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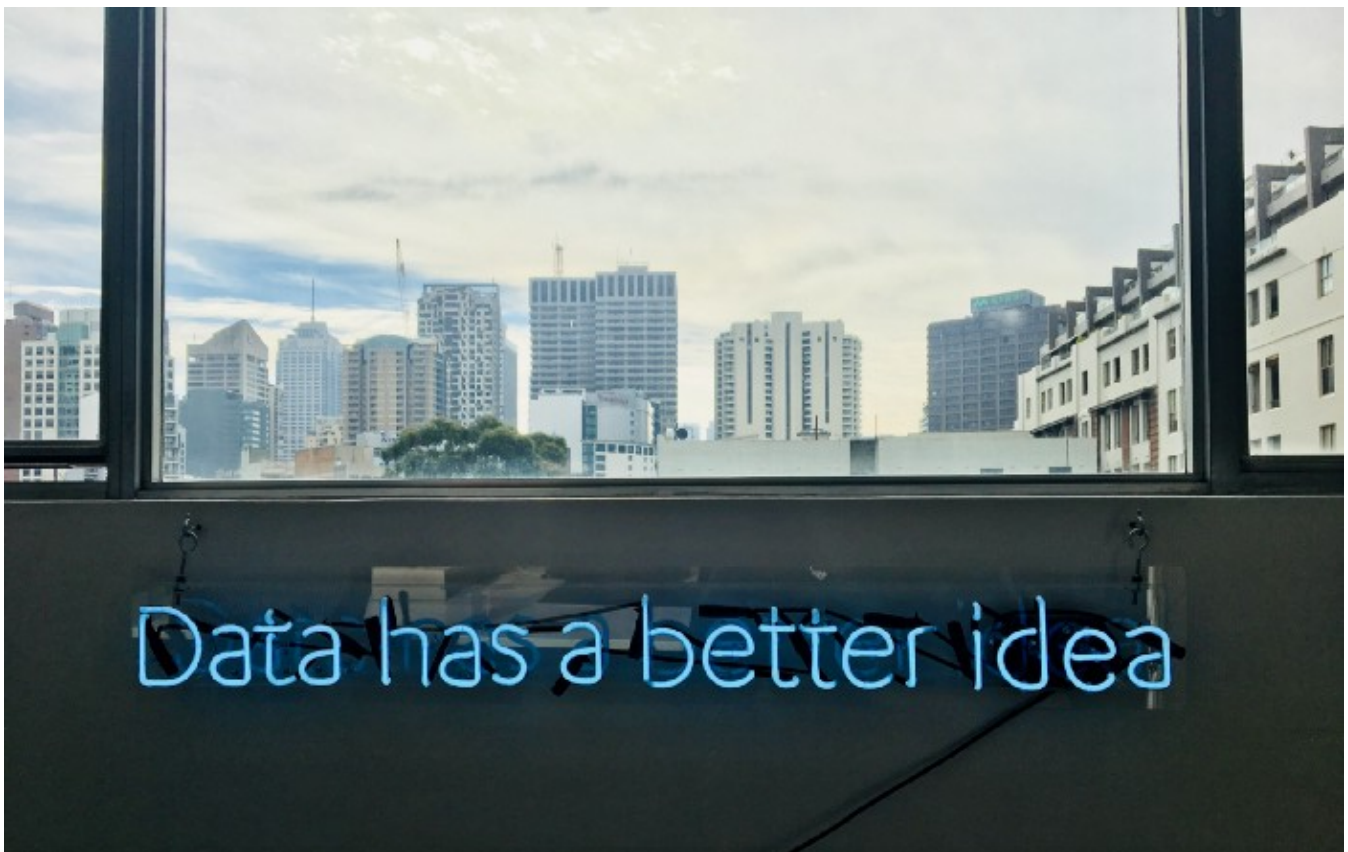
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UX research characteristics: An analysis of 100 open jobs

A data-driven approach to understanding the in-demand characteristics of a UX Researcher.




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An analysis was done to understand the role of a UX Researcher (UXR) looking across a sampling of publicly available job postings. The intent was to take a snapshot in time of different characteristics across a mix of companies to develop an aggregate profile of a successful job candidate. The insights from this analysis can be reused by a variety of audiences to shape job descriptions or create professional development plans to be most competitive in the job market.

What was done

My colleague, [Theresa Nguyen](#), and I collected a purposive meaningful sample (n=100) of open US-based job descriptions on LinkedIn. The data was analyzed using a manual process of reading each job description and classifying content based on an a priori set of categories (e.g., education, skills, responsibilities).

The brands included in the analysis included many well-known companies with a mix of large research teams and small research teams, across a diverse set of industries.



Sample of brands included in the jobs analyzed

This analysis is an extension of a paper my colleague and I (at the time), [T.J. Blanchflower](#) titled [The In-Demand Characteristics of a UX Researcher](#). A similar



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Why do this analysis?

If you've been doing UX research for a while, you probably have a good understanding of what you do and what characteristics and skills are required. However, even the most experienced practitioner may want to get a pulse on the most current set of skills that are in-demand for the purpose of self-evaluation against the current job market.

These findings are intended for the following audiences:

- **Students:** Those who are still in the process of completing their education may want to understand what characteristics are needed for educational purposes or internship possibilities.
- **Job seekers:** Those actively seeking employment opportunities may want to use the data to shape their resume or portfolio to address the most commonly sought characteristics.
- **Experienced professionals:** Those who are experience professionals who wish to do self-analysis on their skills to ensure they are competitively positioned in the marketplace.
- **Job posters:** Hiring managers who are looking to include the most in-demand skills in their job descriptions and want a starting point from which to customize to their specific context.

While it's true that a job description doesn't always include an exhaustive list of what the job entails, by looking across many job descriptions, certain themes emerge. The job description can be used as a starting point on expectations rather than an exhaustive list of all duties and competencies that are required from a UX Researcher.

Where were the jobs?

Based on our sampling the jobs were centralized primarily in California and specifically in the Bay Area, with over 1/3 of all jobs coming from that region. This wasn't particularly surprising given the density of high-tech in Silicon Valley.



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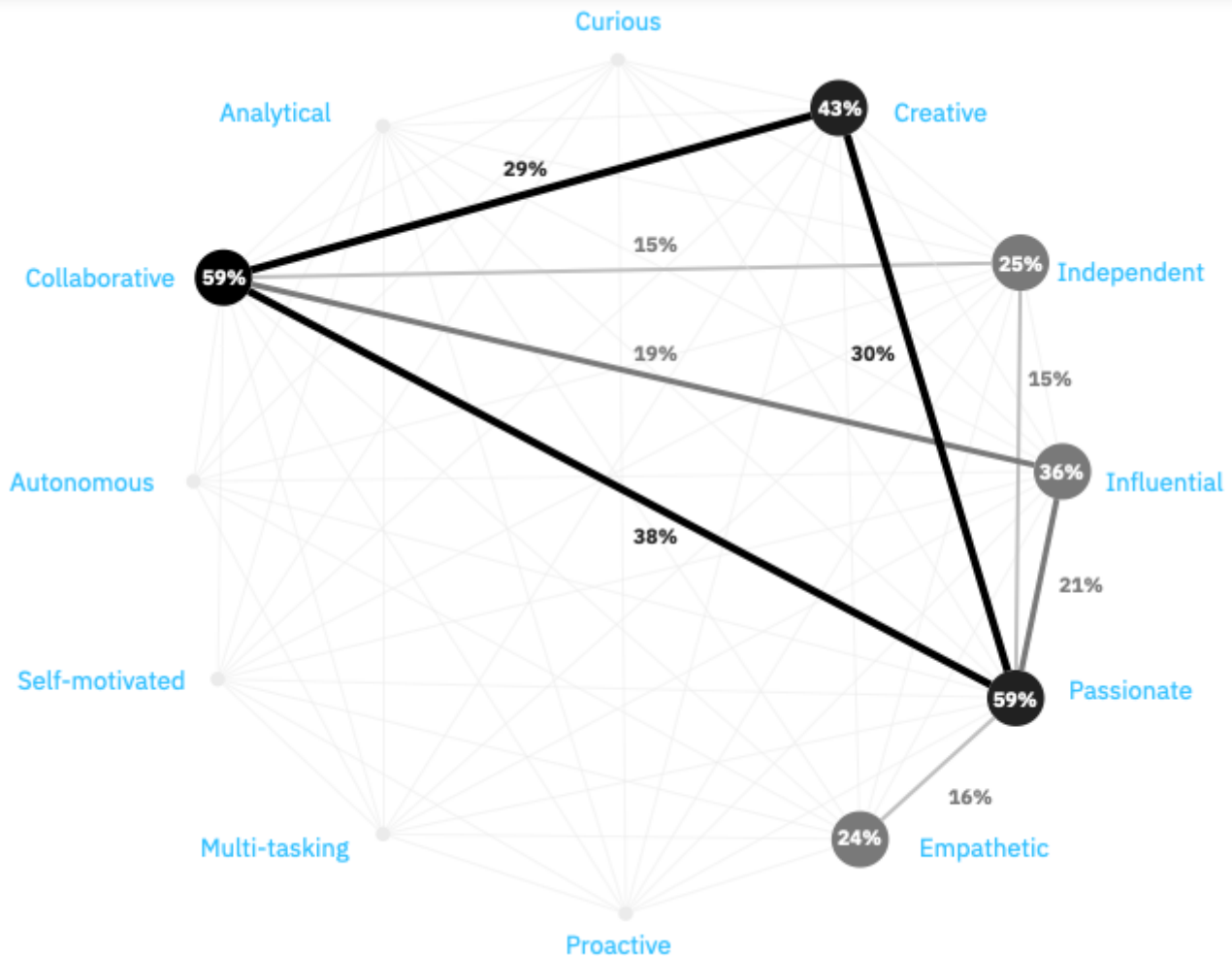
STATE	NUMBER	CITY	NUMBER
California	49	The Bay Area (SF)	38
New York	13	New York City	12
Washington	7	Los Angeles Area	9
Texas	5	Seattle	7
North Carolina	4	DFW	4
Illinois	4	Chicago	4
Massachusetts	3	Boston	3
Ohio	3	Portland	2
Colorado	2	Charlotte	2
Georgia	2	Raleigh	2
Oregon	2	Atlanta	2
Virginia	2	Boulder	2
		San Diego	2
		Columbus	2

It is important to note that the data were collected just before COVID-19 (January 2020) and it would be interesting to understand how the pandemic affected the geographical distribution of jobs with the shift to virtual or hybrid work options.

What are the required soft skills?

Patterns of key phrases emerged in the descriptions such as “we look for people who are *curious*” or “the right candidate will be *creative*” or “you have a *passion* for field research.” This analysis looked at how frequently these skills were mentioned as well as which attributes were most connected. That is, for each job description, how often were the skills used together to describe requirements.




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The numbers indicate for each skill how often they were mentioned across all of the job descriptions as well as how often a combination of skills were mentioned together as pairs. There were clear patterns that emerged, the most commonly mentioned being “Collaborative,” “Creative,” and “Passionate” which were most often mentioned in combination. These will be referred to as “Group A.” A secondary group of attributes (“Empathetic,” “Influential,” and “Independent”) were also identified and referred to as Group B.

Group A (Primary)

- Collaborative:** The ability to work with others on the immediate and extended team to maximize the value of research. Along with Passionate, this attribute was mentioned the most and was connected to the second most Group A and Group B attributes (i.e., it was mentioned the most alongside). Being collaborative meant establishing cross-functional teams (“collaborative cross-border group”), enabling



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- **Passionate:** Passion: A strong conviction for helping people (“passion for customer advocacy”), having an impact (“make a difference and change the world”), delivering user-centered products (“creating best experiences for users”), data centrality (“passion for data”), understanding users (“understanding customers’ behavior and what they need to succeed”), passion to improve (“willingness to improve the research process”), answer hard questions (“passion in life to probe for meaning”), and a passion for evangelism (“championing the value of user experience research and design thinking to the whole company”).
- **Creative:** There were a number of ways in which a researcher must apply creativity into the work. These include creating impactful research insights (“creative and dynamic insights that help teams”), collaborating on design solutions (“help deliver best-in-class creative user experiences”), communication (“sharing your research stories in creative ways,” “Communicate insights in creative and compelling ways,” and “creative approach to delivering research findings”), solve problems (“develop creative solutions to overcome roadblocks”), recruiting (“ability to creatively recruit in a business-to-business setting”), generative research (“get creative about new areas”), and applying the right methods (“creative research processes”), and evangelism (“Find creative and compelling ways to generate and share results and recommendations throughout the company”).

Group B (Secondary)

- **Empathetic:** The ability to understand the perspective of the user and communicating that understanding is fundamental. The UXR practitioner is tasked with not only creating user empathy through research (“create understanding and empathy around user needs, stated and unstated”) but also championing organizational empathy (“cultivate an empathetic culture across the company”) to ensure a user-first culture and relevance of user research (“promote and foster a culture of user research”).
- **Influential:** The ability to inform product design and strategy across the organization, including product ownership (“influence feature product ideation, prioritization”), design (“clear actionable insights to influence the design



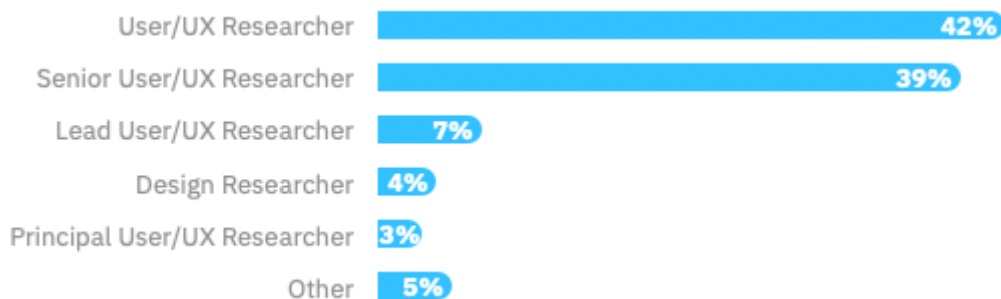
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Influence is effected by providing valid and reliable data and resulting insights in a compelling way.

- **Independent:** While it is critical to be able to collaborate with others, having an ability to work without constant supervision (“design and conduct research independently”) and without being unduly influenced creates a boundary of impartiality (“independent thinker”). It is a balancing act to bridge Independence with Collaboration and be able to move between the two as needed (“comfortable switching seamlessly between self-directed independent work and highly collaborative teamwork”).

What do they call themselves?

Of the 100 job postings, they were roughly equally split between senior (49%) and non-senior (46%) roles. The most prevalent naming conventions for Researcher roles was to describe as “User Researcher” or “UX Researcher” with “Design Researcher” mentioned far less commonly.



Naming conventions for this role sends the clear message that UX research is not just an extension of a Designer’s role (as “Design Research” may imply) but rather a distinct discipline that complements design but is not subsumed by Design.

Is a degree required?

The large majority (85%) of jobs specified that a degree was required.



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under half (45%) mentioned a Masters degree specifically and finally, a Ph.D. was mentioned as either a requirement or nice-to-have 28% of the time.

Typically, each job posting mentioned two educational requirements. That is, there typically wasn't a singular educational requirement such as "must have a Ph.D." or "must have a bachelor's degree." Rather, multiple options were typically listed with a minimum (less education) and preferred (more education).

Where a degree was specified (85%), the breakdown was as follows. When only one was listed, it was either a Bachelors degree or simply a "degree" in some areas of emphasis such as HCI. When two degree options were listed, it was most often split between a Bachelors and Masters as one group or Masters and Ph.D. as another group. Finally, when three or more were listed, it followed the expected pattern of progression from Bachelors to Masters to Ph.D.

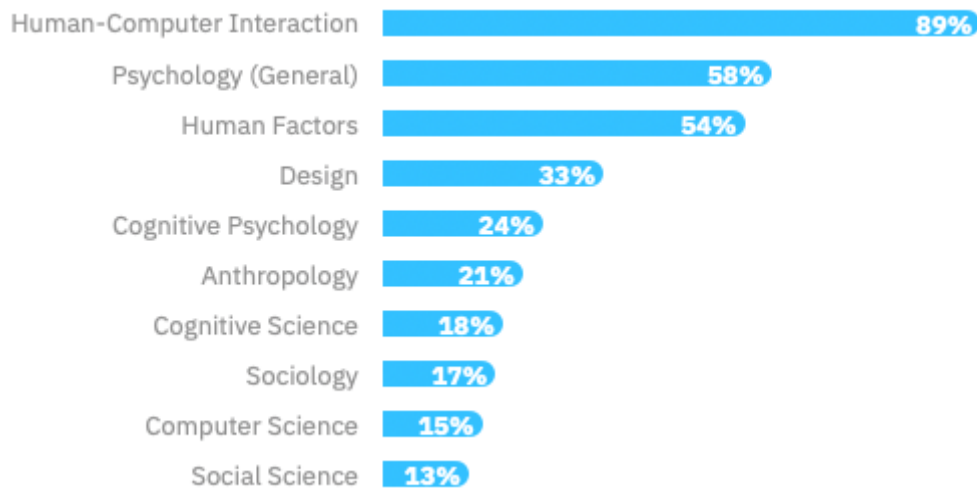
NUMBER	TOTAL %	MOST COMMON DEGREES
Zero	15%	N/A
One	37%	"Bachelors" or "Degree"
Two	39%	"Bachelors, Masters" or "Masters, Ph.D."
Three+	9%	"Bachelors, Masters, Ph.D."

What should be encouraging to those wishing to transition to UXR is that an advanced degree is not an absolute requirement. Rather, on the job or various other learning opportunities can be used to build the skills needed to be a working practitioner.

Which disciplines are most dominant?

Most job descriptions listed more than one discipline specialty with Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) being by far the most sought after specialty. The next grouping of specialties included Psychology (General) and Human Factors with Design in a distant fourth rounding out the top educational specialty disciplines in high-demand for UX Researcher jobs. There was a strong 'human' element reflected in the prevalence of social science disciplines such as Psychology (General), Cognitive Psychology,

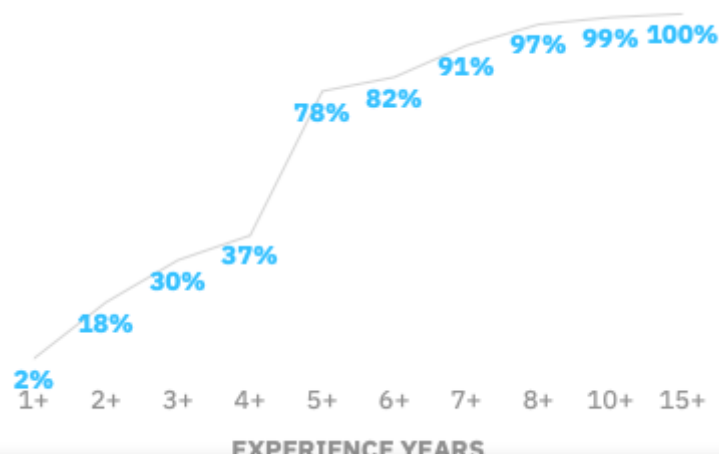


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This data is helpful in dispelling the line of thinking that UX research is simply a function taken on by Designers, rather than viewing UX research as its own discipline. While it is true that Designers must be able to perform a certain level of UX research (and many Designers are very adept at conducting research), UX research has a strong foundation in the social sciences to view it as a unique capability beyond an attribute of the Designer role.

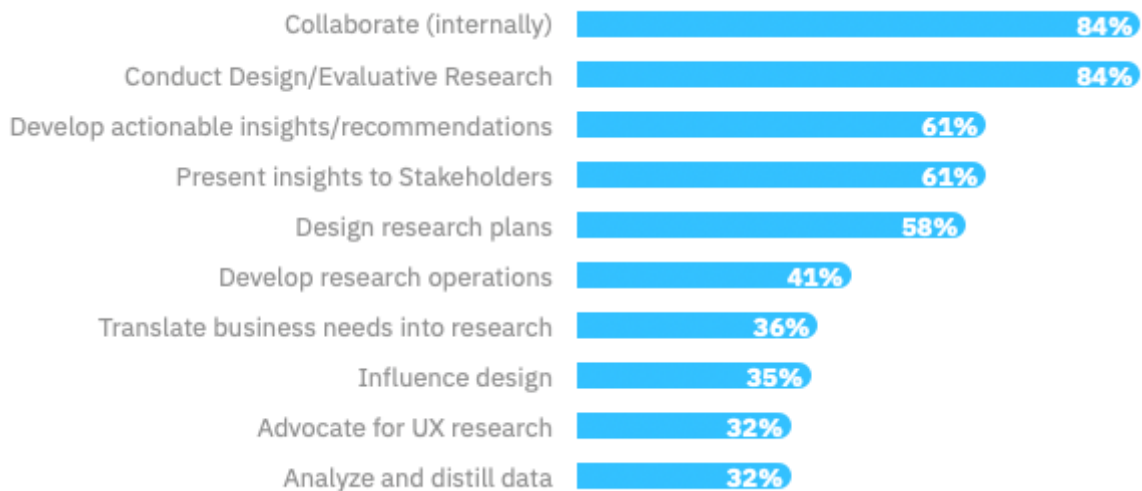
How many years of experience are typically required?

It makes logical sense that as the request for more senior roles increases as does the years of experience increases. Overall, the on-the-job experience most preferred was 5 years or more. When the data were analyzed looking at the difference between 'senior' and 'not senior' roles, the distinction was minimal (2 years) with 5+ and 3+ years being the difference.



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Responsibilities referred to the day-to-day activities that make up the role of a researcher. An interesting insight from the data is that collaboration is as prevalent in job descriptions as the ability to do the research.



The list of responsibilities captures the essence of what a User Research would typically do as part of the job.

- **Collaborate (internally).** A Researcher must be able to work among a larger multi-disciplinary team to create insights that matter to more than one constituent.
- **Conduct Design/Evaluative research.** Executing research is the core of what a Research role does and represents a unique skill brought to the collaborative team environment.
- **Develop actionable insights/recommendations.** Insights are the value that comes out of research. That is, the purpose of conducting the research is to take some action based on the research; The insights be must actionable and lead to post-delivery validation that the insights were beneficial.
- **Present insights to Stakeholders.** Those actionable insights aren't any good if they don't get into the hands of those who matter and who can take action. Being a good written and verbal communicator is key.
- **Design research plans.** Create a document that identifies the purpose of the research what will be done and the expected insights. The research plan will



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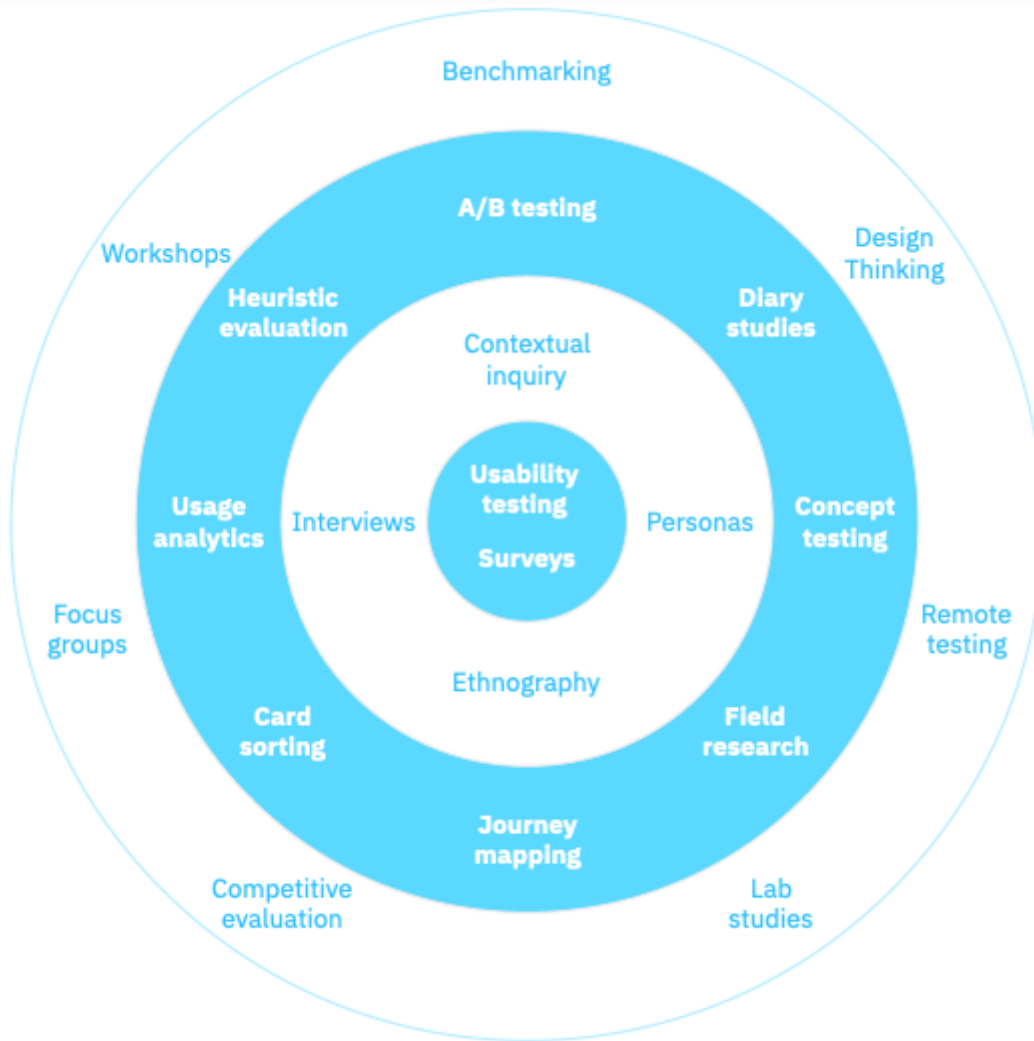
- **Develop research operations.** Create processes and identify tools that enable research to be done at high velocity and deliver maximum value.
- **Translate business needs into research.** Maximize the usefulness of research by creating research plans that are tied directly to what is most important to the business (the hard problems).
- **Influence design.** Ensure that research is useful and not just interesting by translating research insights into actions that directly influence what is being used.
- **Advocate for UX research.** Show where research fits into business processes and the value research brings to solving the most relevant business problems.
- **Analyze and distill data.** Create insights from data through various analysis techniques and bring order to disorder.

Which methods are commonly used?

Methods are the research tools/approaches used to execute the work and create value. Groupings of methods emerged based on how often they were mentioned in the job descriptions. As a reminder, most job descriptions did not intend to list an exhaustive set of required methods, but it was reasonable to assume that those methods mentioned were deemed most critical to performing the job.

The methods closer to the center were mentioned more often than those further away from the center. There were more methods listed across the job descriptions other than those shown but the incidence was very small.




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The methods in the center are labeled “core” as they were mentioned 64%-70% of the time. The next set were mentioned 28%-52% of the time and are considered “primary.” The third grouping called “secondary” were listed 17%-22% of the time. Finally, the group the furthest from the center, called “peripheral” were mentioned 11%-14% across all 100 job postings.

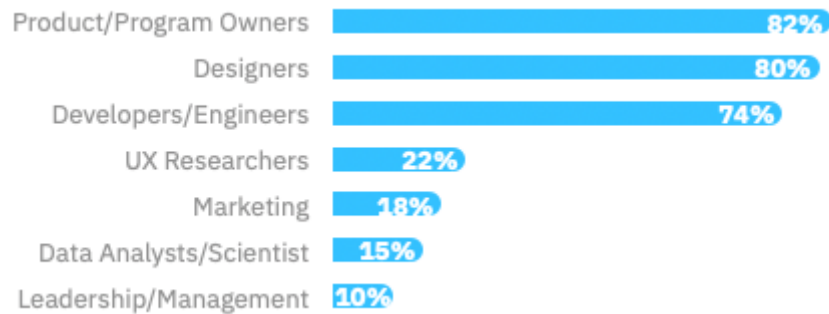
It is recognized that some of these “methods” are more frameworks or approaches (e.g., Design Thinking) rather than methods and they are not mutually exclusive (e.g., Usability testing & Remote testing, Usability testing & Lab studies). For a practitioner, to be competitive they must be able to execute all of these methods, know their strengths and weakness and know when to best apply depending upon various conditions (e.g., cost, speed, risk).

With whom does a UX Researcher collaborate?



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mentioned for each job was four. Of those four, three were mentioned by far the most: Product/Program Owners, Designers, and Developers/Engineers.



- **Product/Program Owners.** UX Researchers need to engage with this role to understand the roadmap for the product, identify the most pressing business problems, and invoke their help in identifying the target users for recruitment and engagement. The relationship enables the *Business* context.
- **Designers.** It is not surprising to see Designers as one of the Top 3 roles. This makes sense given design and research work hand-in-hand during the *creating* and *critiquing* part of iterative design and evaluation. This relationship enables the *Design* context.
- **Developers/Engineers.** Development is responsible for making it work. As such, development is going to ground the *what's possible* and work collaboratively with research to enable testable materials that may either be live or in working prototype state. Development is also a part of the multi-disciplinary team needed to prioritize insights coming out of research on the feasibility dimension. This relationship enables the *Functional* context.

Of note were the small number of mentions of fellow UX Researchers which was likely due to the assumption that a team of UX Researchers would obviously work together and thus, not need to be mentioned in a job description.

What does it mean to be a UX Researcher?

UX Research is a distinct discipline that draws heavily upon the social sciences to create research protocols that are rigorous and produce useful and actionable insights. While



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institutional empathy, works independently without tremendous oversight, and can influence at all levels of the organization to effect change and positive outcomes. The UX Researcher must be facile in a variety of methods, spanning generative to evaluative, qualitative and quantitative, and attitudinal and behavioral.

UXR is not just an appendage of the body Design but rather it's own fully developed entity that provides data-driven insights beyond the user interface.

What should you do next?

To wrap up, here are a few next-step actions you can take to use this data to help move your career forward:

- Pinpoint responsibilities that you are lacking or don't currently have in your scope of work
- Move outside your comfort zone and apply research methods that are new
- Develop in-demand soft-skills that will allow you to flourish
- Evaluate yourself periodically against an objective benchmark

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+Read more...

Additional related blogs on this topic written by [Theresa Nguyen](#) include the following:

- [Breaking down the UX researcher's main responsibility...Research, of course!](#)
- [All the research data has been gathered... Now what?](#)
- [Business acumen for the UX researcher](#)
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