

Design Leadership

A human-centered approach to communities of practice

During a period of rapid growth, I was tasked with hiring and scaling a design team. Ad Hoc was growing rapidly, actively hiring a roster of talented designers. There was no established community of practice to support the team. My role quickly pivoted from individual contributor to design leadership.

The problem

Build a design community of practice, for a rapidly growing remote team.

The solution

Focus on a range of initiatives designed to ensure stability, define our craft, and build community:

- Define Ad Hoc's design methodologies to create consistency in approach
- Create hiring processes and policy to ensure we hired great designers
- Build career paths to enable team members to feel empowered in advancing their career
- Establish coaching and mentorship practices to ensure teams continually refined each other's work

I believe that designers do their best work through constant collaboration, and doing so virtually would be harder than it would be in-person. To solve for this, I developed virtual team gatherings to foster a design community, created a peer feedback program to ensure continuous design critique, and built a scalable approach to management and coaching to ensure that nobody was left behind as the company continued to grow. My areas of focus included career paths, recruiting, defining standards, building community, and leading for impact.

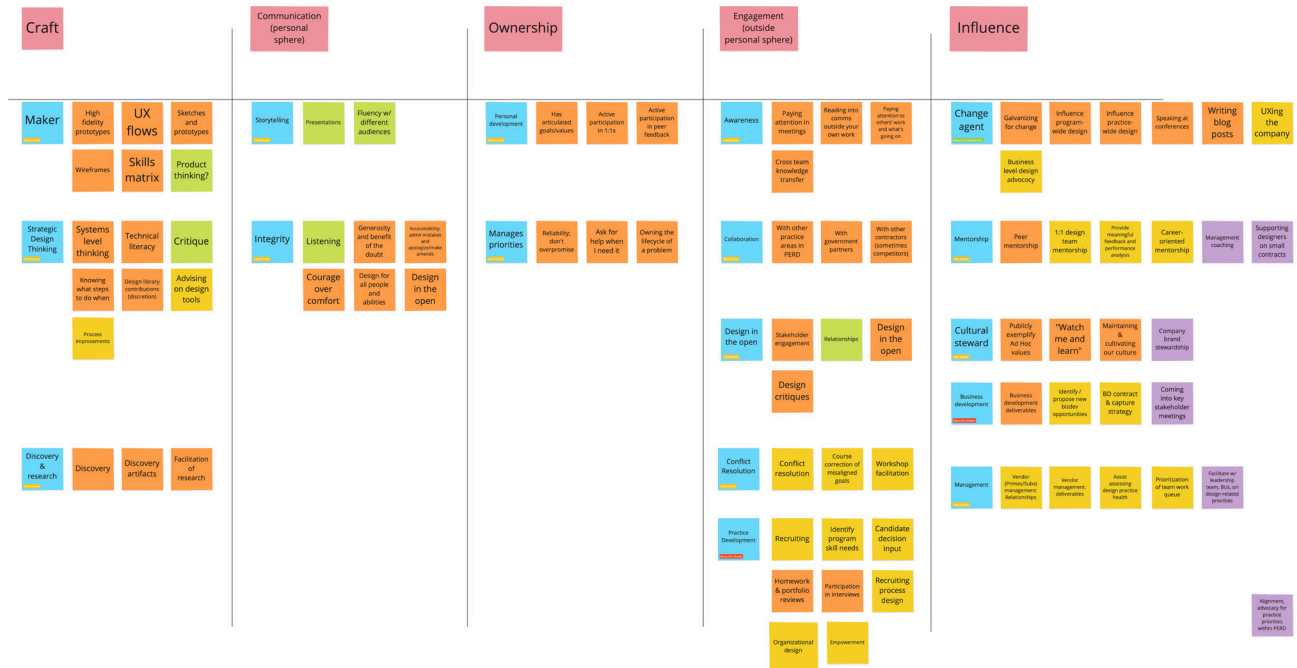
Career paths

I led our design leadership team to craft a job description framework built on clearly defined categories for team member's craft, communication, ownership of their work, and engagement with others.

Team members across the company then used this framework and articulation of their roles and responsibilities throughout the employee lifecycle — from job application, onboarding and goal setting, to performance evaluation and promotion. This work resulted in measured survey improvements in team member morale, retention and understanding of their career options.

Outcomes

- Measured quarterly survey improvements in team members feeling supported in achieving their professional goals.
- Company best retention numbers for our design practice



Career path artifact: affinity diagramming different skills across categories such as craft, communication, ownership, engagement, and influence.

Evaluation Matrix Makers and Leaders

Makers

Senior Designer 2
Senior Designer
Designer
Associate Designer

Leaders

Creative Director
Business Unit Designer
Principal Designer

Tracks
Categories
Category Characteristics

Evaluation Matrix Makers and Leaders

Makers (12)

Craft
Making
Discovery & Research
Strategic Design Thinking

Communication

Storytelling
Integrity

Ownership

Personal Development
Owning Priorities

Engagement

Awareness
Collaboration

Influence

Change Agent
Cultural Steward
Mentorship

Leaders (14)

Craft
- Making
- Discovery & Research
Strategic Design Thinking

Communication

Storytelling
Integrity

Ownership

Personal Development
Owning Priorities

Engagement

Awareness
Collaboration
+ Conflict Resolution
+ Practice Development

Influence

Change Agent
Cultural Steward
Mentorship
+ Business Development
+ Management

Nomenclature

Tracks

Tracks determine the Category Characteristics that an individual is evaluated based on. There are two tracks that all roles are categorized under: Makers and Leader.

Categories

Categories core skills that are broadly important to being successful at Ad Hoc. These categories are the same across practice areas. There are 5 Category Characteristics: Craft, Communication, Ownership, Engagement, and Influence.

Category Characteristics

Category Characteristics set specific goals and expectations for a practitioner's success within their practice. Each practice has their own set of Category Characteristics. Evaluation criteria differ between the Makers and Leaders tracks.

Career path artifact: skills matrix that aligns skills from the affinity diagramming exercise across different career levels.

Recruiting

Much of Ad Hoc's work in government as designers meant focusing on asking ourselves: Are we building the right thing, or are we just building the thing right? The work is focused on formative UX and human-centered decision-making far more than it was on visual design. To ensure Ad Hoc hired the best possible talent that aligned with this need, I created an unconventional design hiring challenge: The exercise was a written assignment that asked a designer how they might approach a kickoff meeting with a stakeholder. It was a written assignment. No visual design, or traditional design artifacts were used. This assignment could be quickly graded (helping scale and meet the need to hire quickly), while also ensuring quality (as the assignment itself was quick to complete). In addition, I built a 'blind grading' process, to ensure that we minimized unintended bias.

Outcomes

Improved time to hire, employee application experience.

Defining standards

Ask ten designers what something means, and you might get ten different responses. To address this, and help new designers on-board and align, I created a taxonomy and shared resource of our high level approaches (we called them capabilities), and specific techniques (methods). This provided a means to define high level capabilities including human-centered design, and more granular methods for day-to-day things like wire-framing, or service blueprinting.

Outcomes

- A shared understanding of how we work
- Measured improvements in team members' understanding of Ad Hoc's approach.

Building community

I led the creation of an accessibility community of practice at Ad Hoc, inspiring designers and engineers alike to go beyond compliance, towards building products and services that were truly accessible for all people. This work led to the creation of an accessibility career path, and later, to Ad Hoc's first ever 'Accessibility Camp' an off-site event designed to deepen the company commitment and perspectives on accessibility. The team participated in inspiring talks, empathy building exercises, and a 'capture the flag' event that spurred team members to integrate their accessibility perspectives to an agile development sprint.

Outcomes

- Development of an Accessibility Beyond Compliance Playbook
- Improved knowledge and perspectives on accessibility
- Improved accessibility metrics on our product teams, including VA.gov
- The accessibility practice achieved full WCAG 2.1 accessibility compliance across the Department of Veteran Affairs website, before the standard went into effect.



Group photo from Ad Hoc's first Accessibility Camp.

Leading for impact

Throughout my work as a design leader, I've sought to build teams that are optimized and empowered to do their best work. I have staffed and overseen design teams across the organization that have delivered:

- 10 million medicare enrollments
- 110 sign-ups for health insurance
- 2.8 million downloads of VA's flagship mobile app