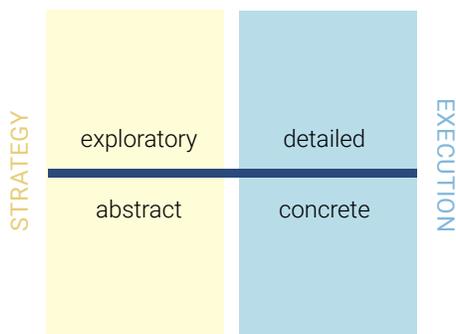
The Pragmatic Framework serves as a proven blueprint for product teams. Activities on the left help you take a strategic, big-picture look at your market, your business and your product portfolio. Activities on the right help you focus on the execution aspect of creating your product and bringing it to market.

The vertical axis of the Pragmatic Framework tells you whether an activity is focused on understanding the market and its problems (up top) or your proposed solution to address those problems (down below).



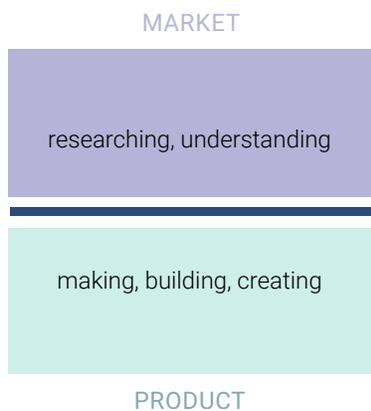
# ORGANIZING DESIGN PRACTICES

We can plot the different design practices on Pragmatic Framework using the same axes to understand their potential contributions and ideal partnership points.



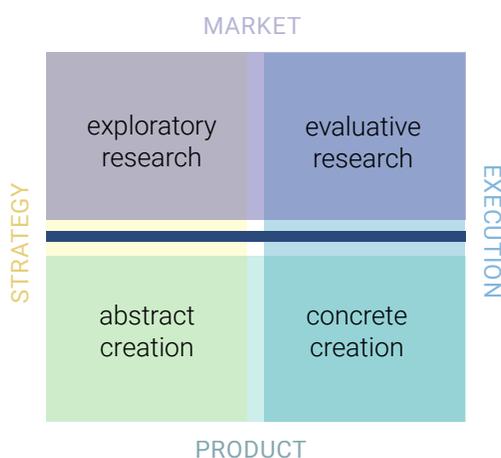
Strategic design practices focus on exploring target users and the problem space (in product management language, "the market and the market problems") while beginning to explore potential solutions.

Tactical design practices focus on execution: making solutions concrete and evaluating and validating those solutions against the market.



Design practices at top focus on people and involve observing and understanding the market: conducting research and conveying an understanding of the people who will use your products.

Design practices at bottom focus on outcomes and the shape of the eventual solution: imaging, planning and building a product that solves the user's problems.



## What emerges are four distinct design quadrants:

Exploratory research (top left) involves coming to a strategic understanding of users and their problems.

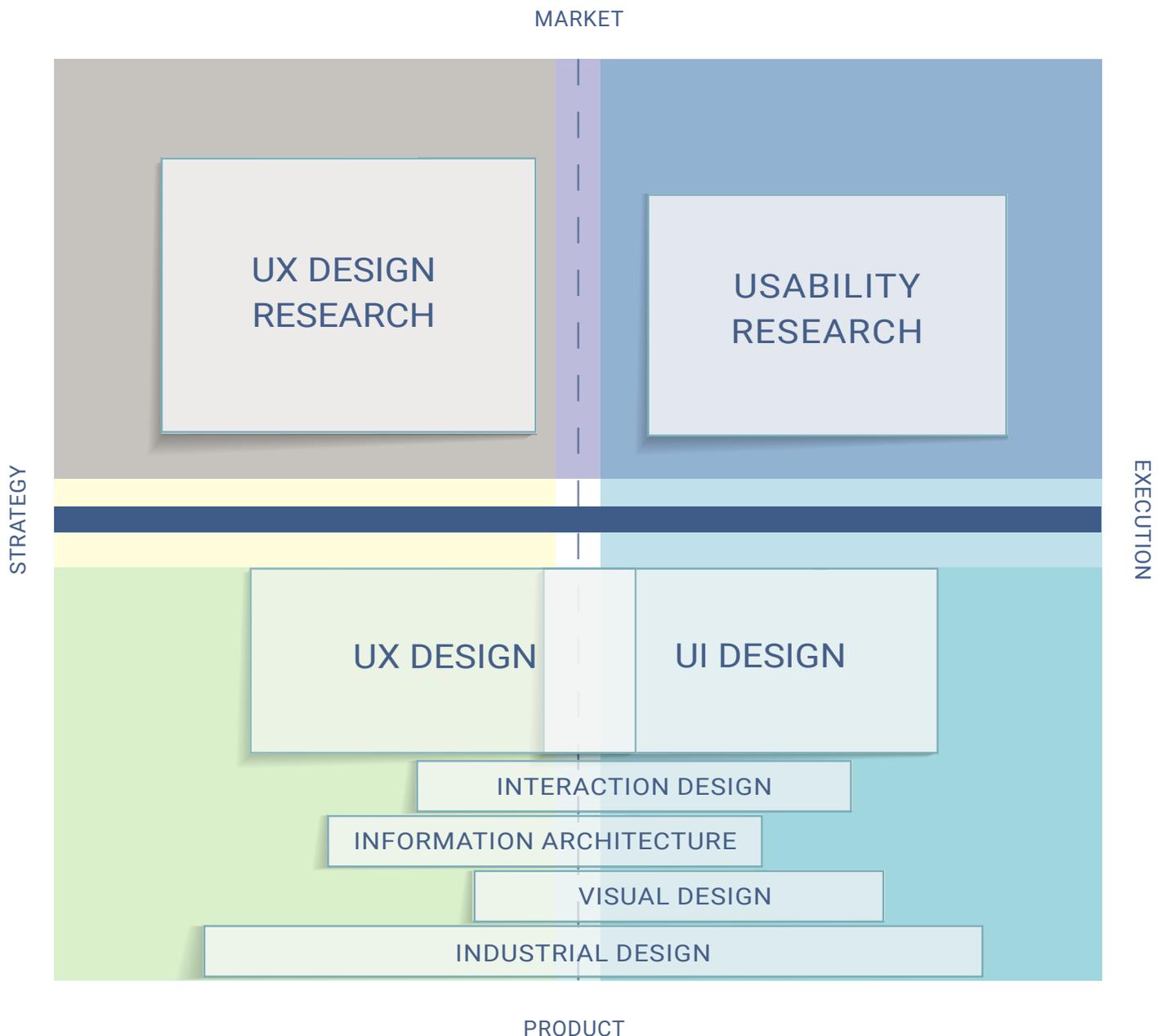
Abstract creation (lower left) has practices focusing on the early stages: identifying potential solutions, using narrative to map out workflows and sketching potential concepts.

Concrete creation (lower right) includes practices concerned with implementation fit and finish for products.

Practices that involve evaluative research (upper right): bringing concepts, prototypes or working applications to users to evaluate whether the solution fits the market need.

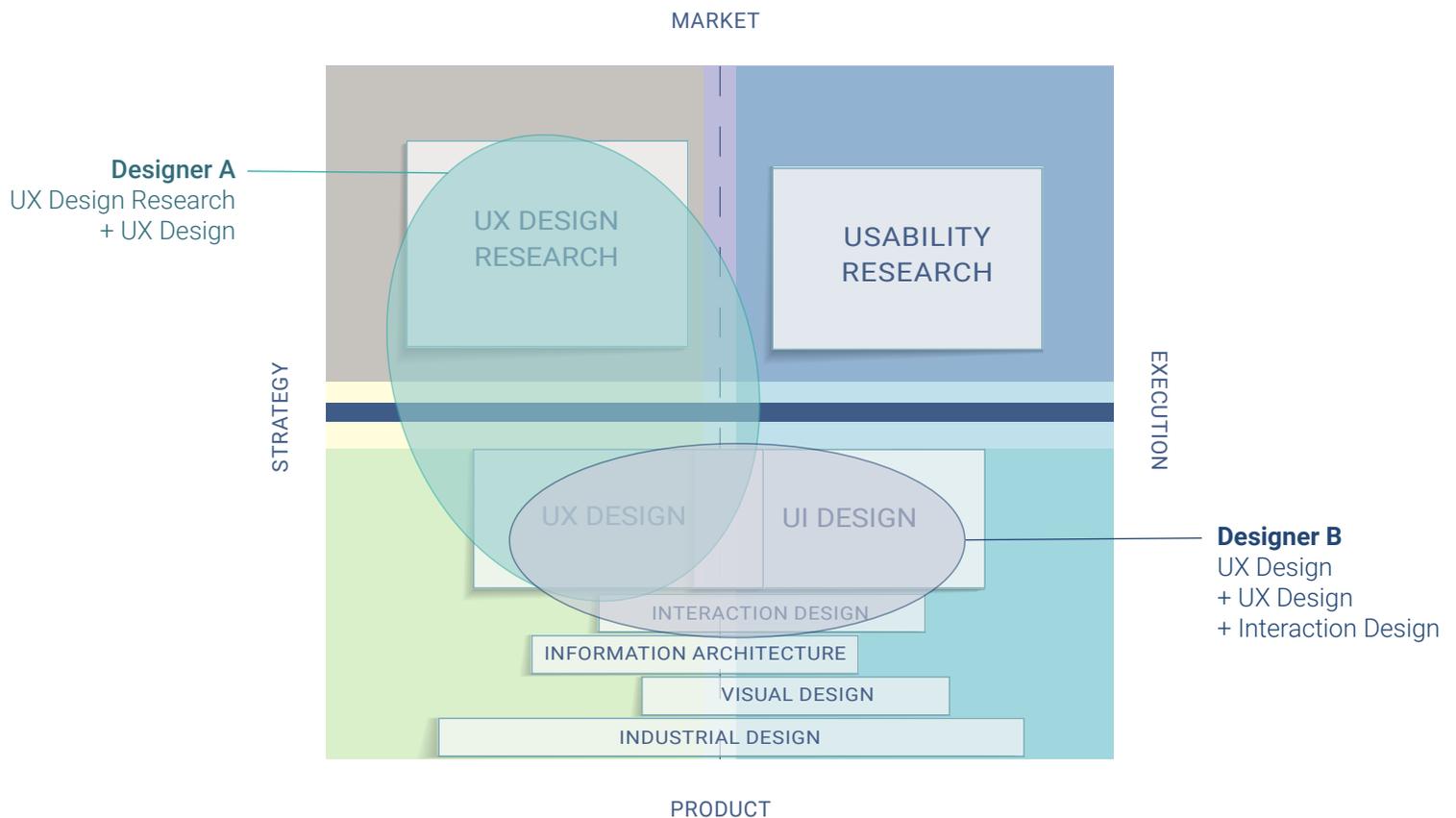
# MAPPING DESIGN PRACTICES

Let's plot the design practices we described previously. Some practices live squarely in one quadrant, and other practices operate within multiple.



# DESIGNERS CAN SPAN PRACTICES

Often, designers have experience across several practices. Designers often develop capabilities that will enable them to take on more strategic roles. For instance, a UX designer skilled in creating complex and well- documented wireframes may wish to expand their user research capabilities.



## What's a unicorn?

It's a buzzy bit of jargon that refers to designers who seem to have it all. These designers have capabilities that run across multiple practices (e.g. brand, UX, service design and visual design). Since unicorns are rare mythical creatures, it's safe to say these kinds of designers are hard to find. To be clear, it's impossible for one person to have "all" design skills; rather, the term references the magical alchemy of one person with multiple capabilities that match what a particular organization needs. So, there is no one shape to a unicorn. While larger, more well- established organizations tend to seek out practitioners who specialize in a specific practice, startups tend to seek out unicorns, given resource constraints at the beginning of a venture.

# HOW TO NAVIGATE DESIGNER VARIABILITY

The key to working with designers is finding out how to best apply their specific skills to add value.

What practices does your organization hire for?  
What are the capabilities of designers who work in these areas?  
How do your design resources match with what your product needs at different points in the process?

Do some NIHITO with your designer(s)!

Find out what you don't know! Apply the same curiosity you use to learn about the market to learning about your design partners.

Seek to understand the design function at your organization, so you can request the right resources and develop a more meaningful and strategic collaboration.



# ACTIVITY

No need to be super formal: Ask your design manager or designer to coffee to discuss their expertise and where they feel they can contribute!

## CONVERSATION GUIDE

### Ask Your Design Manager:

- How does our company's design function align to this design practice map?
- What types of designers do we employ?
- What capabilities are you looking for in a specific role?
- Where is design now and where does it want to be?

### Ask Your Designer:

- Tell me about your career path?
- How did you get here?
- What design practices do you identify with?
- Where do you see yourself on this design practice map?
- In what area do you spend the most time?
- What are your design superpowers?
- Where do you want to grow?



## AND THEN FLIP THE SCRIPT

Ask your design colleagues what they'd like to know about you and your own product management capabilities. Chances are, your design team is just as curious about you and where you're looking to develop a more strategic partnership.



Want to forge a more powerful partnership with your designers?

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