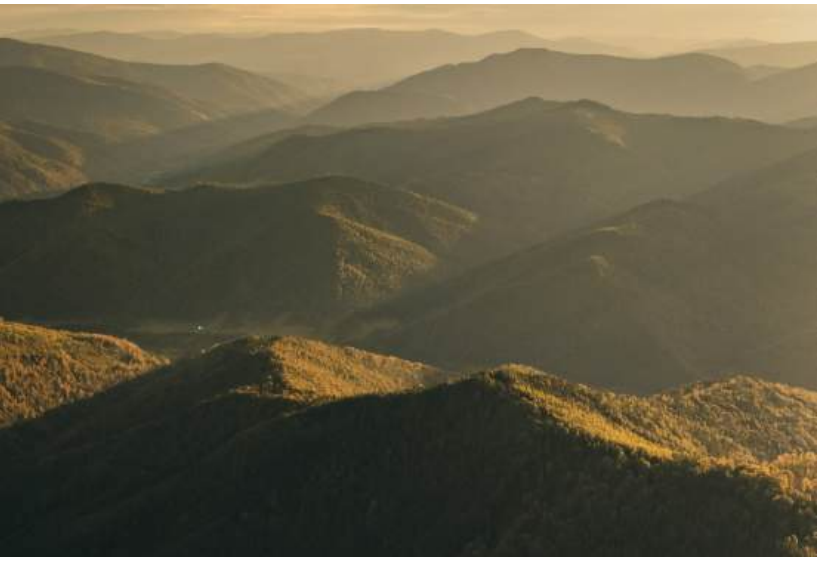
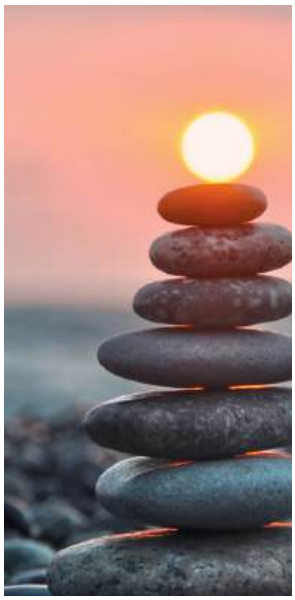
2026
UX TRENDS REPORT





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EDITORIAL STATEMENT – UX TREND REPORT 2026

UX Is No Longer Ignored. It's Actively Under-managed. **Last year, we warned of a UX reckoning.** This year, the data delivers the verdict. Organizations now know that Experience Design matters. They call it "very important" for business success. They believe it will define the next decade. And yet most still fail to measure it, govern it, or link it to real business outcomes

This is no longer a maturity issue. It is a leadership failure. **UX has crossed a critical threshold:** it has become a business risk surface. Poor experiences no longer just annoy users; they erode trust, amplify ethical exposure, invite regulation, and quietly drain value. That is why measuring experiences has surged to the top of strategic priorities while almost no one is doing it well.

Automation Didn't Kill UX. It Exposed Weak Leadership. **AI is now embedded in UX work, widely perceived as a positive force.** Execution is being automated. Standards are accelerating. UX automation with AI is the dominant trend going into 2026. But here's the uncomfortable truth: AI has removed execution as an excuse. What remains is judgment. Ethics. Accountability. Strategic clarity. And the data is clear: the most critical future skills in UX are no longer tools or pixels, but business strategy, behavioral science, psychology, and decision-making under uncertainty. UX is moving upstream—whether organizations are ready or not

UX Has Outgrown Its Job Description. The demand is shifting away from narrow specialists toward leaders and generalists who can manage complexity across systems. Health, finance, government, mobility—entire sectors are turning to Experience Design not for polish, but for resilience, responsibility, and coherence.

UX is no longer a function. It is infrastructure. And **infrastructure without governance fails.**

A Message to the C-Suite

If your company:

- claims UX is important but doesn't measure its impact,
- invests in AI but ignores ethics, accessibility, and sustainability,
- talks about "customer-centricity" without ownership or accountability,

then UX is not a capability in your organization. It is a blind spot. The UX Trend Report 2026 does not describe a future problem. It documents a present one. UX has already moved from craft to consequence. Leadership can either catch up or be exposed by it. There is no neutral position anymore. **Welcome to the Accountability Era.**

Johannes Robier

World Usability Congress

2026 Trend Survey

23%

Design as FORM GIVING

Design is used as finish or styling in products or services

Which “Design” level do you recognize your company at the moment ?

54%

Design as PROCESS

Design is an integrated element in development processes

23%

Design as STRATEGY

Design is a key strategic element in our business model

To what extent is the potential of “Experience Design” in your company being realized?

52 RESPONSES

- 10% Almost Fully
- 17% To a High Degree
- **46% Somewhat**
- 19% Barely
- 8% Hardly at All

Do you believe “Experience Design” will become more popular the next 10 years?

52 RESPONSES

77% YES

23% NO

To what extent does AI influence your work?

52 RESPONSES

- 17% Very Positive
- **50% Somewhat Positive**
- 25% Neutral
- 4% Somewhat Negative
- 4% Very Negative

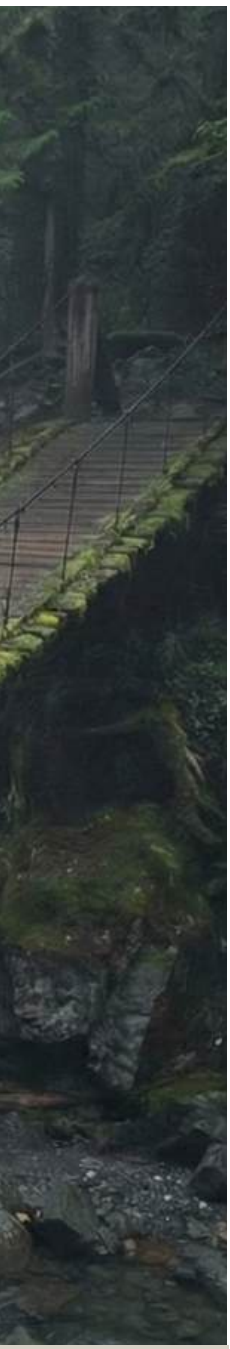
How do you rate the impact of “Experience Design” on business performance?

52 RESPONSES

- **48% Very Important**
- 29% Important
- 19% Somewhat Important
- 2% Unimportant
- 2% Not Important at All

When Leadership Isn't Inclusive, UX Breaks

Dr. Anthony Giannoumis
Motivational Speaker and Professor in Inclusive Leadership



UX failures are usually diagnosed at the wrong level. When a user's experience underperforms, we look to the interface. When users disengage, we revisit the journey. When adoption lags, we add more research, more workshops, more process.

And yet many UX failures persist even when teams are doing "everything right." That's because UX doesn't fail where we think it does. UX breaks long before interfaces fail. It breaks when leadership behaviours make it unsafe to speak, disagree, or be fully seen. This matters in two places at once. It shapes whether UX team members feel safe enough to challenge assumptions, surface weak signals, or admit uncertainty. And it shapes whether users tell researchers what actually matters, or what feels acceptable to say. Inclusive leadership affects both the production of UX insight and the quality of the insight itself. When it breaks, UX breaks with it.

The invisible filter shaping UX insight

Every UX practice rests on a fragile assumption: that people will tell the truth. Discovery interviews, usability tests, feedback sessions, retrospectives. All of them depend on individuals being willing to surface discomfort, disagreement, and contradiction. People do not do this by default. They do it when it feels safe, worthwhile, and consequential. That safety is not created by research methods. It is created by leadership behaviour. When leaders listen consistently, follow through visibly, and take people seriously as individuals, different perspectives emerge. When they don't, insight becomes filtered. Not maliciously. Predictably. People adapt their honesty to the power dynamics around them. UX research often produces answers to the questions people feel permitted to ask, not the questions that actually matter. This is not a tooling problem. It is not a methodological gap. It is a leadership system problem that quietly distorts UX insight long before design work begins.

What inclusive leadership actually looks like in practice.

Inclusive leadership is often described in abstract terms. Values. Commitments. Policies. But people do not experience inclusion as intent. They experience it as behaviour. In a quantitative study of 662 respondents from Ireland and Norway, participants were asked about their perceptions of inclusive leadership. What emerged was remarkably consistent. Inclusive leadership was not experienced as isolated actions or individual traits. Behaviours such as inviting different perspectives, getting to know people as individuals, encouraging safe expression of ideas, and following through when things went wrong clustered tightly together. When one was present, the others tended

> Inclusive leadership affects both the production of UX insight and the quality of the insight itself. When it breaks, UX breaks with it.

to be present. When one was missing, the system degraded as a whole. Listening without follow-through did not count. Inviting perspectives without psychological safety did not land. Openness without trust did not stick. Inclusive leadership showed up as a coherent behavioural system, not a checklist. For UX, this matters because insight quality rises or falls with this system. You cannot method your way out of an unsafe environment. No amount of research rigor compensates for people self-censoring what they know, feel, or notice.

Why UX keeps misdiagnosing the problem

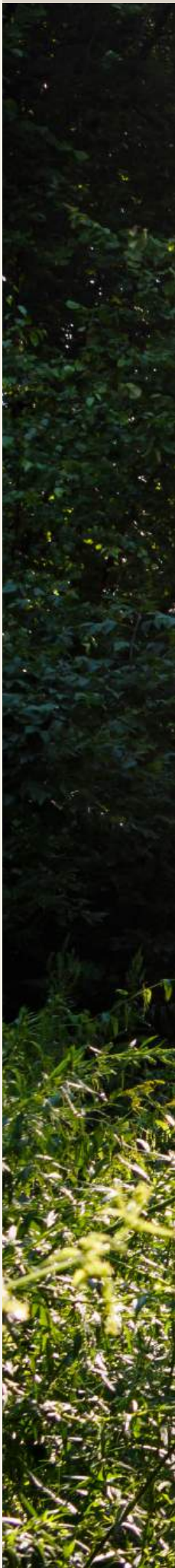
When UX insight feels shallow or repetitive, teams often respond by adding more process. More interviews. More workshops. More frameworks. These can help. But only to a point. Because when leadership behaviour signals that disagreement is risky, that failure is punished, or that feedback disappears into a void, people adapt. They become efficient. Agreeable. Strategically silent. UX teams then end up optimizing for a reality that has already been filtered. Most UX failures blamed on users or process are actually failures of inclusive leadership upstream. This is not an accusation. It is a structural observation. UX practitioners often sense this. The careful phrasing in interviews. The safe insights. The ideas that never quite get said. But without language to name the system producing these patterns, the field keeps treating a leadership problem as a design problem.

Why this becomes dangerous in 2026

This dynamic becomes significantly more dangerous as UX becomes increasingly strategic, automated, and AI-augmented. AI does not fix bad input. It scales it. When leadership environments suppress certain perspectives, AI does not correct for that bias. It accelerates it, wraps it in confidence, and distributes it at speed. As UX becomes increasingly strategic and AI-augmented, organizations that fail to address inclusive leadership will scale biased, incomplete, and fragile insights faster than ever before. The risk is not that UX teams will make mistakes. The risk is that they will make them faster, more confidently, and with far greater organizational impact.

Inclusive leadership is UX infrastructure

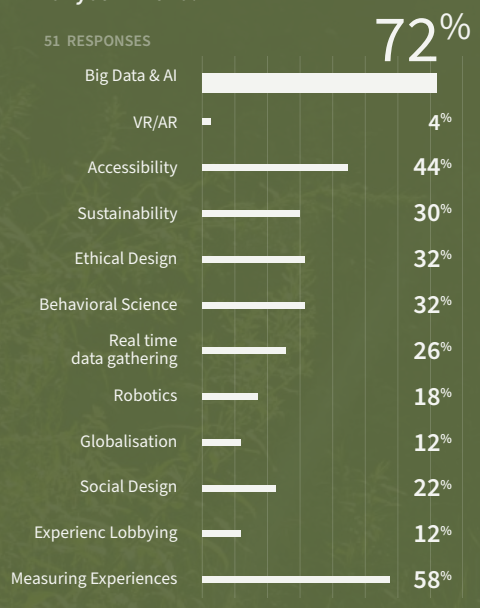
Inclusive leadership is often treated as a soft skill or cultural nice-to-have. That framing no longer holds. Leadership behaviour determines what reality is visible inside an organization. UX depends on that visibility. When people feel safe to speak, UX gains access to complexity, contradiction, and inconvenient truths. When they don't, UX becomes performative. Polished. Methodologically sound. Fundamentally misinformed. This is not about being nice. It is about whether organizations can see clearly enough to design responsibly. Inclusive leadership is not adjacent to UX. It is not an input or an afterthought. It is UX infrastructure, whether we acknowledge it or not.



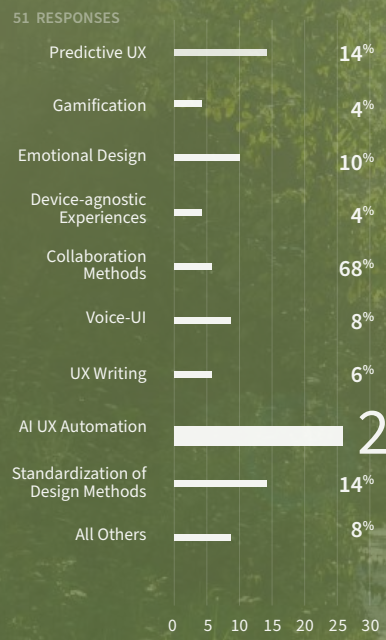
2026 Trend Survey

Do you link Experience KPI's to Business and Technology KPIs? (KPI = Key Performance Indicator)?

Which topics will be most important for you in 2026?



What will be the most important trend for you in the coming year?



Designing with the Mind:

How Brain–Computer Interfaces Are Expanding the Future of User Experience

Tan Le
Founder & CEO, EMOTIV Inc.
Brain Computer Interfaces

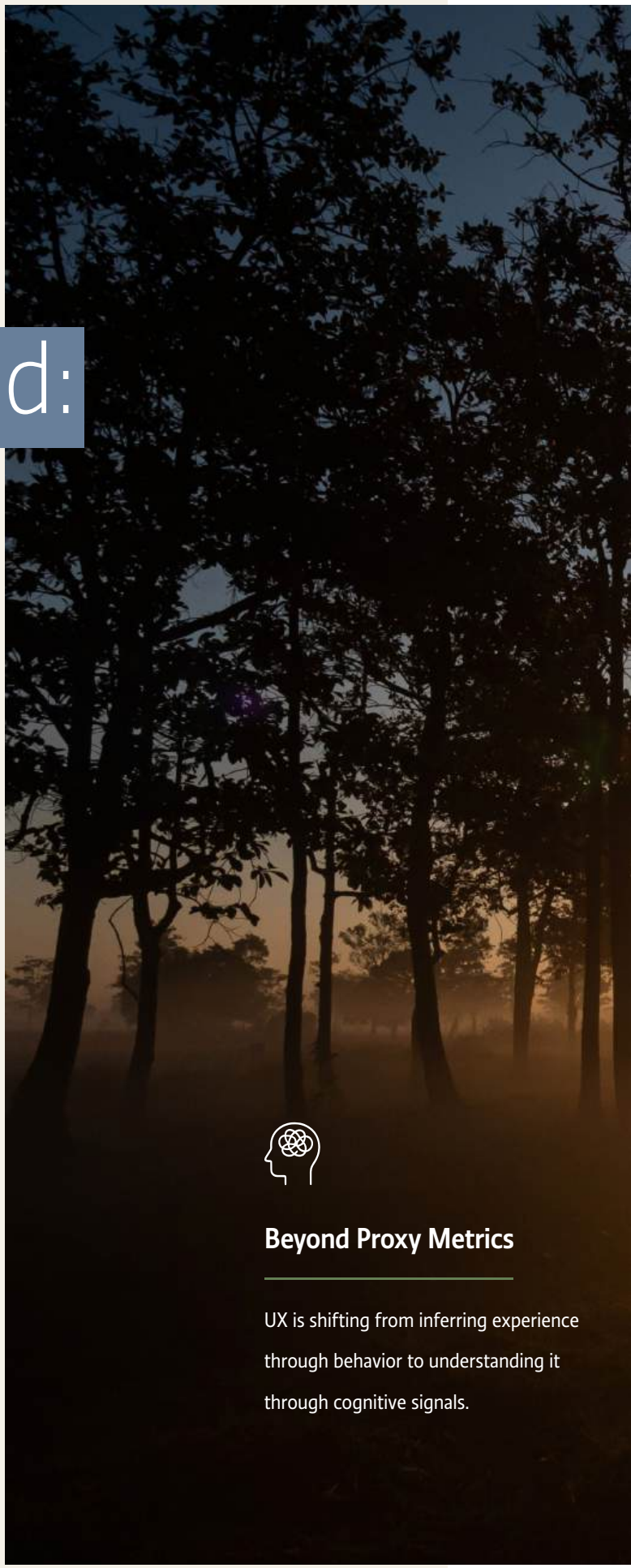
A Shift Beyond What We Can See

As we enter a new era in how technology interacts with the human mind, user experience design must evolve beyond what we can observe to what we can truly understand.

For decades, UX has been shaped by visible behavior—where people click, how long they linger, what they abandon. These signals have helped reduce friction and improve usability, but they have never fully captured how experiences are actually lived—moment by moment, in the mind.

As digital systems become more immersive, persistent, and embedded in everyday life, a deeper question comes into focus:
How do people cognitively experience the systems we design—not just behaviorally, but mentally and emotionally over time?

Brain–computer interfaces (BCIs) offer a new lens on this question.



Beyond Proxy Metrics

UX is shifting from inferring experience through behavior to understanding it through cognitive signals.

Cognitive Sustainability

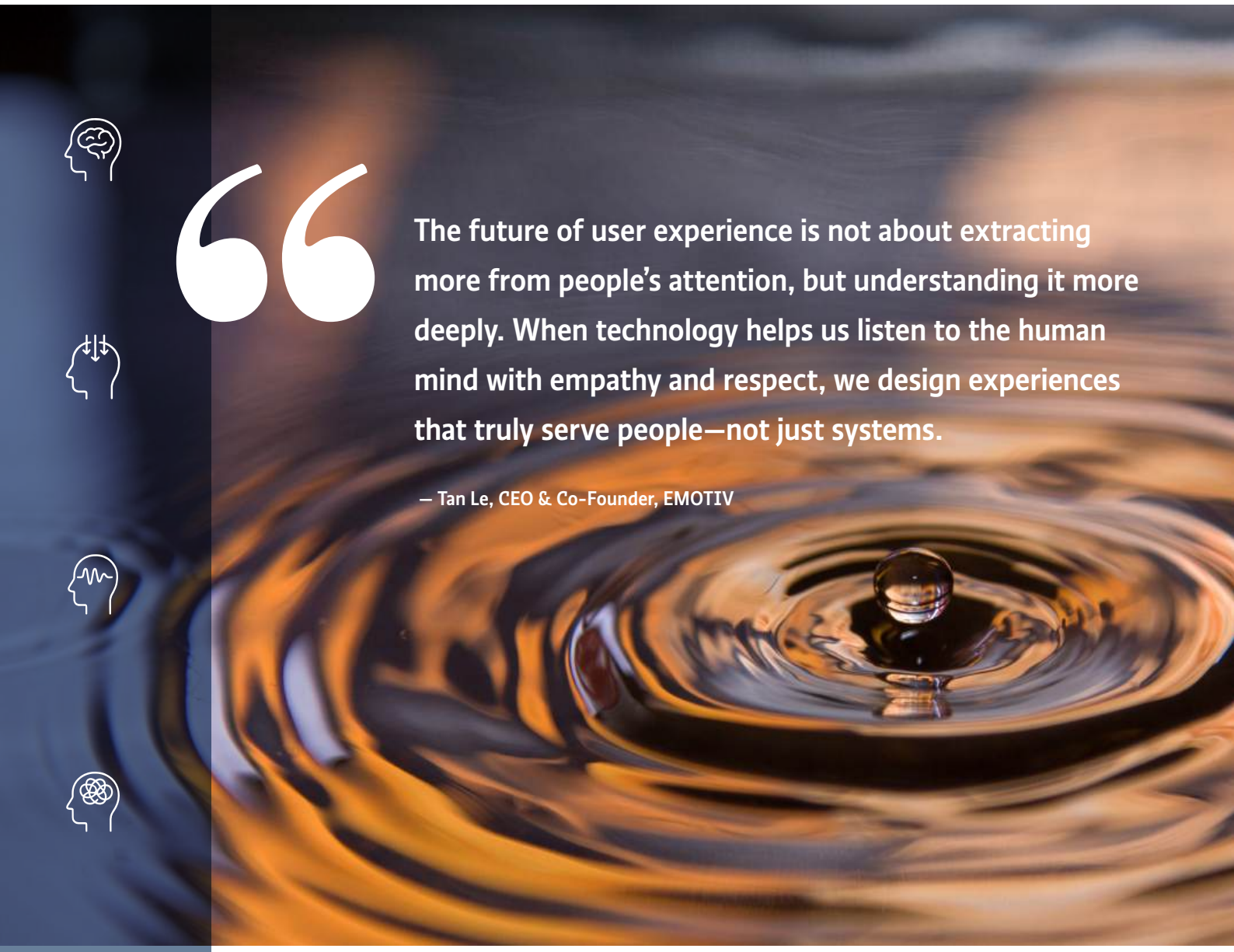
A future design standard focused on minimizing mental fatigue and supporting long-term engagement.

Neuro-Empowered Design

Brain-based insight strengthens design intuition by validating qualitative research with physiological context.

Ethics as Foundation

Responsible neurotechnology prioritizes consent, transparency, and individual agency—empowering users rather than extracting from them.



> **The future of user experience is not about extracting more from people's attention, but understanding it more deeply. When technology helps us listen to the human mind with empathy and respect, we design experiences that truly serve people—not just systems.**
>
> **— Tan Le, CEO & Co-Founder, EMOTIV**

Designing with the Mind

(continued)

From Behavioral Proxies to Cognitive Insight

- **Much of today's UX data is indirect.**
- **We infer attention from cursor movement.**
- **We infer frustration from drop-off rates.**
- **We infer engagement from time-on-task.**

These signals are useful—but they are still approximations.

BCIs introduce a new layer of insight by making aspects of cognitive experience observable in real time. Signals related to mental workload, focus, and engagement can be measured directly rather than inferred after the fact.

Importantly, this does not replace established UX methods such as qualitative research, usability testing, or contextual inquiry. Instead, it augments them, allowing teams to understand not only what happened, but how it was experienced cognitively as the experience unfolded.

The future of UX is not about replacing existing methods, but enriching them with deeper human context.

Designing for Cognitive Sustainability

With access to cognitive insight, designers can begin to ask more responsible questions:

- **Not only did the user complete the task? but at what mental cost?**
- **Not only which version performed better? but which experience supported sustained attention without fatigue?**

This reframes success away from maximizing engagement at all costs and toward **cognitive sustainability**—designing systems that respect human limits, support clarity, and remain usable over time without exhaustion.

As UX increasingly shapes how people work, learn, and connect, designers carry growing responsibility for the mental load their products impose.

BCIs offer a way to evaluate that load directly—and to design experiences that are not just efficient, but humane.

A Quiet but Profound Evolution

Brain-computer interfaces represent a quieter evolution in UX.

Not a dramatic disruption—but a deeper form of listening.

They surface insight that does not rely on conscious reporting or retrospective explanation. Instead, they reveal how the brain responds moment by moment as experiences unfold. Used thoughtfully, this enables systems that are more adaptive, respectful, and aligned with how people actually think and feel.

This shift becomes even more important as AI-driven systems accelerate design and decision-making. As automation handles more of the how, understanding the human why—and the human limits behind it—becomes essential.

In the coming years, UX leadership will increasingly be defined by how well teams design for cognitive reality, not just technical performance.

Responsibility, Consent, and Trust

With deeper insight comes deeper responsibility.

Measuring brain activity requires higher standards of consent, transparency, and governance. Neurotechnology must empower individuals, not extract from them. People deserve to understand what is being measured, why it matters, and how their data is used.

Responsible neurotechnology means clear consent, user agency, and ethical guardrails built into tools and workflows from the start.

Trust is not optional. It is foundational to the future of human-centered design.

Making Cognitive Insight Practical

Advances in personal neuroscience now make it possible to integrate EEG-derived insight into real-world UX and research workflows. Cognitive signals can be synchronized with task events, interfaces, and environments, enabling teams to see not just outcomes, but lived experience.

When combined with observation, interviews, and usability testing, cognitive data adds context rather than complexity. It helps teams design experiences that align with how the human brain actually works—not how we assume it does.

The next phase of UX will be shaped by tools that connect design intent with human cognition in real environments.

Designing With Greater Empathy

The future of UX will not be defined by technology alone, but by the values embedded in how we use it.

Brain-computer interfaces invite designers to move beyond guesswork and toward greater empathy and precision. When applied responsibly, they help us listen more carefully to the human experience—not more intrusively.

Technology should never replace the human experience.

At its best, it helps us understand it more deeply—and design with greater care, humility, and respect for the minds we serve.

From Pixels to Possibilities:

Scaling Ethical UX & AI for a Better Tomorrow

Elizabeth Rosenzweig

Adjunct Faculty, Brandeis University,
Adjunct Faculty, Massachusetts College of Art and Design,
Director, World Usability Day

Looking ahead with intention feels more meaningful to me than trying to predict what's next. I'm less interested in forecasting trends for the sake of marketing—though I recognize it's a necessary part of how ideas spread—and more focused on exploring the directions I hope we move toward or believe should take shape. These reflections come from decades of real-world UX work dedicated to making life more usable, equitable, and human-centered. They draw from futures thinking practices like scenario planning, early signal spotting, and back-casting—imagining the ideal future first and then tracing practical pathways back to where we are today—to guide how we might navigate technological, healthcare, and educational shifts ahead.

With that mindset, I'm turning those big-picture hopes into concrete UX conversations—how design can scale to meet human needs across systems, not just screens.

Scaling UX for Human-Centered Futures

Blending ideas from the second edition of my book Successful User Experience: Strategies and Roadmaps —think user research visions, roadmaps, milestones, and ethical AI—with global usability principles, this report shifts UX from apps to big systems. We're talking 2026 trends like AI teamwork, neuro-inclusivity, multimodal designs, and simple sustainability, all aimed at fair, tough outcomes worldwide. Ethical AI means keeping humans in charge, honoring diverse cultures, and caring for the planet—turning tech into a tool for shared progress.

Futures Thinking to Stay Ahead

Futures thinking helps UX pros handle the unknown by sketching optimistic, challenging, and likely scenarios for things like health apps or online learning. Back-casting starts with goals like access for all, then charts the path back with clear steps for intuitive, fair designs that evolve. Spotting trends like neuro-diversity needs through workshops keeps interfaces fresh, no matter if we head toward AI harmony or bigger gaps.

Roadmaps That Get Results

These phased plans turn user insights into timelines, key measures (like equity scores or better health results), and team alignment—treating whole systems like products, with AI sketching ideas under human watch. Milestones keep things adaptable, adding sustainable AI for predictive health tools or custom learning, while cutting through buzz with designs that actually work. Global links mean sharing data across borders with shared standards to connect us all.

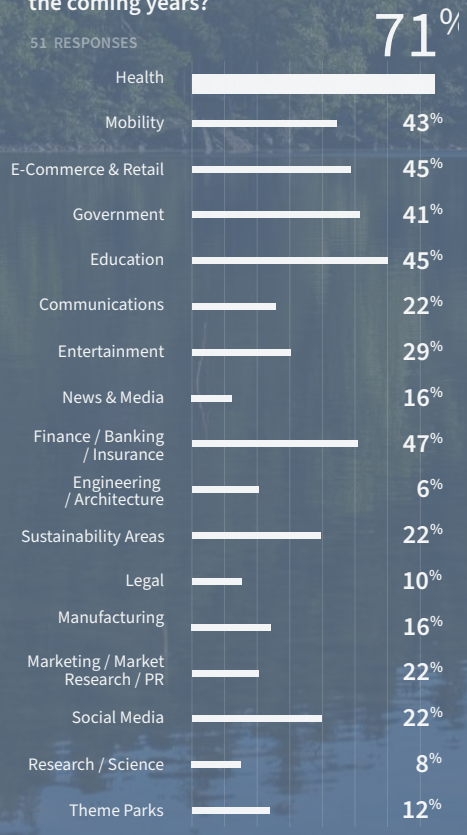
2026 Trend Survey

Will the nature of work in "Experience Design" change over the course of the next 10 years?

51 RESPONSES

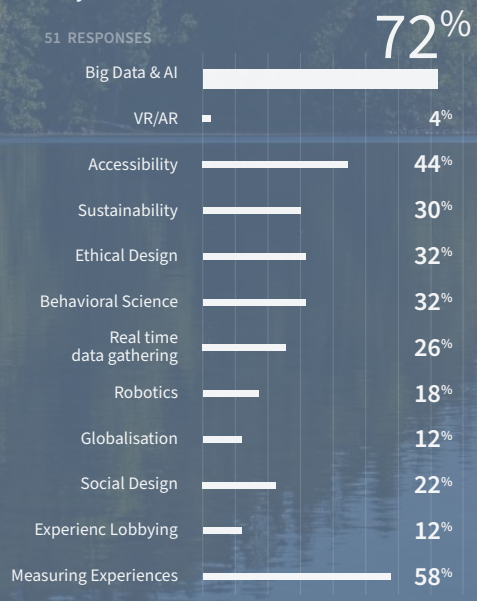
Which industries will be seeking for "Experience Design" support in the coming years?

51 RESPONSES



Which topics will be most important for you in 2026?

51 RESPONSES

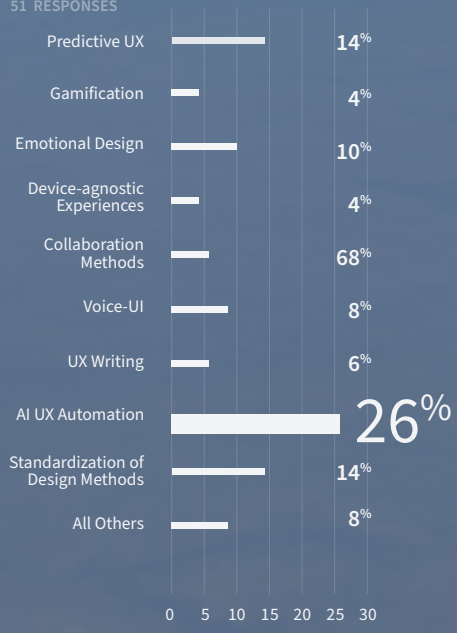


Will there be a higher demand for specialist or generalist UX designers?

51 RESPONSES

What will be the most important trend for you in the coming year?

51 RESPONSES



Research That Includes Everyone

Personas that represent real-world people, journeys, and universal design principles actively incorporate diverse cultural perspectives—from Tokyo professionals to rural Kenyan educators—while advancing neuro-inclusion for ADHD through flexible, real-time adaptive interfaces like dynamic focus modes and paced content delivery. Balancing local customs (e.g., gesture norms) with global equity goals, this evolves digital research into immersive ethnographies blending workshops and cross-border insights, secured by privacy tech like federated learning and emotional AI that personalizes via interaction cues without intrusion. "Liquid UX" multimodal flows—seamlessly shifting across voice, touch, gestures, and visuals, inspired by fluid neural networks—make healthcare apps intuitive for low-literacy symptom tracking or virtual classrooms engaging for neurodiverse global learners, directly tackling barriers like digital divides and language gaps with resilient, human-first designs..

Ethical AI, Human-Led

In a world where AI is evolving faster than ever, keeping humans firmly at the wheel is non-negotiable for truly human-centered design—ensuring technology amplifies our values rather than overriding them. This means scaling ethics beyond buzzwords into everyday practice with real-time dashboards that spotlight biases before they harm, provide one-click opt-outs for user control, and deliver explainable outputs in plain, jargon-free language that anyone can grasp, fostering transparency across cultures and skill levels. Human-in-the-loop (HITL) systems empower us to intervene and override AI-generated plans—whether in diagnostic tools that could misguide healthcare decisions or adaptive learning paths that shape education—while diverse, international review teams conduct regular checkpoints to verify cultural relevance, uphold universal rights, and prevent one-size-fits-all pitfalls. Emotional AI adds a compassionate layer by detecting frustration or confusion through anonymized biometrics like gaze patterns or voice stress, triggering instant simplifications such as streamlined interfaces or guided prompts, making experiences intuitive for neurodiverse users worldwide. For advanced agentic AI that acts more autonomously, rigorous stewardship protocols—decision logs for traceability, automated bias audits, human veto powers at critical junctures, and sustainability checks to minimize energy footprints—build enduring trust, turning potential risks into reliable tools for global equity and well-being in sectors from healthcare to education.

The Future

The future isn't something that just happens to us—it's something we have a hand in shaping, step by step, through the choices we make in design, technology, and collaboration. If 2026 can be about anything, I hope it's about aligning progress with purpose and designing systems that make everyday life fairer, simpler, and more humane. Small, thoughtful decisions at every level—how we craft tools, build teams, or define success—can ripple outward to create meaningful change. That, to me, is the real promise of UX: designing not just for what's next, but for what matters most.

2026 UX Framework

Core Theme	2026 Trend	Real-world Use Case
• Strategic Roadmaps	• AI Collaboration	• Predictive Healthcare with Human Oversight
• Inclusivity Research	• Neuro-Inclusion	• Adaptive Learning Across Cultures
• Ethical AI Oversight	• Agentic & Multimodal	• Veto-powered Diagnostics for Global Equity
• Sustainable Futures	• Green Simplicity	• Energy-smart Edtech with Eco-boundaries

UX IN 2030

Hannes Robier
Founder, UX Agency youspi GmbH

When Speed is Automated, Human Experience Becomes the Job

For the past decade, UX has been optimized for speed: faster sprints, faster prototyping, faster delivery. But by 2030, speed will no longer be a competitive advantage, **AI will make speed universal** . When everyone can generate flows, wireframes, and usability tests instantly, UX can no longer compete on production. The future of UX belongs to what cannot be automated : judgment, empathy, ethics, responsibility, and meaning. As products become more powerful, autonomous, and invisible, UX work shifts away from interfaces and toward human experience in its broadest sense , how people feel, decide, trust, and live with technology over time. This shift will radically change what UX jobs look like, which skills matter, and which roles quietly disappear.

THE UX SKILLS

...We Won't Need in 2030

As we saw the change of skills in the last 5 years out of the UX trend Report, there is a clear way – away from producing to creating real human value. So we see that by 2030, many skills that define UX roles today will still exist, but they will no longer define value.

Execution-heavy skills will be automated or commoditized , including:

- Tool-centered design skills (e.g. being "great at Figma")
- Manual wireframing and prototyping
- Standard usability testing and synthesis
- Applying known UX patterns and heuristics
- Pixel-level interface decision-making
- Basic user research planning and analysis

THE UX SKILLS

...That Become Essential in 2030

In contrast, human-centered skills increase in value as automation rises.

Essential skills for 2030 include:

- Systems thinking across products, services, and organizations
- Ethical judgment and responsibility in AI-driven systems
- Understanding human behavior, emotion, and mental load
- Long-term thinking beyond short-term metrics
- Facilitation, influence, and strategic decision-making
- Designing for trust, failure, and recovery
- Translating human values into business and system rule

In short: less making, more deciding.

The Rise of the Slow Designer

One of the most radical UX roles in 2030 is also the most countercultural: the Slow Designer .

While AI accelerates everything, the Slow Designer is responsible for slowing things down , asking hard questions before damage is done. This role focuses on reflection, second-order effects, and long-term human consequences. Not every experience should be optimized, automated, or scaled. The Slow Designer exists to protect depth, care, and humanity in a world obsessed with velocity.

The Top 10 UX Jobs for 2030

1. Human Experience Architect
Designs how technology fits into human life, not just products. Focuses on dignity, autonomy, emotional impact, and long-term wellbeing. Acts as a strategic voice for humans when efficiency threatens humanity.

2. Trust & Risk Experience Lead
Owns experiences where harm, confusion, or misuse can occur. Designs forconfidence, transparency, and recovery, not delight. This role exists because trust is fragile and cannot be automated.

3. Human Robotic / AI Relationship
Designer Designs how people emotionally and cognitively relate to AI systems over time. Focuses on boundaries, expectations, dependency, and healthy usage. Prevents over-trust, manipulation, and loss of agency.

4. Experience Strategist (Post-Product)
Works before products exist, shaping experience strategy at the portfolio and ecosystem level. Translates human needs into strategic constraints. Helps leaders decide what not to build .

5. Service & Systems Experience Designer
Designs across organizations, policies, channels, and technologies. Focuses on gaps, handoffs, and breakdowns between systems. Most bad experiences in 2030 happen between systems, this role owns that space.

6. Ethical Experience Designer
Turns ethics into practical, everyday decisions. Works on consent, fairness, accessibility, and power imbalance. Ensures systems are acceptable for humans, not just legal or efficient.

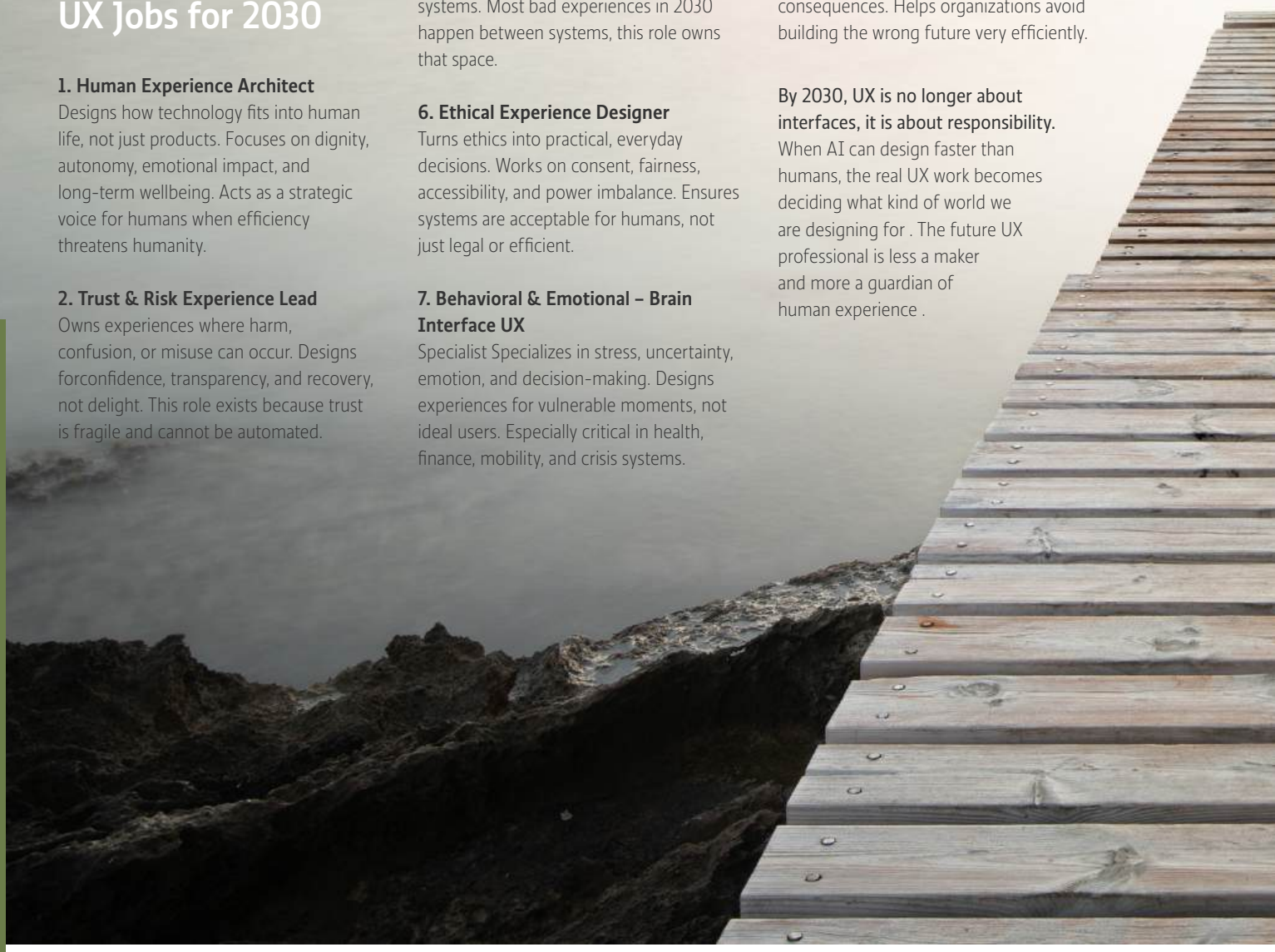
7. Behavioral & Emotional – Brain Interface UX
Specialist Specializes in stress, uncertainty, emotion, and decision-making. Designs experiences for vulnerable moments, not ideal users. Especially critical in health, finance, mobility, and crisis systems.

8. Experience Governance & Enablement Lead
Designs how experience decisions are made inside organizations. Focuses on incentives, ownership, and accountability. In 2030, UX quality depends more on governance than talent.

9. Slow Designer (Human Impact Guardian)
Intentionally slows down design decisions with irreversible impact. Questions whether something should exist, not just whether it can be built. Protects long-term human values in fast-moving systems.

10. Experience Futurist & Scenario Designer
Explores future human experiences before they happen. Uses scenarios and speculative thinking to surface unintended consequences. Helps organizations avoid building the wrong future very efficiently.

By 2030, UX is no longer about interfaces, it is about responsibility. When AI can design faster than humans, the real UX work becomes deciding what kind of world we are designing for . The future UX professional is less a maker and more a guardian of human experience .



WHEN UX WORK HURTS

Understanding Burnout in a Changing Profession

Javier Bargas-Avila
Co-Founder of Astrolabium (left)

Meltem Naz Kaso
Founder of Career with Mel (right)

Over the past year, UX professionals from all over the world opened up to us about the struggle to keep going. Their burnout stories were honest, vulnerable, and remarkably consistent. This article is our attempt to honor those voices and make sense of the patterns behind them.

Across the global UX community, burnout has moved from an individual concern to a structural trend. Our recent study, drawing from 20 in-depth interviews with UX professionals across 10 countries and 379 survey responses worldwide, indicates that burnout in UX is not primarily a workload issue. Rather, it's a reflection of deeper systemic patterns in how UX work is defined, supported, and valued. The findings show clear correlations between organizational instability, role ambiguity, and seniority-related pressures, revealing burnout as an early indicator of broader organizational tension rather than an isolated personal challenge.

Erosion of Meaning:

The Hidden Driver of UX Burnout

It is a common assumption that burnout is primarily caused by excessive workloads and individuals' struggle to cope with high-demand roles. But our data shows a different picture. UX professionals report that their highest stressors stem from inadequate support, shifting expectations, conflicting role definitions, and a gradual erosion of meaning in their work. Survey results highlight that "inadequate support from management" and "role ambiguity or conflicting expectations" are experienced by 76% of respondents, far above excessive workload (59%). Frequent reorganizations, shifts in product direction, and advocacy-intensive environments further complicate the ability to deliver high-quality work.

Reorganizations and Layoffs:

How Instability Is Wearing Down UX Teams

One of the strongest patterns in our data is a measurable connection between burnout severity and exposure to layoffs and organizational restructuring. Statistically significant correlations indicate that UXers who have experienced recent layoffs or leadership changes exhibit markedly higher burnout levels. Many describe the long-term effects of recurring cycles of contraction and change, reduced psychological safety, disrupted direction, and a persistent sense of uncertainty.

These findings challenge a common assumption within organizations that reorganizations and reductions in the workforce are operationally necessary but largely "cost-free". In practice, the human and economic price of these decisions is rarely calculated. Our data shows clear evidence that such disruptions have real-world consequences, not only diminishing focus, continuity, and productivity, but also affecting the mental health of the impacted teams. What is often treated as a structural adjustment reverberates as sustained emotional strain, undermining both individual well-being and the collective capacity to deliver high-quality work.

Leading Through the Storm:

Why Senior UX Roles Carry Greater Burnout Risk

Burnout risk increases with seniority. Our data show that senior UXers, both ICs and managers, experience higher levels of strain as they navigate expectations from two directions: pressure from above to deliver clarity, stability, and results, and pressure from below to provide guidance, emotional support, and protection from organizational turbulence. Many described this position as standing directly in the storm. They are expected to shield their teams, absorb emotional load, translate shifting priorities, and sustain momentum despite unclear or conflicting strategic direction. Yet they are rarely given the support structures or psychological safety

> UX burnout is not a symptom of disengagement. Instead, it is tightly interwoven with a deep commitment to craft, quality, and user advocacy.

required to shoulder these responsibilities. Over time, this combination of upward and downward pressure creates a structural vulnerability: they are stretched thin, often to the point where even highly resilient leaders begin to crack, pushing them toward exhaustion and, ultimately, burnout.

Burnout and the Care for Craft

UX burnout is not a symptom of disengagement. Instead, it is tightly interwoven with a deep commitment to craft, quality, and user advocacy. Many participants report that their emotional fatigue arises not from apathy but from caring intensely while lacking the autonomy, recognition, or conditions to deliver meaningful work. Frequent reorganizations and layoffs further erode this foundation, disrupting teams, breaking continuity, and forcing UXers to rebuild trust, context, and product understanding repeatedly. The study highlights the tension between high cognitive load, fragmented attention, recurrent structural disruption, and the aspiration to maintain rigor in environments that reward speed over depth. In these conditions, caring deeply becomes a source of strain rather than a source of strength.

Prevention vs. Reduction:

Two Distinct Pathways

A key insight is the difference between preventative and reactive practices. Respondents with mild or no burnout symptoms reported active boundary-setting, hobbies, and personal creative projects as stabilizing factors. In contrast, those with medium to extreme burnout relied more on reactive measures like extended leave, therapy, or physical exercise. This distinction points to an important organizational implication: prevention cannot be outsourced to individuals alone. It requires structural clarity, sustainable expectations, and support systems, not only individual resilience.

What Organizations Can Learn from These Findings

The broader reflection from this research is clear: Burnout is not an individual failing. It is a system-level indicator of misalignment between expectations, support structures, and the realities of UX practice.

When UX Work Hurts

(continued)

Sharper Edges for Neurodivergent UXers

A rather serendipitous finding of this study is that neurodivergent participants described facing amplifi ed challenges: higher cognitive load, increased challenges to suppress stimming, inconsistent support, frequent misunderstanding of their working styles up to losing skills they previously had. Without adequate accommodations, these UXers report more intense burnout symptoms and greater difficulty in recovery. Given that this study was not explicitly focused on neurodivergence, these insights point to an important but underexplored area, one that warrants deeper, dedicated research to fully understand the patterns and their implications.

Our study highlights several opportunities for organizations:

- **Clarifying roles and expectations to reduce cognitive and emotional load**
- **Strengthening leadership responsibility for shielding teams during uncertainty**
- **Investing in work environments that support deep focus and meaningful contribution**
- **Recognizing that work quality depends on psychological safety and organizational stability**
- **Designing preventative infrastructures, not only remediation pathways**
- **Expanding support for neurodivergent employees as part of inclusive practice**

Looking Forward

As the UX Trend Report emphasizes, the future of UX increasingly depends on human-centric leadership, systemic thinking, and environments where UX professionals can bring their best to both craft and strategy. Burnout, in this context, is not simply a personal health issue; it is a signal that organizations must examine how they shape the conditions for meaningful, sustainable UX work.

For leaders, teams, and practitioners, the question becomes: How can we anchor ourselves and each other when the system shifts around us?

This study suggests that the answer lies not only in individual practice but in a renewed commitment to the structures, expectations, and cultures that allow UXers to thrive in times of change.

Our work is just a starting point. If you're a UX practitioner, leader, or researcher who wants to contribute, learn more, or collaborate, we would love to hear from you.

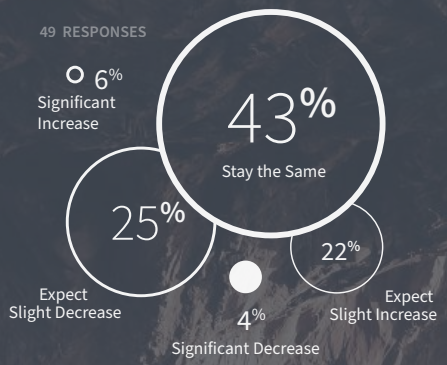
2026 Trend Survey

What skills will "Experience Designers" need to develop in the coming years?

52 RESPONSES

How do you expect your companies "Experience Design" budget to change in the next year (in 2026)?

49 RESPONSES

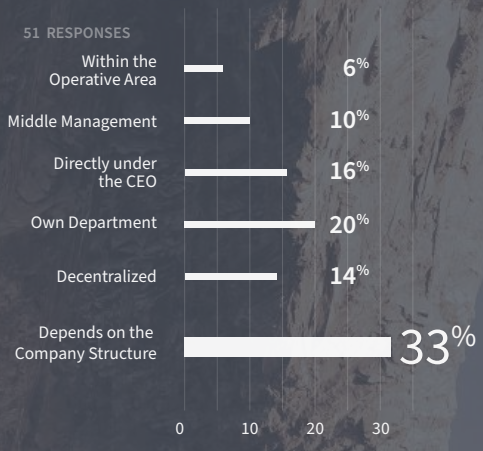


Current Country of Residence

49 RESPONSES

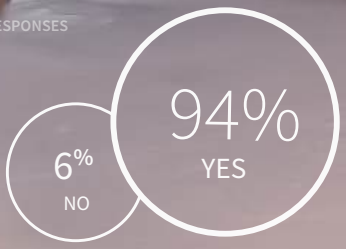
Which department should "Experience Design" located in?

51 RESPONSES



My work is related to Design activities (e.g. Managing, producing, ideating, etc of products, services, processes etc.)

49 RESPONSES



The Human-Centered Approach:

Why UX Is Becoming the Key to Credibility in the Industry

Claudia Bruckschwaiger & Clemens Lutsch (left)

Managing Partner Swohlwahr, Trend Report i50 and Strategy

Abstract

As automation and AI advance, the stakeholder's trust that technology is safe, ethical, and genuinely useful has become a core advantage... and a liability. If technology is faulty and fragile, not only is work affected, but entire organizations. Future organizations will reframe success around human-centeredness, sustainability, and resilience. Those cornerstones are outlined in the Industry 5.0 approach, an extension of Industry 4.0, which focused on smart industry, connectivity and digitization. In this landscape, UX is the everyday proof of credibility, showing whether human-centered intent is real for users, customers, employees, and regulators.

Background:

From MVP to Human-Centered Value

When we talk about "credibility in industry," we mean industry in the broadest sense—not just a specific domain. And that also means that UX, as a professional field, must prove itself in this context within industry as well. We know the key themes of recent years: digitalization, technological innovations, smart devices, cross-platform solutions, and ubiquitous connectivity. These are cornerstones that can be summarized under the title "Industry 4.0." But if we look more closely, it has mostly been about technological progress, the ability to do things differently through technology. Added value arises from automation, rationalization, savings, and speed. But if we consider added value holistically, we must recognize that added value is meaningless if the user doesn't perceive it. Because only through users and customers (and yes, customers are also users, but not every user is a customer) can sustainable economic and social success be achieved. A modern industry must therefore place people at its center; it must be sustainable and resilient in the face of market, societal, environmental, and technological challenges. This approach falls under the umbrella of the trend known as "Industry 5.0". Industry 5.0 complements Industry 4.0 by placing user and worker well-being at the center of production and aligning technology with broader societal goals while respecting planetary boundaries. It explicitly shifts emphasis from narrow business and economic to user and stakeholder value, asserting that industry should provide prosperity "beyond jobs and growth." This is not superficial or cosmetic; it's a governance stance that treats human-centeredness, sustainability, and resilience as mutually reinforcing pillars of competitiveness.

Examples of this include new work concepts that reflect the realities of working from home, mobile working, and performance-oriented work (achieving results) as opposed to time-based work (starting at 9 a.m., finishing at 5 p.m.). Industry 5.0 translates the principles of user-centricity, sustainability, and resilience into production practice: ergonomic design, advanced assistance systems, technology-supported information processing and decision-making, and the reduction or elimination of heavy physical labor. Continuous professional development, digital tools (e.g., AR/XR, digital twins, speech recognition), and the automation of repetitive and monotonous processes are considered factors for well-being, quality, and productivity. Companies that merely claim to be addressing these issues strategically and acknowledging the resulting added value will find it increasingly difficult to ignore the obvious competitive advantages of Industry 5.0. Credibility is no longer based solely on claims of innovation, but on tangible results for users. User experience (UX) is where stakeholders (including not only users but also business leaders) experience whether these results are actually achieved. Remember: companies don't fail because they follow a sound human-centered approach, but because of poor management decisions!

The Human-Centered Approach

(continued)

The Credibility Shift:

Why UX Now Carries the Proof

Credibility, and thus its impact on business success, arises at interfaces, at interactive systems – where people interact with complex systems, where risks must be reduced, and where responsibilities are relevant. The human-centered approach of Industry 5.0 requires the following from these interfaces:

- **Clear accountability for human-centered quality in all processes, products, services, and systems of the organization at the decision-making level.**
- **Clear responsibilities for the professional quality of all related goals and tasks, as well as decision-making authority, which directly benefits the well-being of users and employees and ensures safe workflows.**
- **Reduction of cognitive load.**
- **Reduction of physical load.**
- **Recognition and inclusion of creative methods and approaches.**
- **Transparency in ethical decisions (data protection, accessibility, traceability) to align daily interactions with the benefit for all stakeholders and not just shareholder profit.**
- **Support through assistance systems, automation (where it provides relief), robotics, etc.**

Organizations that pursue a human-centered approach as a strategic element emphasize identifying needs and precisely defining requirements—thus avoiding "solutions in search of a problem." This manifests itself in a UX that feels relevant, respectful, and reliable. These very indications are interpreted by stakeholder groups and users as a sign of interest.

Human-Centered Strategy:

Turning Values into Operations

A credible, modern corporate strategy aligns processes, systems, services, and products with the actual needs and capabilities of the market and, consequently, of the actual users – based on recognized standards rather than fashionable buzzwords or smoke and mirrors. It is no longer sufficient to merely satisfy financial metrics, which often only provide a snapshot of performance and are hardly suitable for revealing long-term developments or momentum. Especially in the face of economic and ecological challenges, exacerbated by the upheavals brought about by AI, added value must be based on sound standards. This not only avoids unnecessary costs but also makes it possible to utilize people within the company in a way that maximizes their value and recognizes them as an asset that enables stability and resilience. Loss of manpower is synonymous with loss of competence and experience – both of which are becoming fundamental business risks due to demographic change.

Industry 5.0 is the engine for new value creation. This is made possible by the following paradigms, to which all stakeholders in an organization should adhere:

- **First, needs and requirements. Act on the basis of verified user and stakeholder requirements to avoid waste and risks.**
- **Standards-compliant practice. Structure processes and work according to established human-centered standards. The use of technologies, the application of AI, design decisions, and portfolio planning must reflect ethical intentions and operational realities, not empty marketing messages.**
- **KPIs. Industry 5.0 is a performance function. Human-Centeredness, sustainability, and resilience are growth qualities that have a measurable impact on success. This can be measured using reliable and valid KPIs and linked to risk minimization.**

This operating model reduces the gap between values and implementation—because it is UX that makes the values, the offering, the quality, and the brand tangible for users every day.

Conclusion:

UX will be your "Credibility Engine"

Industry 5.0 fosters credibility where people, technology, and tangible added value converge. By jointly focusing on human-centered, sustainable, and reliable results, an intuitive and inclusive user experience becomes possible, encompassing far more than design systems, prototypes, or clever prompts. The future demands adaptive organizations that can keep pace with social, economic, and environmental dynamics. Companies will demonstrate their trustworthiness through new, meaningful KPIs, rather than simply proclaiming it. UX professionals will be tasked with ensuring that the well-being, resilience, and sustainability of users and employees are truly lived. This represents a return to the core qualities of UX, which lie in applied science combined with creative methods and solutions. Only in this way will credibility become a lasting competitive advantage.

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