

Shaping the GSG Product Design Team

Data-driven problem solvers

Project timeline

September 2021 - present

Client

Global Savings Group

My Contribution

Design lead, team manager, hiring manager

Team

Product Designers, User Researchers, Design System Specialists

Context

In 2021, GSG's Product Design function operated in silos, with two separate teams, white-label and cashback, functioned independently with minimal crossover. The white-label team, consisting of two part-time Product Design students, two midweight Product Designers, a User Researcher, and a team lead, shouldered the responsibility of maintaining and developing offerings for a staggering 47 brands, all while facing tight deadlines and complex product needs. The cashback team, though slightly larger with a junior, three midweights, a senior and a lead, contended with similar challenges. Here, the Product Designers functioned in a hybrid product/brand role, focusing on research for various brands. However, limited collaboration across the teams meant they primarily operated as "artworkers," with minimal strategic input into product development. This resulted in inconsistencies in user experience and a lack of support for PMs.

Challenge:

GSG needed a design powerhouse. As the company aimed for greater market share, a unified team with deeper product knowledge and strategic thinking was crucial. It was clear that there was a need for Product Designers to have deeper market and business knowledge, greater focus on user research, more engagement with strategic product development, and a meaningful culture of collaboration and interconnection.

The teams are geographically dispersed across London, Paris, Berlin and Munich, with very different cultures and communication styles. There was no consistency in terms of career progression or professional development, and as such Product Designers were stagnating in roles that were comfortable and offered insufficient challenge.

Objectives

Establish a Product Design function that best serves the needs of GSG and our consumers. Merge both Product Design teams (happened early 2022) and create one single team that delivers exceptional design work and strategic value to the business.

- Empower Product Designers to develop their skills and expertise through training, development and increased opportunities.
- Become data-led by putting user research at the heart of our decision-making through access to data and research tools.
- Deepen the knowledge of the team by adding a senior layer to the hierarchy, supporting the more junior team members.

01

How do we establish a true team culture within a siloed environment?

02

Can we establish an environment where excellence is expected and delivered?

03

Design is subjective, so how do we even start to measure success?

Key Success Measures

Skills

The Product Designers now have greater skills across data and research, plus technical Design System topics.

D.S.

The Product Designers have now fully onboarded on the Design System and are serving Product solutions at pace.

Velocity

Thanks to the optimised workflow, all Product Designers can create, iterate and test more quickly than before.

Quality

The team now deliver work of greater quality with less time spent in feedback loops and QA.

01

How do we establish a true team culture within a siloed environment?

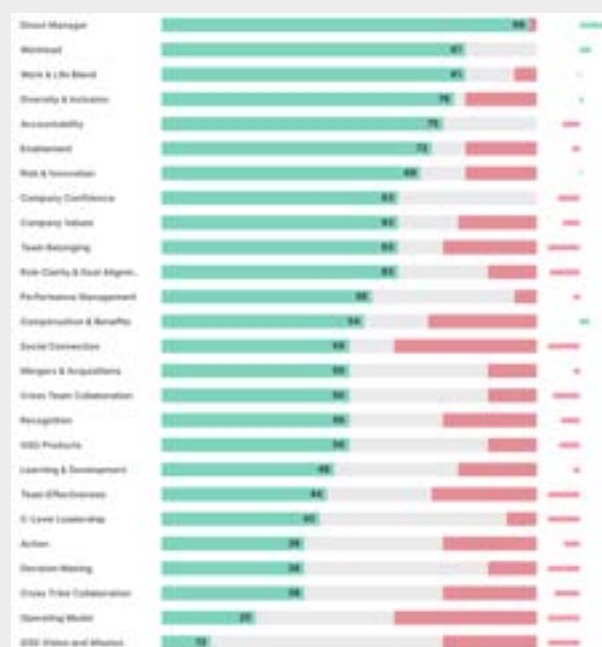
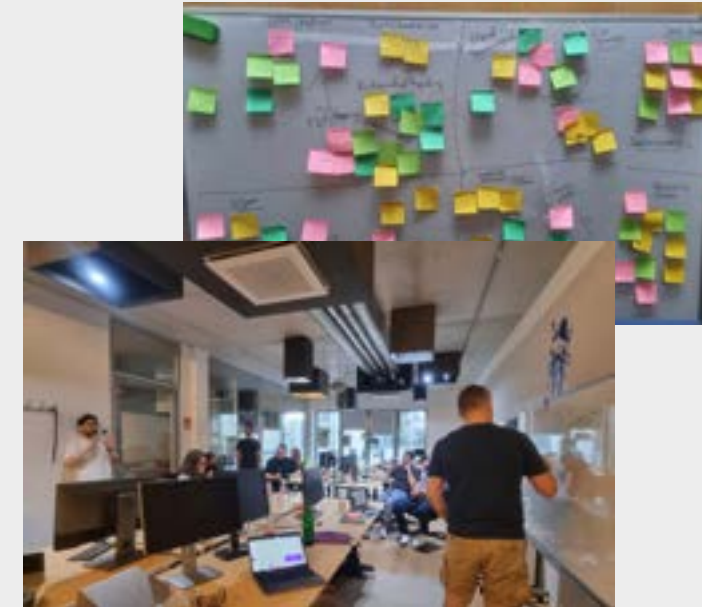
Establishing a true team culture is challenging, not least because the tangible benefits aren't immediately obvious. The challenges with this topic included the very siloed team approach, a language barrier (the business language for GSG is English but for the brand Product teams it was originally French), and a reluctance to engage with the other team due to a perceived lack of crossover.

Painpoint: with the Product Design teams having operated independently of each other for so long, and on separate product offerings, it was difficult to get them to find common ground and engage with each other in a meaningful manner. There were some behavioural challenges to be addressed also, as each Product team had their own ways of working, on top of the expected challenges of running a multi-cultural team.

Proposal: merge the teams to create a single, holistic Product Design powerhouse to tackle all business needs.

Action: the Product Design teams merged in early February 2022. I quickly established regular team rituals, including work flow mapping and deep dives, and arranged an in-person event for the team to develop trust and build relationships. Learning on the great wealth of skills and expertise within the team to develop in-team learning, there is now a strong mentoring culture within the team, with seniors and leads actively working with more junior members of the team as part of their own role expectations, improving skills for both parties. Following a lot of effort, there is now an active feedback culture within the team: Product Designers now actively share work in progress (this was never done before) and get meaningful feedback and guidance from their peers, enabling them to iterate and produce better quality work in a more efficient manner.

Outcome: the Product Design team now acts as a holistic unit, with meaningful communication and intentional collaboration. There is a culture of knowledge-sharing that supports individuals at all levels to grow their skills and depth of knowledge to support their ongoing growth and development. Team engagement scores have markedly improved over the past two years (going from 40% to 48%), attrition rates has dropped, and the quality of output has improved as noted by PMs and stakeholders across the business.



02

Can we establish an environment where excellence is expected and delivered?

Excellence can be a moving target, especially in Product Design. We faced issues with output quality, lack of creative problem-solving, and disengagement. Some of the Product Designers were under-performing, causing frustration among the team.

Painpoint: establishing standards of excellence is crucial for the team to improve and solve consumer problems effectively. Design is integral to product development at GSG, but engagement was lacking.

Proposal: audit the team, identify strengths and weaknesses, set development goals, and address under-performance.

Action: I conducted deep-dive sessions with each team member to understand their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and areas for development. Feedback from PMs, Engineers, and Product Design peers provided a complete picture. I developed a Skills Matrix to identify the necessary hard and soft skills needed to ensure success in role, and established standards of excellence based on QA, process and delivery. Under-performance was addressed to set clear expectations for the team. An under-performing Product Designer was identified through peer feedback and my own observations. Despite intense efforts to help them improve, their disruptive behaviour persisted, and they were transitioned out of the business. This was necessary for the team's ongoing success and well-being, and while personally uncomfortable, was an absolute non-negotiable.

Outcome: With a focus on excellence, clear development expectations, and consequences for under-performance, the team now delivers above and beyond expectations. The iterative process is more streamlined, reducing errors and focusing on solutions that meet business and consumer needs.

It may be a cliché but handling uncomfortable situations is par for the course as a team leader and one of the most critical for the ongoing health of the team.

03

Design is subjective, so how do we even start to measure success?

One of the biggest challenges in any design team is measuring success and proving the team's value to the business. The Product Design team was no exception, lacking data and measurable insights, leading to questions about their impact and value. Product Designers felt they were making recommendations based on gut feelings without critical data to back up their choices.

Painpoint: without data and analytics, feedback was subjective, making it hard to pinpoint successes and areas for growth. Product peers often doubted the validity of design decisions, slowing delivery and eroding their confidence in their own work.

Proposal: instil a data-led approach to Product Design, using analytics, user research, and measurable insights to gauge success and provide tangible confidence in design recommendations.

Action: to enable the Product Designers to be data-led, I established a training and development plan to ensure all team members had a baseline level of knowledge. This prevented the Product Designers from becoming data-limited and afraid to make decisions without extensive research. Establishing research and data insights as supportive tools allowed the team to maximise their value while making informed design decisions. The team engaged with PMs to understand the available data and analytical tools for their products. GSG's dedicated Data Team provided insights on customer engagement, click-through rates, and user events. Each member of the team received training on these tools and ongoing instruction to use the data to inform their design process. I established a culture of product accountability, expecting each of the Product Designers to be subject-matter experts with market and product data insights to support their decisions. This shift was well-received by the wider business but remains an active focus within the Product Design Team.

Outcome: incorporating data and analytics into their process has boosted confidence within the team. The Product Designers can now track and measure the impact of their work, better understanding how it affects consumers and the business, making them increasingly valuable to GSG.

