The Role of UX: Benchmark Study

2021 Results

User Fountain and UXmatters have collaboratively created and launched this survey to help the UX community better understand the current state of User Experience within businesses and other organisations.

User Fountain is a user-experience and user-research agency that offers a managed service, providing usability testing and user research for customer-focused enterprises.

UXmatters has been a leading Web magazine focusing on User Experience since 2005, and its articles provide insights and inspiration to professionals working in every aspect of User Experience.

In this study, 306 UX professionals responded to 36 questions about their role, experience, ways of working, and organisational setup. This report details our findings.
Participants

Participants from across the globe took part in the study.
Most participants hold degrees

81% of participants had either a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree.

- Bachelor’s degree: 42%
- Master’s degree: 40%
- Some university or college: 7%
- Others: 4%
- Doctorate (PhD): 4%
- Associate’s degree: 2%
- Secondary or high-school graduation: 1%
- Vocational training: 1%
Participants have degrees in a wide range of subjects and specialities. Thirty percent of participants studied design; 18%, human-computer interaction; 14%, computer science, and 14%, user experience. Participants mentioned a wide range of subjects under Other.
Participants included UX professionals who recently began their UX careers, as well as those who have been in the industry for over 20 years.
Participants were working in a wide range of industries.

The largest proportion of participants were working in Finance/Banking/Insurance (14%) and Software/App development (13%). Other participants were working in many different industries.

- 19% All Others
- 14% Finance / Banking / Insurance
- 13% Software or app development
- 10% User experience
- 6% Internet / Web
- 5% Consulting
- 5% Design
- 5% Government / Military
- 5% Healthcare / Medical
- 4% Business / Professional Services
- 4% Computers, including hardware and software
- 3% Education
- 3% Media / Printing / Publishing
- 4% Other
Most participants held in-house roles.

By far, the largest percentage of participants held in-house roles (69%), while 14% were working as consultants, 9% in agencies, and 6% freelance.
The majority of participants were working remotely some of the time.

In all, 87% of participants were working remotely, with 47% working remotely part of the time and 41% working remotely full time.
Participants had a wide range of job titles, including UX designers, UX leads, and other senior roles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UX Designer</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UI Designer</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UX Lead</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Designer</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UX Researcher</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UI Lead</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UX Architect</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ways of working

UX teams are working primarily on Web applications, Web sites, and mobile apps, with 10% working on voice user interfaces.

- Web applications: 72%
- Mobile apps: 57%
- Web sites: 54%
- Desktop applications: 42%
- Embedded software user interfaces: 24%
- Intranets: 19%
- Other: 12%
- Voice user interfaces: 10%
Thirty-three percent of teams work with external agencies.
Teams use external agencies primarily for user research, visual-interface design, and usability testing.
Most teams are using external agencies as much in 2020 as they had in previous years, with only 35% using them less.
UX teams changed and adapted in 2020 by increasingly working remotely, adopting new tools and methods, and hiring new team members.

- Increased remote work: 74%
- Adopted new tools: 51%
- Adopted new methods: 46%
- Hired new team members: 42%
- Modified team structure: 35%
- No changes: 7%
- Other: 5%
Teams have hired new team members predominantly for UX design and research roles.
In 2021, teams intend to continue evolving as they did in 2020, by adopting new methods and tools, hiring new team members, and modifying their team structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adopting new methods</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting new tools</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring new team members</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifying your team’s structure</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing remote work</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority UX teams’ new hires will be for UX design roles.
The majority of participants’ teams (51%) had experienced an increased workload in 2020.
COVID-19 has impacted the work of 65% of teams, while 35% stated that their team’s work was unaffected.
The greatest impacts of COVID-19 were on UX teams’ remote work, in-person research, and team collaboration.
Most participants (58%) feel the same about their job security as they did before COVID-19. Some (9%) even feel more secure now.

- **58%** No, I feel the same as before COVID-19
- **33%** Yes, I feel less secure
- **9%** Yes, I feel more secure
Participants felt overwhelmingly positive about their future career progression, with 27% feeling very positive and 45% feeling positive.
The top three things UX teams want to do more of in 2021 are user interviews, usability testing, and user observations.
The top three things UX teams want to do less of in 2021 are face-to-face testing, surveys; and remote, unmoderated testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face testing</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote, unmoderated testing</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/B testing</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of call-center data</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary studies</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leveraging AI-based tools such as predictive eyetracking</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote, moderated testing</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contextual analysis</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User interviews</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Usability testing</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>User observation</td>
<td>5%</td>
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The great majority of product teams are involving UX either from the beginning of projects (40%) or during requirements definition (32%).

- From the beginning: 40%
- During requirements definition: 32%
- During design strategy, prior to coding: 22%
- Not involved: 4%
- During coding: 2%
- Once coding is complete: 1%
The majority of teams (63%) conduct UX research during discovery, prior to requirements definition. However, 21% conduct UX research only after coding is complete and 24% after deployment.

- During discovery, prior to requirements definition: 63%
- During iterative design: 55%
- During design strategy: 54%
- After deployment: 24%
- Once coding is complete: 21%
- No UX research: 8%
Only 9% of organisations have UX leadership in the C-suite.
In 30% of organisations, Product Management owns the UX team, while in 18%, the UX team has no clear owner.
UX teams comprise a wide variety of hands-on roles, with UX designers and user researchers being most common.
The most popular user-centered design methods that organisations have adopted are UX design, user research, and usability testing.
Most organisations (70%) are standardizing user experiences by creating UX design principles, standards, and guidelines. 13% of organisations have no process in place of standardization.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratio</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Graph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:5 or fewer</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>![52% Graph]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>![20% Graph]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>![12% Graph]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:6-10</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>![8% Graph]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:11-20</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>![7% Graph]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:21-70</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>![3% Graph]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most organisations have a 1:5 or lower ratio of UX researchers to UX designers.
Most organisations have a 1:5 or much lower ratio of UX designers to developers.
In 37% of organisations, User Experience is a centralized, internal service that functions as an in-house agency. In 25%, User Experience is decentralized with UX designers fully embedded in product teams.

- **24%**: Decentralized, with UX designers fully embedded in product teams.
- **25%**: Centralized partnership, a coherent UX team that is dedicated to particular product teams.
- **37%**: Centralized internal services, a UX team that functions as an in-house agency.
- **10%**: Other
- **5%**: Not sure
About 36% of participants cited the business impact of User Experience as high, with significant strategic impact across the entire customer experience.
Only 5% of participants rate their organisation’s level of UX maturity as excellent, while 30% rate it as good and 19% rate their organisation's level of UX maturity as low.
Participants turn to Medium, UXmatters, Nielsen Norman Group, Twitter, and books as the most popular sources of content and information relating to User Experience.
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Summary

The results of this survey describe the role of User Experience in 2020 and look into 2021. They highlight how UX teams have adapted over the last 12 months, as well as how COVID-19 has impacted 66% of participants, resulting in increased remote work and the adoption of new tools and methods. User Experience has seen growth throughout this period, with over 40% of teams hiring new members or planning to hire new members in the next 12 months. Plus, participants felt overwhelmingly positive about their future career progression.

Plans for 2021 involve more user research, usability testing, and user observations, which suggests a greater focus on customers’ evolving needs. Many UX teams still have a long way to go in achieving UX maturity, with only about 53% of participants stating their organisation’s maturity is good to excellent.

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