

Notes on Enterprise Design

Overview

“Enterprise design” is the design practice at companies that serve other companies, rather than individual customers. It’s for example the business of Dassault, IBM, Oracle, Salesforce, SAP, ServiceNow etc.

Enterprise design has different goals, business models, metrics, roles, audiences, tools, engagement, culture and practices than consumer product design.

This document is an early mind sweep, that may eventually grow into proper reference material. For now it can be helpful for designers curious about the enterprise design space, as training material, interview framework or conversation support.

This first version has been simplified to large SaaS companies with thousands of employees, including dozens of designers.

Summary

- The customer isn’t the user
- Expert users
- Controlled environment
- Configured products and services
- Complex deployment
- Weaker relationship with end-users
- Difficult changes
- Enduring tech stacks
- Lesser design culture/outcomes
- Different business success metrics
- Enforced regulations
- Different to “no” branding
- Backstage opportunities

Notes

The customer isn’t the user

Enterprise design products are selected at the executive level (e.g. by the CIO^[1] or CTO^[2]), then used by the rest of the company.

Whereas employees may care about speed, ease of access, ease of use or personalization, enterprise buyers will rather first look at TCO^[3], security, scalability, compatibility or compliance. They will consult with their internal legal, brand or technical representatives, further pushing away personal considerations.

Expert users

The users of enterprise design products are likely to be a professional audience, experts in their field with deep knowledge and strong opinions. Designing for them means internalizing a lot of domain knowledge.

This isn't necessarily the same as being tech-savvy or computing experts. E.g. just because a surgeon has great medical proficiency doesn't mean they know all of Excel's shortcuts.

Controlled environment

Devices and apps are company-provided and controlled.

Personal devices may not be able to be brought in the workplace, for example nurses or retail staff leaving smartphones in the locker. Software outside of a very restrictive allowlist may not be installed. Many sites, apps or services may not be allowed on a monitored network.

In extreme cases, devices can be air-gapped into LANs^[4] without Internet connection. Hardware too can be locked down: tin cast into ports, computer physically bound to furniture.

Configured products and services

Enterprise products are usually highly configurable in order to support business processes, regulations, org topologies etc.

System admins will work hand-in-hand with the vendor to initially deploy the product, and may then maintain and extend it on their own. User access, security, business rules etc will drive who can access what, and how.

End-users may still be able to set their own preferences. If so, it will be downstream of layers of company-driven decisions.

The parameters potentially affecting what end-users have access to. Each a subset of the previous one.

Name	Description	Owner
SKU	Product mix subscriptions, modules purchased. Legal agreements and restrictions.	CIO, COO
Configuration	Customer-wide setup: what is enabled, disabled, deployed, created or customized; for whom	Admins, IT
Tenant	Configuration at a local level, for a particular org, business unit, geography or location	Manager, directors
Preferences	Personal, work or convenience settings	End-users
Context	Day-to-day, business- or task-specific factors	N/A

Complex deployment

The effort to implement or deploy an enterprise system can be huge for the customer, in money and time. A successful deployment can take months. An unsuccessful one, years.

This leads to many consequences:

- Mistakes are very expensive, favoring a conservative approach/low risk-taking for both the vendor and the customer. “Nobody gets fired for buying IBM Atlassian.”
- Switching costs are very high, in turn making enterprise products very sticky and creating a high barrier to entry for competitors
- Lead cycles are very long, with 3–5 years long contracts, and renewal negotiated quarters or years in advance

Weaker relationship with end-users

The direct line of communication between designer and user may be weaker.

On one hand, designers are less in touch with the audience. Companies of a certain size will have dedicated research roles, rather than designers performing research tasks. Likewise, there may be entire departments like sales, customer success, support or professional services who are much closer to the action, and whose insights are considered the primary reference material.

On the other hand, the audience itself is different. The primary contacts may be customers rather than end-users—the former only partially conveying the need of the latter.

Difficult changes

A very high value is placed on reliability and stability, since users rely on the service for doing their job or running their business. Especially more so since *deployment is complex*.

Those metrics are often explicitly laid out in contracts and SLAs^[5], with quantified levels of service, levels of uptime and the associated penalties.

Changes are thus high stakes. Testing and releases are managed through formal programs, such as beta partnership with costumers, launching darkly with feature toggles, rather than live A/B testing and continuous releases. The deployment of a new version is contingent to explicit customer acceptance, and may be very slow or not happening at all.

Enduring tech stacks

The tech stack in enterprise design can trail the leading edge by years.

This isn't just a function of big and mature organizations, but also a commercial interest or a contractual obligation to support older version of the product, thus older version of its implementation. It's compounded by the fact that *change is difficult*.

Lesser design culture

Enterprise vendors have historically put less emphasis on user experience than their consumer counterparts. To this day, C-level design voices are very rare, and "design founders" virtually inexistant.

Note that in some industries, there can be a strong design function that's not about UX design, but HFE^[6].

Different business success metrics

The monetization is usually different: recurring subscription revenue expressed in PEPM^[7] dollars, rather than freemium or ad-supported.

Enforced regulations

Regulatory compliance is much more prominent in enterprise than in consumer design.

Because of the demanding audience, criticality of service, engagement with government or just sheer scale, regulations are either enforced or assessed as likely to be: localization in countries of operation, privacy laws such as GDPR, accessibility laws like WCAG, etc. If not *de jure*, at least *de facto*.

Most verticals add their own standards like MILSTD, or IATA/ICAO norms.

Different to "no" branding

Enterprise branding will focus for what matters to its audience: reliability, configurability, feature-richness, etc over being enticing, easy to use, differentiated.







Moreover, customers company often theme the product to their own brand, because they offer it internally to their employees or bundle it as part of their products. The initial brand collaterals may never reach end-users.

Backstage opportunities

Since enterprise design covers not just end-users but also the many areas enabling them, the surface for design and innovation is broader than in exclusively consumer products.

Configuration, administration, orchestration and the many intersections thereof are as many points where designers can intervene.

Further reading: [7 Insights for Navigating B2B Design](#)

1. Chief Information Officer 
2. Chief Technology Officer 
3. Total cost of ownership 
4. Local area network 
5. Service level agreement 
6. Human factors engineering 
7. Per user per month 