

# Design Effectiveness 2019

Clearleft



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# In summary

We surveyed designers from hundreds of organisations to find out how design is currently used and understood in their workplaces.

We found that nearly **9 out of 10** organisations where design is making a positive impact have the following aspects in place:

- 1 Empowerment**  
Design teams empowered by executive management to identify and pursue unplanned or unrequested ideas.
- 2 Environment**  
The physical working environment supports collaborative design activities.
- 3 Research**  
Design research is being undertaken on a regular basis and communicated throughout the organisation.

*When design teams are both empowered and provided with a collaborative physical environment, they're most likely to have an impact on the end goals of their organisation.*





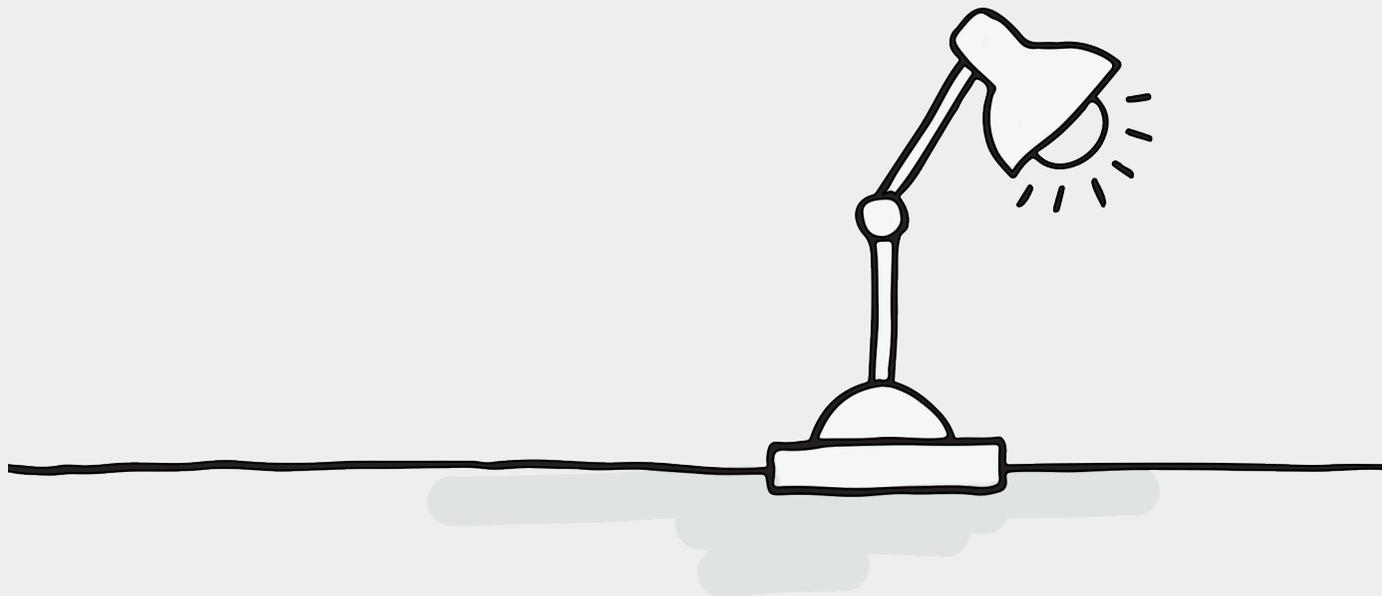
# About the survey

# About the survey

In early 2019, Clearleft surveyed over 400 designers from around the world to find out the current state of design, and to determine under what conditions design could best make an impact on an organisation's goals.

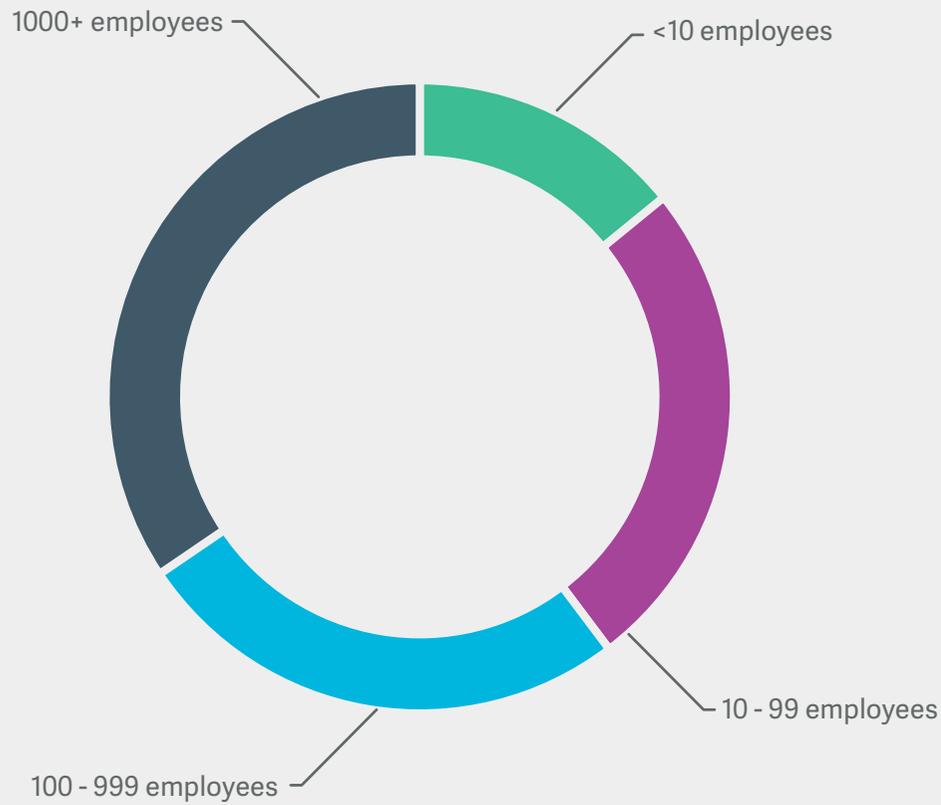
We asked 26 questions to gauge designers' current ways of working, their relationship with developers and management, and the manner in which design fits into their organisation.

We also asked one final open question "**When it comes to design in your organisation, which issue concerns you most?**". We've included the most representative and revealing responses throughout this report.

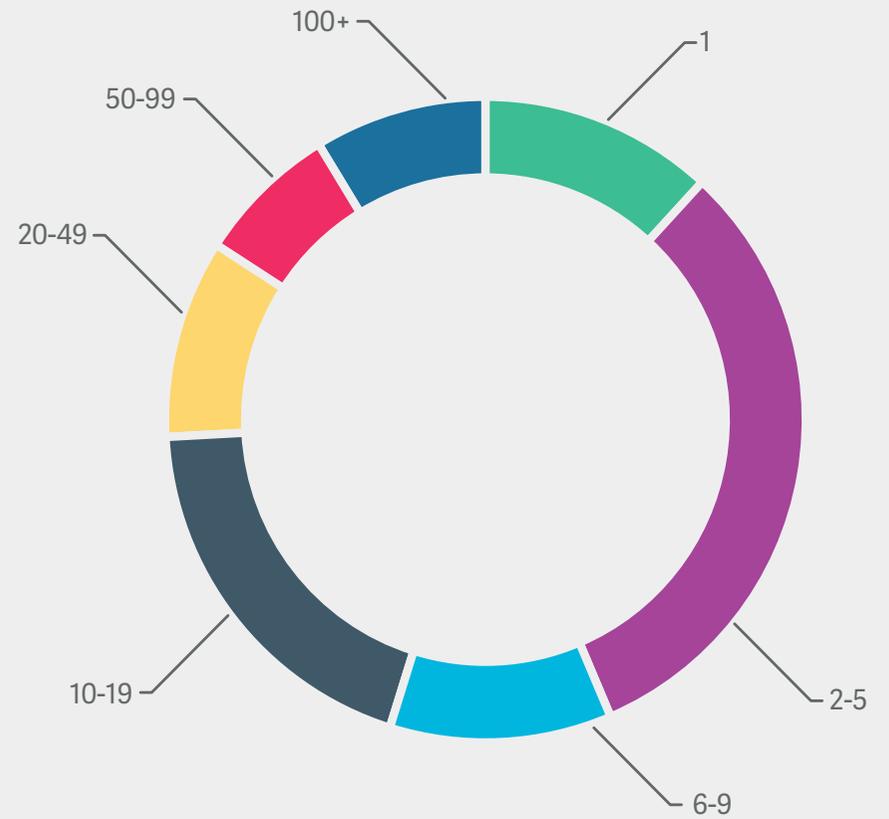


# About the survey

## Size of Company



## Number of Staff in Design Role



# About the survey

The designers we interviewed represent a huge range of organisations, from micro to multinational companies, commercial and non-profits, with single designers to vast design teams.

## **Representation across all industries**

Almost every industry sector we identified is represented within the survey. This includes charities, private companies and public organisations, from health, education, entertainment, travel, utilities and government.

## **Truly global**

We received responses from 37 different countries across North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australasia.

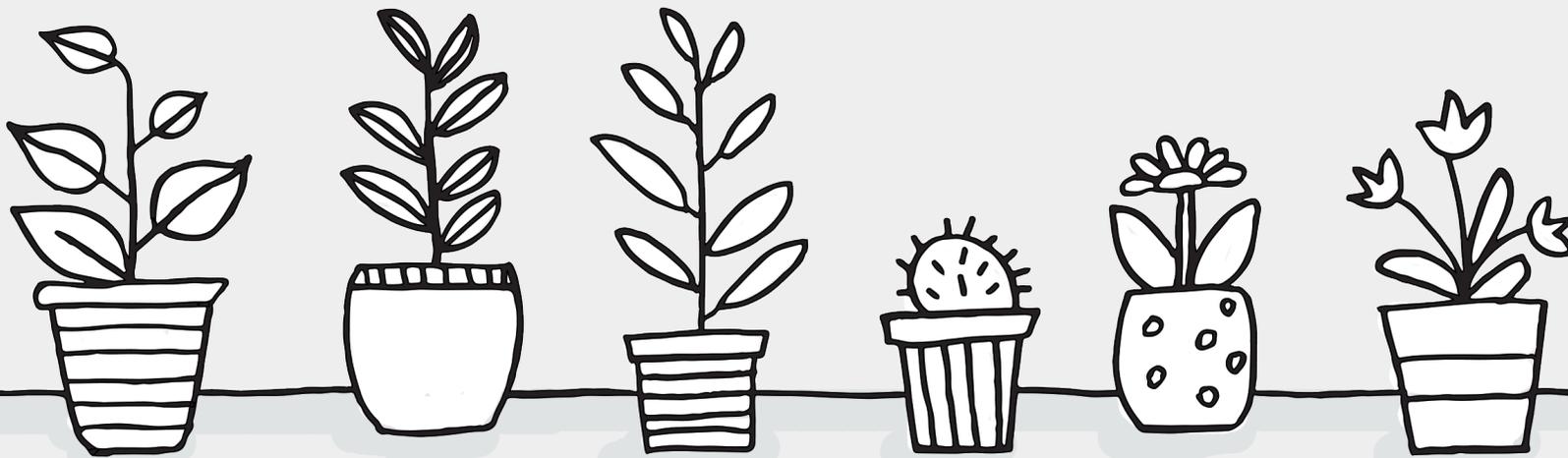
## **In-depth analysis**

As well as assessing the answers directly reported, we used in-depth statistical analyses to uncover the patterns and correlations behind the answers. By segmenting the underlying data we drew out significant indicators and predictive behaviours.

The full results are available to download at:

<https://clearleft.com/de19>

*The designers we interviewed represent a huge range of organisations, from micro to multinational companies, commercial and non-profits, with single designers to vast design teams.*





# Results

# Results

## The role of design

The effectiveness of design can be indicated by where design fits within an organisation and the day-to-day nature of the design work and processes.

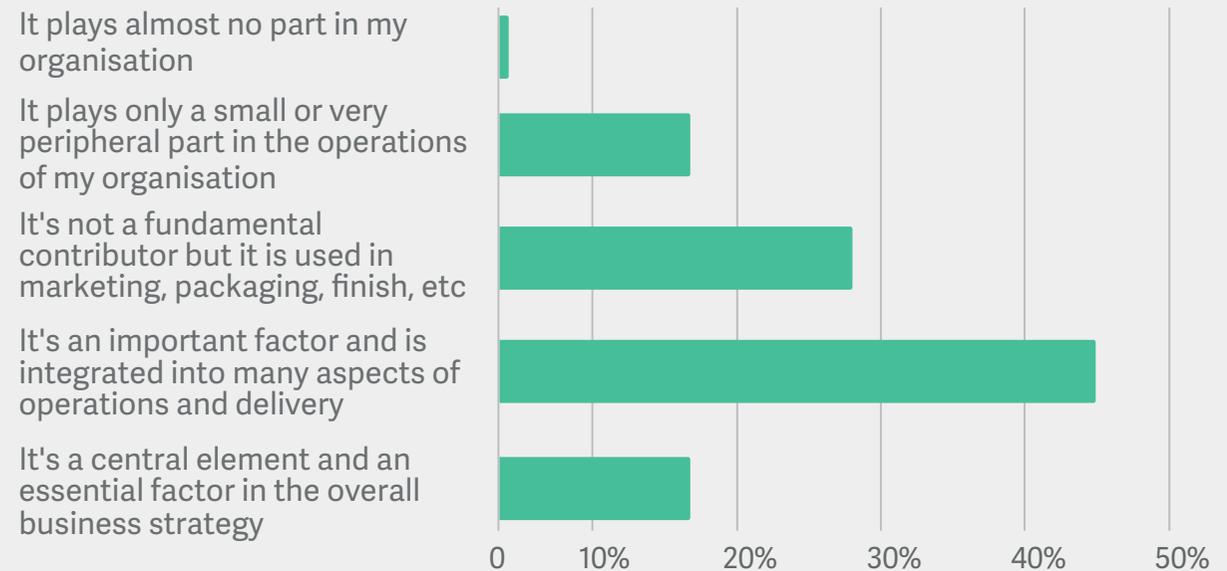
Design can play different roles in organisations. Its contribution can range from a nice-to-have to being a determining factor in the business strategy.

We found that a majority of designers describe design as at least relevant in their organisation.

Although it's a central and determining element for only a few, around half of designers consider design to be integrated into many aspects of operations and delivery in their organisation.

About a quarter of designers consider that design is not fundamental in their organisations, but it's used in marketing, packaging, or to bring a final finish to a product or service. A significant minority of respondents think that design plays only a small or almost no part at all in their organisation.

## How would you describe the role of design in your organisation?



*"We need to improve the understanding of what design actually means in terms of being a part of the user experience as a whole. It has to be integrated from the beginning in projects and needs iterative cycles including user testing and not agency driven with the mindset of just assets being generated and delivered until a certain due date."*

# Results

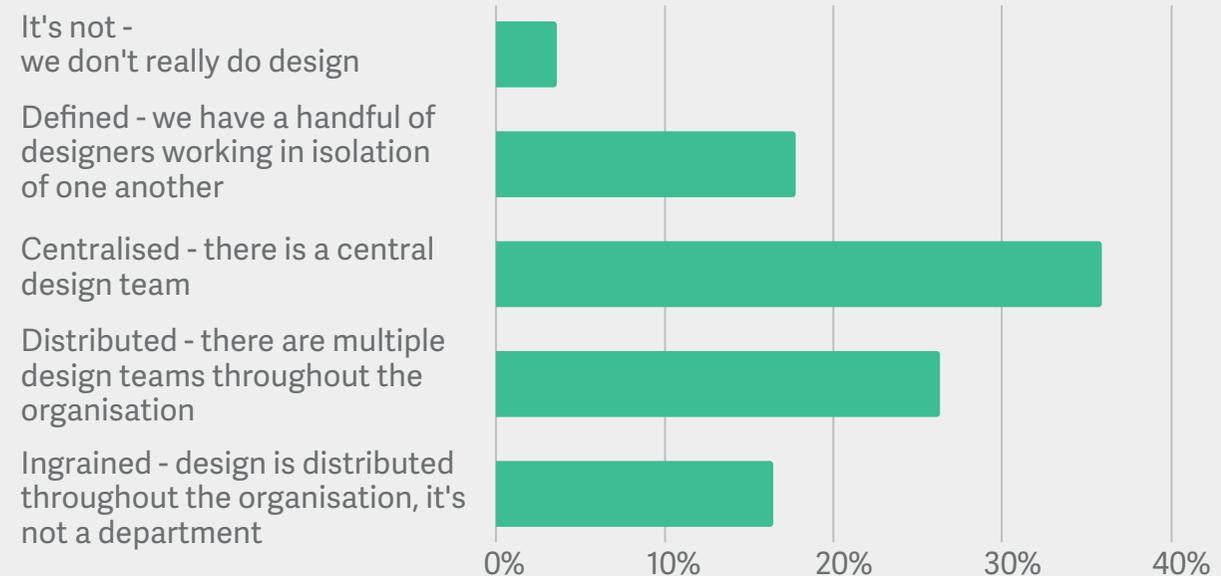
## How design is embedded

Design can be embedded in organisations in many ways. It can take the form of isolated designers, a central design team, multiple design teams, or be distributed throughout the organisation.

Only a few of our respondents consider that design is embedded in an ingrained manner, that is, design being distributed throughout their organisation. Most designers work for organisations that have delineated design teams. About a quarter of designers describe design as distributed, meaning that there are multiple design teams throughout the organisation. Over a third think design is centralised, as they have a central design team.

Almost a quarter of organisations do not have design teams. Most designers in these organisations describe design as defined – where designers work in isolation of one another. Only a few of them consider they don't really do any design work.

## How is design embedded in your organisation?



*"We need to embed a user-centred approach across our design, marketing, innovation, environmental design, and service delivery, to improve the service users experience."*

# Results

## Seniority of design

Giving design 'a seat at the table' has been a rallying cry amongst designers for many years. We found that it is starting to happen, with over a quarter of companies having executive level representation of design.

The vast majority of organisations have design teams with some form of leadership, leaving less than a fifth of companies without any design authority.

## What is the most senior role in your organisation?



*"We don't have enough design roles in the senior positions such as Directors, VPs, etc. Consequently there is a lack of awareness and knowledge of the importance of design by product managers, software developers, directors, VPs, stakeholders, etc. Some people only think of design as research or visual aesthetics."*

# Results

## Executive management understanding

Executive managers have different perceptions about design that can influence the way it's adopted in their organisation. These perceptions can range from design as a cosmetic afterthought to a way for delineating the strategy of the company.

We found that only a few designers describe their management's understanding of design as framing, which is believing design should redefine the challenges facing the organisation and shape its strategy. A higher number, about a quarter, think their management conceive design as problem solving, such that it should be used to find new opportunities by identifying and solving existing problems.

Over half of respondents believe their management understands that design can at least make things look good. Most executive managers in this group understand design as function and form, so it can also make things work better. Only a few of them think their understanding can be described as styling or for

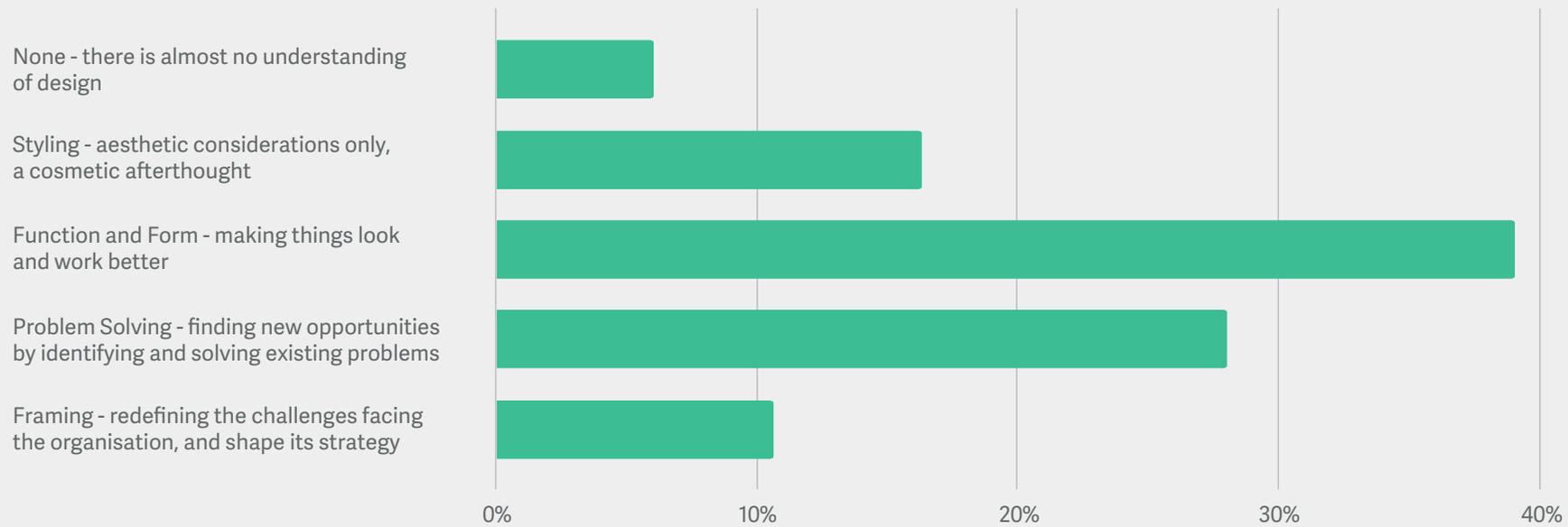
aesthetic considerations only.

A small minority believe their executive management doesn't understand design at all. These figures contrast unfavourably with the reported role of design within organisations. 39% of designers think their management believes design is for problem solving or framing, whereas 58% of designers say design is an important, integrated or determining factor in the company.

Either design is functioning at an organisational level despite management, or designers have a mistakenly low opinion of their executives' understanding of design.

# Results

## *How would you describe your executive management's understanding of design?*



# Results

## The day-to-day nature of design

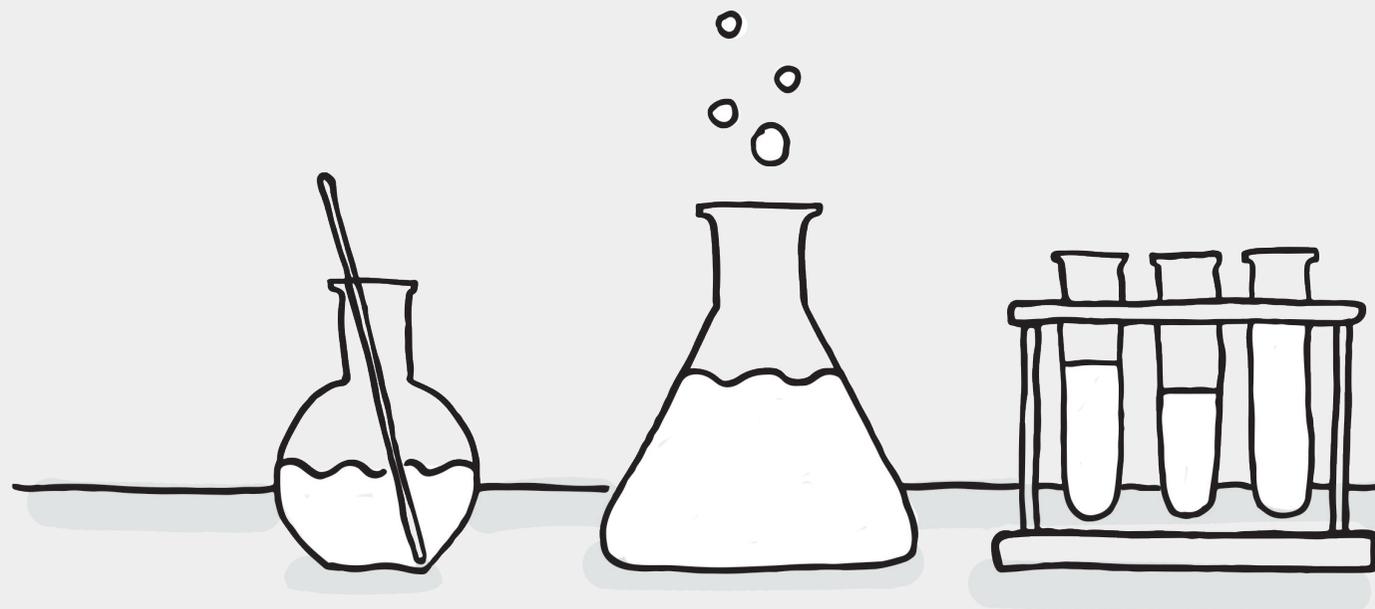
We looked at the freedom design teams have, and how they collaborate with others within their organisation.

Over half of design teams have the freedom to iterate solutions rather than be expected to get a perfect solution first time. However, less than half of them work by developing hypotheses and experiments to test ideas and solutions. Similarly, less than half are empowered to identify and pursue unplanned or unrequested ideas.

A majority of designers collaborate with developers closely throughout the design and development processes. Half of them consider that their physical environment supports design activities eg. it facilitates collaboration, enables dissemination of ideas and process, etc.

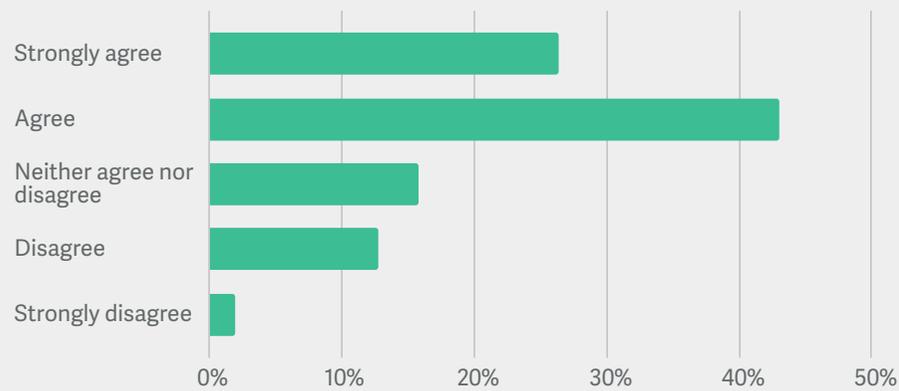
Just under half of the organisations conduct design research regularly or at scale. A slightly smaller proportion share design work in all hands meetings, important executive meetings, and other influential gatherings.

*Over half of design teams have the freedom to iterate solutions rather than be expected to get a perfect solution first time.*

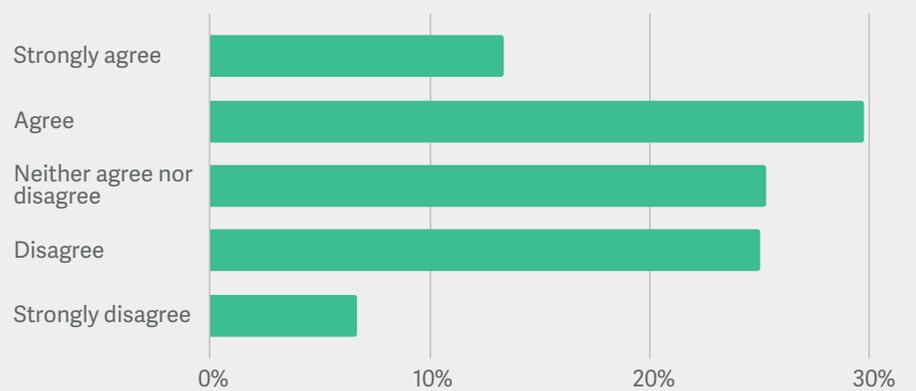


# Results

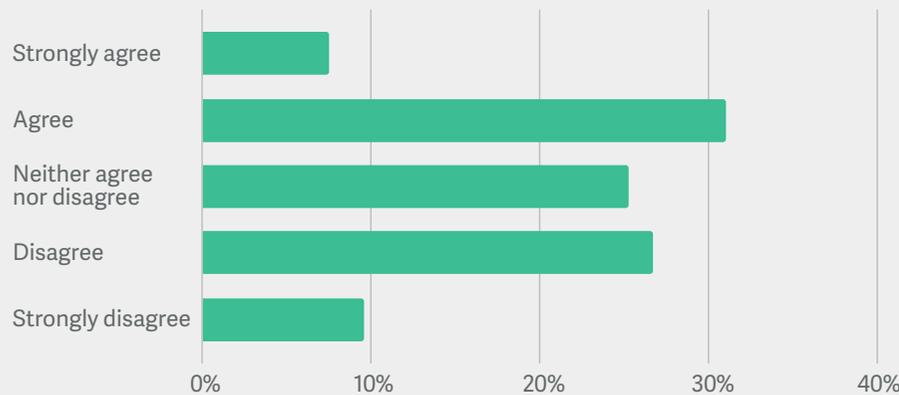
***The design team has the freedom to iterate solutions (rather than be expected to get perfect solution first time).***



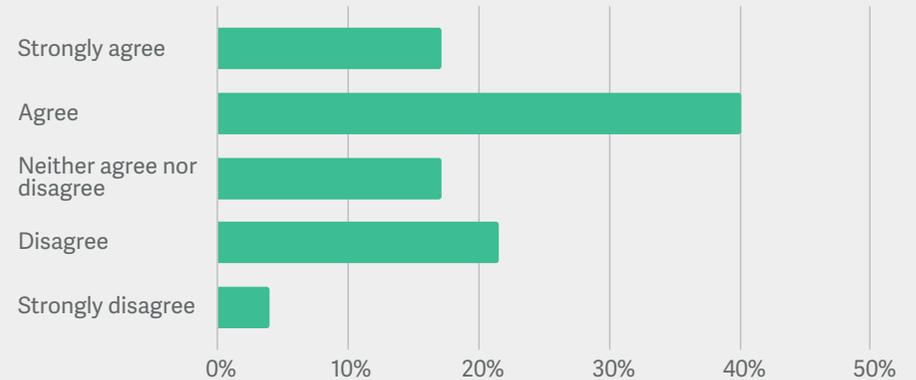
***The design team primarily works by developing hypotheses and experiments to test ideas and solutions."***



***Executive management empowers the design team(s) to identify and pursue unplanned or unrequested ideas."***

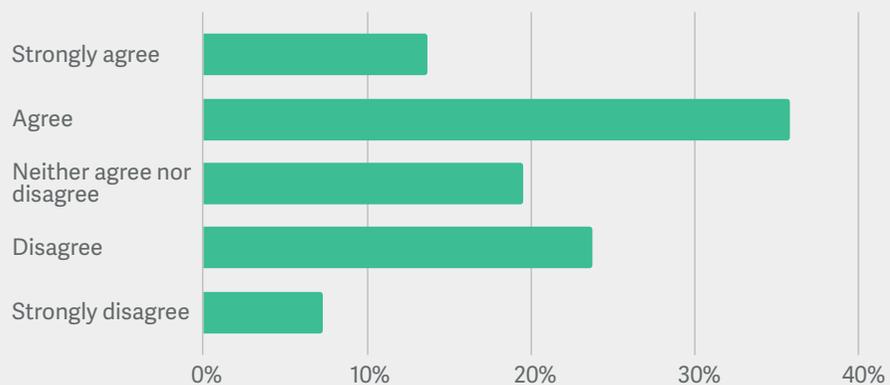


***Designers and developers collaborate closely throughout the design and development processes.***

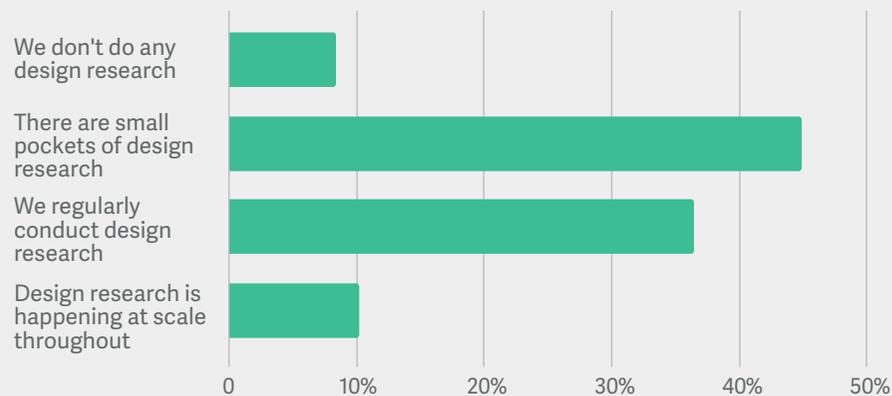


# Results

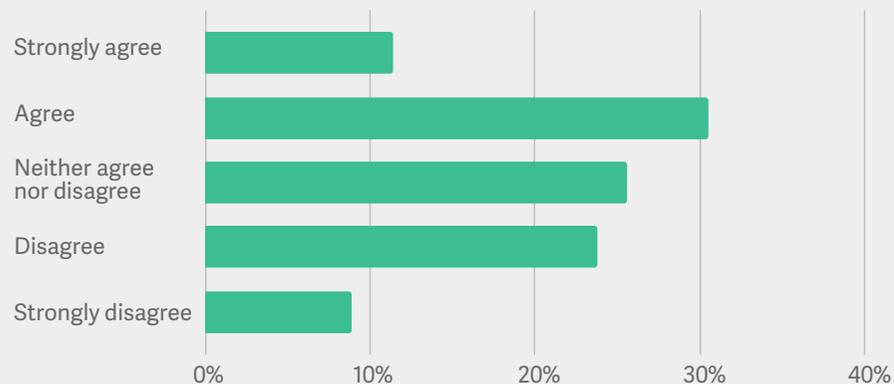
***The physical environment supports design activities eg. it facilitates collaboration, enables dissemination of ideas and process, etc.***



***How much design research takes place in your organisation?***



***Design work is shared in all hands meetings, important executive meetings, and other influential gatherings.***



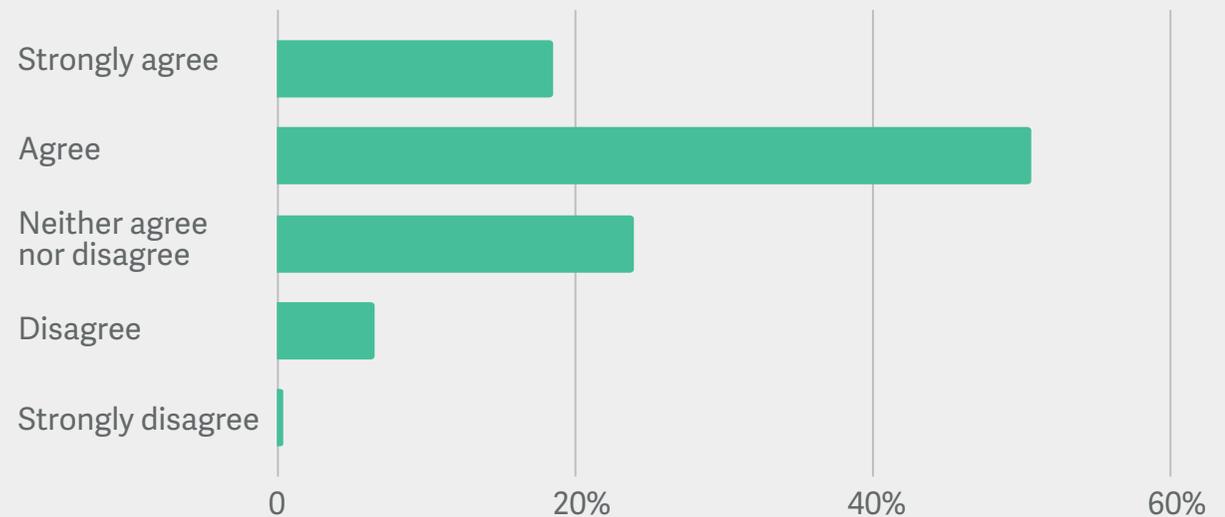
# Results

## Design impact on business

Design can add value to organisations in many ways and on different levels. One of the pivotal opinions we gauged on this survey was whether designers thought design within their organisation “has contributed to an increase in sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty”. In other words, is design having an impact on the end goals of their organisation?

We found that the vast majority of designers agreed that design has had a positive impact towards the success of their organisation. A small minority felt that design was not having any impact. A quarter of designers weren't sure whether or not they were making a difference (the not-knowing tells a story in itself, but that's for another time).

***Design within your organisation has contributed to an increase in sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty.***



*...the vast majority of designers agreed that design has had a positive impact towards the success of their organisation.*





**Analysis:  
What makes a  
high performing  
design team?**

# Strongest predictors of design impact

Like any investment or operational cost, design needs to be having an impact on the goals of the organisation. We concentrated our data analysis on what organisational and day-to-day practices are most likely to be in place in companies where design was said to have 'contributed to an increase in sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty'.

We discovered two attributes stood out in significantly predicting a positive impact of design:

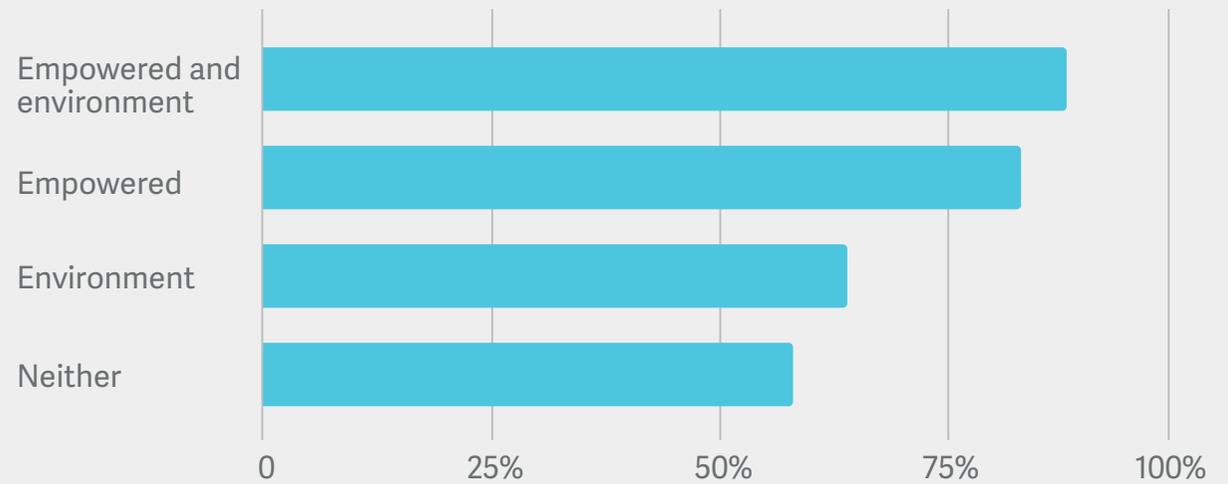
- 1 Empowerment**  
Design teams empowered by executive management to identify and pursue unplanned or unrequested ideas.
- 2 Environment**  
The physical working environment supports collaborative design activities.

Nearly **9 out of 10** organisations where design is making a significant difference have these two aspects in place: empowered teams and a collaborative physical environment.

When design teams are both empowered and provided with a collaborative physical environment, they're most likely to have an impact on the end goals of their organisation. This likelihood decreases when only one of these attributes is present, and reaches its lowest point when none of them are in place.

Whenever executive management empowerment is not present, the positive impact of design teams on sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty is considerably lower. This suggests that while a collaborative workplace is important, the empowerment of design teams by executive management to pursue unplanned ideas is vital.

**Agreement that design impacts sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty.**



# Four Segments of Design Behaviour

We cross-tabulated empowerment and environment to create a simple ladder of design competency across all the organisations we surveyed.

We identified **four steps** according to their level of design support:

- 1 Transformative**  
On the top step we find about a quarter of design teams. These are empowered by executive management and have a collaborative physical environment in place, thereby enabling design to be a **transformative** influence.
- 2 Strategic**  
The next step down is populated by a much smaller proportion, and represents those organisations that appear to be **strategically** aligned - design teams are empowered by management - but don't have a collaborative workplace.
- 3 Tactical**  
The third step down have a collaborative workplace but are not empowered to seek out new solutions, therefore are likely to be limited to **tactical** improvements.
- 4 Emergent**  
On the bottom step sit over a third of designers in a far more challenging position, where they have neither executive empowerment nor a collaborative workplace, meaning design is **emergent** but probably nowhere near reaching its potential.

## Four Segments of Design Behaviour

We found that most design teams do have some type of support, whether that is mandate, environment, or both, but a significant number are still facing difficult conditions not conducive to making an impact on the goals of the organisation.



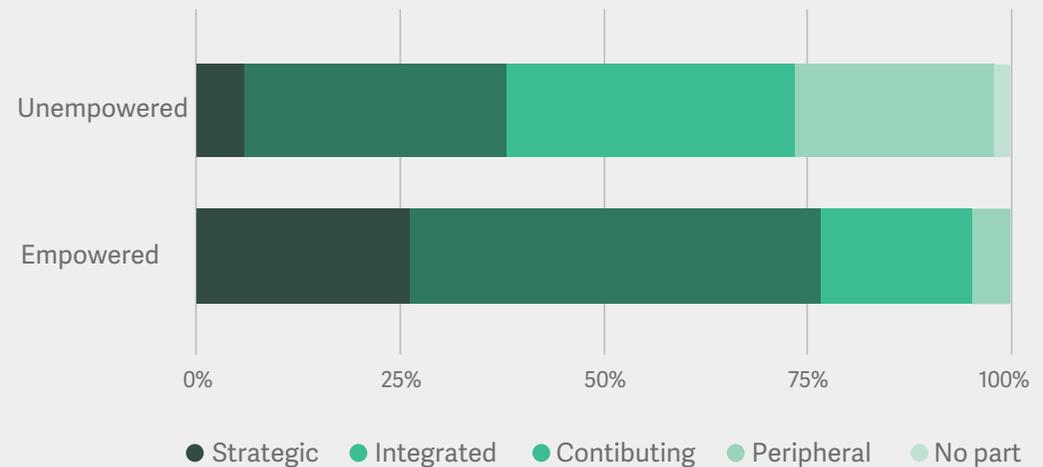
# What do empowered teams look like?

## Design is important within the organisation

We analysed responses to see what the stand-out aspects of empowered teams are. When design teams have a mandate from executive management, how do they typically work?

Empowered design teams are integrated into many aspects of operations and delivery. Frequently design is a central and determining element – it is an essential factor in the overall business strategy.

### How would you describe the actual role of design in your organisation?

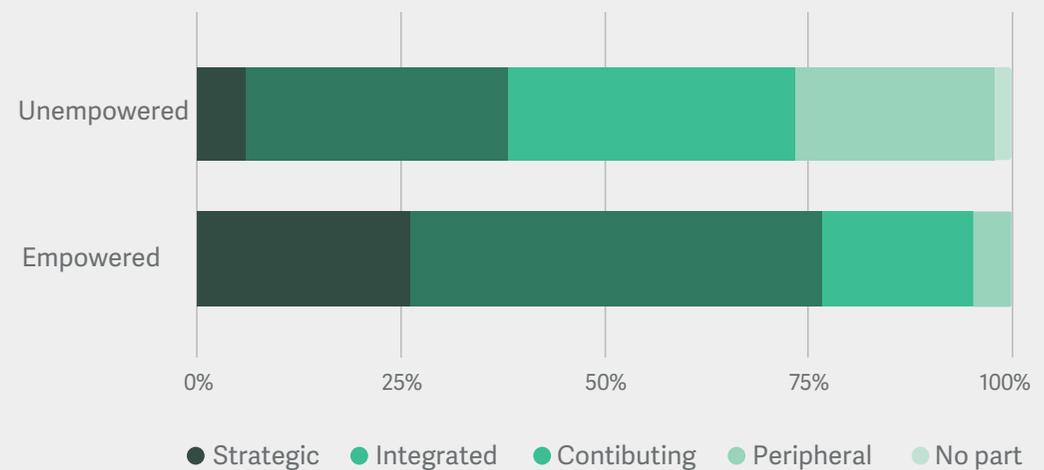


## What do empowered teams look like?

### Designers work throughout the organisation

Empowered designers work in multiple design teams throughout the organisation. Design may even be ingrained, that is to say distributed throughout the organisation, rather than being its own department.

### How is design embedded in your organisation?

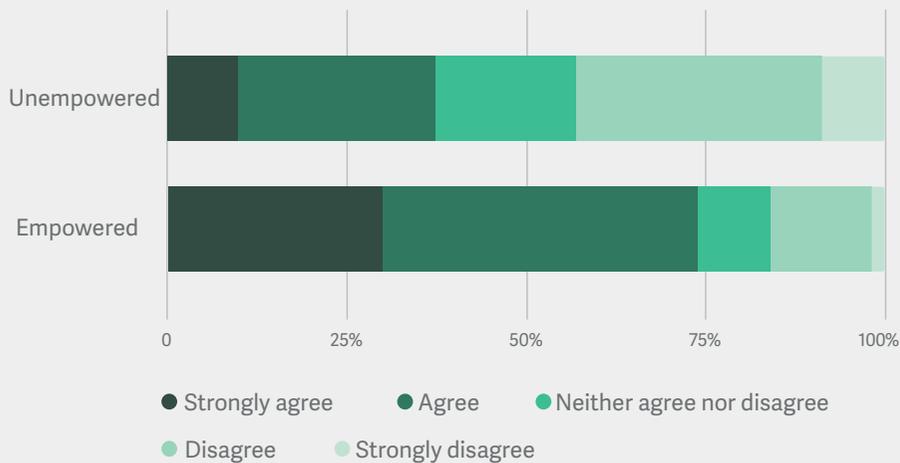


# What do empowered teams look like?

## Collaboration

Designers and developers collaborate closely throughout the design and development processes.

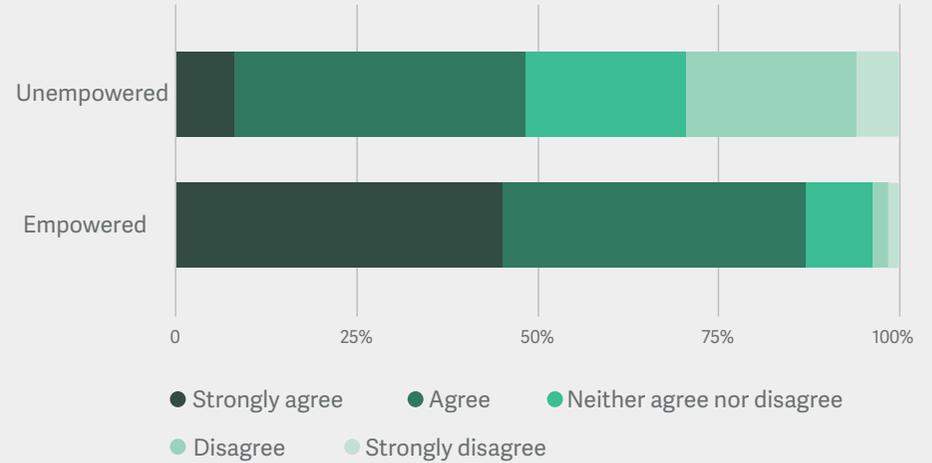
***Designers and developers collaborate closely throughout the design and development processes.***



## Iterative working

Empowered design teams have the freedom to iteratively improve solutions, rather than be expected to get the perfect design first time.

***The design team has the freedom to iterate solutions (rather than be expected to get perfect solution first time).***

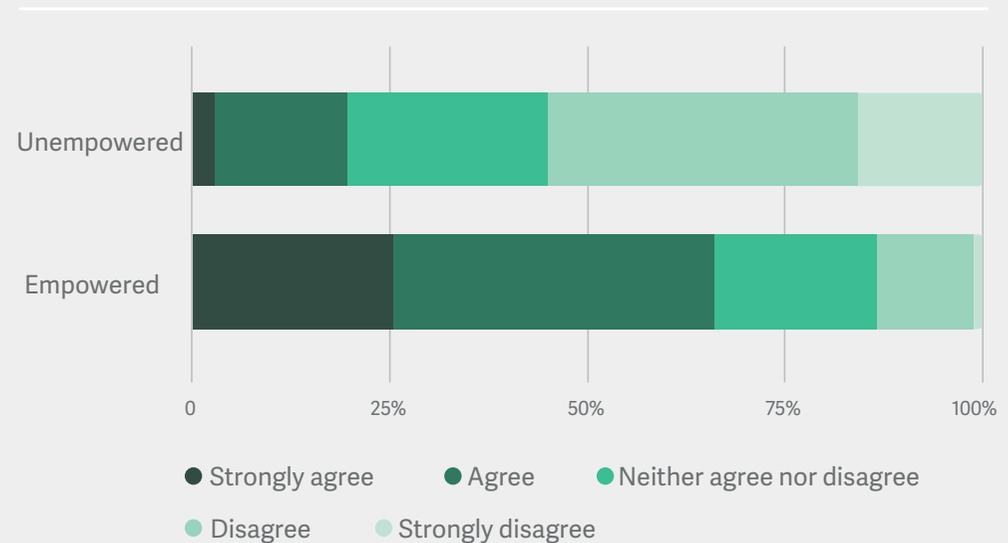


# What do empowered teams look like?

## Sharing design work

Design work is shared across the company in all hands meetings, important executive meetings, and other influential gatherings.

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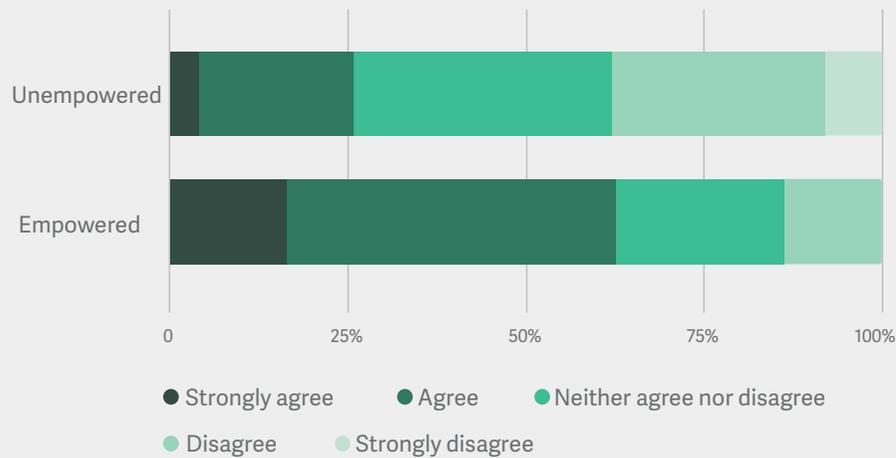


# What do empowered teams look like?

## Customer-centric view

Employees outside the design and research teams have a good sense of customers and their needs.

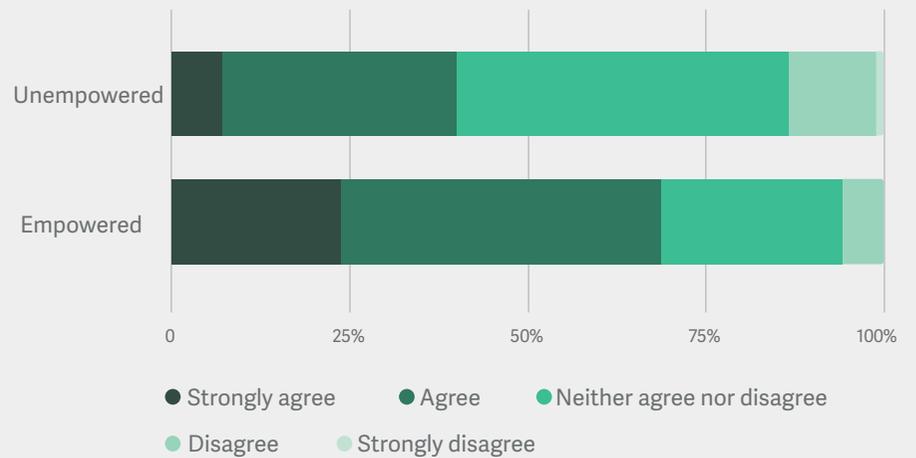
*Employees outside the design and research teams have a good sense of customers and their needs.*



## Pride

Empowered designers are far more likely to have pride in the work they produce.

*How often are you proud of the work you or your team do?*



## What do empowered teams look like?

Design teams that are empowered by executive management embrace design as an important or central factor in their operation. These companies are far more likely to have design teams embedded in a distributed or ingrained manner.

Most design teams that are empowered by executive management engage in activities that enrich design and its potential within their organisation. The majority of empowered design teams have the freedom to iterate solutions and collaborate closely with developers throughout the design and development process.

Most of these teams also share design work across the organisation, and employees outside the design team have a good sense of customers and their needs. Engaging in such practices not only helps design teams, but organisations as a whole benefit from them as they promote the alignment of teams working towards shared goals.

Empowered design teams are proud of the work they do. Pride is one of the most important drivers of workplace engagement, meaning teams who have pride in the work they do have higher levels of productivity and retention.



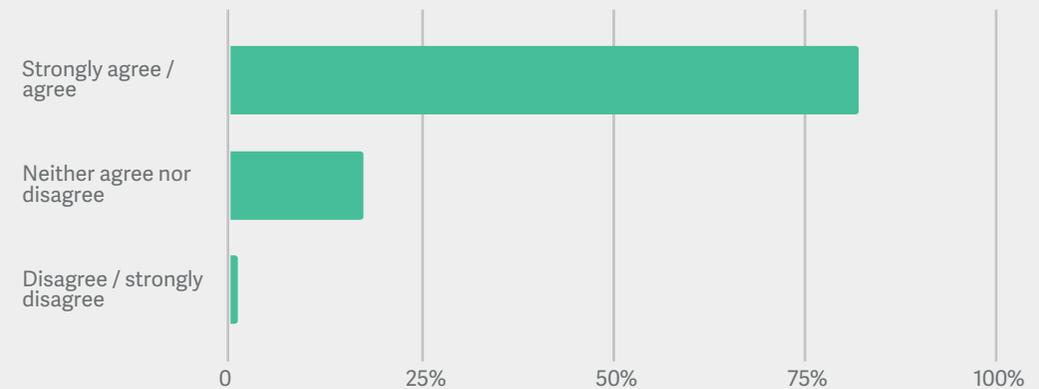
*Upper management speaks often about wanting us to be a customer-focused organisation. Embedding this change in people's minds is difficult and takes time.*

# The importance of doing research and sharing design

We cross-referenced research with design impact to see how important research is to the success of design teams.

Of the organisations where regular design research was being undertaken, 82% agreed that design was increasing sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty.

***Design within your organisation has contributed to an increase in sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty. Where research is happening regularly or at scale.***



## The importance of doing research and sharing design

***The presence of design research is a key difference between design teams that impact business and those that don't.***

Over half of design teams that have contributed to an increase in sales, competitiveness, and/or brand loyalty do design research regularly or at scale. In contrast, of those organisations where design was not having an impact, **95% are undertaking little to no design research.**

Companies with the most effective design functions have integrated research and design teams. They are set up with research and design distributed throughout the organisation. The work of those disciplines is shared with the rest of the employees so that research and design become fundamental to the decision making and strategy of the organisation.



*There is a misunderstanding of market vs design research and the roles they play in understanding our customers and how they support business opportunities.*



# Conclusion

# Conclusion

**The highest performing design teams are those which are empowered by executive management to pursue unplanned ideas, and are provided with a physical environment that supports collaborative design activities. The very best teams regularly perform research which feeds into their design, and share their work across the entire organisation.**

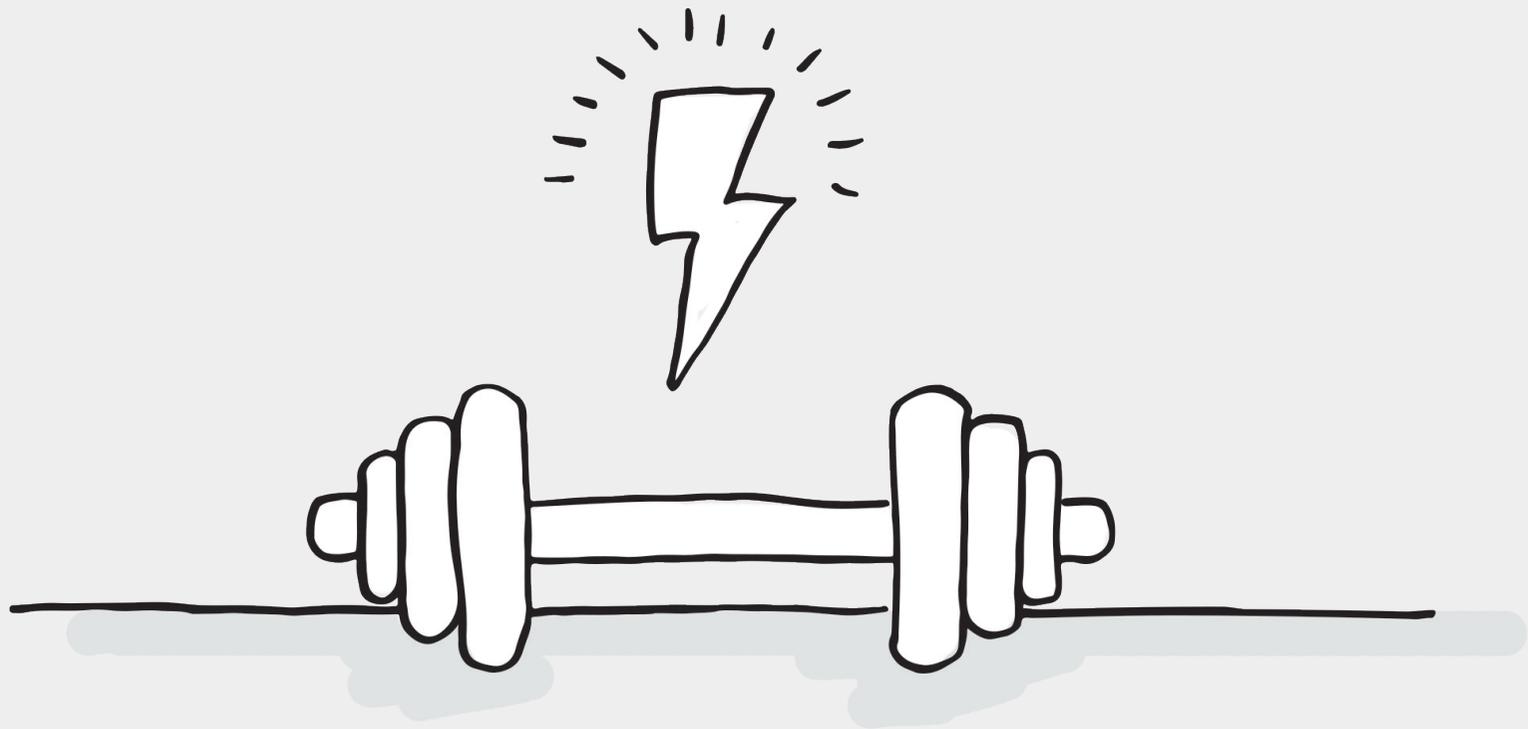
**Teams with all these in place have the potential to be transformative in their impact on a company.**

We found that empowerment is the greatest predictor of an impactful design function within an organisation. Executive mandates can be hard to come by, but high performing design teams have other facets which can be more readily put in place. As well as research and a collaborative environment, these include the freedom to iteratively improve solutions, collaborating closely with developers throughout the design and development processes, and giving all employees a good sense of customers and their needs.

Getting these aspects together could raise the importance of design in your organisation from emergent, through tactical and up towards strategic. With executive buy-in, design would then be well placed to have a truly transformative role which not only increases sales, competitiveness and brand loyalty, but is a determining element in the overall business strategy.

We hope you've enjoyed the insights we gleaned from this report. Hopefully you have some ideas about what your company needs to do to improve the effectiveness and impact of its design teams. If you'd like to talk to us about what your next steps might be we'd love to chat.

[info+report2019@clearleft.com](mailto:info+report2019@clearleft.com)



# About Clearleft

Clearleft is an independent design consultancy based in the UK. We're a multi-disciplined team of designers, technologists and consultants with a worldwide reputation. Since 2005, we've helped over 100 clients in 5 continents embrace digital to become more efficient and competitive.

***Since 2005 our purpose has been to advance the practise of design to transform organisations and people's lives for the better.***

We work with design leaders to:

## ***Explore***

We enable you to learn more about your customers and their motivations, and create innovation ideas for competitive advantage.

## ***Deliver***

We'll create elegant digital products and design services that really mean something to you and your customers.

## ***Grow***

We'll help you accelerate the capability of your design team and scale up design maturity in your organisation.

***We're about transforming organisations to have design as a competitive advantage so that, over time, you don't need us any more.***

## Credits

The Design Effectiveness 2019 survey and report was designed, analysed and written by:



### **Richard Rutter**

Richard is a cofounder and managing director of Clearleft. Since forming Clearleft in 2005 with Andy Budd and Jeremy Keith, he has worked with clients of all shapes and sizes, transforming their ideas into new and improved digital presences through a pragmatic combination of research, delivery and digital transformation.



### **Maite Otondo**

Maite is a senior researcher at Clearleft with over 10 years experience in countries across Latin America and Europe. With a background in anthropology and design, Maite provides a deep understanding of the people we design for and ensures we keep them at the centre of every step of the design process.



### **Ben White**

Ben is the creative director at Clearleft. Since 2003 he has worked for design agencies in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Ben heads up the design team and guides the creative vision for all of Clearleft's work.



### **Ian Scott**

Ian is a cofounder of Then Somehow, a culture change consultancy. Ian provided additional statistical number crunching and data analysis.

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