

The state of multimedia design in Copenhagen in 2022.
Deep Dive Project Semester 2 MMD KEA_

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Project Goal

As a 'pre-internship' student, the world of work in this field remains a daunting and blurry entity. With this project I endeavour to pull back the curtain ever so slightly.

or more formally...

To contextualise the learnings from Multimedia Design at KEA into the modern corporate creative landscape, by speaking to people who work in the digital product design field on a daily basis.

A heartfelt thank you to the generosity of everyone involved.

Disclaimer

The following texts should not be taken as the interviewees verbatim responses. The interviews were not recorded, and the answers given are accurate to the extensive notes I made during the interview, and may have been slightly altered for privacy, confidentiality, or even simply narrative considerations.

Permission has been given by the interviewees to share this publicly.

Alex Sabour - Senior Creative Strategist - Valtech
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Adilice Sanches - Senior Product Researcher - Pleo
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Sara Said Mosleh - Design Consultant - IS IT A BIRD
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Andrea Bergholt - UX Research & Designer - Nuuday
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Through a fellow student I got connected to Alex, who generously offered to video call me almost STRAIGHT AWAY for the short interview. As a result my questions were a little ungathered, however I still ended up learning a lot about how the business functions.

Gareth: Why would a company like L'Oreal outsource this work?

Alex: The best specialists (creative directors, developers) rarely if ever would work in a retail/e-commerce company like L'Oreal. They only need the specialist knowledge for a project, and for a project to be achieved quickly.

G: How are clients sought out?

A: Bigger projects come through Senior Account Directors and their relationships as an RFP (request for proposal), almost like a bounty on a problem, and may already be developed into a brief.

G: How does a project pass through Valtech by roles?

A: Once a project is agreed and signed, it is passed to a project manager who gathers directors in each department (departments organised by field), to agree on how to proceed. Teams are then assembled and the process is overseen by the project managers and the directors, directly and indirectly.

G: What hard or soft skills do you see changing in value over the next few years up or down?

A: Web3 will definitely have a big impact in the near future on employability, however nothing that I've noticed just yet. In terms of soft skills, the standard for good communication is always slowly increasing, being able to write a good email, and good copy writing in general is always a great skill to have. A lot varies from country to country, but in Copenhagen, experience working with pharma in any way is an advantage in most larger agencies. About 70% of the work we do locally is through the pharmaceutical industry. Specialising in niche coding languages is a tasty skill to have at the moment, but I can't comment on the future of that much.

Summary

Valuable insight from Alex here. It's worth noting that his company Valtech mainly cater to large multinational and fortune 500 companies. Despite this he also mentioned that some projects can be as small as 20 hour jobs (and up to over 10,000 hours).

It seems in larger agencies, skill sets are very important, as they need to be specialised and capable enough to 'out-skill' the large multinational companies they serve.

It will be interesting to see how this contrasts with a smaller agency's processes,

If smaller agencies value skill sets as much, and what then, instead?

Larger companies outsourcing to utilise specialist skill-sets might mean that a smaller agency with equally niche skills could also be tasked to work with huge clients.

Through an existing contact at Pleo, Adilice volunteered to speak to me. Although not strictly a designer, nor currently working at an agency, as a product researcher her participation in the design process, and the modern way that Pleo are known to operate meant there should be some very valuable insight here.

Gareth: In an agency, I understand that clients pitching problems provides your workload. At Pleo, where the company has one product, how is it decided what to work on?

Adilice: At Pleo the work is prioritised with factors from two places. From our research and feedback from the users, and overall strategic decision and KPIs created by other very smart people in the company. Usually a strategic decision will in turn be informed by research to find out the viability, feasibility, and value of an innovation or update.

G: Looking through your LinkedIn profile I found this super interesting phrase: 'maintain and organise a repository of detailed research information, Can you elaborate on what this is?

A: We're a very new department of research here, so we're currently building a detailed database of content, such as personas, which will be consulted on a regular basis.
For example, when expanding to a new market, cultural, legal, tax, and geographical concerns will have to be addressed ahead of time.
We also keep a record of pain-points, even once resolved, so that we don't repeat mistakes that became invisible by solving them.

G: I also noted that you 'collaborate with cross-functional team members [...] to promote knowledge sharing, and create efficient feedback-loops', can you elaborate on that?

A: Alongside the active research we do, there is also a lot of passive information coming into the company. People here have direct contact with clients and users, and if we can equip these people with the knowledge required to receive this data in a scientific way, there is far more data for us to use.
It's a valuable task for us to spend time with customer

success, customer service and others teams.

G: Are there any trends that you've noticed in the last few years developing in the digital design world?

A: I've noticed that there does seem to be a trend of moving away from the more traditional idea that research is a bookending part of the process, marking the springboard of a project and then simple validation at the end.

I see it becoming a more integrated tool to be used throughout the design process at every stage, by every member, throughout both divergent and convergent processes.

I've also noticed that, 'back in the day' you'd have a graphic designer or graphic design department and that was it. We then moved into fragmenting the roles out into UX/UI/graphics/content/back-end/front-end etc.

Now, as the hard skills become less of a specialist property, it seems as if we're slowly returning to a simpler structure of designers, less restricted in their scope, but more diverse in their backgrounds and perspectives. Potentially just divided into product and brand design teams.

Netflix and Spotify seem to be right up on the curve with this idea.

Summary

Some very interesting insight here, imagining designer roles consolidating as specialist skills become more commonplace and less necessary certainly makes a lot of sense.

The idea of a 'passive stream' of research from other departments in the company interacting with the users is something entirely new to me, and very interesting.

The use of personas, not just as a reference point to make sure a product isn't designed for the designer, but also to keep track of various technical concerns when dealing internationally seems like a very good idea!

Before starting my studies I saw research as a boring but necessary step to add enough weight to an idea in order to pitch it. Now however, I've noticed most of the most important design work is often done before you even start ideating, if the research is done well.

Sara works at Is It A Bird, a medium-sized research and design agency. Their USP seems to be approaching problem-solving through an anthropological research perspective. Because of this fairly unique perspective, I'm fascinated to understand how this connects into the design world of problem solving as I currently know it.

Gareth: As someone who's held both positions, how does being a research consultant differ with being a design consultant?

Sara: In previous places I've worked, the process can be very much separated by department. The research was done to completion, and then handed over to the design department to take care of the rest of the process. This presents a lot of challenges with there often being a single moment to make the designers aware of all the significance, implications and nuance of the research, which wasn't always possible. Now I work much more in tandem with the research process, holding the designer role within the research process means I'm advocating for the role of the designer in the future, and potentially making mock-ups and prototypes in XD for example, or hosting workshops or making visual communications depending on the case.

G: What's a reason a company would outsource research to IIAB?

S: Usually someone such as a senior UX researcher in a company will realise a specific project will require more resources than they have in-house. Sometimes it's to support or validate a decision that has huge implications, sometimes it's a larger company that needs to 'shake things up' and get outside the box a bit, and need an outsider's perspective on exactly how to do that.

G: Once a potential client gets in touch with IIAB, what's the process like?

S: Well typically there'd be an interview, there'd be a lot of listening about the problem, as well as showing the client where and how we can provide value for them. Then there's a proposal that's written up, maybe with some back and forth and an finally a contract is made.

After that, we build a team depending on the task based on experience and skill-set.

G: What trends have you noticed or do you predict affecting the industry of digital design?

S: At the moment most innovation, especially in UI, is technology driven.

New technological possibilities have been the push for developments and I think in the future that will change to developments based on deep research decisions to make them more competitive.

Traditionally qualitative data has always been necessary for researchers, but by it's nature harder to work with. New technology finding it's way deeper into our lives make the lines between qualitative data and quantitative data run much thinner. This could unveil a whole treasure chest of new insights.

Summary

This was a very interesting conversation for a few reasons. Sara is all but confirming the previous ideas that design and research are merging ever closer. It was interesting to learn why a company would approach a research agency such as IIAB, and an insight into what that process looks like.

I'm interested in how their process seems to take place in the first 'diamond' of the 'double-diamond' concept.

Understanding deliverables as something like a workshop, to aid the launch of the rest of the process in the client's own company is also something I wasn't aware happened.

Finally, looking to the future, the nature of technology such as the IOT providing so much new quantitative data that it helps to measure what was previously considered qualitative, means technology is not only unlocking new possibilities, but new unused ways to understand them and the users which is VERY exciting.

Andrea works in the CX department at Nuuday, a parent company of 9 national digital communication and entertainment brands in Denmark. She previously worked at IAB as a junior consultant.

Gareth: I can see you work in the 'need help and change team' at Nuuday, what does that mean? What other teams are there?

Andrea: So at nuuday, the teams are divided by the customer journey. We in 'need help and change' will work to directly fix issues our existing users are experiencing. There is also an 'order to active' team, focusing on new users, and a team based on departing users.

G: How has your experience been working in an 'agile environment'?

A: At nuuday we're less strict on the absolute principles of the agile method, although I've learned a few new amazing 'ceremonies' since starting here. If you're familiar with the double-diamond structure you're half way there already. Agile has become a very standard way for UX teams to operate in, and we operate a slightly looser approach to maintain efficiency and allow for further exploration when we feel the need for it. The first time I truly experienced the agile method was at IAB. It was exciting how effective it is, and to really be aware of the team working around you.

G: Is taking an internship something you would recommend? How important do you consider taking internships to your own career?

A: I started my internship at IAB, and it's a perfect opportunity to test any hypotheses or ideas you've come up with during your studies. You gain a much broader understanding of the skills you're probably already using. The real world situations and their details teach you some vital things that a school just can't. For the interview at my first real job, all I recall them asking about was my internship. If I hadn't done that, I can't imagine I would've even made it that far in the selection process.

G: Back to Nuuday, how does your team come across a problem to solve, and then how do you go about solving it?

A: There's a mix of seeking problems ourselves, and a backlog that is created from other researchers and feedback in the company.

One of our core strengths is business empathy, so sometimes we in the CX department use that to merge existing issues, or investigate further in order to capitalise on an opportunity to solve multiple issues at once.

We are always prioritising the user's point of view, which will often dictate how we proceed.

Once we've arrived at a problem, a product owner will set priorities, assemble teams, and in an ongoing way, be careful to avoid duplicate work between departments and brands, making sure our solutions aren't ones that will shortly 'expire' due to developments elsewhere, it's a huge job.

Most problems we tackle entirely in-house, they could be as ambitious as adding a whole new process or feature for users, or as simple as editing and updating the prompts and scripts for our customer success department on the phones.

It's all about solving the right problem, and solving it right.

G: Once you've arrived at a solution, how do you test it?

A: Testing is done in-house. On the higher level we actually have a very cool fake living room with recording capabilities on the premises. We invite people in order to test a lot of our solutions.

We also do some testing in situ for more in-depth understanding where it's needed.

For more simple solutions that require simple validation, we often have clickable satisfaction smileys to obtain ongoing awareness of how well a function or feature is working.

A level up from there might be a pop up with carefully worded questions. This is a really cost and time efficient way to monitor how things are working, and makes it easy to prioritise things that 'need help and change'.

G: And finally, where do you see any trends heading

regarding this field of UX research and design?

A: It's fairly easy to see that design is continuing it's move towards being more human-centred and less business centred, creating longer lasting solutions. We actually have a saying at Nuuday which is "making sense with technology".

As the amount of cumulative research in the world builds, there's less assumptions being acted on, eliminating "that's just how it is" all the time which is great!

Summary

Andrea's perspective on internships was incredibly reassuring. Showing us even more value in doing one that I previously realised.

I'm impressed how her department has chosen to be divided by the customer's journey segment, rather than by skill-set, and goes to show the organisational variety between companies.

Andrea's and Nuuday's focus on design thinking shines through in her respect for the customer's perspective, and how the work continues to exist before and after they have solved a problem. Doing serious research and testing, with serious investment made in both.

Although Nuuday is obviously a very modern company in many ways, it reassures me that a 'non design' company has such a future facing and design orientated approach to UX, UI and CX.