UCD

[00:00:00] **Jack:** It feels like everyone wants a design system at the minute, every 32 seconds, someone shares a link on Twitter to their pattern library eager for internet kudos, desperate to show off the corner radius of the buttons, but between everyone trying to start one and everyone else trying to convince us that they invented them in the first place, there lies and effective tool that can make your life a lot easier, but it can only be effective if we start to put, start to leave the criticism at the door and we start to take designing systems just a little bit more seriously.

So in this session, I want to talk about a little bit about what the point of a design system is really, some common misconceptions and myths and the reality behind them and then lay out a new plan or a new approach for how we can do this and make them a bit more team centric and also where to start.

[00:01:00] Design systems, help organizations stay consistent. That's usually the driving factor, the trigger for a project like this to kick off. You might have multiple products as part of your organization and the design and the look and the feel have converged diverged. And this is an attempt to kind of bring those back together.

They empower individuals to work collaboratively. So if you're feeling inconsistency the minute I can hazard a guess that you've got lots of designers in different areas who maybe aren't really working together as well as they could. And this is an opportunity for you to kind of bring those people in help them to focus on something, on one thing together.

But they also helped you to deliver better when selling this into a business, it's really easy to throw around words like faster and more efficient. And it's true to an extent [00:02:00] that will be an outcome eventually, but I think we need to be honest with ourselves. That to begin with these things will slow us down and that's good. Cause it'll slow us down and not make us more considered and I'll make the way we design just a little bit more deliberate.

Organizations are so keen to have a design system that they build one that dictates how a few team members and frankly, quite often designers, think the organization should work. But the design system needs to reflect how your organization already works.

A good way to think about this is you're effectively creating a history of what's coming before a library of stuff that's happened. Documents of ways of working. Ultimately a design system should be boring, to be honest. And if it's exciting and if you're quite pumped to do it, then maybe go outside, but also [00:03:00] it might be that you're coming from the wrong angle, perhaps.

So there are these misconceptions that I think both internal in the design industry, but also like external misconceptions of what is expected of a design system. But I think that based in a good place, they come from a good place and the best in some kind of reality, there's some truth to them.

So let's go through them one by one.

The biggest culprit, I think is that a design system is a library of reusable patterns.
A style guide or a pattern library is just one part of your design system, focusing on it is reactionary to the inconsistency in your products. It's more effective and more efficient, to be honest, to solve the root cause of that inconsistency at the very beginning.
And before the inconsistency happens. And the root cause of that, generally is in the process. It's in how people work together, both in [00:04:00] design teams, but also as multidisciplinary teams.
Visual consistency is the goal of a design system. There is this idea of being as consistent as humanly possible of things looking the same.
But actually complete consistency is quite difficult and maybe even impossible to achieve, especially when your organization is juggling with multiple products under the same brand, there's a quote in vogue which I think is quite common advice that when shaping eyebrows... they should be sisters and not twins.
And I really liked that because it's kind of saying that these two things that you see as part of the same face. Don't need to be identical. And actually if they are identical it might cause some issues. It might be a little bit weird. I think it's the same for products and services under one brand.
We're not necessarily trying to, to recreate the exact same experience. We're just wanting to experience [00:05:00] is the feel like they belong and together.
Obviously in some, some areas that isn't necessarily true, like from government, for example, you want those to feel like they are, almost the same, but at the same time, you don't want to feel like you're renewing your driver's license with, I don't know that the prison service, you know, like I think they need to be different enough, your brand touchpoints, then they become the consistent elements. So it could be like your logo. It could be, your color scheme, it could be a typography. Those are the things that can be the same.
Everything else can be varied to some degree. And that's and that's okay. It should tell designers how to design products and services.
Well that's not untrue that shouldn't be its focus. It's focus should be to help teams make their products and services. The design system after all is a collection of guidance and processes and principles.
And it's not [00:06:00] hard and fast rules, or it shouldn't be hard and fast rules because an effective system is led by the emerging products and services, not dictated by them. So if you're starting this project and you're thinking, "well, if we do the design system, then we can redesign everything to be in line with it" there's some truth to that, but that's not necessarily the most effective way to approach it instead, document what's been done. And then that becomes your design system.
After that, you can then change things over the time. It should set the tone and the structure of how your organisation is designs the thing it does.
A design systems for designers. This is one of the most difficult myths to kind of overcome in an organization, I think.

Your design systems should be relevant to everyone involved in making the products and services in your organization and yes this includes designers and it could even be led by designers but the [00:07:00] design in this sense is more about realizing a product or a service than it is the job that you do day to day. For example, an architect, right? An architect designs, a building, but they don't supply the bricks. They don't write the regulations and laws and they don't necessarily design the interiors. However, all of those things contribute to the building design.

So there's a little bit of how we shouldn't think about it. So how should we think about our design system?

Well, I think of it as a system that is the principles and materials that are needed to design a product or service. So it's not just the pattern library, it's the stuff around it, it's how we did it as well. And why we do it, not just the things we use, in a way that remains consistent is necessary. Again, like eyebrows your products and services should be sisters, not twins.

But we can break this down into two main areas. And I [00:08:00] think this is probably why there's some confusion around this area.

When you think about a system, you would generally think about a technical system. You think about the things, the cogs in the machine, the circuitry, the parts of a vehicle. And they're important, they're the things that make the thing happen. You know, they make the sound come out of the speakers, they make the car move.

They're a group of things that work together as part of a larger network, but what I think we're missing and why I think we can really capitalize on this is the flip side of that coin, the behavioral system.

So what I'm generally talking about here is a process driven design system and the processes is the behavior it's the individual needs and rewards and expectations and attributes of the human beings in an organization.

How do those people do the work they do? What do they need to be able to do that, [00:09:00] not just the tools.

Thinking about our design process before putting together patterns and components helps us see where we can streamline and improve how we work as a team, not only helps improve design overall, but will bring individuals together, create a collaborative environment and increase ownership at every stage. Design isn't just for the designers.

So where do we even begin, then?

That's what a design system isn't, there's some misconceptions of what the design system is, so how do we get started?

Well at the beginning, thats very good place to start.

Try to figure out what your design system should be, what should be in it, what content needs to be in there, what tools need to be in there.

There are hundreds of thousands of organizations tackling their own design [00:10:00] systems to varying degrees of success. And the temptation is to take inspiration from them. And we all do that. It's part of the process of designing

something sometimes. We go away and sit at our desks and we tap around and we call it competitive research.
But ultimately we're looking at like, what other cool stuff is going on? And like, what can we learn? What could we do better than.
Keep in mind that they're solving design problems that are unique to their organization and they may not even be doing that very well. So you can look at government, you can look at Shopify, you can look at co-op or IBM or all of these places but that's only going to get you so far. Because they're not necessarily going to be able to transplant and fit and map to your organization.
So here are seven steps that I think is a good starting place to implement a process first design system.
Step one: do some research. Learn about your [00:11:00] teams end-to-end process of starting a new piece of work.
How are decisions made? Who makes them. What they need to make those decisions. Consider the process from inception right through to delivery of the final piece of work and how people work together on that. And using that information, you can then think about how to streamline and connect each process.
Where are the commonalities and the ways of working. How does work move from one person to another? How does it go from research to design, to engineering, to live? What actually happens at those stages? Not just sending a sketch file across but what decisions happen?
The goal is to then look at that and make each process as collaborative and multidisciplinary as possible.
And you can start by mapping that out. Now you understood all the work that goes into making a product. You can map the processes out. You should try to [00:12:00] generalize the process and map out each stage, creating opportunity for cross team collaboration as you go. So this is a fairly common example of what a design process might look like.
It comes from somewhere, research or testing, external or internal. And then a need is highlighted, you design that, and it gets put into a backlog and then it gets implemented. Sometimes in there might throw in a design crit. You might share it, but generally that's the process. But what we can do is look where we can introduce new stages.
We can introduce there just for review and documentation. The idea behind this really is that you want to get people thinking about the reusability of the stuff that they do, not just patterns and components, but ways of working and principles to get them thinking about that reusability as they're doing the work.
So a need has arisen for research or testing, [00:13:00] and then you come up with the first step of what that solution might be. From there you take it to a review session. Sometimes I like to think of these as a peer review and then a wider review. And the first one, the peer review is where you ask your team or you share it with them just to offer a desk and say, is this the right thing? I think about this the right way?

Involve them in it, be collaborative don't sit on it yourself, and from there you might need to go back and refine that solution. But if not, you can then begin to document it. I'll come to that in a second, but you can begin to say what this thing is, what problem you're trying to solve.
And then once the fleshed out and the designs fleshed out more, you can go back and review it again. But this time try and be more open with it and broader with it. Bring together a group of people from different teams. Again, not, it's not just about designers. It's not just about your team solving that single problem. There are plenty of people in the organization who can contribute. And then from there, it gets documented [00:14:00] fully and then gets added to the backlog and then it gets implemented.
Now I understand that that looks like it's a long process and it looks like it's going to slow things down, but it's kind of by design.
But as people get used to it, then people begin to understand that they need to attend these sessions and they need to make a decision. It needs to be reviewed and everyone needs to review stuff. We stop going from isolated designers diverging and one singular design team converging and coming together to solve a problem.
Create a template for all that information that you're going to gather. This is where consistency really does matter, because ideally you want everything that you document to follow the same structure.
Really that design process should be able to be transplanted into engineering. It should be able to be transplanted into product or even management or even the team, you know, should be able to scale to various [00:15:00] things.
You're going to start documenting the design as it goes, and you want to be able to put that in a place that everyone can access and everyone can understand, and it's consistent for every single thing. This is where you're going to need to start connecting different disciplines and experiment with where your design system might live..
So this is an example of what I have done in a previous world. This is a trello card and for every single- so this was specifically for patternsns and components, and I know that's not all that design systems are about, but for every single addition over time before it can go live into a website, this has to be fleshed out and documented.
What's the problem you're trying to solve. What's the solution, what's it supposed to be used for? What is it not supposed to be used for? How does it work? But you can also begin to bring in some things that otherwise fall by the wayside. In some [00:16:00] organizations I've worked in accessibility has always been a bit of an afterthought, but now this is a good opportunity for you to bring that in the very beginning where you can say this is accessible because.
Oh, this isn't accessible because, and what we're doing at this point is we're beginning to create a world where patterns and components and guidance and anything that lives in the design system can have various states.
I think we're probably all familiar with the idea of 'alpha, beta, live'. I like to apply this to a really granular level and think when I'm documenting this pattern, let's

say, I can say, "well, this is my first idea as to how I can solve this problem. It's not been tested. I think it's accessible, but again, I've not tested it, but it's my alpha pattern. Feel free to use it. Feel free to apply it to you and work, but understand that more work needs to be done." And the next person can pick it up or I can continue with it.
And say, "okay, I'm going to test it. It's now in beta. It's been tested. It's [00:17:00] now accessible. It's not live in anything yet, but it's robust enough to be used without much more work". And then eventually when it's live, that's it, that becomes the defacto business bottom line as to how the pixels or radius that button should be.
So once you've kind of mapped that process that when understood. You can begin to fill in some gaps. You can begin to see where you need a little bit more work a little bit more touch a little bit more love. In fact, for example, perhaps you don't have design principles and you think it will benefit your team to have a set of principles for them to hang their hat on, or maybe you want to tighten the relationship between design and product or engineering and research. Just so they can work together more collaboratively in a little bit tighter.
And a good way to do that is by creating ceremonies.
So anyone who's worked in that kind of super agile environment will be aware of ceremonies or stand [00:18:00] ups, retros and things like that. But create or set aside some time just to discuss the design system, like whether its to contribute to it, to manage change or to check in with its users.
I like to arrange a designated session once a week. Where new patterns can be discussed. Old components can be updated, but the importance there is to create an environment of decision making. So these are the decisions that are for you to make.
So set the tone. "Come to this meeting we're going to talk about X by the end of the meeting we're going to decide what is the correct way to do it. And the decision might be, it needs my work, but use this as an opportunity to, to kind of streamline that process, use it as an opportunity, to own it, to have more accountability and responsibility
If your [00:19:00] organization is large, there is a good chance that there are a lot of people that will be left out that could contribute. I've said throughout this entire talk that it's not just about you as a designer. But perhaps as a marketing team, our communications team, or technical stakeholders, these were all valuable design resources.
There's a shared identity with the things that your organization puts out there. Sometimes it's not that fun, but for example, let's say Spotify, right? If you worked for Spotify. They have a level of ownership over that product.
They all contributed to it in some way, the people that serve a lunch in the cafeteria are contributing to the wellbeing of the people and the environment that they're in. So everyone should theoretically be able to have some input. I'm not saying that someone who's never even thought about design, is going to make decisions, but it should be able to input. It's only [00:20:00] fair and just in this collaborative environment.

You're design system is never going to be done. It's never going to be finished. I think if anyone shares their cool design system website, that's fully populated and, make you believe that it's finished, then I don't think they've solved the problems correctly.
As teams grow and teams change. So does the design system, so you need to reevaluate where you've come from and where you're going.
It's okay to remove stuff. It's okay for something to fail. And it's okay to start again, if you need to, I've done that in previous organizations where we've looked at what's there, we've appreciated what it's done so far and how it's got us to where we were, but to progress, we've had to just start again and that's okay.
We are all trying to be better at what we do so I [00:21:00] think it's important to share the things that you find and learn along the way she had them internally, but share them externally, share them with people in a community like this. Lots of people would be interested to know how you got on.
I would be interested to know how everyone gets on with this kind of thing. And there are lots of people there to offer advice. If you need it. And there are lots of people there that need the advice that you can give.
The main benefit of a design system is not documenting the patterns and components, but the main benefit is in streamlining those processes and bringing together your team as a cohesive unit. By learning from the people that contribute to the products in your organization, everyone that contributes to it, you can begin to instill that collaborative way of thinking.
Like by default, from day one, encourage everyone to be involved in design. Open it up for other people, and then free the [00:22:00] designers up to solve broader problems. And the side effect of that being there come much more agile. Things move a little bit faster. Things become a lot more efficient and if you're struggling to sell it into your business, things will come a hell of a lot cheaper as well.
Thank you very much.