Building high-impact product design teams

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Inspired product design sometimes happens by chance. Usually, it's the result of inspired product design teams with an incredible balance of creativity, expertise, and detailed understanding of performance requirements.

At Solace Digital, a pioneer and leader in digital design of products, experiences, and innovative content, we're sharing our learning on how we've built an incredible product design team in less than one year, whose results already touch 25M+ users across the globe.

The scale of the design industry is massive

$250B+
Global annual spend on agency design services

51%
B2B businesses prefer to communicate with imagery over text

81%
Of all businesses regularly use graphic design services

507K+
Formally trained designers globally across all mediums

88%
Of consumers are less likely to return to a website with a poor user experience (UX)

Sources: Hubspot, multiple advertising and media industry publications, American Marketing Association (AMA), Gartner Group

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Profile and skills

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The first rule of recruiting designers is to start with numbers

Given that an agency's focus should be on the intersection of design and performance, you want to ensure that your designers deeply understand the performance side of design - engagement rates, time-on-site, conversion rates, pipeline valuation, etc...

The recommendation is that any organization looking to put together a high-impact product design team should have the same starting point.

The first step in doing this is by writing a designer job description that includes experience in one or more of the following areas:

- Design thinking and problem solving
- Strong understanding of typography, layout, colour, grid systems, and advanced design principles.
- Commercial design experience in agile teams
- Mobile and web applications
- UX frameworks e.g. lean and the double diamond

Recommended Ideal Designer Profile

Candidate must check all of these boxes

- ✓ Validated design skills
- ✓ Body of work
- ✓ Soft skills

- ✓ Prior agency or client-serving experience
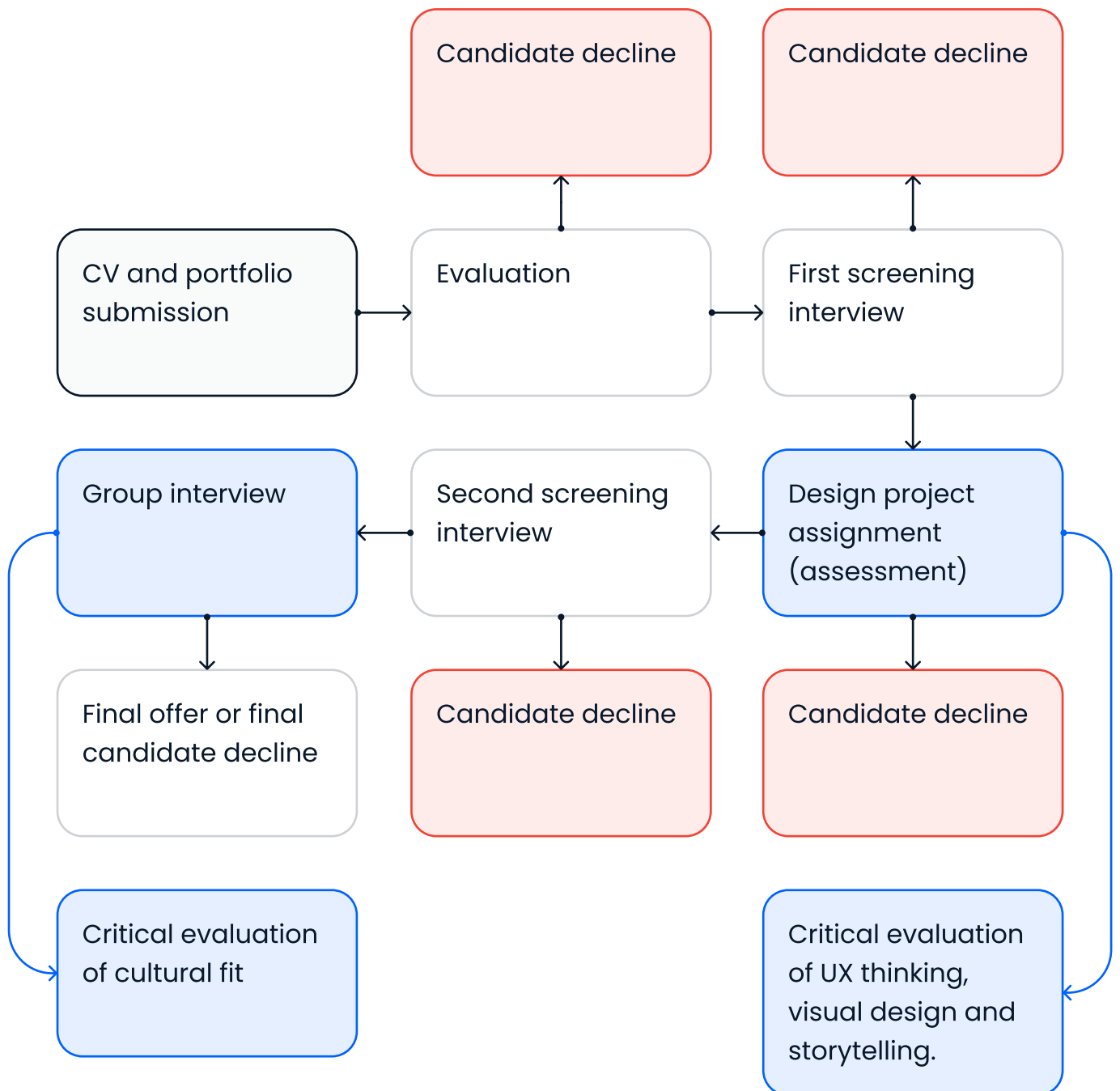- ✓ Collaborative, leadership, partnership skills

70% of candidate evaluation

Candidate should check at least 2 of these boxes

- ✓ Design systems
- ✓ Lean UX or Double Diamond
- ✓ Usability testing

- ✓ UX workshops
- ✓ Design sprints
- ✓ Digital storytelling

30% of candidate evaluation

The Designer Interview Process

Candidate decline

Candidate decline

CV and portfolio submission → Evaluation → First screening interview

Group interview ← Second screening interview ← Design project assignment (assessment)

Final offer or final candidate decline

Candidate decline

Candidate decline

Critical evaluation of cultural fit

Critical evaluation of UX thinking, visual design and storytelling.

Example interview questions and topics

- What is the top-performing work product that you have ever designed? How did you measure performance? What outcomes resulted from this performance?

- What role does brand play in the performance of design?

- Can you give an example of design that you thought was truly inspired but, to your knowledge, performed very poorly?

- A client asks for a revision to a work product that will undermine prior design principles that are tied to future performance. How will you approach the client?

- A client requests a work product and says they have no performance requirements. What would be your response?

Ideal interview answer themes and topics

- An example of "beautiful design" they created that failed to perform - self awareness of the importance of performance

- An example of working for a difficult client and having to win their trust

- One or more examples of having delivered design work that was measured and how the metrics were derived, what they meant

- Several examples of active collaboration on complex projects - how was responsibility divided, what leadership role have they played, how were disagreements resolved

- At least one example of having done very creative design that complied with brand guidelines

- At least one example of a design project that resulted in work that is in active use by a client today, touching at least 1000 users +

- At least one example of effective marketing (outside of design) that shows an understanding of how an end-to-end marketing approach works

- Demonstrates understanding of the growth potential and hard challenges facing a startup digital agency

- Understanding that clients are seeking business results, not design

- Awareness of branding and the role it can play in guiding design

- Experience dealing with challenging clients who may have very strong "design" opinions that are not well informed by design principles

- Demonstrated experienced of a failure or two that became a learning experience

- Understanding of core marketing principles - pipeline, engagement, conversion

- Proven experience taking on hard business challenges

- Strong collaboration and communications skills

Onboarding and teambuilding

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Onboarding new designers must be a comprehensive and rigorous process

Every agency aims to maximize time to value creation for every new hire in order to keep up with client demands. However, taking a long-term view, with more investment up-front, will lead to greater returns long-term. That's why, especially for new designers, the first priority is to involve them in initial meetings with clients, development of the creative brief, and most importantly, deep engagement in the performance planning that underpins all client work. You should push new designers to "know the numbers" before they ever start doing design work.

It is also important to schedule 30, 60, and 90 day check-ins to ensure the new designer is gaining comfort in agency processes and their integration into the company. The performance focus of the 30 and 60-day check-ins also ensures alignment of designer output with the output requirements of the agency.

Example New Designer Onboarding Process - First ~90 Days

Start Date

Design work begins

Onboarding Check-in

Online UX/UI courses
Client meetings
Creative brief development
Mirroring peer designers

First 30 days

Performance planning
Design concepts
In-depth UX/UI process review

Performance Check-in

Design work in full swing

First 60 days

Ongoing participation in ...
Client meetings
Sprint planning / refinements
Creative brief development

Performance Check-in

New Designer First Week Plan - Slow Start For a Fast Ramp Up

Although it may seem counterintuitive, to ensure a fast time to value for a new designer or any agency hire, the first week should be intentionally slow. This is to build confidence, comfort, and connection that will help the new designer to move rapidly forward from the second week. This means allowing adequate time to set up software and devices, meet colleagues in a non-superficial way, learn about the office space, and begin to understand the working rhythms of the team.

The following "week 1" schedule has been developed based on the proven practices for a high-growth agency that is adding staff, gaining new clients, and expanding its practices areas at a very fast pace.

Day 1

✓ Device and software configuration

✓ Lunch with the CEO and manager

✓ Tour of the office space

✓ Welcome "coffee" with the team

Day 2

✓ Agency systems & ops

✓ Email and calendar configuration, understanding schedule of standing meetings

✓ Overview of key client projects in action

✓ Lunch with the design team

Day 3

✓ Review debrief documents from three past client projects

✓ In-depth review of work in progress for current client projects

✓ Discuss first assignments with manager, read creative briefs and other background materials

Day 4

✓ Start attending standing meetings

✓ Meet with the project team for the first assignments

✓ Create first "30-days plan" with manager

Day 5

✓ Debrief with manager and HR on first week experience

✓ Finalize schedule for week 2

✓ Shadow at least two members of the design team

New Designer Onboarding Process - Additional Practices
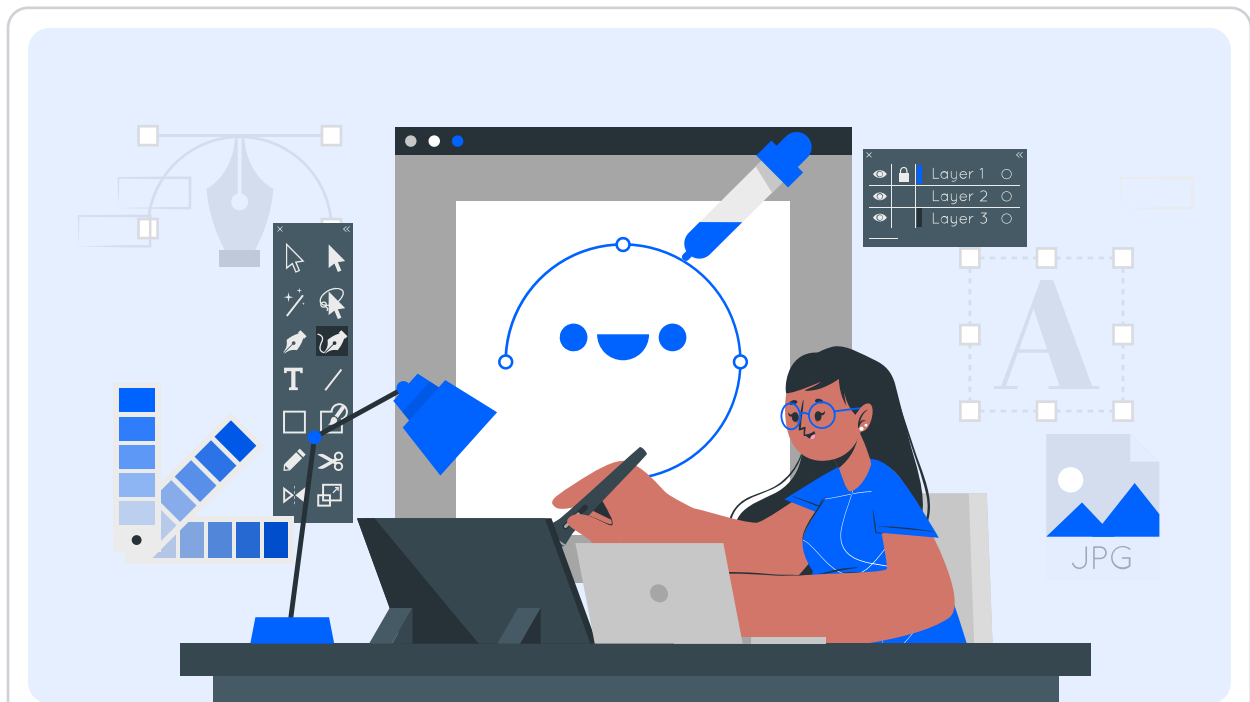
Design Fridays

With few exceptions, designers should get together informally on Friday afternoons to share an inspiring design idea, either from their current work or something that caught their eye externally. The design team will look forward to the sessions, which reinforce the collaborative approach an agency should have across the design team. Design Fridays help reinforce that first and foremost, designers need to bring great design to life, whether it's fully their original ideation or something that came together through a group effort.
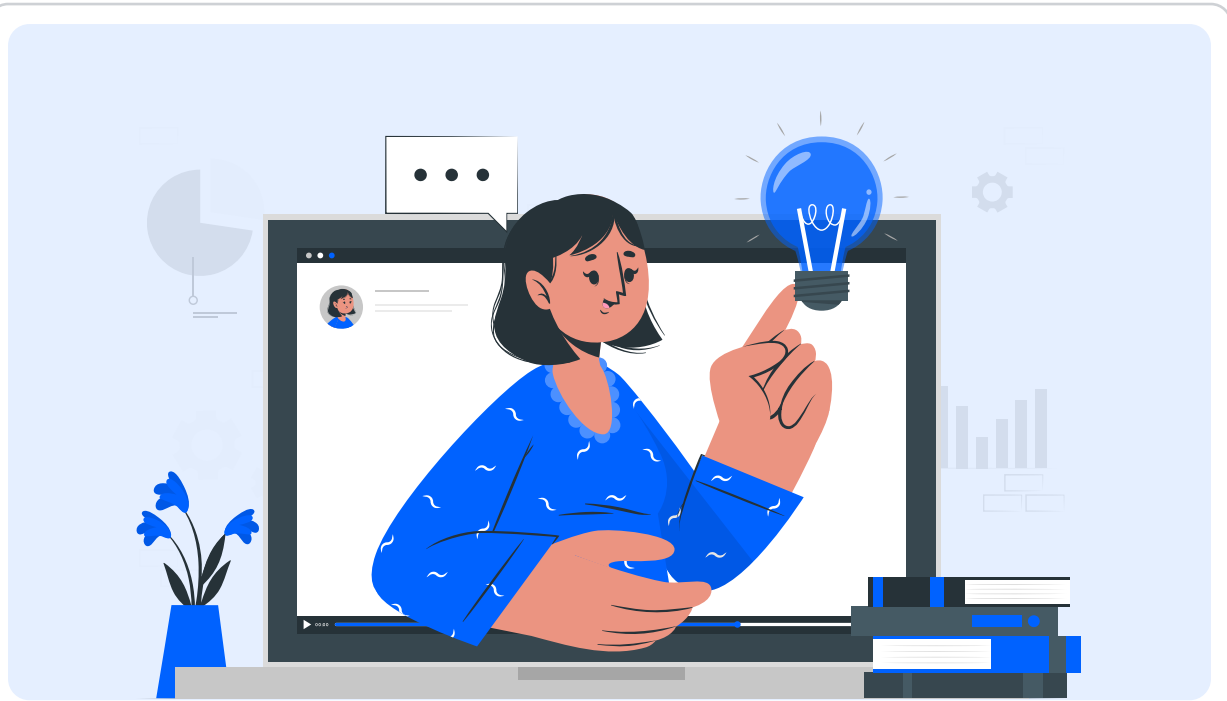
Ongoing Training

Thriving agencies should budget for every staff member to take at least one external training session per year, including attendance at in-person conferences. For designers, this is especially important as a lot of their learning opportunities come from immersive experiences where they have the opportunity to apply new ideas as part of the learning experience. To ensure follow-through, participation in at least one training opportunity should be a mandatory annual requirement as part of the performance review process.

Continuous Peer Reviews

At the conclusion of the delivery of every client project, every project team member, especially designers, should participate in an open, friendly, and constructive peer review session to ensure the organization is constantly learning and improving. The feedback does not tie to any official performance review process and for the design team, further strengthens the open connections between designers.

Design Twinning

For more complex and larger-scale client projects, the agency should pair two designers together to develop the work. Not only does this help balance workloads, it also reinforces the collative culture of the company and strengthens bonds between designers. This practice also further reinforces the agency focus on designers bringing great design to life as the primary deliverable, rather than whether each designer creates a breakthrough everytime on their own.

Design Subscription Services

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The best designers prefer constant change. Pioneering Digital Design Subscription Services enable just that.

Innovative agencies are launching design subscription services, a perfect fit for the challenge of organizations not always wanting or needing to have dedicated in-house designers. Companies can simply subscribe to service and have unlimited access to top design talent whenever they need it.
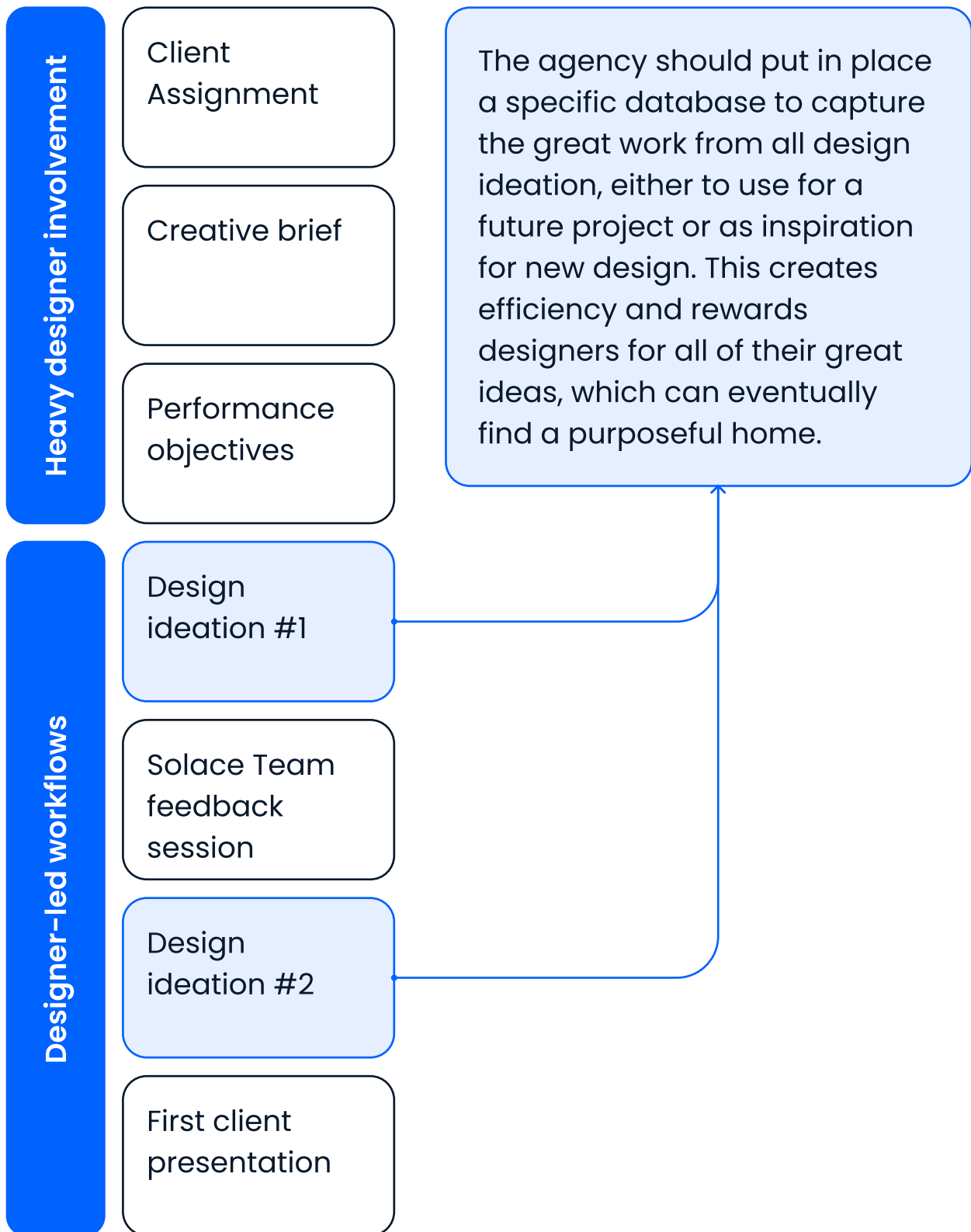
This is also a perfect fit for designers, who can often tire of working on just one brand as the well-intended brand guidelines can drain creative energy and inspiration. Instead, designers end up working on new brands all of the time, so every project can feel like an opportunity to maximize creativity and deploy disruptive, bold ideas.

Design Subscription Service - Non-Stop Energy for Designers

How Designers Work with Design Subscription Clients

As the number of agency clients grows, especially through a new Design Subscription offering, the agency needs an "operating system" to help align staffing and capacity to ensure they are meeting demand and always delighting clients. At the core of this approach is a continual ideation process that captures all of the great insights, inspiration, and drafts from the design team. In many cases, a great design idea that may not be the perfect match for one client could be applied to a different client with slight modifications. It's also critical to have in place a rigorous process to ensure work is always moving forward at the right pace, and that helpful feedback milestones occur early enough to make adjustments while still keeping to the schedule.

Rigorous Design Process

Heavy designer involvement

Client Assignment

Creative brief

Performance objectives

Designer-led workflows

Design ideation #1

Solace Team feedback session

Design ideation #2

First client presentation

The agency should put in place a specific database to capture the great work from all design ideation, either to use for a future project or as inspiration for new design. This creates efficiency and rewards designers for all of their great ideas, which can eventually find a purposeful home.

Designers need time to think, research, and reflect. A project rating system ensures they have it.

The following scale, or one that is similar in nature, should be used for rating the time considerations of client projects. This approach makes sure that designers are not overburdened, and that the agency will have sufficient capacity for a growing body of client work.

Project A: UI/UX for a mobile application and/or website, 75% of a designer for ~12 weeks

Project B: New brand launch, 75% of a designer for ~8 weeks

Project C: Innovative content or experience, 50% of a designer for ~4 weeks

Project D: Appearance modification of a website or other customer-facing content, 25% of a designer for ~4 weeks

With this approach, the following workload combinations are possible:

Designer 1:   1A and 3D projects for 12 weeks

Designer 2:   1B and 2D projects for 8 weeks

Designer 3:   1C and 1D project for 4 weeks

Evaluating design performance

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Great design inspires, engages, and converts. Agencies should have a scorecard to keep track of it all.

High-performing agencies start and end every project with performance metrics. Their teams don't celebrate even the most innovative new design concept unless the end work delivers business value to the client.

In an increasingly digital world, business leaders are constantly bombarded with metrics, conventional wisdom, and lots of opinions about "how to measure" and what constitutes "good." To help guide clients to the metrics that really matter and to ensure you are continuously increasing value generation, the following scorecard was developed to measure the impact of design, among other key metrics and performance indicators.

Design Scorecard - metrics that are directly related to design, from UI/UX to branding and innovative content

Key metrics and definitions

Time on site: the amount of time for a unique user to visit a website, either on a desktop, tablet, or mobile device. This is measured from the entry time on the site until a full exit, and includes visits to multiple pages across the site and popup content initiated front the site as well.

Bounce rate: the percentage of unique visitors who leave a website after accessing only a single web page.

Engagement rate: the percentage of content consumers who like, forward, comment, repost/retweet, or engage otherwise with digital content in comparison to the number of unique impressions.
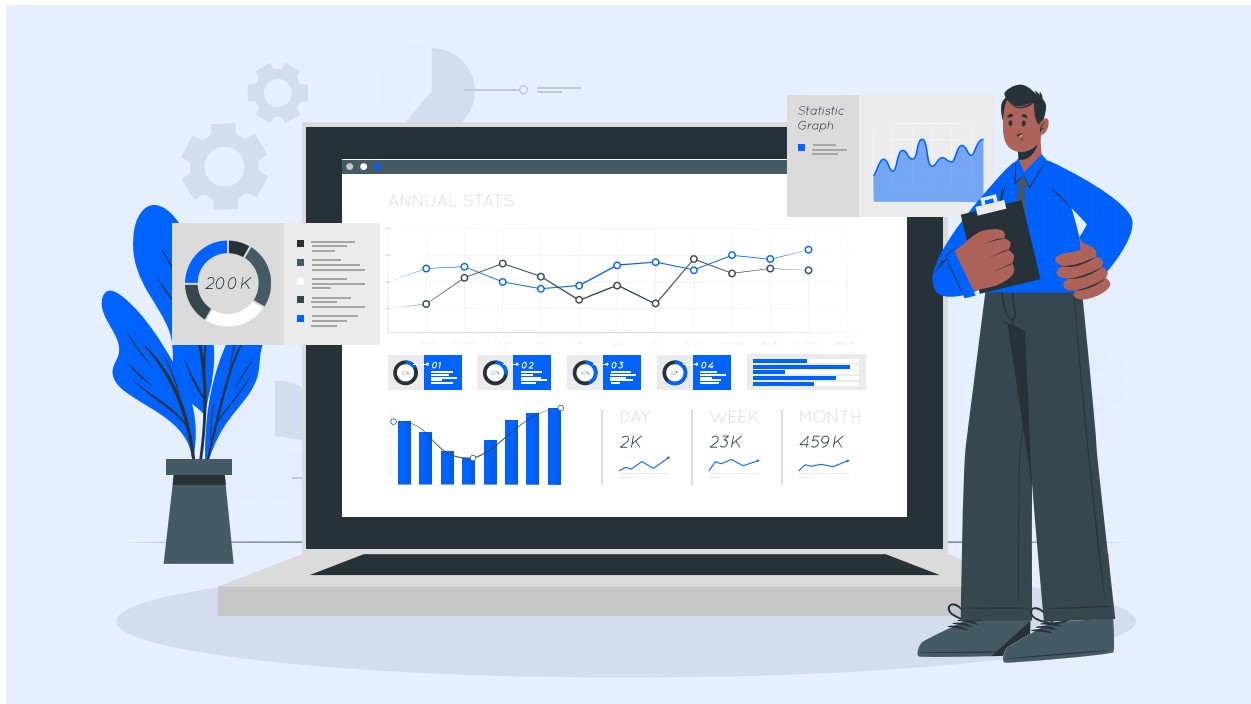
Conversion rate: the percentage of customers who visit a website, landing page, portal or social media channel and complete a transaction that involves a purchase, requesting a meeting, sharing contact details, or other steps that generate business value.

Cost per impression: the number of impressions compared to the spend on paid content placement and advertising. Typically, this is measured in cost per 1K impressions, known in abbreviation as CPM.

Agency Digital Design Scorecard

Metric	Benchmark for "Good"	My result
Time on site or application	2:00+	
Time to value	<:30	
Clicks (steps) to accomplishment	4	
Number of application opens/ site visits per month	>10	

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Inspired Design = Great Process + Talented Individuals

London, our HQ and home, is full of inspiration for designers. The ambition and vision of our clients also inspires the breakthrough design we deliver. Most importantly, we establish workflows, a culture, and rigor to ensure our amazing designers thrive at Solace Digital. Our practices are proven every day, underpinning the success of our clients and growth of our agency.

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