

Designlab

2024

UX Design Leader Survey Report

ABOUT DESIGNLAB

Designlab is an online education platform that helps designers and design teams build the skills they need to succeed. Over the past decade, more than 20,000 learners have launched and advanced their careers through Designlab's award-winning programs, which blend hands-on, practical curriculum with personalized mentorship from industry professionals. To explore all of Designlab's offerings go to designlab.com/courses.

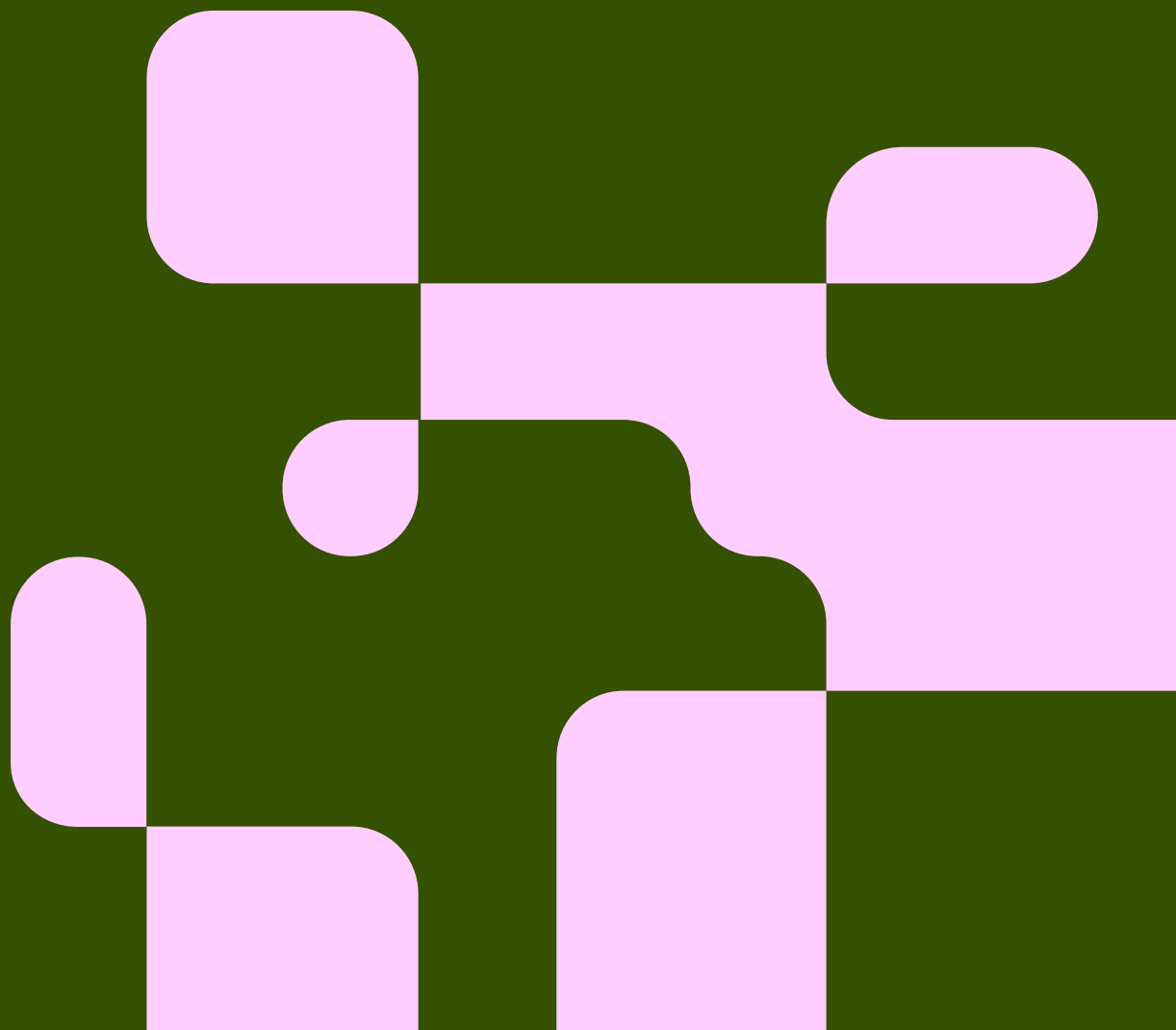
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report summarizes the findings from a survey of 70 UX design leaders. Typical titles of respondents include roles like “Head of UX,” “Director of Product Design,” and “UX Architect” – and the teams of survey respondents spanned a wide range of sizes and industries. The survey aimed to capture insights into these UX design leaders' roles, team management, challenges, and perceptions of the evolving UX landscape. The results are contextualized here within broader industry trends to provide a comprehensive view of the state of UX leadership today.



Introduction

Now is an especially compelling time to take stock of the UX and product design space, as the industry navigates a period of significant transformation. The challenges facing design teams are increasingly complex, from integrating artificial intelligence into workflows to aligning more closely with business strategy. At the same time, the market for UX talent has been in flux. Following the surge in demand during the pandemic and the subsequent slowdown as tech firms corrected for overhiring, the UX hiring market now shows signs of stabilizing, with moderate but steady growth on the horizon. Nonetheless, for the time being, the hiring landscape remains competitive, with companies seeking designers who can not only deliver creative solutions but also drive business impact. Despite these challenges, the outlook remains optimistic, with design continuing to play a critical role in shaping customer experiences and driving innovation.



KEY THEME: INTEGRATION WITH THE BROADER BUSINESS

A central theme that emerges from this survey is the deepening integration of design teams within the broader business landscape. More than ever, UX leaders are recognizing the need for their teams to go beyond traditional design expertise and contribute to strategic business goals. This trend mirrors a broader industry shift, where designers are increasingly expected to align closely with product, marketing, and business strategies, making design decisions that are both creative and data-driven, ensuring they have a tangible impact at the organizational level.

From hiring practices to team development, design leaders are prioritizing soft skills—such as critical thinking, communication, and business acumen—alongside technical design capabilities. The demand for these cross-functional abilities signals that design is no longer operating in a silo. Instead, it's becoming a key player in shaping business outcomes, influencing product roadmaps, and driving customer experiences.





Furthermore, leaders are grappling with the challenge of aligning design efforts with business strategy, a task made even more complex by the rapid evolution of technology and the growing role of data in decision-making. As companies increasingly turn to artificial intelligence, automation, and new digital tools, the expectation is that design teams must not only adapt but also lead in these areas. This underscores the evolving role of designers, who are now being asked to think like business strategists as much as they are creative problem-solvers.

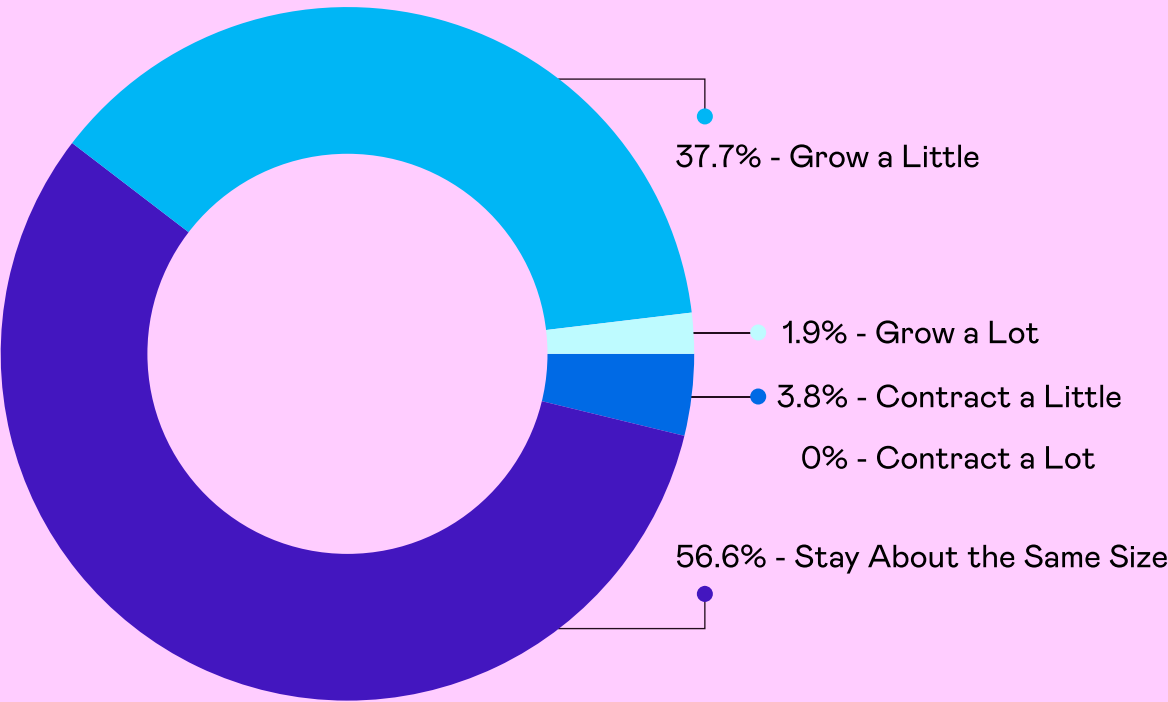
Growth and Hiring



FUTURE GROWTH:

An overwhelming 94.3% of respondents expect their design teams to either remain the same size (56.6%) or grow modestly (37.7%) in the coming year. This cautious optimism, while a far cry from the aggressive hiring of the pandemic, may be a sign that the worst of the correction across tech is behind us and that we’re entering a new period of modest but sustainable growth.

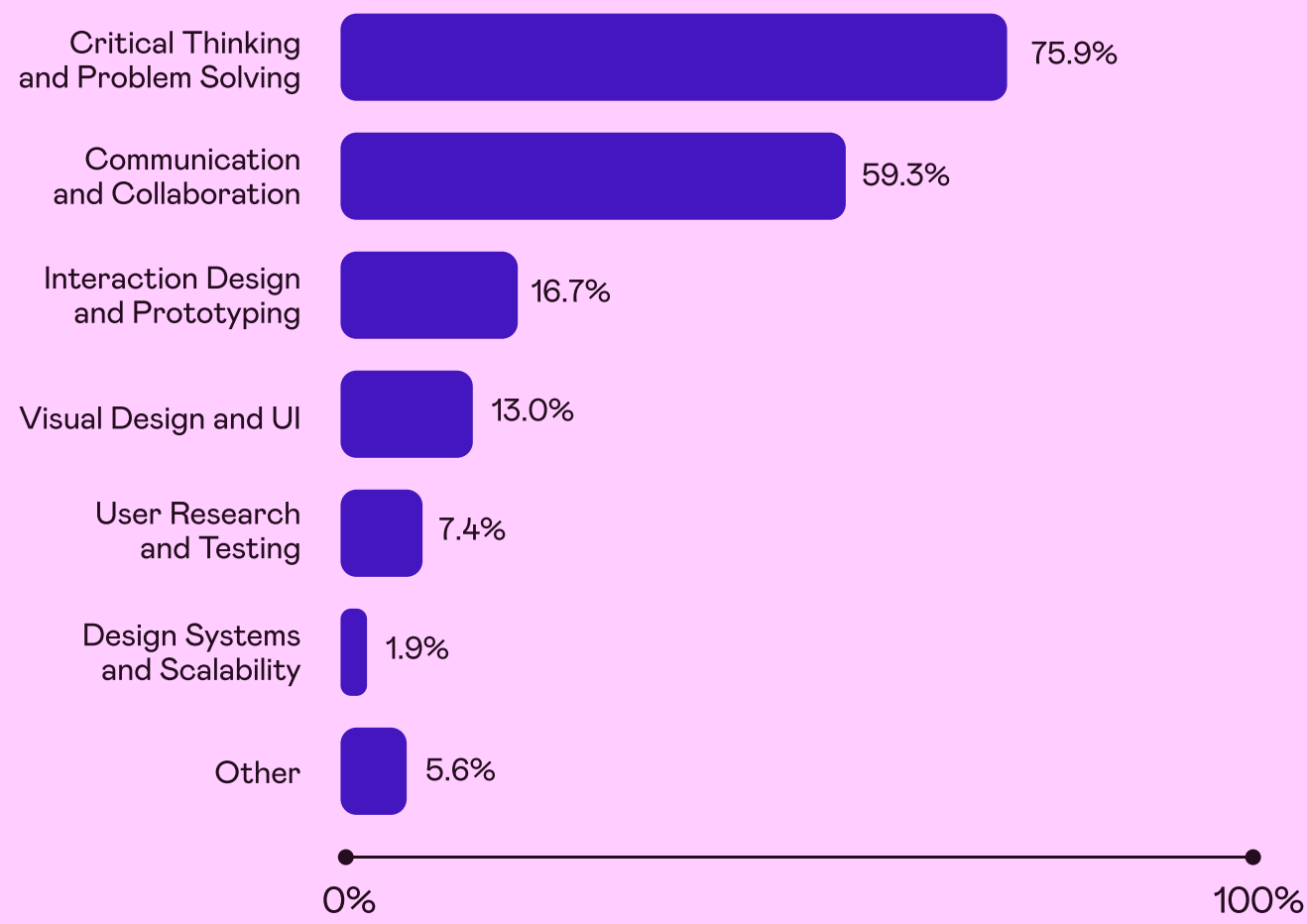
Over the next 12 months do you expect the size of your organization’s full design headcount to:



CRITICAL SKILLS FOR HIRING:

When hiring, leaders prioritize critical thinking and problem-solving (75.9%), followed by communication and collaboration (59.3%). This aligns with the growing emphasis on designers who can navigate complex challenges and work effectively across teams. For job seekers wishing to be competitive, their focus in applications and interviews likely needs to go beyond showcasing design skills.

What are the most critical skills you look for when hiring new design team members?



Challenges and Advocacy

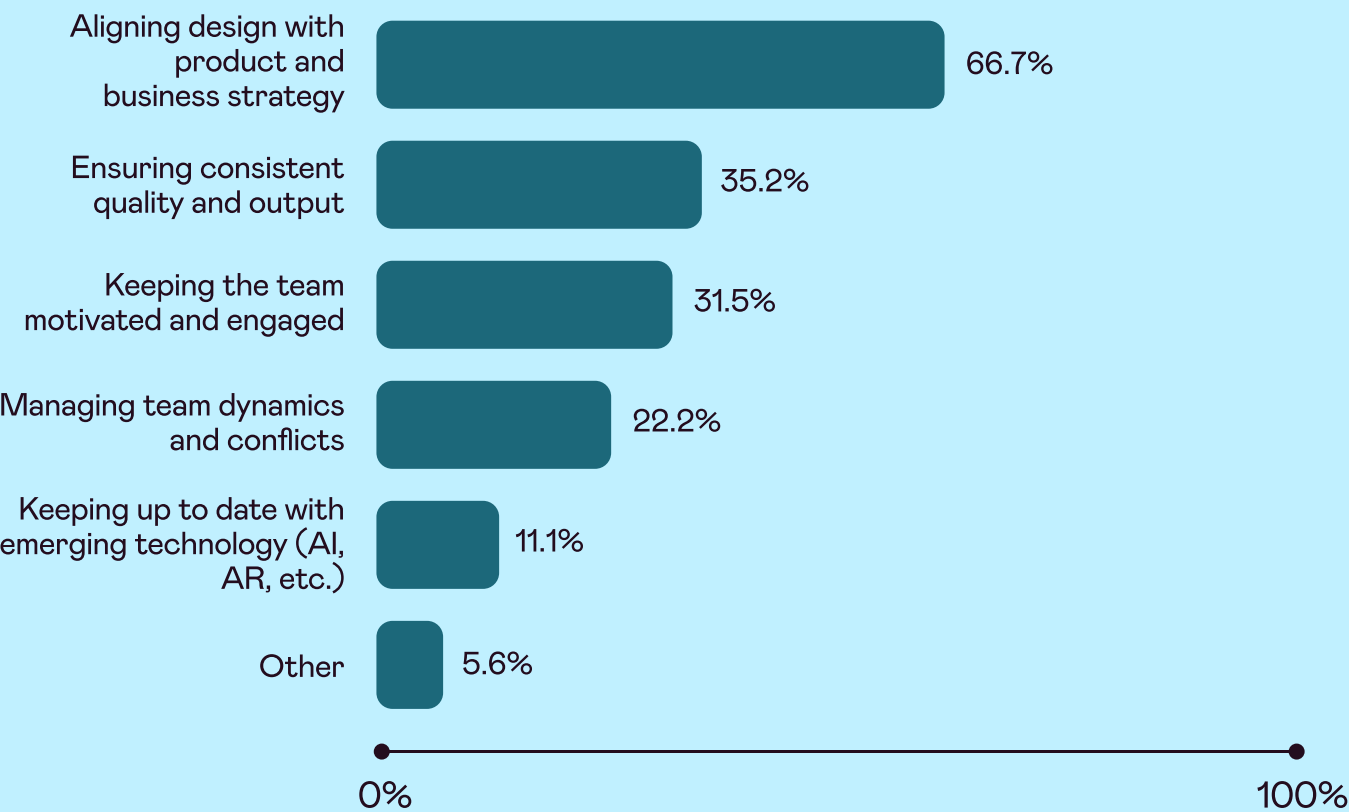


CHALLENGES AND ADVOCACY

TOP CHALLENGES:

The most frequently cited challenge among respondents was 'Aligning design with product and business strategy' (66.7%), with 'Ensuring consistent quality and output' (35.2%) being a distant second, mentioned at about half the frequency. This finding was in line more generally with the overall theme we found in the survey of how the interaction between design and the rest of the org has been at the top of design leader's minds.

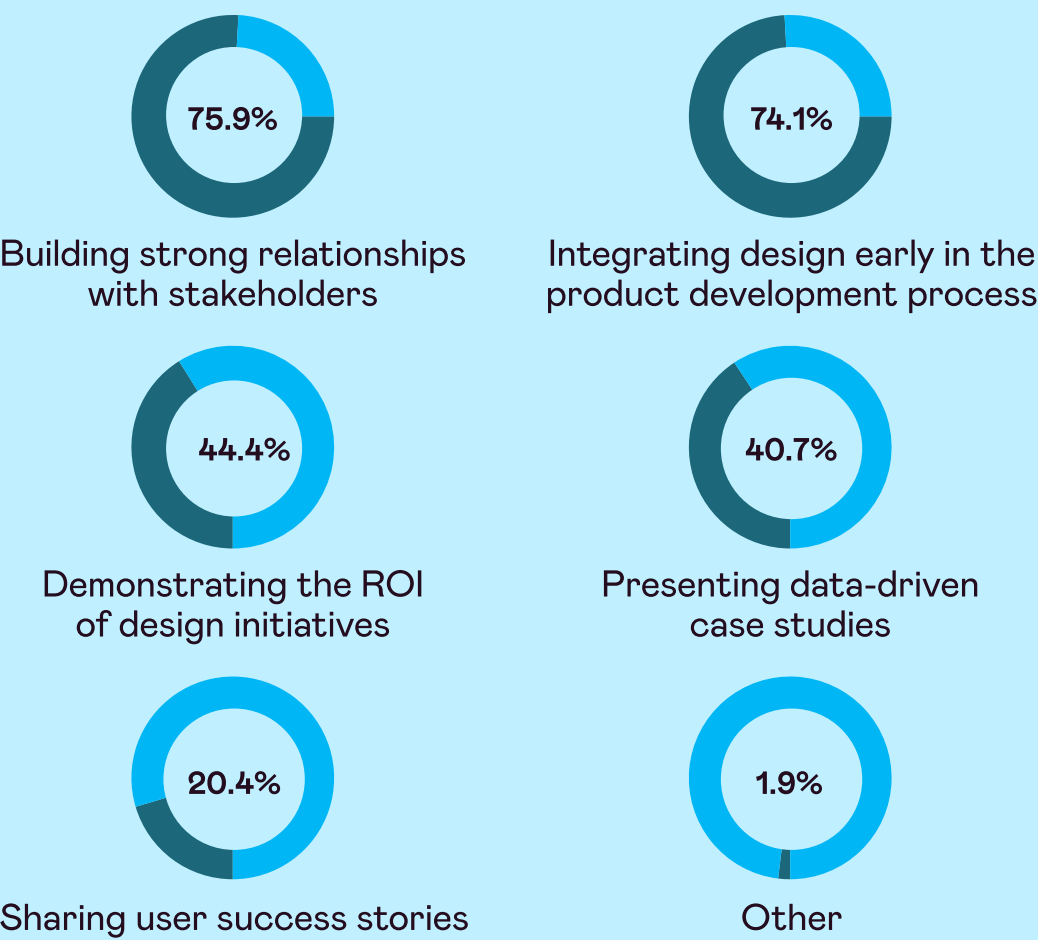
What are the biggest challenges you face as a leader managing a design team?



ADVOCATING FOR DESIGN:

We see a less striking trend when examining how design leaders advocate for their team and function, with leaders using a wide range of approaches from relationship building (75.9%) to integrating design early in the product development process (74.1%) and more.

How do you advocate for the value of design within your organization’s leadership team?

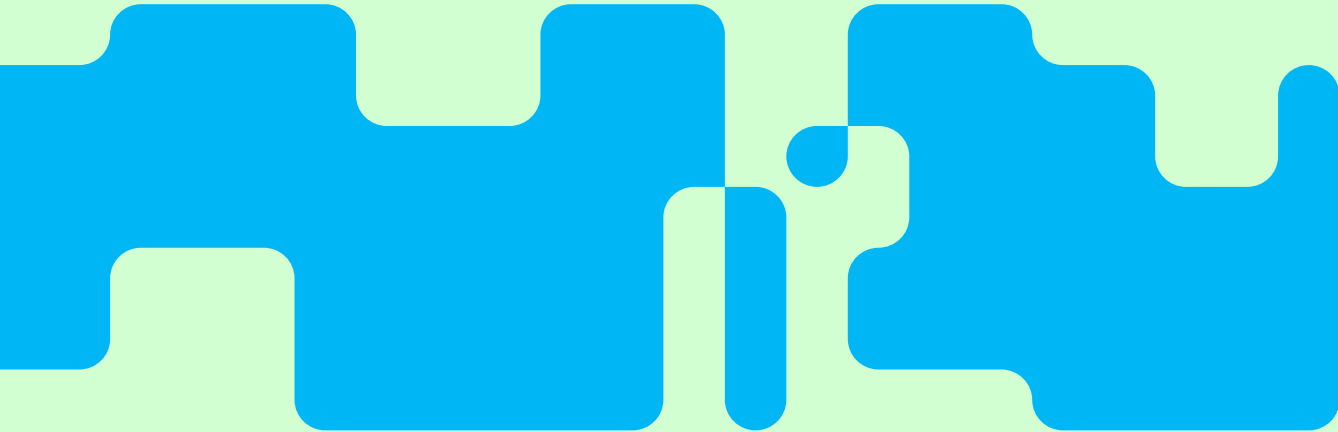


Design Systems & Design Maturity



DESIGN SYSTEMS & DESIGN MATURITY

The relationship between design systems and design maturity is a critical one, as the adoption and effective use of design systems often signals the progression of an organization's design maturity. Design systems act as a foundational framework that standardizes components, tools, and processes, enabling consistency, scalability, and efficiency across design efforts.



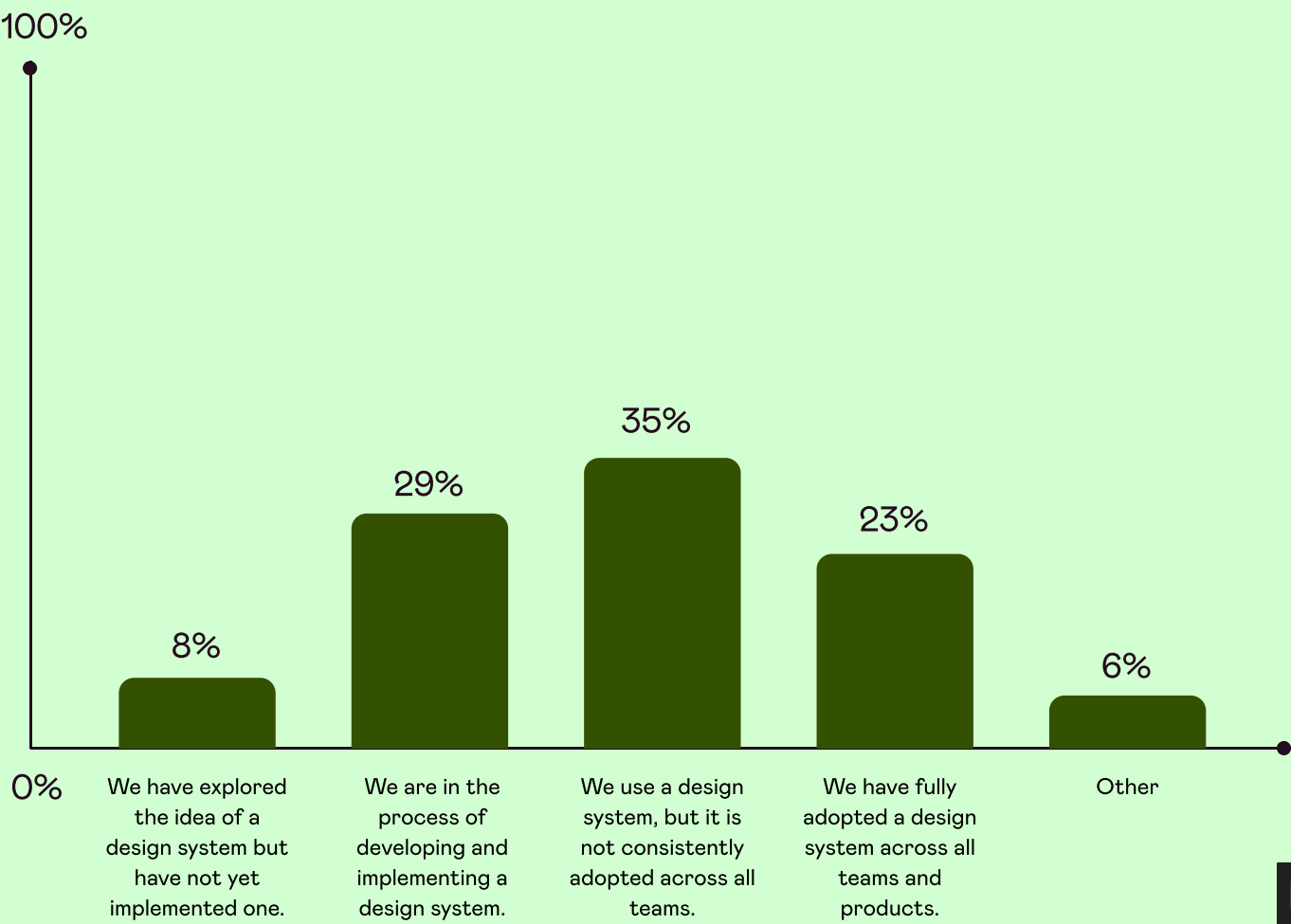
At the early stages of design maturity—where design may be ad-hoc or inconsistently applied—organizations typically lack formal design systems. Teams often rely on individual designers' skills and preferences, leading to varied outcomes and inefficiencies. Conversely, in the most mature organizations, where design is a core driver of innovation and business strategy, design systems are not only fully adopted but continuously optimized. Here, the design system is deeply embedded in both design and development workflows, enabling rapid iteration, innovation, and scalability across a growing set of products and platforms. It showcases an organization's capability to integrate design across all aspects of the business, ensuring that design not only supports but drives strategic decision-making.



DESIGN SYSTEMS & DESIGN MATURITY

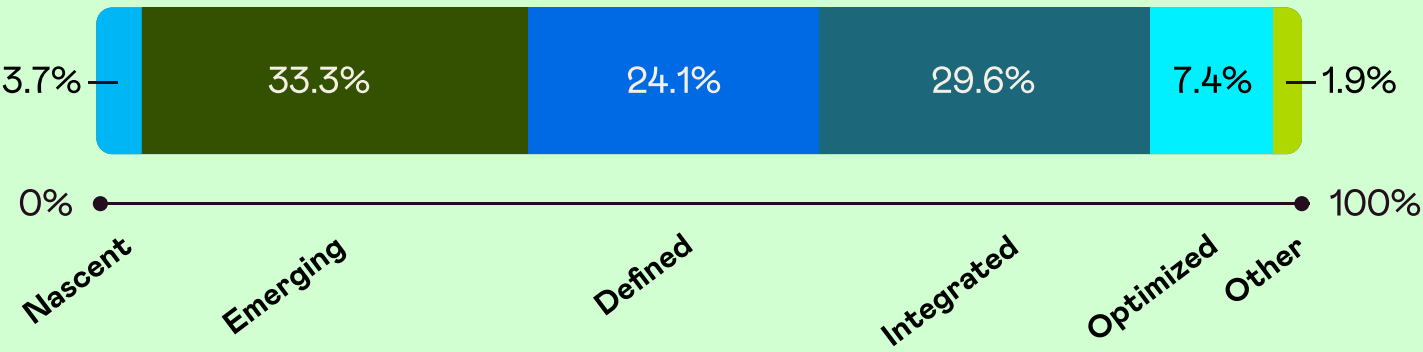
Looking across both the design maturity and design systems axes, design leaders in our survey largely reported being in the middle stages for both. For instance, 100% of respondents stated that they had a design system in some stage of development, though less than a quarter (23%) claimed to have implemented their design system across all teams and products. Similarly, ~4% of respondents described their organization’s design maturity as “nascent” (the earliest stage), while at the same time less than 8% labeled their organization's design maturity as “optimized” (the most advanced stage).

How would you describe the current state of design system adoption within your organization?



DESIGN SYSTEMS & DESIGN MATURITY

How would you assess the design maturity level of your organization?



Nascent: Design is ad hoc and not a formalized function in the organization.

Emerging: Design is recognized, but processes are inconsistent and depend on individual designers.

Defined: Design is an established function with standardized processes and a growing influence on projects.

Integrated: Design is integrated into the organization’s strategic processes, with strong cross-functional collaboration.

Optimized: Design is a key driver of innovation and business strategy. With continuous improvement and scaling of design practices.

Other



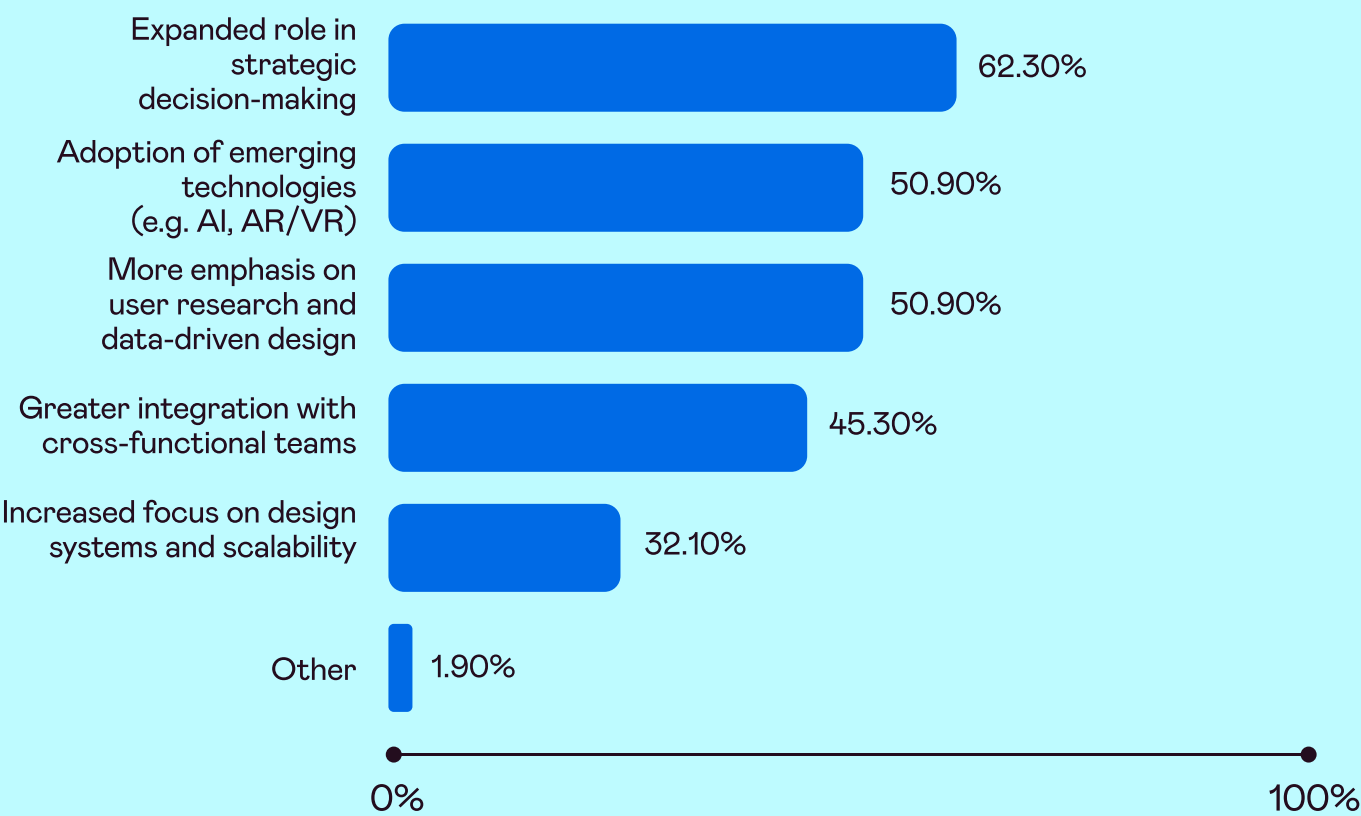
The Future of Design Teams



THE FUTURE OF DESIGN TEAMS

Looking ahead to the next five years, more than 60% of design leaders believe design teams will play a more significant role in strategic decision-making, and around half expect increased adoption of emerging technologies like AI. This forward-looking perspective aligns with industry predictions that design will become increasingly central to business strategy.

How do you see the role of design teams evolving in the next 5 years?



Responses regarding AI adoption specifically indicate a wide range of approaches thus far. Some leaders are actively using AI tools for automation and productivity (24%), while others are still in an experimentation stage (19.6%). Yet others haven't meaningfully adopted AI at all (13%). These findings reflect the nascent state of AI integration in design processes and the fact that true best practices are yet to emerge.

What design teams are currently doing to adapt to emergence of AI:

13%

Nothing

20%

Experimenting/
Researching AI

24%

Using AI for
Productivity/Automation

11%

Partnering with
AI/Data Teams

17%

Education/Training
with AI

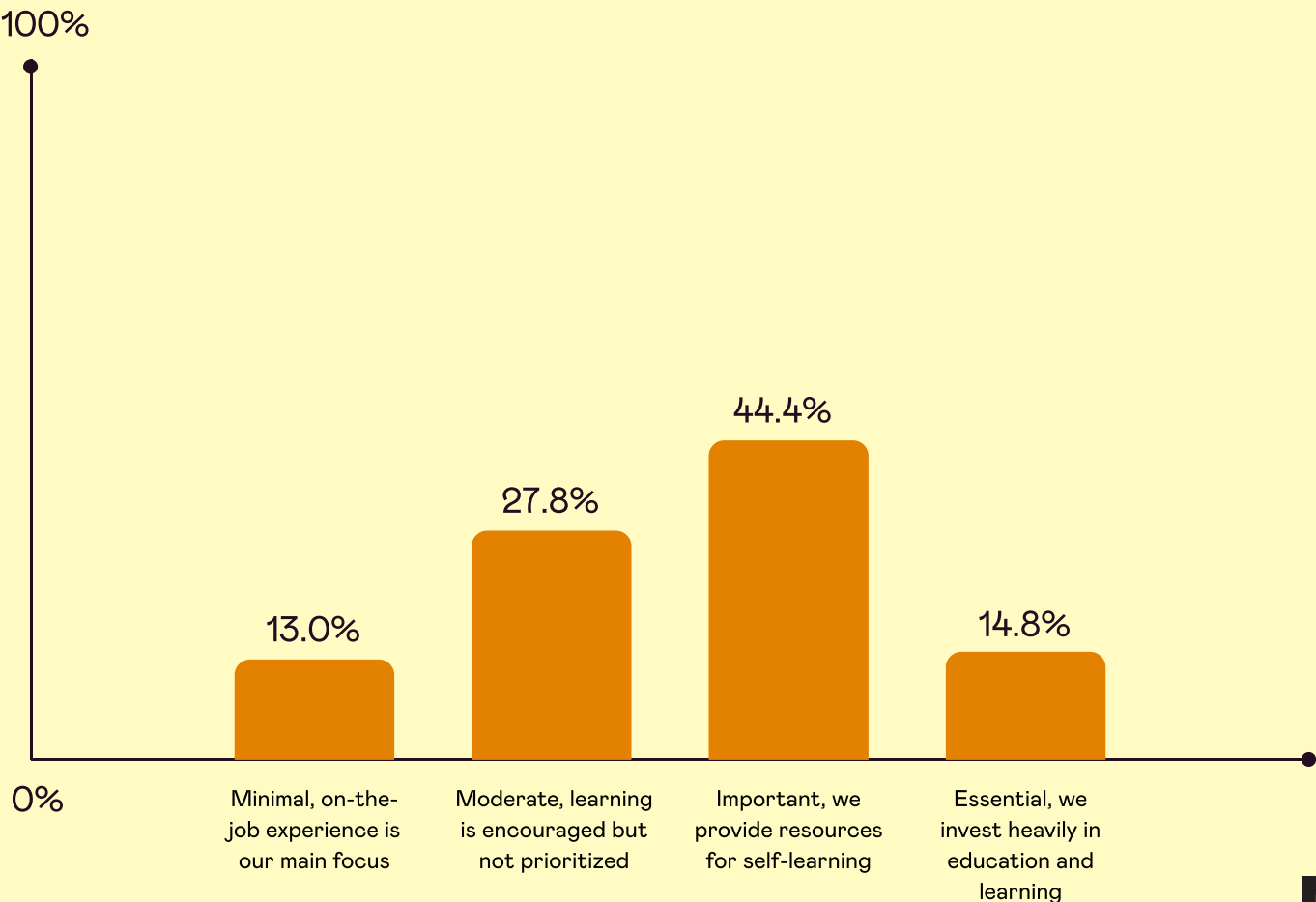


Education and Learning



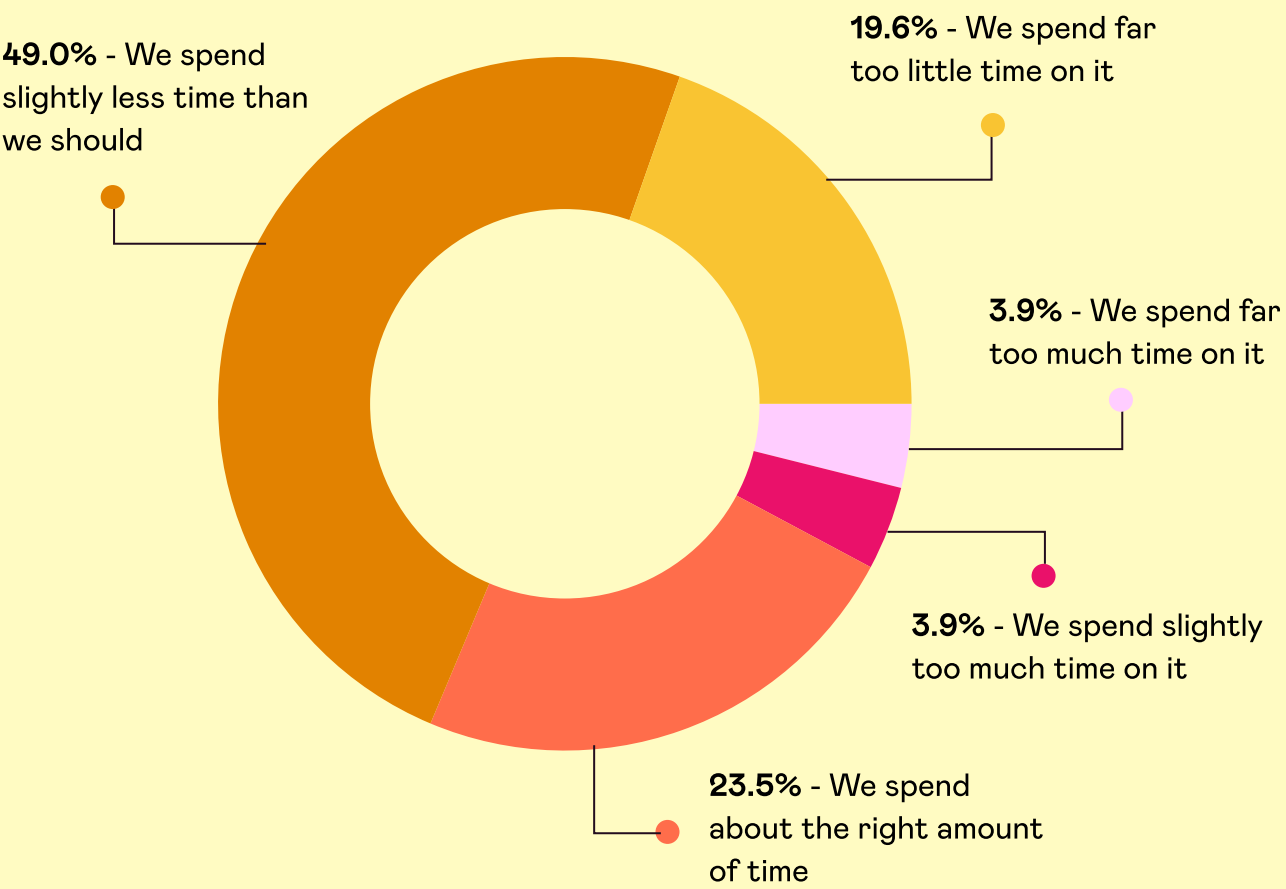
In the midst of the current design landscape design leaders clearly recognize the value of continued learning for their team, with nearly 6 in 10 respondents (59.2%) calling it “important” or “essential.”

What role does design education and continuous learning play in your team’s growth?



Yet at the same time there remains a disconnect between the perceived value of learning and actually finding time and resources for training to take place. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents (68.6%) felt that their teams were doing less learning than they should.

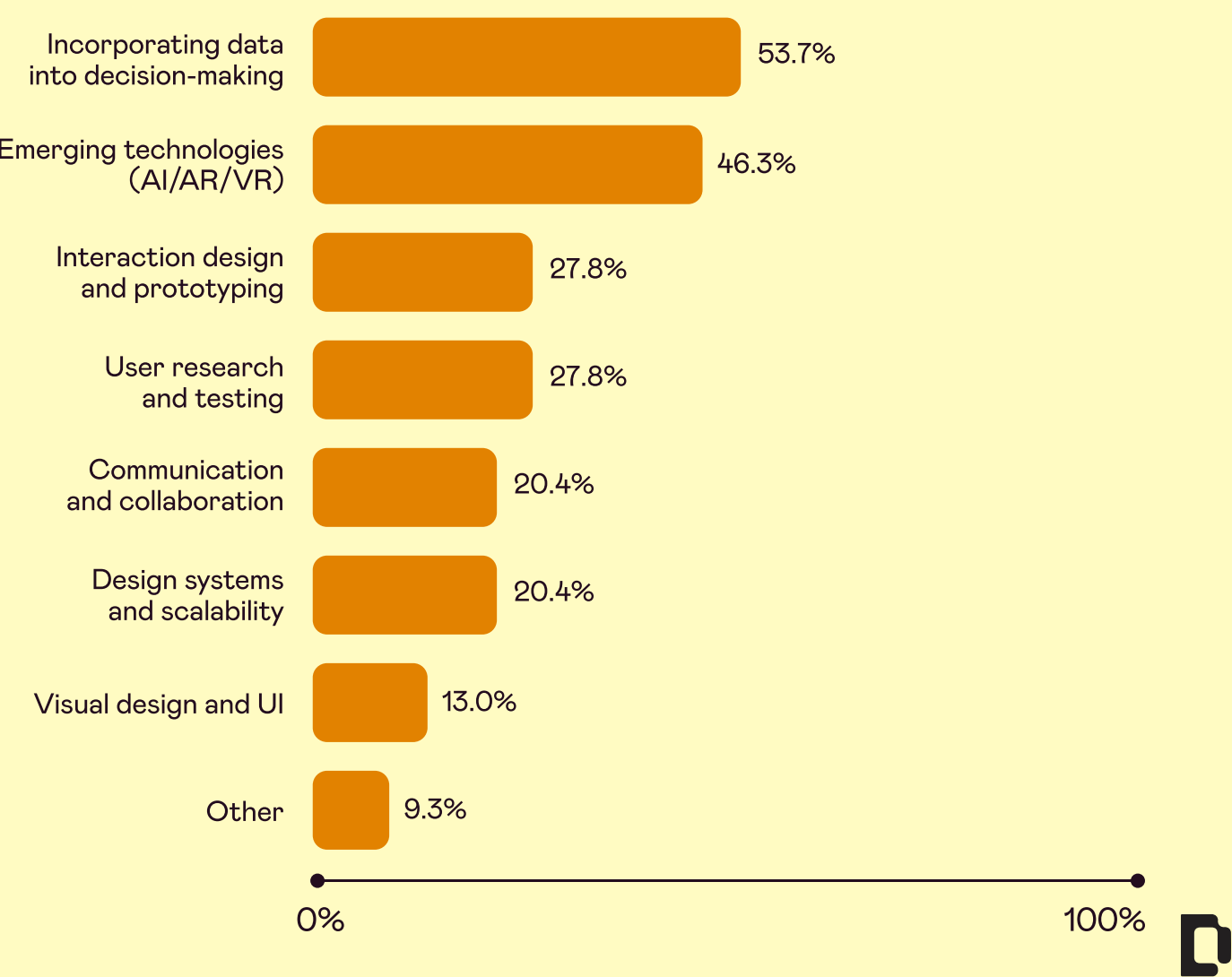
How do you feel about the amount of design education and continuous learning taking place with your team?



EDUCATION AND LEARNING

In terms of the specific opportunities for learning, there was no strong consensus. The most cited area was “incorporating data into decision making” which seems to be connected to the overall theme that emerged around strategic alignment across teams and proving value for stakeholders.

In which areas do you feel your team has the greatest need for upskilling?





Conclusion

The results of this survey offer insights into the evolving role of UX design leaders and their teams. As design continues to integrate more deeply with business strategy, UX leaders face the dual challenges of aligning creative work with broader organizational goals and navigating the rapid adoption of emerging technologies like AI. The steady, albeit cautious, growth predicted for design teams underscores the ongoing demand for design's influence across industries. However, the gaps between the perceived value of continued learning and the resources allocated for it reveal an area of untapped potential. Moving forward, organizations that can successfully bridge these gaps—investing in both the strategic alignment of design and the continuous development of their teams—will be better positioned to stay competitive in an increasingly dynamic digital landscape.