

5 Key Trends In Design Leadership

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Design finally has a seat at the table. Here's what is next.

General Electric, the nation's largest industrial company, recently [announced](#) it will relocate its headquarters from suburban Connecticut to tech-centric Boston. Intriguingly, of the 800 employees going to the new headquarters, only 200 will be top executives. The other 600 will be "**digital** industrial product managers, **designers**, and developers," [according to the New York Times](#). Talk about **design** having a seat at the table.

It's the latest sign that corporations are shifting from engineering driven to **design** driven, product-centric to customer-centric, **marketing** focused to user experience focused. Whether they're selling [cars](#), [phones](#), or [lightbulbs](#), companies have made **design** integral to their business. Now what? How do you get ahead when **design** is no longer the competitive edge but the barrier to entry? Here, I've identified five trends at the intersection of **design** thinking and leadership—and how to make the most of them.

1. DESIGN THINKING IS CORE TO INNOVATION.

Boston Consulting Group recently released its [10th annual global survey](#) on the state of **innovation**. **Design** figures prominently at almost all of the top 10 companies: **Apple**, **Google**, **Tesla**, **Microsoft**, **Samsung**, **Toyota**, **BMW**, **Gilead Sciences**, **Amazon**, and **Daimler**. And according to the Industrial **Design** Society of America, most respondents to the survey rank **innovation** as either the top priority or a top-three priority at their company—the highest percentage since BCG began asking the question in 2005.

Recommendation: If your company has not embraced **design** thinking, do it now. If it has, but only loosely, codify it.

2. DESIGN THINKING IS NOT A FAD; IT'S CORE BUSINESS PRACTICE.

Design thinking is now corporate code. "At **Intuit** we've established a **design** thinking method, and we have 1,200 trained **innovation** catalysts," says Klaus Kaasgaard, vice president of user experience **design** at **Intuit**. "This three-day class does not make you a **designer**, but it does help spread that way of working and thinking into the business." Similarly, the global company **Philips** has incorporated **design** into its methodology. "We renamed our **design** thinking program to call it 'co-create,' because that's exactly what we do. It's about building, testing, learning," says Shawn Carney, chief **design** officer and executive vice president at **Philips**. "We use it in the business to engage with some big hairy problems. Pulling in the CEO and the C-suites, we use **design** thinking and co-create tools, we **design** the conditions, we give them the components."

Recommendation: Select a **design** thinking method and share it company-wide.

3. CORE TO DESIGN THINKING IS USER EXPERIENCE.

The lines between **design** disciplines are blurring, because every customer touch point involves **design**. That's why both **GE** and **IBM** are in the process of hiring more than 1,000 UX **designers** each: Both companies want to invest in building **design**-driven customer experiences. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Expect user experience **designers** to ply their trade in nearly all corners of the corporate world in the coming years.

Recommendation: Hire UX **designers**, even if "user experience" seems tangential to your product.

4. DESIGN LEADERSHIP TALENT IS IN HIGH DEMAND.

A recent **LinkedIn** study ([PDF](#)) of SMB talent acquisition managers found that their biggest recruiting challenge in 2016 is finding candidates in "high-demand talent pools." **Design** leaders, UX leaders, **design** thinkers, and **design** strategists are all high-demand functions. There is no more critical role for any company to develop, large or small, than **design** leadership, and executives are catching on.

In the past, business competition was between companies with good **design** and not-so-good **design**. In the future, companies with good **design** will be pitted against companies with good **design**. So the competitive advantage will be on internal [design leadership](#), not just **design** alone.

Recommendation: Give **designers** positions of power.

5. DESIGN LEADERS TEND TO KEEP A LOW PROFILE.

The **LinkedIn** study also found that companies want to do a better job of finding and attracting passive candidates—the people who are not actively looking to change jobs. I've noticed that the best **design** leaders tend to keep a low profile, and that those who are more boastful tend to be either newbies or posers trying to get into the game.

I recently talked with seven top **design** leaders who all agreed; they don't want to be found by recruiters, they don't return emails or phone calls from recruiters they don't know, and they are keeping their online profiles relatively discreet. But they do value peer-to-peer conversations and people who have deep knowledge about their line of work.

Recommendation: Enlist hiring managers or other experts to find top **design** talent.

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