HOW WE DOCUMENT 2024

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zeroheight

HELLO

design system friends!

welcome

Welcome to **How We Document**, our much-anticipated annual report highlighting the dynamic world of design systems. This is our third year of the report, and we jumped into the deep end of design systems and documentation by gathering insights and experiences from you, the heart of the design systems community. Over 300 of you participated to help us establish where things are, where we're going, and where we need to be.

This report goes beyond data. We offer actions to take and ideas for applying these insights. Whether you and your team are seasoned experts or just starting out, our findings can guide you through every step of the journey. Here's a glimpse of what awaits you:

Benchmark your progress and set goals: Discover where your design system stands along the path of design system maturity. Gain insights and practical tools to help you measure your achievements, set realistic goals, and understand the metrics that matter.

Enhance your team's workflows: We unpacked the common challenges design systems face and uncovered what teams do to optimize their workflow. Learn about options to hone workflows, enhance collaboration, and level up your design system.

Stay ahead of the curve: The design systems landscape constantly evolves, and staying informed is vital. Our data-driven insights offer a clear view of current trends and future directions, equipping you with the knowledge to stay ahead and inspire your next big leap!

How We Document is more than a report—it's a testament to our collective growth and the endless possibilities that lie ahead in design system documentation. A huge thank you to everyone who contributed to this survey, making **How We Document** a rich resource for all.

So, grab a cup of your favorite beverage, settle in, and let's dig into the insights that await us!

x,

zeroheight

Some fine print

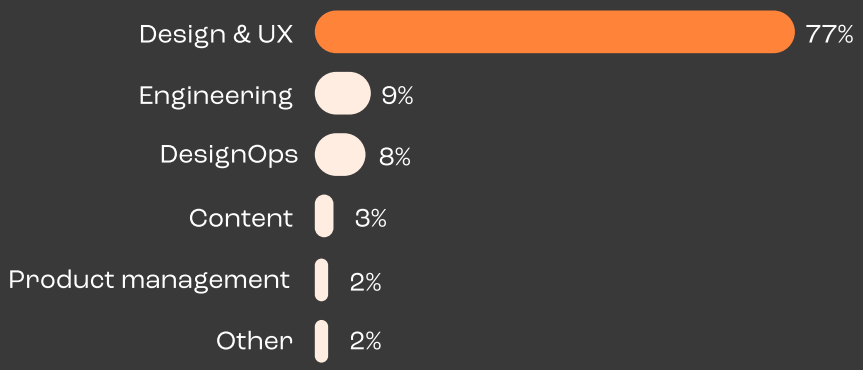
For the report, we rounded all percentages to the nearest whole number. Some totals might slightly go over or fall short of 100%. We indicate where respondents could select multiple answers; total percentages may exceed 100%.

contents

who took this SURVEY

Primary disciplines

In our survey, the majority of participants (77%) are from design roles. Engineering and DesignOps each make up about 8%, with Content, Product Management, and other disciplines at around 2%.



Job titles that include “design systems”

When we looked closer at the data, there were 175 unique job titles from our respondents. Of those, 15% of them explicitly include “design system” in the name, which we list in this report. We omitted levels (e.g., senior), but created a separate section when “lead” appeared as a noun in the title. At some organizations, leads may be in a leadership role without people management responsibilities.

Top tip

Job seekers—search for positions that have “design system” in the title. This could indicate seriousness behind design systems.

Hiring managers—include “design system” in titles or descriptions to attract specialized candidates.

Job titles

Design

Product Designer, Design System

Design System UX Designer

Design System Designer

UI Designer Senior & Design System

UX/UI Design System

UI Designer/Design System Ops

Interaction Designer for Design System

Operations

Design System & Design Ops Manager

Engineering

Design Systems Engineer

Design System Tech Lead

Design System Front-End Developer

Design Leads

Design Lead, Design System

Design System Lead

Design System Team Lead

Lead Design System

Lead UI Head Design Systems

Management

Associate Director, Design System

Head of Design System

Manager, Design System

Portfolio Manager: Design System & Standards

Product Management/Owner

Design System Product Owner

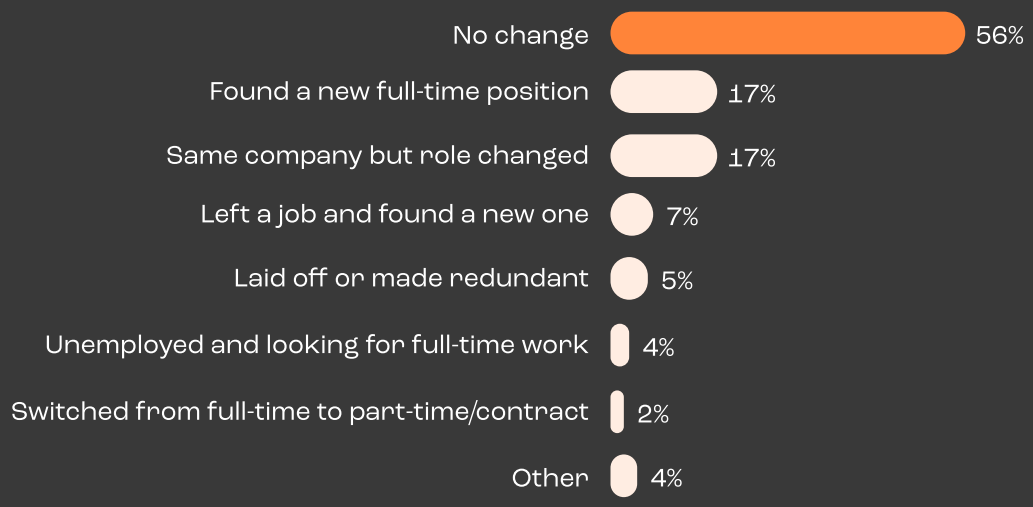
Product Manager, Design System

Design System Lead & Product Owner

For titles that don't include "design system" most of them are your typical design, engineering, management, and content titles.

Employment trends in the design systems community

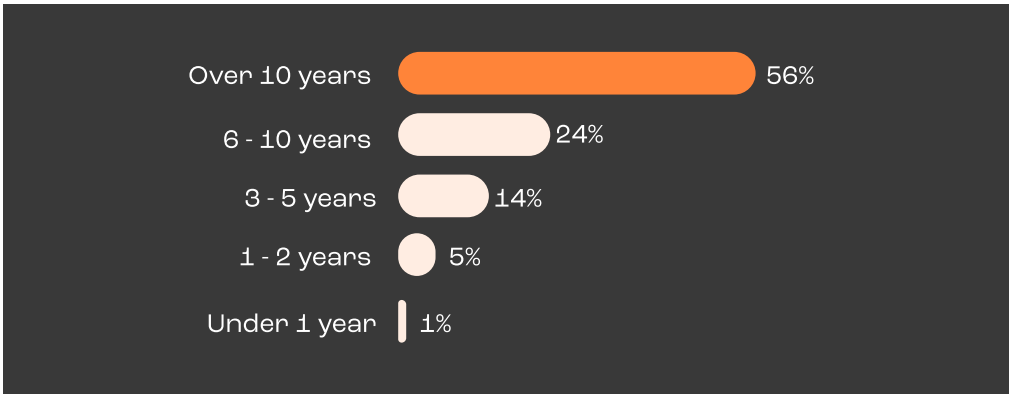
Despite multiple layoffs in the tech industry in late 2022 and 2023, most of our respondents (56%) reported stable employment. Interestingly, 17% found new full-time jobs, indicating potential market positivity. Another 17% transitioned to different roles within the same company. Smaller numbers reported moving to other companies (7%), being laid off (5%), facing unemployment (3%), or switching to part-time or contract work (2%). While we're not seeing the hiring sprees of 2021, this data suggests some opportunities for growth and internal mobility.



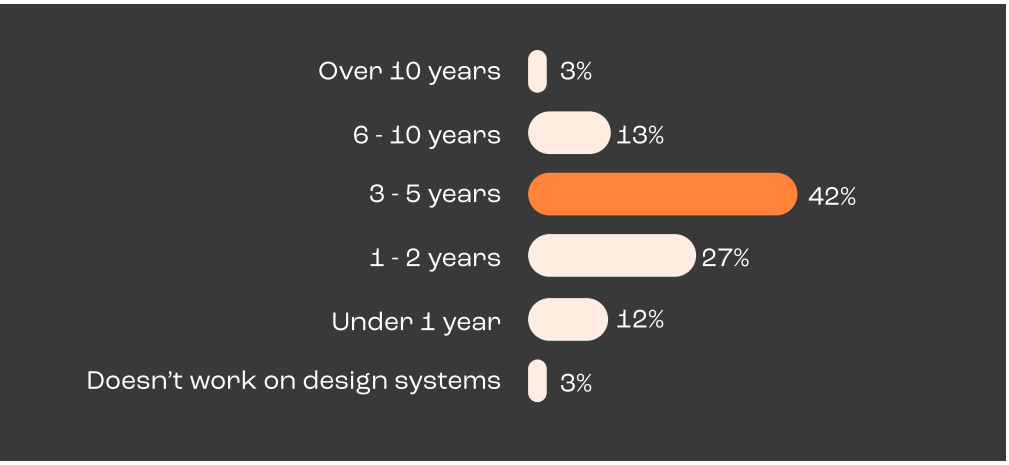
Our design system experience

Overall professional experience

Most survey participants have over ten years of professional experience, similar to last year. Although this might suggest design systems are more suited to experienced professionals, our deeper findings indicate otherwise.



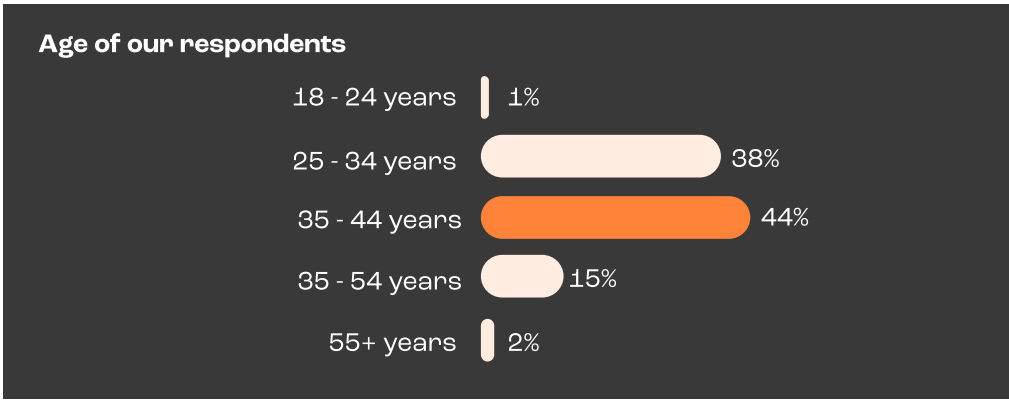
Design system experience

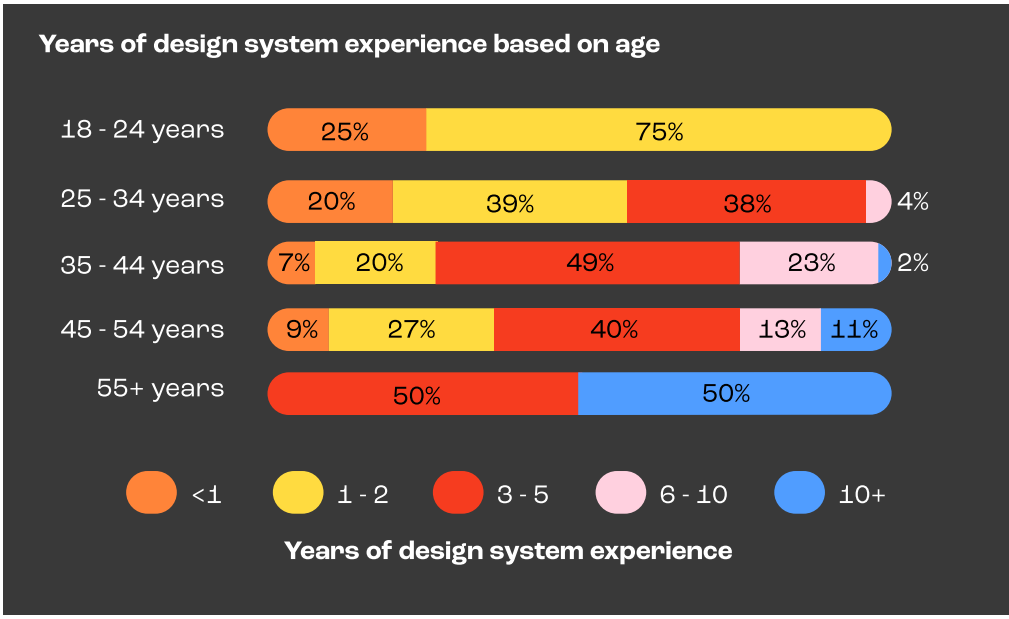


Nearly half (42%) of respondents have 3-5 years of experience working with design systems. An overwhelming majority (81%) have 5 years or less experience with design systems. Considering Atomic Design celebrated its tenth anniversary last year, these numbers highlight a slow adoption rate of methodologies in the industry.

More seasoned professionals work on design systems

The largest age group among our respondents is 35-44 years old (44%), followed by 25-34 years old (38%). This trend is similar to last year and suggests that more experienced professionals often manage design system projects due to their complexity and the need for cross-functional coordination. In higher age categories (35 years and older), most people have 3-5 years of experience, though many have less. Encouragingly, most respondents, regardless of age, are relatively new to design systems. So, newcomers to the field aren't far behind.





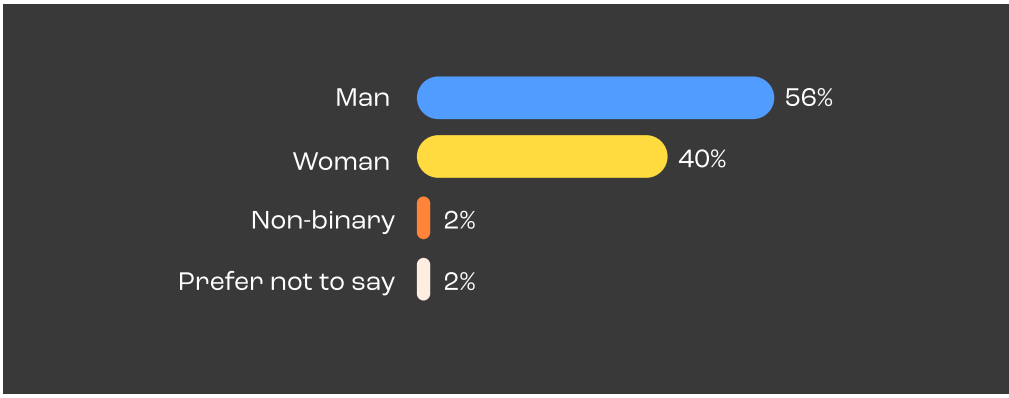
Top tip

If you're interested in getting involved, it's evident you can build a career in it. Check out "Thoughts to consider when pursuing a career in design systems" by Taylor Cashdan and "Episode #6: Design Systems Careers" from Design Systems WTF for other insights on working specifically on design systems.

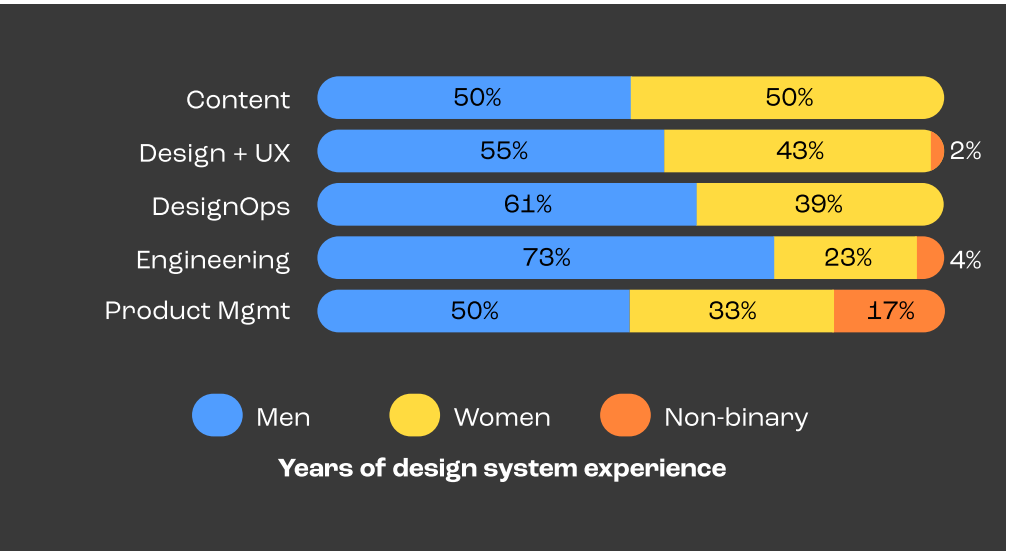
Gender

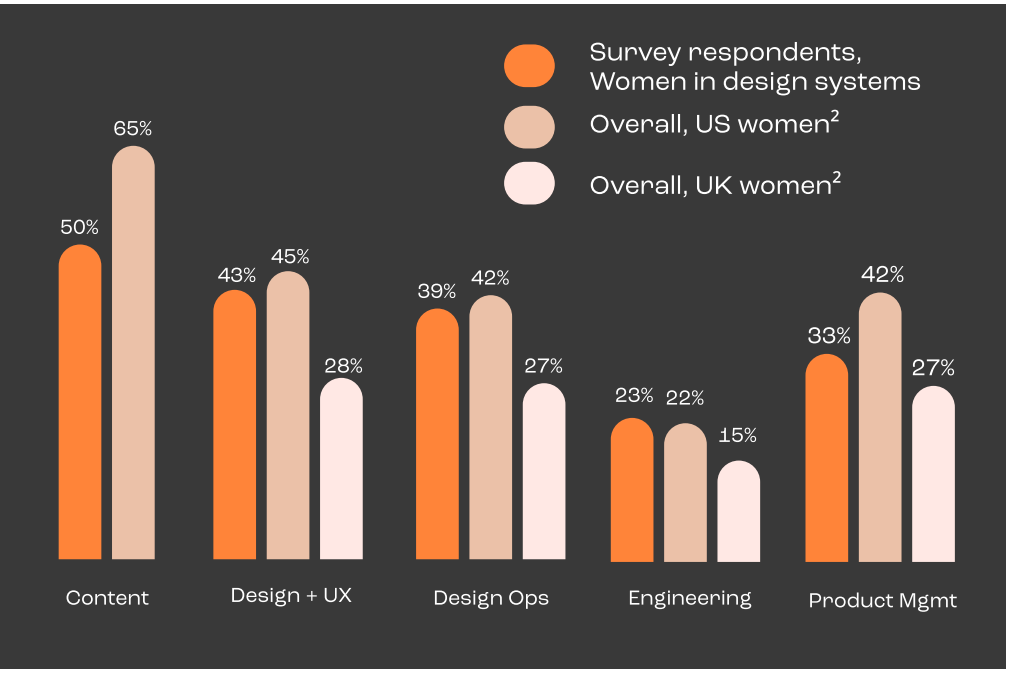
Gender of respondents

Consistent with last year's findings, most of our respondents identified as male (56%), with a significant representation of women at 40%. This is notably higher than the broader tech industry, where women constitute only 27% in the US, 21% in the UK, and 31% in the EU.[1]



Gender distribution across design system roles





A deeper dive reveals that the representation of women in design system roles aligns closely with their overall representation in these roles in the US, and exceeds their representation in similar roles in the UK. It's great to see that women's representation in design systems aligns with or surpasses what's typical for the tech field. Unfortunately, we couldn't find equivalent data for the EU, but we are keen to understand gender representation in tech internationally.

[1]Women in the broader tech industry sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics's 2022 data, Office for National Statistics data from July 2022 to June 2023, and Eurostat's Employed persons by detailed occupation (ISCO-08 two-digit level) from December 14, 2023.

[2]National data sources: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022 data set "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," and Nomis by the Office for National Statistics July 2022-June 2023 data set, "Annual Population Survey - Employment by occupation by sex."

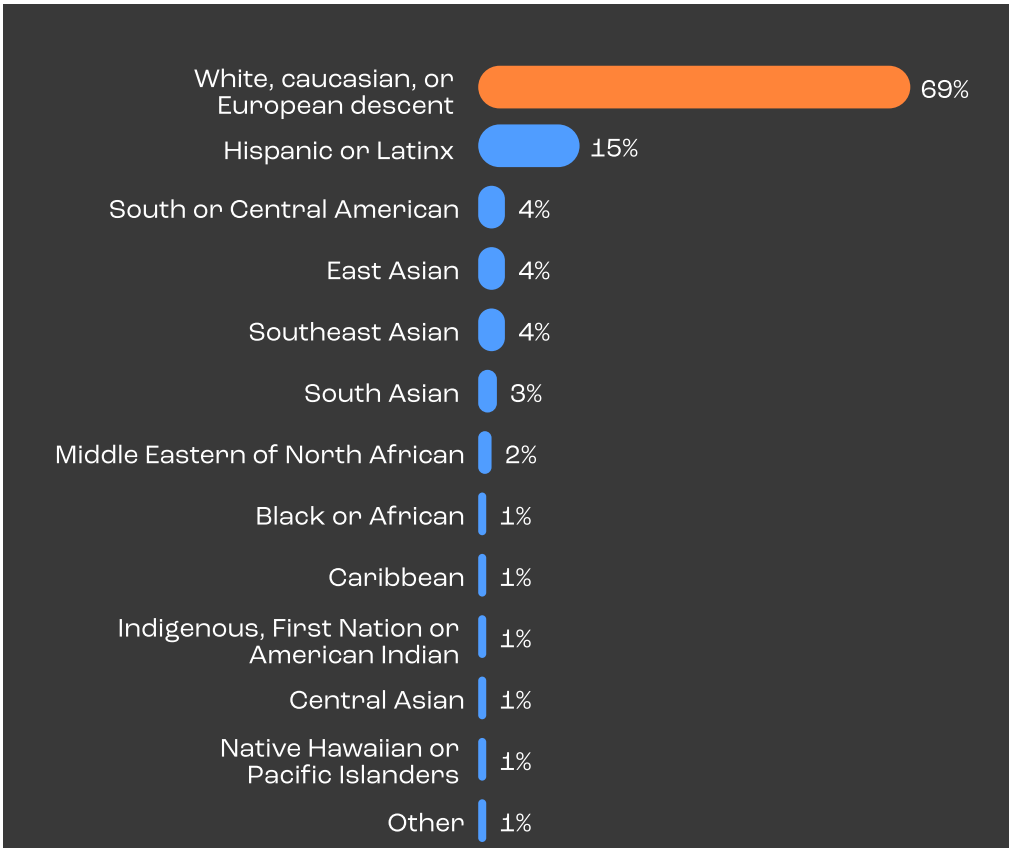
The urgent need for greater ethnic diversity in design systems

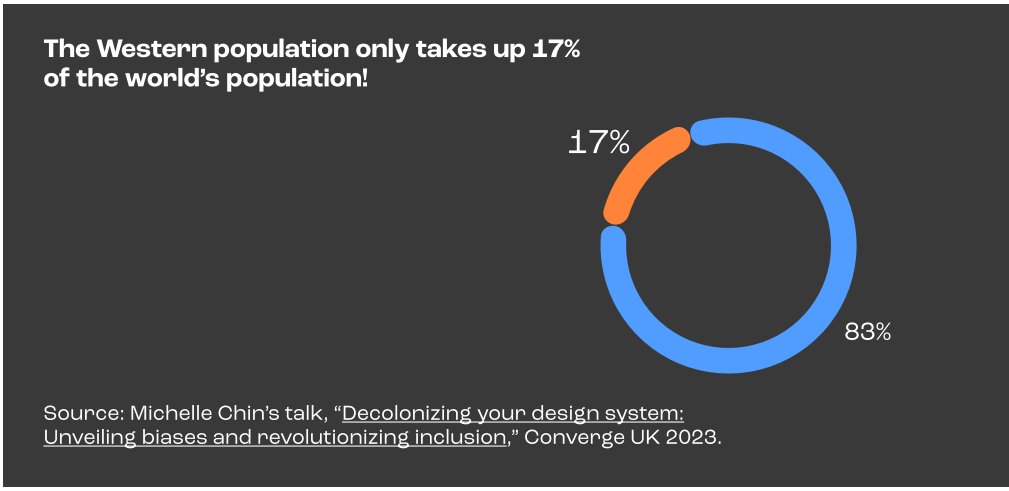
Our survey results this year echo last year's findings, showing a predominant representation of respondents who identify as white, Caucasian, or of European descent. Despite the option for respondents to select multiple ethnic identities, other groups were significantly underrepresented.

We often widely recognize the importance of diverse teams for the breadth of perspectives and richness of ideas they bring. However, considering that Westerners represent only 17% of the global population, the current state of ethnic diversity in design systems points to a substantial gap. This disparity raises critical questions about our collective efforts to promote equity and representation.

The design field often emphasizes empathy and inclusion. Yet, these findings prompt us to reflect:

- What proactive steps are we taking to foster diversity?
- How can we, as a community, contribute to making the discipline more inclusive and representative of the world's ethnic diversity?





Top tip

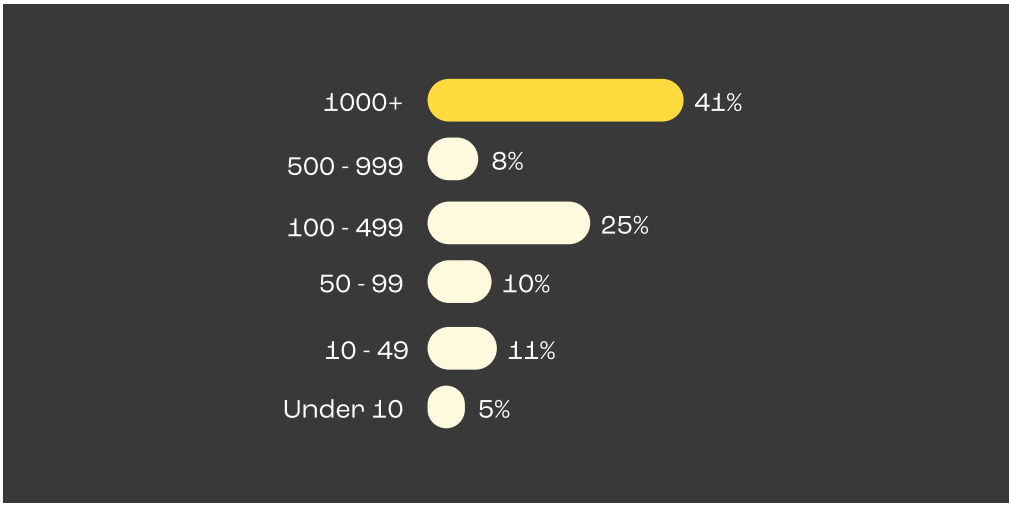
Taking active steps to improve ethnic diversity in design systems might not be straightforward or can take more effort. It's worth trying and a great way to show active allyship.

your

ORGANIZATION

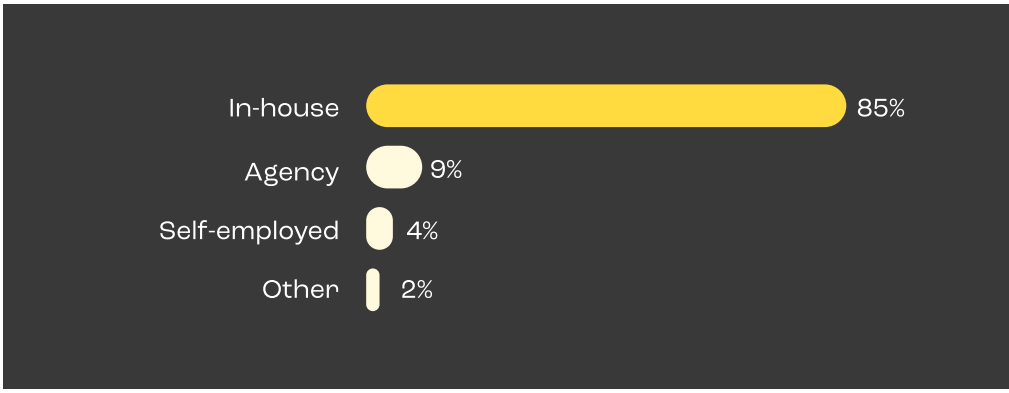
How big is your organization?

Our survey reveals a diverse range of company sizes among respondents. The majority are from large enterprises with over 1000 employees, but there's also significant representation from mid-sized companies, small businesses, and startups. We aim to provide insights through the lens of company size to offer you more relevant information.



In-house vs. agency

A significant 85% of respondents are part of in-house teams, with a smaller portion working in agencies or are self-employed. To simplify responses, we asked agency employees to focus on the primary design system they worked with in 2023 for this survey.

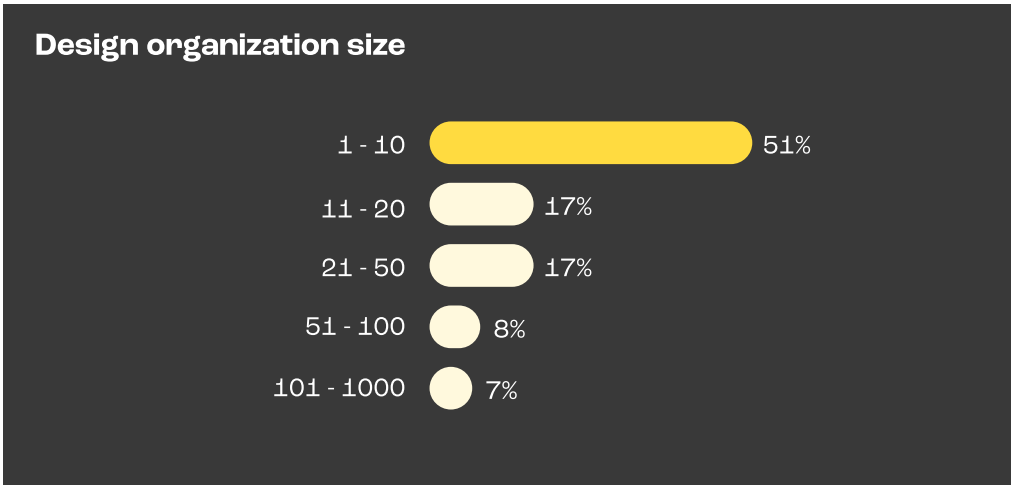


How many design systems did agency orgs work on?

0-40	177	6	3	3
Range	Total	Average per agency	Median	Mode

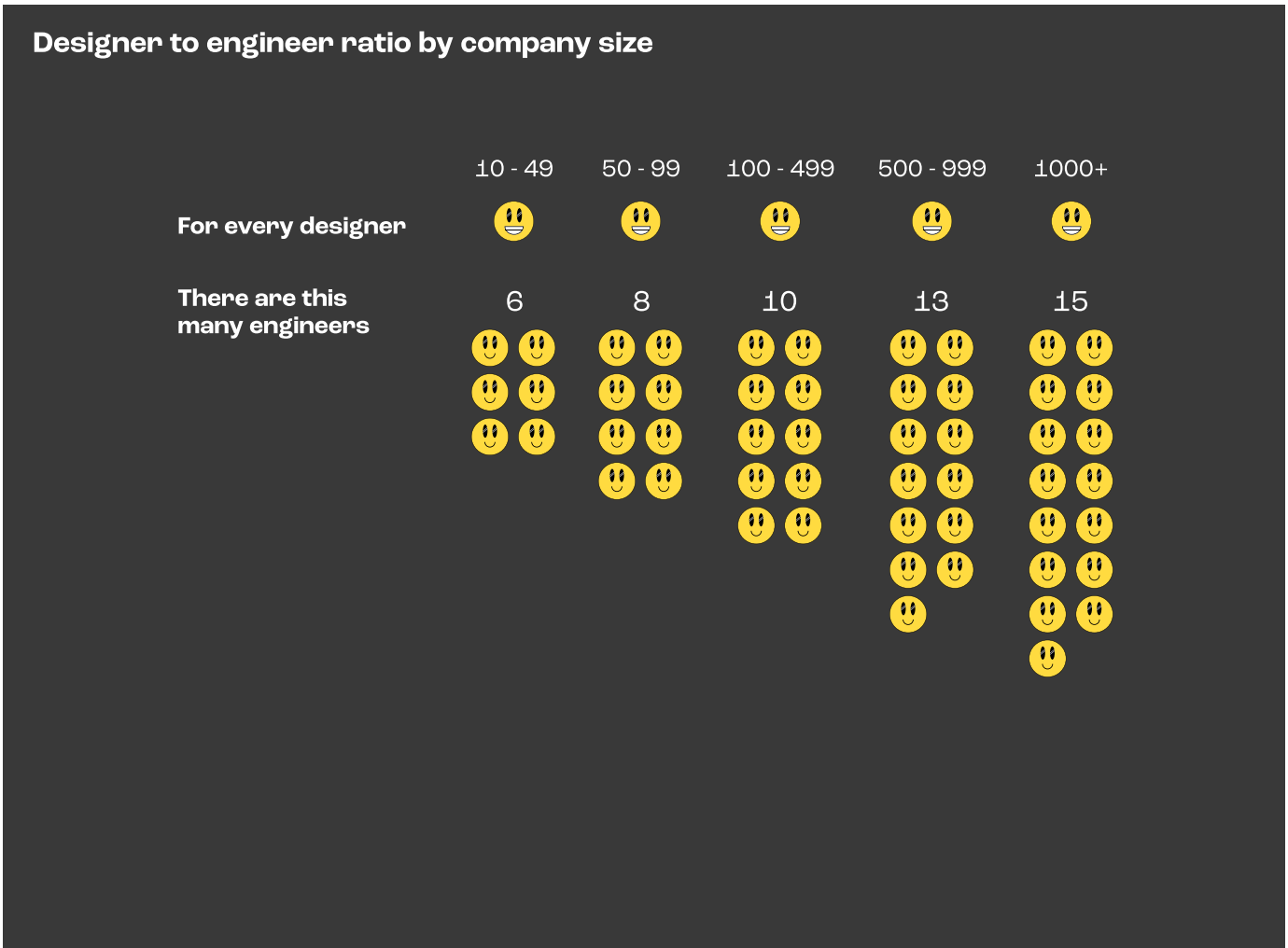
The scale of design organizations

Continuing the trend from last year, most of our respondents (51%) are from small design organizations. However, we also see a significant presence from teams of various sizes. Our analysis often considers the size of design organizations, striving to provide insights relevant to different team scales.



Designer-to-engineer ratios

An interesting pattern emerges when examining the ratio of designers to engineers in organizations of varying sizes. As expected, larger organizations tend to have a higher ratio, but the increase is steady rather than abrupt. The trend of 1:13 and 1:15 with larger companies might suggest a growing recognition of design, possibly getting closer to Peter Merholz and Kristin Skinner's 1:10 ideal ratio from "*Org Design for Design Orgs: Building and Managing In-house Design Teams*."

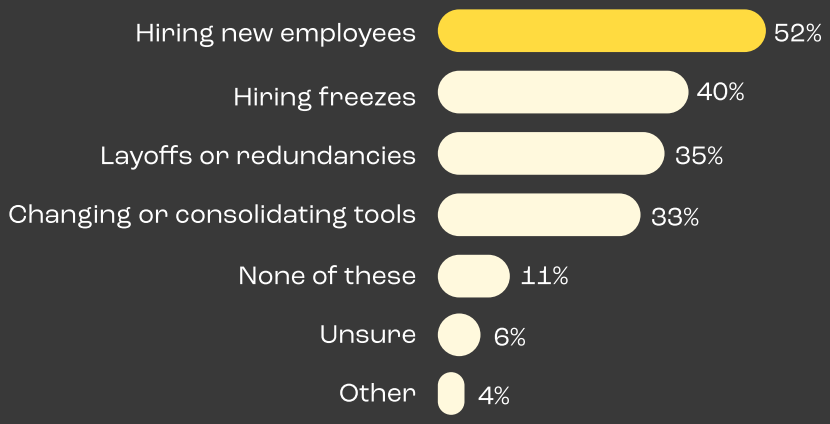


The tech industry's impact on design and engineering teams in 2023

In response to the recent upheavals in the tech industry, we've examined their effects on design and engineering organizations. This analysis shows how these organizations have adapted operationally in a changing landscape.

A notable finding is that over half of the companies surveyed reported hiring new staff, pointing to an overall growth trend in the sector. However, this narrative of expansion is layered and complex. Around 40% of organizations faced hiring freezes, and over a third had to confront challenging decisions, including layoffs and tool adjustments due to budgetary constraints.

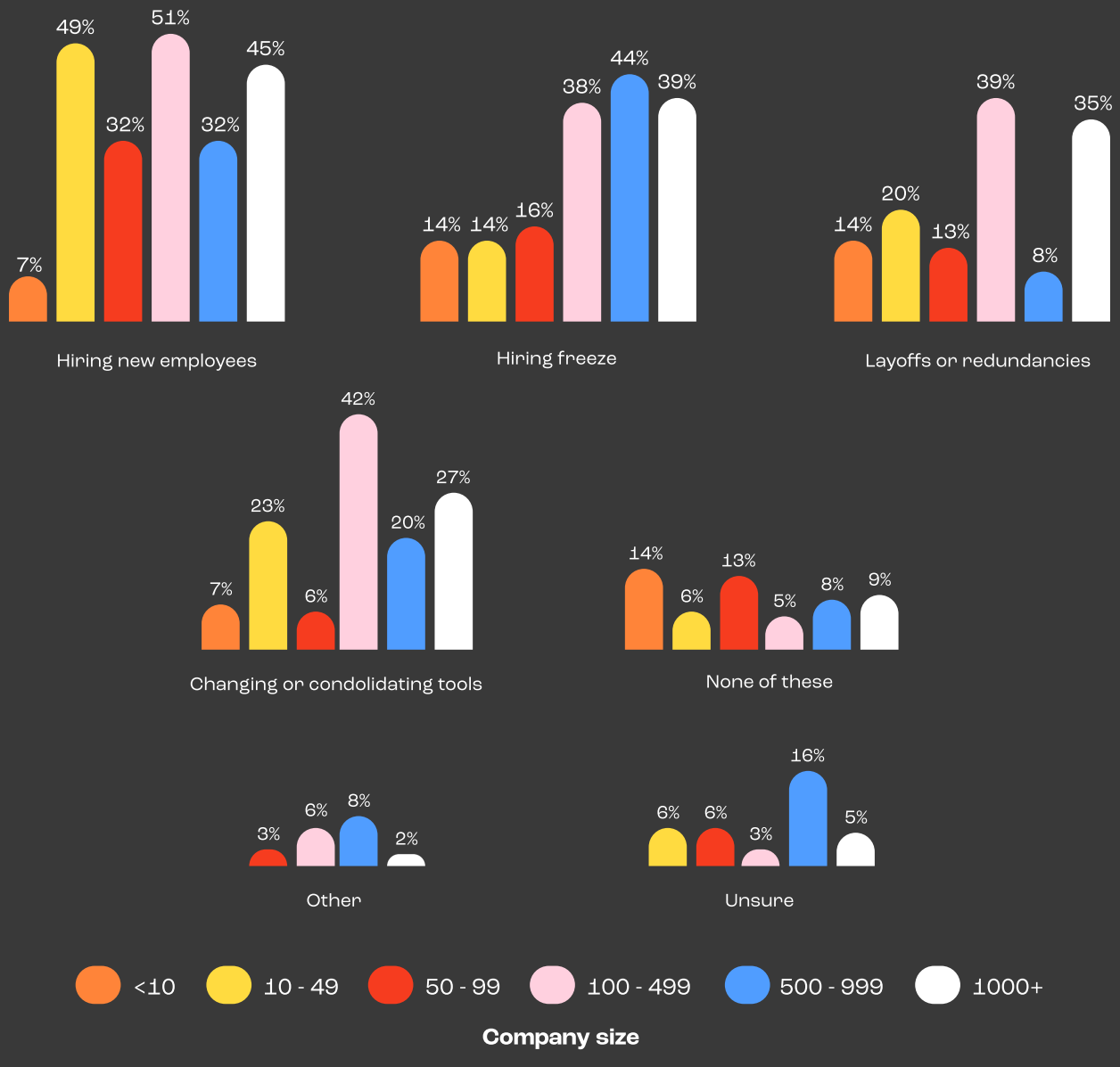
Factors that impacted design and engineering teams



Respondents could select multiple options.

When we dive deeper, company size appears to influence these trends significantly. For instance, mid-sized companies (100 - 499 employees) showed the highest rates of both new hires and layoffs. This pattern might reflect their more significant resources and the need to respond to market shifts swiftly. On the other end, the smallest companies (under ten employees) exhibited more operational stability, with fewer layoffs and less need for tool consolidation. We could possibly attribute their resilience to factors like operational agility, smaller-scale management, and different degrees of market impact.

Factors that impacted design and engineering teams by company size



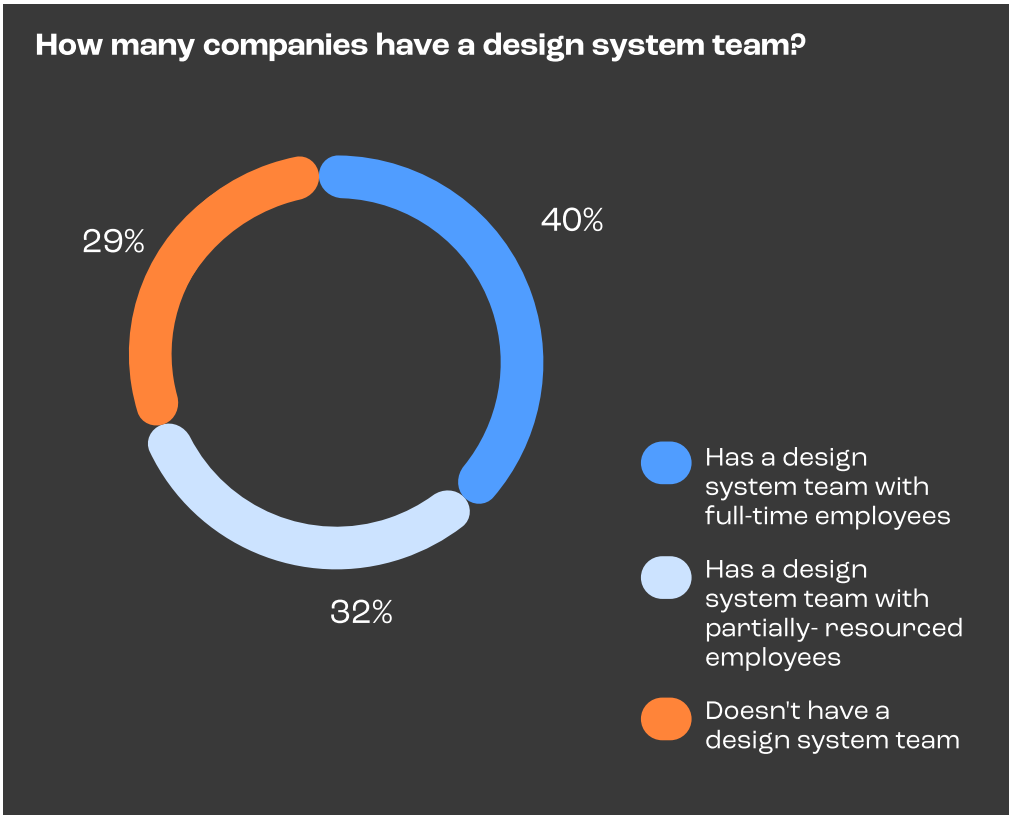
Respondents could select multiple options.

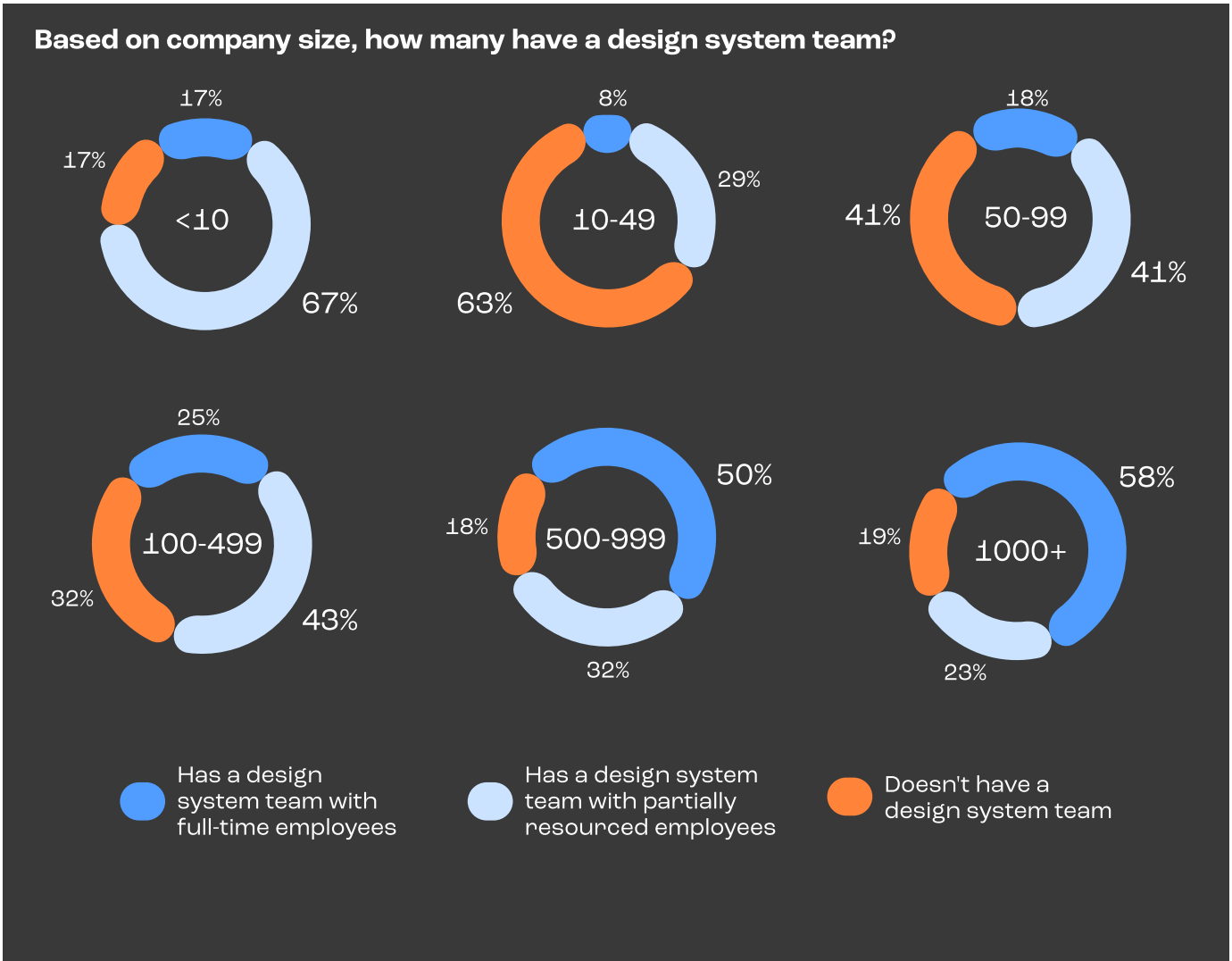
your design system

TEAM

Design system teams across company sizes

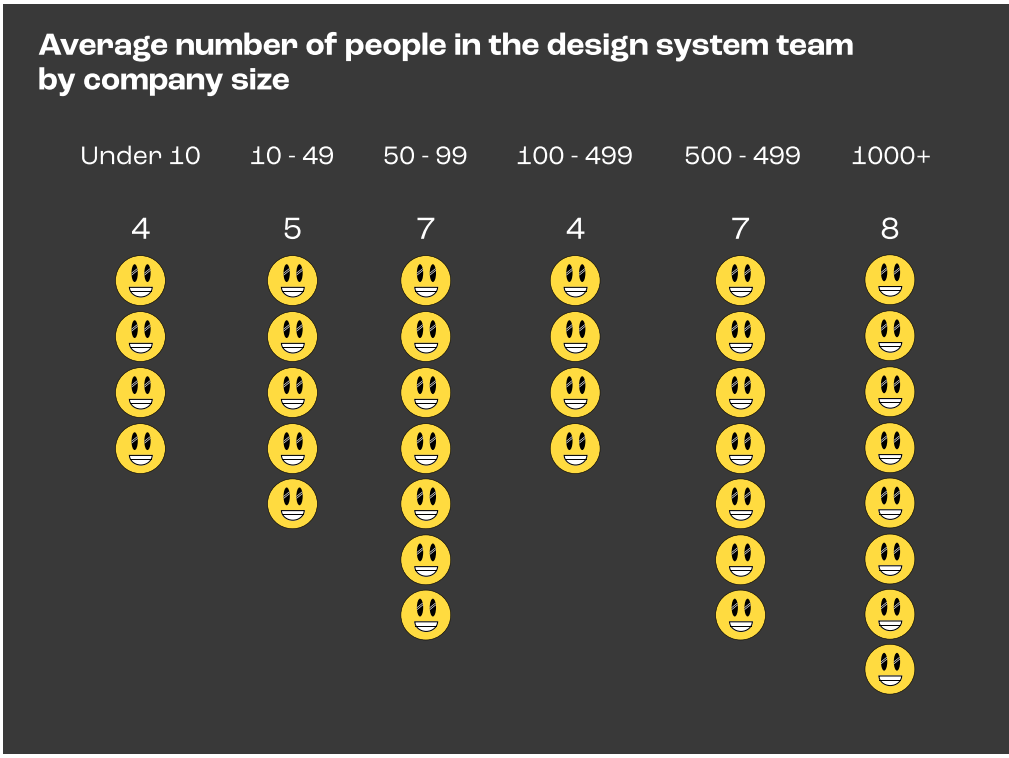
Similar to last year, it's encouraging to notice that most companies, that have a design system, have a design system team (72%). Over half of these teams (55%) have dedicated staff. Consistently, larger organizations are more likely to have fully dedicated design system teams. Smaller companies often rely on partially resourced employees, likely due to their scale. Notably, among smaller companies with 10-49 employees, the majority (63%) reported not having a design system team. This could indicate a transitional phase in their growth, where the need for a dedicated design system team is yet to be a priority.





The link between design system team size and company size

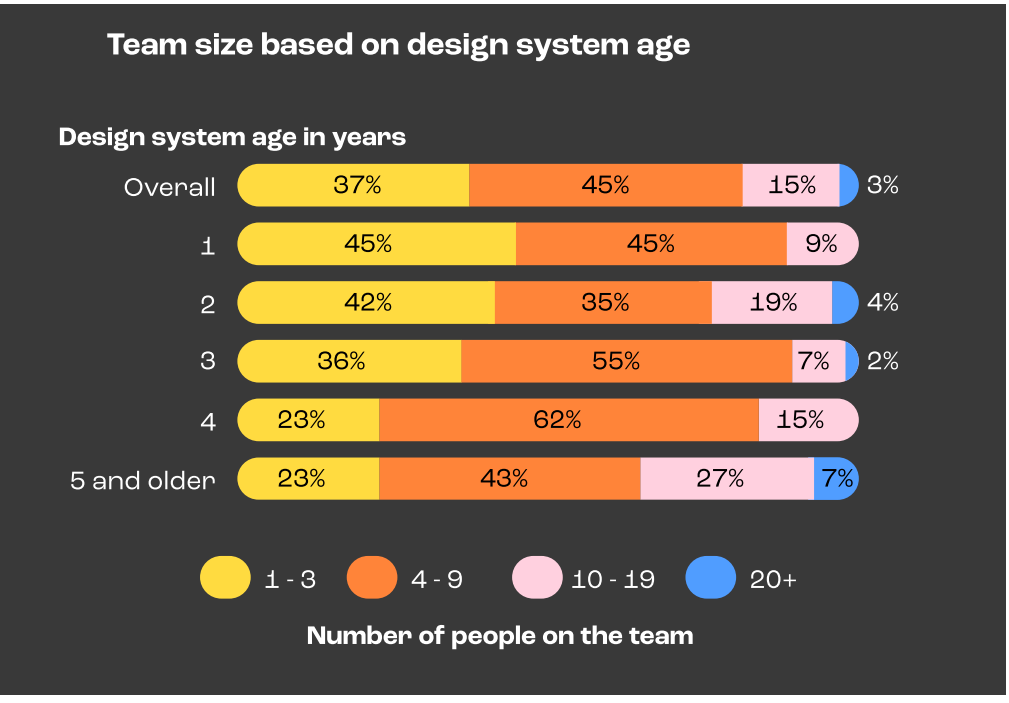
Design system team sizes correlate with the company's overall size but don't scale proportionally. This suggests a focus on efficiency in team structure. Mid-sized companies (100-499 employees) are a bit of an outlier, with an average team size of 4 people. This might reflect transitional challenges such as resource allocation, budget constraints, or organizational restructuring.



Top tip

Job seekers—Large companies (500+ employees) might offer more design system-specific opportunities.

Design system team size and its evolution



Most design system teams (45%) included 4-9 people, followed by teams of 1-3 people (37%). Meanwhile, large teams of over 20 members are comparatively rare (3%).

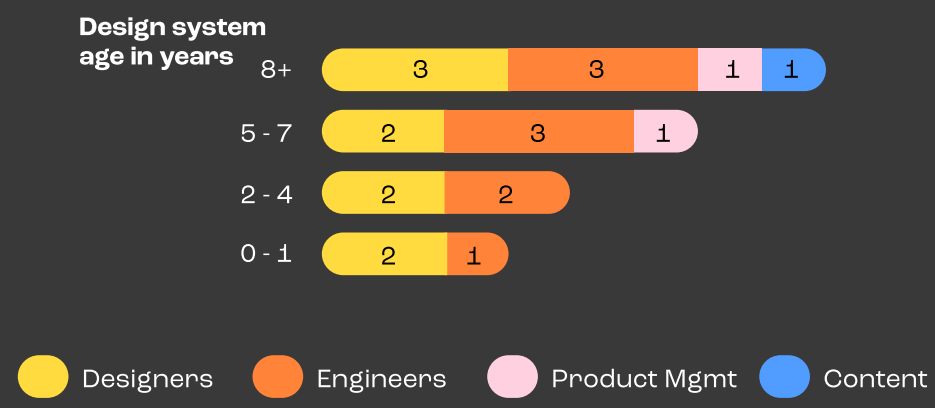
When we look at team-size distribution based on the design system's age, things get a bit more interesting. In the first two years, most design system teams include 1-3 people. Once a design system is three years old, things shift. Most respondents whose design systems are at least three years old, have 4-9 people on their team. This trend could indicate that at three years old, design systems are recognized, warranting more team members.

Evolving roles in design systems with maturity

Consistent with the common understanding, our data shows that new design systems (one year old or younger) typically begin with an average of two designers and one engineer. As these systems mature, not only do the numbers of designers and engineers increase, but roles such as Product Managers and Content Specialists also start to become integral parts of the team. This evolution reflects the growing complexity and needs of design systems over time.

Team make up based on design system age

Number indicates number of people in that role on the team.



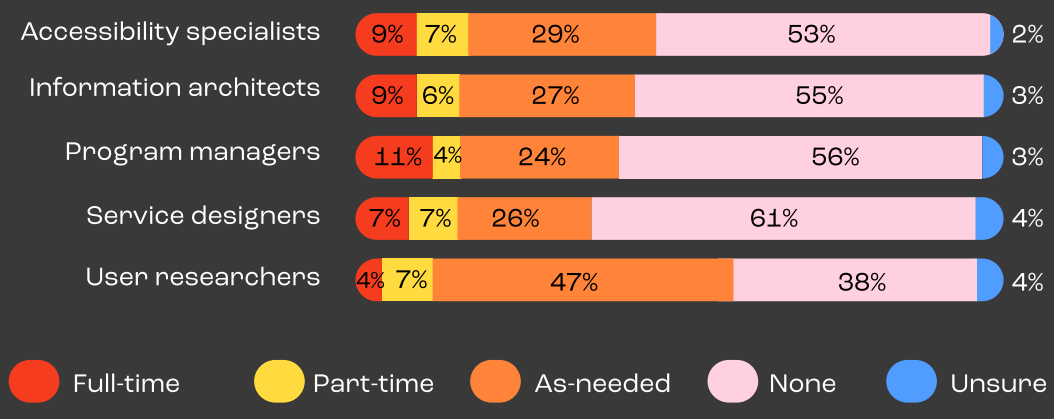
Extended support roles in design systems

In addition to core team members, design systems often receive support from various other roles, although this tends to be on an as-needed basis. Roles like program managers, accessibility specialists, information architects, service designers, and user researchers are less likely to be permanent team members. Most design systems teams do not have regular support from these roles. We often recognize the complexity and the challenges in scaling design systems, and there's a clear benefit to involving these specialists. While it may not be feasible for teams to have such roles full-time, engaging them as needed can be a practical and effective approach.

Top tip

Even if your company doesn't have specialists in these roles. See if anyone has these skill sets. Alternatively, this could be a good growth opportunity for team members to learn new skills.

The level of support from other roles for design systems



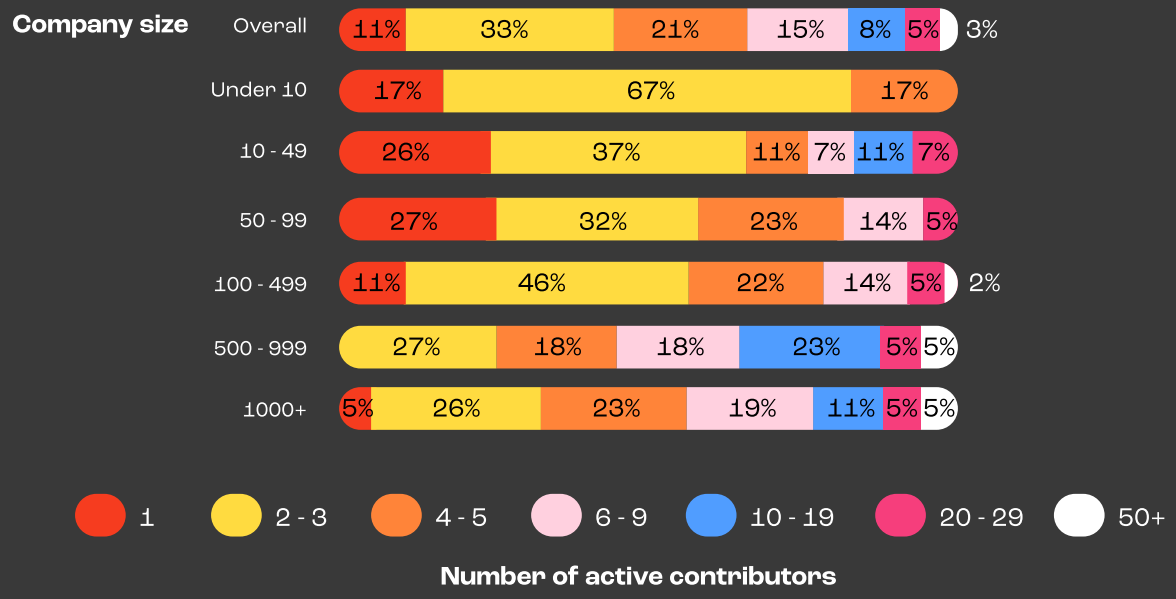
Level of support they provide

Limited active contributors in design systems

In organizations of all sizes, we found that a third (33%) have only 2-3 people actively contributing to their design systems. A smaller portion, 21%, has 4-5 contributors, and an even lesser number (15%) have 6-9 contributors. It's uncommon to see a large group actively contributing to a design system.

Analyzing the data by organization size reveals a consistent trend: most design systems have 2-3 active contributors regardless of size. In smaller companies, ranging from under 10 to 50-99 employees, having just one active contributor is quite common, too. Conversely, in larger organizations (100-499 to 1000+ employees), having 4-5 active contributors is a typical option. Interestingly, companies with 500-999 employees exhibit the most varied distribution in the number of contributors, suggesting a reflection of diverse factors such as the complexity of the design system, the number of products or brands it supports, and organizational structure variations.

Number of active contributors across company sizes

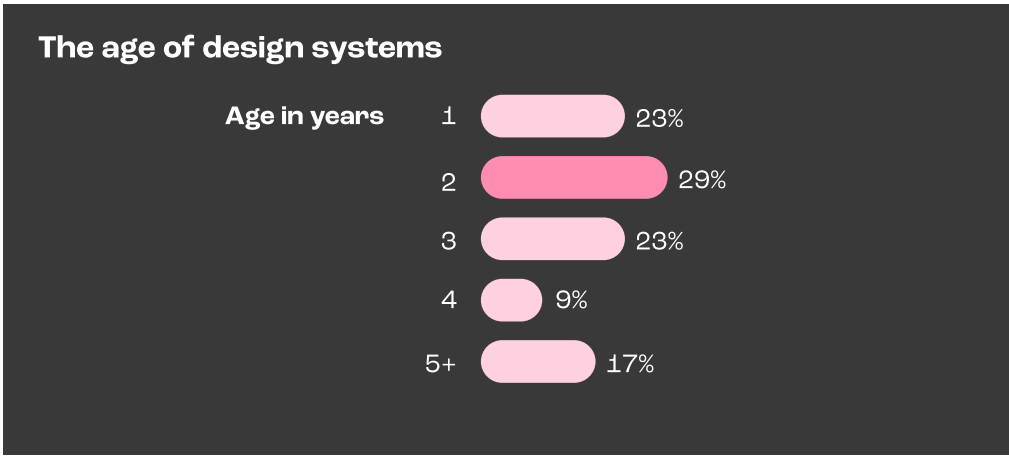


your design system

DOCUMENTATION

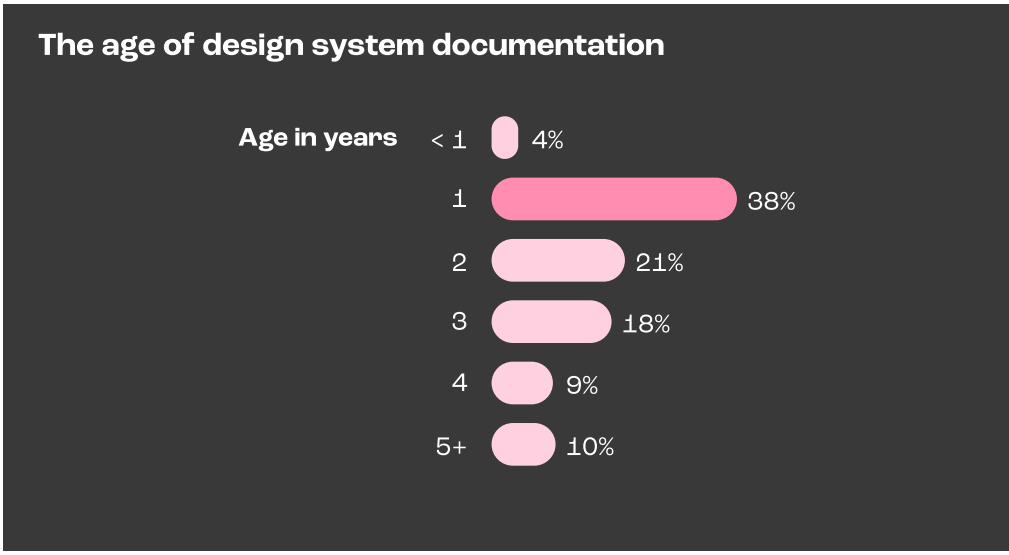
Design systems are young

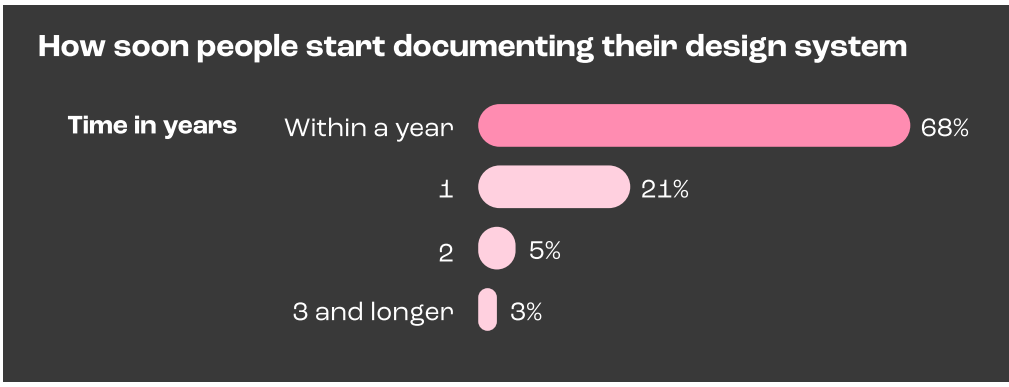
Our findings reveal that most design systems (29%) are only two years old, and a majority (75%) are three or younger. This underscores the notion that it's never too late to start a design system. This data should be encouraging for those considering implementing a design system—you're not far behind the curve.



Documentation is a natural part of the process

In terms of documentation, the trend mirrors the age of design systems: 81% of design system documentation is also three years old or younger. A striking 92% of design systems begin documentation within the first year of their creation. This is similar to last year, which reflects a continued shift in approach; teams no longer wait to complete their design and code libraries before starting documentation. Instead, there's a move towards a more integrated and concurrent process, documenting as the system develops.



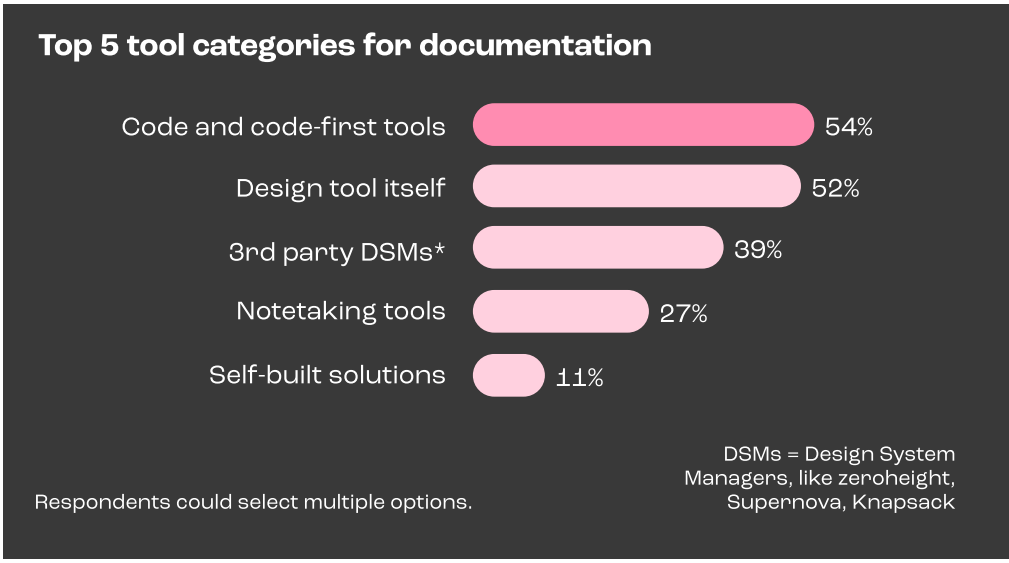


Top tip

From an adoption perspective, the sooner teams get used to referencing documentation, the more likely it will become part of their day-to-day process when using the system.

Documentation tools

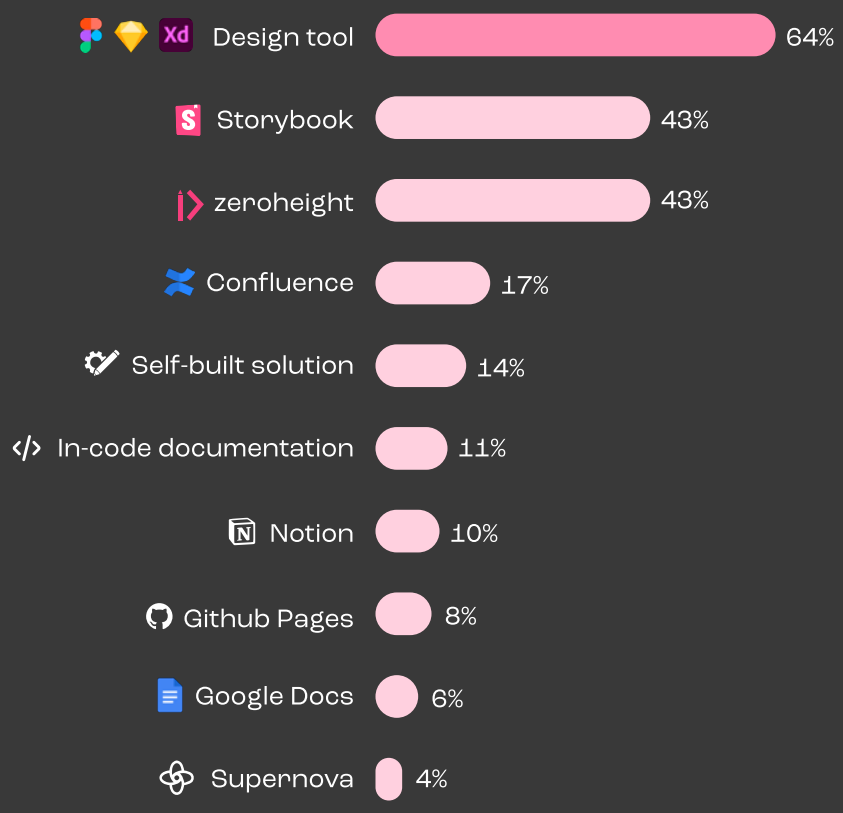
In documenting design systems, a majority of respondents (71%) use multiple tools. There's a close split in tool categories: 54% use code and code-first tools, while 52% use design tools directly. This marks a shift from previous years, where design tools trailed behind code-first tools. The integration of technical and development features in design tools may be bridging this gap, raising the question of whether design tools might surpass code-first tools in the future.



Popular tools for documenting design systems

Specifically, 64% of respondents use their primary design tool for documentation, with Storybook and zeroheight being popular choices. Interestingly, note-taking and writing apps feature among the top 10 tools used, reflecting the varied needs and approaches in design system documentation.

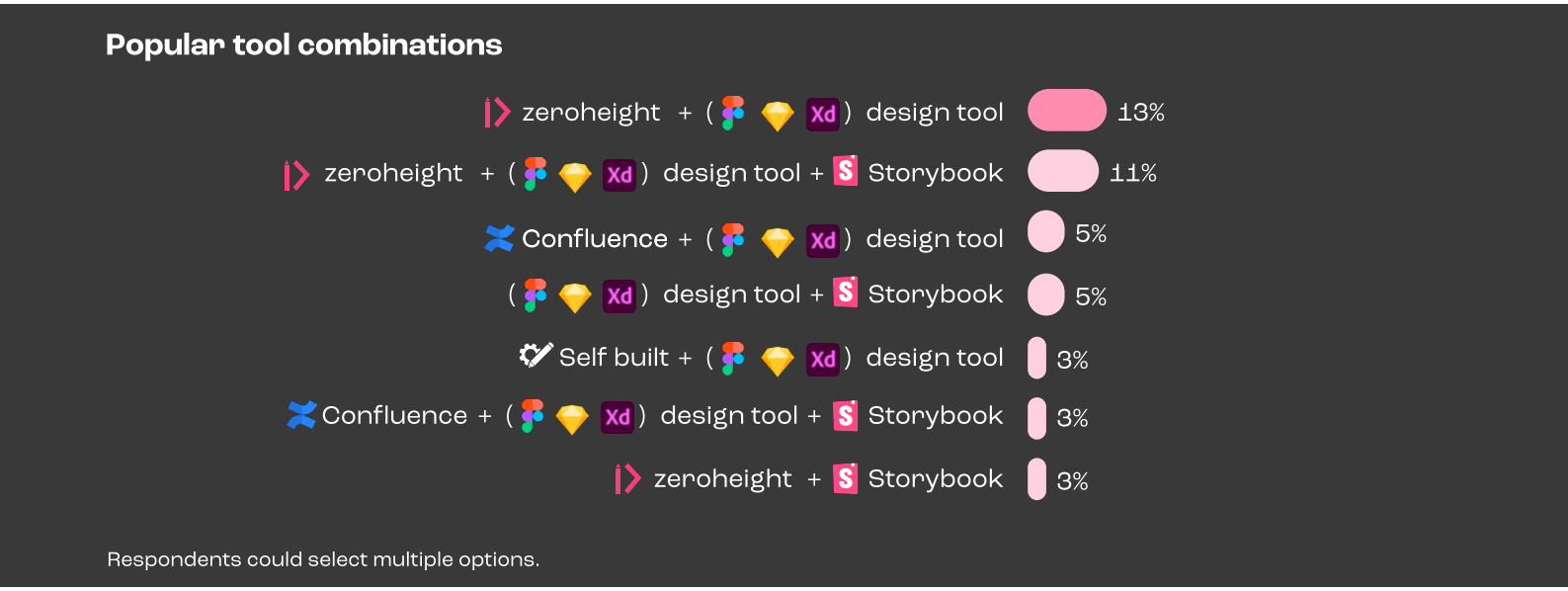
Top 10 tools used for documentation



Respondents could select multiple options.

Popular tool combinations

Consistent with past trends, many organizations (71%) blend different tools to achieve their documentation objectives. The most popular combinations are zeroheight with a design tool (13%) and a trio of zeroheight, a design tool, and Storybook (11%). Other notable combinations include Confluence with a design tool, and a design tool with Storybook, both at 5%. This highlights a preference for pairing documentation tools with design tools, possibly indicating an evolving synergy between these tool types in addressing developer needs.

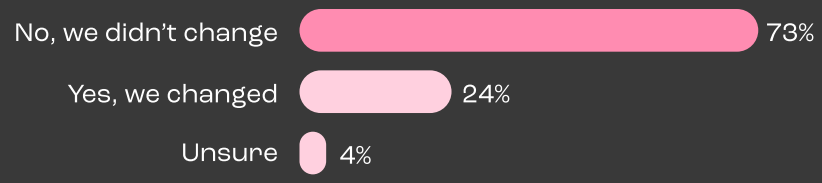


Changing documentation tools

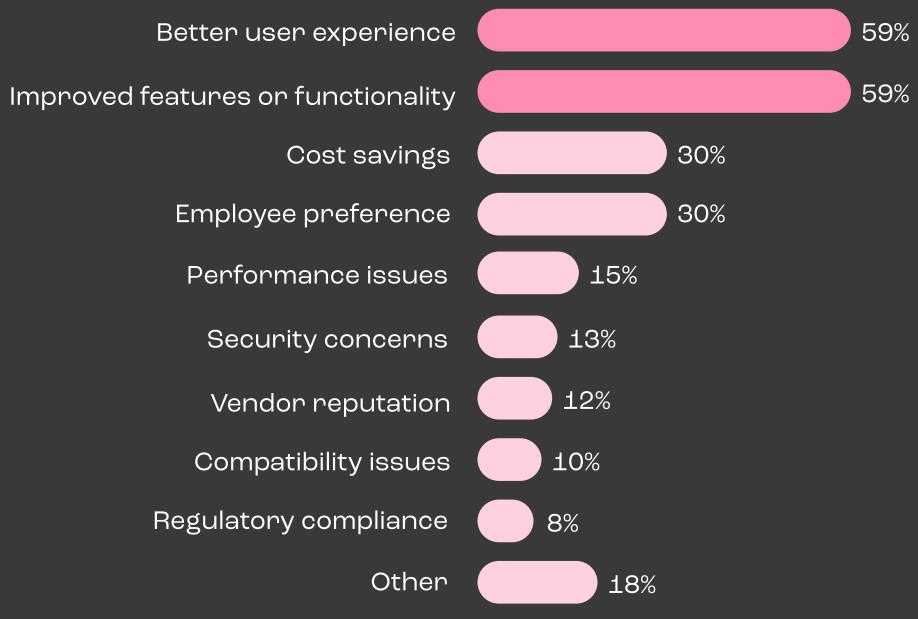
Tool transitions are significant undertakings due to migration, onboarding, and procurement challenges. Often teams try not to change tools frequently, but this year, we noted that about 25% of teams changed their documentation tools. From our data, there wasn't a clear indication of any trends based on the categories or specific tools teams changed. This indicates specific tool changes are rather unique to each team's scenario.

However, we asked why they changed tools, the primary reasons included better user experience and improved features (both 69%), followed by cost savings and employee preference (both 30%). This trend suggests that design system teams actively seek tools that offer superior experiences and functionalities, with employee input playing a vital role in these decisions

How many people changed documentation tools?



Reasons for switching tools

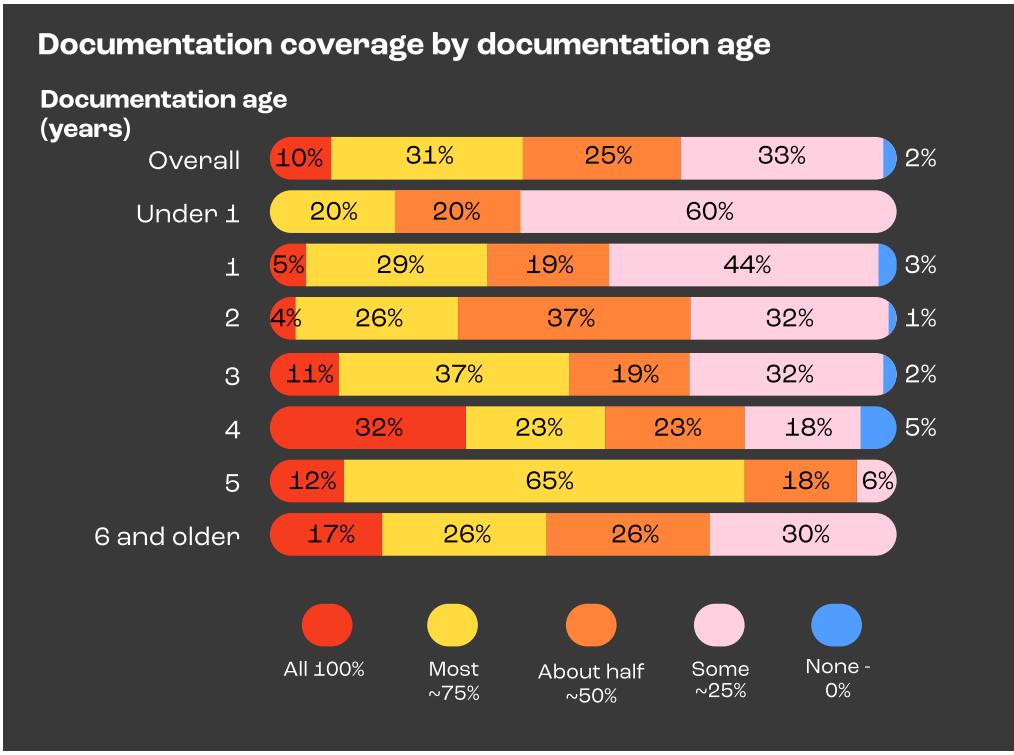


Respondents could select multiple options.

What teams are documenting

Documentation covers most of the design system

Our survey indicates that complete documentation of design systems is rare, with only 10% achieving full coverage. The majority (56%) have documented about 50-75% of their system, and a minimal 2% have no documentation. The extent of coverage varies depending on factors like the system's age, available resources, and prioritization, but the emphasis on documentation is evident.

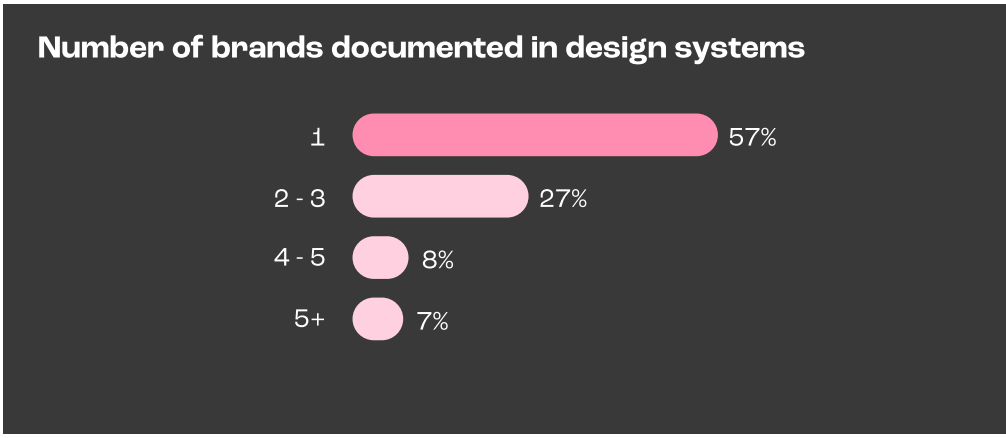


Coverage trends based on documentation age

Intuitively, one might assume that the longer a design system has been documented, the more comprehensive the coverage would be. Our findings indeed show a notable upward trend in documentation coverage over time. Many progress from documenting some to most of the design system between the second and third years. When a system reaches three to four years, a significant portion appears to be fully documented.

Documenting multiple brands in design systems

Documenting a single brand within a design system is straightforward, yet 43% of teams face the complexity of managing multiple brands. For these teams, developing a clear and strategic information architecture is crucial to maintain clarity and ensure the sustainability of the documentation, especially when scaling.



Top tip

Multiple brands—explore documentation structuring strategies to ensure success. Our information architecture activity can help you navigate this complexity.

What we're documenting

Color system	88%
Atomic components	86%
Typography	76%
Form components	59%
Brand guidelines	56%
Design tokens	53%
Spacing system	52%
Code for components	49%
Grid system	47%
Complex components	47%
Principles	45%
Getting started guides	42%
Accessibility guidelines	42%
Patterns	38%
Layout system	36%
Release notes or change log	35%
Content patterns	34%
Code usage guidelines	33%
Example page templates	31%
Voice and tone	31%
UX copy guidelines	30%
Illustration guidelines	25%
Contribution model	22%
Governance processes	20%
Animation or motion guidelines	13%
UX research	12%
Localization guidelines	10%
Information architecture	9%
Sound guidelines	2%

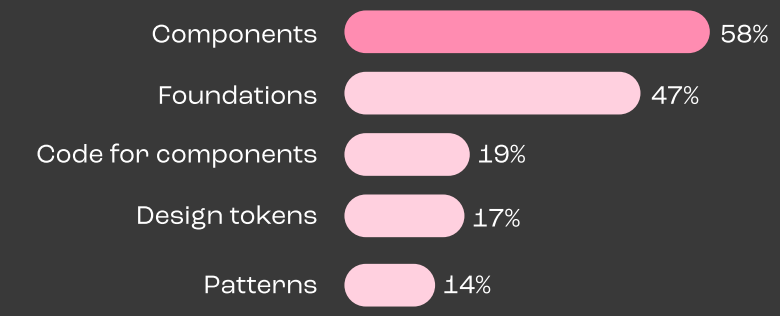
Top tip

Use these insights as a checklist to ensure your design system covers crucial aspects.

Respondents could select multiple options.

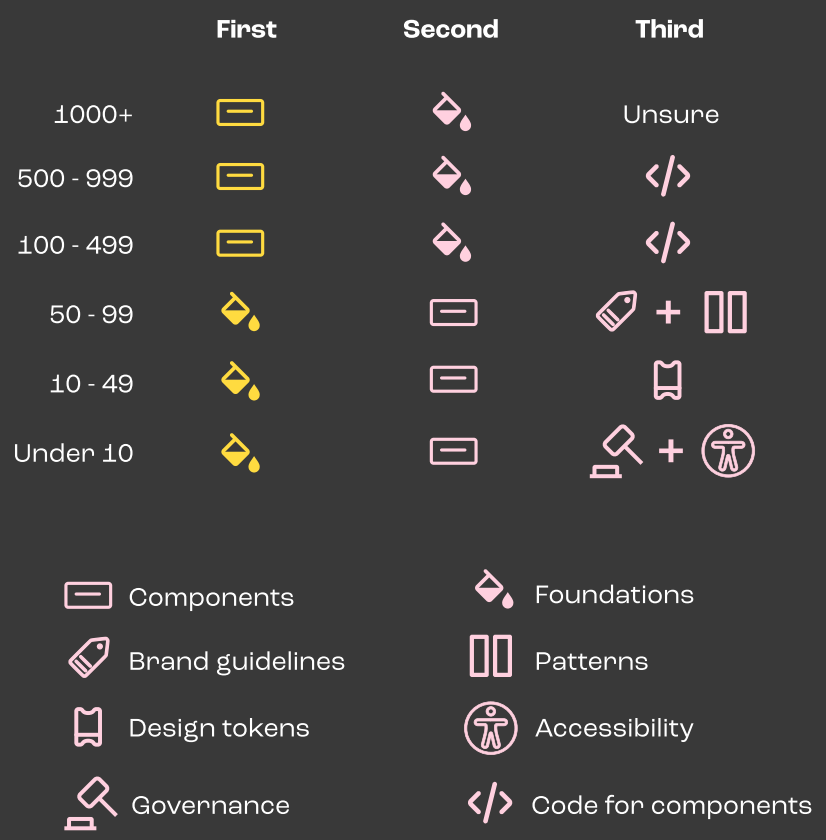
What people reference the most depends on company size

Top 5 most viewed information



Respondents could select multiple options.

Access popularity based on company size



Across all company sizes, components (58%) are reported as the most frequently viewed part of the documentation, followed by foundations (47%). Coded components, design tokens, and patterns are also commonly accessed. However, there's a notable shift based on company size. Smaller companies tend to prioritize foundations, reflecting their need for frequent referencing due to less established brands and reliance on design libraries. In contrast, mid-size to larger companies focus more on components, likely due to their established brands and the complexity of multiple teams and products.

Top tip

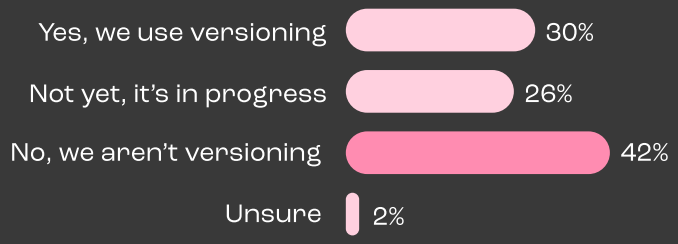
Need focus? Tailor your documentation priorities based on your company's size.

Versioning as a sign of design system maturity

Reflecting trends from the previous year, a notable 42% of respondents indicated that their documentation does not include versioning or releases. However, approximately a third (30%) have incorporated these elements, and another 26% are in the process of doing so. The presence of versioning tends to correlate with the maturity of the design system documentation. For instance, 64% of very mature systems have implemented versioning, and about half (52%) of mature systems have done so. This pattern suggests that the need for versioning mechanisms becomes more apparent as design systems become more robust and support a broader range of products at different development stages.[1]

For design systems that are still evolving, it's essential to anticipate the future need for versioning and release management. Even if not immediately necessary, planning to include these elements is crucial. Starting early discussions about how to scale the system to incorporate versioning or releases can ensure that when the time comes, the team is ready and the implementation can proceed smoothly.

How many include versioning in the documentation



Top tip

Think about versioning before you need it! Planning now can facilitate a smoother transition when it becomes essential.

[1]For documentation maturity, we defined the levels as:

- **not very**—it's inconsistent and mostly absent
- **slightly**—it's static and not updated often
- **partially mature**—it's partially there; some integration with engineering
- **mature**—it's mostly there; good integration with engineering
- **very mature**—it's built into our organization with governance and sophisticated integrations

your design system

CONTRIBUTION

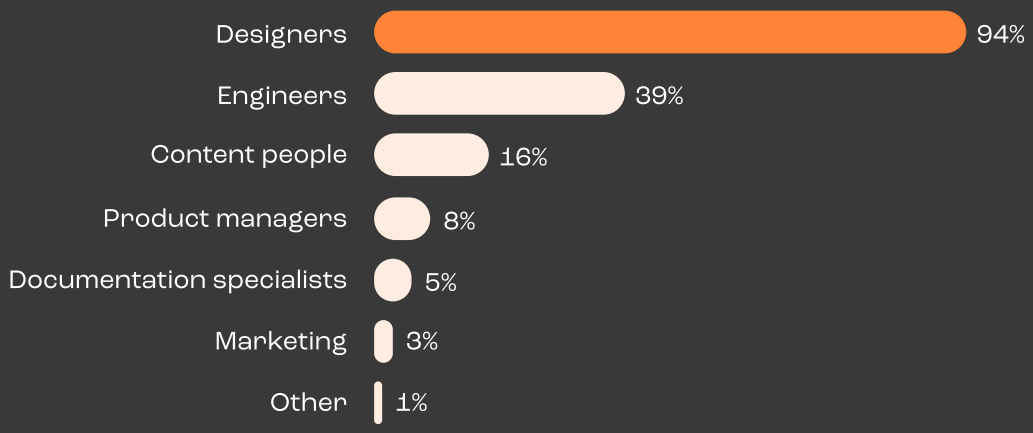
Who’s contributing to documentation?

Third-party tools broaden the range of contributors

An overwhelming 94% of respondents indicated that designers are key contributors to documentation. Engineers (39%), content writers (17%), and product managers (8%) also play a role. Interestingly, teams using third-party documentation tools report a broader range of contributors. For example, 97% of these teams have designers contributing, compared to 64% in teams not using such tools.

Product managers and documentation specialists are more likely to contribute when teams use third-party tools. Notably, using third-party tools seems to encourage content specialists' involvement, with 21% of these teams reporting their contribution, compared to only 9% in teams not using these tools. However, third-party tools do not significantly affect the number of engineers contributing. We assume this is because other documentation options are developer-friendly.

The roles that document design systems



Respondents could select multiple options.

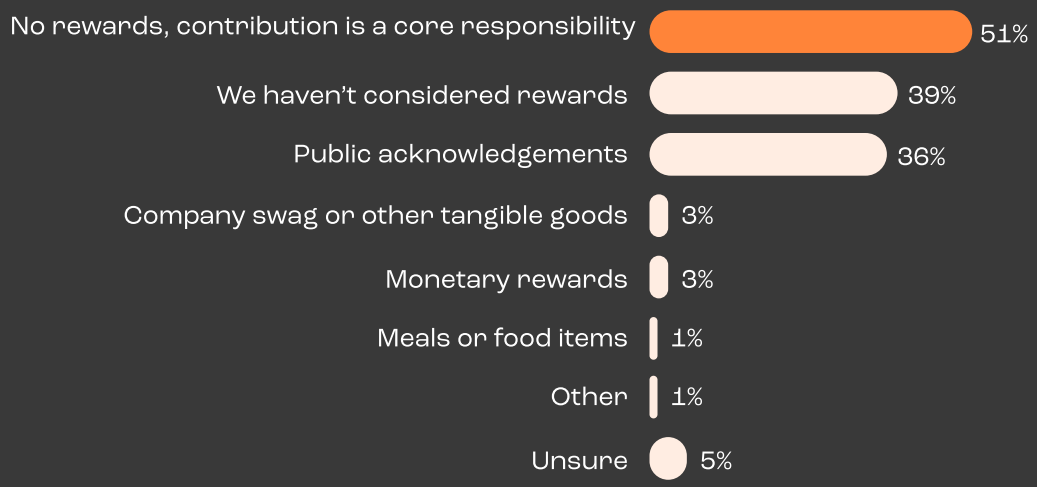
Top tip

If your documentation tool restricts contribution due to specific permissions skills, consider switching to a more inclusive tool. This can broaden who can contribute, overcoming bottlenecks or staffing issues and can facilitate adoption.

Acknowledging and rewarding design system contributions

About half (51%) of respondents view contributions as part of core responsibilities; hence, they do not offer specific rewards. However, 39% haven't considered rewards at all. Public acknowledgment, such as Slack shoutouts or mentions in team meetings, is the most common form of recognition (37%). Larger companies are more likely to offer tangible rewards, while public acknowledgment is more common regardless of company size. The number of contributors also influences reward strategies, with public acknowledgment more prevalent in teams with more contributors. Interestingly, even in companies where contributing is a core responsibility, some teams still publicly acknowledge individual contributions.

How organizations reward contributors



Respondents could select multiple options.

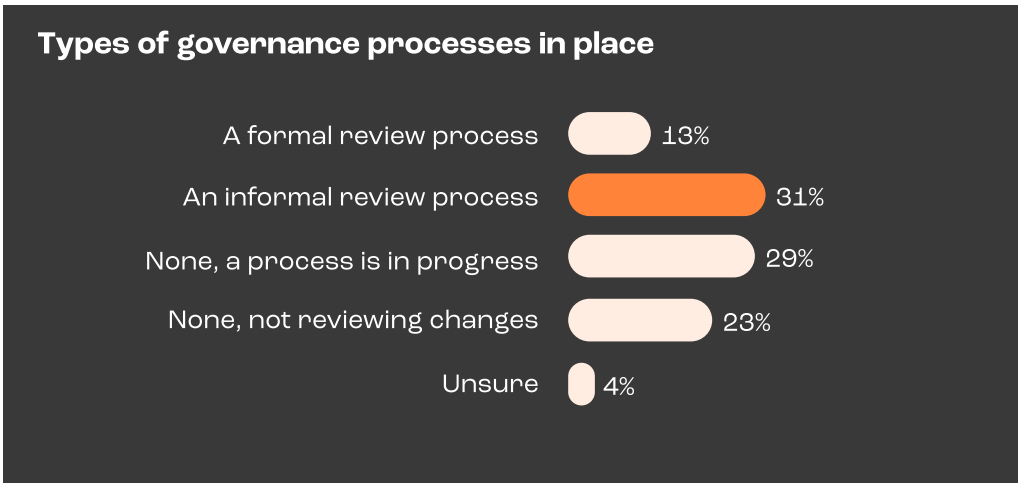
Top tip

If contemplating rewards for contributions, align them with your company's existing benefits or reward mechanisms, and consider their potential impact on contributions and team dynamics.

Contribution process

Establishing governance in design system documentation

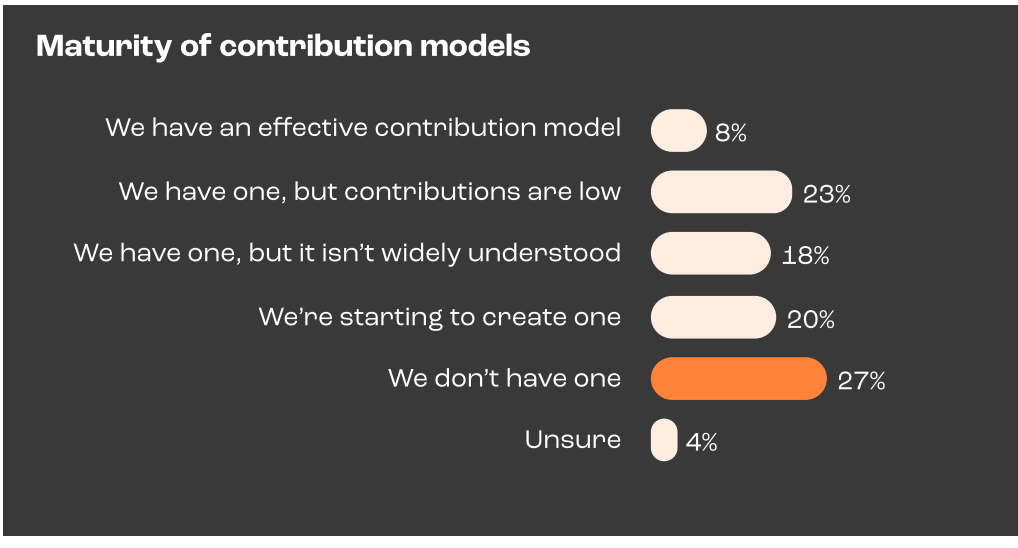
A significant 73% of respondents have implemented or are working towards some form of governance for their design system documentation. This is particularly noteworthy given that most systems (52%) are relatively young (two years or younger). The prevalence of even informal governance processes (reported by 71% of those with a process) highlights the importance of structured approaches, especially in the early stages of design system development.



Maturity of contribution models in design systems

The landscape remains varied, with only 8% of teams reporting a highly effective model. This is crucial across all organizational sizes, particularly for larger teams where complexity increases. Teams with an effective contribution model typically have fewer contributors, suggesting that smaller teams might find it easier to establish and follow a model.

Adapting existing design or code review processes might provide a familiar framework for larger teams struggling to develop a contribution model.



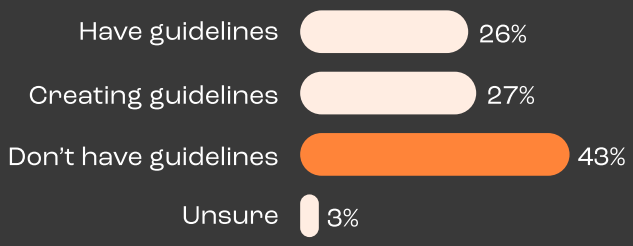
Top tip

Avoid overcomplicating contribution models that become too complex to follow. Try mirroring or adopting existing processes in your organization as a starting point.

Content guidelines for documentation are slowly gaining popularity

Less than half of the respondents indicated the absence of content guidelines for documentation. While 26% have established guidelines, another 27% are in the process. Since 61% of respondents have small teams of 1-3 people working on documentation, the need for formal guidelines may not be as pressing yet. However, establishing these guidelines will become increasingly important as teams and systems grow.

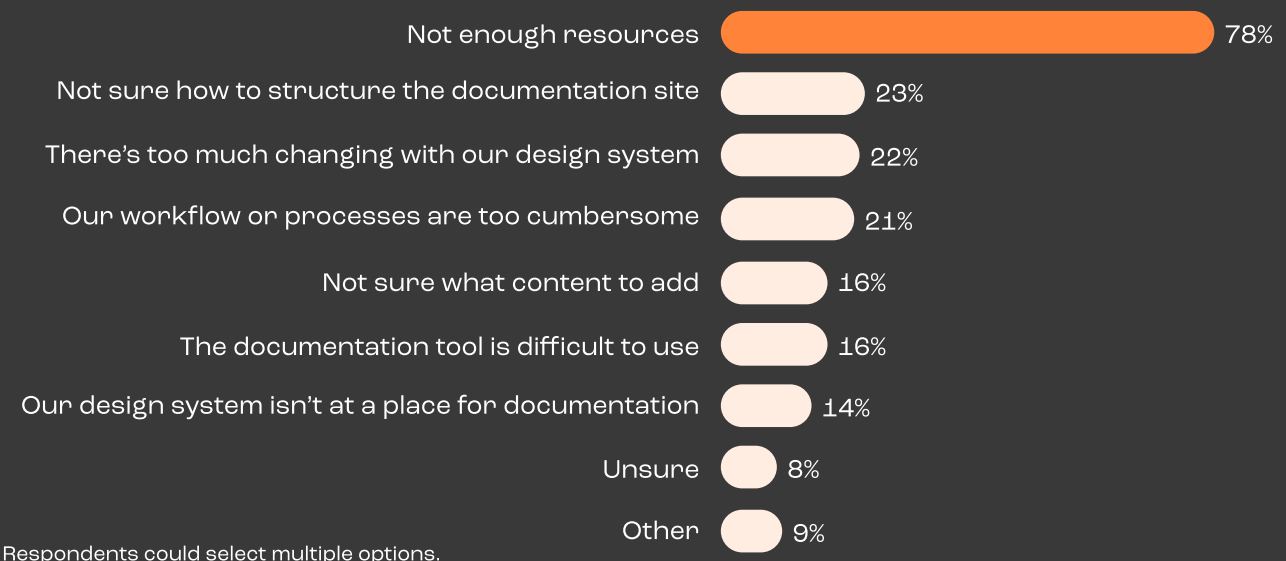
Teams with content guidelines for documentation



Addressing resource challenges in maintaining documentation

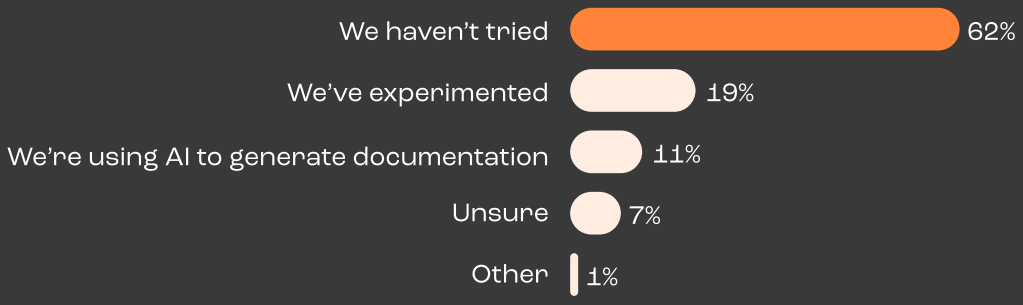
The lack of resources, such as time or personnel, is a significant challenge for 78% of respondents in maintaining their documentation. To address this, teams could reevaluate and simplify their processes and workflows or switch to more user-friendly documentation tools. These changes might make existing resources sufficient for effective documentation. Additionally, exploring the use of AI tools, like ChatGPT, could be a game-changer in streamlining the documentation process. Although most (62%) haven't used AI for this purpose, it's worth experimenting with for its potential to expedite workflows.

Top challenges in documenting



Respondents could select multiple options.

Teams documenting with AI



Top tip

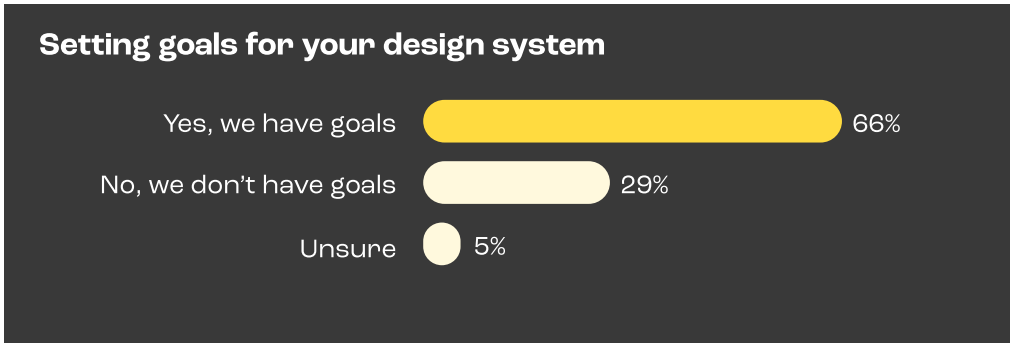
Experimenting with AI tools like ChatGPT could offer significant efficiency gains in documentation.

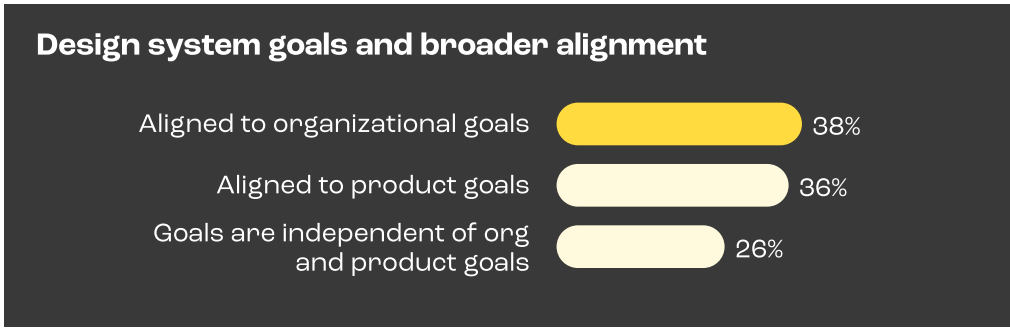
your design system strategic value and IMPACT

Goals, metrics, and measurement

Aligning design system goals with broader objectives

A significant 66% of respondents indicated that their design systems have specific goals. Interestingly, they stated that 74% of these goals aligned with the organization's or product's broader objectives. This alignment is crucial as it helps demonstrate the value of design systems to leadership and stakeholders. For design systems without defined goals, establishing them in alignment with broader organizational or product objectives can enhance visibility and direction.





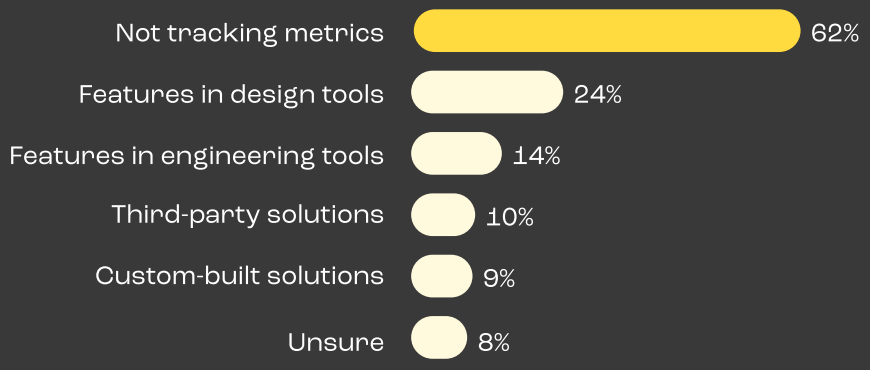
Top tip

The success of a design system goes beyond quantitative data. Consider aligning metrics with the system's goals and the intended impact, or the "UX outcome" as Jared Spool suggests.

Trends in tracking design system metrics

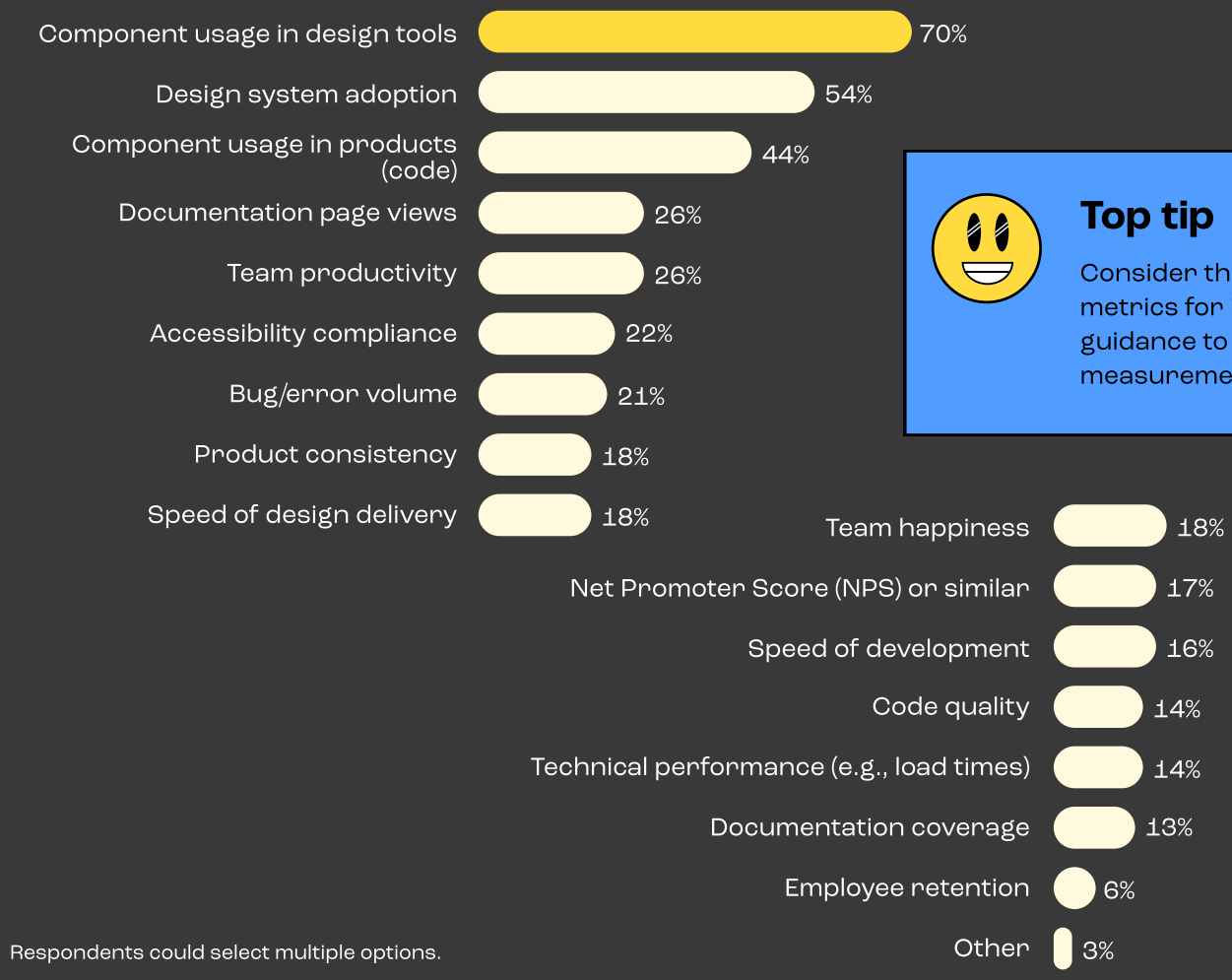
Despite the importance of metrics, 62% of teams do not track them, likely due to the complexities involved in defining and calculating metrics while managing design systems. For those who do track metrics, the focus predominantly lies on various forms of adoption, such as component usage. It raises the question: should adoption be the primary metric, or are there other, potentially more impactful, metrics that align with business value?

How teams are tracking design system metrics



Respondents could select multiple options.

What teams are tracking in their design systems



Respondents could select multiple options.

Top tip

Consider this list of popular metrics for inspiration and guidance to establish your measurement strategy.

Tools and strategies for measuring design system success

Fortunately, more tools are emerging to ease the difficulty in measuring design system metrics. The most common methods include using features in existing design or engineering tools, third-party solutions, or custom-built tools. This development is promising for teams looking to gauge the success and impact of their design systems more effectively.

Top tip

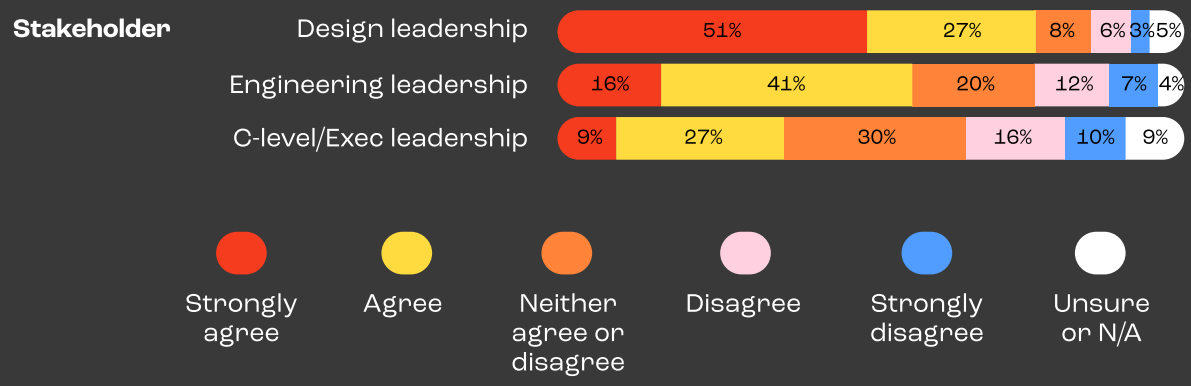
Be cautious with crafting goals solely on the convenience of metric tracking. Ensure the metrics are relevant and meaningful to your design system and team.

Design system buy-in and investment

Stakeholder buy-in might not be as difficult as we think

A substantial 78% of respondents found it easy to secure buy-in from design leadership for their design systems. Engineering leadership buy-in was also positive, with 57% finding it easy. However, gaining buy-in from C-level/ executive leadership showed a more varied response, with 36% agreeing it was easy but 30% remaining neutral. This pattern suggests that while design leadership often readily sees the value of design systems, engineering leaders and higher executives may require more convincing. For those facing challenges in obtaining buy-in, especially from engineering leaders, it might not be as daunting a task as anticipated.

Agreement levels: Getting stakeholder support was easy

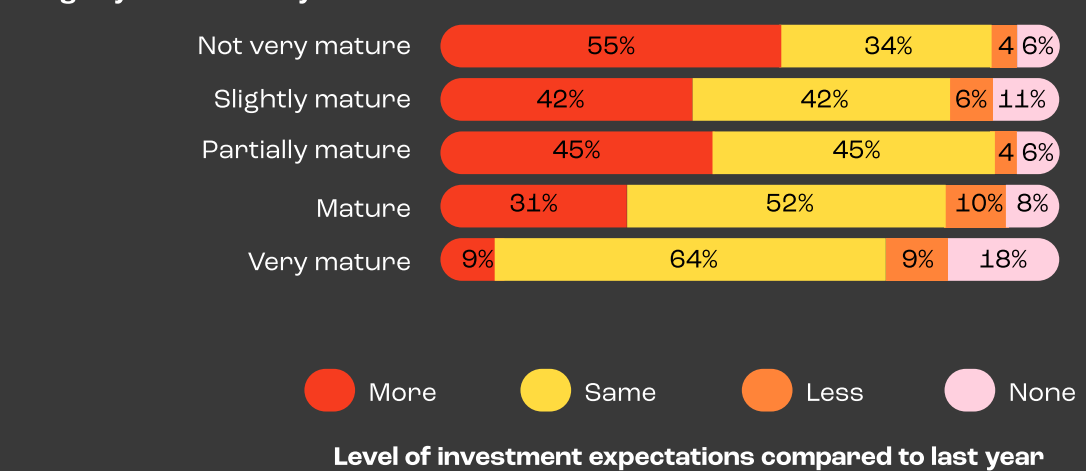


Investment trends in design system tools

Encouragingly, 85% of respondents expect either steady (44%) or increased (42%) investment in design system tools, indicating recognition of these systems as a long-term asset. Looking at design system maturity, over half of the less mature systems expect more investment, while teams with mature documentation foresee consistent support. This trend highlights an ongoing commitment to design systems, with growing ones likely receiving more investment.

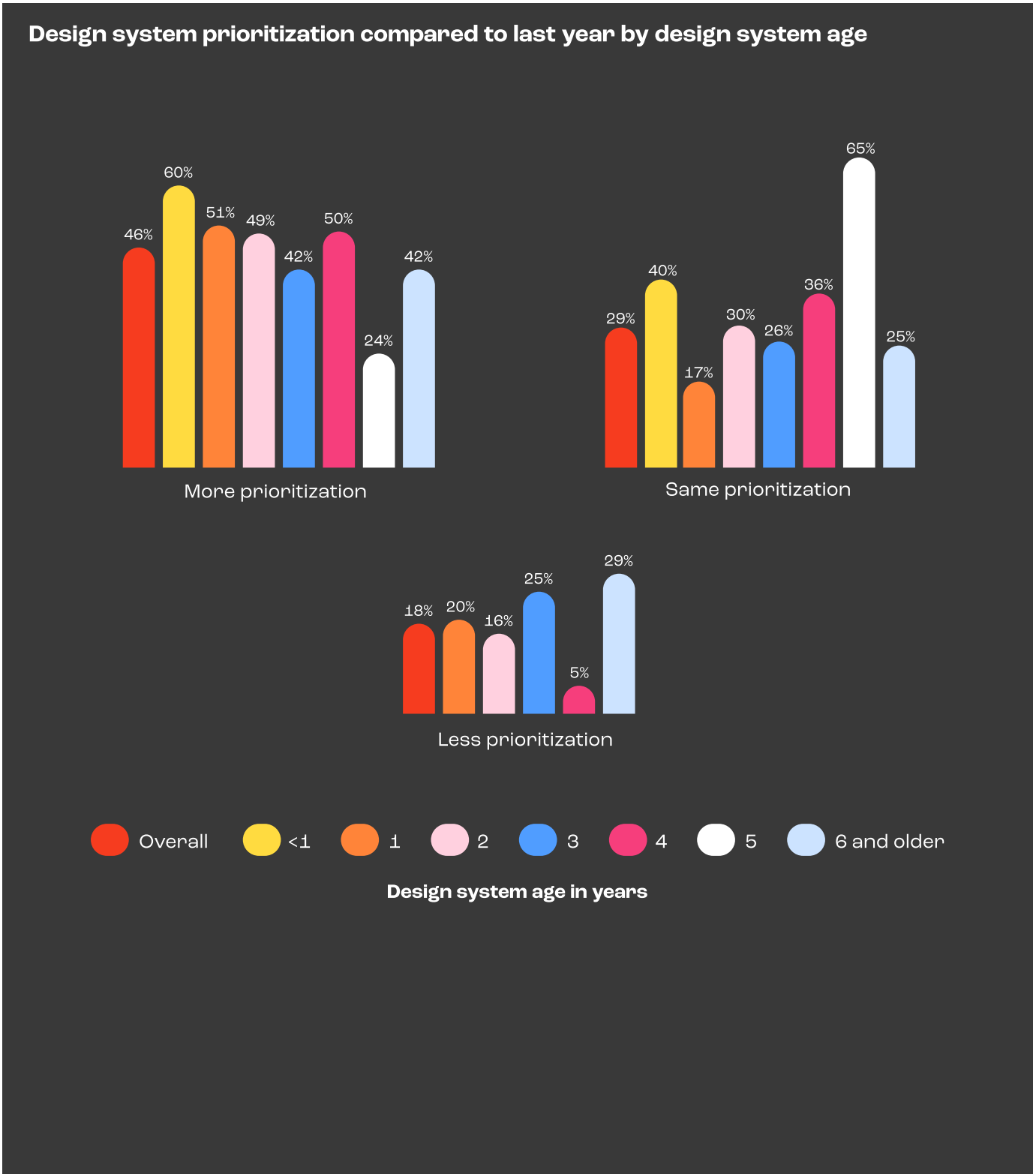
Tool investment expectations this year compared to last year

Deeper dive: Tool investment expectations by design system maturity



Prioritization trends in design systems across organizations

Nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported increased prioritization of their design systems compared to the previous year, and 29% said the priority level remained the same. Interestingly, very small companies and design systems in their 1-3 year phase showed a higher risk of deprioritization. In contrast, systems over four years old generally maintained or increased in priority. The findings indicate that the initial years are crucial for establishing a design system's value, but they tend to retain their importance once they mature.



Design systems in different stages: Prioritization and maturity

The relationship between a design system's maturity and prioritization is significant. For this, we used design system documentation maturity to measure overall design system maturity. Less mature systems reported more instances of reduced prioritization, while very mature systems mostly maintained or increased their prioritization. This suggests that design systems continue to be valued and prioritized as they mature, reinforcing their long-term significance in organizations.

This year, we inquired about the impact of the recent turbulence in the tech industry on design and engineering organizations. Budget cuts, hiring freezes, and layoffs significantly influenced how companies prioritized their design systems. We observed a diverse range of responses rather than a clear trend in one specific direction. This variation underscores the distinct ways broader departmental decisions affect different companies. Encouragingly, despite these challenging organizational changes, the prioritization of design systems has shown a notable degree of resilience for the majority of respondents.

Comparing organizational changes with design system prioritization trends

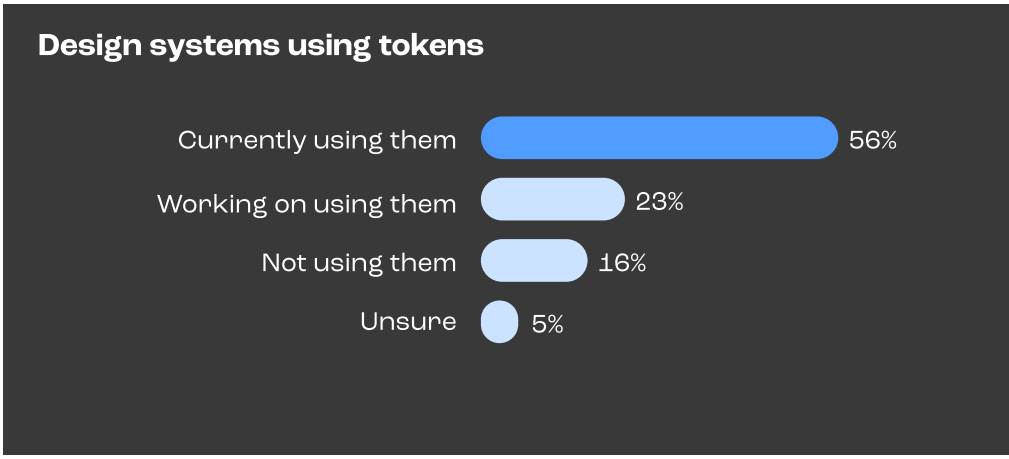
Design system level of prioritization compared to last year

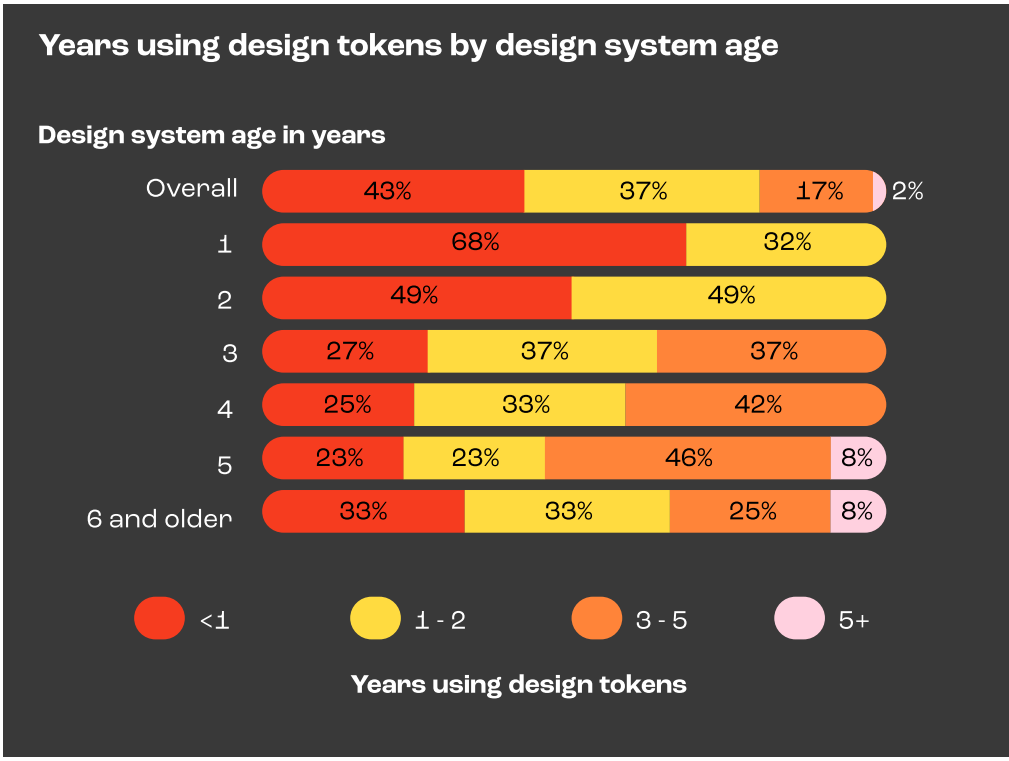
your design system's

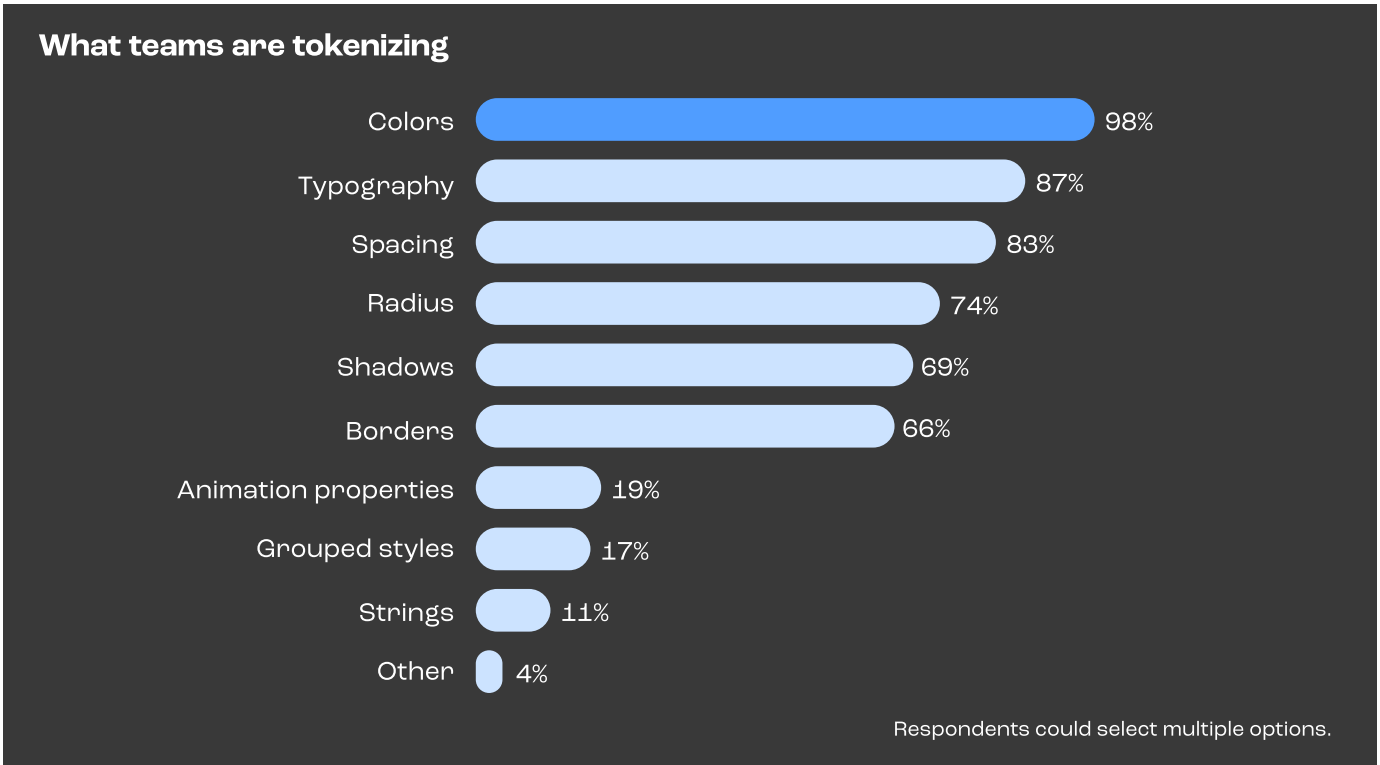
DESIGN TOKENS

Design token usage thrives in younger design systems

Over half of the participants (56%) with design systems reported using design tokens. Interestingly, 23% are considering their implementation, and only a minority (16%) do not use them. A striking 80% of respondents indicated they adopted design tokens in the last two years, indicating a recent surge in their usage. This trend is more pronounced in newer design systems, where tokens are often incorporated early. In contrast, systems that are 4-6 years old typically adopt tokens later in their lifecycle. We suspect that older design systems began adopting tokens in the last two years because design tokens weren't widely used before, and their creation used to be more manual.



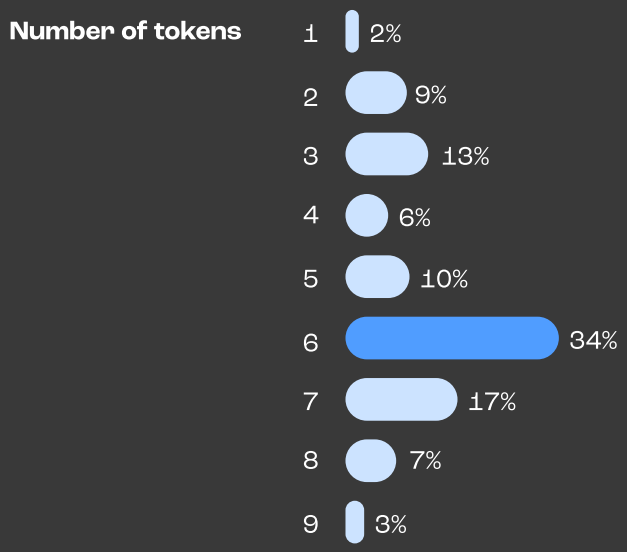




Popular token combinations and trends

Last year's trend continues, with six types of tokens being the most common choice (34%). The favored combination includes borders, colors, radius, shadows, spacing, and typography (27%). The majority of teams (51%) define between 7-8 types of tokens. This pattern suggests a future shift towards broader adoption of diverse tokens as design systems mature. When fewer tokens are used, typically, three types are chosen (13%).

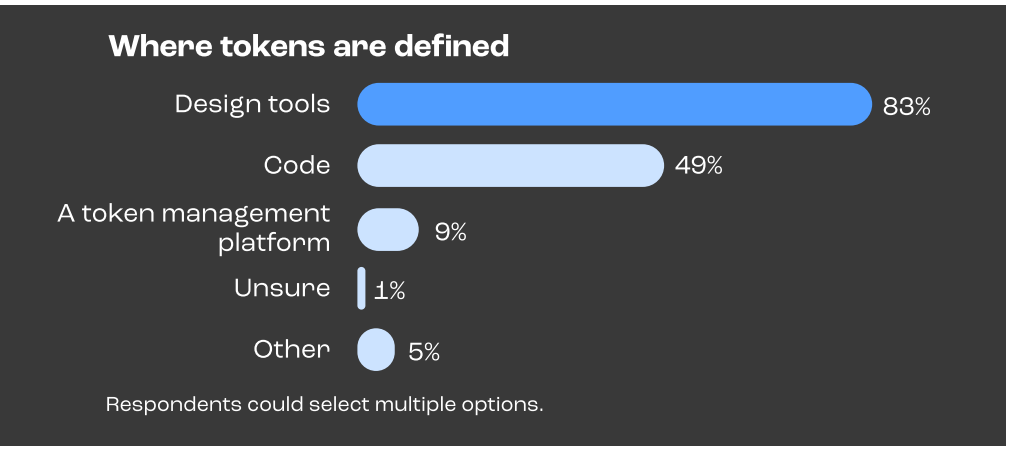
Number of token types used in a design system



Top tip

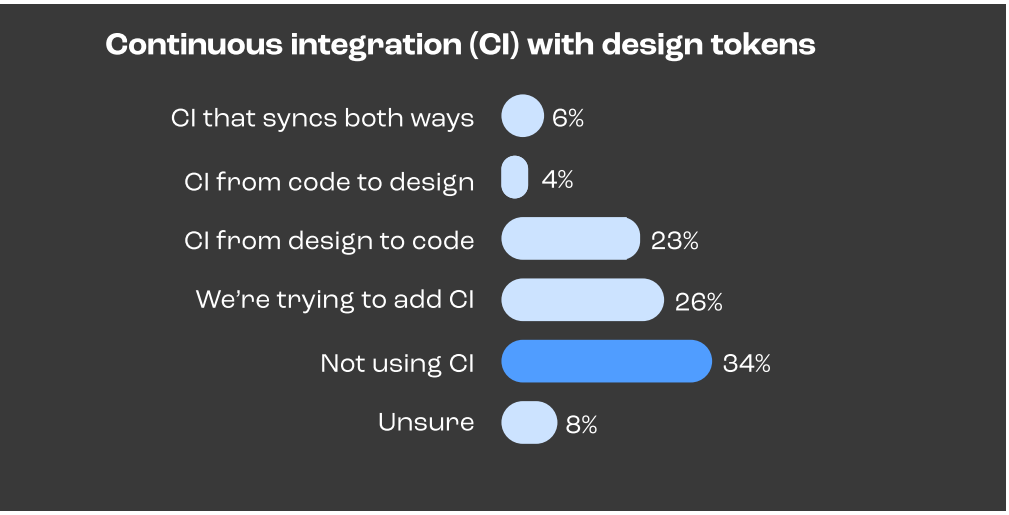
If you're new to design tokens, consider starting with just three types, which was a popular option. It's enough to get started, make an impact, and avoid becoming overwhelmed.

Design tools are the primary platforms for token definition



Following last year's pattern, the bulk of token definition occurs within design and coding tools, with a dominant 83% happening in design tools. This preference highlights the centrality of design tools in the token definition process.

Design tokens and continuous integration

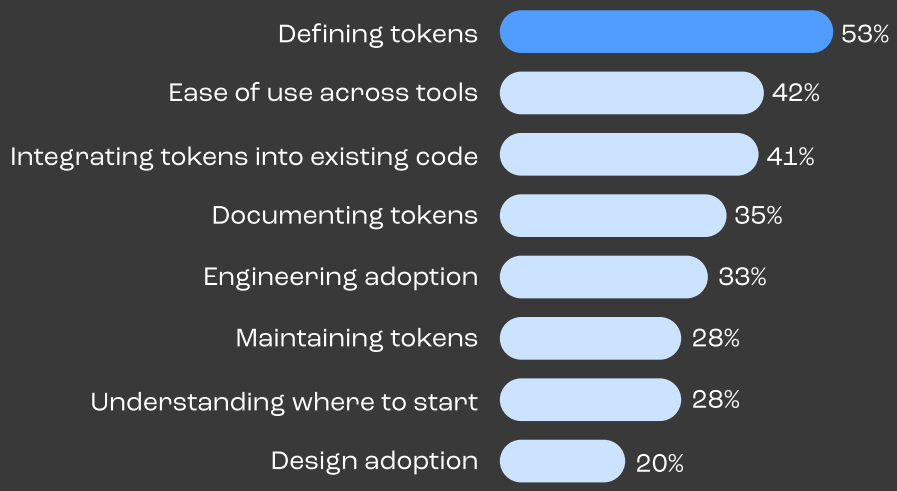


Approximately 59% of respondents either do not have continuous integration for their design tokens or are in the process of implementing it. Among those with integration, syncing from design to code is the most common approach (23%), likely due to the ease provided by design tools and associated plugins.

Challenges teams have with design tokens

Incorporating design tokens presents various challenges. The top hurdles include defining the tokens (taxonomy, structure, naming), integrating them across design and development tools, and merging them with existing codebases. These challenges stem from the flexibility in token naming and organizational concerns about longevity and redefinition. Additionally, implementing and maintaining tokens can often be cumbersome or manual, and integrating them into existing codebases poses its own set of difficulties.

Challenges teams have with design tokens



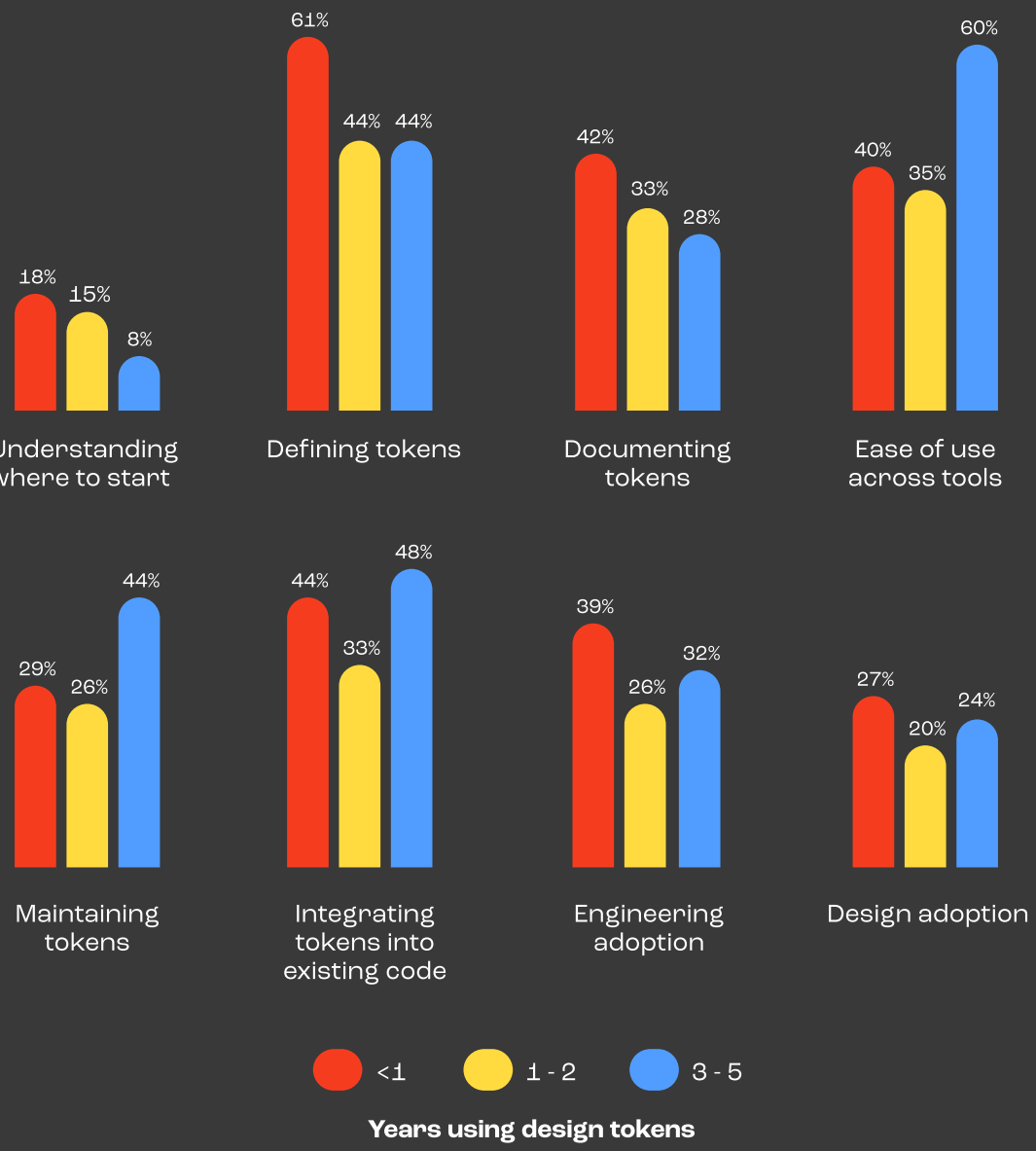
Respondents could select multiple options.

Top tip

When exploring tokens, consider the long-term maintenance workflow and identify ways to alleviate pain points. Work with cross-functional teams to identify risks and complexities that may arise with implementation. Invite them to help plan and brainstorm solutions.

Teams that have used tokens for two years or less face a relatively even spread of challenges, but their top challenge is defining them. For teams with over three years of experience, the main challenges shift to ease of use across tools and integration with existing codebases. Those with over five years of experience report difficulties defining tokens, possibly due to evolving requirements or the need for renaming.

Design token challenges by years of usage



Respondents could select multiple options.

Emerging trends in design token usage

When looking for hallmarks of design token maturity, we hoped to find a stronger distinction. However, a few factors made this a bit more challenging. Some of these factors include the constant evolution of tools, managing tokens is still very much a manual process for most, and newer systems are in a more nimble position to adopt tools compared to more established systems.

Despite these challenges, we observed some encouraging trends:

The initial year of using design tokens:

- Teams primarily focus on defining tokens within their design tool (46%) or using a token management platform like zeroheight, Supernova, Knapsack, or Tokens Studio (54%).
- Approximately 40% initiate some form of continuous integration.

First to second year:

- There's a shift towards defining tokens directly in code (42%).
- Teams are progressively getting a significant portion of their codebases, either some (44%) or all (47%), to consume these tokens.

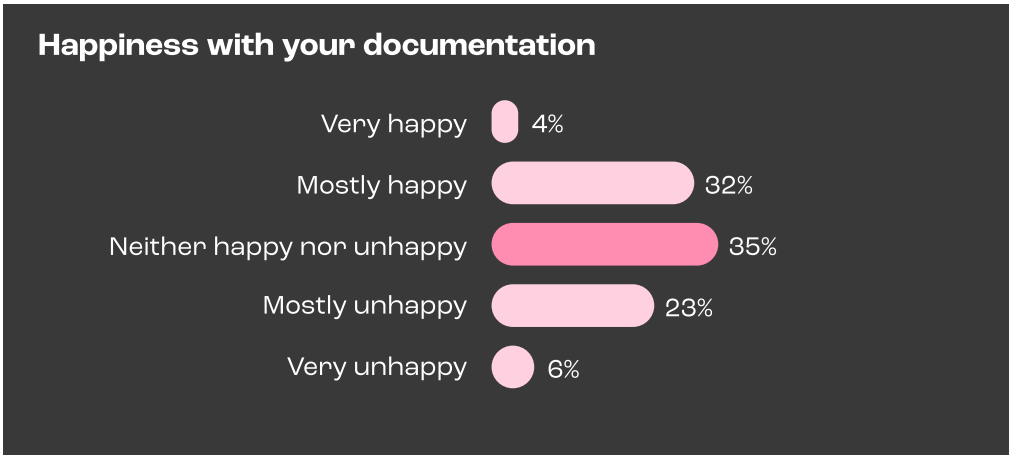
These insights, though early, offer a glimpse into the evolving practices around design token integration in design systems. We're excited to see what next year holds for design token tools and implementation. Maybe we'll better understand and identify key milestones in design token maturity.

your design system

HAPPINESS

Design system documentation happiness levels

Respondents' overall satisfaction with their design system documentation is varied. About 35% expressed neutral feelings, while 32% reported being mostly happy. However, 23% indicated they were mostly unhappy.



Key factors contributing to people's happiness:

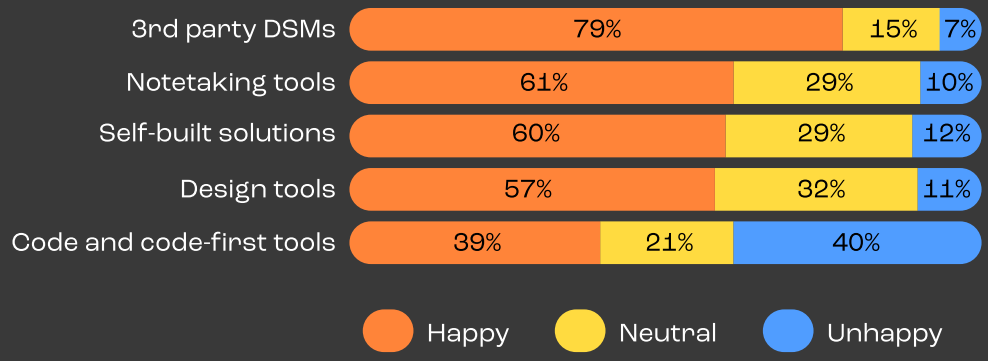
- Consistency levels (55%)
- Active referencing by team members (49%)
- Effective syncing and integration with design tools (47%)
- Compatibility with existing processes and workflows (45%)

Key factors contributing to people's unhappiness:

- Cumbersome content creation and maintenance (56%)
- Insufficient resources for maintenance (54%)
- Inconsistencies across design, engineering, or live products (52%)
- Documentation being underutilized (31%)

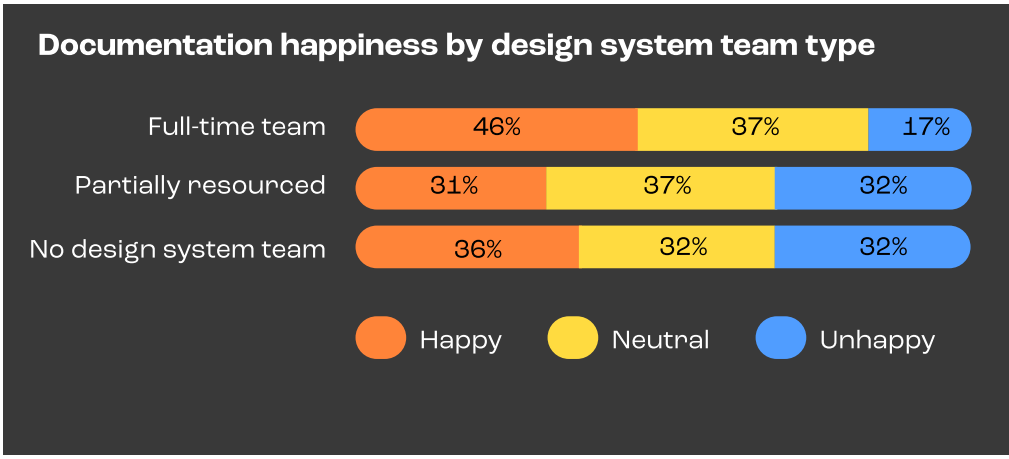
Third-party DSMs influence on documentation happiness

Satisfaction with documentation doesn't significantly vary with the type of tool used. Most tool categories showed a trend towards satisfaction, except for code and code-first tools, which had mixed feedback. The highest satisfaction was reported by users of third-party design system management tools like zeroheight, Knapsack, or Supernova. It's important to note that many teams use multiple tools, and response volumes vary by category. This analysis provides a general understanding, not absolute conclusions.



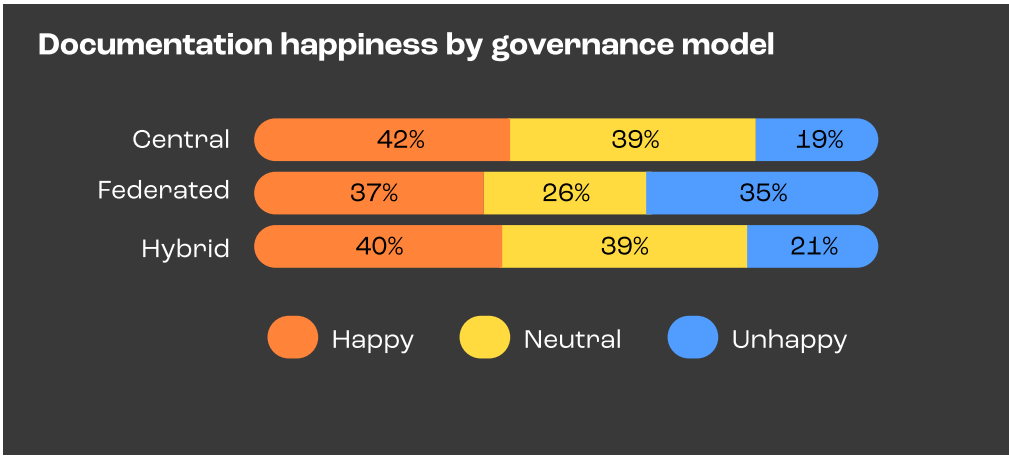
Team structure's influence on documentation happiness

When looking at respondents' happiness with their documentation with the type of design system team they have, the results are pretty even. Teams with dedicated, full-time design system staff reported higher satisfaction levels than other team structures.



Governance model's influence on documentation happiness

Documentation satisfaction levels don't seem to be heavily influenced by the governance model employed. However, respondents with federated governance models reported higher levels of dissatisfaction. This suggests that while the governance model may not be a key determinant of satisfaction, certain models, like federated ones, could pose specific challenges.



THANK YOU

As we close the pages of this year's **How We Document**, we hope you're leaving with a renewed sense of direction, inspiration, and a toolkit brimming with actionable insights. Our journey through the findings of the design systems community has been enlightening, and it's clear that our collective pursuit of excellence and innovation in design system documentation is stronger than ever.

But the conversation doesn't end here! To further enrich your understanding, we're hosting a four-part webinar series where we dive deeper into the trends in:

1. Design system makers and teams
2. Design systems and documentation
3. Design system processes and management
4. Design tokens

Join us in real-time this March and April to get thoughts and reactions about data from design system pros. It's a great opportunity to get your questions answered! (If you're reading this after April, fret not—We posted these recordings on our website.)

Register today!

Until next year, keep exploring, innovating, and sharing! We can't wait to catch up with you again.

Your pals,

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