

An Illustration Of The Value Design Brings To A Business.

And, more importantly, an illustration of what it sometimes takes to make it work, work, make it work.

PART ONE.

UNDERESTIMATED CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

Here's a real story that happened some time ago.

I got offered a job. I had been doing just fine where I was, but this challenge appeared. And appealed.

Some people I had previously enjoyed working with were luring me into this new company they were at. And what did lure me in, apart from the opportunity to work with these great people again, was the challenge that I saw for myself there.

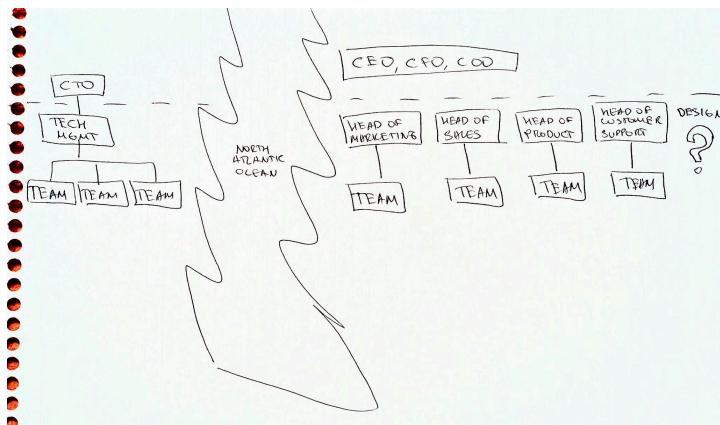
Challenges motivate me. There are a lot of things I love doing in life. Taking on professional challenges and watching the progress towards solving them is one of those things.

Now. I will tell you about the challenge. And I will tell you about how I underestimated it spectacularly. And about what it meant and how it affected me and my motivation. And what happened after. And so on.

It was during the preliminary discussions, that I understood there was a challenge there for me. At the stage when I was trying to understand why these people wanted me to join them at this company.

I realised there could be an interesting opportunity for me there while discussing the company's structure and product delivery

workflow. Let me quickly tell you about the company's structure. In broad brush strokes.



The main offices were in England, and all the departments were based there, except the Engineering, which was based in Canada.

The Engineering department was quite large, with different teams and multiple tiers of management, all the way up to the CTO.

There were Sales and Marketing teams, the product was targeted at both B2B and B2C customers.

The Product team consisted of several Product Managers, and was led by a Head of Product, but was not represented at the C-level.

There was no Design team as such. There was a UX designer and a visual designer, attached to Marketing.

The Customer Support (probably called "Customer Success", but I can't say I remember for sure) consisted of about 4 or 6 employees with two tiers of management.

Of course, I could foresee some potential friction in the collaboration with the Engineering, due to the teams being separated by an ocean and a hand-off process, and also maybe some difficult conversations with the Sales, who might be advocating for the B2B

clients' requests that might not align with end-users' needs. But overall I was looking forward to it, thinking about the positive aspects of sharing ideas, discussing opportunities and limitations with these teams.

It was this stark contrast between the (absence of) Design team and the (complexity and numbers of) Customer Support team that was the writing on the wall for me.

You see, by that time, I had worked in dynamic start-ups as well as in corporate environments, which taught me the valuable lessons of what works, what doesn't, and why, and how to fix it if it doesn't work, and how it looks when it does work.

In other words, I knew what I was looking at. And I knew that I could be of value to this business. And I knew what to do. And I felt very excited by this challenge. As I do.

So I accepted the offer and joined the team.

What I didn't know was how strikingly I had underestimated the challenge.

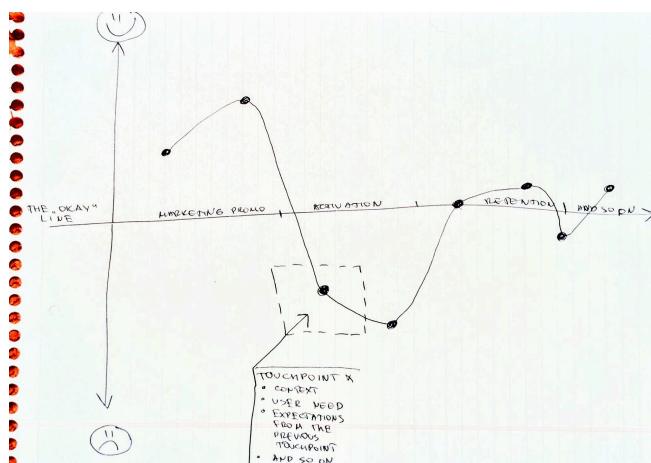
But if you, dear reader, are rooting for the protagonist of this story (me) and are worried about any negative outcomes of this underestimation, I'm itching to let you know that this story has a happy ending. Well, at least for me. And for the business too. And for the product, and the people using it. So let us continue.

I joined the company as the Head of Design (or Head of UX, I don't remember, but it's not that important). I joined with the intention of making a positive impact on the business, namely: an improved product experience for the customers, a stronger Design and Research team (to inform business strategy and lead the development of a product that people would love), and better cross-department communication (with

Marketing, Engineering, Sales, Customer Support) to inform Design decisions.

In the first month or so, while having intro meetings and one-on-ones with different people from different departments, and while keeping an eye on the UX projects currently in the works, I dedicated most of my time to conducting thorough research of the product, and the industry, and the competition, and the people using the product, and their contexts, and their tasks, and their needs, and expectations, and considerations, and so on. As I do.

The result of this research was something I unimaginatively called "UXD Strategy" (as in User Experience Design) and consisted of a number of project suggestions. The underlying document for this UXD Strategy was a comprehensive user journey map that included all the touchpoints a customer would have with the company's product, starting with marketing promo materials and all the way to the interface to delete the account, if the customer wished so, and everything in between. It is this bit of '*everything in between*' which was of the most utility. It was a graph, with all the touchpoints represented progressively along the horizontal axis, while the vertical axis represented customers' mood on a scale from "*Oh, I am so delighted rn, I literally can't wait to tell all my friends about this great product*" all the way down to "*Jesus Christ, god almighty, why are you testing me with this treacherous interface? There'd better be Paradise!*". It looked a little bit like this:



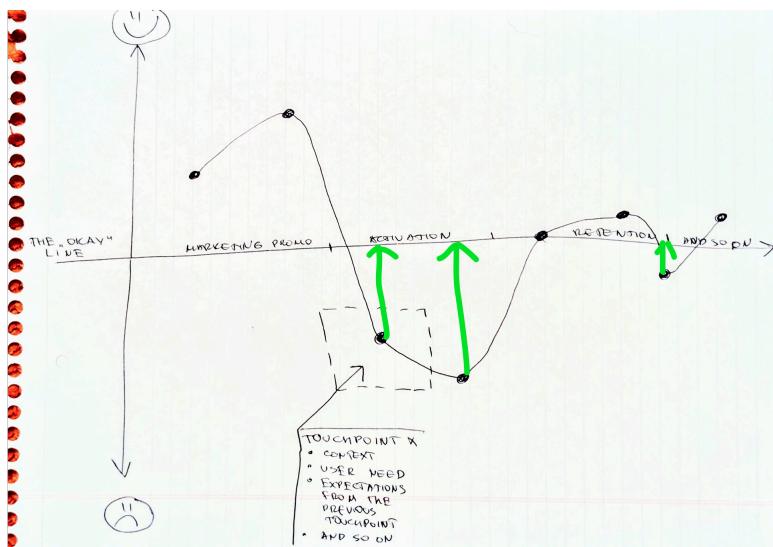
The touchpoints of the user journey were connected by a line, to signify a *continuous journey* and a *holistic perception* of the product.

This line was quite undulating, sometimes staying quite high on the vertical *happiness scale*, sometimes diving down to the unacceptable depths of misery and despair.

As I mentioned before, my UXD Strategy was suggesting a number of projects. They were divided into two phases:

1. The projected results of the shorter Phase 1 were aiming to *normalise user experience*.
2. The projected results of the longer Phase 2 were aiming to increase revenue by adding utility to the product, making the experience more enjoyable, improving retention and referral, and so on.

The first phase was, simply put, bringing all the deep dips in the undulating journey map up above an acceptable level. Making the experience okay. Not great yet, but acceptable. Because, say what you will, but a working TV, even if it's not 65-inch wide, is more enjoyable than the one that randomly switches channels or switches itself off.



As I had been working on my UXD Strategy, I would share my ideas with the designers and with the people who had lured me in, in the first place. Their feedback was important to me, we discussed things, and generally agreed that that wasn't a bad thing to do.

The next logical step was, of course, to share these ideas with the Product and the business, and have the projects from my UXD Strategy included in the backlog, prioritised against the existing projects there, and included in the product roadmap, as per business impact slash business effort.

The first hint of the upcoming surprise materialised when I was discussing these ideas of mine with the Head of Product's right arm - a Senior Product Manager, I think her role was called, but I don't remember for sure. Our discussion concluded with her words: "Well, good luck trying to persuade our Head of Product to change the roadmap. There is no chance of that happening." (She said that as if it were a good thing to say.)



That is a joke, of course. I had stopped taking professional things personally a long time before that specific moment in my career. I just smiled and thought "Bring it on!".

[The screen fades to black for a dramatic theatrical pause.]

PART TWO.

DIGITAL REVOLUTION TRANSFORMATION.

- "The Product roadmap is set in stone and it is not changing for the next year and a half. All the projects have been agreed with the CEO and the Engineering, and there is no room to bring any additional projects in."

This was my second meeting with the Head of Product. The first one was an intro one-on-one, and was filled with pleasantries, and general terms like "agile" and "user-centric" and "sprint" and so on.

This was the first *functional* meeting, one to discuss work rather than have small talk.

As I said earlier, I had been prepared to meet some resistance from the Engineering leadership maybe, or some push for features from the Sales. The last department in the company I expected to refuse collaboration was, of course, Product. I came to the meeting energised and excited: my ideas made sense (verified by others), my ideas were shaped into projects that we could prioritise against the existing backlog, and so on.

Yet, there I was, hitting a solid wall while doing 240 km/h. And let me assure you, I know what doing 240 km/h feels like. Even without hitting anything, it is scary enough to make my right foot shake on the accelerator, everything in the side windows is a blur, and you start to feel disoriented because the white salt flats of Bonneville stretch out to the horizon in all directions, and you are trying to judge how far that wall of stones that you passed five minutes ago on your way here is, now that you're moving so fast through space.

Here's that wall. "Set in stone", figuratively speaking. And here I am, experiencing this exciting impact with this wall while doing 240.

"...set in stone", "...a year and a half", "...agreed with the CEO and the Engineering", as these words flew through the sunlit office of the Head of Product, I was looking at the nice view behind the window.

I don't remember if I was shocked to hear that. Most likely I should have been. What I do remember was thinking this: there are two types of Product people. Let's call them *Product owners* and *Project managers*. Without getting too bogged down on the names now, and just for the clarity of communication, I will explain what I was thinking. I was thinking: it makes sense - it is about motivation. While product owners are normally motivated by increasing revenue, so in turn, by maximising the quality and utility of the product, project managers are motivated by completing projects, delivering the deliverables, without worrying about the impact on the product, the experience, and (maybe even?!) the business. It made sense. And the view from the window was pleasant. It was a nice sunny day.

The meeting was over.

Now, logically speaking, in this peculiar situation, a Head of Design has the luxury of choosing from three options:

- 1) Fight
- 2) Flight
- 3) Milk the cow

Let's start with Option 2 - Flight.

In the hypothetical situation where Research & Design cannot influence the product roadmap, the prospects are quite bleak. Yes, the Head of Design can still build a team, establish the workflows and processes, conduct research, and so on. It is possible to work with whatever is in the roadmap already, and while some of those projects could have benefited from Design input, others were rather limited, due to being so far into development already, and some others, between you and me, were plain useless for the end-user. The Head of Design's impact on the business would have been minimal and wouldn't have balanced with the salary the business was assigning to the role.

Option 3 - Milk the cow.

It was not entirely out of the question to stay, build out the team, deliver shiny prototypes, and detailed personas, and such, organise and attend meetings that would end with the words "Okay, let's reconvene next week and take it from there.", all the while, enjoying a perfect work and life balance.

But that option required accepting that you are not maximising your value to the business, which in my books is unacceptable, because in the words of Hunter S. Thompson: "I'm a total professional".



I am a total professional. I chose to drive positive change. Option 1, please and thank you.

I knew I was in a decent position for that. The people who had lured me into the company were in leadership roles, and I had their support. I was in a leadership role. I had direct access to the C-level executives, and to everybody else.

Now, in telling this story, I do slow down the pace every now and again to provide detailed descriptions of some parts for dramatic effect, but this next part is quite long, so we might as well just imagine a montage of what was happening, shown to the sounds of upbeat music from the 80s.

Picture: me pointing to the slides about the use of UX design, about the benefits of a workflow that includes research and design, the slides showing that long undulating journey of a customer along their touchpoints with the product, in a meeting room with the CEO, in the room with all the C-level execs, in a call with the Engineering management, in the CEO's office, in a wider presentation to the whole team in the office, in the CEO's office again, me interviewing new designers, other designers from the team showcasing the improved designs to the wider team, discussions with the Product, travelling over to Canada to meet up with the technical leadership and the engineers in person, delivering presentation to all the developers, showing prototypes, explaining users' pains, having workshops for specific projects with specific developers, having meetings behind closed doors with the senior Engineering leadership (now, these were so intense, you might as well picture them in black and white), hiring designers, talking to the CEO again, talking to the Product, the Sales, the Customer Support, presenting to the wider team again, and so on, and so forth.

As you can see from this montage, there was a lot of effort. Not just from me. A lot of effort from a lot of people. So much so that even the montage of the events could easily last four minutes and five seconds, which, coincidentally, is the length of the 'Eye of the Tiger'.

I apologise, that was a rather low-hanging-fruit joke. Let's pretend it never happened. We're very close to the happy ending now, we can't turn back.

So what do you think happened?

The idea was met with a lot of positivity from a lot of people: the developers, the people in customer service, the people in product. But it's not a democracy we're talking about, and the popular vote wasn't the deciding factor. The deciding factor was the *gradual* acceptance by the senior management.

You know, if you tell me about your idea multiple times, and if your idea is not too bad in the first place, there is a chance, eventually,

I will get accustomed to it, and I might accept it. I might even think this idea is my own... Just kidding, let's not go there.

So the idea got accepted. Some people left. Some people got promoted to a Design Director role and were given co-leadership of the Product team, in addition.

The projects from the UXD Strategy got into the backlog, where they were prioritised against the existing projects. The product roadmap changed. The engineers started to be more involved in the Design phase, and the designers were involved in the Delivery phase. The people using the product started to see changes. A less confusing signup flow, a shop that looked and functioned as expected, a better reading experience, and so on.

The number of messages to the Customer Support team started to go down.

The Design team introduced a style guide and reusable elements, to standardise and streamline the workflow.

A guy from the Customer Support team told me he was interested in retraining as a UX Designer.

If nothing else, this last thing is the best symbolic evidence that my challenge was completed, if you remember how it started.

Now, I was hoping to pick up your brains about something.
What do you think about this for the ending scene:

A mouse pointer is moving across the screen.
As the view zooms out, we see the mouse pointer is moving decisively through different screens of an interface, without hesitation or doubt.

As the view pans out, we see that it is happening on a screen in a room, a person is controlling the mouse, and another person is watching them.

The view keeps panning out to reveal that all this is happening on another screen, a 65-inch TV on a wall in a large room full of people. People from Engineering, and Sales, and Customer Support, and Marketing. And there are smiles on their faces. They are happy to see that. They feel proud.

And there are people from Design there as well. They know.

Cue, 'Eye of the Tiger':

