



## Interviews

# Fall in Love with the Problem, Not the Solution

Intuit's Suzanne Pellican on why designers need to (sometimes) take a back seat to their developers.

By Sean Blanda

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The explosion of “design thinking” mentions in corporate settings has completed the phrase’s journey from revolutionary concept to *Harvard Business Review* buzzword. But, as with most buzzword-worthy concepts, there’s a kernel of truth here.

Companies, especially large ones, have seen real change by embracing design wholesale. But making design intrinsic to all products quickly gets complicated if you're, say the 7,700 Mountain View-based financial services company, Intuit.

To incorporate design thinking into Intuit, Suzanne Pellican, the company's VP of Design for Quickbooks, led an overhaul of entire corporate processes and hit products like the accounting software QuickBooks and tax filing service TurboTax by conducting deep user research that involved everything from performing street interviews to shadowing small business owners. The result? Entirely new products (like a special Quickbooks version for Self-Employed people) and year over year user growth (15 percent for TurboTax alone in 2015).

Chances are, you work at (or with) a large organization that should instill more design thinking. So how did a 12-person team change the culture of Intuit and its \$4 billion in revenue? We asked Pellican to share what works and what doesn't.

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## **Why don't big companies get as much attention as small nimble startups when we talk about design?**

The history of design would show that it's a discipline you bring in and not one that is inherent in a large corporation. If you go back and look at big companies for the last century, design was not a core competency. You had administration, engineers, marketers, but design was a function within the areas of agencies that companies hired. It wasn't until the last 20 or 30 years that large companies began to embrace this discipline, but it's been a slow process. Now, in the past four years, it's exploded and now some of the best talent is in these big companies and not the agencies. That's causing its own problems. But the pendulum has swung and we're passing the center point — talent isn't only on the outside of big companies anymore.

## **What's the biggest hurdle designers run up against in a larger organization?**

A phenomenon I see most recently: More often than not, design is too far ahead of the organization or execution team. Design can imagine things or outcomes pretty quickly and manifest it almost immediately in the form of comps or prototypes. Usually, that's a very good thing.

But, if you do a disproportionate amount of that and you get too far ahead, you run risk of being irrelevant to the teams that are executing on the stuff you were thinking about months ago. Design as a discipline needs to continue to understand the pace which change and execution comes about, while honoring it. Don't fight against it. Stand behind that engine and push gently. Don't stand on the side, cross your arms and complain that they aren't going fast enough.

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Otherwise, it sets up a tension where no one wins. Which is why designers need to use their skill of empathy on the organization itself. They need to sit in the shoes or chair of a developer. How can

they enable the developer in a way that is in service to the end goal? Maybe it will result in something even greater than the designer ever imagined because that developer feels so aligned with the problem that they are offering something too. Developers aren't just your execution arm. They are your partners. Anytime they can sit together, go to lunch together... that stuff works really well to make sure everyone is on a team.

**You mentor a lot of young designers. What is the biggest gap in their knowledge that you find? What are the conversations you have with them that make you go, “I have to catch you up to the way the world actually works here.”?**

Designers and the craft of design is a special and exquisite skillset. Their contribution is incredible and important. But designers consistently struggle to align that skillset with an organizational understanding of how to build and run a business — so that you can get the best design to customers. It's usually called “business savvy,” but designers have a unique skill to apply to the internal structure: empathy. I wish they looked at an organization like it was a group of end customers — they'd quickly understand how to accelerate what is being asked of them so they can get their work to customers faster and in higher quality. But designers have a funny wall. They tend not to lean in there and they assume everyone is against that, even though that's the opposite of what is happening.

**Isn't one of the reasons that wall exists is because designers believe they have a “special and exquisite skillset” like you said?**

That's fair. There's an assumption that coworkers will deal with that and that designers can just do the thing they are good at. But it's more complicated than that.

**You've worked to reshape how Intuit thinks about design. How do you have patience to tackle something like that?**

I don't mean to sound hokey, but Intuit is so mission driven that I wake up every morning and know each employee has the best intentions to do right by the customer. And that's what stops me from curling up in the fetal position.

**You mean, you assume the best intentions?**

You have to. I have to believe that we work tirelessly to bring in empathic craftspeople to do right by who we're serving. Sure, people make mistakes, but we're working toward the same thing. So my job is to enable them to tap into their creativity and potential as quickly as possible and have them believe in that potential so they get to creative outcomes faster and with great confidence. I'm not trying to teach anyone to appreciate design. I'm trying to teach them that they can be an incredibly creative person. And if they can think about that work as a design challenge, then I can give them a bunch of tools to help them solve that challenge. And if I can get them to be more in love with the problem than the solution, we all win.

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## **What does “falling in love with the solution” look like?**

When you come up with an idea, and go “aha!” and you fall in love with it. You assume it's the right answer and keep moving forward. The cost of being wrong at a big company is higher. It takes 1,000 people to ship things. So we need to make sure we're all aligned on what the problem is. We need to realize “Oh ok, my solution isn't the best. Maybe my coworkers have a better solution.” Which starts with getting everyone intensely focused on the problem that we're trying to solve. It's game changing.

## **How do you motivate people to see that creative potential? What do you say? Especially to skeptics?**

When we were first starting out, we stopped talking about it, and we just created experiences so the team could, well, experience it. We would invite people to a design thinking workshop where we asked them to solve a challenge, like “How to solve a digital wallet.” We told them to go talk to customers. We established what we did and didn't know and asked them to have empathy. They came back, synthesized their findings into a problem statement, and we learned.

And, remember, that's not how most people work every day. They show up, open computer, sit down to Outlook, pound through emails, go from meeting to meeting, and then they check out. When we help people get out the door it helps us get back to our roots of deep customer understanding. It completely shifts people's perception. They learn what they are doing and who they are doing it for.

After they talk to customers, we have them brainstorm solutions. There's hurdles there, too. Lots of people come up with a solution and then sit back and go "Well, there's the answer!" "No," I tell them, "Come up with five or six more." It's right around when they can't come up with any more that they begin to reframe the problem and go beyond the obvious. That's where the magic happens. Then we just have to hold them accountable with non-obvious solutions and that often means a non-obvious way to execute it. People like picking solutions they know how to execute so they can promise bosses predictability. So we have to surround them with people that can help. It's that messy part in the middle that's hard.

## **What is your advice to someone working at a large company that wants to convince people around them to take design and the design process seriously?**

Designers take their thought process for granted. Invite people to be part of your design process where you identify the problem and create solutions. When you do that, much better results come. And that way, your craft of design can do what it does best: Manifest solutions the way other disciplines cannot.