

Building Bridges Within and Beyond UX

Let's talk about skills and specializations that make a great UX professional

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ABSTRACT

What are the tasks and skills important for being a UX professional and do they match the perception of co-workers from outside of UX? This understanding has implications for how UX professionals can have the most impact to the product or service in order to operate most effectively. This paper will share insights into the UX department of LogMeIn, a major SaaS (software as a service) company. Surveys on the image, skills, tasks, and profiles were conducted with UX professionals and their co-workers from other departments. Results show that those from other departments focus more on defining UX through deliverables and communication skills. Following the analysis, a practical application for how UX work can be most effective through combining multiple UX skills is presented. Enjoy the read and be sure to share your feedback and thoughts.

KEYWORDS

UX, User Experience, Job Profiles, Tasks, Skills, Specialization

1 UX Professionals – What do we even do?

Hey there, UX professional – are you a generalist or a specialist? Or maybe even T-shaped? Do you maybe even identify as a glamorous unicorn, smart fox or specialized hedgehog (check Table 1 for an overview)? There are many job titles within the area of user experience design, and numerous ways to study associated fields, degrees, apprenticeships, and autodidactic approaches, ultimately leading to landing a user experience job. It's highly unlikely that we could develop a set of standards for UX skill sets which would be applicable for any company structure, however there is no shortage of articles which discuss the best practices within a UX setting. However, researching job profiles online, an endless flood of articles discusses what works best in the UX setting.

“Generalists” (Ross 2015) are defined as having a broad overview of all associated fields of UX while being responsible for multiple disciplines, e.g. user research, design, information architecture, testing, and sometimes even development. They can fill many positions and carry out diverse work while maintaining the option to specialize at a later point in time. They can be great facilitators and are flexible in team settings while rarely being star designers or in-depth researchers. Additionally, their profile can lead to quite a large amount of work and potential bias when researching, designing, and testing on their own without incorporating feedback from others (Ross 2015).

UX specialists are known for their in-depth knowledge of a specific topic, their ability to focus, and their access to great projects that require an expert. However, there is potential for less variation in their work, fewer career opportunities, and little chance to transition to a generalist position if the need arises (Ross 2015). While there is no cute animal to go along with the generalist, the specialist is sometimes described as a “hedgehog” (Wilt 2015) due to its ability to “solving one set of problems or delivering one set of outcomes in a pinch” (ibid.) while potentially being “handicapped by having become locked into their own discipline or one business domain” (ibid.).

Another praised profile is that of the “T-shaped designer” (Schaden 2016) which sadly does not come with a fancy animal equivalent either. T-shaped designers are supposed to be the “sweet spot” (ibid.) between generalists and specialists. While they offer a strong specialization in one area, additional knowledge and “surface-level talents” (ibid.) in other UX areas allow for great teamwork and a good overview of the bigger picture. A skilled web designer who can also code will communicate much more easily and efficiently with the developers while being more likely to be empathetic to their struggles and processes.

If we go back to the “UX design bestiary” (Interaction Design Foundation 2017), there's another animal waiting for us: The “fox” (ibid.) which greatly interested me – and not just because of it being my namesake. The fox is someone who can “think laterally and apply insights from several fields” (Wilt 2015). They come from a different background and might have filled in jobs across a broad number of departments and positions. Due to this extensive set of experiences and adaptability, they're said to be “more comfortable with [...] uncertainty” (ibid.). This allows them to focus on their curiosity and creativity, which is great for both

research and problem-solving – the core tasks of a great user experience professional. However, Wilt stresses the importance for companies to employ both foxes and hedgehogs, as their differing perspectives can be valuable in varying situations (2015). Last but not least, the famous “UX unicorns” (Wilt 2015) should be mentioned. They can “do it all” (ibid.) and will also “speak about it at the next big conference, inspiring us with their incredible wit and tact” (ibid.). There are countless discussions and articles about the value of unicorns, strategies how to find them, and of course – how to become one. Due to their immense rarity (including within our company), I will not focus on unicorns in this article but rather on the image and nature of UX professionals and their skill sets. In general, the mentioned authors all highlight that there is not one specific profile that makes a great team, but the diversity of diverse perspectives and backgrounds that lead to delightful and efficient user experience design.





	The unicorn can do it all. They are rare and it is unclear whether the effort of finding one is really worth it.
	The fox has multiple specializations and can easily adapt to new challenges and uncertainty.
	The hedgehog is the specialist and can provide in-depth knowledge of a specific field and great focus. It can even become T-shaped.
	What about a chameleon for the generalist? They will blend in and adjust to the situation at hand.

Table 1: The updated UX bestiary (all icons provided by freepik/flaticon.com)

So, let’s first have a look at the job titles. Have you ever struggled to explain to someone outside the field what you do? Have people ever wondered what you are being paid for at a software company which already has relevant aspects covered by interface designers, developers, and strategists? When discussing my background, I previously had to explain how I came from communication and accessibility research, then completed a five-year design degree, worked at a web agency, and finally ended up at a major software company where I currently work on the user experience team. Yet when people realized they couldn’t place me into a neat little box with a clear job title, the questions continued. When I respond by stating that I’m a designer, many immediately associate that with graphic design. And when I get more specific by stating that I am a product designer, that association shifts to packaging or industrial design. To combat this, I stopped stating my job title and started explaining the responsibilities of my day-to-day role such as making interactions with our software a pleasant experience, finding easy solutions that don’t require onboarding

or extensive explanation, and discovering easy-to-comprehend solutions to everyday problems. In short, helping users to achieve their goals. And these goals rarely have anything to do with our software – no one is using a video conferencing tool to enjoy our button design or marvel upon the distribution of the settings. People use our tools to collaborate efficiently, to meet other people, and to get things done.

Now let’s have a look at our company: How do we see ourselves within the user experience department of LogMeIn, and who on the outside recognizes what we do?

With more than 2.700 employees and 18 products across three main business areas, LogMeIn is one of the top SaaS companies worldwide, thus our large user experience department, including quantitative and qualitative researchers, designers, editors, and UX engineers, is no surprise. We conduct user research, lay out and design the product, find solutions based on strategic goals, and work together with development, management, marketing, localization, and Quality Engineering.

Looking at this rather traditional constellation, I wondered how we see ourselves and how this perception compares to how our co-workers see us. In two one-week-long internal surveys targeted at UX professionals and their co-workers from other departments, I asked employees across the company about their job titles, tasks, soft skills, fun aspects of their daily work, and the future of UX.

Sixteen UX professionals participated in the survey called “Quick UX Self-Portrait”, among them nine designers, five researchers, one editor, and one director. For the survey called “How do you see UX professionals?”, there were 11 participants: five product managers, one portfolio manager, two engineers, one director of product management, and two anonymous participants (that labelled themselves as “Senior Code Monkey” and “Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch”). The surveys asked about tasks, soft skills, favorite aspects of UX work, job flexibility, the future of UX, and profiles.

1.1 Tasks

The first two surveys yielded a general comparison of how we see ourselves vs. how our co-workers see us. As defining and describing what we do often seems to be quite a struggle, my first question was about the main tasks of UX professionals, based on 30 analyzed LinkedIn job offers when searching for “User Experience” jobs in Germany (see Figure 1).

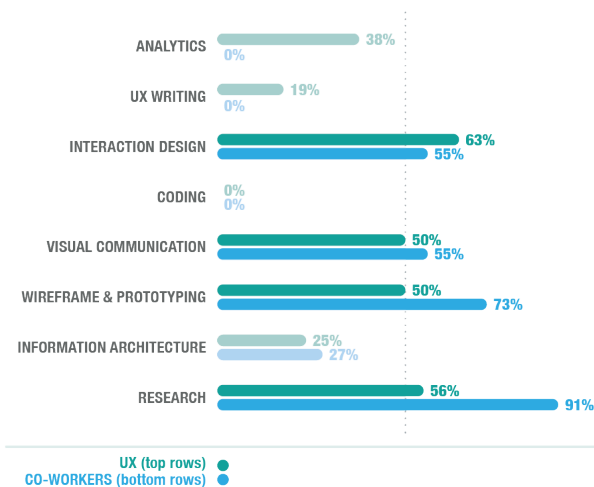


Figure 1: Main tasks of UX professionals as seen from within and outside the UX department (for improved readability, percentages are rounded to the next whole number)

Participants had to pick their three top tasks that they associate with UX jobs. Focusing on the tasks with at least 50% agreement, UX professionals see

- **Interaction Design** (63%) and
- **Research** (56%)

as their main tasks, closely followed by

- **Visual Communication** (50%) and
- **Wireframing & Prototyping** (50%),

with a general broad acceptance of most tasks except for coding (seems like our UX engineers didn't participate in the survey, huh). Our co-workers agree, with over 90%, that research is a main task, but then seem to strongly focus on wireframing & prototyping followed by interaction design and visual communication:

- **Research** (91%)
- **Wireframing & Prototyping** (73%)
- **Interaction Design** (55%)
- **Visual Communication** (55%)

This strong focus on research, wireframing, and prototypes shows how product managers and software engineers focus primarily on the deliverables they receive from UX professionals, while designers, researchers, and editors are more aware of the broad variety of tasks they face in their daily work and the required specialization in various areas. Further interesting insights and statistics can be found in InVision's **Hiring Report** from 2019 (see <https://www.invisionapp.com/hiring-report>, InVision 2019). In their extensive global survey, they asked 1,635 product designers, design students, and those responsible for

recruiting and hiring designers about hiring practices and expectations. The report also asked product designers and managers for the top technical "hard skills" (InVision 2019) needed in product design:

- UX Design (83%)
- User Research (59%)
- UI Design (55%)

These are closely followed by Information Architecture, Design Software Proficiency, and several more skills. Compared to our internal results, it is almost identical with the self-portrait results of the UX professionals (Interaction Design, Research, Visual Communication on the top three).

1.2 Soft Skills

In order to paint a balanced picture, I also asked about soft skills that are important for UX professionals (see Figure 2). As in the previous question, I asked participants to pick exactly three of the presented options (based on internal resources).

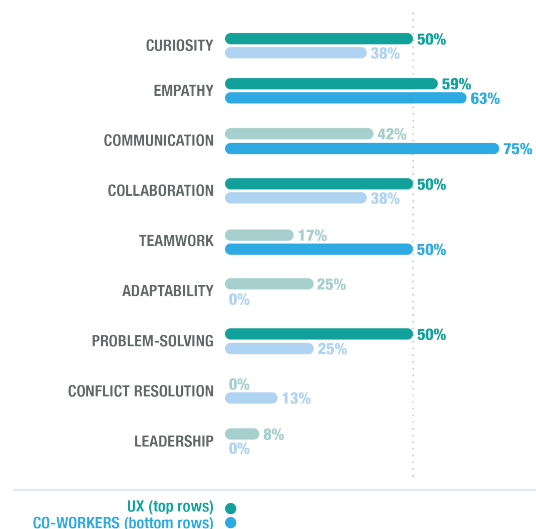


Figure 2: Most important soft skills of UX professionals as seen from within and outside UX departments

Again, focusing on items with at least 50% agreement among the participants, UX professionals deemed

- **Empathy** (59%),
- **Problem-solving** (50%), and
- **Curiosity** (50%)

as the most relevant soft skills. This again paints a quite broad and balanced picture of the various empowering soft skills. Our co-workers from outside UX showed a less balanced prioritization with a strong focus on

- **Communication** (75%),
- **Empathy** (63%), and
- **Teamwork** (50%).

With around 60% agreement from both groups, Empathy seems to be generally recognized as a main ‘ingredient’ that makes a great UX professional. Empathy is what drives us to meet our users, learn about their problems and challenges, and design great experiences that delight their daily life. From the answers, it is also visible that UX professionals focus on solving problems for their users while co-workers understandably focus on the interaction with the UX department (see the high scores for Communication and Teamwork). InVision’s Hiring Report also mentions that “hiring managers rate collaboration as most desirable soft skill” (2019) when looking for product designers. The report also lists the top soft skills needed in product design, led by Collaboration, Communication, and Empathy.

Coming back to our internal results, there sadly was little agreement from either side that leadership is a relevant soft skill for UX professionals from both sides. This is especially interesting as we have a VP of User Experience at LogMeIn. Our co-workers do not seem to expect leadership from UX, even though our main focus is understanding our users’ problems and solving them by representing their voice in our products.

1.3 Favorite Aspect of UX

After sharing their opinions on the most relevant tasks and skills in their job, UX participants should now also state their favorite parts of their jobs. In the other survey, co-workers from outside UX should guess the favorite work aspects of UX professionals. There was no limit of how much they could write in the free text field, but no participant wrote more than one sentence. The replies of the UX participants can be assigned to five major categories:

1. **Problem-solving & Creativity:** Eight participants stated that problem-solving and the associated creativity are their favorite aspects of their UX job. One participant described it as “when you finally find a solution to a tricky problem and it works both for design and engineering and delights the user”, others mentioned “solving puzzles, thinking through abstract problems and crafting simple solutions”, “problem solving through research methods”, “solving complex problems in novel ways”, and “solving problems and helping users”.
2. **Collaboration throughout the entire process:** Five participants stated that their favorite aspect is the broad collaboration across departments throughout different phases of the product creation lifecycle. They mentioned the “work on cross-functional teams”, “working with PMs, developers, and researchers” and the “diverse international team” as being a few of their favorite areas.

3. **Being the users’ voice in the company:** Three participants said that their favorite task is to help team members to see the users’ perspective. They mentioned that they want to “understand the customer/user and [...] the teams” and “talking to many people and understand their needs”.
4. **Research:** Four participants also mentioned research itself as their favorite aspect of their work, e.g. by saying “finding out ‘why’ and developing an appropriate solution”, “the ability to dive at will into completely new questions/research areas”, and “problem-solving through research methods”.
5. **Building great products:** Another general aspect mentioned several times, both indirectly and explicitly, was the love of building great products while simultaneously delighting users.

These replies match closely with the most relevant tasks and soft skills stated by the UX participants. The participants appeared to enjoy the core aspects of their jobs while collaborating across departments and communicating extensively with users.

Co-workers were asked to guess the UX professionals’ favorite aspect of their jobs. Their replies were remarkably short and didn’t show as much overlap with the answers of the UX participants. However, five major categories could be identified:

1. **Customer engagement and delight:** Four co-workers had the impression that close contact to our users and customers is the favorite task of most UX professionals. They mentioned “customer engagement and seeing designs come to life”, “getting in touch with customers to get direct feedback”, and “user interviews”. One participant also mentioned “seeing users delighted using the designed item”.
2. **Early influence:** Three participants mentioned aspects of influencing a product early-on by stating “inventing new things”, “early thought leadership”, and “being able to influence how people work”.
3. **Problem-solving:** One participant also explicitly mentioned problem-solving as their guess for the favorite aspect of UX work: “Identifying problems and coming up with a solution.”
4. **Collaboration:** Only one participant mentioned collaboration as a possible favorite aspect of UX work by stating “getting to interact with many other departments/functions”.

In contrast to the coherence between tasks, soft skills, and favorite aspects as stated by the UX professionals, there is much less coherence to be found between the most relevant tasks and soft skills co-workers stated, and their guesses at the favorite aspects of UX work. However, the aspect which was stated the most (customer engagement) does align with the highlighted empathy towards users. Other than that, co-workers mentioned thought leadership here but didn’t see it as a relevant skill in the previous question.

Comparing the replies from the UX professionals with those of the co-workers, the mentioned categories are similar (problem-solving, collaboration, customer engagement) but to differing

degrees. While problem-solving was most frequently stated as a favorite aspect by UX professionals, their co-workers focused on the aspect of customer engagement. However, these usually go hand-in-hand and complement each other very well; in order to delight the users, we have to solve their problems and be creative while doing it. So, it seems as both groups look at two sides of the same coin.

In InVision's Hiring Report (2019), the top four rated qualities product designers want most in their new job were stated as the following:

1. **Problem-solving**
2. **Meaningful work**
3. **Remote work & Flexible working hours**
4. **Experimental & Impactful work**

All these qualities appeared in the replies to our internal survey as well, with the problem-solving and desire for meaningful and impactful work being the qualities most frequently mentioned. The appreciation of flexible work hours (in combination with remote work and international travel) was mentioned at least once. For further reading, the Hiring Report also lists employer attributes that attract designers (such as career growth and well-designed office space, InVision 2019).

1.4 Job Flexibility

In order to better understand the background of UX professionals and whether they see their jobs rather as a 'one-way road' or a more flexible 'highway', I asked the UX participants whether they had switched job roles before and if they would be open to switching roles in the future (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

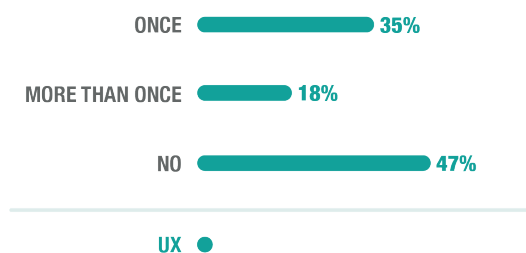


Figure 3: Replies of UX professionals whether they changed their job profile before

Figure 3 shows that more than half of the UX participants have changed their job profile before (35% did once, 18% did more than once). About 47% have always worked in their current job role.

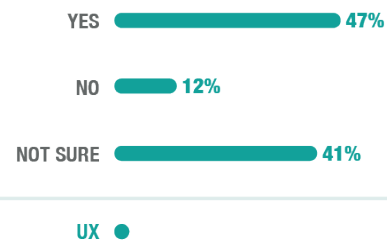


Figure 4: Replies of UX professionals whether they would change their job profile in the future

Figure 4 shows that only about 12% of the UX professionals rule out ever changing their job profile. While about 41% are not sure, 47% clearly stated that they see a job change as an option in the future.

All in all, at least half of the UX participants seem to be flexible regarding their jobs and daily tasks and are not 100% certain they will stay in the same role for the rest of their career. This is also reflected in InVision's Hiring Report which mentions that product designers "begin considering new opportunities [...] 10-12 months after starting a new job" (2019). An interesting follow-up question here could focus on whether this attitude could be connected to a lower degree of specialization – therefore asking whether generalists are more likely to be open for new job roles and tasks. In contrast, participants responded negatively when asked whether they could see themselves as specialists for a specific job role, as they don't see themselves switching roles. There could be additional reasons for the unwillingness to switch such as being content in their current role or feeling as though they've already achieved the highest possible position.

1.5 The Future of UX

To return to the question of the perfect UX skill set, and in order to combine it with its impact on UX jobs in the future, I asked UX professionals and their co-workers to share their assumptions about how UX jobs will change in the future. There were five options to choose from in reply to the question "Do you think UX jobs will stay the same in the next ten years?":

- Yes, pretty much.
- Not sure.
- No, they will require more specialization in existing tasks.
- No, they will require a broader skill set of existing tasks.
- No, they will require new skills.

The possible answers were phrased in such a way as to understand which employee type the participants see as the most promising for the future of UX jobs: UX specialists with new skills, generalists with a broad skill set, specialists of existing tasks, or no change to the current status of UX. They could also state that they are not sure. As visible from Figure 5, both the UX professionals and their co-workers seem to agree that there will be new skills required (36% co-workers and 35% UX professionals)

and that a broader skill set will come in handy (55%/30%). These statements complement each other quite well, as existing UX professionals might have to add new skills to their set, therefore broadening it. While some UX professionals can imagine a future where a stronger specialization is preferable (12%), it seems like this is not a favored option outside the UX team. Additionally, the co-workers appear more self-confident in their statements while UX professionals were more likely to state that they are not sure about the ideal future skill set (9%/18%). Only 6% of the UX professionals stated that they don't expect much change.

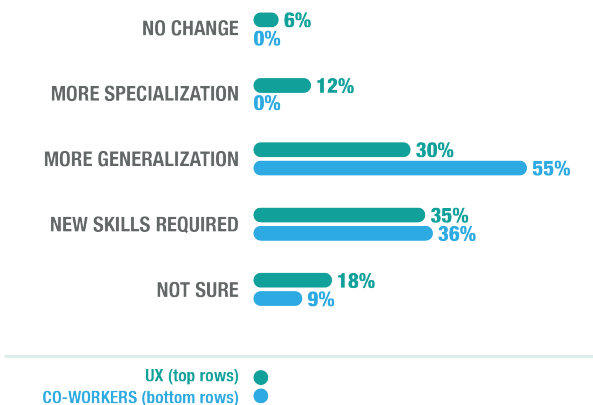


Figure 5: Future changes in UX jobs as seen from within and outside UX departments

1.6 The Perfect Profile

Adding on to the previous question, the participants were asked to state what type of professional works best in a UX setting. They could select one of the following statements:

1. **A broad, general knowledge** of many areas.
2. **Strong [single] specialization** in one specific area, e.g. design or writing.
3. **Multiple specializations**, e.g. coding/design or research/design.

The first statement describes the ‘generalist’ who has a broad knowledge and skill set while not specializing in any of the disciplines. The second statement describes the aforementioned ‘specialist’ or ‘hedgehog’ who can also be a ‘T-shaped’ professional if they have a good general knowledge of the other UX disciplines. The third statement describes the special use case which led to this paper – the case of an UX professional who is specialized in two disciplines and that could also be describe as a ‘fox’, even though descriptions vary whether this can be two specialization within UX or a lateral mix of one specialization from outside UX and one from within. The other previously mentioned type of the ‘unicorn’ was not included as an option as it is highly unlikely to directly find and recruit a ‘UX unicorn’ and therefore resources should not be directed at this task (Interaction Design Foundation 2017).

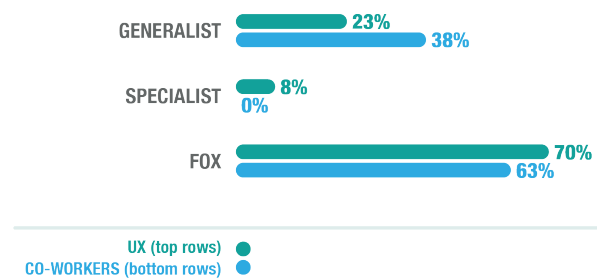


Figure 6: Replies of UX professionals whether they changed their job profile before

As visible from Figure 6, the agreement between UX professionals and co-workers is quite high here – the concept of a double specialization (or fox) was seen as the best ‘breed’ (62.50% agreement among co-workers and 69.23% agreement among UX professionals), followed by the broad and knowledgeable generalist (37.50%/23.08%). Only 7.69% of the UX professionals and none of their co-workers see the specialist as the best type of skill set for working in UX. Surprisingly, the fox received the most votes, even though it seems to be a quite uncommon ‘beast’ in the UX world, though not as uncommon as the infamous UX unicorn.

2 Fox Meets Discovery Mission

So where does a fox really thrive, and how can a company make the best use of this double-specialized creature? Let me tell you about one of my most recent projects. The following example is based on personal experience at LogMeIn with a mixed background of quantitative research (in applied linguistics) and communication design. We were uncertain of which direction we wanted to take one of our GoToMeeting features. We held a cross-department workshop to discover the right path to take but ended up with many possible directions – some areas were well researched and others not. As we didn’t want to base our decision on a mix of research and subjective views and assumptions, we decided to perform clearly targeted, extensive research on this specific feature. This would provide a solid foundation to decide how to move forward with this topic. In order to provide more than just research, a prototype would be built at the end of this three-month “Discovery Mission”. It would be based upon research insights and recommendations on how to put this into missions on the roadmap.



Figure 7 Basic concept of a UX discovery mission

Having both the background and experience to supervise the research and design, I could lead the mission without having to facilitate a handover of the research results to a designer. Thus, during the first step of conducting customer research with in-depth one-on-one interviews, online surveys and an extensive competitor and trends review, I assisted the qualitative researcher on the discovery mission. With two pairs of hands, eyes, and brains working on the research items, we easily discussed insights and challenges and created a flexible time table. This also allowed us to move forward much faster and still have time for other projects and tasks apart from scheduling interviews and performing data analysis. Based on the gathered research deck, we easily defined pain points and opportunities for this feature of GoToMeeting. The combination of pain points and opportunities then allowed us to create a specific vision of how this feature should work in the future in order to delight our customers and address their current pain points.

With the clear vision in mind, I moved on to the design aspect of the mission while the other researcher focused on her other and new projects – she would not have to educate another designer new to the project as I was already aware of the research insights, customer comments, and status quo of our competition. Together with the product manager and engineering squad for this aspect of our meeting tool, I continued working on a first wireframe and looking at possible designs.

Within a month, we had an elaborate 3-step prototype which was created in such a way as to fit into the current roadmap and missions that it would fit into their current roadmap and missions: The first phase was to fix major pain points and to simplify the feature. Step two was to introduce a new feature which was defined through opportunities. And step three was to create the big vision for the future. Steps one and two were then clearly prioritized and received deadlines within the next six months while Step 3 would be revisited afterwards and adjusted to the current status quo, which would allow for the creation of further missions and goals to make this feature a real delight and fun to use while offering new aspects which would set us apart from our competition.

Examining the potential downsides of this approach, a small number of weaknesses can be determined: While putting more control and responsibilities into one person's hands allows for a better project management and faster target achievement, this also means that if this person is unavailable for a large amount of time, the entire project is held up, which can be quite costly. Furthermore, it would be quite time-consuming for another designer to pick it up. Additionally, we must ensure that we don't introduce bias by holding various feedback sessions with a diverse group of colleagues. Therefore, the UX fox should prepare a fallback plan and keep other designers in the loop through presentations and briefings while always seeking feedback and other perspectives on their work. This way, risks can be minimized, and collaboration can be fostered.

3 Learnings and Recommendations

So, where's the manual for building amazing bridges? First of all, this short paper is obviously a very specific look at the situation at LogMeIn. It should not be applied to UX in general but can surely give an impression of how a major UX team at a SaaS company perceives itself and is perceived outside the department. A follow-up study should introduce the differentiation of different UX jobs and ask more in-depth questions especially targeted at the different profiles and positions. Taking all this into account, the main recommendation is to shift focus away from the UX bestiary and building specific bridges and towards building a diverse team which can forge bridges where needed. This being said, there are at least three general takeaways from this small survey and working example:

1. Communicate well, educate thoroughly

Being part of a busy and globally active UX team of a major company, we do not always have the time to educate our colleagues (and ourselves). However, regularly sharing what we can do, what we can offer, and what our processes are can easily improve our collaboration with other departments and will allow us to integrate colleagues into projects right from day one. Communicating our efforts and achievements through a regular UX newsletter, readouts, and workshops consistently across the company definitely has improved our image and position.

2. Hire the talent, not the job title

Even though I myself definitely seem to have the hobby of accumulating titles, they might not indicate much about my soft skills and technical talents. Today, I would easily rate skills such as talent for collaboration, facilitation, and curiosity much higher than a specific title. At the same time, I have the strong belief that often, these soft skills can be reflected in the achievement of milestones such as a PhD, which essentially is the result of maximum curiosity in and focus on a specific topic. Understanding the complex construct of education, talents, and skills a potential

employee consists of might easily be the hardest but also most rewarding aspect of the hiring process.

3. Explore new ways of harvesting talents

The job position of “UX Researcher/Designer that leads discovery missions” did not exist until I joined LogMeIn. Now these missions take up about 90% of my time. Even though companies might feel that the bigger they get, the more specialized people they can afford (and should have), a healthy combination of T-shaped hedgehogs and curious foxes with a random unicorn here and there (you wish) can bring us back to the heart of users experience design: Empathy, exploration, and problem-solving.

And finally – consistently revisit and adjust your vision while making your own experiences and decisions. Talk to your colleagues inside and outside UX. And don’t believe everything a random fox tells you on the internet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the fantastic people at LogMeIn that replied to my survey, shared their feedback, and had the patience to deal with a very curious fox. And thanks to each and every reader that took the time to read until the end – I hope you enjoyed my first little insights and ideas, and please don’t hesitate to share your feedback and comments. Stay curious!

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Her work connecting subtitling and graphic design gained her the Karl Steinbuch Scholarship of the MFG Innovation Agency for ICT and Media (2013) and two Future Awards from the German Association of Post, Information Technology and Telecommunications Enterprises (DVPT). She regularly shares

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