

Create a Better Product With Design Collaboration — Mindset, Tools, Process

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Digital products are more complex today than ever before. Creating them requires multiple team members, each with their own set of skills and expertise. At Savvy, for example, our customers work closely with: a product manager, UX designer, visual designer, developer(s), content strategist, and a growth specialist.

We use design collaboration to handle this complexity. Done right, design collaboration empowers each of those experts with the mindset, process, and tools to come together and build a better product faster.

We wrote this resource to help other app creators adopt a collaboration culture and process. Read on to learn why design collaboration is important for creating compelling products and experiences. We'll also dive into the elements of a design collaboration mindset and culture, tools for effective design collaboration, and a real-world example of design collaboration at work.

What is "Design" Collaboration?

Before we jump into it, we need to get on the same page about what design collaboration is... and is not. At its simplest, design collaboration is collaboration in a design-first environment. But, because of the nature of design, especially the design we do at Savvy, design collaboration tends to go beyond what people normally think of as collaboration.

While collaboration is generally defined as two or more people working together on the same task towards a common goal, design collaboration involves much more.

Design collaboration includes more people with different skillsets, tougher challenges, and bigger goals with farther-reaching impacts.

You might think of collaboration as two people hanging a piece of art. It simply requires communication, teamwork, and four hands. Design collaboration is when a team of curators carefully design a visitor's experience. They select the art, choose where and how to hang it, which room it lives in (and the room's lighting, furniture), even the preceding rooms and the building as a whole.

Why Design Collaboration is Important

You can design a product without collaboration, but it takes a collaborative design process to make that product great. That's why design collaboration is so fundamental.

We don't just build apps for our customers. Savvy builds multi-platform experiences, complex internal systems, and in some cases, entire brands and businesses. To do so, we leverage expertise across several core disciplines: strategy, design, development, and growth. Each project involves many people, each with their own skillsets and specialties.

Design collaboration puts those minds together, combining their separate, specialized expertise to create solutions that tackle all aspects of a shared goal. Instead of coming at a problem from one angle, design collaboration places that problem in front of all experts, forcing them to consider new perspectives and possibilities.

For example, we involve our developers early on in the design process to make sure we're accounting for technical opportunities and limitations as soon as possible. This allows us to take

advantage of and push our technical capabilities while eliminating costly roadblocks further in the process. It also limits how much a single person can work in a silo, keeping the work in the open and the emphasis on the user needs and product goals.

#### Cultivating a Design Collaboration Mindset

The right mindset goes a long way in establishing effective collaboration in the design process. It lays the guidelines for who collaborates, how, and to what end.

#### COLLABORATION IS FOR EVERYONE

Designers sometimes think that people who are not designers are not qualified to give good feedback. But great design is more than visuals. It encompasses everything about a product, from its branding to its engineering to its growth.

Design collaboration brings in many people, each with their own perspectives and strengths. It gives everyone a voice. These fresh perspectives give designers more information. Perspectives equip designers to make the right decisions on choices that have lasting impacts on other design, development, and marketing options down the road.

Collaboration with customers is as important as collaboration with other designers and team members. At Savvy, we keep our customer involved throughout the creation of their product. We take our time to explain options and have discussions with the customer to make sure we understand their thoughts.

This enables us to get buy-in from customers early on and work from clear beginnings and ends. Larger reveals aren't big surprises, and no one gets to the point where they're seeing work for the first time.

Customer collaboration means arriving at a more defined product sooner, without costly back-stepping and unnecessary meetings.

It's easy to get caught up in your role and ignore the big picture. By involving more people earlier on, you're fostering closer connections with teammates and cultivating a shared responsibility and interest in the success of the product. You're creating a more open and transparent process, as well as a more connected and invested team.

#### COLLABORATION IS CONTEXTUAL

Customers come to us with complex challenges and goals. Not to mention, we continue to work with our customers for months, even years, and accumulate vast tomes of knowledge on past decisions, research, and other valuable context.

By adopting a context-first approach, you can make sure everyone is at the highest level of knowledge. This enables them to make the most informed decisions as they work on the product. To accomplish this, we keep everyone at Savvy updated on relevant information by bringing in all team members early, documenting and recording meetings, establishing some overlap, and treating the next team member in the process like a customer.

Context is just as important on a case-by-case collaborative basis. Follow these guidelines to keep context first in collaboration:

Provide context before showing your work. Chances are if your work is on the screen while you're giving context, you've lost your audience's attention.

Describe the problem you're trying to solve or goal you're trying to achieve.

Present your work as it relates to the problem at hand. Explain your thinking and why you made certain decisions.

Be specific about what you want feedback on.

COLLABORATION IS OPEN, HONEST, AND FEARLESS

It isn't easy to put your work (and yourself) out there. Emotions can get in the way of providing open and honest feedback, especially when you're worried about hurting the other person's feelings.

That doesn't mean there's no place for emotion in collaboration. How something makes you feel is important in design. We think of and create solutions for people... people who are emotional, and who use emotions in their decisions. Leaving emotion out of the conversation might short-change a potential idea or solution. At best, having only a pragmatic discussion around facts and data won't provide the full picture. At worst, it may be a red herring or provide a false narrative.

At Savvy, we empower our team to be "fearless" about receiving feedback. This means letting go of any anxieties about being judged for what we create. It also means understanding that we are stronger together and stand a greater chance of creating something great. In being fearless, we better trust and empower each other to give honest and thoughtful feedback.

Our team also believes in being fearless about providing feedback. This means understanding the problem that needs solving as well as the customer's brand and goals. It also means asking lots of questions either to uncover relevant thoughts or to help guide decisions.

Try presenting feedback in an exploratory and guiding manner, with the intent of building up and improving the work rather than tearing it down.  
Tweet This

Your feedback should be constructive. Instead of saying you don't like something, frame your feedback to point back to the problem you're trying to help solve. Provide actionable steps on improving the work or at the very least the reasoning behind your thinking. And don't forget to express what you like and why.

COLLABORATION IS MORE THAN NEW IDEAS

It's one thing to be open and accepting of collaborative feedback, another to parse those thoughts and use them as catalysts to spark your own. This is a more advanced skill that develops over time. One way to practice this is to become a better listener.

Often, during a conversation with others, we think more about what we are going to say next rather than what others are saying. This impacts the feedback process, especially in design, because we often know what we want to say before hearing another opinion or solution.

When you choose to listen first and react second, it allows you to fully understand the feedback someone else is presenting and sets you up to go deeper — what is the perspective they're using and the place they're coming from? Chances are this is a perspective you didn't consider during the creation process. By listening to and understanding the context and reasoning behind the feedback you're receiving, you're opening yourself to more ways of looking at, thinking of, and experiencing your design. You can then test these new perspectives against the challenges, goals, and use cases you're designing for to see if they better suit the user.

It's easier to be more receptive of feedback when all collaborators practice active listening. Ultimately, the skill of giving great feedback comes from learning how to receive it. As we make an effort to be better listeners, we also find ourselves becoming more humble and, in our opinion,

better designers.

#### Finding and Using the Right Design Collaboration Tools

The right tools go a long way in reinforcing your team's design collaboration mindset. In this section, you'll learn what to look for in collaboration tools. We also recommend tools based on our own experiences.

#### SELECTING THE RIGHT TOOLS

Effective collaboration tools remove all barriers for collaborators to quickly and easily access and interact with the work. This keeps the focus on giving feedback. They also allow others to collaborate on a design without destroying the original.

In the past, we used relied on tools that provided basic versioning control instead of true collaborative features. For example, a designer would save a Sketch file and upload it to Dropbox. Another team member would then download it, work on it, and re-upload it. There was no easy way to make changes while the file was in another's hands. We tried something similar with Github, a tool that proved great for managing codebases, but not so much with iterative design work. Needless to say, these version control processes made our collaboration more time consuming, confusing, and very un-collaborative.

Now we choose from a variety of more advanced tools depending on the type of collaboration we want to achieve.

#### FIGMA

This is a collaboration-first, shared workspace tool. Figma works well for having multiple people in same area of the design file. You can watch teammates design or work together on the same design in real time.

##### Benefits:

Figma reduces the ability for someone to work in a silo.

There's no need to add unnecessary polish or create static deliverables to enable collaboration. So you don't need to change your workflow to show off a design.

It's easy to see and interact with the work in its native environment and apply tweaks at will.

When to use: Flow docs, high-fidelity wireframes, spur-of-the-moment collaboration, and walking customers through a series of screens to explain and get feedback on design direction.

#### MARVEL

While Figma tends to feel more free-form and flexible, Marvel allows for a more standardized form of collaboration. It also makes it easy on our customers to collaborate with us.

##### Benefits:

Marvel is a cleaner, more formalized and focused space, great for collaborating with non-design team members.

It removes all need for the customer to pay for an account or have a deep understanding of the tool to see the work.

Customers can download screens and see them in action on a device environment via the Marvel app.

When to use: Presenting more finalized design work with customers and developers. (Learn about how Marvel compares with other prototyping tools.)

#### OTHER COLLABORATION TOOLS

Zeplin is a useful hand-off tool that allows developers to dive into the nitty gritty specs of design work. (We talk more in-depth about Zeplin [here](#).)

Quip is a great platform for brainstorming and product/process documentation. We use it to record and organize all of the context and knowledge that team members need to know when working on a project. It's also useful for brainstorming new ideas that aren't visual-focused.

Please note that there are many other tools out there that add similar benefits to collaboration as the ones listed above. This list represents the tools that have worked well for us in our day-to-day collaboration and is not indicative of all the options that might work well for your team.

#### Savvy's Design Collaboration Process in Practice

Now let's take the best practices and tools outlined above and show how they fit together in a real-life situation. We'll use the live drawing experience in the Press Play app to demonstrate the importance of design collaboration. This experience involved significant collaboration from a number of team members across disciplines, including a visual designer, UX designer, developer, product manager, and of course, the customer.

#### THE CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

Press Play is a sweepstakes app that holds daily, weekly, and monthly drawings. Users earn tickets by watching ads and enter drawings by selecting five emojis. Winners are then rewarded based on how their choices match up with the drawing's randomly-selected emojis. This particular task had us creating a fun and exciting live experience for users awaiting the results of the live drawing.

It was important for us to create a game-like animation for this experience. We especially wanted to evoke a sense of playfulness and anticipation on the screen where users go to see how their chosen emojis match up with those from the sweepstakes drawing.

That said, we needed to be mindful of the level of complexity an animation requires and its impact on the overall product's timeline and cost. Our goal was to push the level of fidelity within a reasonable time without significantly impacting the project's budget.

#### THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

##### Stage 1: Wireframes and Brainstorming

First, a Savvy UX designer created Press Play's overall UX and wireframes, determining what screens were needed and the timing for each one. She also put together a rough concept (shown right) for the live drawing animation, expressing initial ideas based on customer's needs and the project's established UX.

She presented the wireframes and the rough animation to the product manager and visual designer. Then all three met with the customer so everyone would hear the feedback directly.

##### Stage 2: Research and Context

The Savvy visual designer tasked with creating the actual live drawing animation came in with fresh eyes and without much prior knowledge of the Press Play product. To get up to speed, he talked in depth with the UX designer and product manager. He also dedicated additional research time to understand the overall product goals, challenges, and to familiarize himself with the work to date. As mentioned earlier, he was part of the wireframe presentation and present for the customer's feedback.

With that context, he conducted some additional research more directly related to the task at hand. In doing so, he made sure he understood the live drawing experience requirements, goals, and challenges. He looked at other apps with similar experiences and fidelity and referenced the rough animation to know what exactly the final animation needed to show (in this case, the winning emojis and the user's emoji selections). Before getting too tied to a solution, he met with a Savvy iOS developer to understand technical constraints and considerations.

Our visual designer and UX designer then brainstormed what was important for the visuals. They agreed that there needed to be a slow reveal to build up suspense/anticipation for the user

#### Stage 3: Iteration and Feedback

As our visual designer worked through a number of different directions he tapped the UX designer to chat through his progress and designs in Figma. By talking through the work they spurred more ideas and iterations while making sure they were staying true to customer expectations. With more solid options at hand, he met once again with the iOS developer to make sure everything was in line from a technical perspective.

#### Stage 4: Customer Feedback and Development

When we landed on several, more finalized versions of the experience, the visual designer walked through them with the customer using Figma. The product manager and UX designer for Press Play provided feedback and guidance as well.

Once they all learned what piqued the customer's interest, the visual designer set off to maximize the visuals and make them ready for development. He continued to work with the iOS developer to get the most out of the concept on a technical level.

#### THE END RESULT

Press Play's live drawing animation is an example of design collaboration at work; a team of cross-discipline experts working together to solve a design and development challenge with bigger implications. Without design collaboration, we wouldn't have discovered the ideal intersection of user experience, visual, and technical.

When the customer saw the animation alive in his app he called it "groundbreaking."

What's more, the research, collaboration, and creation of this Press Play experience helped us discover a gap in the product's user journey. Originally, the live drawing's intent was to be a fun way to show the results to users. As we moved through the design process, we realized that if a user doesn't watch the live drawing, and they lose, they don't get to experience an end to their user journey for that drawing.

From that discovery, we decided to improve the app in a couple of other places as well. We added a results/live drawing element to the Winner's Circle and a win-lose history section to the User Details side of the app. In the end, design collaboration empowered us to realize this unfulfilled need in the user experience.

#### Concluding Note

It takes design collaboration to tackle the complex, crucial problems that come along with building great products and experiences. By leveraging the specialized expertise of multiple team members across disciplines, design collaboration makes sure teams meet challenges from all perspectives and come to better solutions. With the right mindset, tools, and process, design collaboration empowers teams to go deeper with creative thinking and iteration.

We hope this guide gives you a good foundation from which you can build your own effective design collaboration process. You can learn more about design and product strategy on the Savvy blog, and feel free to contact us for help on the Savvy Apps website.