



Becoming User-Centered

Strategies for Evaluating Your Organization's
UX Needs, Earning Buy-In, and Hiring Help



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Becoming User-Centered

You know your product would benefit from user experience, but you're not sure where to begin. This guide will give you the tools to get a UX practice off the ground at your organization.

From understanding the ins and outs of UX roles to hiring an agency or your first UX employee, we've got you covered.

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User Experience

101

Make a case for having a user experience practice and understand what different types of UX professionals bring to the table.

Why User Experience?

User Experience Roles

Why User Experience?

UX helps your team understand the people who use what you make

UX professionals contribute to products by clarifying who your users are and finding out what they need. This all happens through first-person research like user interviews, observations, surveys, and card sorts. A UX specialist may also pair this with more quantitative data collected through website or app analytics, among others.

UX professionals will share their findings with the product team to not only generate empathy and understanding for the people using the product but also give them the tools to make better solutions and decisions. These solutions and decisions are improved because they are rooted in evidence, rather than speculation.

Expect to see deliverables like personas, journey maps, and ecosystem maps that can guide the evolution of a product for years to come.

UX creates products that work for the user and the business

Expect to see deliverables like user flows, wireframes, sitemaps, and interactive prototypes that provide the roadmap for visual design and development.

Because UX is grounded in the needs and behaviors of real users, UX professionals are at an advantage when it comes to making something that realizes a business objective and satisfies the user. As such, UX professionals develop strategies and conceptual layouts that solve the needs of both the user and the business. When you know your users well, and you're schooled in best practices for usability, your team is able to produce highly engaging, effective interactions that generate results.

UX ensures your product is easy to use

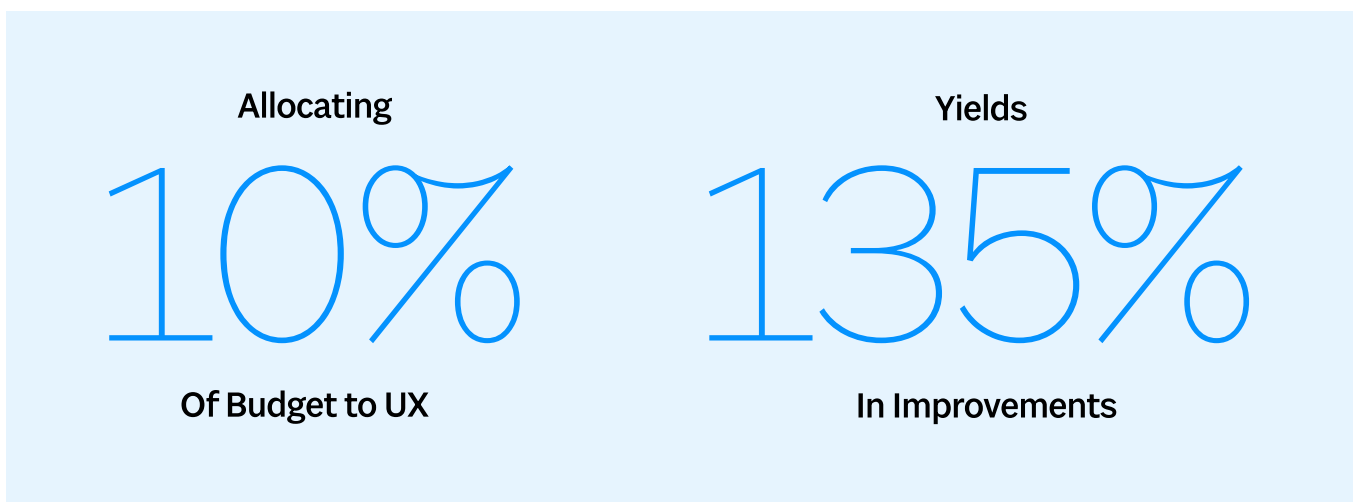
UX answers the question, “Is the product you are building actually working for your real users?” Through various usability testing methods, UX professionals leave nothing to chance. They may begin testing concepts when they’re low-fidelity sketches and continue testing through high-fidelity design, launch, and even beyond. By testing frequently and iterating on the results, you can be sure that your product is easy to use and even easier to understand.

Expect to hear about methods like usability testing using think-aloud protocol, click tests, and tree tests.

Investing in UX pays off

Adding user experience practices to your organization has costs: it’s an investment in both skilled professionals and a new process. However, according to the old adage from software development: when an interface is in development, fixing a problem is 10 times more expensive than correcting the problem in design. And after the interface is released? Fixing that problem is 100 times more costly.

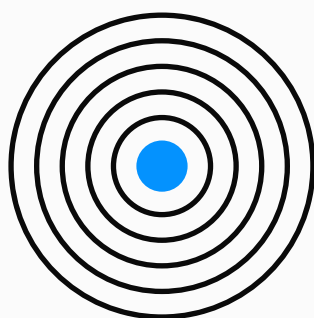
Nielsen Norman Group found that allocating just 10% of a project’s budget to user experience can results in a 135% improvement in website usability. You’ll also increase user satisfaction, improve efficiency, and reduce end-user support. When you skip UX, you may find your organization ultimately pays more in many other ways.



User Experience Roles

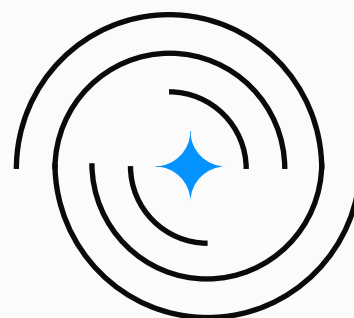
UX is a practice that builds on a series of activities: beginning with research and strategy that evolves into UX design concepts, feedback from users, and iteration. Some UX professionals do a little bit of everything (often referred to as generalists) while others specialize in strategy, research, usability testing, writing, or design.

Their roles largely break into two domains:



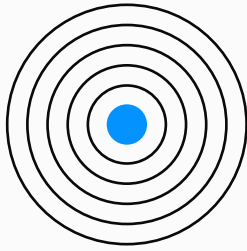
UX Strategists

UX Strategists have deep experience with user research and understand the interplay between the user experience and the business's goals. The strategist is constantly interacting with users and stakeholders to gain feedback as a means of improving a product throughout its life cycle.



UX Creators

UX Creators drive a product's layout and functionality, rooted in user-centered thinking. These professionals participate in the ideation, prototyping, and usability testing phases of a product's life cycle.



Typical Activities Completed By **UX Strategists**

User Research

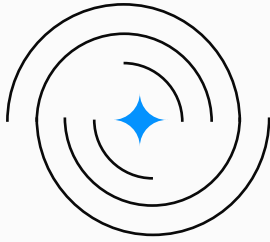
- Seek to understand the target user's needs, motivations, behaviors, and pain points
- Employ quantitative and qualitative research methods—to gain insights about users—such as interviews, surveys, contextual inquiry, analytics, diary studies, competitive research, etc.
- Analyze data, synthesize findings, and make recommendations
- Create research reports, artifacts like personas, journeys, etc. to share the knowledge with the broader team and inform the product's direction

Strategy

- Apply user-focused thinking to business objectives to come up with solutions that improve the business's bottom line and the user's experience
- Conduct workflow analysis and propose efficiencies
- Give input and recommendations from the user's point of view to high-level business stakeholders
- Plan and run ideation workshops with stakeholders and users to generate ideas and get buy-in
- Ensure the UX direction fulfills the needs of the business

Usability Analysis

- Plan and run usability tests and heuristic audits on the existing product as well as prototypes of new concepts to gather user feedback about the utility, desirability, and usability of each solution
- Report results and make recommendations to the team
- Pair the right usability testing method with the right question: quantitative, qualitative, moderated, unmoderated, etc.



Typical Activities Completed By

UX Creators

Information Architecture

- Shepherd the big-picture vision for the experience through execution
- Structure the content of a website or app to make it findable and logically organized based on UX research—navigation and taxonomies
- Develop conceptual models and workflows to meet business goals and satisfy user needs
- Iterate based on usability testing results and stakeholder feedback

Content Strategy & User Experience Writing

- Direct page-level content
- Write instructional or informational copy to enhance the user experience and match the organization's brand
- Iterate based on usability testing results and stakeholder feedback
- Work with SEO strategists and marketing copywriters to make the content easy to find and understand from any mode of user acquisition

User Experience Design

- Absorb the UX research and strategy to create wireframes and low-fidelity design prototypes that solve problems and meet (or exceed) the user and business needs
- Iterate based on usability testing results and stakeholder feedback
- Create high-fidelity production-ready designs (depending on the team's composition)

Lay the Groundwork

Make a plan to incorporate UX at your organization.

Determine Your UX Needs

Strategies to Get Buy-In for UX

Lay the Groundwork

Determine Your Organization's User Experience Needs

You know your organization needs UX, but you'll need to make a case for it.

The first step is understanding exactly where you could use UX support. Then, it's about determining what user experience skill sets will bring the most immediate value and therefore the greatest return.

Don't worry, though, we're here to help. This worksheet will help you get an idea of where you need support and who you'll need to bring on board.

Once you finish this exercise, you'll know exactly where to begin.

Complete the following steps within the exercise:

Areas in Need of UX Support

Brainstorm projects or products that can benefit from user experience

Skills Assessment

Determine which user experience skillsets would be useful for each product

Prioritization

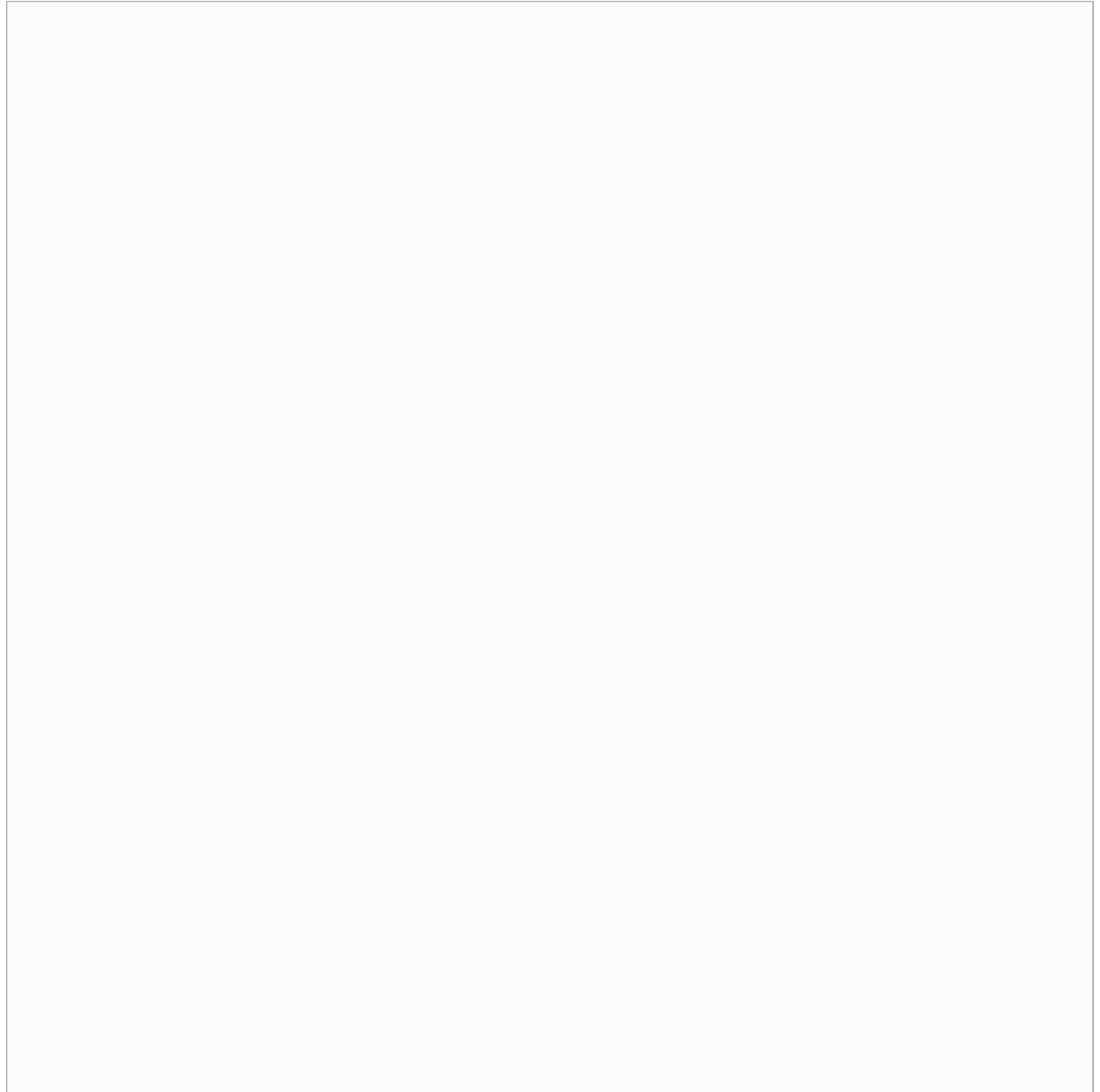
Identify areas of greatest risk or impact focusing on one product's features or multiple projects

Analyze Your Results

Tips on how to best approach your prioritization results for your organization

Areas in Need of UX Support

Begin by brainstorming a list of all of the products or projects that could benefit from user experience.



Skills Assessment

Now, determine which user experience skills would be useful for each product or project.

Place a check in the box for “Need soon” and/or “Need later.” **We recommend defining “soon” as the next two quarters.** After determining your need, estimate the level of effort (small, medium, large, or extra large) using relative sizing. **You may choose to define your sizing as follows:**

Small

A week or two of effort for one person

Medium

A month or two of work for one person

Large

Around 6 months of work for one person

Extra Large

At least 8 months of work for one person

Product or Feature Name

Enter a product/feature name from the brainstorm.

Rate the Following Tasks.

Use the scale provided to breakdown task priorities. For a description of these skills, see the [User Experience Roles section on page 6](#).

Strategy Skills	Need Soon	Need Later	Level of Effort <small>S M L XL</small>
User Research			
Usability Tests and Audits			
UX Strategy			
Creator Skills	Need Soon	Need Later	Level of Effort <small>S M L XL</small>
Information Architecture			
UX Design			
Content Strategy and UX Writing			

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Content Strategy and UX Writing			

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Information Architecture			
UX Design			
Content Strategy and UX Writing			

Prioritization

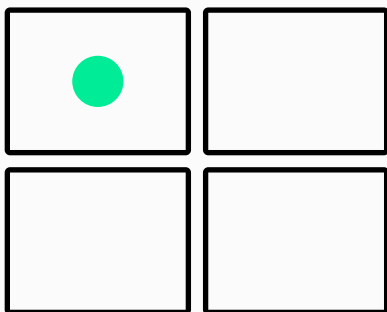
Finally, if you have more than one product or project, use this matrix to identify areas of greatest risk or impact. Just one product? You can use this same matrix to prioritize features instead.

Plot products or features according to their value to the organization and the amount of UX effort given the assessment you conducted on the previous page.



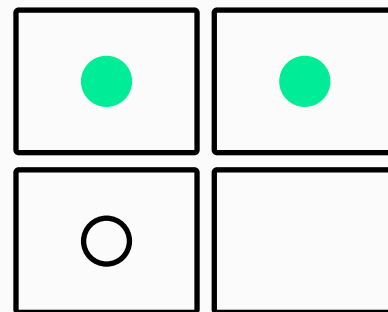
Analysis

High value, low UX effort products should see a greater return on investment than low value, high UX effort products. For your initial investment in UX consider two approaches:



For the UX-Skeptical Organization

Focus on high value, low effort UX because these are easy wins that will help you prove UX is worth the investment.



For the UX-Receptive Organization

Broaden your focus beyond high value, low effort to high value, medium-to-high effort UX if your organization is ready to make an investment. Knock out low value, low effort UX last.

Lay the Groundwork

Strategies to Get Buy-In for User Experience

You see the value of UX, but getting the rest of your organization onboard can be tricky. Here are a few strategies and tactics you can use to make a case for increasing the role of user experience at your organization.

Align with organizational goals

The first step is to consider how your organization creates value. For example, how can UX support or increase revenue generation? Look for ways that UX can relate to organizational goals and key performance indicators. Maybe it's the case that a great user experience will make your product stand out from competitors. Or perhaps, it can decrease drop-offs from a funnel, increase customer engagement, and improve efficiency for users.

Tap into what about your product or project would matter most to your organization.

Recruit allies

Join forces with your peers and get everyone talking about the need for user experience.

When you want to add a new discipline to your organization's process, you don't need to just influence the single person at the top. Identify key influencers who are from different areas of the organization who could also benefit from the inclusion of UX. Look for the people whose opinion carries weight in the wilds of your organization. Who is everyone's go-to developer? Who is the project manager of the high-functioning team? Which of the BAs is known for getting things done?

Start with a quick win

One of the easiest ways to get a quick win is to usability test your existing product. Whether it's a classic moderated study or a quick unmoderated test using an online service, a modest investment in one targeted round of usability testing will give you a list of ways to improve your product. This brings the point of view of the user to the forefront. You'll have evidence in the form of task success rates and video clips of the usability test participant sounding confused, frustrated (or perhaps delighted) to share with both the product team and leadership.

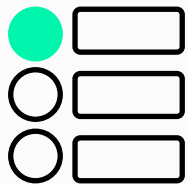
Seeing is believing—these tangible results make one of the best arguments for investing in UX at your organization.

Usability test your existing product to get an immediate win.

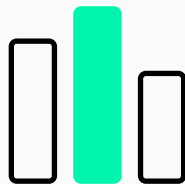
What if you don't have anything to test yet? Invest in some user interviews and observations. The findings that you'll get from them may influence the direction of features or spark innovative ideas from the team. While it may not generate immediate success metrics like usability testing will, you'll benefit from the team working smarter.

Measure the impact

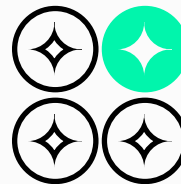
As you add UX work, keep track of the impact of improvements to the experience. This can be done through each of the options below. You'll be able to make a case for growing the UX practice if you have evidence of its success.



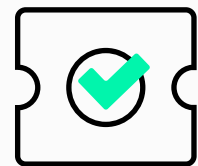
Usability Testing



Usage Analytics



Customer Satisfaction Surveys



Fewer Support Tickets

Bring in the

UX Pros

Ready to hire? Arm yourself with the know-how to find a good UX match for your organization.

Who Should You Hire?

Hiring a UX Agency

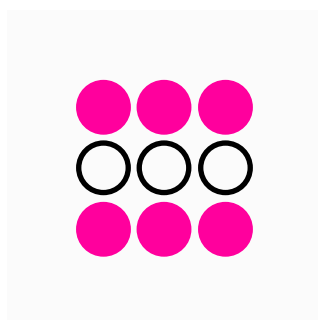
Hiring a UX Employee

Bring in the UX Pros

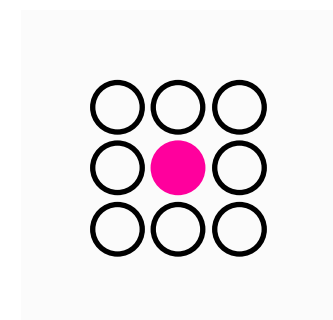
Should You Hire an Agency or Bring in a Full-Time Employee?

Once you've assessed how much UX work exists at your organization, you can begin to think about who will do the work. For many organizations, going from having no UX presence to having UX on the team is a big step.

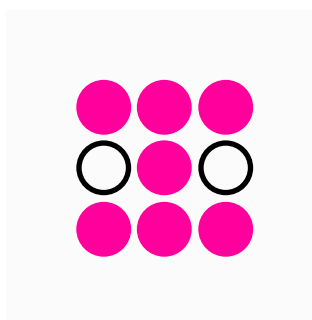
Will you start by having an agency prove the value of UX? Will you begin by building a dedicated team starting with a dedicated employee? Or will you do both?



Agency



Employee



Both

Bringing in an Agency

A UX agency is a flexible option. Bringing in an agency can be a great way to try out UX, or it can be a relationship that lasts for years and enables you to target specific initiatives.

Upsides

- Agencies engage in both short-term and long-term projects, so there's low commitment—no need to think about staffing beyond a few months
- Agencies can start quicker and move faster because they are able to dedicate multiple team members to any project—also, they already have proven processes in place
- Agencies are able to leverage experienced UX specialists for research, usability testing, and design
- Agencies are able to draw from a deep portfolio of experiences across a variety of industries
- In some organizations, an external perspective has added weight
- You can grow an internal team while working with an agency

Downsides

- Some agencies do not have cross-disciplinary expertise or breadth, so you may need another agency if you need other services like development (or a particular tech stack)
- Even if there is good transfer and robust documentation, when your relationship with the agency ends you wind up losing institutional knowledge
- Pricing varies, and it could be fixed or hourly billing—expect an hourly rate between \$150–\$350 per hour

Hiring a Full-Time Employee

Adding team members is a commitment that will bring expertise to your organization for years to come.

Upsides

- Your organization gets all their time and attention—they gain a deep expertise in your users and your industry
- A permanent hire can build relationships within the company across disciplines and teams—this broadens their perspective and helps them understand how to get things done
- A permanent hire develops an institutional memory—this may lead to more consistency across digital experiences
- A hire is a reliable resource for teams to reach out to because they're a permanent part of your organization
- A permanent hire can be the foundation from which you can begin to grow a team

Downsides

- You have an employee at your disposal for 30–40 hours per week, which means you need to utilize them to their full potential and shepherd their growth for years to come
- You may need more than one UX professional to accomplish your business goals or to achieve the right balance of UX capabilities
- It is expensive and time-consuming to recruit and hire in the tech industry and UX is an in-demand specialization—many experienced UX professionals command 6-figure salaries before benefits and perks, and in the remote work world your competition is national (if not global)

Average National Salaries for UX Professionals

Salaries reflect the average of salaries reported by Payscale.com, Glassdoor.com, Salary.com, and Salary Expert for the United States. Data was retrieved on September 28, 2022.

Job Title	Junior	Mid-Level	Senior
Usability Analyst	\$61,404	\$80,492	\$104,800
UX Designer	\$74,551	\$96,544	\$122,182
UX Researcher	\$66,474	\$89,541	\$116,608
UX Strategist	\$77,958	\$105,275	\$145,665
UX Writer*	\$58,000	\$73,123	\$93,000

*Salary information for the UX Writer position was only available from Glassdoor.com, so the salary reported here reflects only one source.

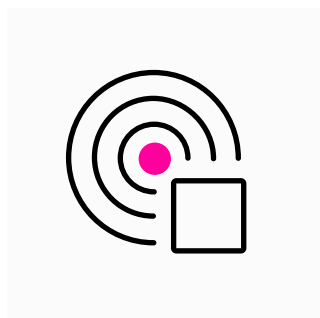
Bring in the Pros

Hiring a User Experience Agency

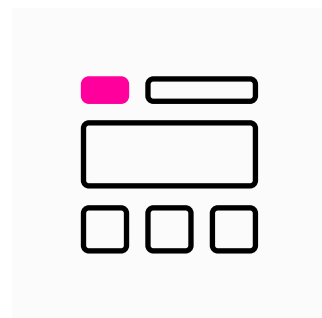
Agencies that offer UX services run the gamut from global consultancy firms to boutique studios that focus only on UX.

Finding a good fit for your organization and the project you have in mind comes down to asking the right questions, doing your research, and weighing your considerations.

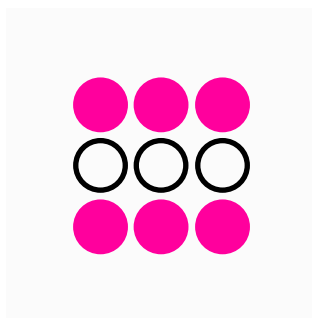
Understanding the following topics will be vital.



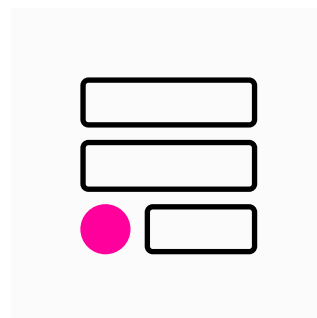
**Approach To
Problem Solving**



**Relevant Past
Experiences**



**Working
Together**



**Budget and
Timeline**

Find the Right Agency Fit

Weigh these considerations to evaluate UX agencies.

Before discussions, think about how much dedication your team will provide to the project.

Consider the type of agency

Do you want a firm that specializes in user experience or do you want a firm that offers additional capabilities like project management, design, and development? UX firms may have deep research skills, but design and build firms may bring insights into technical feasibility and more staffing options. You have the opportunity to determine how the experience of the agency (whether broad or narrow) aligns with the needs of your team.

Evaluate the types of problems they've solved

Has the agency demonstrated that they can solve the types of problems you have? Evaluate their case studies and their client roster. Contact client references and ask about their experience with this agency:

- Did they materially contribute to the success of the project or product?
- Were they leaders or did they require more detailed instruction for the project?
- What was their communication style?
- Did they communicate well, especially about project status, scope changes, timelines, and budget?
- What was the company like to work with?
- Did they deliver what was required and then some?

Ask about their UX approach

Can the agency explain their process and methodology for UX work and why they believe this approach will be successful for your project? Ask for specific examples on how they've designed research-based experiences that were validated by usability testing. Do you get the sense that they are experts?

Discuss working together

Discuss your expectations for a working relationship. Do you want the agency team to work alongside your team or do you want the agency to take ownership? It's very helpful to think about how much time and resources your organization plans to dedicate to the project before entering these discussions.

Also, make sure you are on the same page about what deliverables you should expect, and how they'll transfer knowledge back to your team during the engagement and once the engagement is complete.

Get a preview of the team

Ask who will be assigned to your project and what their experience is. Do they sound like they have the right skills and background for your project?

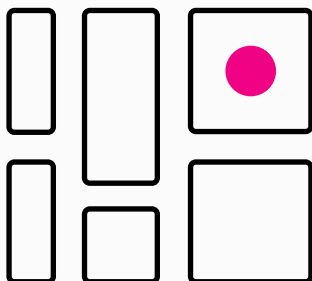
Talk budget and timeline

Being open about your budget and your timeline will make the whole process easier. There's no point in pursuing a relationship with an agency that is beyond your budget or that can't fit your work into their schedule. Keep in mind that estimates are guesswork, and everyone bills differently. Some agencies will have a fixed scope of work and issue change orders for overages. Others will bill hourly toward mutually agreed upon priorities, which may offer your organization more flexibility to change direction.

Bring in the Pros

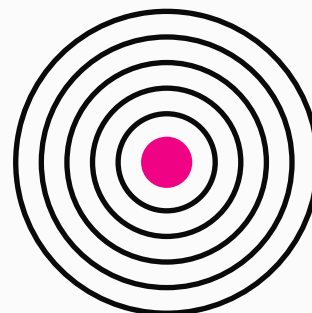
Hiring a Full-Time User Experience Employee

If you're going from a UX team of zero to a UX team of one, you'll likely be hiring outside of your area of expertise. We have a few job descriptions that you can use as starting points, as well as five of our favorite interview questions that will reveal the candidate's capabilities.



UX Generalist

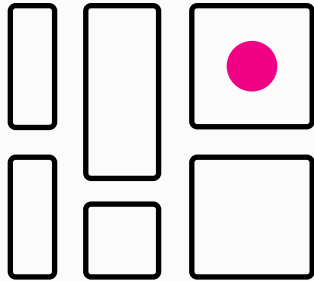
The User Experience Generalist position is a good place to begin if you need to cover all aspects of the UX lifecycle, but be aware that generalists may have varying levels of proficiency for each skill. This is why it is important to understand the UX needs of your company before hiring.



UX Strategist

The User Experience Strategist position contributes higher-level UX thinking and leadership to the team—making them an excellent complement to the generalist. With deeper expertise, strategists have a greater influence on the overall product direction and the team's embrace of user-centered design.

To better understand the UX needs your company may have, make sure you have [completed the worksheet starting on page 10](#).



User Experience **Generalist**

Job Description Summary

The User Experience Generalist's primary focus is translating user and business goals into a successful experience. They conduct user research and define the solution through wireframes and usability studies that lay the foundation for a successful product.

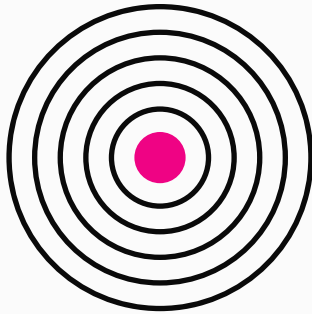
The User Experience Generalist is the driver for user-focused solutions that follow best practices and accessibility standards while accomplishing the product's goals.

You'll work closely with product team members and developers to provide feedback and education, further infusing user-centered thinking throughout the team. You'll encourage others' ideas and help educate the team on UX best practices and testing techniques.

Successful candidates will have a degree, certification, or equivalent work experience showing aptitude for user research and UX design.

Duties and Responsibilities

- Establish the user-centered mindset for the product and work closely with design and development team members to create the best solution for the business and the user
- Understand usability best practices and make recommendations based on those principles
- Explore multiple strategic directions that translate the product's goals and previous recommendations
- Ensure all proposed directions balance the user and business goals while understanding that each solution needs to be flexible, accessible, and responsive
- Create and facilitate various types of usability tests and provide direction on when each should be completed
- Create insightful presentations from analysis, research, and testing results
- Lead or participate in the entire product process, including initial research, interviews, assessments, wireframing, and prototypes
- Provide requirement details to the development and quality assurance teams
- Understand when to continue pushing the solution and when to keep the product moving forward
- Create wireframes and interactive prototypes to be used in usability testing or production requirements
- Proactively seek the support of stakeholders and other team members
- Share work with stakeholders and other team members to gain insightful feedback to push work further
- Provide insightful feedback from the UX perspective to other team members
- Use Axure, Figma, or other wireframing tools at a high-level and are able to use third-party usability testing platforms



Senior User Experience **Strategist**

Job Description Summary

The User Experience Strategist takes ownership of the experience strategy and is responsible for articulating user experience findings and recommendations to the team and stakeholders. You'll lead engagements through user research and analysis, workshoping activities, information architecture, content strategy, and low-fidelity wireframes and prototypes. In addition, you'll drive the initial problem-solving and will articulately walk the team and stakeholders through your reasoning. It is critical that you not only can do user research but can analyze the findings in a nuanced and understandable format and drive the vision for the user experience.

You'll work closely with product team members and developers to provide feedback and education, further infusing user-centered thinking amongst the team. You'll encourage others' ideas and help educate the team on UX best practices and testing techniques.

Duties and Responsibilities

- Lead teams in understanding complex systems and workflows by communicating those systems in ways that drive a better understanding of opportunities
- Understand usability best practices and make recommendations based on those principles—communicate these recommendations in a way that builds consensus and understanding
- Confidently plan and lead discovery sessions and workshops with users, team members, and stakeholders
- Identify appropriate user research techniques for a product, conduct the research, and use the findings to form critical insights into what users really need and identify strategic opportunities for the business
- Create and facilitate various types of usability studies and provide direction on when each should be completed
- Develop the UX strategy, information architecture, and initial concepts for solutions
- Expertly present strategic recommendations to the team, stakeholders, and executives
- Collaborate with UX and design team members to create high-quality digital experiences
- Provide insightful feedback from the UX perspective to other team members
- Lead or participate in the entire product process, including initial research, interviews, assessments, wireframing, prototypes, and providing requirement details to the production team

Successful candidates will have a degree, certification, or equivalent work experience showing aptitude for user research and UX design.

5 Interview Questions

It may be tempting to focus on work samples or portfolios, but keep in mind that the candidate's UX work may be protected by non-disclosure agreements or hidden behind logins and paywalls. You may have to rely heavily on the interview process to gauge their ability.

Here are five of our favorite questions to ask candidates so that you can make a more informed hiring decision.

Share a revealing insight you learned from conducting user research.

The answer to this question will tell you if they've been responsible for conducting their own user research, or if they relied on someone else to do it. It will also clue you into their ability to explain a finding in a way that anyone can understand—an important part of communicating to team members, stakeholders, and higher-ups.

Tell me about the last time you conducted a usability test.

A surprising number of UX professionals have never conducted a usability test or only ever usability tested as part of a class or bootcamp assignment. That's why you should ask about the "last time." You want to get a sense of recency and frequency and whether they ran the test or someone else did.

Pay attention to how they describe the process and what they learned from it. If they don't provide details, ask follow-up questions like "How did they recruit participants?" "Were they personally moderating the session or was it unmoderated?" "How did they report the results, and to whom?" and "How were the results received?"

Describe a time you improved a user interface. What was the problem and your solution?

Here, listen for functional improvements like a better workflow, navigation, or layout—not improvements to the look and feel. Notice if they frame the design problem in terms of the user or the business goal. Ask how their solution was received by the team, business, or users if they don't mention it.

On the spectrum of roles from UX Researcher to UX Designer, where do you see yourself and why?

Are they an expert in one area but weak in another? Are they a designer who wants to practice their research skills more? Do they do a bit of everything? With this answer, you'll learn about their affinity for areas of user experience and how their interests might map to your organization.

Tell us about a time when you had to present a research finding or a design solution that was contrary to the prevailing belief of the team or stakeholder. How did you approach it?

For this question, look to see if they backed up their finding or solution with evidence. Did they cite UX best practices, research, or usability testing findings? Notice their communication skills. Are they explaining the situation in a way that is easy for anyone to understand?



Sparkbox partners with complex organizations to create user-driven web experiences.

If you're interested in having Sparkbox work with your team, speak at an event, or just want to introduce yourself, [drop us a line](#).

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