# how we document

2022

welcome to 2022

Design system documentation has been maturing at a rapid pace over the last five years. **how we document** is an opportunity for us to stop, reflect and look at the biggest challenges that face us in how we document and grow our design systems. We spoke to just under 500 design systems professionals from across the world to establish where we're at, where we're going and where we need to be.

contents

- **who** took this survey

- your **organization**

- your design system **team**

- your design system and **documentation**
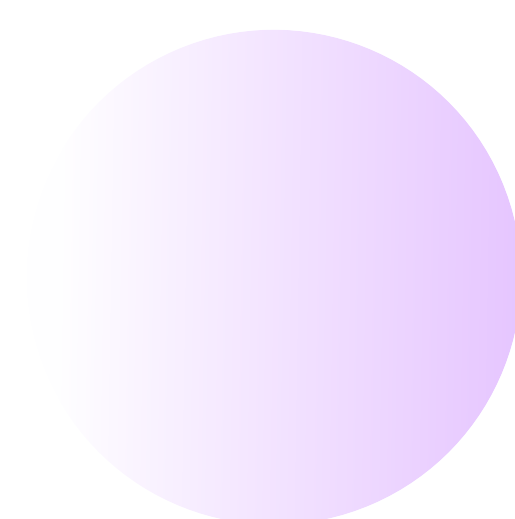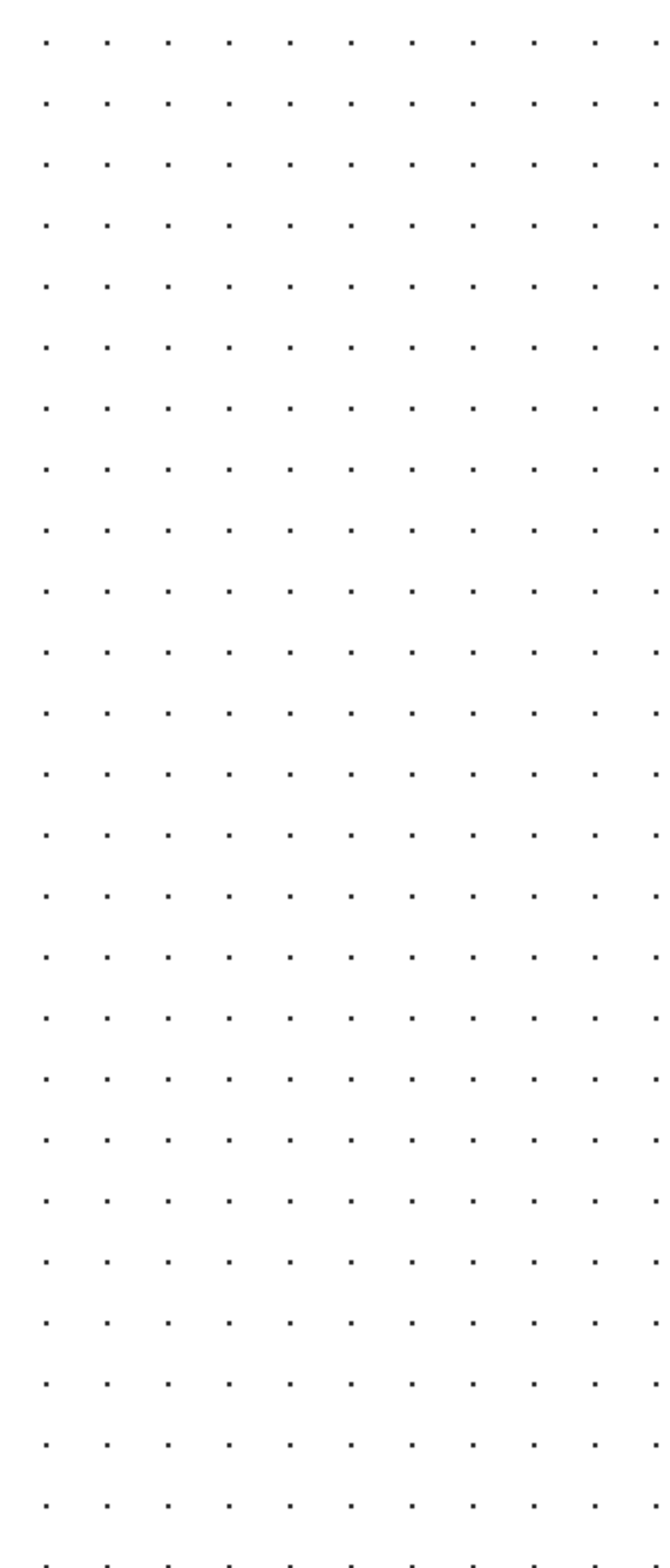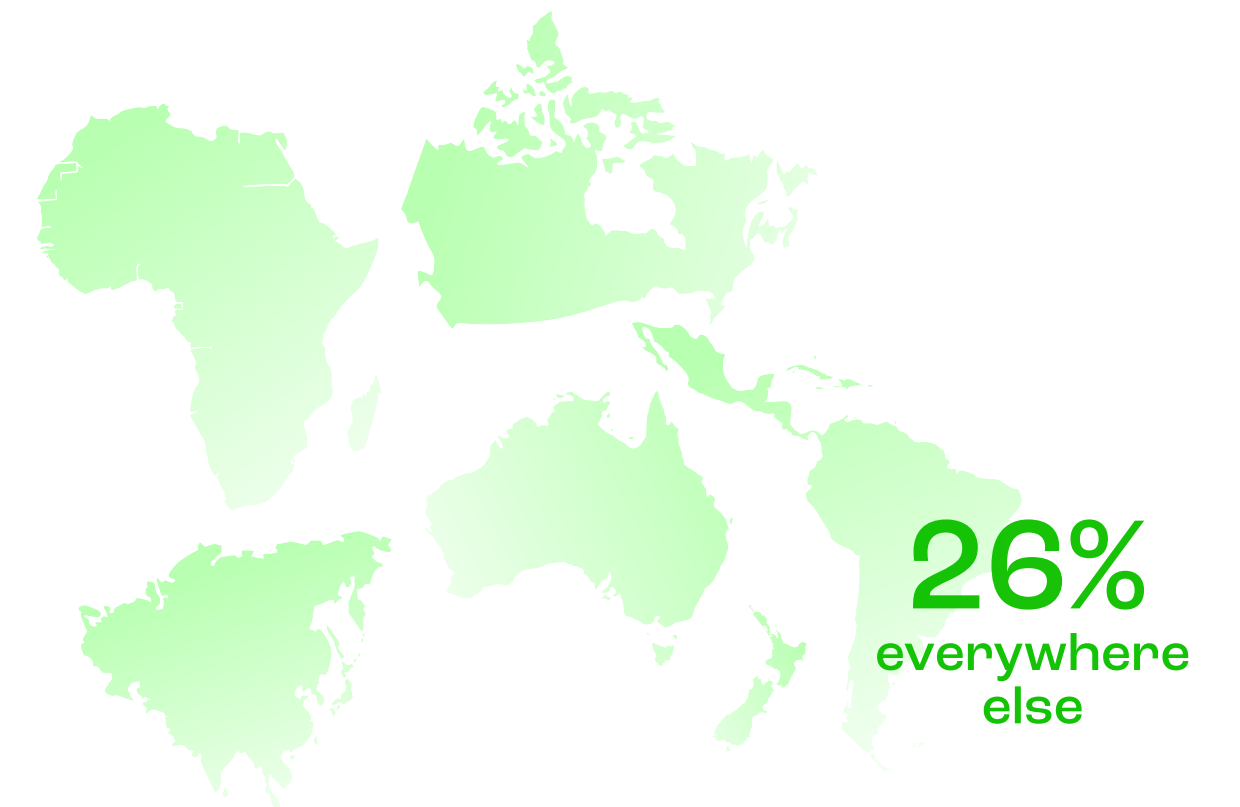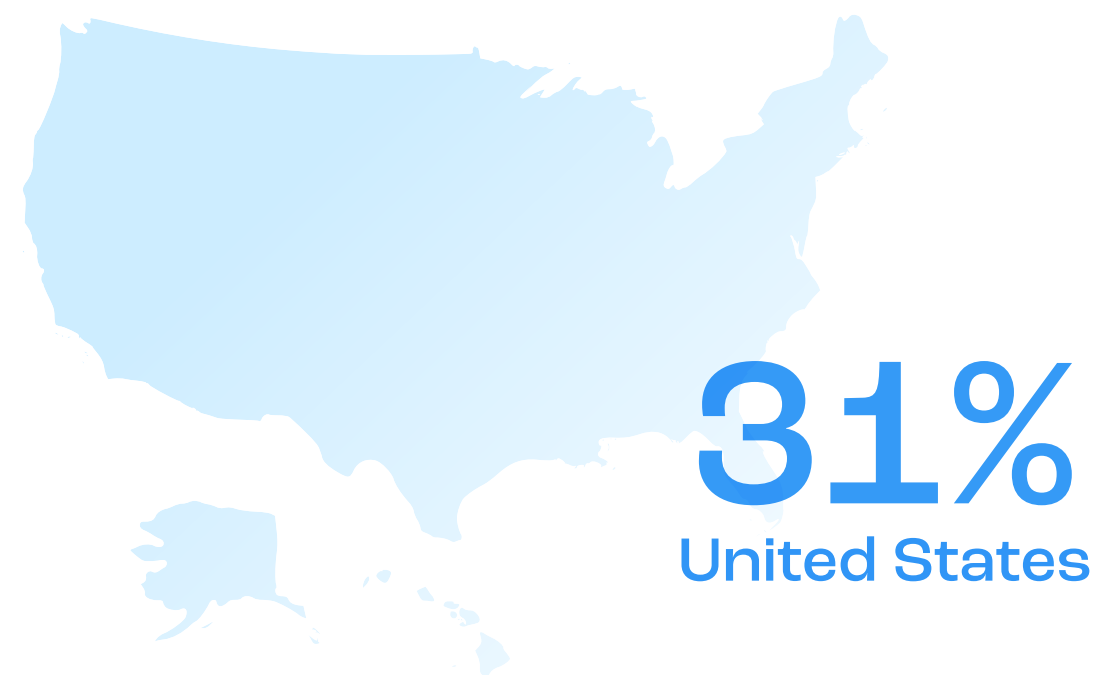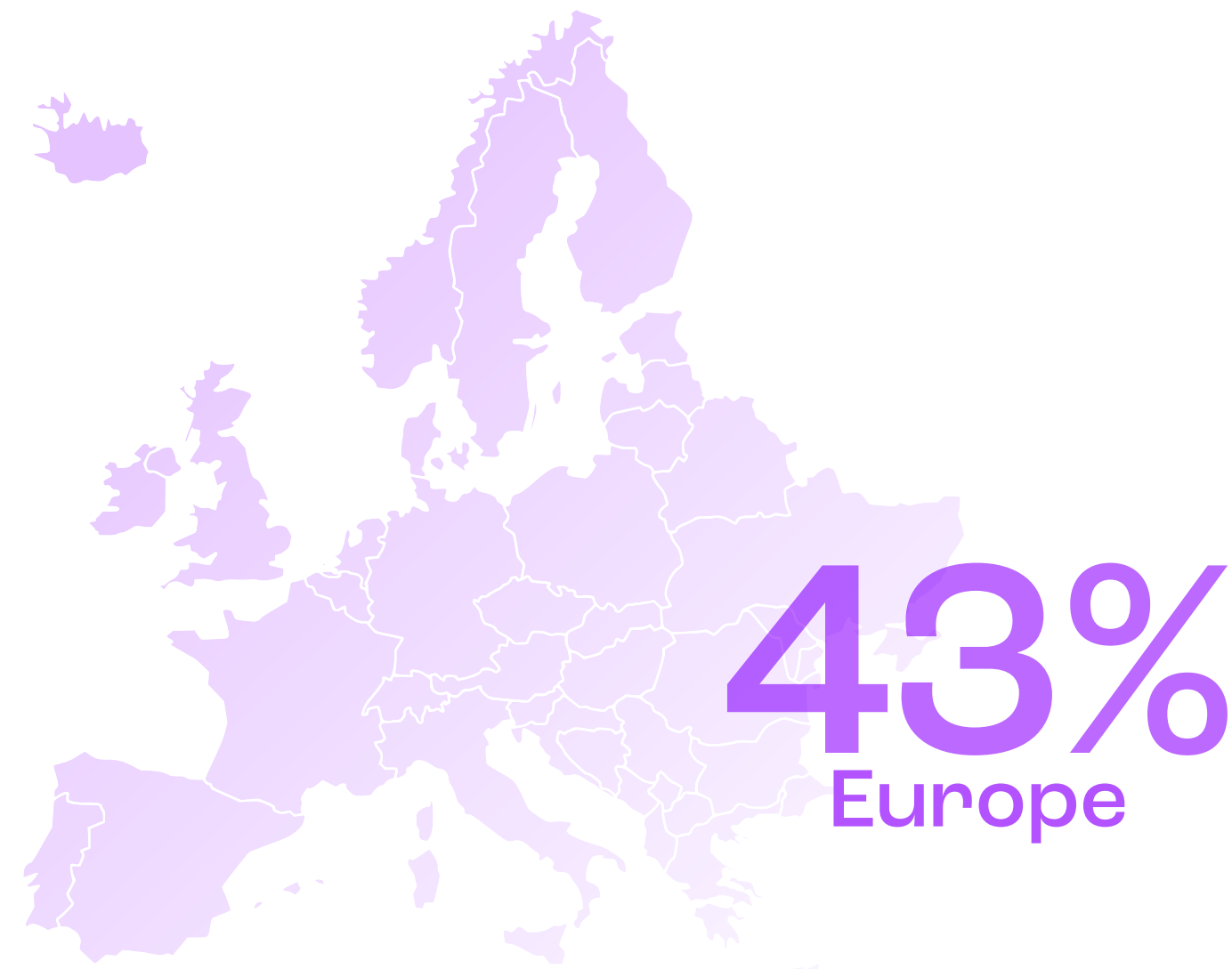
who took this survey

who and where?

460
respondents

While design systems professionals are still predominantly Europe and US based, design systems are emerging to be more global, and less western-centric
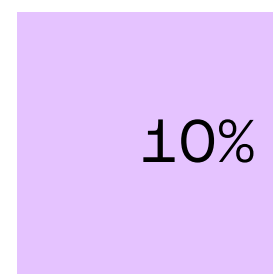
43%
Europe

31%
United States

26%
everywhere else

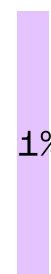# primary discipline

83%
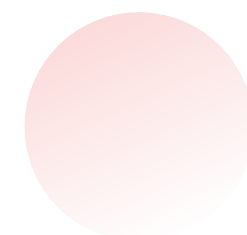of job titles were
Design & UX

10% engineering

3% product management

3% design program management

1% content

The "design" in design systems is still holding strong (which is not necessarily a good thing). Unsurprisingly, 83% of respondents were in Design and UX, with the majority of these being individual contributors (52% of respondents)

job titles

there are 220 unique job titles when it comes to design systems, yet only 8% of job titles explicitly state "design systems" and only 1% state "DesignOps"

2%
content

8%
explicitly
design system

21%
product design

33%
mention UX
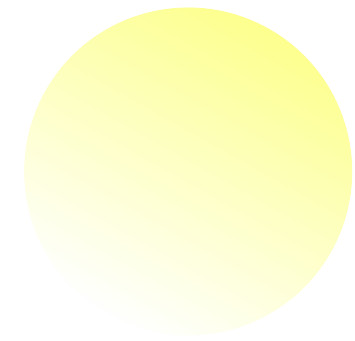
8%
engineering

25%
UX design

76%
of people have documentation as a core part of their role

1%
DesignOps

2%
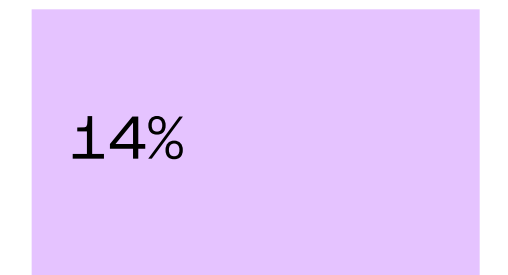product manager

professional experience
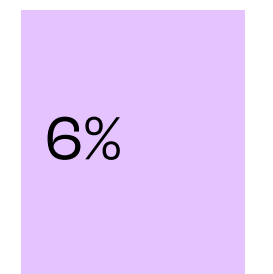
56%
10+ years

5 - 10 years 23%

3 - 5 years 14%

1 - 3 years 6%

0 - 1 years 1%

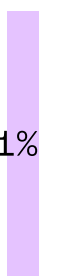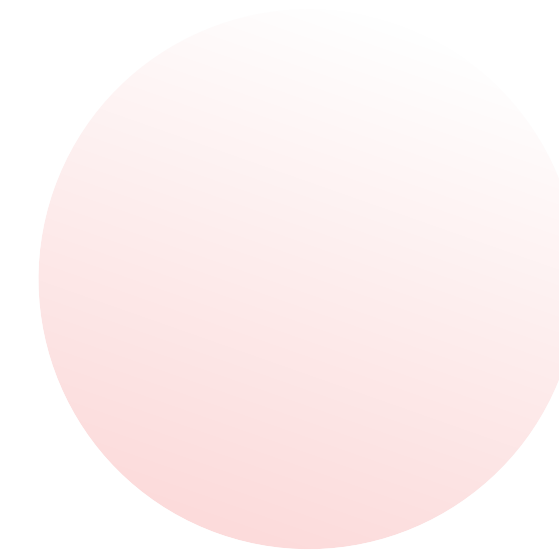Most people who completed the survey have been professionally working for 10+ years. Design systems are not an inexperienced persons' game, it seems

design system experience

0 - 1 years   11%

45%
1 - 3 years

3 -5 years   29%

5 - 10 years   13%

10+ years   2%
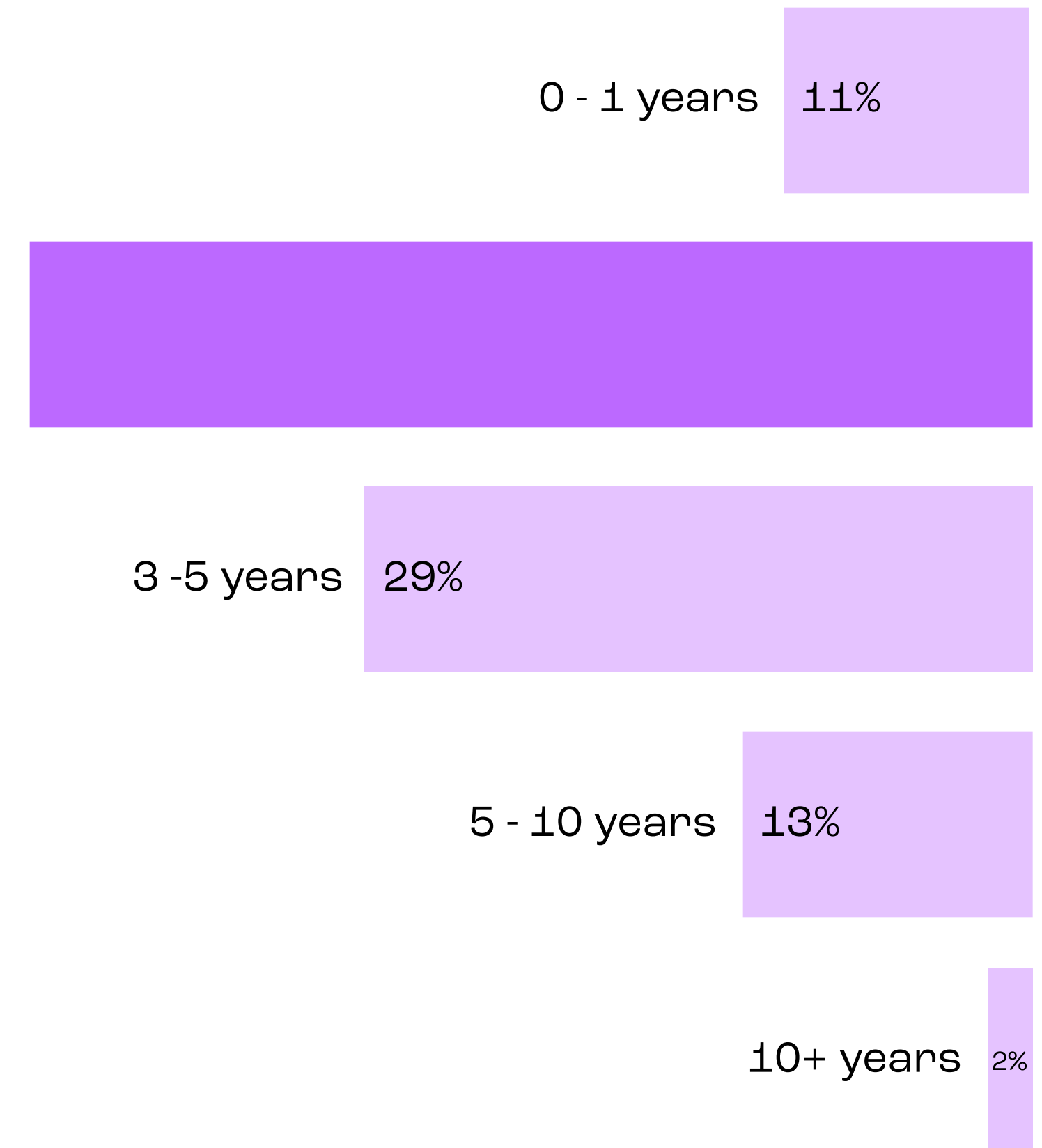
However, the average time that anyone has been working on
design systems is between 1-3 years (45% of respondents)

your organization
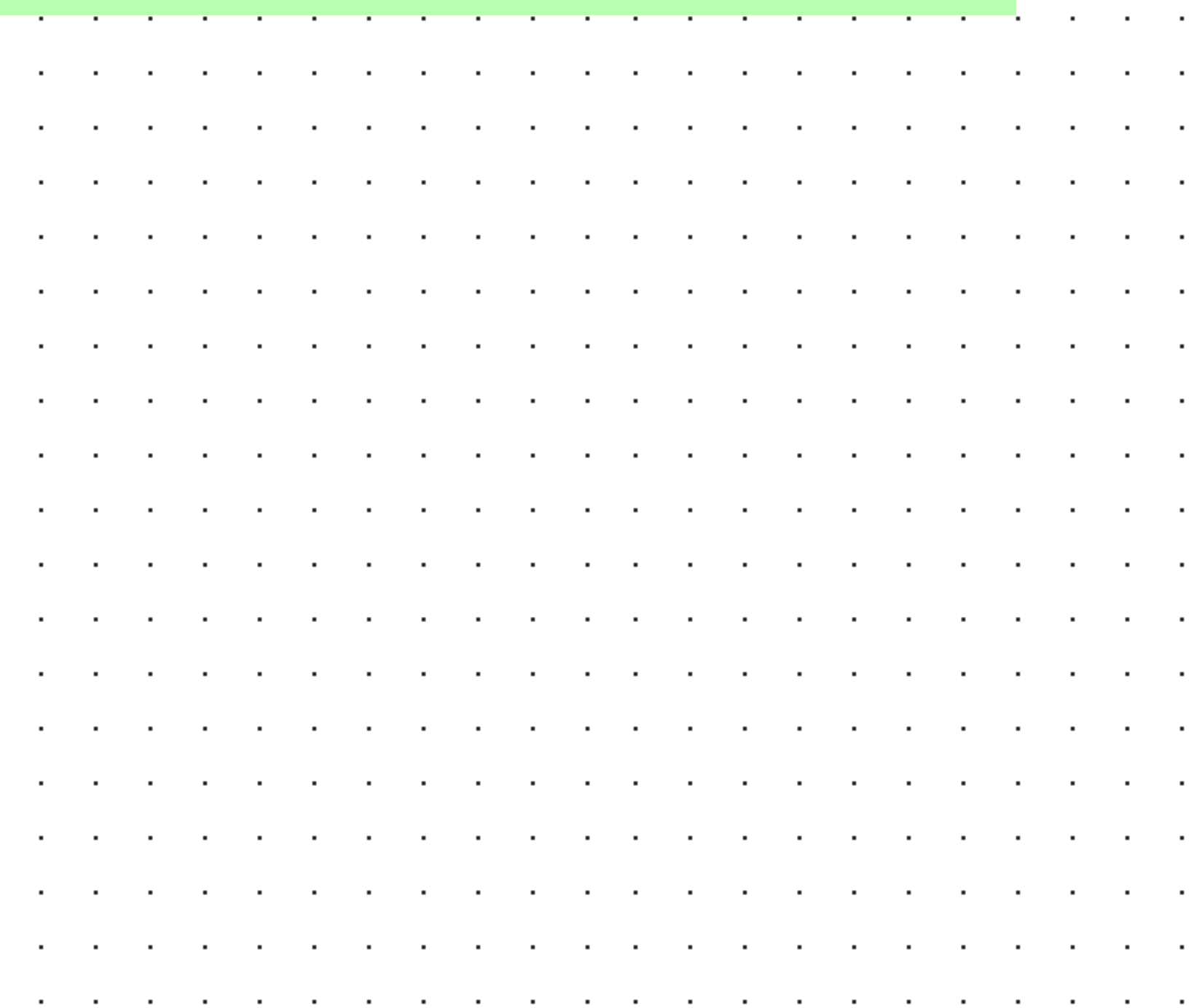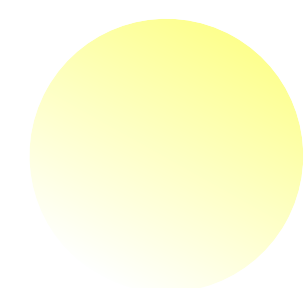
how big is your organization?

30%
1 - 50 people

25% 50 - 200 people

24% 200 - 1000 people

21% 1000+ people
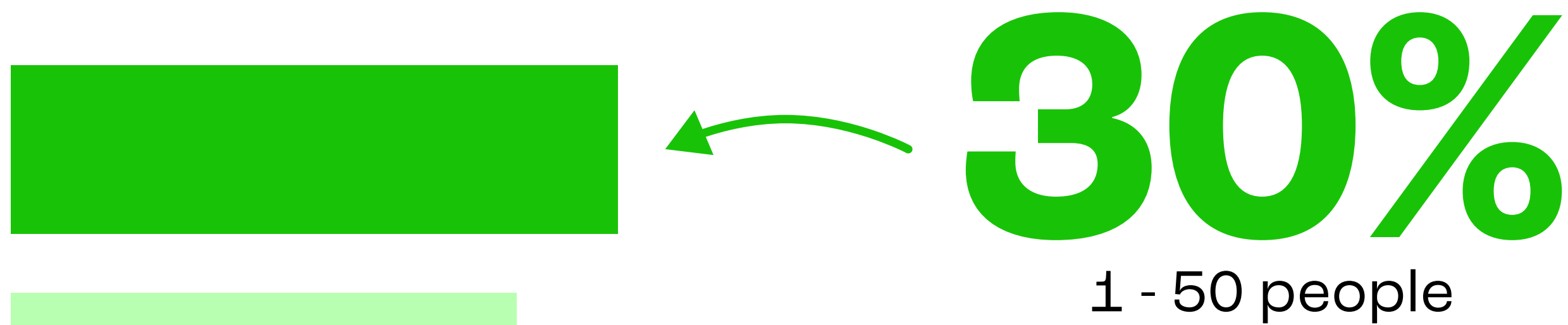
There was a relatively even spread across different organization sizes, with the majority falling into the typical "startup" or small agency size

in-house or agency
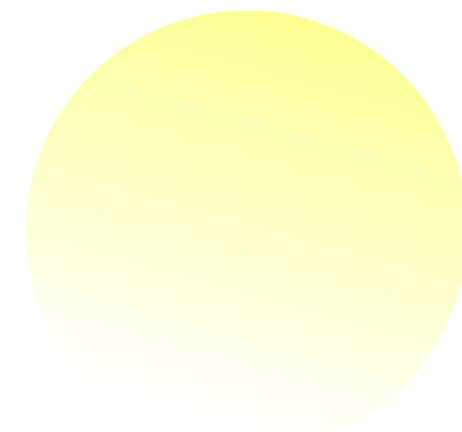
80%
in house

However, most of the respondents work in-house, as opposed to agency, or as freelance or contractors
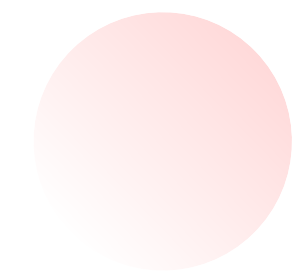
your design org

63%
1 - 10 people

15% 11 - 20 people

13% 21 - 50 people

5% 51 - 100 people

4% 100+ people
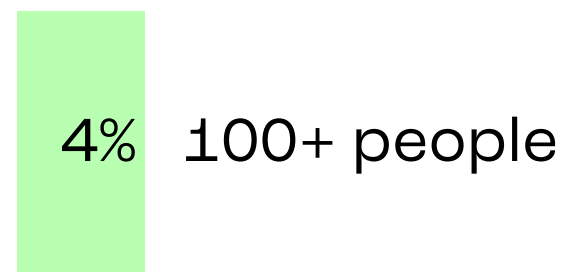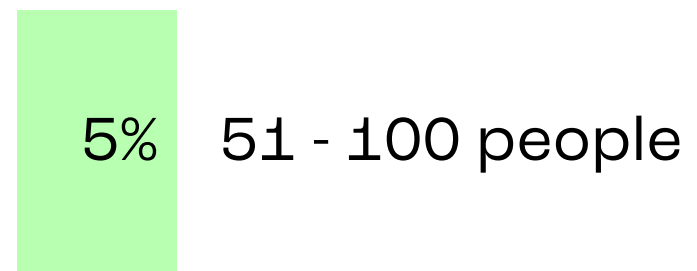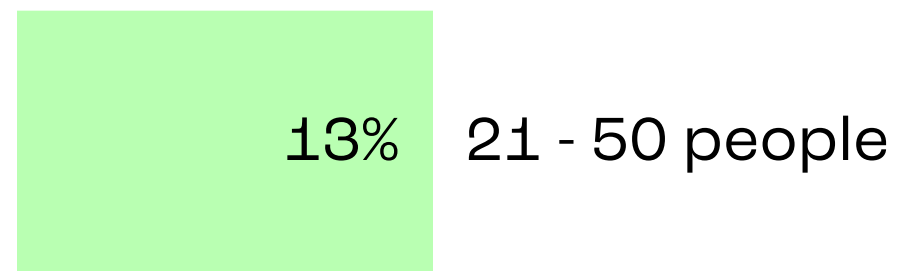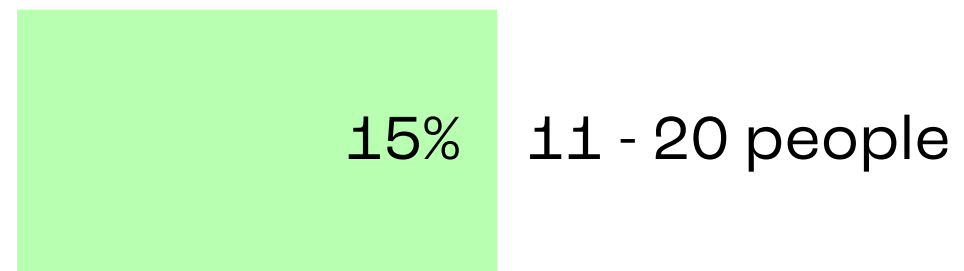
Considering the spread in organization size, small design orgs are still in the majority

designers & engineers

When it comes to the ratio of designers to engineers, the ratio grows with organization size. However, how much it grows is surprising when you get into big organizations, with 1000+ organizations reaching a designer to engineer ratio of 1:25. Is this the ratio that works, or is design still reaching maturity in enterprises?
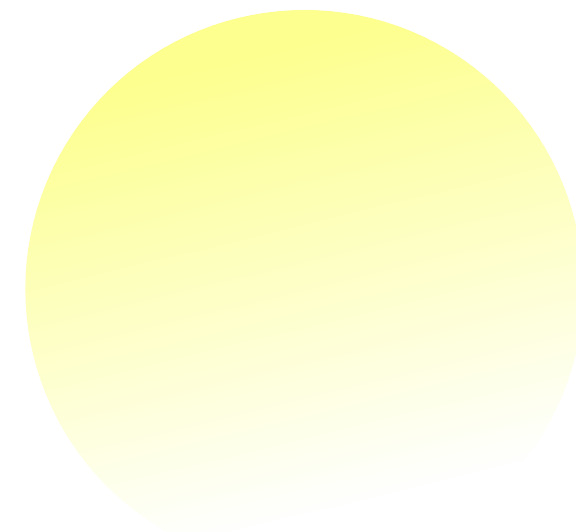
organization size	0-50	51-200	201-1000	1000+
for every one designer	😊	🙂	😳	😱
there are this many engineers	👷👷👷	👷👷👷👷👷👷👷	👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷	👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷👷
	3	**7**	**13**	**25!**
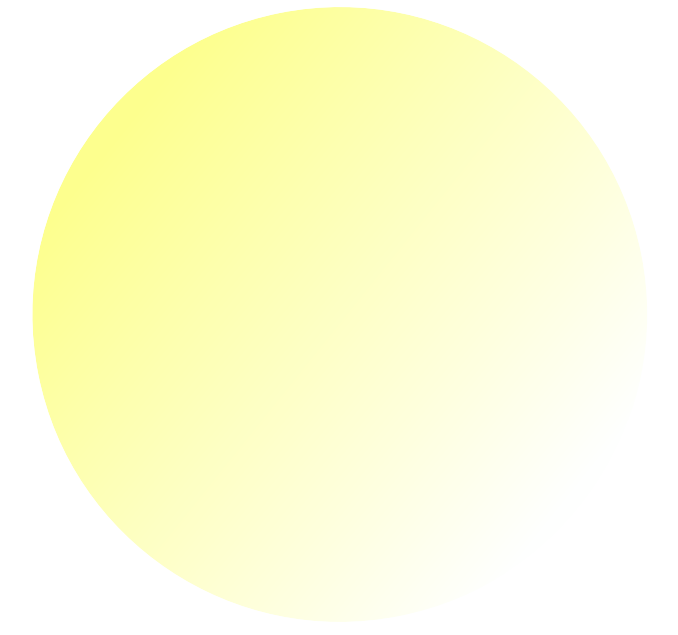
your design system team
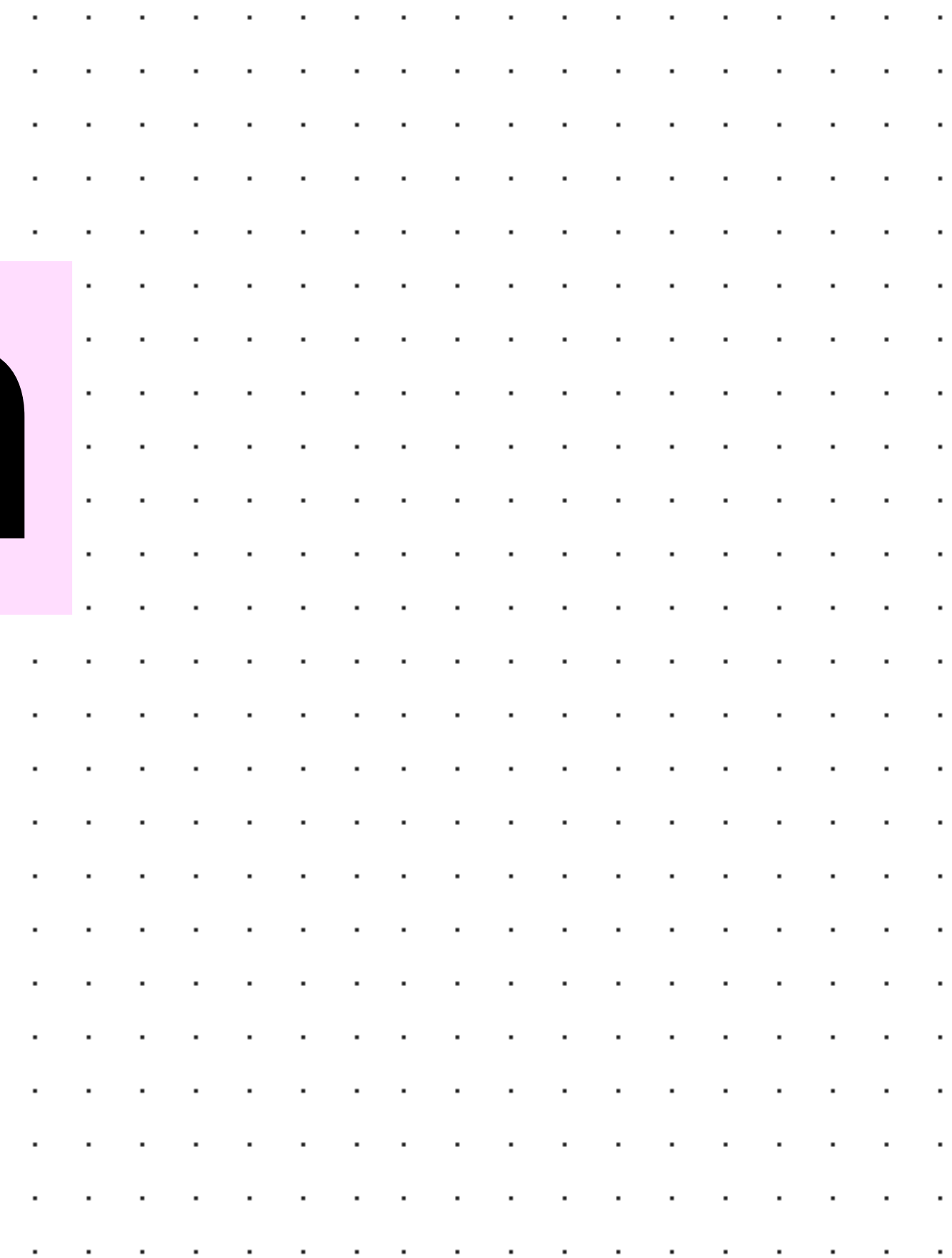
dedicated design system teams are still in the minority

39%
have a design system team
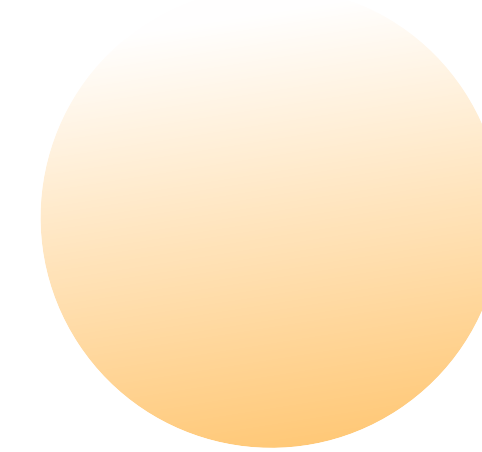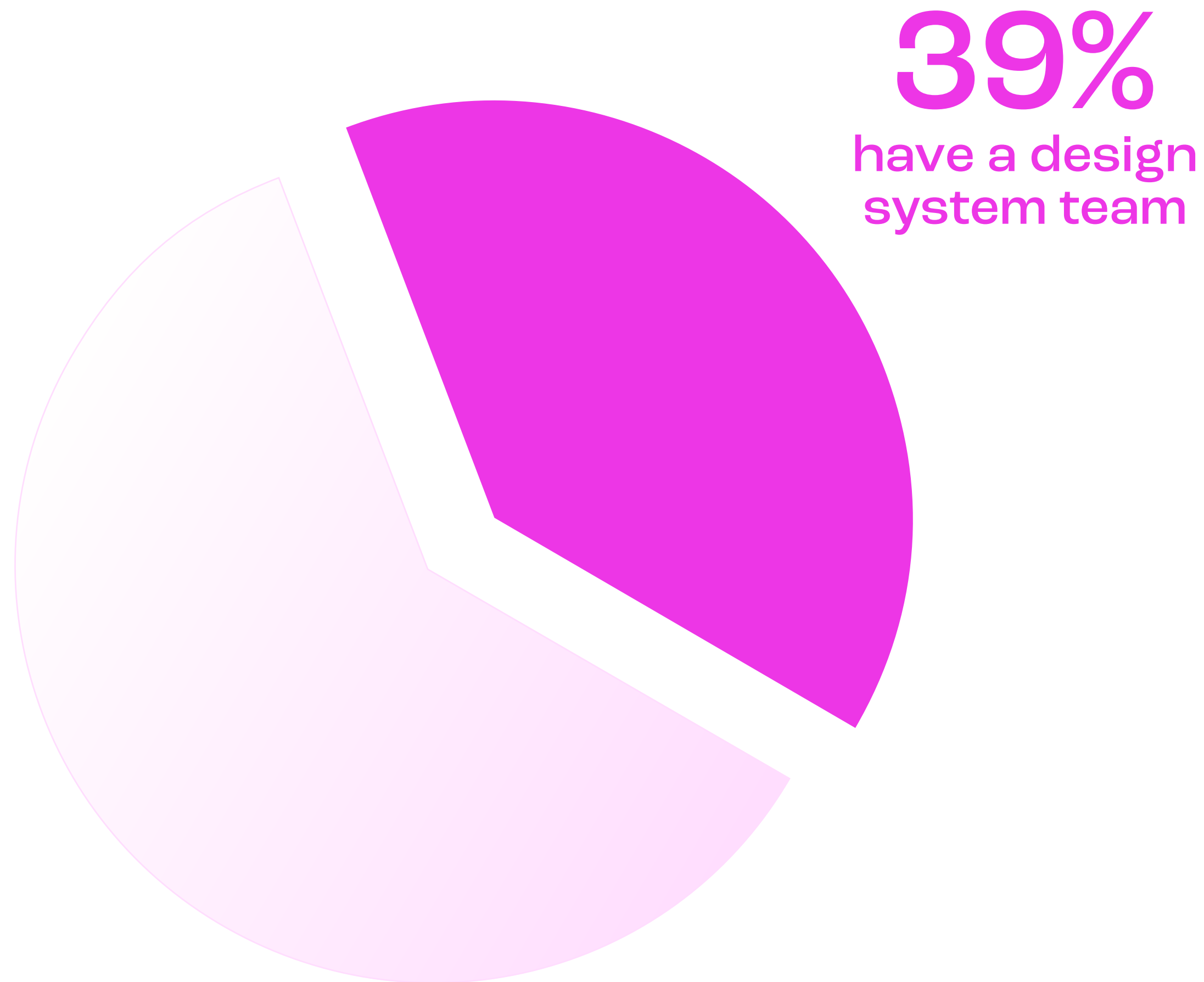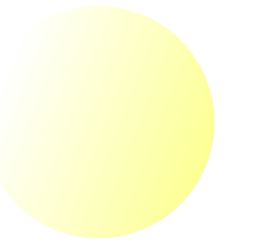
Surprisingly, only 39% of organizations have a dedicated design systems team. It seems that we still haven't reached the point where a dedicated team is commonplace

design system teams are more likely in bigger organizations

58%
more likely in enterprise

scale-up 39%

startup 26%
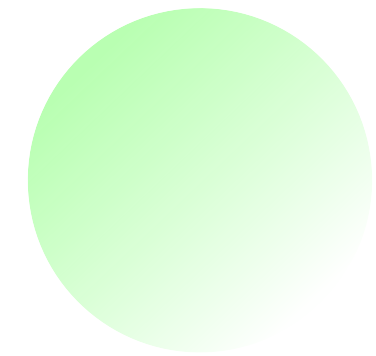
Unsurprisingly, the likelihood of having a dedicated design system team changes with the org size, with the likelihood of an enterprise organization (500+) being much higher than smaller organizations

design system team size

50%
4 - 9 people

1 - 3 people 33%
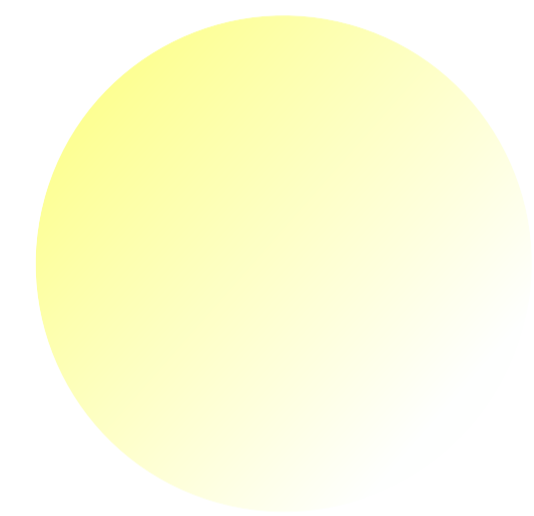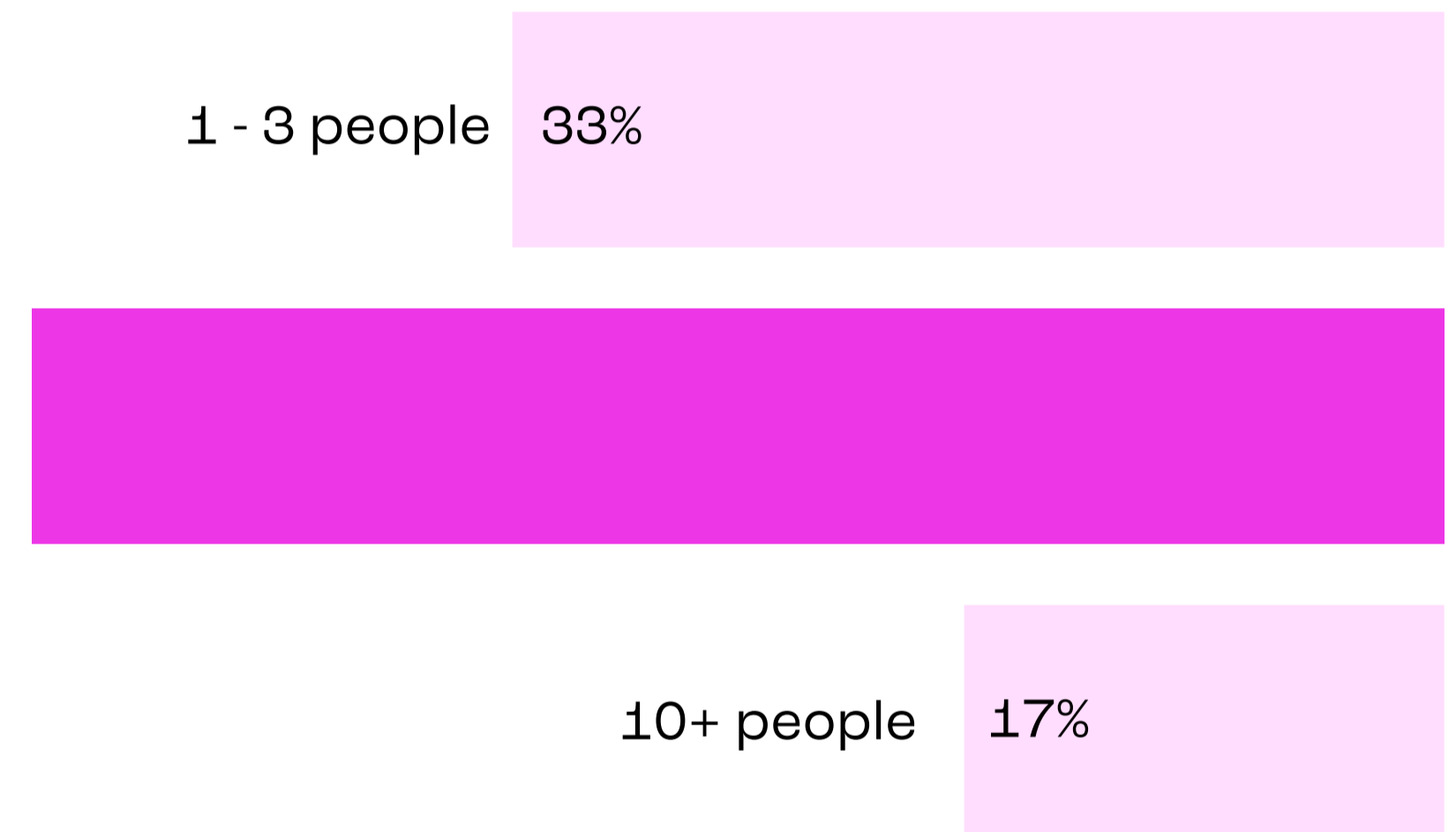
10+ people 17%

50% of all design system teams sit within 4-9 people, with only 17% of teams numbering more than 10 people. Interestingly, the amount of design systems teams with >10 people seems to be very low, which suggests that the value they bring keeps scaling, even when the team size doesn't

design system team makeup doesn't change much

Similarly, the size of the design system team doesn't seem to change much as the organization size changes. Although, this could just be a case of design system teams still being on their way to maturity

organization size	0-50	50-200	200+
average number of people in design systems team	😊	🙂 🙂	😳 😳
	😊	🙂	😳 😳
	😊	🙂	😳 😳
	😊	🙂	😳
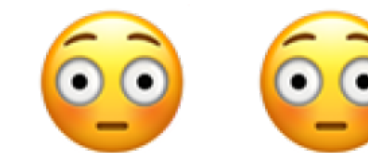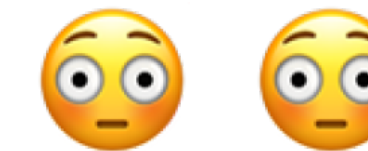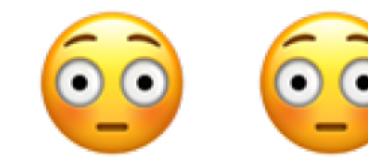
design system team makeup changes over time (but not much)

3	10	1	1

7 years

3.5	4	1	0.5

5- 7 years

2.5	3	1	0.5

2 - 4 years

2.5	3	0.5

0-1 years

designers   engineers   PM   content
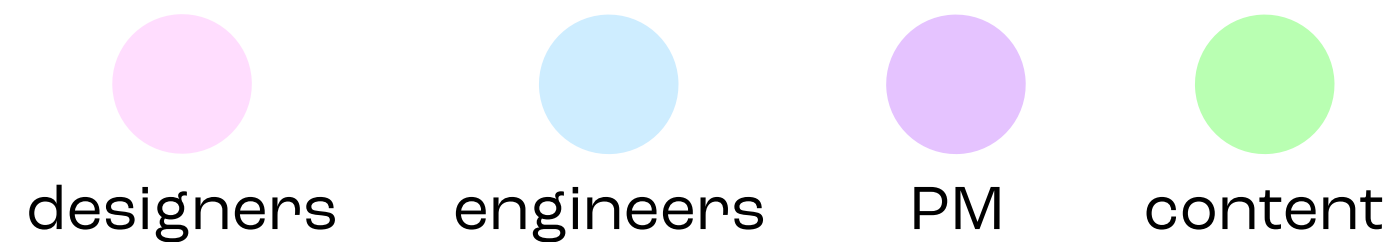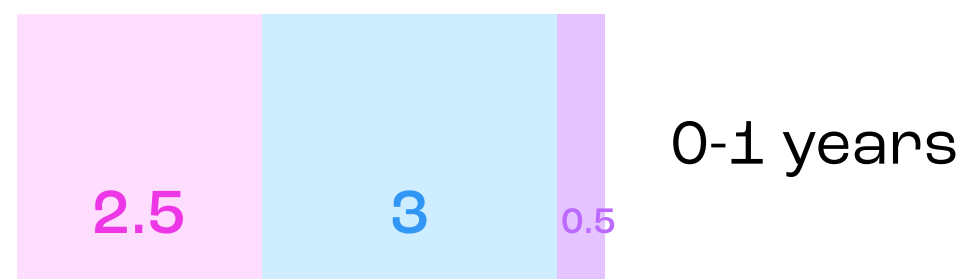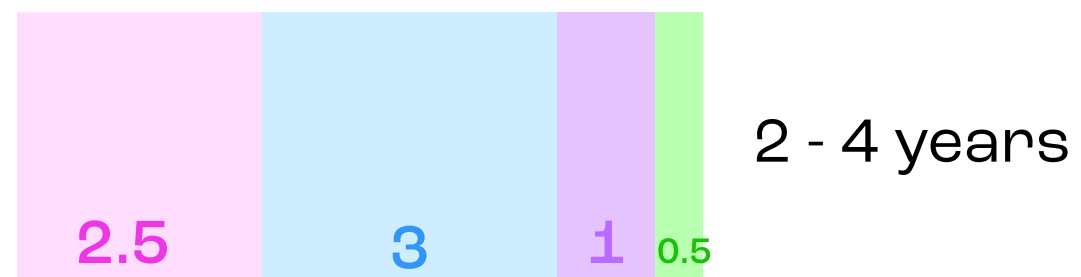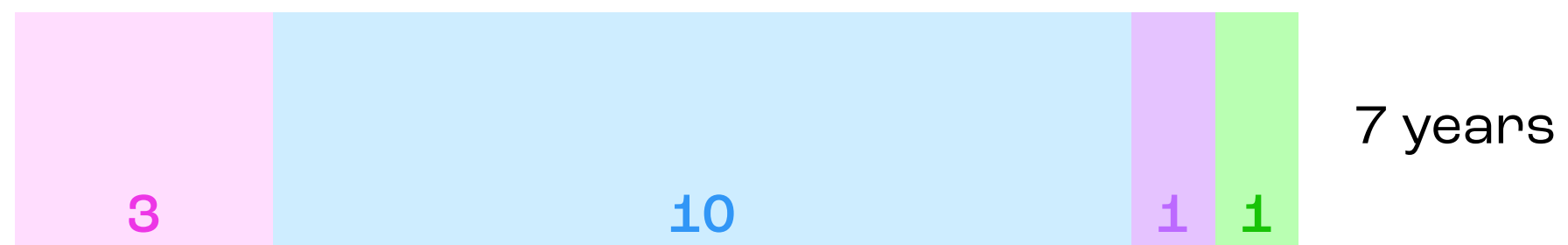
When you look at the breakdown of roles in a design system team, it stays relatively consistent with regards to design, product and content. The main difference with mature teams is the amount of engineering resource required to keep the wheels turning

your design system and documentation

most design systems are relatively young

5% 1 year old

44%
2 years old

25% 3 years old

14% 4 years old

12% 5+ years old

Design systems are still in their infancy, with 74% of systems being 3 years or younger, and only a small percentage beyond the 5 year mark
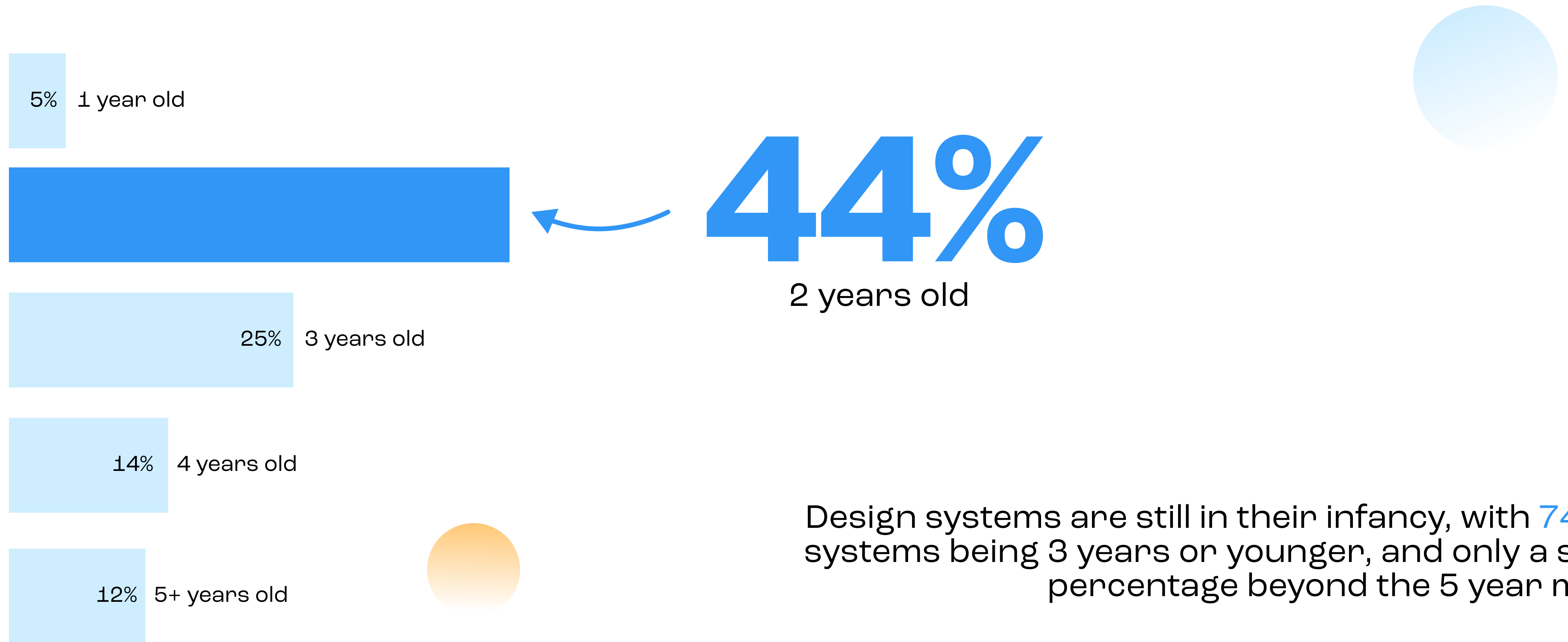
documentation is no longer trailing behind the system

13% 1 year old

53%
2 years old

21% 3 years old

8% 4 years old

5% 5 years old

However, a promising sign is that the difference between starting your design system and documenting it seems to be relatively low, with 90% of systems starting to document within 1 year of starting
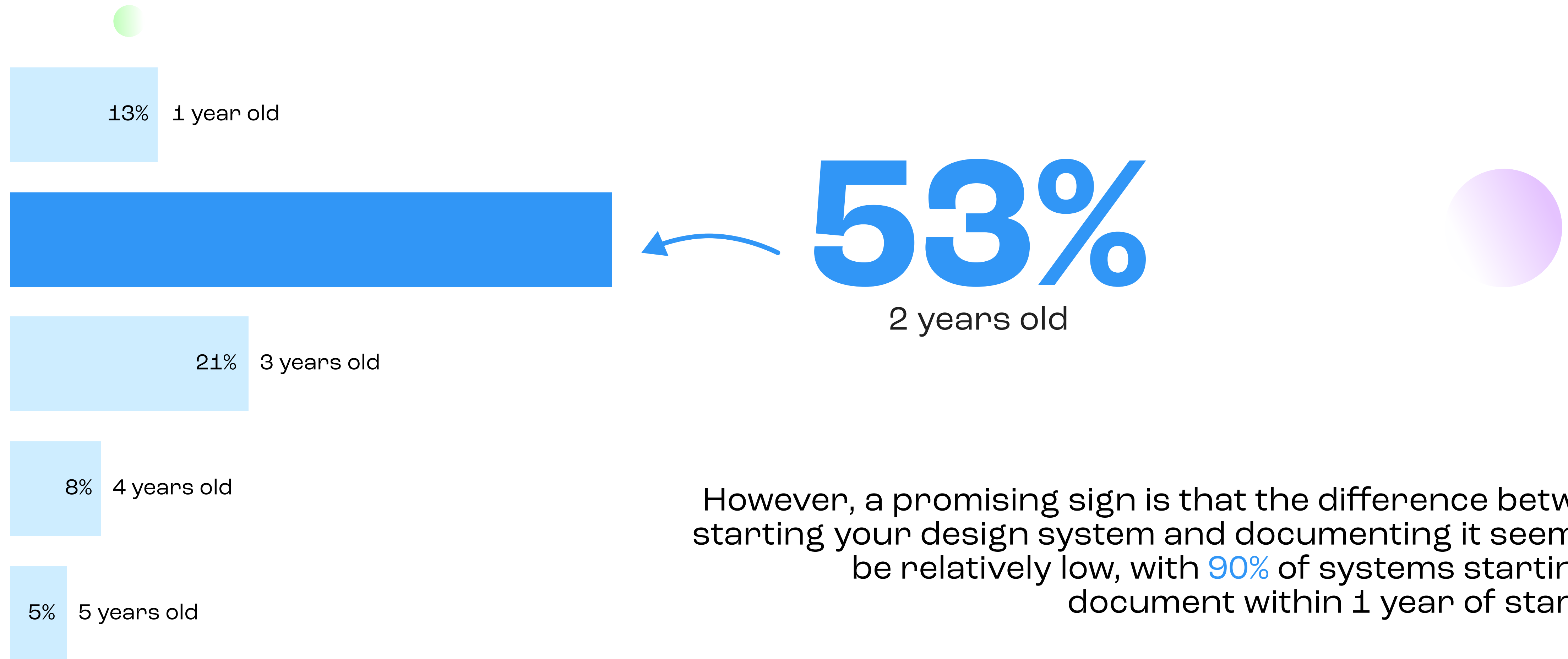
third-party documentation tools are leading the charge

66%
third-party DSMs

62% code and code-first tools

55% the design tool itself

48% notetaking tools

11% self-built solutions
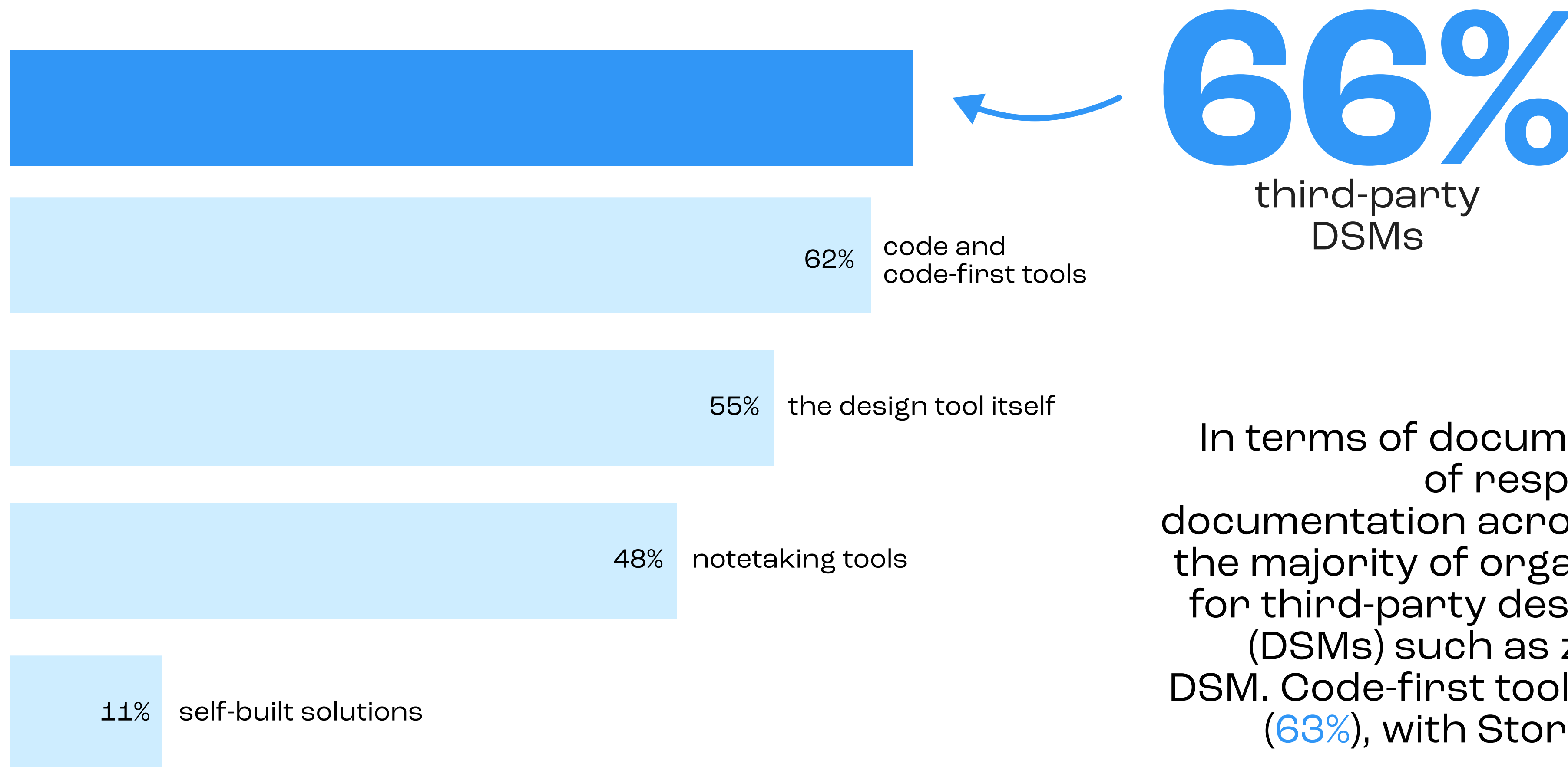
In terms of documentation, the majority of respondents spread their documentation across multiple tools, with the majority of organizations (66%) opting for third-party design system managers (DSMs) such as zeroheight or Invision DSM. Code-first tools are common as well (63%), with Storybook being the most popular by far

the most popular documentation tools
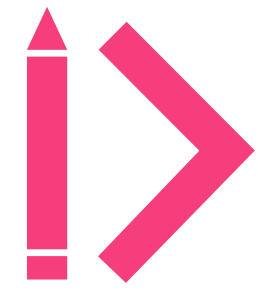
zeroheight
58%

The design tool itself
55%

Storybook
50%

Confluence
22%

Self-built solution
12%
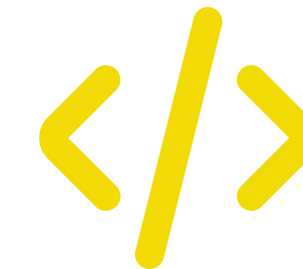
In-code
10%
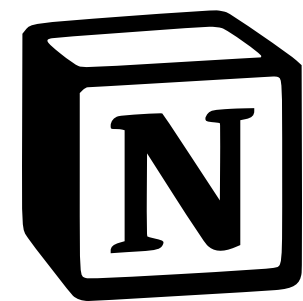
Notion
8%

Google Docs
7%

Invision DSM
3%

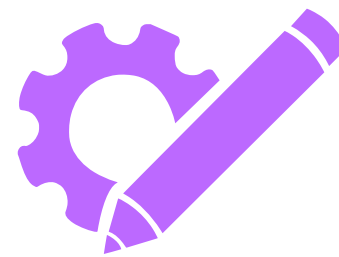# tool combination bingo

9%

6%

4%

3%

3%
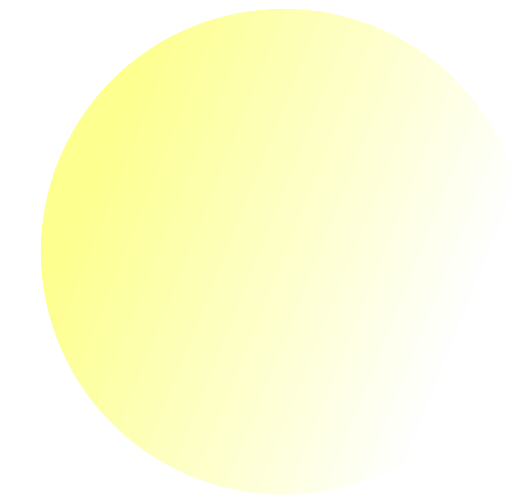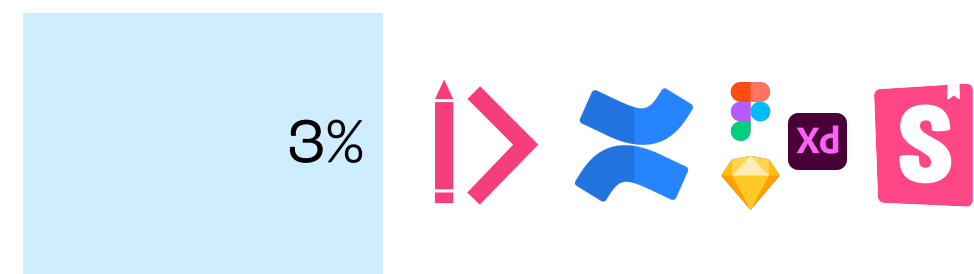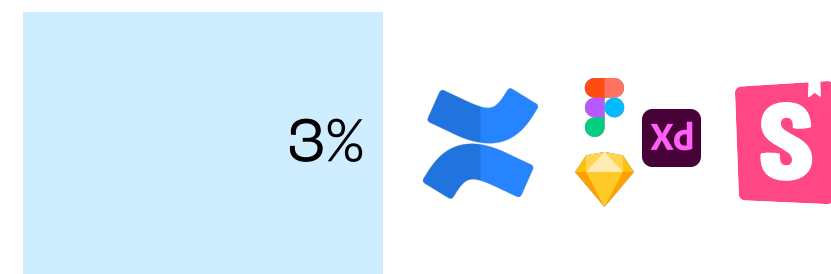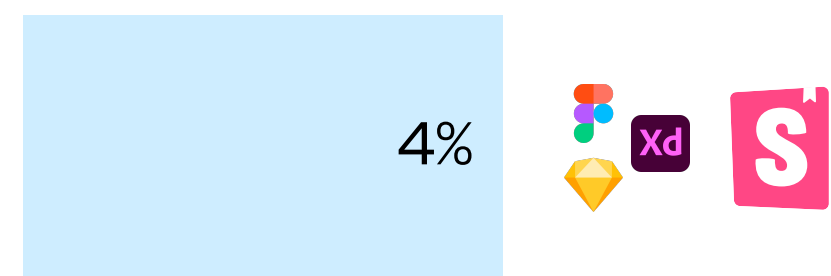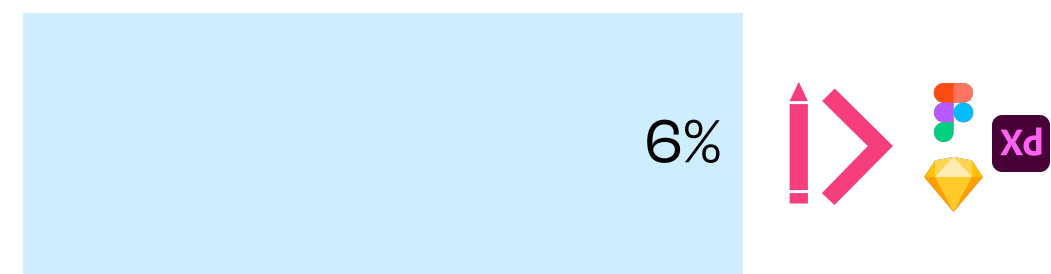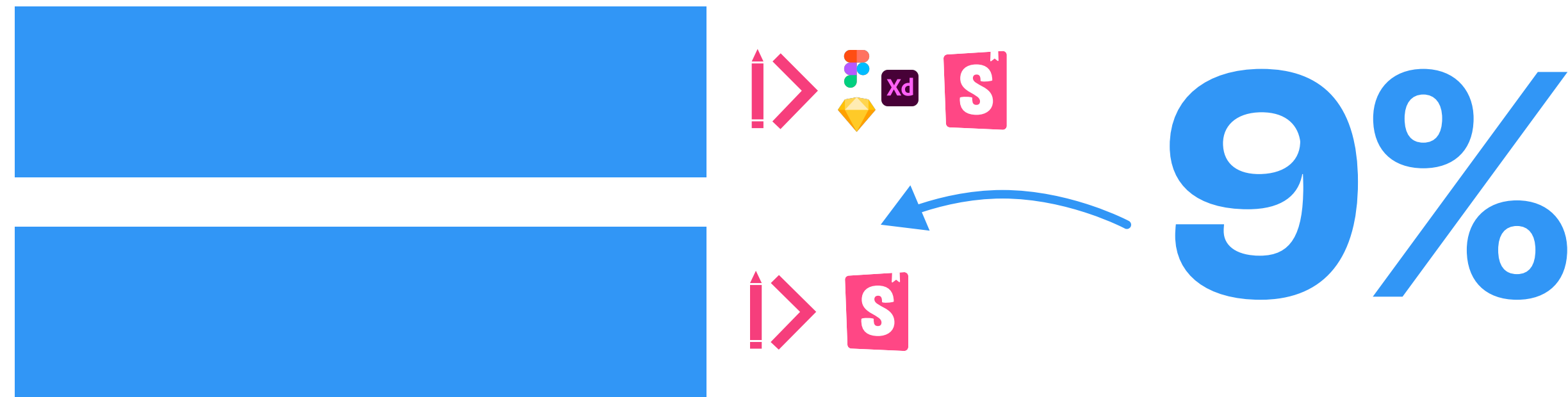
Organizations use a combination of tools to get the job done, especially when it comes to documenting for both design and dev. In fact, 61% of folks still have separate documentation for the dev and design side of the system

When it comes to the most popular combination of tools, it's still common to see a home for design documentation, a home for code documentation, and somewhere that sits between
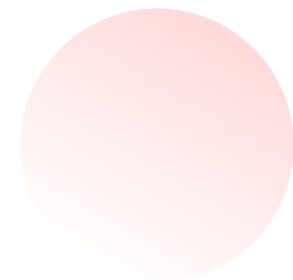
documentation is not covering enough of our system

3% 0%

29%
1 - 25% of the design system is documented

27% 25 - 50%

18% 51 - 75%

17% 76 - 99%

6% 100%

A pressing problem seems to be documentation coverage, with 59% documenting < 50% of their overall system
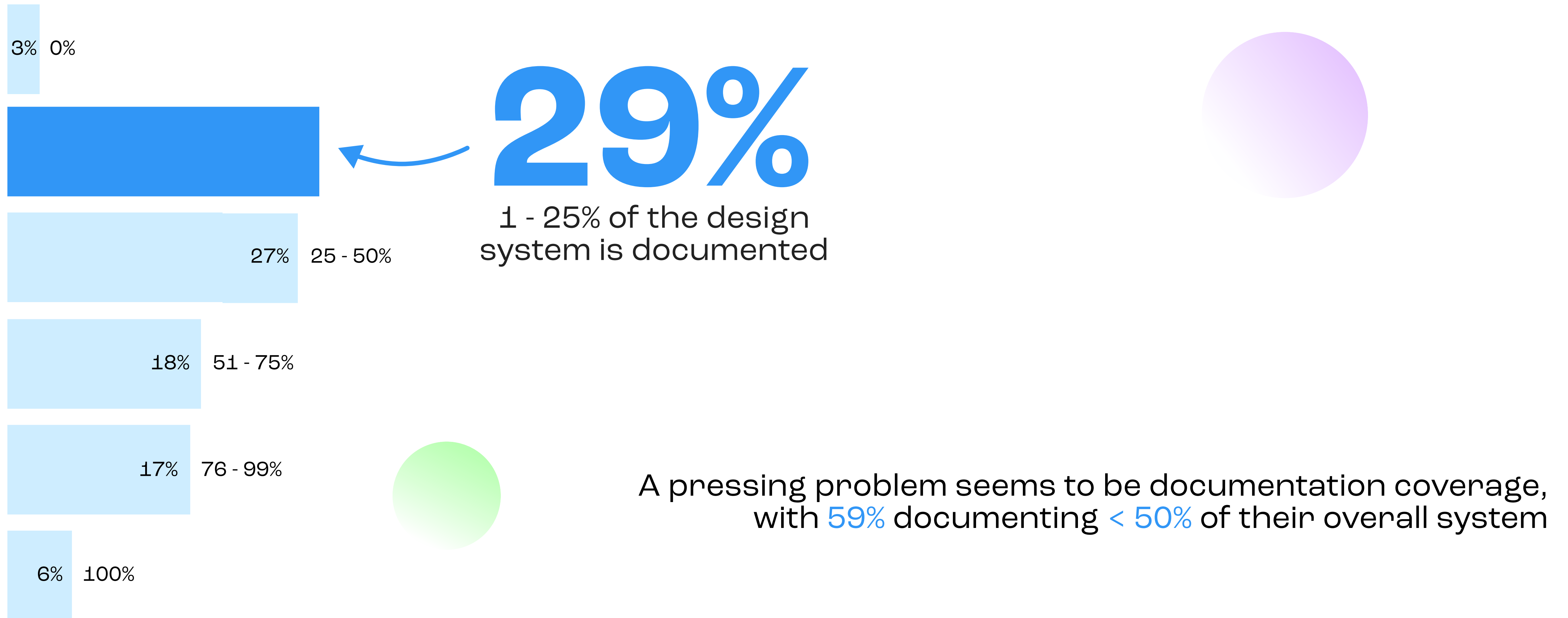
what does your documentation include?

color
92%

buttons
87%

typography
87%

forms
75%

principles
61%

spacing
61%

grids
59%

layout
53%

complex components
52%

design tokens
42%

brand guidelines
42%

code for components
41%

tone & voice
32%

release notes or change log
31%

UX Copy guidelines
30%

example page
29%

A11y guidelines
27%

code usage guidelines
23%

illustration guidelines
20%

contribution model
18%

motion guidelines
16%

UX research
13%

sound guidelines
1%

most of our documentation is monolingual

30%
do localize
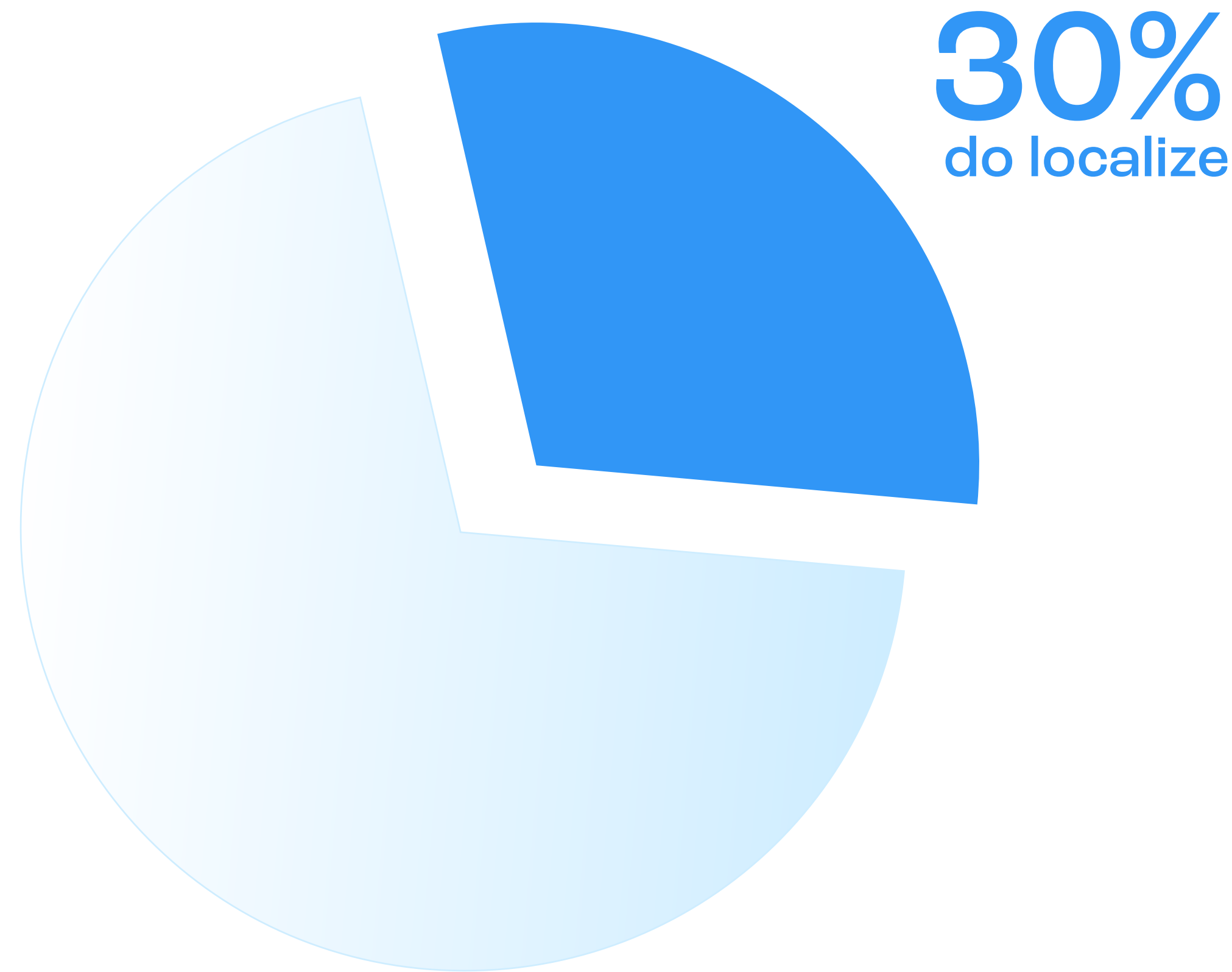
Localizing your documentation is still a relatively niche thing amongst respondents, with only 30% localizing their documentation into other languages

Surprisingly, the size of your organization has little bearing on whether you're likely to localize, with 27% of enterprises localizing their documentation. Similarly, maturity doesn't seem to have an effect, with 30% of self-identified 'mature' design systems being localized

version control is not as common as it should be
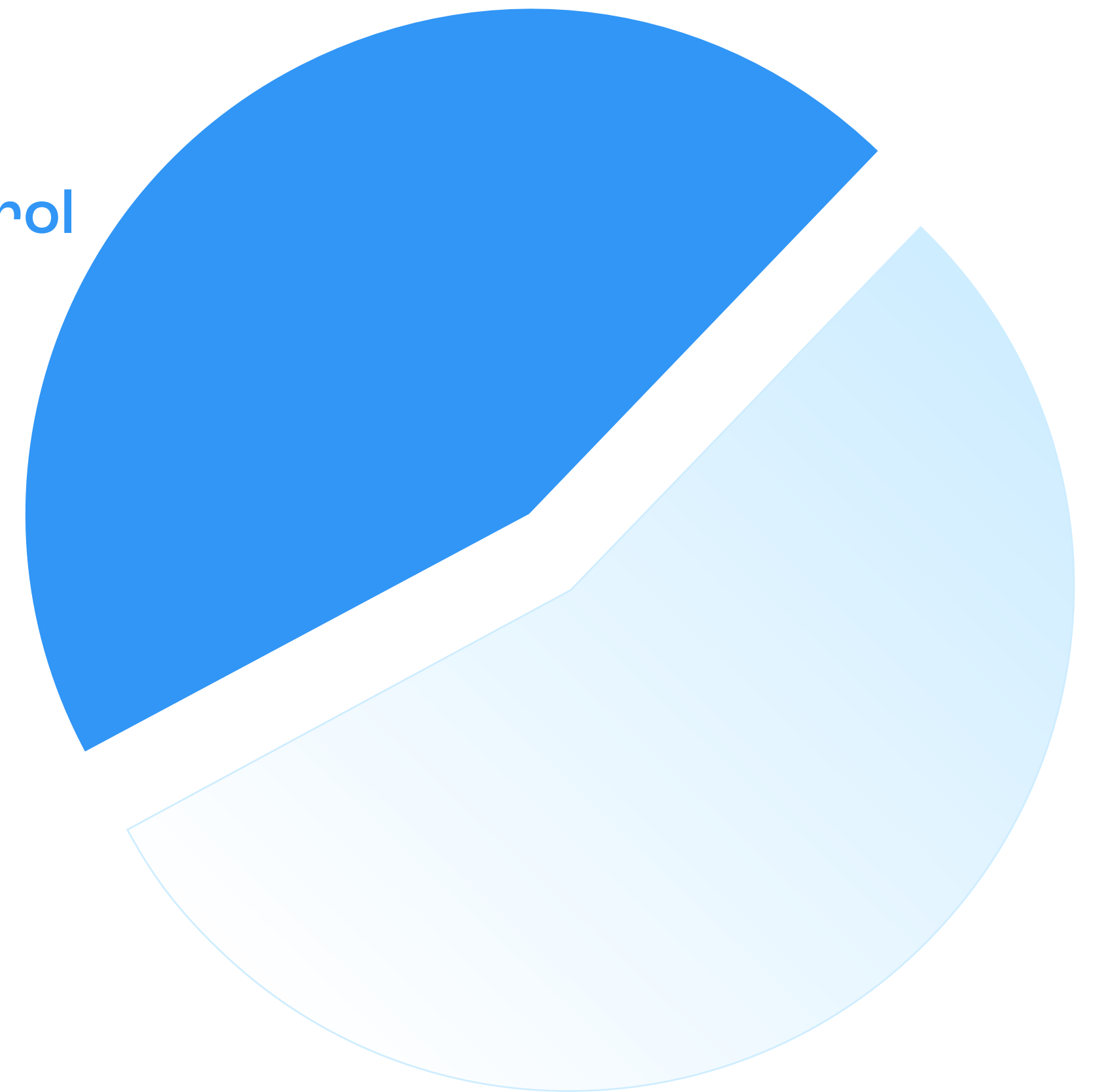
45%
use version control

Surprisingly, only 45% of respondents use any kind of version control on their documentation. Tool usage and organization size have little impact on this number

However, the self-identified 'mature' design systems have a much higher chance of version controlling their documentation (85%)
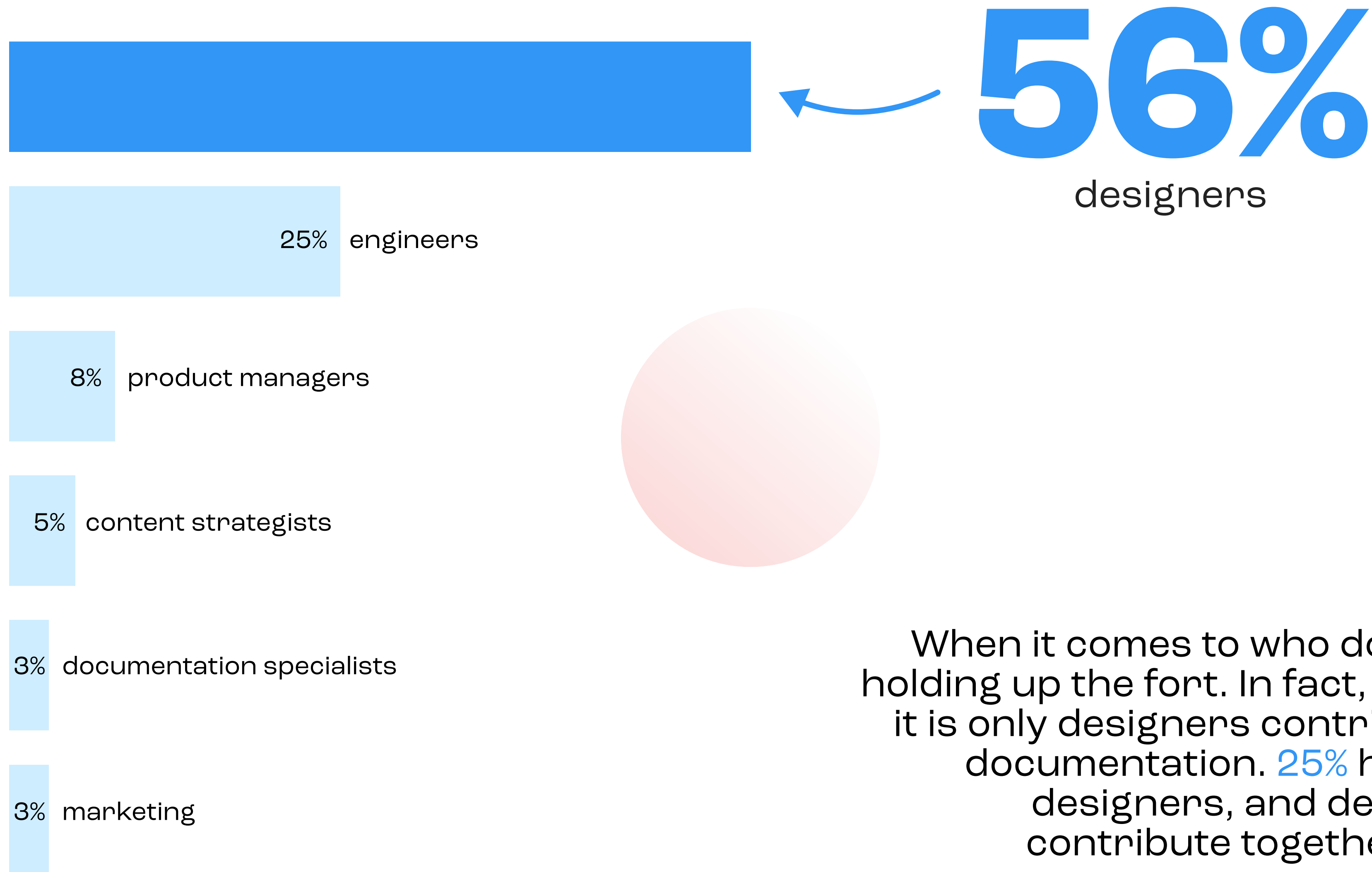
how people contribute to your design system

60%
have a contribution model
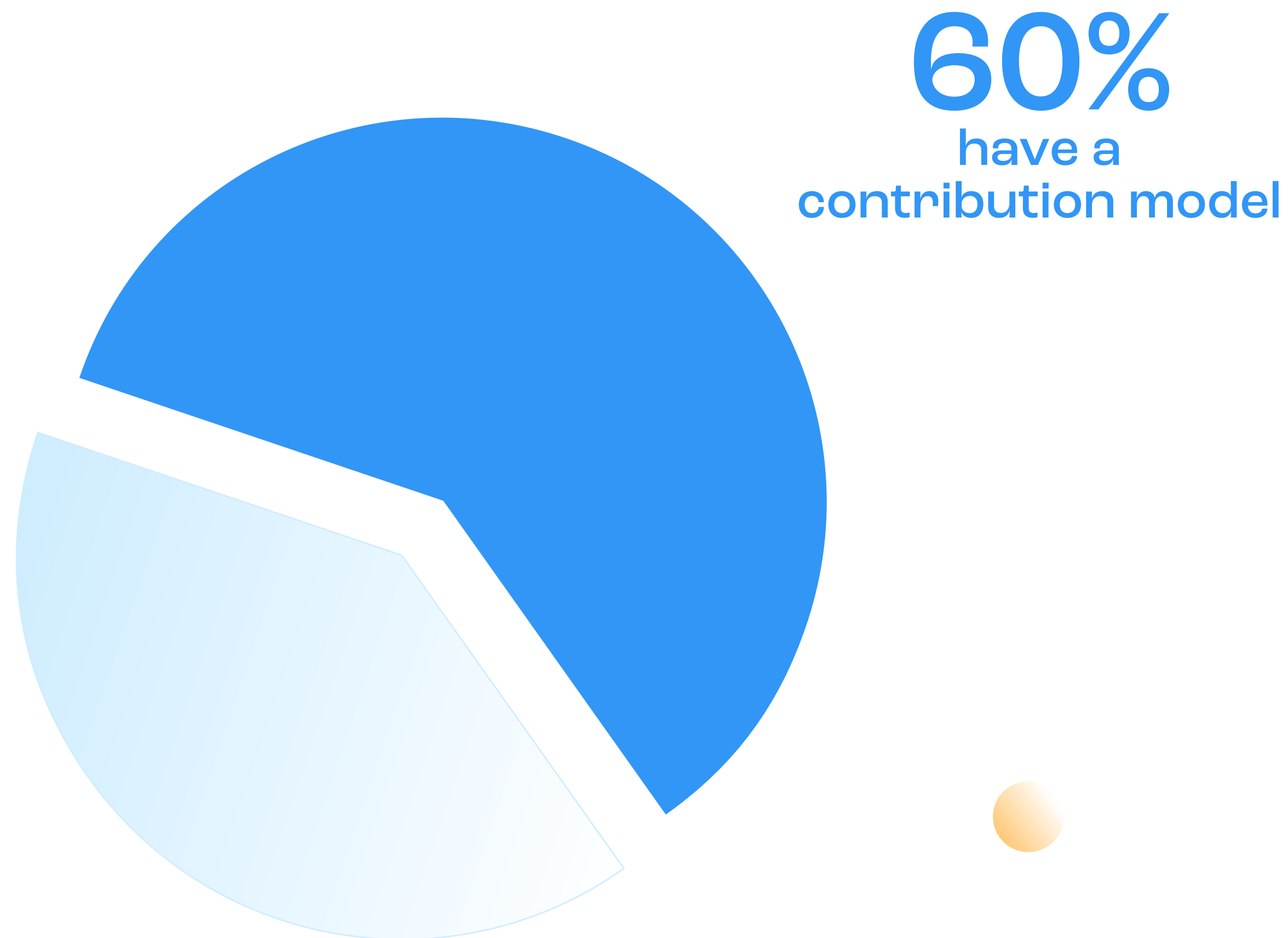
Only 7% of respondents believe they have an effective contribution system, with 53% having one, but not feeling it is effective. Either their contribution system is not understood (25%) or contributions are low (28%)

In terms of how many people contribute to the design system and the docs, then numbers are relatively similar, with 95% and 89% of design systems and documentation respectively being contributed on by 1-10 people. This is in line with average design system team size

who documents your system?

56% designers

25% engineers

8% product managers

5% content strategists

3% documentation specialists

3% marketing

When it comes to who documents, it's still designers holding up the fort. In fact, among 47% of respondents, it is only designers contributing to the design system documentation. 25% have both the engineers and designers, and designers, engineers and PMs contribute together in 5% of the organisations

not many have content guidelines for their documentation
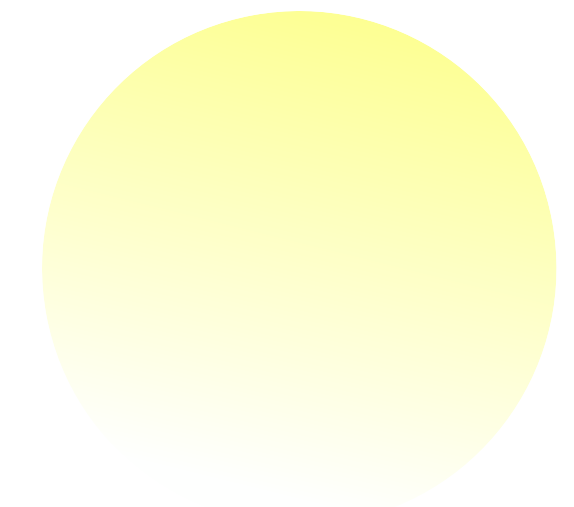
36%
do have content guidelines

When somebody is contributing to your docs, only 36% of respondents provide content guidelines or templates to work from. However, this goes up to 54% on "mature" design systems

governance is almost commonplace

73%
have a review process

27% of respondents don't have any governance at all on their documentation, with only 17% having a formal process. Most respondents (56%) opt for an informal review process

measuring the success of your documentation

91%
don't track metrics
on their docs

88%
don't have KPIs
for their docs

Surprisingly, only 9% of respondents track metrics on their documentation, with 12% having KPIs that are directly associated with the success of their documentation. This feels like it should be one of the most pressing concerns with design systems teams in organizations
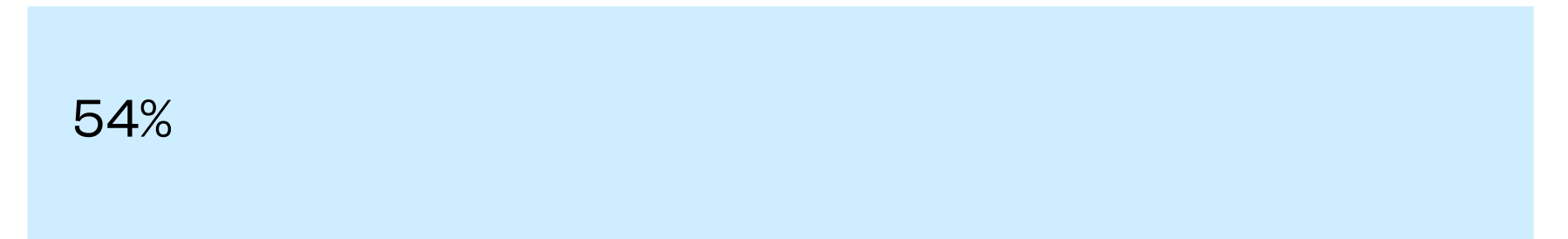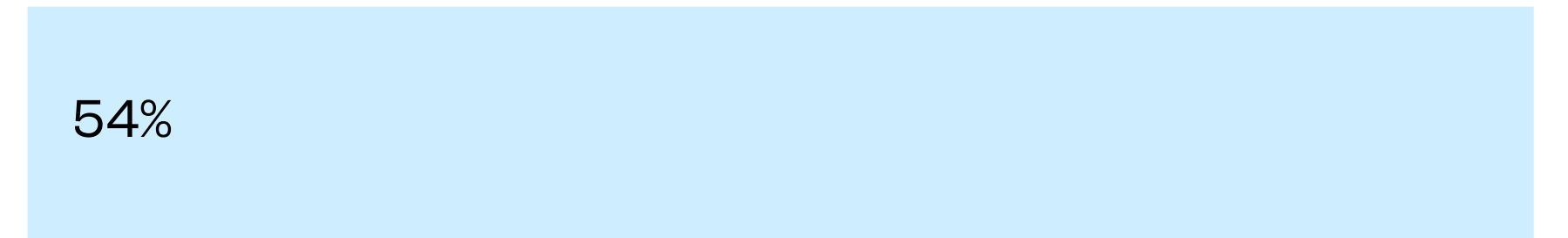
adoption is the key concern
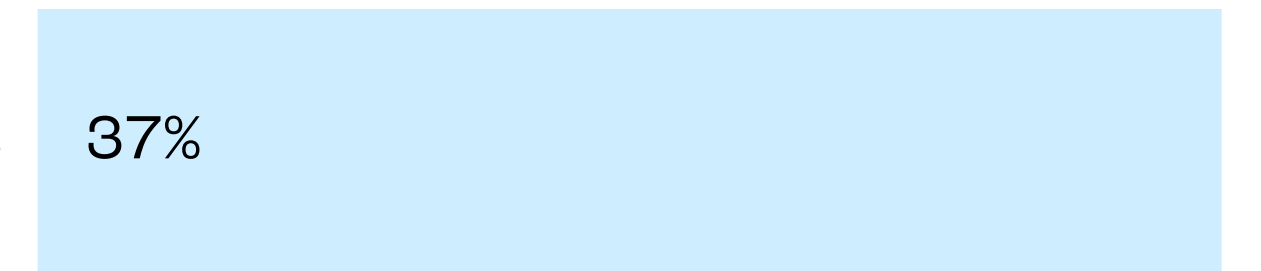
71%
design system
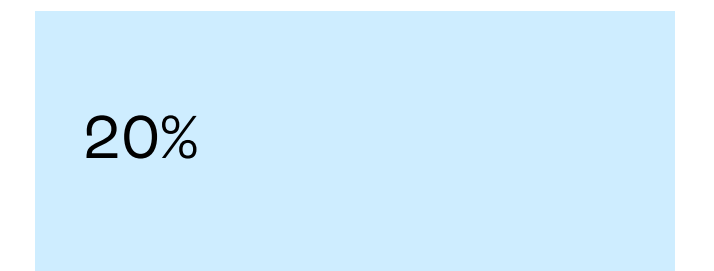adoption

documentation coverage 54%
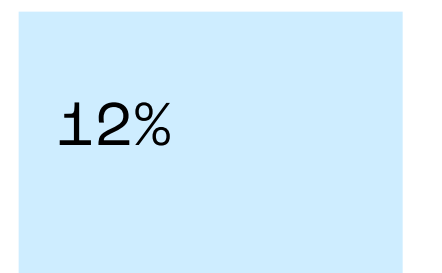
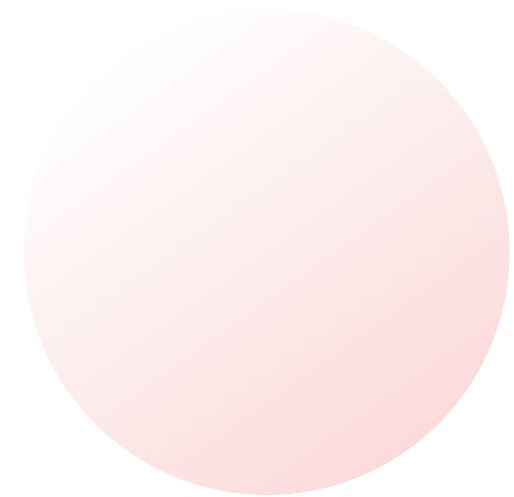team productivity 54%

team happiness 37%

viewer growth 20%

NPS or similar 12%

Out of those who have KPIs, most center around coverage and adoption, with team productivity ranking highly as well. Reduced support requests were the lowest ranked KPI

design tokens are on their way

While design tokens are still relatively new, over half the respondents use design tokens at some stage in their pipeline. Unsurprisingly, most of these were standard tokens like color and typography, with very few organizations tokenizing animation or creating composite tokens

18% grouped styles

58% shadows

90% typography

47% borders

96% color

48% radius

70% spacing

17% animation

59% of respondents currently use design tokens in some way

but where are tokens defined?

71%
design tools

55%
code

18%
a token management platform

1%
a custom solution

Token definition is still primarily done in design tools and code. However, specific token management platforms (like zeroheight or Theo) are clearly growing in popularity. With design tools starting to build this into their products, will this continue?

design tokens and continuous integration

53%
design system adoption

yes, from design to code   34%

yes, and it syncs both ways   8%

yes, from code to design   5%

How the design tokens work from design to code is still relatively fragmented, with only 12% syncing design tokens both in and out of design tools. Similarly, less than 50% of respondents who have tokens have continuous integration with their tokens, with only 8% having CI that runs both ways from design to code and back again
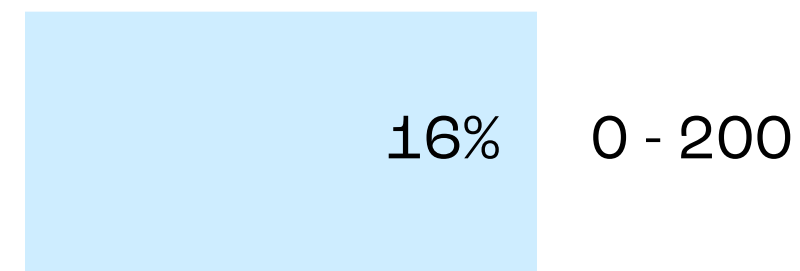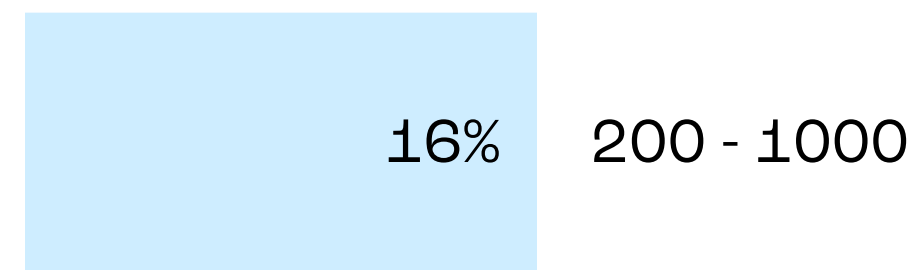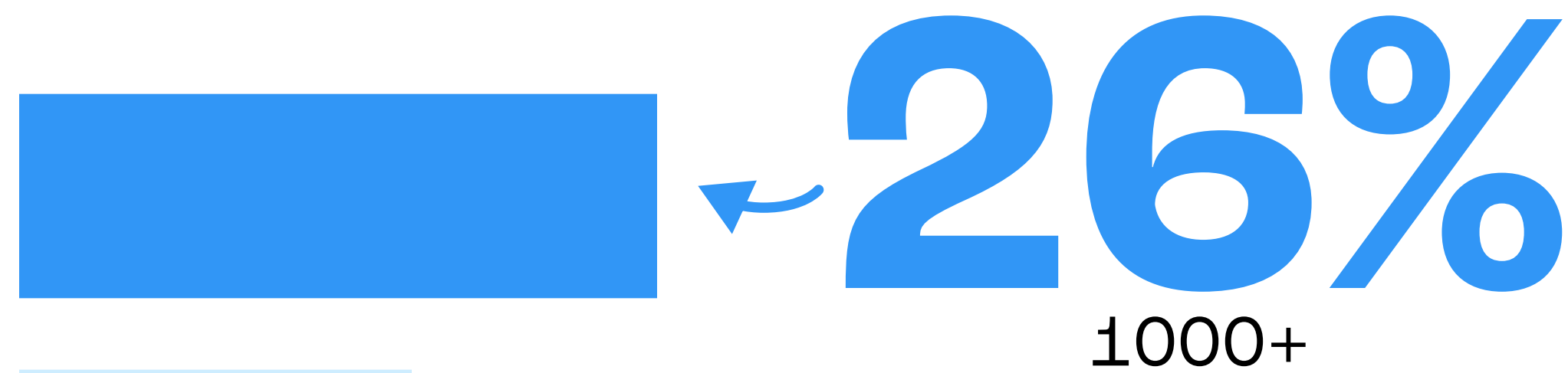
maturity is a pressing concern with documentation
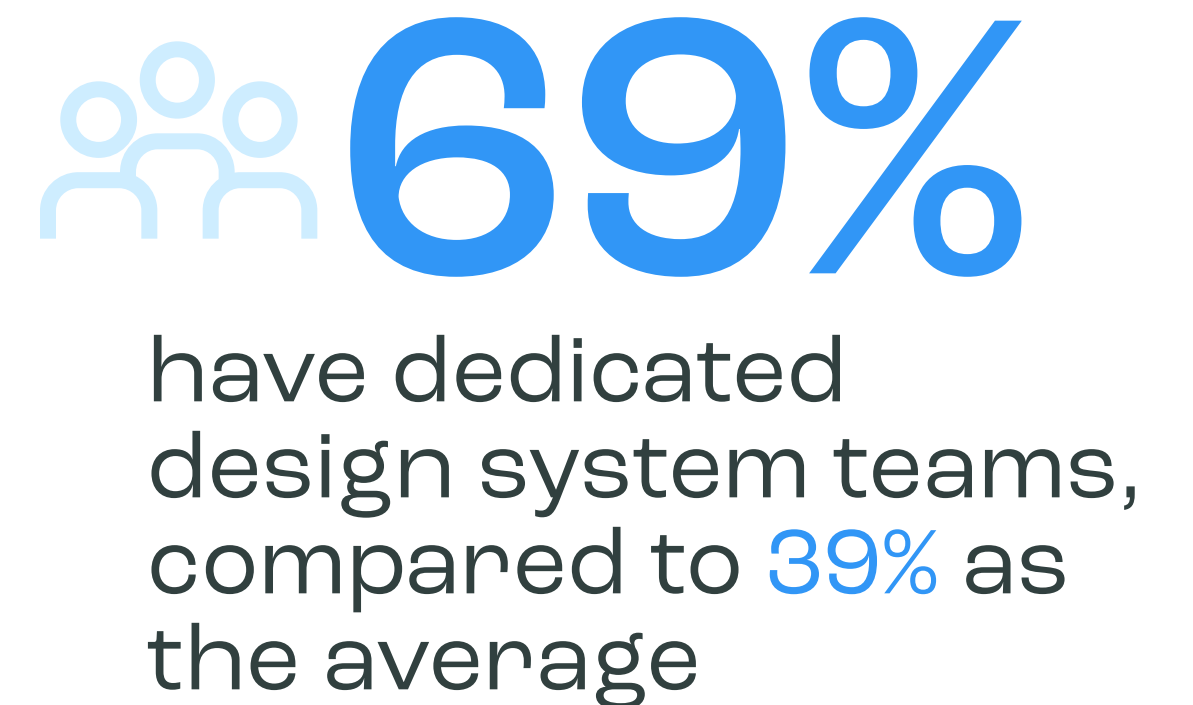
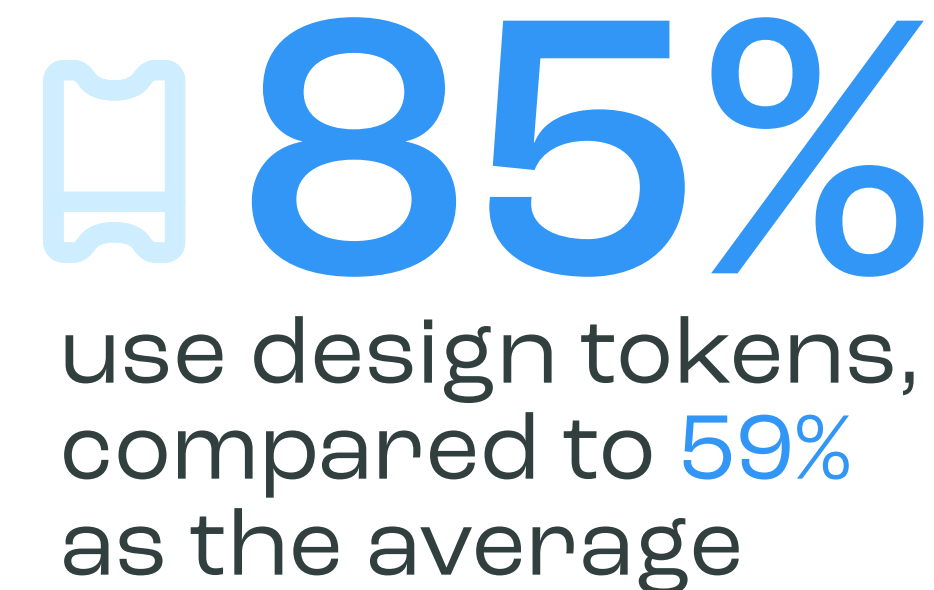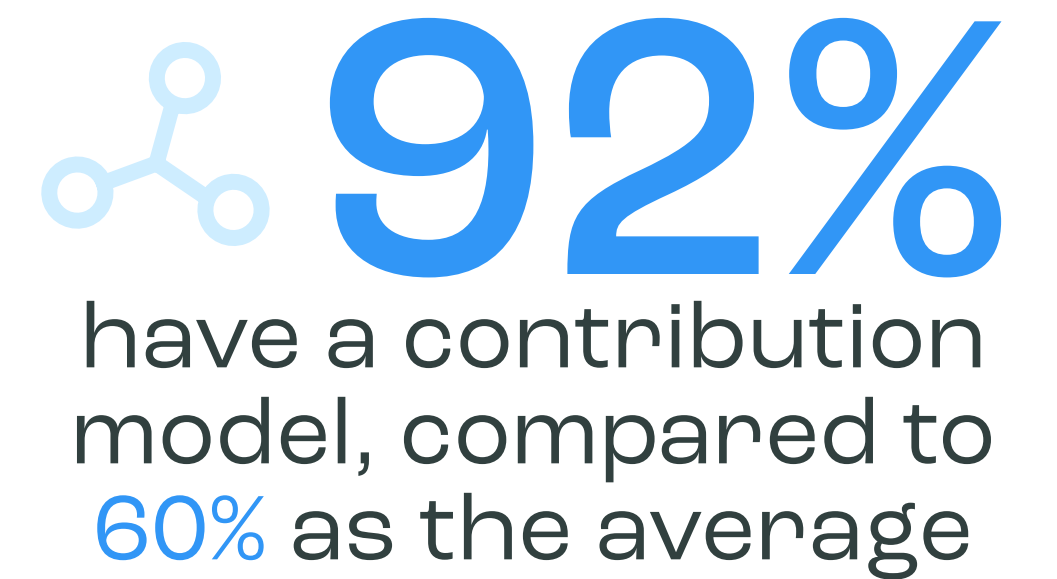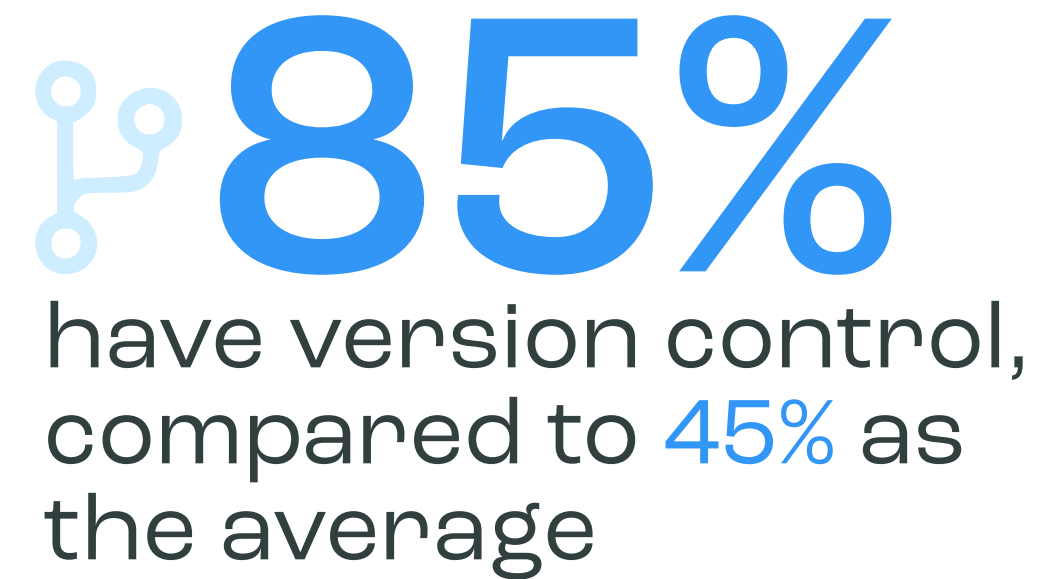## 55%
feel their documentation is functioning well enough
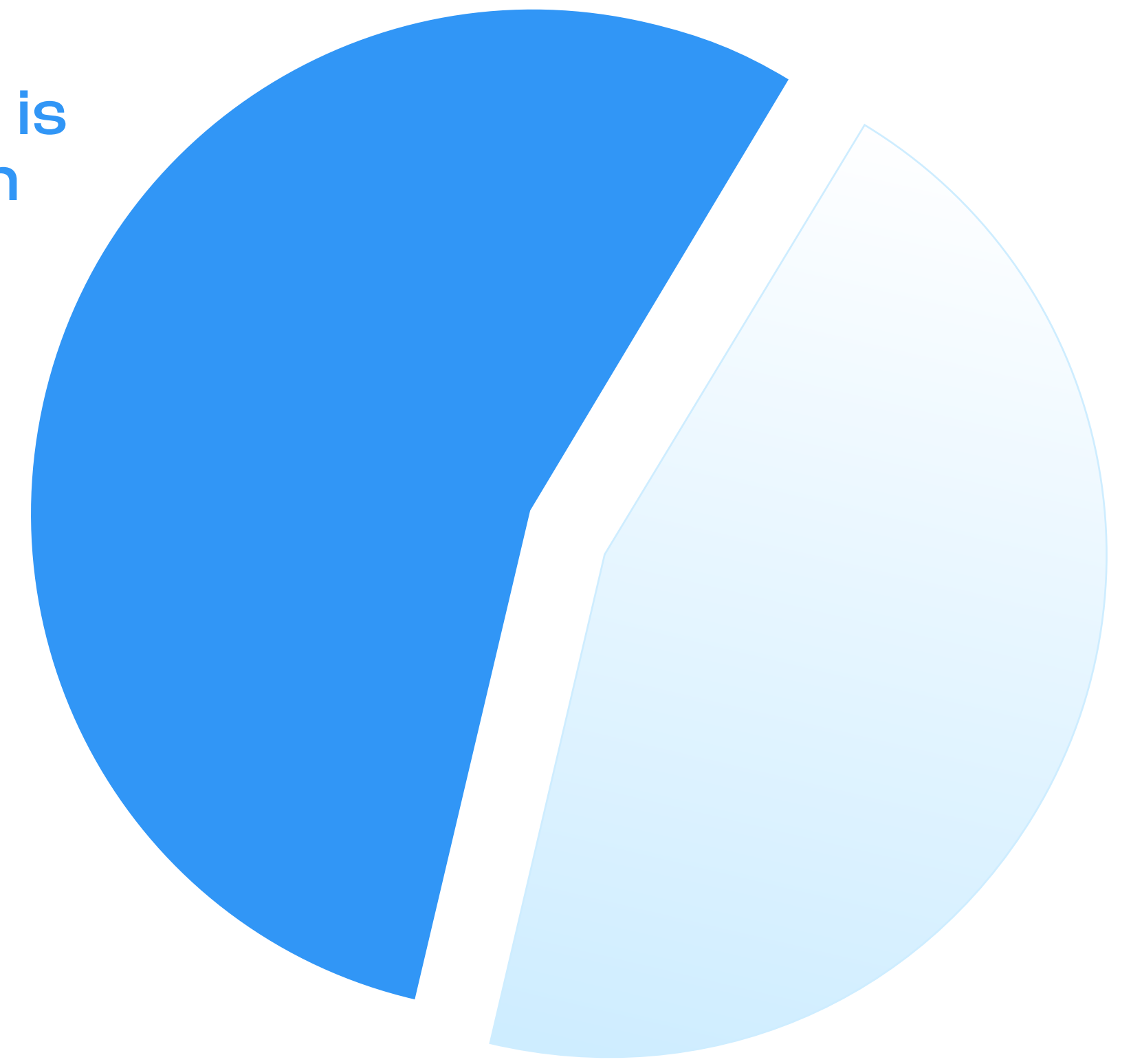
Measuring the maturity of your documentation isn't easy. However, 19% of respondents have mature design systems, integrated with engineering, with some form of governance and working contribution model
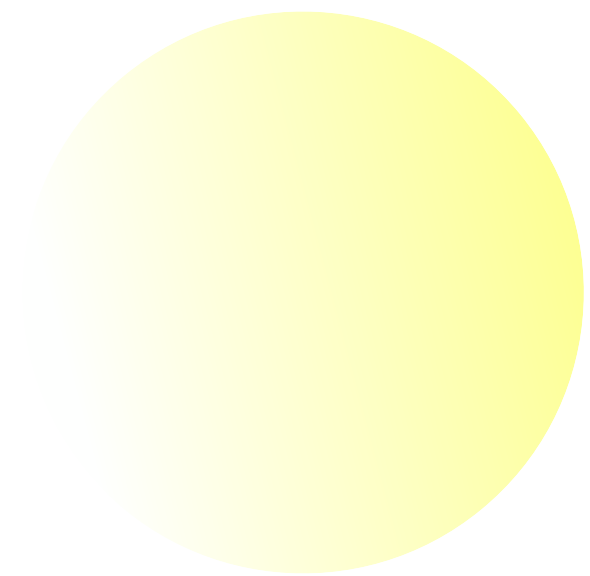
what are the hallmarks of mature design system documentation?

26%
1000+

16% 200 - 1000

16% 0 - 200

Unsurprisingly, larger companies are more likely to have a mature design system

85% have version control, compared to 45% as the average

92% have a contribution model, compared to 60% as the average

85% use design tokens, compared to 59% as the average

69% have dedicated design system teams, compared to 39% as the average
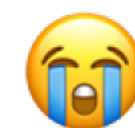
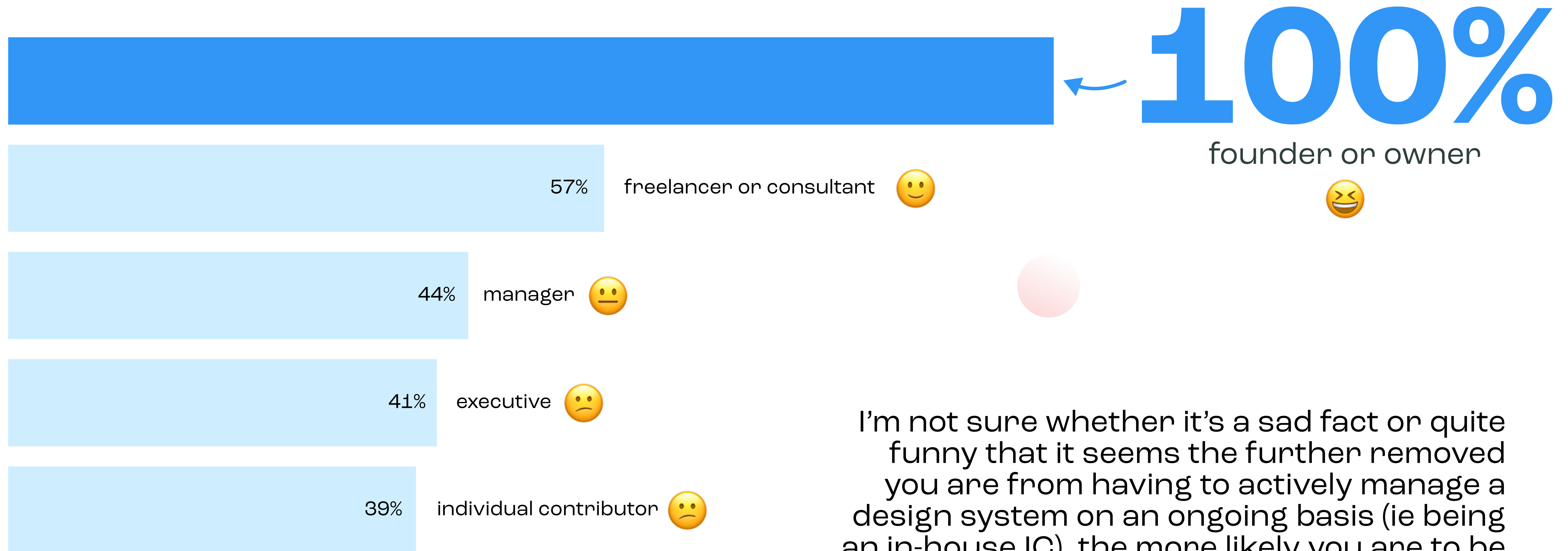# design systems teams need a hug

😆 3%

🙂 28%

29% 😐

😕 28%

😭 12%

Happiness is an interesting one. We expected a bell curve that sits somewhere around "meh", with people not feeling particularly happy or unhappy with their documentation. However, there were decidedly more people who were unhappy (40%) with their documentation than happy (31%). So, what are the hallmarks of someone who's happy with their documentation?

happiness with the design system vs job role

100%

← 100%

founder or owner 😆

57% freelancer or consultant 🙂

44% manager 😐

41% executive 🙁

39% individual contributor 🙁

I'm not sure whether it's a sad fact or quite funny that it seems the further removed you are from having to actively manage a design system on an ongoing basis (ie being an in-house IC), the more likely you are to be happy with the system you're working on

is happiness related to being in-house?
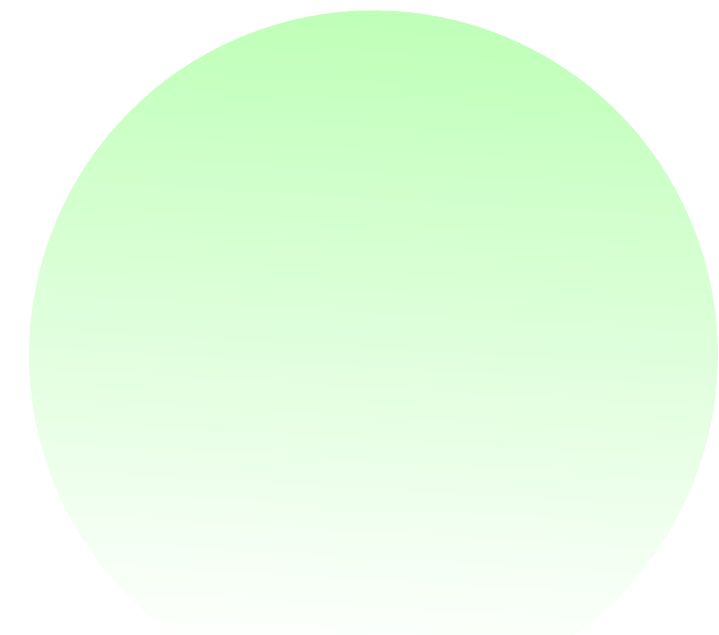
55%
agency

self-employed 50%

in-house 41%

Similarly, we saw a slightly happier bunch of design system professionals when we go to agencies or in-house. Could it be something to do with not having to maintain a system over time? Interestingly, we saw very little difference in happiness levels when it came to design system age, the different job roles or the different organization sizes.
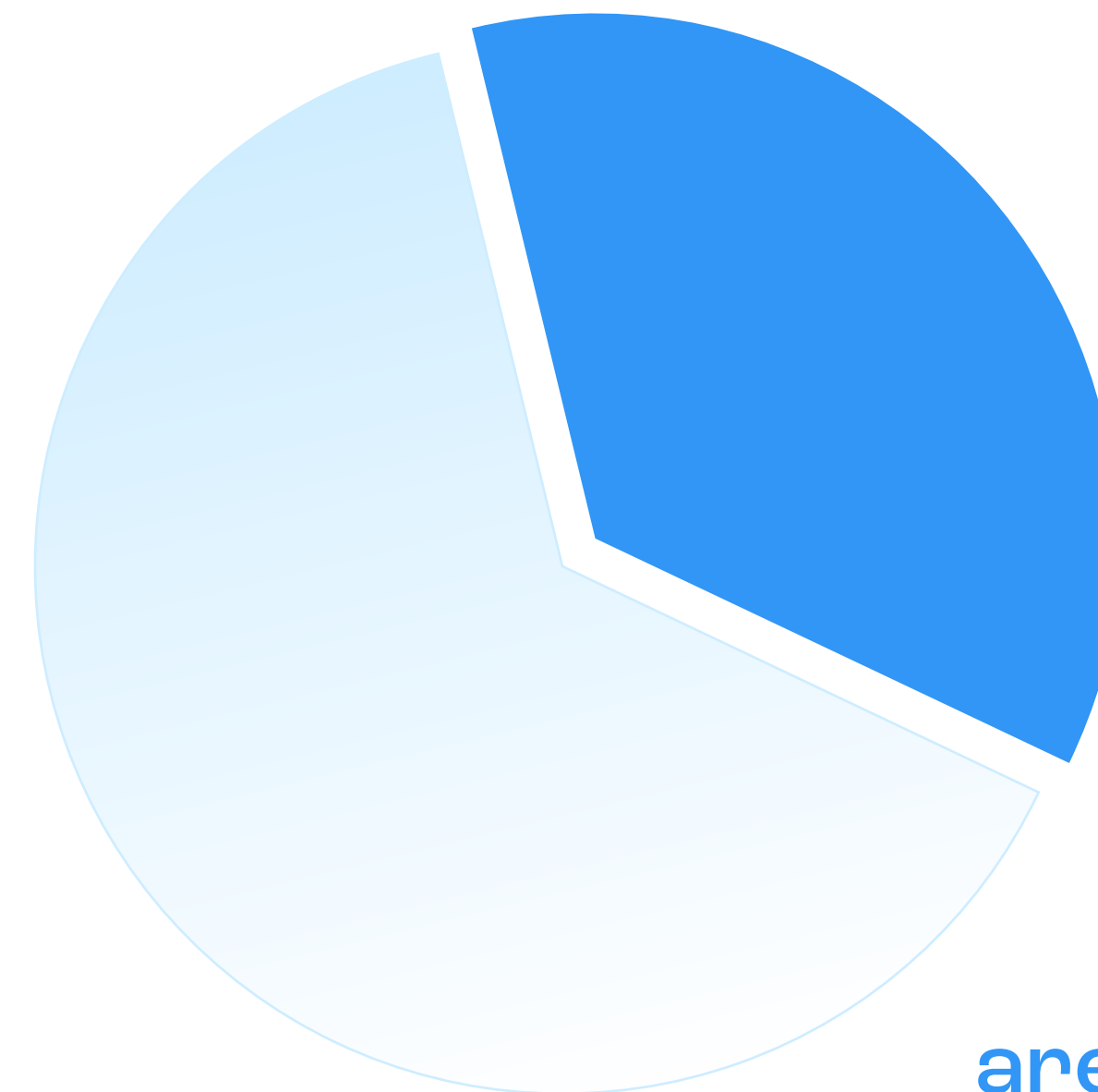
Now to move on to the features and processes of the system itself...

happiness in your design system team

First off, there does seem to be a correlation between having a dedicated team and happiness with your documentation
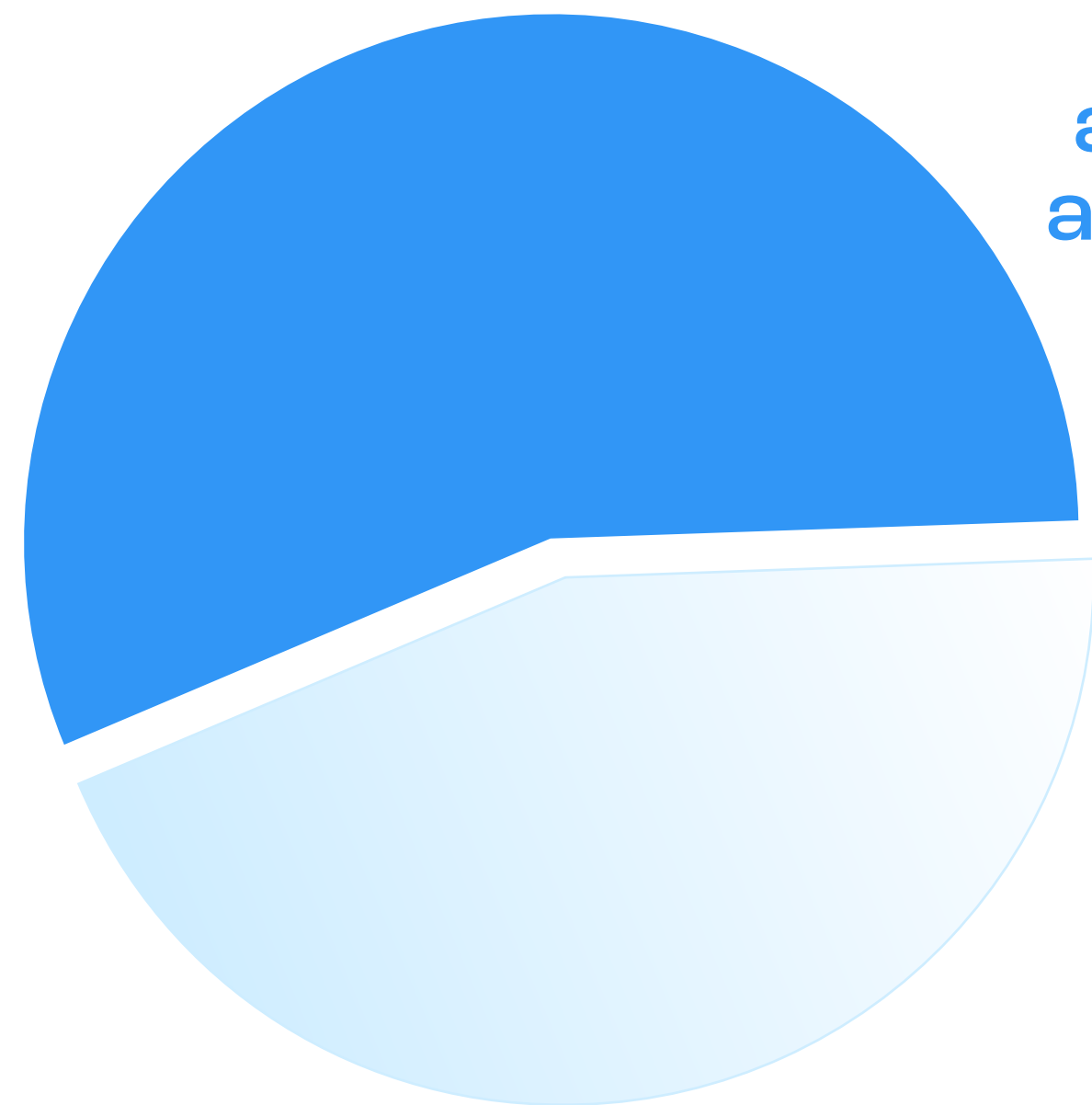
56%
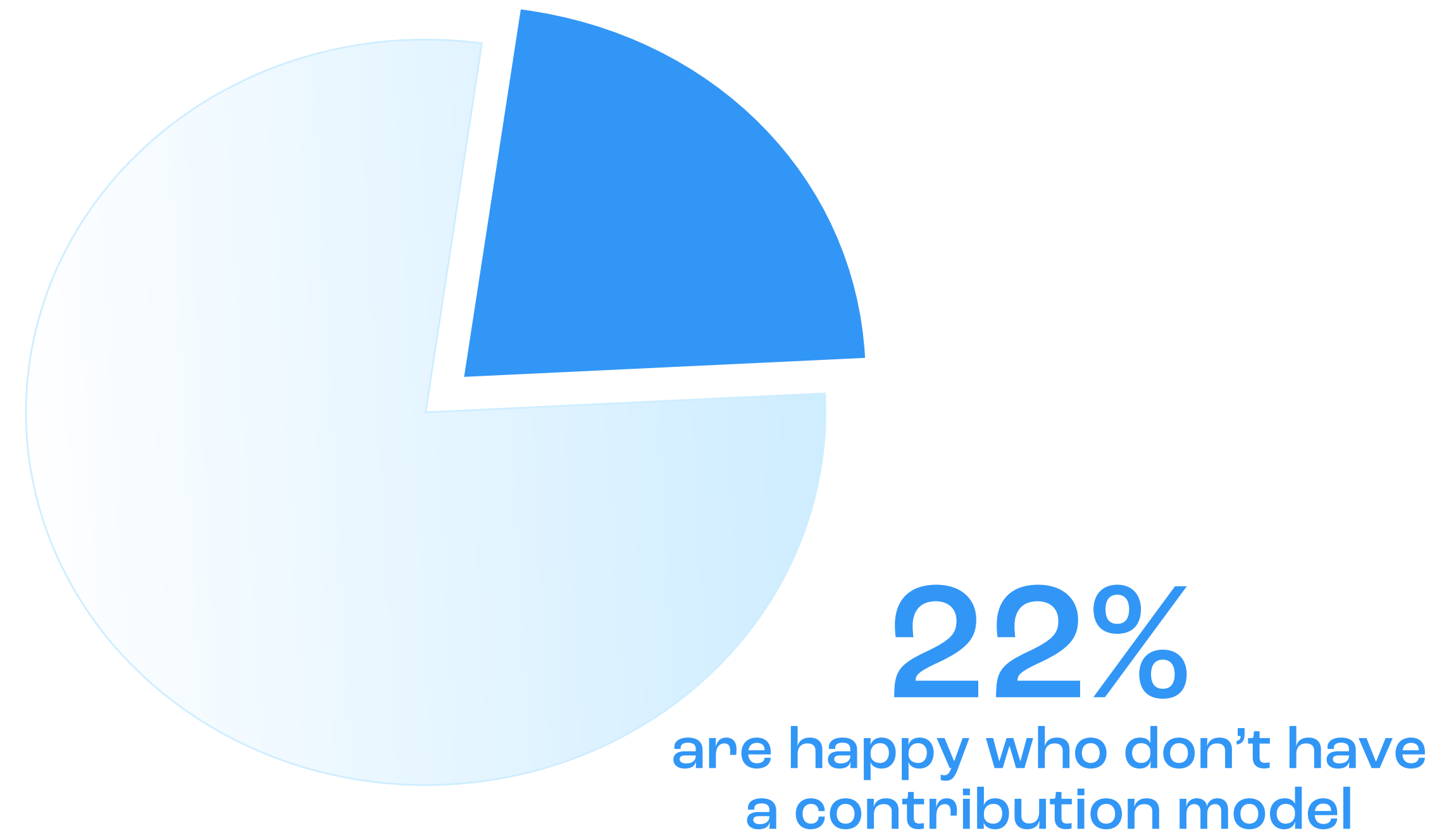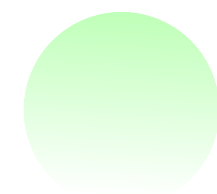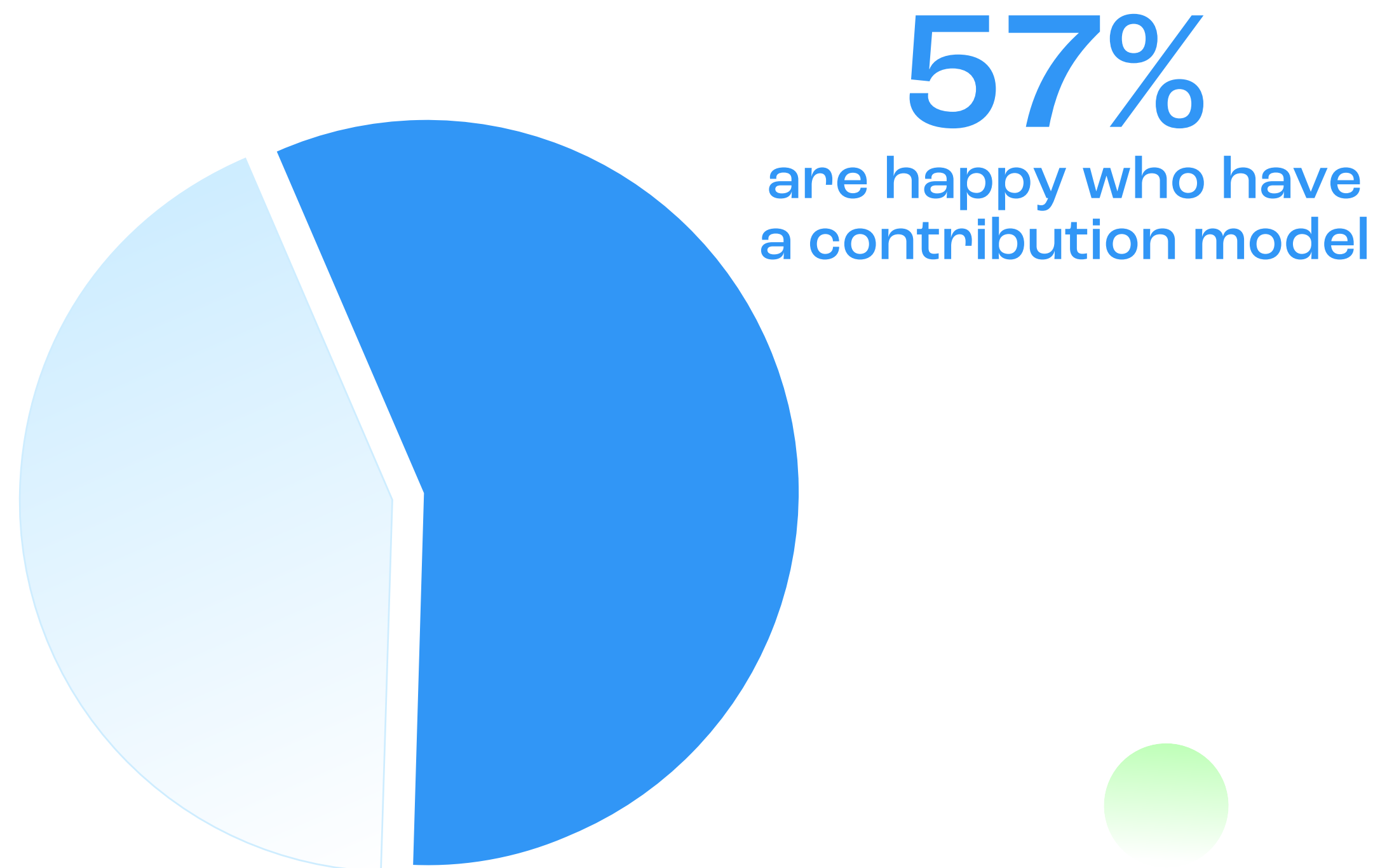are happy who have
a design system team

36%
are happy who don't have
a design system team

happiness in contribution

Similarly, we see a big correlation between having a functional contribution model and happiness with your documentation. Interestingly, when you break this down, it's more about having your contribution model understood and less about having active contributions
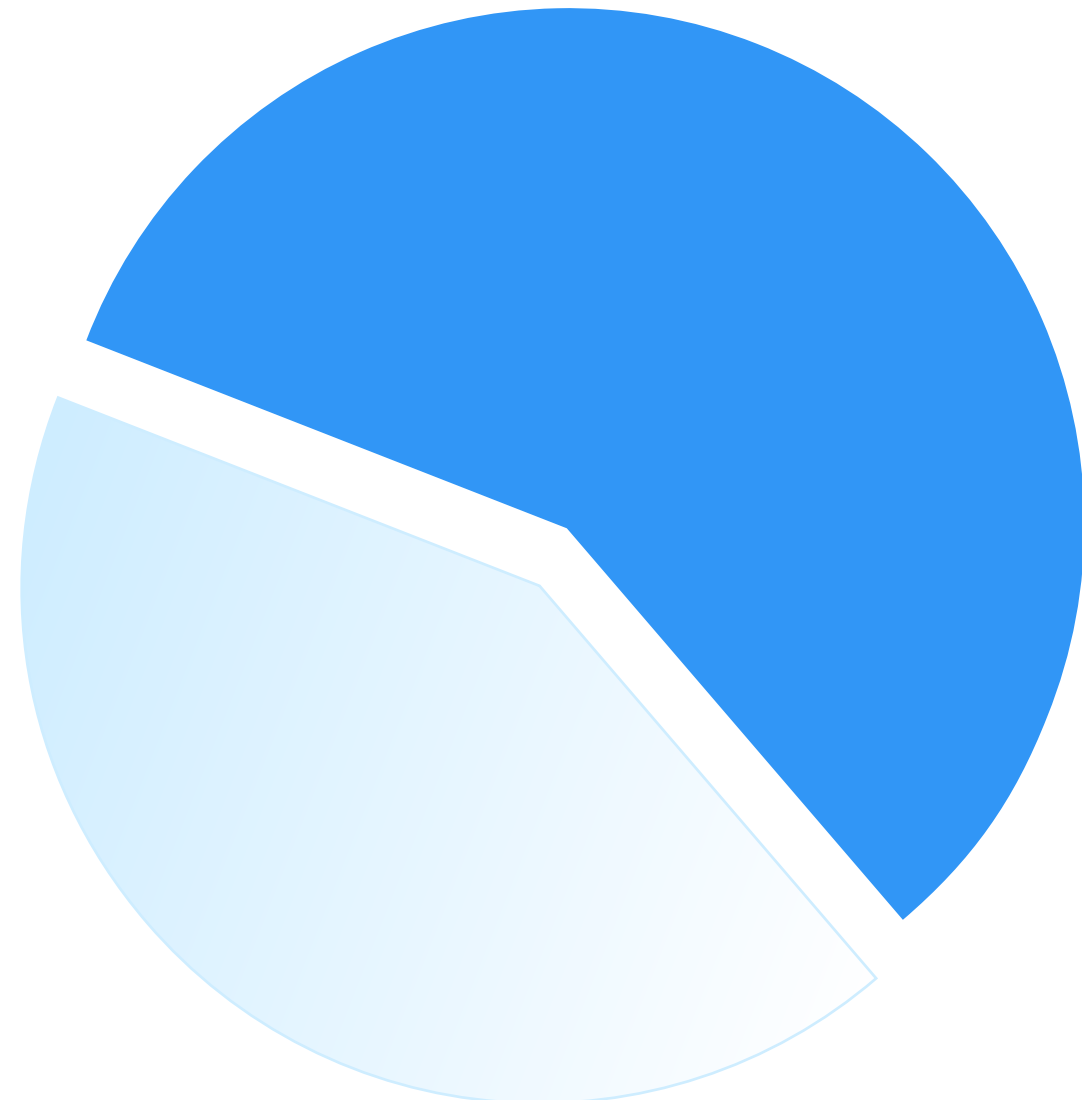
57%
are happy who have
a contribution model

22%
are happy who don't have
a contribution model

happiness in governance

Similarly, not having a governance model for your documentation correlates with unhappiness with the documentation overall
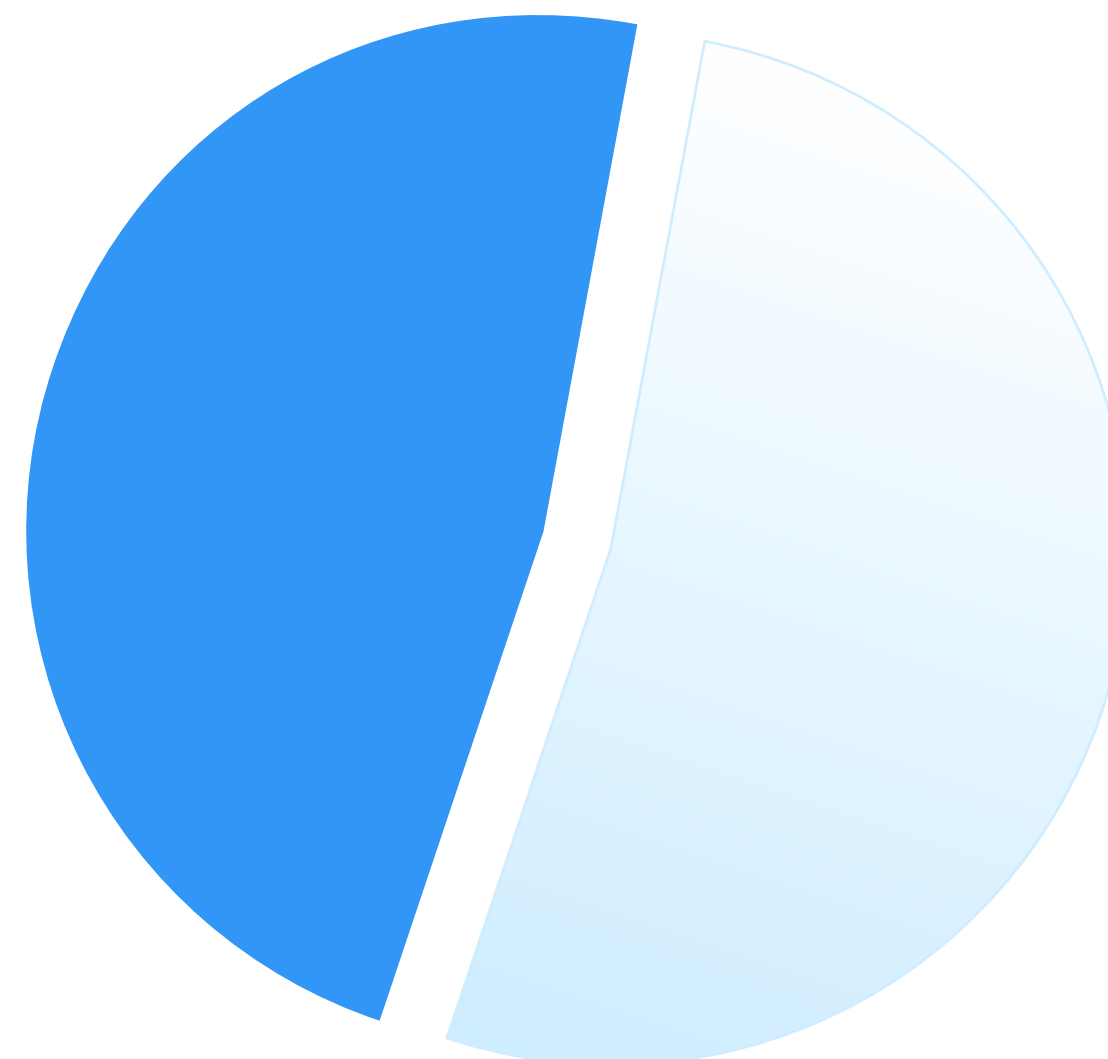
58%
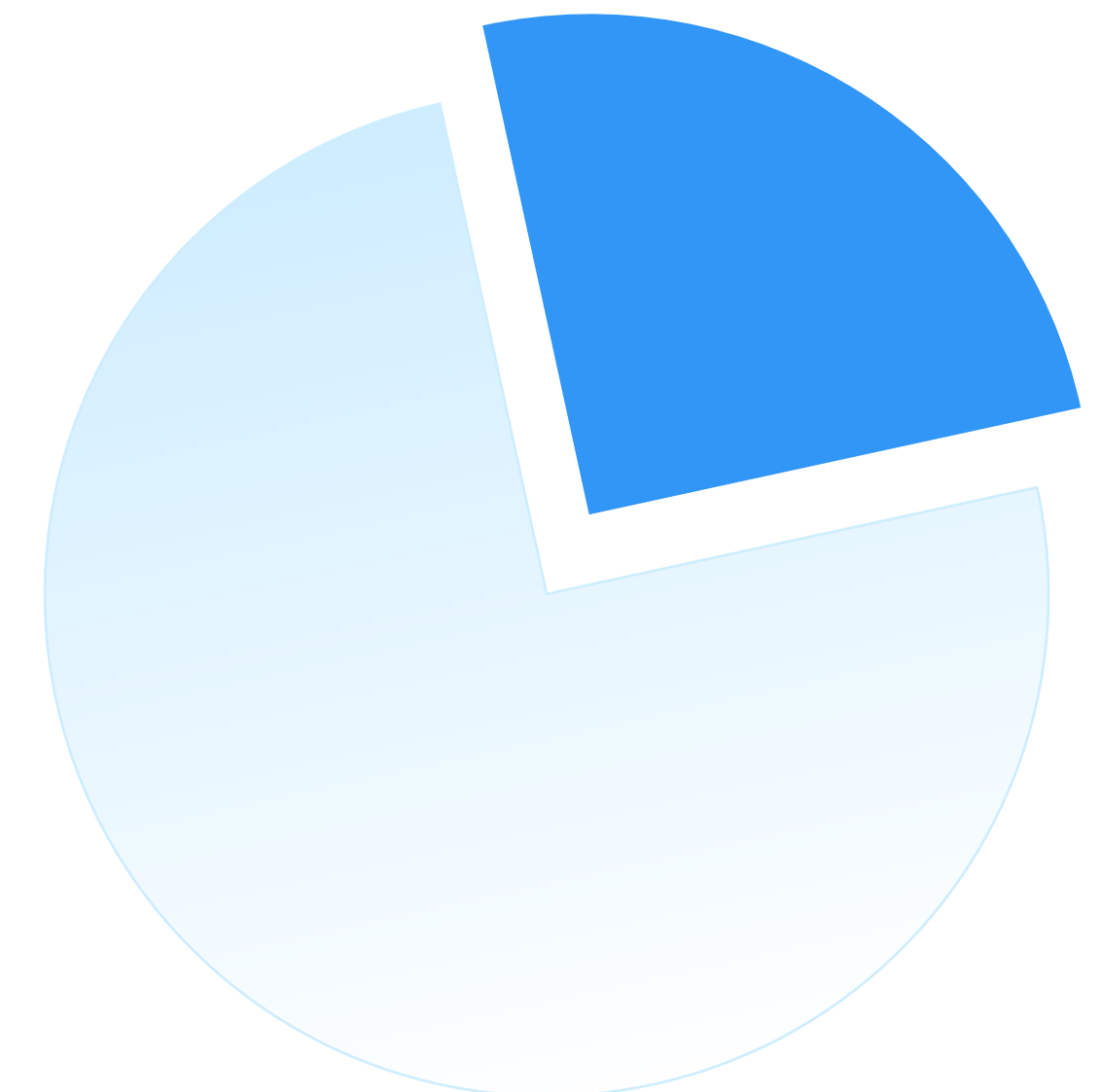are happy who have a formal review process

48%
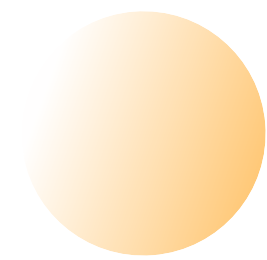are happy who have an informal process

25%
are happy who don't review changes

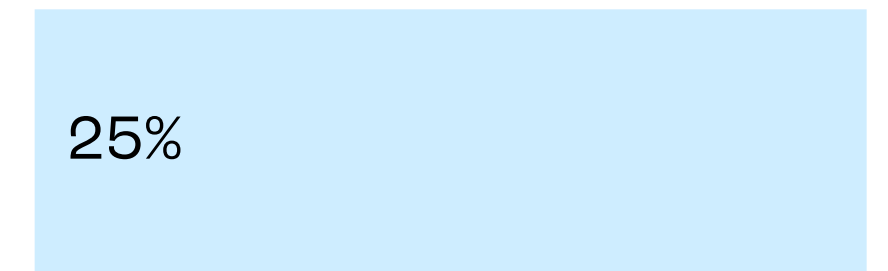# how much is covered in a happy design system?

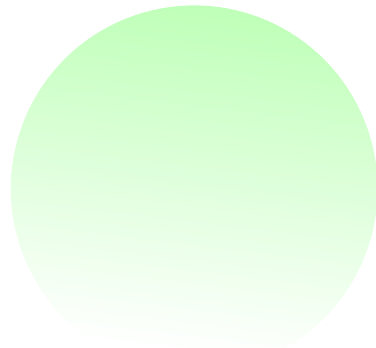**65%**

average documentation coverage 😊

😕 25%

Finally, it isn't surprising, but the more of the system that is documented, the happier the team seems to be, with the happiest teams covering an average of 65% of their design systems, compared to an average of 25% for unhappy teams
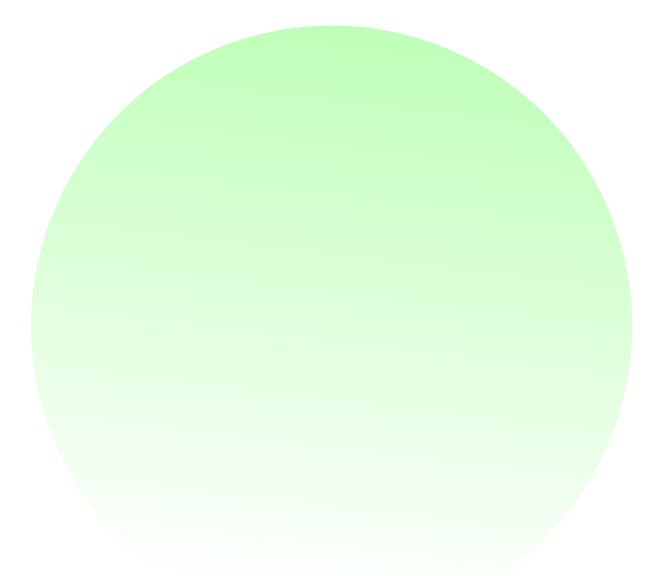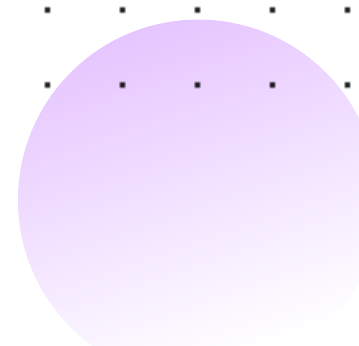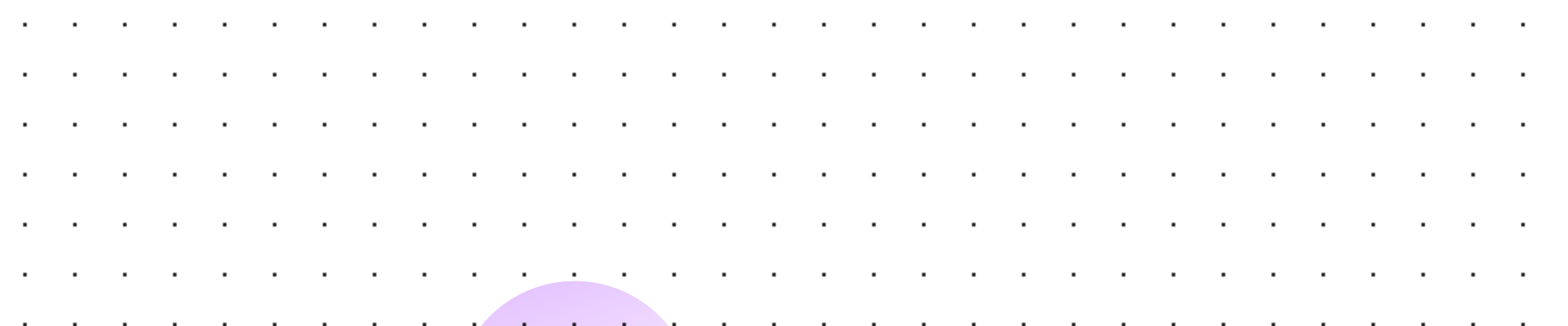
until next time

That's a wrap for **how we document 2022**. We'll be back at the end of the year to see how we've improved over the next twelve months. Will we start measuring the success of our documentation more? Will tokens continue to be the hot talking point? Will we finally break out of our monolingual documentation?

This report was brought to you by **zeroheight**, the design system documentation platform that makes it easier to collaborate between design, engineering and product.

The **how we document** survey was conducted from Sep to Oct 2021 across social media, industry Slack channels and in emails to design system professionals.

try out zeroheight today