

Dover

Hiring Guide: Design

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Introduction

If your product isn't easy or delightful to use, customers won't find any value, no matter how revolutionary the idea. Product designers help marry ideas and user experience to bring your brainstorms to life.

While product design can entail anything from manufacturing and physical products to app creation, for the purposes of this guide we're going to focus on digital product design. This entails branding, UX, wireframing/mockups, iconography, and web or graphic design.

There are two unique features of product design that set it apart as an integral part of an engineering team:

1. Product design is human-centered, and focuses on making a product useable, predictive (anticipating how a user will behave and react), and enjoyable.

2. Product design is never-ending (or almost so). Everyone follows the structure they consider the most suitable and efficient, but the process may include an unexpected number of iterations that are crucial for understanding the problem and finding the best solution to it.

Your first hire is often even more difficult and critical, as they'll set the pace and tone for the team moving forward, and provide them with the necessary tools/research so that they understand where you are in the lifecycle of the product, what experiments have been tested, and what users need to get value from your software.

This guide aims to help you answer the who, what, where, when and why about bringing a product designer onto your team — we've also backed it up with Dover's internal data and insights from our work with 200+ startups.

Types of design roles



A product designer may also be referred to as a User Experience (UX) Designer, Customer Experience Architect, User Interface (UI) Designer, Interaction Designer, or Information Architect depending on the type of company, the size, and diversity of the design department and the particular individual's area of expertise.

While the “traditional” model was to hand off a product to product designers after the requirements were set, **many product designers now work hand-in-hand with the product team throughout the product development process.** By being involved throughout, they keep the user experience top of mind.

The journey from Junior Designer to Principal is fairly standard:

- **Junior**
- **Mid-Level**
- **Senior**
- **Lead**
- **Principal**

We're going to group lower level and higher-level designers together, since many of these rungs may be skipped in a smaller organization (i.e. a Senior designer may jump into Principal and Lead positions based on the project.)

Junior/Mid-level Designer

While your first hire will typically be more senior, once you start building out a product arm of your company, you'll bring in junior designers who:

- improve existing features through conducting user research and a/b testing
- work on smaller-scope projects that are clearly-defined and close to launch
- build on their core design competencies
- learn how to seek and integrate the right feedback

Junior designers are not your first hire: they need a generous amount of support to develop their skillset and guidance to get to the point where they can handle more scope. Plus, you don't want them to make critical mistakes on the foundational aspects of your product.

Senior/Principal/Lead Designer

High-level designers have the ability to handle larger and more ambiguous projects. While the amount of leadership they'll have might fluctuate based on the type of project they're working on (Aaron James, Senior Product Designer at Netflix calls Lead and Principal “**ephemeral states**”).

Other companies have adopted a similar approach to that of engineering teams: as someone progresses in their skillset, they have the option to continue being an individual contributor or become a manager.

That being said, all senior designers typically handle the following responsibilities:

- set individual quotas and team goals,
- have complete ownership or understanding of a feature, or problem space
- they can coordinate groups of people and effectively collaborate with their team.
- build community and mentor Junior designers to help them level up
- solve ambiguous problems through iteration and experimentation

Your first hire

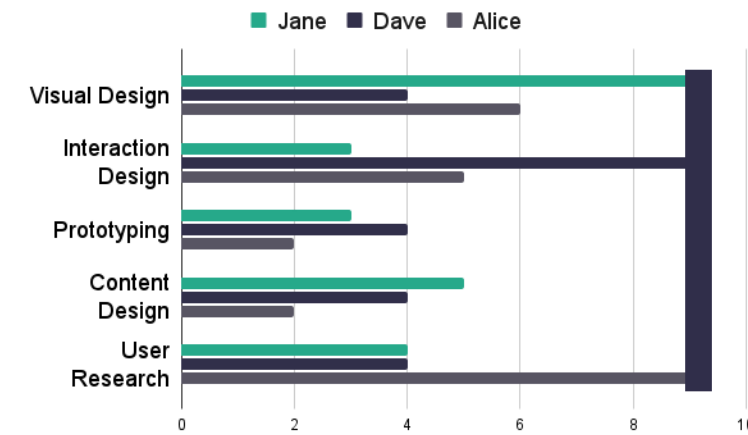
The first designer you hire plays a pivotal role in setting the course of the team as you scale. They'll be in charge of mentoring junior designers, building workflows, and setting up your design infrastructure.

This is why a generalist will typically bring deeper expertise in one of the big design functions: prototyping, content design, user research, visual design, interaction design.

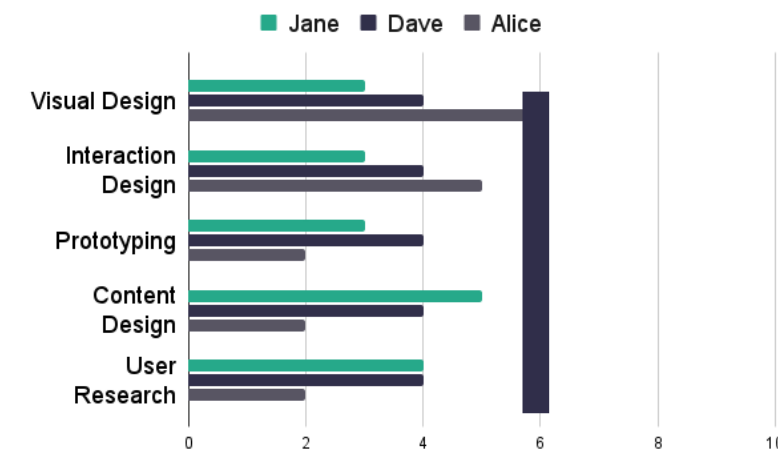
The reality is that anyone who excels across all of these functions is a unicorn and nearly impossible to find. Even a Principal or Staff Designer will likely have one or maybe two areas they're exceptionally good at. Before making your first hire, you need to figure out which design priorities are most urgent and hire for someone whose skills excel in those areas.

To visualize this, think about this as a graph.

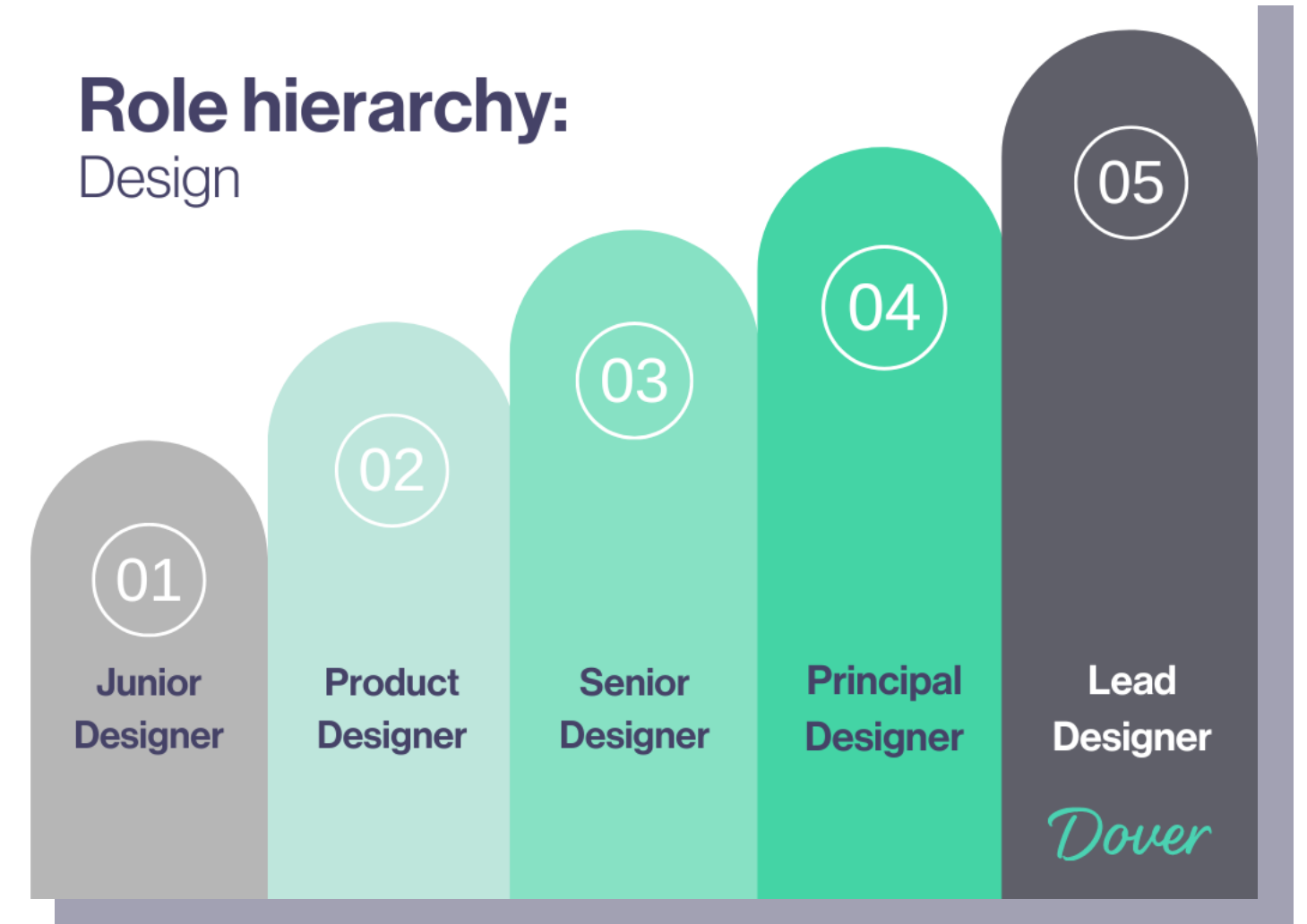
The y-axis represents the different areas of marketing, and x-axis represents a strength of someone on your team. The bar represents an ideal state of performance: you have a content machine, your ads are humming along, you're hitting your revenue targets, etc.



If you hire people with spikes all around (again, highly unlikely), it'll actually lower the bar for success, since their individual spikes will be much lower.



Role hierarchy: Design



pro tip:

On progression.fyi, or levels.fyi, you can compare your career ladder to those at similar or larger companies than yours to gather insights and inspiration.

1. Is design a blocker?

If a lack of design expertise on your product or eng team is preventing you from getting your product to market, you need to find a design partner as early as possible. This arrangement can take different forms depending on your immediate and ongoing needs (for example, you may start them on a freelancer contract until your design needs are more ongoing).

However, if you can get customers without investing in design, you may be able to delay your first designer hire until you hit other important milestones, like your next round of funding.

2. Will your design needs be ongoing?

If you have continuous or consecutive projects for a full-time designer to own over the next six months or longer, you're ready for a design hire. For most SaaS products, you will continue to learn and iterate on the product, which means there will be a constant need to update and iterate your UI.

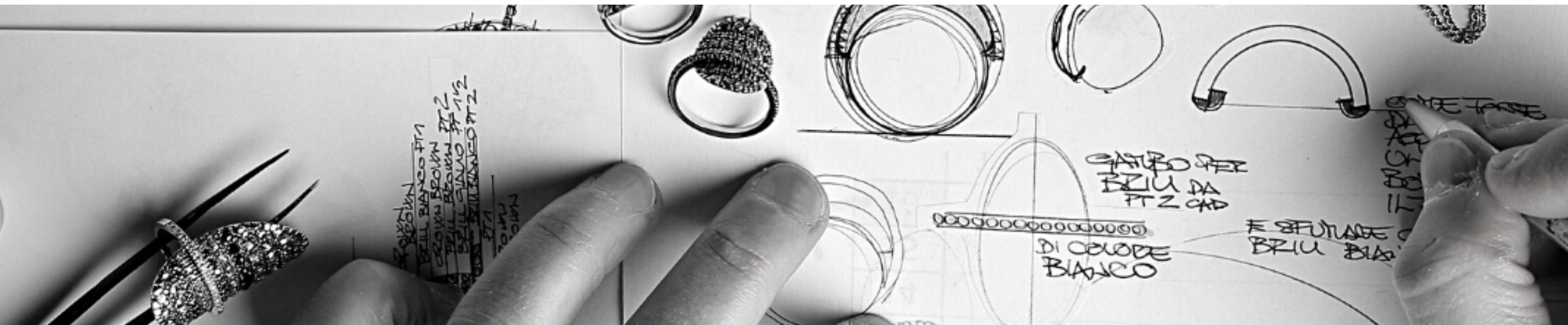
If you have more self-contained projects, or you need to focus on your initial branding and website, to get your product to market, you should outsource to a freelancer or agency.

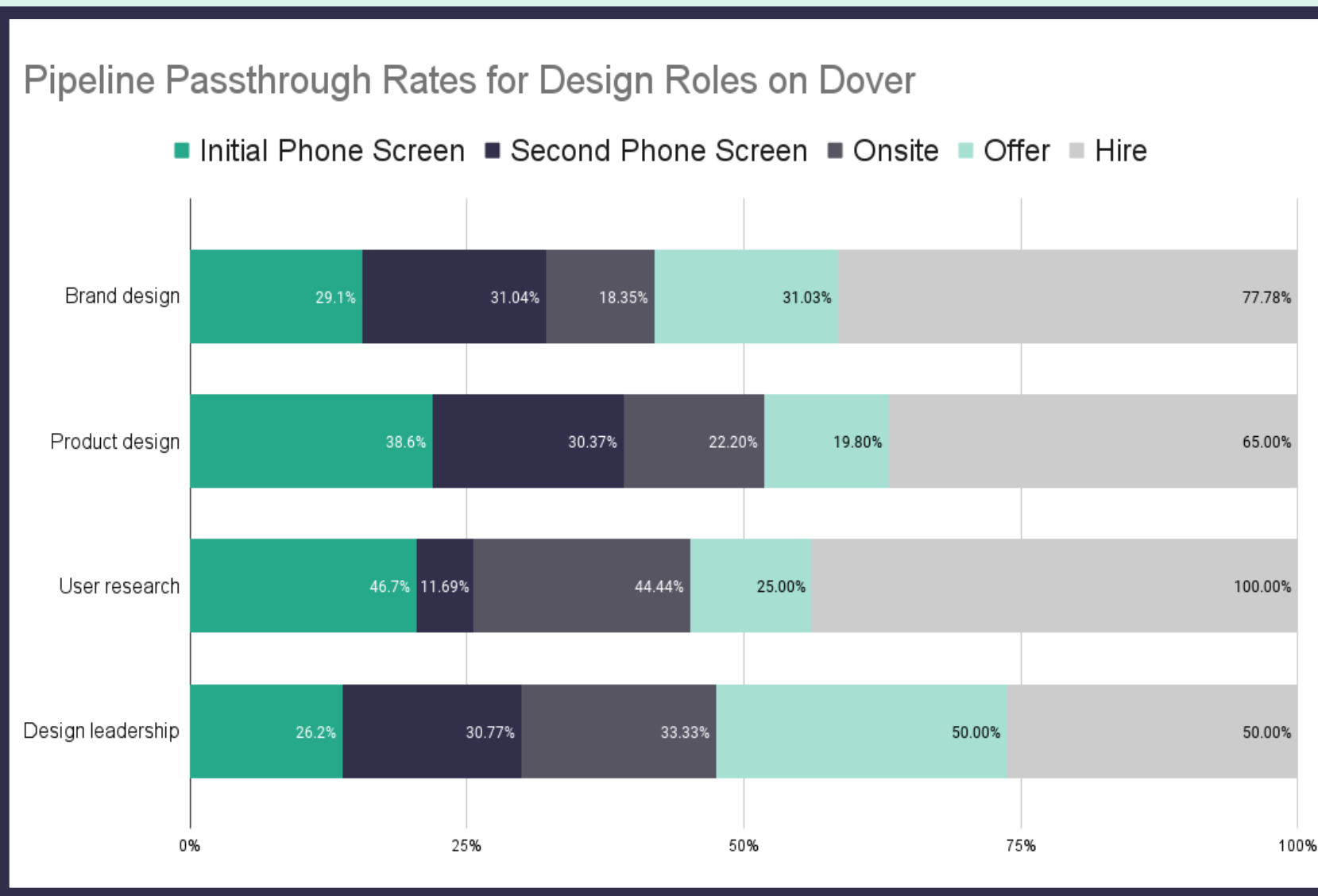
3. Do you have lots of competitors in your category?

If you're entering a category where all the other products are painful to use, you could have a competitive advantage and quickly gain early market share through exceptional design. In other words, design and usability can be a key differentiator for your business. If your competitors are dominant players with strong brands, you might want to put money into building an exceptional user interface.

For example, Gusto gained traction in their market by designing a simple and trustworthy UI that appealed to their customer base of small business owners. Design set them apart from competitors like Justworks and Paylocity, whose strategy was to build massive sales teams and focus on large companies.

3 questions to answer before hiring your first designer





How long will it take me to hire a designer?

The unemployment rate for tech jobs is 1.3%, its lowest level since June 2019 and about one-third of the national rate. As more startups open up their talent pool by adopting hybrid or remote work models, the projected growth rate for tech jobs over the next decade is near twice the national jobs rate. That means that hiring salespeople is about to become harder than ever.

On Dover's platform, we've seen that candidates **reach onsites 50% faster and are nearly 40% more likely to convert to an offer** when passing through our process management. We credit that to creating a positive, transparent and responsive candidate experience.

If you're curious, the graph on the left breaks this down further by role type.

Top job boards for designers

General:

- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Indeed](#)
- [AngelList](#)
- [We Work Remotely](#)
- [Remotive](#)
- [Toptal](#)
- [Dribbble](#)
- [Behance](#)

Women:

- [Hire Tech Ladies](#)
- [In Her Sight](#)
- [Power to Fly](#)
- [Where Women Work](#)
- [Career Contessa](#)
- [Fairy Godboss](#)
- [Elpha](#)

Underrepresented groups:

- [Power to Fly](#)
- [Diversity.com](#)
- [iHispano](#)
- [Black Career Network](#)
- [Black Jobs](#)
- [HLPA](#)
- [WorkplaceDiversity](#)
- [Diversity Jobs](#)

Focus on the you vs. the I or we.

The goal of an initial recruiting email is solely to get candidates on the phone. You'll have an opportunity to sell them on the company during the interview process. Spend the majority of your message talking about the role, answering:

- How much impact will they have?
- How much autonomy and ownership do you offer?
- Who will they be working with day-to-day?
- What are some projects they'll work on in the first six months?

Optimize messages for mobile.

Emails are read on mobile — think of the scroll test; if they have to scroll more than twice, they're probably not reading the entire email. Get the important information in first.

Have a direct CTA.

Include specifics and action steps for the candidate. Writing: "Can you hop on a call within the next few days?" is much more specific and committal than "Are you free to chat sometime soon?"

Get your pitch down to two sentences.

Salespeople are master storytellers. They have a better eye for a good vs. bad pitch, and will likely delete your email if they feel they can't easily understand what your company does. Focus on making your pitch a problem and solution statement, like "We're working to solve X to help Y."

Use flattery and personalization.

In the crowded tech space, catching a talented candidate's eye often requires a personalized pitch. Crafting an email subject line or LinkedIn message that references one of their unique experiences or interests will get their attention much faster than a generic recruitment message.

On Dover's platform, outreach that contains a personalized sentence results in 10 to 30% more interested responses — even if those candidates have responded as not interested to another company's outreach. And even if the individual isn't looking to change careers at that exact moment, they're likely to keep you in mind once they are ready to consider new opportunities.

Include relevant links to:

- Your LinkedIn profile
- The job posting for the role
- Your company website
- Any relevant press (if you haven't had a write-up yet, you can also consider writing a blog post about why you started your company)

Follow up 2-3 times.

Many people may not respond to your initial reach out, especially secondary connections. In fact, **our data shows that you double your response rate by sending 2-3 follow-ups at 3 day cadence.**

Your follow-ups should be shorter than your initial outreach. It's ok to reinforce a key point, but consider introducing a new concept to avoid being too repetitive. Ideas include additional press, or employee testimonials.

Optimizing outreach

30%

increase in interested responses in outreach that includes details about the candidate's interests or past roles.

Let's take a look at an example

Subject: Launch new products at BlueVine - fintech startup with \$200M raised

Hi [REDACTED],

I'm a MIT grad/engineer running a boutique search firm for software and bio startups. Your nearly 6-year tenure and rise into management at [REDACTED] caught my attention. I thought you might want to learn more about BlueVine or connect for a broader discussion of the market & your career goals. Plus, it's always good connecting with fellow alumni! :)

(And BTW, if you want to keep working in the city, I could see [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] also being worth discussing/having on your radar.)

BlueVine has raised nearly \$200M in venture funding and made over \$1B in small business loans the past 5 years. Their engineering team is based in Tel Aviv, but we're looking for a hands-on eng manager to build out a new product group in Redwood City and develop our new generation of products.

This is an opportunity to have the impact and flexibility of an early-stage startup, backed by the resources of a high-growth business. BlueVine has made a big dent in the lending world but harbors much larger ambitions. It would be great to tell you more.

Feel free to put time on my calendar for an intro call. If the timing isn't right, I'm happy to circle back later or grab a coffee. Would love to see if I can be of any help. Warm regards!

Personalization and flattery.

High-level overview of company funding, investors and customers.

Focus on impact and scope of the role.

Direct CTA — including a calendar link can double response rates.

Designing an interview loop

With designer, the interview process is about finding the right strength instead of a lack of weakness. As mentioned earlier, **it's difficult to find someone who exceeds in all areas of design, and your goal is to figure out where their spike in strength is.**

Pre-interview: be transparent about the steps in your process early on.

Nerves are a part of every interview. One way to reduce stress and help your candidates put their best foot forward is to include key information about the interview process early on, in places like your job description and in outreach or calendar invites.

You should include who the candidate will speak with, as well as detail the different stages of the process.

1. Initial sell conversation

Your first intro call is an opportunity to garner interest in the role, and your company with the hopes of moving the candidate into a traditional interview process. Read more in our [Selling and Closing Guide](#).

2. Remote screen #1

The first remote screen tends to focus on the candidate's background, experiences, and any particular personality traits you're looking to evaluate. A [first-round phone screen](#) should quickly qualify the candidate for or eliminate them from further evaluation so that no one is wasting their time.

Additionally, they can help you:

- Check for potential dealbreakers early on (e.g. availability, relocation, proficiency in sales CRM platforms, pitching and closing, etc.)
- Ask for clarification on information in candidates' resumes or LinkedIn profiles
- Evaluate candidates' verbal communication skills (especially if they're going to work in a senior or managerial role)
- For passive candidates, learn about their goals and desire to switch companies
- Their passion for your problem space and hands-on technical expertise

Save more in-depth skills assessments for your second screening interview.

Download our [phone screen scoring rubric templates](#) to get started.

3. Remote screen #2

This second screen tends to focus on technical or practical skills. This interview should map to the hard skills in your rubric.

This is where the candidate may also as you more hard-hitting questions about the business, such as your revenue streams, funding and future vision.

At Dover, our philosophy is to give them an open-book view of the business. Most candidates should know (and do know) that joining a startup is a risk. **Transparency will lead you to candidates who are curious and creative problem-solvers, want to collaborate, care about autonomy and believe the pros of joining your startup outweigh the risk.**

If you choose to be more cage-y with this information, you run the risk of hiring someone who ends up leaving if they feel they were sold a faulty vision of where the business is headed and what the job entails.

4. Portfolio assessment

It's critical that your hiring team scrutinizes the apps, websites or products designers have built as part of their portfolio or previous work experience. After all, you can't assess design skills verbally. You'll then conduct a portfolio review with the candidate to dig further into their workflows, ideas and skills.

Julie Zhuo provides the following checklist of questions to her team at Facebook when assessing portfolios:

- **The idea:** Is there a solid rationale behind why they worked on what they worked on? Does it identify a real problem and attempt to solve it?

- **Usability:** Is it easy to use? Is the design thoughtful and clear for how this product works? Does the designer have a good grasp of common patterns and interactions?
- **Craftsmanship:** Did the designer sweat over all the details, both big and small, of the end-to-end product? Is there a sense that the final product is well-made?

If the signals from their work is positive, you've found a very promising candidate to move to an onsite.

5. Onsite Interview

If candidates make it to the final stage of the process, you have enough conviction that they would be able to do the job. The point of an onsite is to assess culture fit and increase the likelihood that the candidate signs.

You can read more about running an onsite interview process in [this guide](#), but at a high level, we suggest choosing 3-4 focus areas from your hiring rubric that you care the most about for a product designer.

Additionally, you'll want to conduct a live whiteboard challenge to see how well they problem-solve and collaborate with your team in real time (more on that later).

6. Debrief

After a candidate has gone through your onsite process, the hiring manager should meet with all interviewers to discuss whether or not an offer will be extended.

You may realize in a debrief that you have insufficient information to make a hiring decision, and in this case, having a formal conversation is still helpful because it will help you uncover what signal you may be missing on a candidate and align on what next steps (if any) to take. This could mean more assessment, or a revamp of your rubric or questions.

How to structure a debrief

1. **First, make sure that interviewers are not talking about the candidate before everyone has written up this feedback.** If you can, schedule a debrief on the day of an onsite interview to decrease the probability of interviewers biasing each other.
2. **Ask interviewers that participated in the panel to simultaneously throw out rankings from 1 (low) to 4 (high).** By doing this at the same time, you prevent bias or a junior team member being swayed by a senior team member.
3. **In the order that the interviews were conducted, ask each interviewer to explain their rating.** Start by recapping what they were asked to evaluate in their interview, so the room has that context. The hiring manager should take notes and enter them into your ATS, or a spreadsheet.

If you're having trouble understanding how the interviewer landed on their rating, you should ask follow up questions, like "this interview sounded positive, what would you have needed to see to give a strong yes, vs. a yes?" or "why was this a weak no vs. a solid no?"



Onsite assessments

The goal of an onsite assessment for a salesperson is to get a sense of how they pitch, how they deal with difficult customers, and how well they handle questions on the fly. You aren't necessarily looking to see if they get everything 100% correct — instead, you are looking at how they break down the problem you're solving, how they handle tough conversations and how well they consolidate and communicate information.

Make sure you're assessing for good thinking, not just someone who validates your thoughts as a person who thinks about your company's mission day in/day out.

Two types of assessments:

An ideal assessment for a PD is one where you ask the candidate to:

1. Evaluate an existing product in the world (a new app for a pet adoption site)
2. Design a new feature for a product (the future of Dover's Candidate Management modal)

3 tips as you outline the process to the hiring team involved:

1. **Limit take-home prep time to 3 to 4 hours max** to be considerate of a candidate's time, especially if they're not being paid for this portion of the interview.
2. Depending on how your company is set up (remote, hybrid, or in-person) you'll want to **have the candidate present their assignment to a panel of folks from across the organization** who will assess them on the following criteria:
 - Ability to identify users, pain points and future buyers.
 - Clear communication of goals and longterm vision, including a definition of success metrics.

- Prioritization of features: can they provide a clear roadmap for the next 3-6 months?
 - QA and accessibility: Do they discuss possible roadblocks or areas of concern in the design process? Do they have ideas for iterations and future versions?
 - Feedback: PDs have to be able to handle a constant flow of hard questions. How do they deal with Q&A on the spot?
- 3. Provide enough context for them to succeed.**

Even though part of a designer's job is to do their own research, you don't want them to spend extraneous time tracking down information that is critical to succeeding. Remember, their job is not to articulate what your company does perfectly — the goal is to understand how they communicate with others and convey information.

Make sure to give them enough info on:

- How your product is priced
- Your buyer personas and their use cases
- Common objections from customers



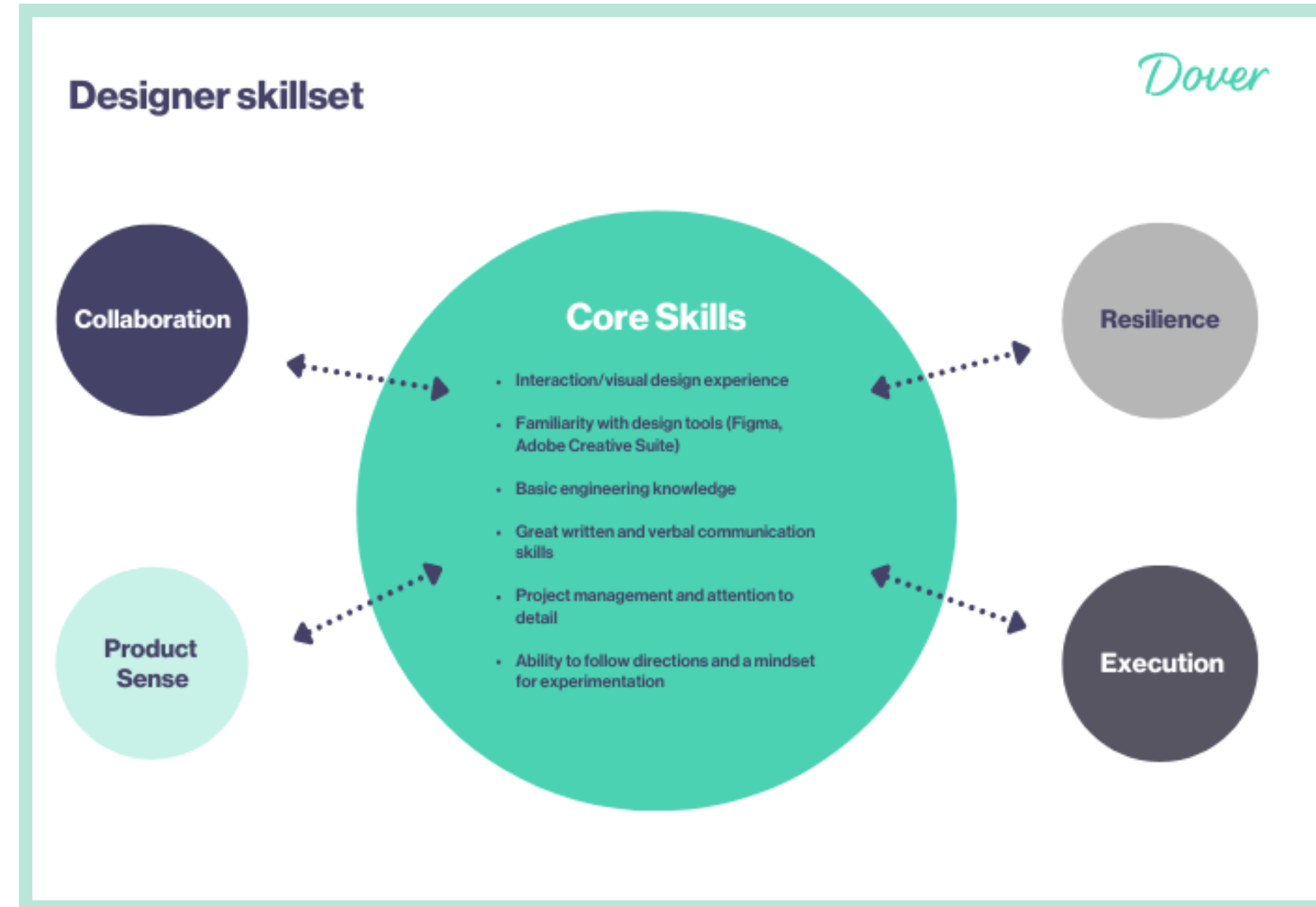
Skills and requirements

Core requirements

- Interaction/visual design experience
- Familiarity with design tools (Figma, Adobe Creative Suite)
- Basic engineering knowledge
- Great written and verbal communication skills
- Project management and attention to detail
- Ability to follow directions and a mindset for experimentation

Secondary skills

- Collaboration
- Empathy
- Resilience
- Execution without clear direction



Soft skills



Collaboration

A salesperson will need to meet regularly across your team to understand new product features, customer pain points and continue to optimize and iterate on buyer personas.

They'll need to be able to recognize which customers are not successful using your platform, or how to sell/save customers when you're experiencing churn. They'll also need to understand how the product works in detail, and how to align messaging across the organization so that what customers are sold is what is being delivered.

Example question: "Tell me about a time you disagreed with a member of your team and how you resolved it."

- **Weak answer:** Defensiveness, or placing blame on others, the problem resulted in gridlock or deprioritization rather than compromise and solution.
- **Strong answer:** They have humility and self-awareness. They're able to diagnose where and why they needed to compromise, and how they did so. A candidate who ends their response by saying what they learned from the situation and how they applied these lessons going forward should get serious bonus points.

Execution

Your early team will likely receive projects without crystal clear direction or a baseline metric to build off of — it's important that they can do the research required to make decisions and iterate in order to reach an end goal.

A sales hire for your early team should be comfortable with conducting research, scoping, and defining success metrics and then (and only then) acting upon them. This is also why you want to hire someone with a few years' of experience who understands or has experienced different strategies, roadblocks and channels.

Do you have an example of a time you've not had clear direction of a project?

- **Weak answer:** They've either never worked in an ambiguous environment, or recoil at the idea of working without definitive direction.
- **Strong answer:** They can describe specific situations in which they've worked with little guidance and enjoy working autonomously. They're able to discuss the roadblocks and hurdles involved, describe a thorough research and iteration process, and articulate how they sought feedback and revised the scope while still aligning with the company strategy or vision.

Empathy

Empathy in sales doesn't only increase revenue — it increases referrals, and retention. A 2019 [study](#) by Gartner, found that **customers are most motivated toward growth purchases when they see the sales rep as a trusted adviser who boosts their confidence in their purchase decisions.**

Salespeople aren't psychologists, but they should be able to understand how to form genuine relationships with prospects and notice larger shifts or patterns in customer need.

What's the biggest challenge you see for yourself and your potential team in the next year?

- **Strong answer:** If they address how evolving roles sometimes clash with established workflows, they prove that they're willing to compromise and understand the importance of flexibility.
- **Weak answer:** If they discuss "hitting quotas" versus "building relationships," or if they're too optimistic about the future of the company, it might signal a poor sense of self-awareness, potential selfish motivation (i.e. hitting my bonus vs. helping my team), and a lack of self-awareness.

Resilience

A salesperson might face rejection on a near daily basis, especially at a startup. Finding someone who can handle this thoughtfully and push through customer doubts will be vitally important. If these objections are approached in the right way, they give your team a valuable opportunity to ask more questions, learn about a prospects' needs and tailor your pitch accordingly.

Though many people think resilience is inherent, it's actually a skill that can be taught.

Carol Dweck, a popular psychologist, coined the term “**growth mindset**” to describe a person who believes they're not limited by inherent traits or abilities. Instead, they believe have the capacity to learn, grow, and improve. At a startup, this is especially important, as folks with fixed mindsets typically are **less innovative and take less risks**. Those with a growth mindset also tend to have a wider view of the business and its future vision, whereas those with fixed mindset focus on short-term or quarterly goals.

How do you handle customer rejection or objections? What is your most disappointing closed/lost deal and what did you learn from pitching or working with the prospect?

- **Strong answer:** They talk about difficult situations with humility and stress the importance of learning as they go, admitting when they don't know the answer, and bouncing back quickly from mistakes or difficult conversations. Bonus points if they describe what they learned or how they implemented it moving forward.
- **Weak answer:** They describe fearing adversity or struggling to think on their feet, or they speak downright negatively about the prospect. They also don't describe what they learned or how they incorporated feedback into their pitch process afterward.



Compensation, equity, and commission



Salary

Compensation for marketers, like other roles, varies based on company size, equity and other types of benefits. We recommend downloading our [compensation guide](#) or checking out [this blog post](#) if your startup is new to benchmarking/ researching and setting salary bands.

First, you'll want to sign up for a compensation benchmarking tool (we recommend [Pave](#)), but there are plenty of free calculators that can give you a general sense of salary data in different locations, industries, and company sizes. Sites like [Glassdoor](#), [Elpha](#), [progressions.fyi](#) and [levels.fyi](#) can be extremely helpful as a reference point.

Regardless of which option you choose, you'll always want to cross-reference more than one tool to ensure you're making an informed decision.

A solid base salary range for junior designers in 2022 is \$80-\$90K depending on experience, location, and the amount of scope they'll have within the product team. The chart at the right breaks it down by seniority.

Equity

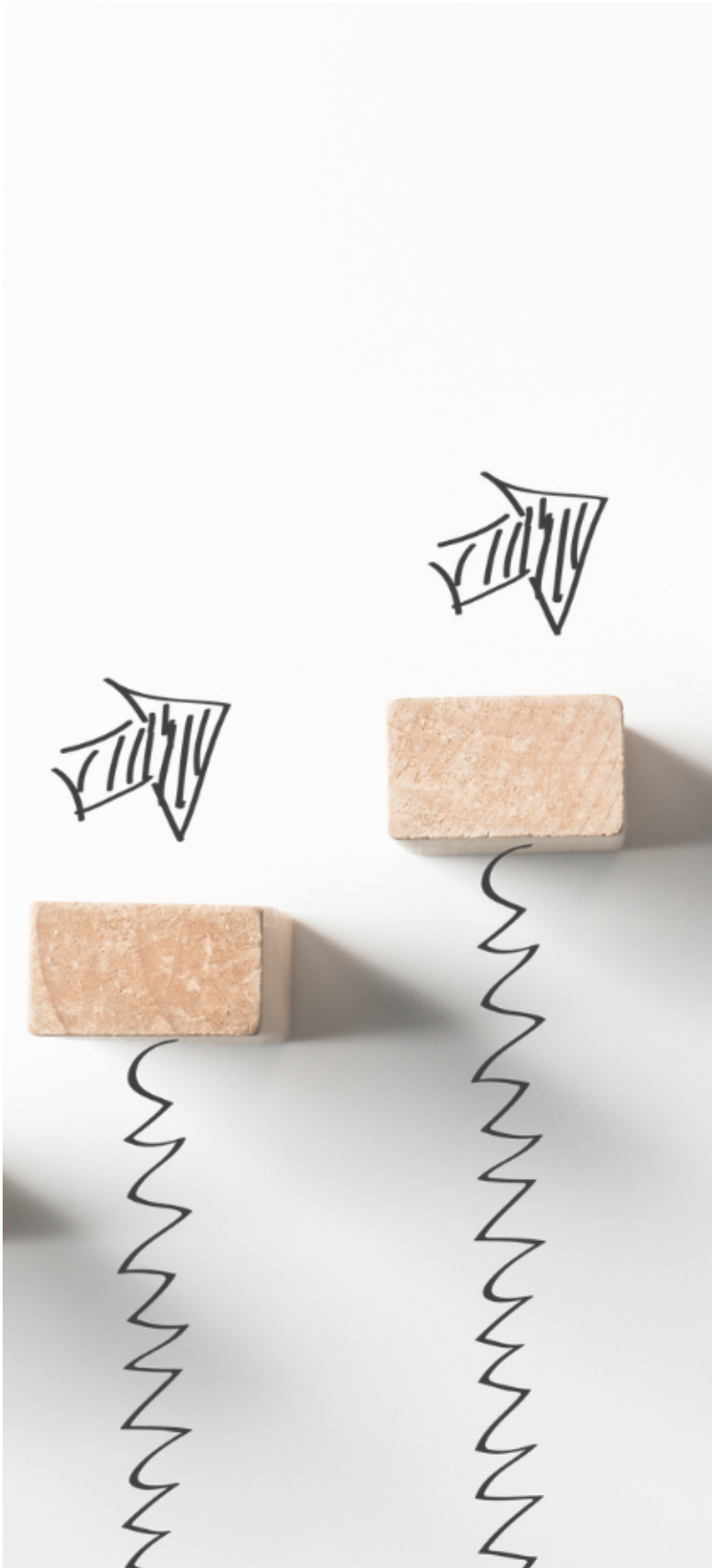
Equity for startup employees is a trickier subject to tackle than compensation. It's dependent on a number of factors, including your funding, size of company and which hire number they are (i.e. the earlier the higher, the greater their risk and the higher their equity should be.)

As a general rule, you should keep you startup and equity bands within the same percentile — for example, **if you're targeting 75th percentile for equity, and the salary for that role \$155K, that would equate to 1.36% ownership in company** (for a company that has raised from \$3 to \$10 million). A great resource on equity compensation is the [Holloway Guide to Equity Compensation](#). Programs like [Pave](#) or [OptionImpact](#) provide equity benchmarking alongside salary bands.

ROLE	MEDIAN SALARY + EQUITY
Junior Designer	\$90K
Product Designer	\$104K
Senior Designer	\$141K
Principal Designer	\$167K
Lead Designer	\$220K

Source: BuiltIn, 2022, Median salary + equity

Dover



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 scale

 INSTABASE