



**Guide
To:**

Smart Executive Leadership for Design Systems

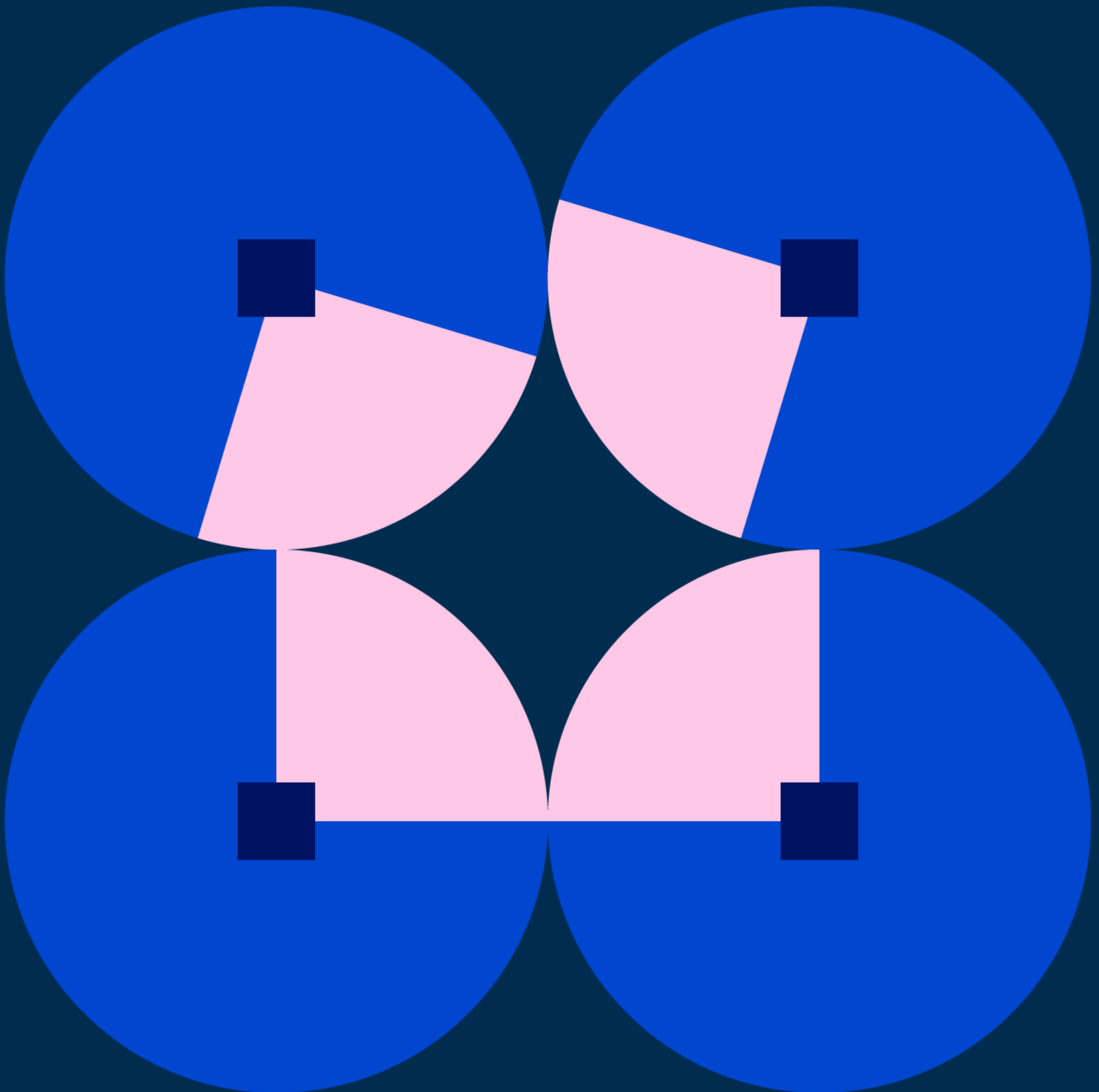


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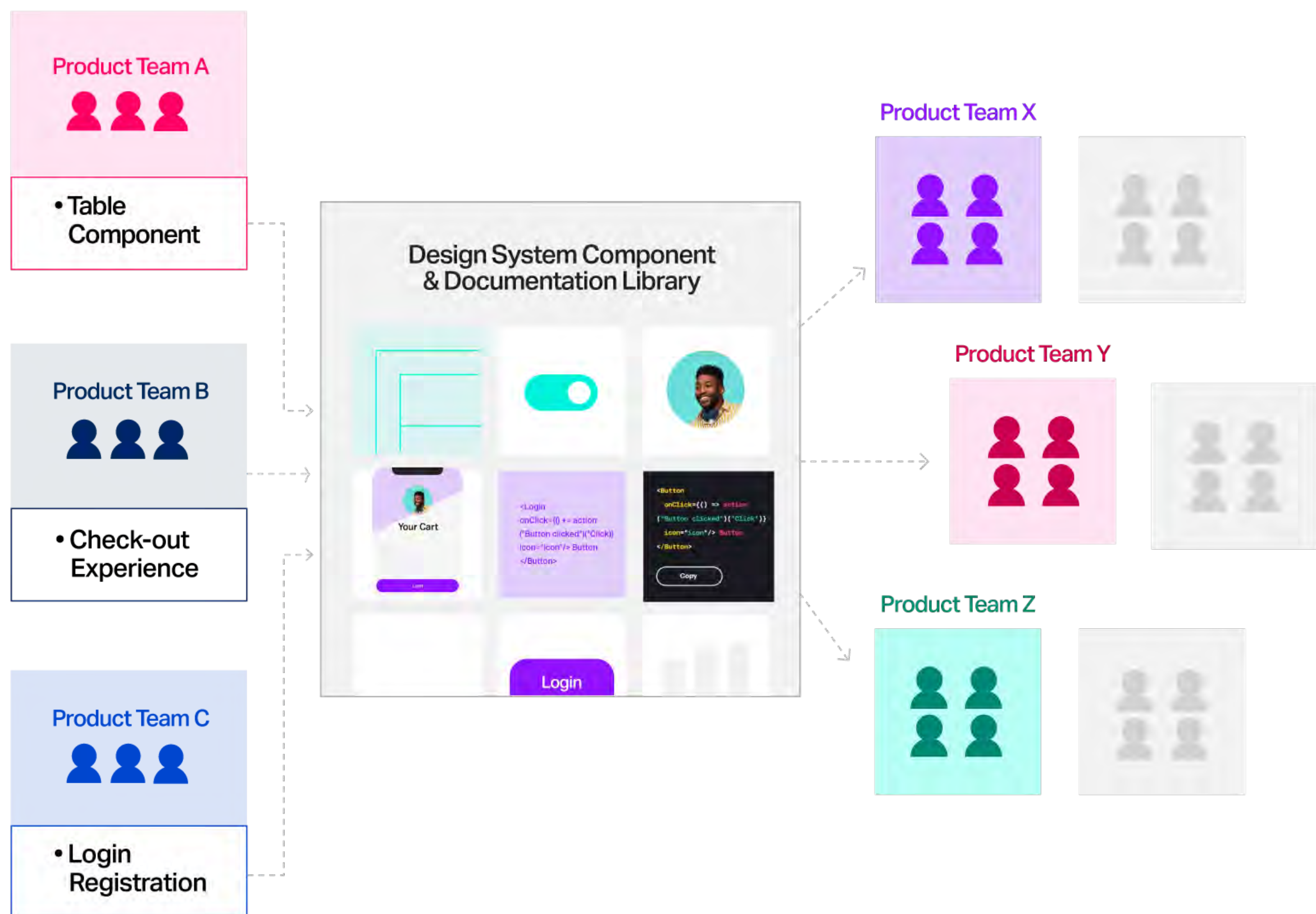
This guide is for product organization leaders – COOs, CIOs, digital transformation leaders, heads of product, design leaders, and engineering leaders who are considering investing in design systems. It will cover the potential costs and benefits, common pitfalls, and best practices for how leaders can position the initiative for success.

Design systems scale digital production

Much like the automotive industry in 1913, digital design is finally having its **"assembly line" moment**. Design systems replace slow, bespoke methods and operationalize a factory model for digital products.

Many digital product teams still craft each experience pixel by pixel, but in an increasing number of organizations, design systems now enable designers and developers to draw from an evolving archive of components with guidance for when and how to use each piece.

Some nascent systems only contain assets and documentation for designers, greatly improving design efficiency. However, a fully-functional design system powers the entire product workflow from ideation through development. It pairs design components with code in one curated, accessible hub for designers and developers. Teams create and update digital experiences much more quickly. The system standardizes repeatable work until products are built with roughly 70% reusable components and only 30% bespoke work.



As the design system matures, teams move beyond archiving small building blocks like buttons and drop-downs, and begin to standardize larger building blocks, like an entire registration or checkout experience. Product teams contribute new or updated pieces to the design system as part of their ongoing work. The design system crew filters contributions, and helps keep the system tidy and consistent. Other product teams are able to find and reuse the approved, coded pieces to build quickly, instead of building everything from scratch.

Mature design systems can cut entire days from each two-week production sprint. It's as big a paradigm shift as **agile overtaking waterfall methodologies.** (Some may even argue it's bigger.)

The science and art of building great design systems is an ocean of a topic, but you don't need to know all the ins and outs to make a smart investment. This guide gives you the basics to help your organization start using design systems the right way.

The business benefits of design systems

It pays to be the visionary behind the design system revolution in your organization. More than any other initiative, design systems have immense potential to steer efficiency and excellence into hyperdrive. The jump from **no design system to a nascent design system** should boost product development efficiency by **at least 25 percent**. Here's how...

Design systems reduce duplicative work and costly do-overs with a shared visual/coded language for design and development.

That means you can **accelerate...**

- ✓ time to market
- ✓ design workflows
- ✓ development workflows
- ✓ designer/developer onboarding
- ✓ designer/developer collaboration

Design systems scale consistency, accessibility, regulatory compliance, and user-tested patterns across teams and projects.

That means you can **reduce...**

- ✓ compliance/regulatory risk
- ✓ fractured customer experiences
- ✓ technical debt
- ✓ design debt

Tip: Free-up your in-house talent to focus on real problems

One of the most important (but less quantifiable) benefits: Design systems free your most customer-centered thinkers to refocus their skills on problems instead of pixels.

InVision's 2019 study of over 2,200 product organizations worldwide found that when companies apply design talent directly to business objectives, design was 26x more likely to impact company valuation, and 4x more likely to increase revenue.

To project potential benefits for your own organization, begin by exploring the status quo.

- How much do designers and developers currently reuse vs. build from scratch? To find out, identify a common UI element used across multiple products – a configuration screen or table component, for example. How many sprints/months did it take for each product team to design, test, build, and maintain it?
- How much delay/friction happens in design-to-development handoffs? Look at the number of emails,

Slack messages, and calls spent searching for assets and details, plus extra meetings, false starts and restarts.

- How often do projects fail QA due to compliance or accessibility issues?
- How many products and platforms across your company's portfolio currently look and behave inconsistently with one another?

You can also anchor projections on ROI indicators from other organizations:

- **IBM iX design teams** saw a **50% increase in workflow efficiency** when they started using design systems.
- **LinkedIn** saw **designer efficiency increase by 150%** after implementing a design system.
- **Developers at Apartments.com** finished a **6-8 month project in two weeks**, thanks to their new design system.
- **Teams at Vodafone** saw a **40% increase in design productivity**, plus faster, easier onboarding for new members.

Read more about how to **estimate design system ROI** in this article by Justin Baker.

Tip: Are you overdue for a design system?

Your organization is already in dire need of a design system if...

- ✓ Dev teams complain that waiting for assets and wireframes from design is slowing them down.
- ✓ Products not only look different but also function differently, and customers notice.
- ✓ Managers can't seem to allocate the right designers (visual design vs. UX design vs. UX research) for each squad or product. There aren't enough specialists or generalists to go around.

"If you have a digital product, you already have a design system. There are established patterns and components in play. The question is: are you being intentional about developing that system? Or is it happening accidentally?"

Mike Davidson
VP Partnerships and Community
InVision



Maximizing design system resources

Building and maintaining a powerful design system is not a one-off project. It's a new, systematic way of working that unites products, teams, and functions.

You can improve your return on investment by strategically supporting a few motivated designers and developers as they become the first design system builders. Give them freedom to spend as much as 20% of their time working on a first version of the design system. This keeps costs low, and you can slowly ramp up support and staff as the system pays for itself.

The initial push to launch a first version of the system requires a great deal of **grassroots and executive support**. (In fact, you might be reading this because some brave soul has already approached you, hoping you'll heroically back their design system effort.)

This is how the process usually goes:

1. A few designers and developers collaborate to audit products and select reusable components.
2. They agree on a first round of guidelines and documentation, and organize the libraries.
3. They establish a central site or platform to host the system.

4. They develop a loose plan for how to govern, grow, and evolve the design system over the coming years, to meet the needs of each product and use case.
5. They select one to three products to adopt the new design system – often the mobile app or a product undergoing a rebrand.

The do's and don'ts of getting started

Throughout this process, though, are chances to make costly mistakes. Helping builders avoid them can be one of the biggest helps in creating a healthy, functioning design system.

- ✗ **Don't** let your team try to build a big, comprehensive design system all in one go. This can take years to accomplish. Meanwhile the design system crew becomes disconnected from product teams, and loses sight of whether the system is actually meeting anyone's needs. By the time it's finished, it's irrelevant.
- ✓ **Do** encourage them to take advantage of an ongoing product effort – a new product launch or a redesign. Initially, ask teams to spend a little extra time and effort to make each new component reusable. Add documentation

and foundations, and use that to create a first iteration of the design system. Once that first iteration launches, they can make upkeep a tiny part of their day-to-day work.

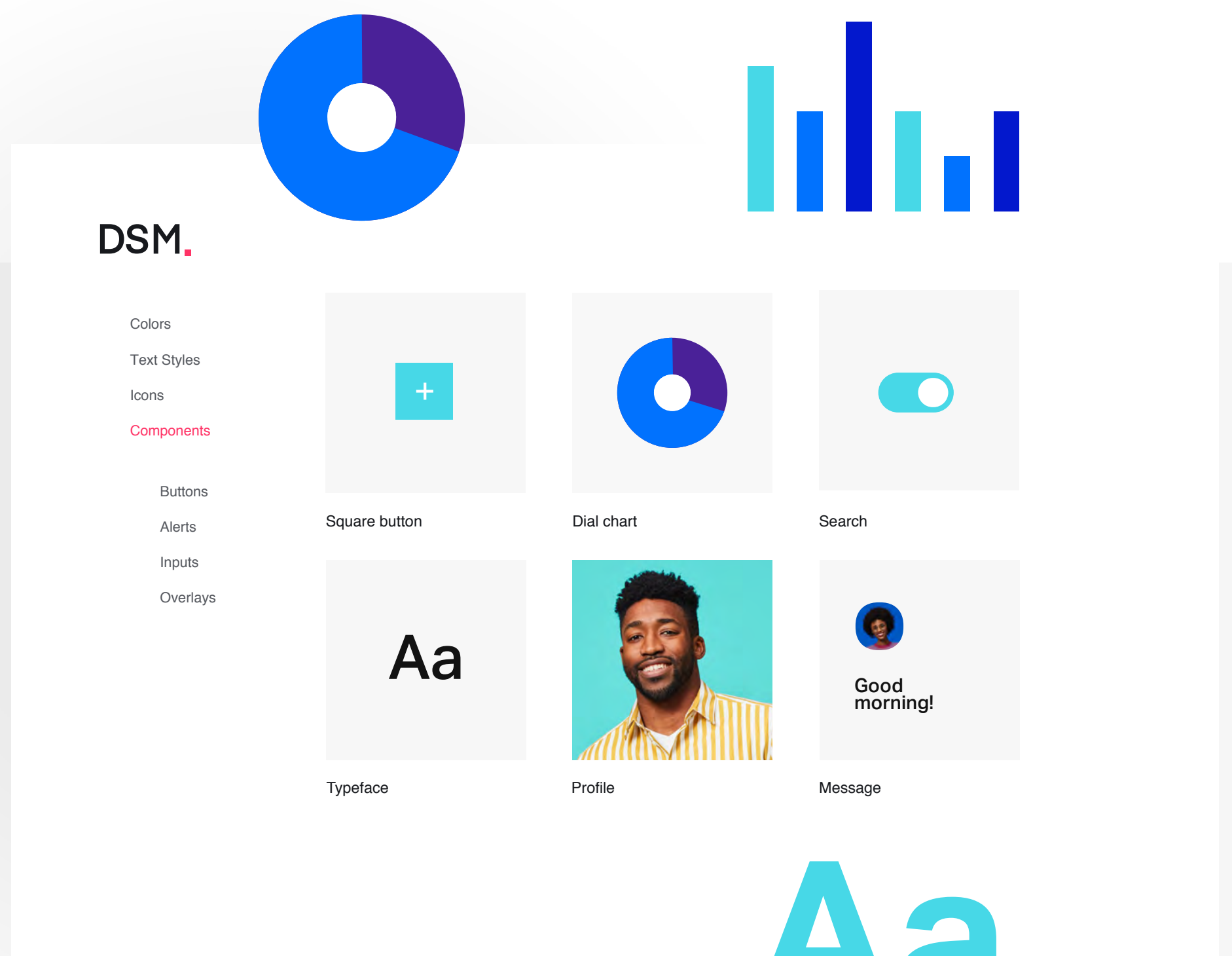
- ✗ **Don't** immediately hire a full-time design system team (unless you have the time and money to go big).
- ✓ **Do** foster a design system community. Support a few passionate designers, developers, and product leaders as they head up a design system crew and grow grassroots support. Make room for them to commit as much as 20% of their daily workload to the effort. Later, when the system becomes more sophisticated, you will find the benefits merit the cost of a full-time design system product manager, designer, and developer.
- ✗ **Don't** let teams over-engineer the design system hosting site, for example, building a custom internal web portal that only a developer can build and maintain. Many teams fall into this trap and find that it becomes too costly to keep the system up to date.
- ✓ **Do** encourage teams to find a simple, accessible design system hosting platform like **InVision Design System Manager** that allows people to make updates anytime, without asking a developer for help. To begin with, it can even be as low-touch as a simple spreadsheet.



Tip: Build faster in one accessible hub

With **InVision DSM**, designers and developers can rapidly build a design system in one central, accessible platform. Designers can upload entire Sketch libraries in one click. Engineers can integrate existing coded components. Everyone can contribute documentation. Before you know it, you have one tool serving as the single source of truth for the whole product organization. And even better – version control. No more messaging around to ask 'what's the latest file' ever again.

[Talk to an InVision design system expert](#)



How to use your influence for success

Organizational change always comes with pain. But as a leader, you can help teams mitigate the stress of adopting new tools and processes and get to success faster. Here are a few ways we at InVision have seen leaders from hundreds of customer organizations put their sway to good use for design system initiatives.

Keep the focus on iteration, not perfection. When it comes to design systems, there's no such thing as 'done' – there's only the new normal of faster, more intentional, more connected product teams. If teams become caught up in building a be-all, end-all design system, they will need years (rather than weeks or months) to launch, only to realize the end product is already out of date. It's important to get a first iteration out quickly – even if it's only a core component or two with some guidelines – so they can immediately start to use it and improve it with real use cases.

Become an advocate for the design system crew. Help other business leaders understand the importance of design systems, especially in an era when customer needs change so rapidly. (Design system work is a great example of slowing down to speed up.) Do your part to protect the extra time designers and developers need to work on initial design system components. Help them

build a long-term business plan to support the system as it grows. And maybe, most importantly, be a mentor to this passionate band of changemakers. Pioneering a first version design system is a fast and furious education in change management.

Remind designers (and yourself) that a design system means freedom to work on bigger problems. Working with a design system can intimidate many designers. They think it will inhibit their creative freedom or even replace them entirely. Spread the message that the design system is changing their jobs for the better, elevating them from bricklayers to architects solving big picture problems for the business and its customers. They get to spend more research time with customers, build empathy, and help shape the roadmap, instead of re-pixelating the wheel again and again. And remember that, by unleashing them to solve bigger problems, you are personally paving the way for a more resilient, more profitable business and a happier, more committed team.

Encourage designers and developers to talk candidly.

Working on a new design system miraculously reveals long standing silos, tech stack issues, and fractured handoffs and workflows across teams. As a leader, you can help teams see this as a positive: Help them take advantage of this new awareness by encouraging developers and designers from many corners of the organization to talk to one another openly, map out their workflows, find places where they can sync language and processes, and eliminate friction. Design

system work can feel like the first wholesome, unified, cross-functional effort for many product organizations.

Open doors to help the crew establish a design system

guild. The design system makers will need an open community of designers, developers, marketers, product managers, and others who care about building a stronger customer experience in a faster, more unified way.

Together they can discuss possible additions and tweaks to the system, find volunteers to tailor new components, and discuss feedback on edge cases. Use your influence and connections to validate their work, make introductions to other teams and leaders, and offer meeting time or email shoutouts to promote the community.

Help the team establish design system principles early on.

Building and growing a design system consists of a long series of joint decisions. That's why agreeing on basic guiding principles is essential before work begins in earnest. A few questions to start them on the right path:

- How is responsibility for the design system shared among product teams and the design system guild?
- How can we make the system feel more like collaboration and less like control?
- How do we weigh the need for cohesion against the pressure to just build one-off so we can ship something fast?
- Are we aiming for only design standardization right now, or full design and dev production standardization?

Make adoption expectations clear to product leaders.

Sometimes a design system fails because of nothing more than inertia – teams don't ever get around to changing their behavior and using the system to build products. Your voice can make a major difference if you clearly denote which products are expected to make use of the new design system from day one. Sometimes this mandate from the top is the only way to get product leaders to pause, notice the design system exists, and adjust to the new paradigm. Use a company event or celebration with lots of fanfare to announce it. It's okay if it starts with just one product at first, but it must start somewhere.

Tip: Get expert help for the tricky parts



Along with a best-in-class platform for design system components and code, InVision offers the DSM Kickstart program. It delivers an experienced team of design system consultants to your virtual doorstep to help with all things people and process. They walk your design system crew through difficult decisions around governance, adoption, contributions, and cross-functional workflows, so that your new design system investment is primed to pay off quickly.

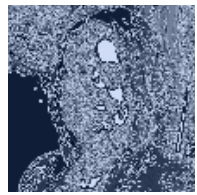
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The best time to start is now

Rather than taking years, digital transformations now happen overnight. Companies that already have sophisticated design systems in place have pivoted faster and managed to thrive in the changing market landscape. As a leader, you have the responsibility – and opportunity – to lend credence, speed, and resources to the efforts of the brave design system pioneers in your organization. If you invest the time to do it right, you not only ensure these passionate teams succeed in their goals, but you also position yourself as the visionary who brings huge efficiency gains to the entire organization.

InVision has talented design system consultants and a world-class design system platform here to help as soon as you're ready.

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