Journal of User Experience

Vol. 21, Issue 2, February 2026 pp. 49–54

The UX Profession: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Rebecca Baker, PhD
IMA | Institute of Management Accountants
https://www.linkedin.com/in/rebeccabaker/
beccad4wn@gmail.com

Introduction

User Experience, as a profession, is having a moment—a really uncomfortable moment. After years of exponential growth culminating in countless boot camps, university programs, TED Talks™, and more, the seemingly endless number of job offerings dried up. Between 2022 and 2023, the UX profession saw a drop of almost 71% in job listings (Brookshier, 2023). That's a huge drop in demand for what had been, up to that point, a booming profession! What happened? As any good engineer will tell you: It's complicated.

Yesterday

To understand how the bottom dropped out of the UX market, we have to consider why it had such exponential growth in the late 2010s. A study by Forrester (Paun, 2017), which became widely cited, found that good UX raised a site's conversion rate by a staggering 200%. Another study by the Design Management Institute (Wescott et al., 2013) showed that design-led companies outperformed, by 100 to 1, an enormous margin, those that weren't design-led in the S&P 500. These and other studies provided both an incentive for companies to invest in UX and a justification for UX professionals to ask for more headcount and investment. Coupled with the very visible success of companies like Netflix™, Uber™, and Slack®, all of which relied heavily on an easy-to-use interface, the continued growth of consumer-facing software (as opposed to the previously prevalent business-only facing software) was staged for an explosion of hiring in UX.

Unfortunately, no ready supply of UX designers existed. Educators scrambled to catch up, and bootcamps run by agencies popped up while universities threw together programs as offshoots of their art departments. Anyone entering the software workforce was told of the advantages of going into UX: how you could, with a little elbow grease and perseverance, teach yourself how to be a UX designer in 8-10 weeks and earn a six-figure job from your choice of companies. And many folks did.

I remember a friend of a friend (we'll call him Alex) who asked to buy me a coffee to see what it would take to get started in UX. Sitting down, I could tell Alex was enthusiastic and earnest; he leaned forward, eager to tell me about how he had become passionate about UX and all that he learned in a 6-week online course. A half hour went by, and I think he barely paused while I'm certain his coffee had gone cold. When he finally wound down, I gently asked what he thought the most important aspect of being a designer was. He covered the relative virtues of empathy and visual design in 15 minutes. Finally, I told him that the most important thing I look for when hiring designers is their ability to ask good questions and listen for the answer that is given, rather than the answer that they expected to hear. I explained that empathy was not, in fact, the key. We can all relate to a frustrating experience. It is more important to be able to extract the desired goal and create a way to accomplish it, which might, in fact, not involve changing the interface at all. You need to be open to the key to success being changing some process or environmental factor. He nodded his head eagerly and explained that he had redesigned LinkedIn® for his bootcamp, including coding new components for a theoretical design system.

When I extracted myself from the conversation after several attempts at redirection, it was clear to me that, as a UX designer, Alex would struggle. He was very enthusiastic, but he struggled to listen. Just as importantly, he wasn't extrapolating information from what was being said. His training had taught him how to identify interface usability issues (poor visual affordances, unclear wording, and confusing dialog workflows) from his own perspective, rather than the perspective of the user. I was mildly surprised when a small company hired him as a UX designer 2 weeks later. Fast forward a few years to when the pandemic hit. While other professions were laying off people, UX was hiring and growing even though many people being hired had little to no experience and, like Alex, were enthusiastic, but unpracticed.

Therein lay the cost to this explosive growth. Companies, eager to improve their bottom line by dipping into the magic of UX, hired quickly without an implementation or success plan, often bringing in whole departments of inexperienced designers who had only an academic understanding of software design. Product managers sometimes took advantage of these designers by doing drive-by design, the practice of leaning over the designers' shoulder, telling them exactly what they wanted, and using the designer to drive the mouse. Large companies with legacy software placed their expectations of shiny, simple-to-use interfaces on the design department, without cost analysis of how these changes would be implemented by their engineers (which required upending complex workflows coded in software from the 1990s). Simply put, companies wanted the promise of UX, but they did not know what that meant, or how to define it, so they could effectively integrate it into their products. I have been asked, more than once, to "make it sexy." (To which, I consistently replied that if they wanted a lacy little black number on it we could do that, but I didn't think it would fit the overall report generation workflow.) I've also been asked to "reduce the number of clicks." (To which, I offered to put everything on one page, thus eliminating all the clicks.) Evidence, albeit anecdotal, showed companies struggle to understand how UX can be implemented and measured to provide the impact that translates into superior conversions and ephemeral user satisfaction ratings.

As companies started to acknowledge the struggle, design systems (a set of plug-and-play, coded interface components to be used consistently across designs and systems) were suggested as a solution. These systems, especially attractive to companies with an appetite for constant acquisition, either consumed an entire group of designers and engineers to create, maintain, and implement, or were left to be a volunteer effort, doomed to become only an end-of-year presentation slide for the board. Two different companies I worked at took the volunteer route for design systems. If you wanted to add a component, you had to find a developer who would code it in their free time—in both Angular™ and React™—then you had to document it and socialize it. Or, you could create your own one-off design, ignoring the design system altogether. Guess which route most designers took? As a result, the effort to get multiple software programs to share the same interface was less than successful.

Exacerbating the problem, the established processes (Agile® or SAFE®, etc.) did not include design, making it difficult to understand when designers should be engaged and what their timelines should look like. I remember one product manager who habitually asked me for designs after the development team had finished most of the coding, then acted surprised when

the designs couldn't be implemented without reworking some (or most) of the code. Design was not considered part of the strategy, woven into deliverables and outcomes; rather, it was treated as a stand-alone strategic item. (Imagine: "We are going to sprinkle some UX on this and everything will be awesome!") Companies were not prepared for the time and investment that real usability improvements took.

Designers did not help matters. Flush with data that showed that design is important and ideals from workshops and classes, which stressed the importance of empathy, designers were unprepared to do effective research or understand how to make meaningful compromises. They created beautiful works of art that were never implemented due to a lack of connection with engineering and product management, who dictated what was possible and what was desirable. Trying to get designers to estimate timelines so that we could include design in the overall project plan was a nightmare. One designer I worked with refused to provide time estimates for design deliverables because it interfered with her "creative process." Software ships but art sits, and too often designers produced art rather than software. To justify changes, they would do research that, often times (due to a lack of understanding of what research entailed), consisted of five interviews with random individuals from inside the company to create personas that simply confirmed their design decisions. Without accurate data about their users and businesses, designers were not prepared for the compromises that would enable real usability improvements or how to adequately justify investment in those improvements.

Today

Then AI entered the proverbial room. The pandemic had lifted, and companies suddenly realized they had over-invested in some roles. The bubble burst. Tasks typically completed by junior-level designers could be automated or done by someone with no training in design. They could use AI to generate idea after idea with little to no overhead. Product managers who had been using designers to drive the mouse no longer needed the driver. Record layoffs ensured there were fewer roles, but many more people to fill them. Just like that, the heyday of UX halted. Or rather, UX as we had come to define it, reached a moment of necessary, perhaps overdue evolution.

Clearly, as designers, we have to adapt. Some designers may move forward in adjacencies, like product management or project management, and flourish in these areas as they bring their understanding of user needs into both. While these roles advocate for the end user, many professionals are often unprepared, as training for these professions emphasizes business needs rather than user needs. Product management, in particular, benefits from a background in UX because requirements gathering and writing often happen in this group. Similarly, some may find specializing in an area like visual design, research, or front-end engineering will be more effective for them. Remember Alex? As I suspected, he struggled with success in UX. He bounced through three companies before finally moving into front-end engineering, where he is now thriving. His passion for visual design and empathy give him an edge as he codes, and interpreting the requirements he's given with a holistic view of user experience helps him advance.

In addition, the profession of UX design must also change. But how must the UX design evolve? If we consider where we've failed or succeeded, the weaknesses and strengths of the current software processes, and the opportunities in other areas, I believe we can see our way forward.

A key area in which design failed—both from a company and a designer level—was goal setting. Establishing well-articulated and measurable goals for design is key to shipping successful software. Unsurprisingly, being able to accurately articulate goals is also key to using AI. Expanding a designer's expertise to understand enough software engineering and business to be able to outline design changes and suggestions in terms of cost and ROI, including how those things will be measured during and after implementation, will be key in the evolution of successful design. Being able to do these things involves understanding how businesses measure value, which varies from place to place, the context that makes that value meaningful, and how you can explain those measures. We must be able to articulate what problem we are trying to solve as well as how we will know that we solved it. We must define the success measures. This approach takes a human, a storyteller if you will, with experience and training in

the real world to understand the end goal, in its context, as well as the ability to extrapolate the steps needed to accomplish that goal.

Another area in which design stumbled was effective and accurate research. Learning how to accurately measure impact and verify outcomes, as well as distinguishing good research from bad (especially useful in a world of AI hallucinations), is key in tomorrow's design world. Tomorrow's designers must understand the difference between opinion and data. I started at a company many years ago and was examining some design decisions they had made that seemed counterintuitive based on our traffic data. They said they had done research to inform the decision, so I asked to see it. As it turns out, their research involved printing two versions of the same dialog box, showing them to six different people, and then asking which they liked better. They assured me it was rigorous because they varied which one of the paper dialogs they showed participants first. Flabbergasted, I had to explain to the (very enthusiastic and very naive) designer the issues with this approach. Understanding research and statistics, being able to distinguish the good from the bad, and knowing correlation from causation will be critical for successful UX professionals. With all of the research available today, it's paramount that a knowledgeable human understands that non-toxic glue will not help pizza cheese stick better or that people should not consume five to six small rocks daily to get their minerals. More importantly, a human with a focus on other humans will share the understanding of the importance of optimizing medical outcomes over financial reimbursements (Ross et al., 2023). Companies today are inundated with more data than ever before. Although AI and data professionals can process the data to find patterns, UX professionals must be positioned to provide the context, ask the questions, and challenge the answers.

Yet another area that caused issues for design in the past, and today, is process. Design must be included holistically in the overall work process for successful launches. To do that, designers must be involved in project planning, estimates, and reporting on capacity and progress. A basic grounding in project management terminology and software will ensure designers strategically insert themselves into processes that can be less than welcoming. This area leverages something most UX designers excel at: communication and empathy. Understanding how different areas work, such as development and product management, will let a UX professional steer project management toward including design in the right places to make design impact strategic. Using interview and listening techniques, skills that are a staple of the seasoned UX professional, with colleagues as well as users will reveal the opportunities and roadblocks to act accordingly.

Finally, design must be seen as a part of a company's overall strategy, rather than a stand-alone strategic item or something sprinkled on at the end like an ice cream topping. UX is a tool like software development, not a strategy in and of itself. Companies need to define the priority of usability within their overall approach to developing new and existing features and the customer experience, so usability findings can be applied consistently throughout the software development lifecycle.

Tomorrow

The good news is that the UX profession isn't dying, unless we try to cling to what once was, letting nostalgia blind our profession from the opportunity in front of us. Rather, UX as a profession is evolving to include business acumen, process understanding, and research, making it a more valuable, impactful profession that can be supplemented with, but not replaced by, AI. The core skills of a seasoned UX professional are the ability to listen and determine root cause, communicate context and issues by synthesizing stories that present the whole of the experience, and see opportunities and roadblocks in existing processes. These skills will become ever more valuable as companies become intimate with the limitations of AI. Early data on UX job demand reflects this, and jobs for seasoned UX professionals show a gradual increase (Shields, 2025). Areas that require experience and nuance will continue to see demand: accessibility design, for example, as well as highly-regulated, high user-touch areas like healthcare and edtech, in which usability is critical for user success and the current state of that adoption is low. But it will take work to enhance UX professionals' skill sets by leaning into those underutilized areas of the profession that differentiate strength, durable skills of communication, listening, storytelling, and critical thinking. And user experiences will be better for it.

References

Brookshier, K. (2023). *UX job listings plunged in 2023*. Indeed Design. https://indeed.design/article/ux-job-listings-plunged-in-2023/

Paun, G. (2017, March 23). *The bottom line: Why good design means better business*. Forbes Agency Council. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/03/23/the-bottom-line-why-good-ux-design-means-better-business/

Ross, C., & Herman, B. (2023, November 14). *UnitedHealth faces class action lawsuit over algorithmic care denials in Medicare plans*. STAT. https://www.statnews.com/2023/11/14/unitedhealth-class-action-lawsuit-algorithm-medicare-advantage/

Shields, L. (2025). *Signals in the noise: What Q1 2025 tells us about UX hiring*. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/signals-noise-what-q1-2025-tells-us-ux-hiring-lance-shields-xq8ac/

Westcott, M., Sato, S., Mrazek, D., Wallace, R., Vanka, S., Bilson, C., & Hardin, D. (2013). *The DMI design value scorecard*. Design Management Institute. https://cdn.ymaws.com/sites/www.dmi.org/resource/resmgr/Docs/DMI_DesignValue.pdf

About the Author

Dr. Rebecca Baker, PhD
Baker started her career as a research assistant at the Space Vacuum Epitaxy Center at the University of Houston doing cool stuff with science. She moved into software design when she discovered physics didn't have enough people-y bits. She has authored a book on UX and Agile, "Agile UX Storytelling: A Zombie Software Case Study" (available on Amazon; it makes an excellent gift), holds a patent for Information Encapsulation, and has spoken at a ridiculous number of conferences. A UX Jedi, excellent listener, 30-year veteran of the software design space, and dungeon master, Dr. Baker's publications and talks span topics from technical writing to remote usability testing to agile UX processes and beyond. Her passion for research and helping people understand the "why" behind design, combined with the recent developments in large language model (LLM)-based artificial intelligence, led her to partner with the marvelous Dr. Rekart to publish her most recent book, "Designing for Human Intelligence in an Artificial Intelligence World: Understanding Human Cognition to Design for Humans."