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Home

Home > My courses > Capstone Project 2 > 15 DESIGN SPRINT PART 3 > Lesson Proper for Week 15

Lesson Proper for Week 15

What's the Best Application of Design Sprints?

Design sprints can be used in a variety of ways to develop your product. We'll walk you through a few different ways we have used them or have seen others use them.

A wide variety of projects and people

Brian Colcord, Director, UX and Product Design, at the publicly traded LogMeIn, got the same kick out of discovering design sprints that we had:

"The design sprint was an eye-opening thing to me, because you always struggle within these corporate settings with opinions, and stakeholders, and all of those types of things. When I got introduced to the design sprint that showed me that you can involve all of these people in that process, and the outcome can be exponentially better and faster than how we were going about it currently. It just really opened my eyes."

The types of projects a design sprint can handle vary. At Constant Contact, C. Todd and his team have run them on a variety of initiatives beyond digital products. The finance team was keen on digging into hypotheses-driven test approaches, the sales and marketing teams were interested in exploring the design and packaging of the product offering, and the franchise team wanted to test different combinations for particular audiences.



As we discussed in the previous chapter, our brains need environmental and internal triggers to get us into the creative flow. To ensure our survival during times when calories needed for creative thinking were not as close as the vending machine, we evolved brains that conserve energy. Your brain wants to hang on to its calories for as long as possible. In times of need, your brain jumps into action and chews on all that stored energy as quickly as possible. Times of need can be artificially manufactured by creating deadlines. Our brain doesn't know the difference. When you create deadlines, your brain stops procrastinating and gives you what you need.

A framework for timeboxed activities

The same thing happens when you create a time-bound design sprint. Scheduled activities and consequences snap your brain into action. The best way to create urgency and get the juices flowing is to set hard dates for the sprint. There is a real need to create extrinsic motivators to get the best results. For example, schedule customer interviews, which will provide the feedback you'll need, on the last day of the sprint or set up a presentation to your bosses to show them what the sprint uncovered. These motivators get you focused, which the brain likes, and forces you to get the really important stuff (e.g., prototyping) completed, so you won't look unprepared come testing day.

Having said this, there is a deliberate and almost paradoxical tension that must be created for this collaboration to be successful. The design sprint is a framework that aims to provide enough structure to get the team engaged and excited while also remaining flexible enough that it doesn't smother the creative process. We'll dive into when to be flexible and when to be structured throughout the book. Time spent with the team needs to be sensitive to the very real technical challenges of building a functional prototype, while supporting the sparks of insight that come from collaborative exploration. The brilliant pianist Bill Evans said it best in his liner notes to Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*: "Group improvisation is a further challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result."

The Ideal Design Sprint: Five Days

A full design cycle in one week

While we've seen design sprints as short as a few hours and as long as a few weeks, our recommendation is to dedicate at least one full day for each of the five phases of the design sprint. Although it's very possible to complete the entire process in three days, we must stress that in no case should you leave out the customer feedback phase. Forgoing this feedback can undermine the very reason you are doing this exercise—to get insights that lead to a better understanding. The ideal design sprint provides time for team members to reflect on their ideas and challenges and also provides opportunities to validate or disrupt those ideas. By allocating a day to each phase, you have time to test assumptions and overcome the possibility of jumping to conclusions. This gives the team the opportunity to reflect on some of the decisions and discussions of the previous days' work. We'll discuss the details of that in the next chapter. In our experience and through the interviews we conducted, we discovered other time frames in which design teams are applying the design sprint framework. What if you don't have five days? Or you do, but the folks on your team do not, because they have day jobs working on something besides your shiny new project? Yes, everyone has something else to work on. When this happens, you can try some or all of the approaches covered in the following sections—these alternatives are proven to work.

Alternative Approach #1: Compact It

"I can't give you five days. I can give you two."

The biggest challenge to the five-day sprint comes in larger, enterprise organizations. It is difficult to get all the right stakeholders in one place for five uninterrupted days, as many stakeholders have other responsibilities and "day jobs" to attend to.



For many design sprints, the full team only needs to be present for the Understand, Diverge, and Converge phases of the sprint. For the Prototype phase, the participation of the full team is useful to provide the right copy, and it's also useful for everyone to observe the user sessions during the Test phase. However, if it's not possible for everyone during a final session once the user testing is complete. That can save two full days of the participants' time.

Even three days is sometimes difficult, so the first three phases can be condensed into two days with the full team. Then the Prototype and Test phases can extend by up to half a day to a full day each, which can make them go at a more relaxed pace.

Alternative Approach #2: Shorten the Days

"I can give you five to six hours each day"

At Constant Contact, C. Todd found through experimentation that a 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. time frame helps alleviate the concerns of having to give up multiple full days to a design sprint. At one point, he tried breaking up the sprint even further into small one and a half to two-hour workshops over the course of two to three months. Some of the participants had many other responsibilities and their schedules were tightly booked. While these design sprints made an impact, their value would have been greater had they been more condensed and not drawn out over multiple months. We abandoned that practice and will now run a workshop but will not engage a full-on design sprint over such a great length of time. There's something magical about the forced intensity a design sprint brings.

Beware of too short

Shortened days do help with alleviating the exasperated response of: "You want me to give you three to five days, are you nuts?!" However, design does take time, and any problem worth solving needs adequate time to be solved.

Alternative Approach #3: Spread It Out

"Let's do bite-sized chunks over four weeks"

Matt Bridges, CTO of Intrepid Labs, a digital design agency focused on mobile app design, told us that his company spreads design sprints over four to six weeks, and for good reason. The agency's team and clients don't have the luxury of getting together for five full consecutive days

Steve Fisher, currently Director of User Experience at NetApp, describes his experience when he worked as UX Director for SeaChange:

"Traditional design sprints in the Google Ventures mode of five days, all day, that's wonderful. If you're a startup funded by Google Ventures, and you need your series A, you're going to be there. But [when] you have 10 other things to do and people to manage, it's hard. You can't do all-day sessions. So we broke them up into two-hour chunks. Get them in the morning because their brains are fresh, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., then you wrap up. We did that actually two days a week. We spread it out over a four-week sprint every Tuesday and Thursday. That was the easiest way to do it. We found Tuesday and Thursday, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., were optimal times to get people engaged."

Steve clarified that the designers worked on the project for more than just the two hours, and that only during those two-hour sessions were the other cross-functional stakeholders working on specific exercises with the UX team.

Jürgen Spangl at Atlassian had a similar experience when he tried to run a seven-week design sprint. Yes, that's correct, a seven-week design sprint. When we heard that, we thought: that's not a sprint, that's a marathon! "I would never run the seven-week one like how I ran it in the past. As ambitious as it was, it probably had a lot of change. It brought a lot of change in the company trying to skill-up and educate too many people at the same time and all that drawing to an outcome is just not possible."



The danger of this approach is that it essentially becomes like a Waterfall process and the "sprint" is no longer a sprint, rather a leisurely pace.

Alex Britez at MacMillan Education started with a six-day design sprint in his organization, using the following phases:

- **Understanding** Align on the problems to solve
- **Empathy** Bring in stakeholders (students) and interview them
- **Ideation** Categorize insights and generate solutions
- **Decision** Decide which solutions to build and test, by using a science fair–like arena
- **Prototyping** Build the idea into a clickable product
- **Testing** Solicit feedback on the prototype from users

Two key differences in this flavor are an entire day devoted to customer interviewing for empathy, and allowing a prototype build over a weekend to be ready for Monday's testing.

Alternative Approach #4: Ultra-Compact It: A Few Hours

"I can give you a few hours. What can we get done?"

We've sometimes seen projects that can benefit from aspects of the design sprint process, but the entire project is just one week. We can't spend the whole week on design thinking! Or sometimes the stakeholders are available for just a few hours on a larger project.

In cases like these, the sprint can be focused into the essence of the most important aspects. We don't have as much time to diverge and converge as we'd like, but we can still create a concise challenge statement, understand our goals and assumptions, and understand who the users are and what their journey is through what we might want to create for them. After some quick sketching and storyboarding, high-level wireframes can then be reviewed with users and can form the start of a backlog of things to implement, to get a project off to the right start.

In March 2015, this happened at thoughtbot. Peter Bell from Ronin Labs had three weeks to build a new system to run a course for enterprise training. We wanted to begin with a design sprint, but Peter needed to get on a plane in three hours, so that's all the time we had. Three hours? Yes. So off they went and did the quick exercises just described. The result? Peter's now secured seed funding and has the customers and users he needs, starting from nothing.

"One of the other things that we've really done, which is kind of an adaptation of the design sprint is design studios, which I've learned a lot about in the last couple of years. I put them into practice here, and they are more like day-long design sprints, where you kind of have these three design threads and you break off into teams. They allow for including more people, and I think they work better for something that's just like trying to iron out a specific flow, or that's a little bit less of a problem. Design sprints, I think, lend themselves better to bigger, overarching problems. If you're just trying to figure out how we get somebody through a purchase flow or something like that, the design studio day helps to ignite that and push that along. We practice those as well; we use those."

—Brian Colcord, LogMeIn

Alternative Approach #5: Align with Your Team's

Agile/Scrum



"My engineering team follows Agile, how can this work together?"

Damon Dimmick at Constant Contact reflected on what he referred to as the "scrumification" of design sprints:

"I basically advocate for a model where, in the Scrum world, the first week before we even get to doing any kind of a design sprint, or even it could be weeks before, we've got a product owner with a backlog and the team is getting together, continuous grooming efforts and the hypotheses are going on that backlog, the assumptions are going on that backlog. This is what is basically called a discovery phase."

He continued on about how the hypotheses drive the work: *"As you get these hypotheses and validations that you want to actually work through, what you're hoping to do is take these into sprints of work, unpack them, understand them, and then the output is actionable stories, which could include designs or they might not, depending on what's needed. Once you've got a whole backlog of those, you go through the usual Scrum mechanics, the PO starts to look at their prioritization,"* and then the team adjusts accordingly.

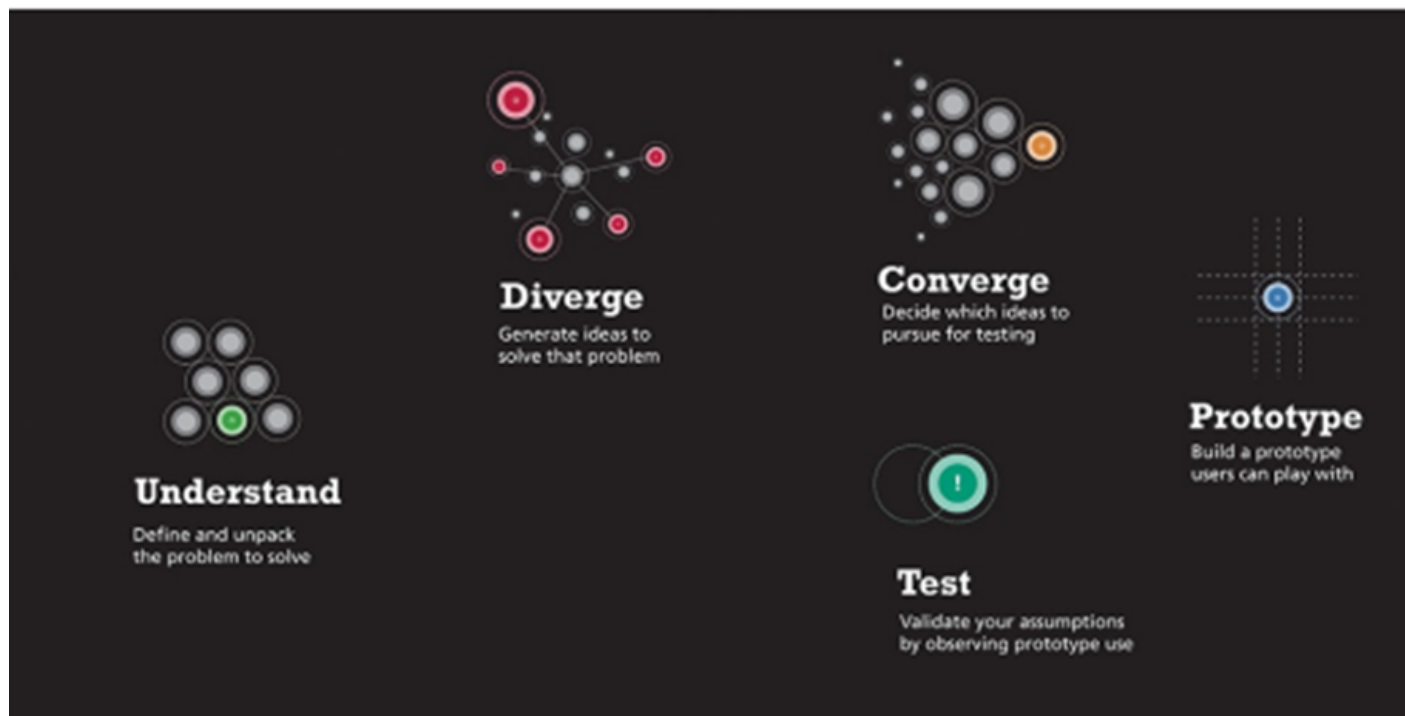
Match the design sprint length to the Scrum length

Trace and his team at thoughtbot run one-week design sprints, and for some teams at Constant Contact that's also true. Alok Jain, Senior Manager of User Experience Design at 3-Pillar Global, runs two-week design sprints for similar reasons, as his development team runs the Scrum in two-week cycles.

Regardless of the format you ultimately work with, there are many ways to adapt a design sprint to your constraints. The examples given here hopefully offer you a taste of how it may fit into your organization.

Important Note

- Timeboxing your efforts creates a sense of urgency. Really: you get stuff done.
- We don't know if there is a limit on how many projects a team can work on, but from our observations it follows that a team focused on one project can be more productive than a team focused on many projects.



- The five phases of a design sprint can sometimes be condensed into a smaller time frame or, alternatively, experiment to find which works best in your organization.





◀ Preliminary Activity for Week 15

Jump to...



Analysis, Application, and Exploration for Week 15 ▶

Navigation

Home

 Dashboard

Site pages

My courses

Capstone Project 2


Participants

General

15 DESIGN SPRINT PART 3

 Preliminary Activity for Week 15

 Lesson Proper for Week 15

 Analysis, Application, and Exploration for Week 15

 Generalization for Week 15

 Evaluation for Week 15

 Assignment for Week 15

Network Defense and Remote Access Configuration

OJT/Practicum 2

Seminars and Tours

Courses







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-  Quizzes
-  Resources

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