

# SPREAD THE (DESIGN) FIRE

## HOW A DESIGN BASICS WORKSHOP IGNITED THE WORLD

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This case study describes a design basics class that taught design to a thousand non-designers in a corporation, in 10 different cities across six countries, all in just one year.

The paper will explore how a multi-national software company with more than 22,000 engineers, operating in multiple cities around the world, created a design basics class for all employees to learn and practice design in their daily jobs. The case study offers insights on how companies can educate non-designers, who comprise 99% of the organization in question, on user experience design and make design *everyone's* responsibility in the company. It enables design educators to create educational programs that take the principles of design beyond the confines of design teams to the entire organization.

In many large companies, people confuse design as meaning solely how things *look*, not how they *work*. But when people are taught design, they start “noticing” that design influences how their product works. By noticing design, they become aware that whatever role they play across engineering, product management, quality control or sales, they can apply design principles to build better products that meet their users’ needs.

### 2. THE DESIGN CHALLENGE

The transition to a design-driven company is far from easy. It necessitates a culture change for any organization that is rooted in traditional engineering practices. Making this change happen requires strong support from the top management, as well as passionate advocates at all levels of the organization who have the perseverance to drive the vision: “We all deliver product experience and we all take an active part in shaping it”.

To reach this goal, every employee in the organization should be able to answer three key questions:

1. Awareness - “Why is UX important to me?”
2. Relevance - “How is it *my* job?”
3. Enablement - “What can I do?”

The challenge is not answering these questions, but addressing them in a way that converts all employees from non-believers (“I don’t care about design”) to believers (“I care about design”) and practitioners (“I know how to contribute to it”).

An awareness program that answers these questions should relate to all employees and align everyone to the same level of understanding design. It should trigger further action and practice of design in their own daily jobs. It should turn the company into a powerhouse of design-minded professionals.

With organizational and financial help from within the company, a group of like-minded people started the “Design Eye Opener” class as part of a larger corporate initiative called the *Design Whizz Program*. The Design Eye Opener came in 3 flavors: a full one-day class, a 99-minute executive version, and a shorter version for all new colleagues entering the company.

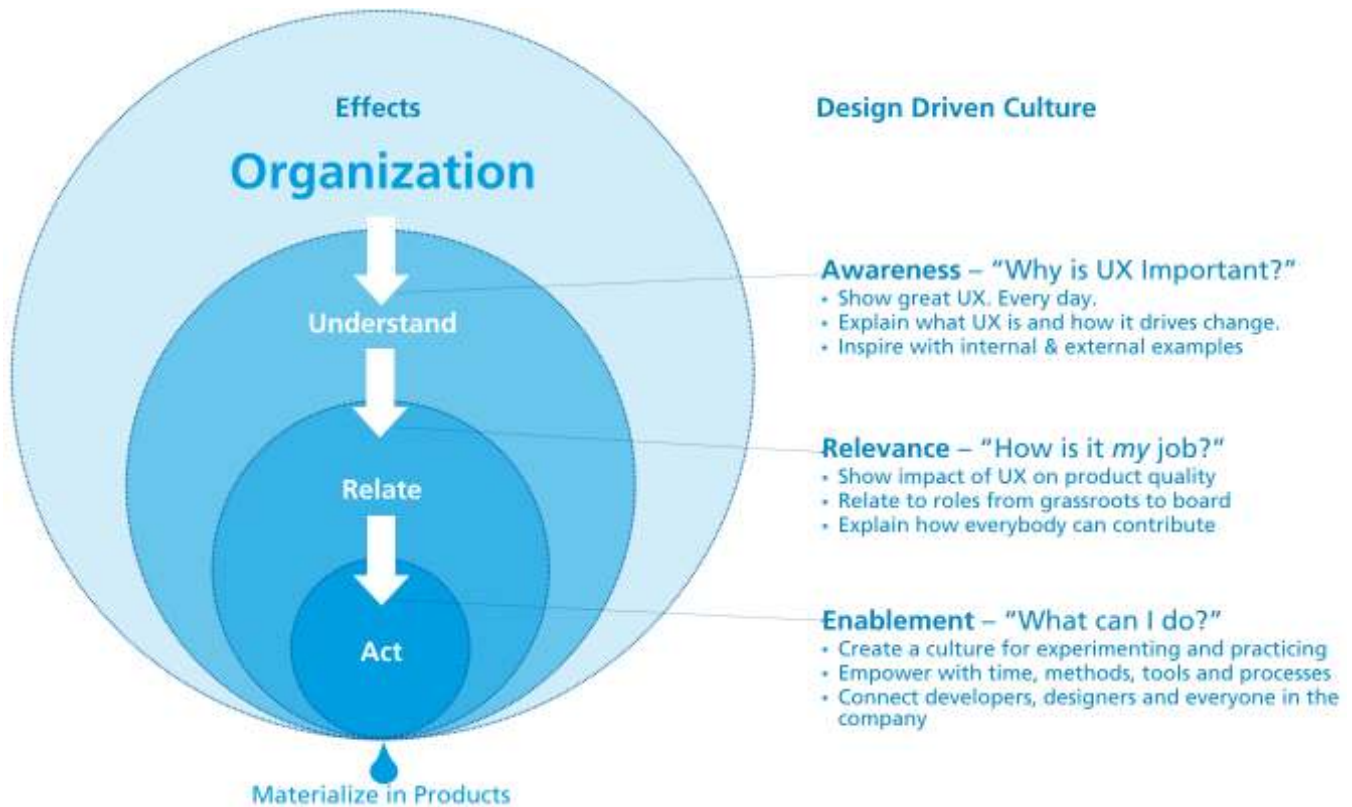


Figure 1. Strategy to build *Design Culture* in the corporate.

### 3. DESIGN EYE OPENER

The “Design Eye Opener” is primarily a one-day workshop created with the ambitious goal of teaching 22,000 non-designers to become mindful of design while developing software products. It is designed against the current trends in corporate training that disseminate knowledge through massive online courses or outsource training to external training providers. The program is designed to make learning enjoyable by experimenting, seeing, hearing and touching products. It is crafted to spark a desire to learn more about design by exposing people to the larger field of user experience design *beyond* software. Within a year, the class was taught to more than 1000 employees across 12 different cities. Below are some aspects of the program design that fueled its success.

#### 3.1. A HIGHLY ENGAGING CLASS

Because design is strongly rooted in “doing” and not only “thinking”, participants “experience” design in several ways that touch all of their senses.

- They touch and interact with physical products, criticize their design and sketch improvements.
- They listen to stories of how products from their everyday lives are designed. These stories help them connect design to their everyday lives, as they stumble upon those same objects at home and work.
- They look at examples from every aspect of product development (security, performance, quality), so people can relate to all roles in the company as an engineer, quality specialist, marketing person or manager.
- They watch the videos of several renowned designers and listen to how they designed their products.
- They analyze several examples of products, helping them judge what makes a good or a bad design.
- They learn the design process from how cars are designed and other non-software examples.

Participants leave the classroom with their minds bursting with aha! moments, design stories that stick, principles they can follow, and a much closer connection to design.



Figure 2. Design Eye Opener sessions in Walldorf, Berlin and Montreal

### 3.2. AN INTIMATE CLASSROOM SETUP

The Design Eye Opener is taught in an intimate classroom setting with only 16 employees in every class. There are clear reasons why the design class is taught in a classroom by colleagues within the company as opposed to being offered as an online course or through an external training provider:

- Design is about humanizing technology. Online courses can potentially be counter-productive due to their impersonal nature of delivery.
- The classes are heavily interactive and pull together colleagues from different teams to share and learn.
- In a classroom, questions get answered immediately and fuel further learning after the class. Participants start

influencing others in their own teams to learn about design.

- The classroom setup lends itself to freely discuss design problems and solutions that are unique and confidential to the company.
- Participants bring new examples and stories to enrich every class, which transforms the classroom into a learning hub and one that is continuously evolving.

### 3.3. A BROADER AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE ON DESIGN

By using a holistic approach to learning about design, the class ensures that it is truly eye opening for colleagues from all departments, from brand new colleagues to company executives.

- Though the company is into software making, the class does not restrict itself to designing software only. The class brings examples from all fields including industrial, graphic, communication and interaction design.
- It teaches by using examples from all aspects of product development, and not just the user interface or styling. It shows how products can be designed to perform well, even when they have no user interface. It connects design to the end-to-end product experience.
- The class is a bundle of lessons learned from many different sources, each one easy to relate to for all employees in the organization – experiences designed by the company's own competitors and customers.
- The content is adapted and localized using examples of products and services from the location where each class takes place, which makes learning "stick" to employees from any country. Apart from English, the class is also taught in other languages such as Chinese, German and Hungarian.



Figure 3. Design Eye Opener in Shanghai

### 3.4. WIDE REACH AND AVAILABILITY

The way the program is rolled out also plays a crucial role. A few tactics help attract people from all around the world to take the course.

- The class not being mandatory attracts people who are curious about design and spread it by word-of-mouth.
- The class is offered in every location every month consistently, and is available for all roles.
- Making design education part of everyone's learning map makes the program visible to all.
- It encourages everyone to join because it is affordable (free) and accessible (in every location).
- The content continues to evolve based on ongoing feedback from every class, making it stronger.
- With very little marketing, the classes get booked through word-of-mouth recommendations from participants.

### 4. EXECUTIVE DESIGN EYE OPENER

Along with a steadily growing number of employees joining the Design Eye Opener came requests to also offer the same class for executives in the company. This paved the way to raise design awareness through a two-way approach: a bottom up approach through all employees and a top-down approach through the management.

The Executive Design Eye Opener was created as a second flavor of the regular one-day classroom session, specifically for people in top management of the company. Executives came for a compact 99-minute class and learned about design using the same examples, principles and exercises as used in the full-day class. Everyone from Vice Presidents, Senior Vice Presidents, up to the Supervisory Board, learned the essentials of design in exactly the same way. Within eight months, more than 75 executives across four continents were inducted into the world of design.

Following the class, senior executives started inviting their team managers and teams to attend the Design Eye Opener class. They put design as an agenda item in their weekly meetings. They spoke about and connected to design while making presentations in larger forums. More and more people in the company found themselves wanting to up-skill themselves on design because it was becoming a basic skill that everyone should possess.

### 5. INDUCTION DESIGN EYE OPENER

While existing company employees were becoming more and more thoughtful about design, new employees at the company had to be brought up to speed. A third flavor of the class called "Induction Design Eye Opener" was created to initiate design learning for new employees, irrespective of their roles. Often, engineers had not heard or learnt about user experience design in depth in their own student or work life. Therefore it was imperative to teach design to these new hires on the second day of their induction process, right upon joining the company.

### 6. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Within a year, design spread to a thousand employees across all levels from the Supervisory Board to the new hires, enabling everyone to understand how they can use design to influence their work. Employees were contacted 6 months later to find out how the class had influenced their daily work. Here are some direct quotes:

*I try to apply design to my work every day and pay more attention to every tiny detail I code.*

– Developer from Budapest, Hungary

*I feel I now have a different approach to creating a backlog for the team. I ask several questions on design.*

– Project coordinator from Sofia, Bulgaria

*The class provided me with a hands-on guide whenever I want to simplify a solution for a customer.*

– Analyst from Shanghai, China

*For a newbie like me it was eye opening for me to learn about design*

– New hire from Bangalore, India

*Design has helped an agreement within the team when we have different opinions about product features*

– Technical architect from Walldorf, Germany

As a result of the Design Eye Opener, an increasing amount of non-designers across all ranks are talking and acting in favor of design in the company now. Though the program was created for the 22,000 engineers building software products, colleagues from other functions such as Sales, Human Resources, Marketing and Communications also started joining the class. The Design Eye Opener is rated as 4.7 / 5.0, which puts it among the top 5 training programs within the company. The program also shows that when designed with care, employee-driven, ground-up initiatives can spread organically like wildfire compared to a structured, top-down approach that can get diluted over a period of time when it becomes standardized and disseminated uniformly across the organization.

## 7. BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

There are several other activities conducted by the *Design Whizz Program* that further support awareness and learning of design outside the classroom.

For example:

- Employees join an online collaboration group after the class that connects all participants across the world. They use the forum to share examples of design and local design events that they come across.
- Every 3-5 weeks, all participants receive a design newsletter that covers a design story from outside or within the company. Such a design nugget triggers further conversations around design in the online community.
- Every second month, a Chief Designer from a customer's company is invited to talk about their design practice in one of the locations. These talks are run live in one location and recorded for others around the world to watch. Inviting designers to the company premises and sharing their insights globally is a highly economical way of bringing inspiration from all around the world to the company's doorstep.  
See: <https://experience.sap.com/sapdesigntalks/>

That apart, several other activities like generously rewarding colleagues who practice design in their work could further positively reinforce learning and practicing design. Some people are naturally empathetic, attentive and curious and therefore more ready to become design-minded than others. Hiring such people accelerates the learning process and increases the design quotient of the company overall. Injecting design into every aspect of employee development can accelerate learning and transformation of the company to become design mindful. (These are unfortunately outside the scope of this paper, as they don't directly relate to design education.)

## 8. CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

One of the biggest challenges was the amount of time it took to create such a design awareness program. The Design Eye Opener workshop took six months to formulate by a group of individuals who contributed 20% of their time at work curating and creating the class from scratch. It had to be designed and fine-tuned to the sensibilities of employees from different parts of the world. It had to excite people across all levels and roles in the company. It had to uphold its own design quality that it emphatically preaches.

It needed investment and sponsorship from the top executives of the company. The Design Eye Opener only spread quickly to 10 locations within a year due to the global and local sponsors in every location who were willing to make that investment.

The selection of trainers also played a crucial role, as non-designers taught the class to non-designers. Trainers had to be design-minded individuals who practiced design in their own jobs and could connect with the engineers and other colleagues they were teaching. They had to be authentic storytellers and seasoned facilitators (tough skills) who can inspire their audience and spark off a desire to learn more about design. More importantly, they should be ready to spend 20% of their time teaching design.

Building a strong support system also proved to be crucial to run the program in a hassle-free manner across all 10 locations every month. The support of all internal functional teams such as Marketing and Employee Communications, Training and HR, Local Facilities and IT cannot be underestimated. Building those connections in every location was a struggle.







Design in <b>Talent Hiring</b>	Believe and position SAP as a design-driven company during hiring. 	Assess for design potential at the time of hiring. 	Create specific role and career path for 'Designer Engineers'.
Design in <b>Talent Development</b>	Hold Design Eye Opener when on-boarding new colleagues. 	Make a design curriculum for non-designers that runs through the year. 	Connect and inspire through Design Talks from outside. 
Design in <b>Performance Management</b>	Make design awareness & practice part of everyone's goals.	Give 10% capacity for all employees to learn and practice design.	Coach and mentor teams to enable design practice at all locations.
Design in <b>Leadership Positions</b>	Ask middle and senior management to enable design practice actively.	Hold Executive Design Eye Opener at all Management levels. 	Recognize and reward generously for design action, not ideas.

Figure 4. Steps to bring design into every aspect of employee engagement. \*whizzing indicates activities that are pursued currently

## 9. CONCLUSION

The Design Eye Opener workshop was able to spread design learning to such an extent because the employees of the company created it from ground-up for their own colleagues. It is a classic example that disproves top-down dissemination of change in the company. It is a case study of how real change happens at the grassroots when passionate individuals come together with purpose, commitment and focus. The Design Eye Opener also bears witness to the changing demands of design education in corporations to reach all employees outside the design department. One of the major reasons why this learning became so viral is because it is embedded perfectly into a larger awareness program that fuels and drives the learning even outside the classroom (through online collaboration rooms, design newsletters and design leadership talks).

There are challenges ahead to institutionalize the class so that it can spread to the 22,000 employees in the next three years. An even greater challenge would be for the company to also spread design awareness to its larger ecosystem of partners and customers. When that happens, the boundaries between design and engineering departments would fade away and organizations with all its creative people will be crafting truly delightful products.

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