

The Ten Key Skills for a Successful Distributed Designer



Christian Villum

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When a newcomer is introduced to the concept of distributed design [which is when a design is published openly for anyone to work on, and people contribute

from afar], we tend to focus very much on the collective process, the value chain of the actual distribution and, of course, the outcome.

However, we rarely take a look at what each individual contributes to all three things. Obviously, the whole thing is dependent on the actions, the competences and the mindsets of everyone involved in the process. So what skills are actually needed to meaningfully contribute?

To emphasize the need for looking at the skills and mindsets of each individual, and before we dive into a proposed list of these, let us first kill off the most common fallacy: The “build it and they will come” theory. In other words, the expectation that if only you put an open license on your design, put the files out there on Github or another platform and tell the world about it through all your social media channels, people will line up to co-create with you.

They will, most likely, not.

In a world of digital abundance, there are so many ideas and so many code repositories out there for the world’s creatives to engage with, that your open asset and good intentions will merely be drops in the ocean. Community-driven mechanisms of shared ownership, collected drive and shared visions for success, require additional effort for maximum effect.



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Therefore, assessing appropriate skills and mindsets are absolutely essential to ignite the engagement of your peers, and ultimately succeed.

Let's look at the list of essential skills and mindsets first (in a non-hierarchical order):

Taking a Network Approach

You want to make sure that your design is positioned for interaction with others and that you flex your social skills in order to share it. Accessible language and your attitude both online and off are important as is the meta-data you offer to ease the onboarding of others.

Perhaps you should write up an instruction on how to start, set up an FAQ to help tackle common questions — and maybe create a design manual that also covers how your design is open for remix, and what you are hoping to achieve by inviting others in.

You might also need to create some social capital by joining relevant communities to connect with key peers and contribute to their work before you ask them to join yours.

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Being Generous

With others contributing to your work, there will surely be efforts that you are less likely to appreciate or be associated with. This is the nature of the beast, and part of the duality of appreciating both amazing and less amazing contributions.

Let go of your inner control freak: find peace with the creative exploitation of your work, regardless of the quality. “Your real enemy is obscurity”, as prolific open content proponent and author Cory Doctorow famously said.



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Carry an Experimental Mindset

It is easy for all of us when creating something to imagine the timeline from idea to polished product. We cannot help but think ahead. But if you plan your direction too firmly, you miss out on some of the beautiful and unexpected factors that your peers bring to the table.

You need to celebrate design's virtues, which is to allow the process to take twists and turns and zig-zag towards the end goal. Find comfort in designing the framing for moving forward, but making it wide so that everyone's ideas can proliferate.

You cannot predict innovation as a designer; you have to explore your way towards it — with others.

Exercise Cultural Appreciation

You are a creative soul, otherwise you would not be reading this. However, your perspective is one of many and, regardless of how open-minded you are, bias is commonplace. Bias is impossible to avoid, because much of it is subconscious, and this is why the distributed, peer-based creation process is so potent: it brings diverse viewpoints, approaches and methods together in a manageable way.

Make sure your work is presented and discussed in a way that is inclusive towards everyone, and make sure to allow for diversity in the community you are building. Diversity matters — diversity wins.

Show your Collaborative Skills

Even if the open-license allows anyone to do pretty much anything with your design (of course within the boundaries of the law), you will play an absolutely central role in the development of the design. You came up with the initial idea and you are passionate about it, so of course you will sit in the very centre of your community.

This is the reason why you need to use the best of your collaborative skills to drive things forward in a positive way. This means always showing compassion, interest and empathy towards peers, and always appreciating the contributions of others, even when you disagree with them on priority, direction and approach. Look at your shared work as a pool of creativity, which is an “open buffet” for anyone to use.

There is always something in a buffet that you like the most and things that you skip when putting together your final plate...ahem, product.

Pick Up Some Degree of Technical Savvy

This means, for instance, learning how to use the common collaboration platforms and understanding the culture for each of them. Or even more concretely, understanding Git and version control in order to navigate the space of multiple stakeholders working on the same design assets at the same time.

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each other. You need to decide upon one at an early stage, and it would be a pity to not choose the most ideal one. It is a lot of work to change it later on. Lastly, digital fabrication is a key component of prototyping and creative processes in general when you are making products. Why not learn how to use them while you're building your great design?

Be Humble

By sheer definition, you will be one of the people who knows most of your idea and design, and if you are a person full of drive, you are likely to have an answer for most questions and concerns relating to this design. But be careful that you do not become overly self-assured. There are some brilliant minds out there: connect with them and learn from them, as they also learn from you. Being humble is a great way to make room for brilliance from all sides.

Have Lots of Patience — But Be Ready to Run Fast

When you publish your design, you are ready to go. You may publish your design with a lot of energy and excitement around the prospect of collaboration, but then nothing happens. Or perhaps it happens really slowly, until it suddenly explodes.

Both situations can be hard to handle, but it is, again, the nature of the beast. Distributed design innovation and informal multi-stakeholder collaboration ebbs and flows, you cannot always force it — nor stop it.

Be prepared and make sure you set up your community with lots of empowerment to those that are willing to take it. This way you are neither a bottleneck when things accelerate, nor the only engine pushing things forward.



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Adopt Hyper-Curiosity

What happens when you allow the whole world to collaborate on your idea and design? Frankly, no one knows. By becoming a distributed designer, you are placing yourself on the very edge of digital and social innovation, and we are all learners at this point. This means you need to be genuinely curious about what happens, regardless of what that is. Not normally curious, but pioneering, frontline curious. We are changing the world here, laying down the road as we move forward. Let's be curious together about what it means.

You may feel a bit overwhelmed by reading such a list: that is by no means the intention of this article. On the contrary, these are ideals to strive for, but not prerequisites to get started. Being aware of them is half the battle and, as long as you go into the distributed design process with an open mind and a gentle heart, you will find

not only outcome-based rewards, but learnings on a scale that mind-numbingly exceeds the kind you can pick up on your own.

So dive in and keep this list handy as you pioneer this space with fellow distributed designers; one of the most visionary global communities of the digital age.

This article is taken from the book “This is distributed design”, published Nov 15, 2021 by the Distributed Design Market Platform project. Read more [about the project](#) and [download the free book here](#).

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