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Remote Design Work: Top Challenges

Summary: Communication is the top challenge when designing remotely, according to 213 UX professionals. Receiving feedback, replicating informal conversations, and maintaining a clear direction on projects were the biggest communication concerns.

By [Rachel Krause](#) on February 7, 2021

Topics: [Remote UX Work](#), [Design Process](#)

Remote work is becoming the new normal thanks to increasing network speeds, a variety of video conferencing tools, and a pandemic that forces workers to remain in isolation. While many practitioners and companies have been working remotely for quite some time ([including us at NN/g](#)), for many people 2020 marked their first exposure to remote work.

We wanted to understand how the transition to remote work has affected UX designers, the challenges they faced, and how they remained productive in a new environment.

Research Method

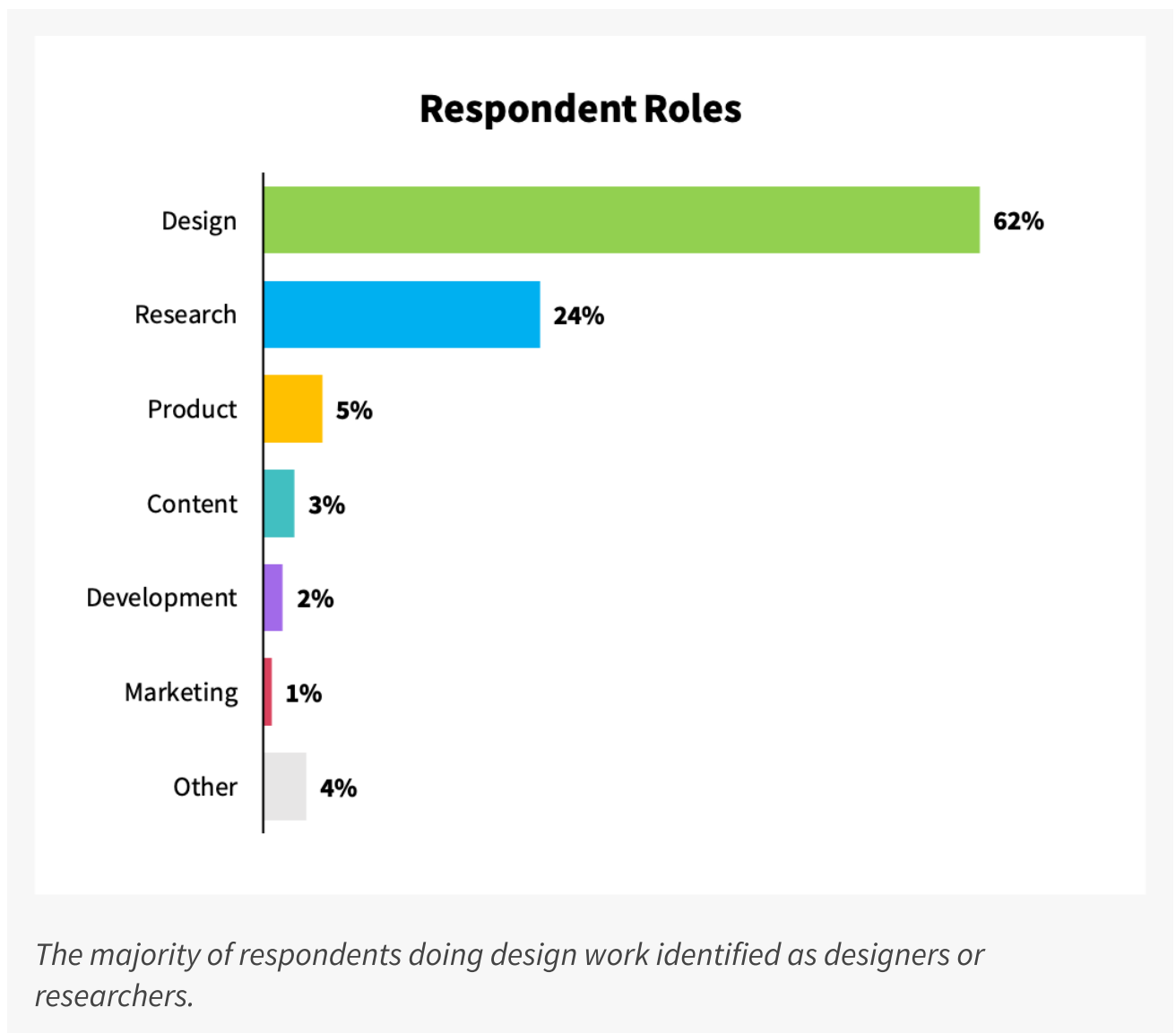
This research consisted of 17 remote interviews conducted via video conferencing and a survey of 306 UX practitioners. These 323 total participants represented a diverse range of countries, industries, roles, and experience. 70% of our survey respondents indicated they started working remotely due to the

2020 pandemic.

Respondents were asked about several aspects of remote UX work, including research, design, facilitation, and management. For each aspect, they were asked to identify major struggles and to give advice for other practitioners facing similar situations.

This article discusses challenges encountered while doing **design work remotely**, with a focus on communication. Followup articles will discuss findings related to tool preferences and capabilities, research activities, workshop facilitation, and approaches to management.

Of the 323 total participants, 296 identified that they were involved with design work in some capacity. Most respondents (62%) identified design as their primary job role, with research as the next most popular role (24%).



Respondents were asked questions about the following topics in relation to design work:

- Their current design-team makeup
- Whether they do design work
- Preferences for remote design tools
- Challenges when designing remotely
- Advice for others in similar situations

A [thematic analysis](#) was done on the data collected by tagging individual observations and quotations with relevant codes, and then organizing them into themes. **The biggest challenge, identified by 43% of respondents, was communication.** This article summarizes the top three issues with communication that practitioners reported.

Challenge: Receiving Feedback on Designs

Feedback is an important part of the design process. Frequent checkins for feedback prevent designers from going too far in the wrong direction.

Respondents complained about:

- Unsatisfactory tools for gathering feedback
- Delayed feedback
- Too much formality in the process of gathering feedback
- Lowered confidence due to working in isolation

Advice for Moving Forward

- **Choosing the right tools can make it easier for teams and stakeholders to provide feedback.** When selecting tools, look for software that has a low entry barrier so that nondesigners can easily accomplish their tasks. Nearly half of the designers surveyed rated 'collaboration with others' as the most important function of a design tool. Consider tools that have commenting features and can be accessed via a web browser rather than needing to be

downloaded.

Subscription-based tools such as Figma and InVision are great for gathering feedback right in the tool itself, but your company may not provide them. In this case, you have to be creative with how you solicit feedback. For example, if your company uses Dropbox or Google Drive to manage files, post wireframes and prototypes and use the commenting feature to collect feedback.

- **Select one tool rather than a collection of tools.** When asking team members and stakeholders to provide feedback, aim to have them navigate as few channels as possible. If you require people to navigate a PDF here, a Figma file there, and then provide feedback in Slack, there's a good chance you'll end up dealing with longer turnaround times, missed instructions, or a general lack of participation. Using a single tool minimizes the chance that people will be lost in the process.
- **Set a timeline for feedback collection and stick to it.** Set a recurring schedule for feedback so that stakeholders and team members make it a part of their routine — for example, every week or every sprint.

Challenge: Replicating Hallway Conversations

When teams work in an office together, there are several opportunities for informal communication each day. Whether you pass someone in the hallway on the way to get coffee or you walk up to a colleague's desk, these are short moments where you can discuss projects, solve design problems, and build relationships.

Respondents mentioned:

- Difficulty of replicating short, informal conversations remotely
- Feeling disconnected from their teams

Here are some participant quotes capturing these hurdles:

Here are some participant quotes capturing these narratives.

“For collaborative UX teams, it can be hard not to be in a shared workspace where we can use a wall, post-it notes, and have ongoing discussion with each other.”

“Since I work across time zones, the biggest challenge is to stay connected and to maintain a flow of ideas without every member receding to his own silo.”

Advice for Moving Forward:

- **Set a recurring time for the team to meet with the intention of collaborating.** Start by adding an hour-long recurring meeting once a week for the team to work together on anything that’s needed: ideation, presenting and gathering feedback on design concepts, editing the same design file, and so on. As the team gets used to it, this meeting won’t be seen as forced.
- **Start meetings with an informal discussion to allow team members time to build relationships.** In an office, coworkers have plenty of built-in opportunities to get to know each other: in the lunchroom, before and after meetings, or in the hallways. In a remote setting, this informal communication needs to be more intentional.

Plan for 5–10 minutes at the start of longer meetings and workshops to catch up with colleagues. Consider posing an open question, such as, “If you could travel anywhere tomorrow, where would it be and why?” Or give attendees a task, such as “Show us something on your desk and explain its importance to you.” These quick discussions will allow team members to build relationships without spending extra time outside of regular meetings.

- **Try a full-day video conference to replicate in-office communication.** Schedule a full-day video working session, which will replicate working together in the same room. There is no formal agenda, but team members can unmute when they want to ask a question or work through a design problem together in the moment without having to schedule a separate meeting. Teams have found success with this method when they’re nearing a deadline, working on a large initiative, or just need more informal time together as a

working on a large initiative, or just need more informal time together as a

team. One major drawback is the exhaustion that comes with being on video for an entire day, so consider starting with a quarter- or half-day and only do this occasionally.

Challenge: Maintaining a Clear Direction

In addition to gathering feedback, designers struggled with miscommunication on projects. Communication is mostly text-based in many remote teams, which can lead to making assumptions or misunderstanding the task or requirements due to a lack of context or detail.

Respondents mentioned:

- Unclear design and project requirements
- Lack of detail when sharing work with other team members
- Objectives and constraints getting lost in translation when communicating remotely

Advice for Moving Forward:

- **Have a single source of truth so that all requirements, documentation, and updated designs live in one place.** Depending on how your team works best, this can be the backlog, intranet, cloud storage, or workspace. Whichever you choose, it can act as a self-service area for team members to find the latest designs and feedback.
- **Provide clear documentation when handing off designs.** Think about what your audience needs from the documentation. Will it be consumed by developers or stakeholders? The audience will determine whether your documentation should be about how interactions will work or the importance of features to the business. To avoid miscommunications, have a video discussion when you first hand over designs instead of sending designs and documentation only via email.

- **Check in with team members frequently.** Make sure you're coming out of your metaphorical UX cave to ask for feedback and validate that you're going in the right direction. Don't be afraid to show incomplete or messy work.



Don't get stuck in your UX cave for too long. Make sure to check in with your team frequently for feedback on ideas and designs throughout your projects.

Conclusion

Every team is different and encounters unique challenges. Because good communication is essential to high-functioning teams, it's important that we focus on fixing these issues as early as possible. Start small by diagnosing the biggest communication challenge your team currently faces, and consider the likelihood that you are impacted by the 3 challenges identified in our research. Then decide which tactic will best help your team.

See also our full-day course on [Remote UX Design](#) for more information.

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