

*The Art of Building Great User Experience in Software*



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# Effective UI

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*Jonathan Anderson,  
John McRee, Robb Wilson  
& the EffectiveUI Team*

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*Jonathan Anderson, John McRee, Robb Wilson,  
and the EffectiveUI Team*

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## **Effective UI**

by Jonathan Anderson, John McRee, Robb Wilson, and the EffectiveUI Team

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**Proofreader:** Nancy Kotary

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**Cover Designer:** Karen Montgomery

**Illustration and Interior Design:**

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## The Stakeholders

Every project has a set of stakeholders, whether or not they're all immediately identifiable; many more people will try to influence the project than will be willing to actively participate in it. For professional service companies, stakeholders are almost always representatives of the client, but those representatives have their own stakeholders. For internal projects, stakeholders are those people who control the budget, the resources, the mandate, and the domain knowledge that fuels the product's development.

The participation of stakeholders is essential to a project's success, but there are many ways that stakeholders can unintentionally hinder the project. Most stakeholders aren't familiar with how innovative, UX-driven software products are built and can at times unwittingly behave in ways that derail progress or interfere with good decision making. It's important, therefore, that the relationship between the stakeholders and the project is set up for success, and that the stakeholders are aware of how they can best support the project's progress while still having their interests attended to.

The project team relies on stakeholders to provide a thorough and stable understanding of the project's goals and its user base. As the development of the product begins and design encounters unknowns, a steady stream of difficult questions arise. It's critical to the progress of a project that answers to those questions can be readily obtained and are firm and reliable. From the beginning of the project through its end, the project team relies on stakeholders (by way of the project leader) to provide reliable, steady direction for the product. Stakeholders need to provide clarity that diminishes uncertainty and risk, rather than increasing uncertainty and risk through frequent changes and unstable decisions.

## Securing Authority

Since the decisions and direction provided by the stakeholders to the project team need to be stable and reliable, the authority of the stakeholders to commit the project along specific lines also must be stable and reliable. This may seem a strange concern, since stakeholders are typically higher up in the company and are ostensibly conveying their authority down to the project leader and team. But a lack of clear and secure authority in stakeholders is actually an enormous problem for many projects.

The stakeholders must ultimately speak as one voice and communicate a unified vision for the product, provide only one answer to a question, and choose only one favorite from any list of options. The project's success will be greatly jeopardized if:

- *There's uncertainty about the prerogative of the group to make autonomous decisions.*
- *Conflict amongst stakeholders leads to instability in their decisions.*
- *Higher-ups in the company can overrule stakeholders' decisions.*

The decisions made by the group of stakeholders actively participating in the project must be definitive and must be supported by stakeholders and influential people who aren't actively participating in the project. This degree of authority and support often isn't automatically in place, and if you don't secure it at the beginning of the project, you risk the bottom falling out of the project midway through. Your stakeholders might have their own stakeholders, but the project can't wait for or depend on decisions to be run up the management ladder. The active stakeholders on your project must have the necessary authority to commit to decisions that won't be overruled after they've been made.

### **Authority afforded by trust**

The list of people interested in affecting a product's development is always much longer than list of people who have the time or ability to actively participate in the project. Some managers of involved departments or business units assign someone under them to participate in the day-to-day activities of the project, but then these managers will appear suddenly when they disagree with decisions or when the project grows in significance. The same can happen with managers who either declined to participate initially or who weren't initially actively involved but later decided to assert themselves in the project. Other stakeholders may participate in the original concept work on the project, disappear during the early stages of development, and then reappear later in the process.

This kind of behavior poses a number of serious problems for the project. From the project kick-off through to its end, the progress of a project entails a tremendous amount of thinking, design, decisions, and compromises. Anyone who hasn't participated actively in that progress lacks much of the context and information that is necessary for understanding why certain

decisions were made. They also lack the perspective necessary to balance their ideas and individual agendas against the other priorities and considerations that are guiding the project. Late-arriving or on-again, off-again stakeholders, not understanding or appreciating the decisions that have come before, often challenge decisions or revisit basic premises that would shake the foundations of the project. As we discussed in Chapter 3, changes stakeholders may perceive as simple may, in fact, be enormously difficult and costly. These changes will probably be improper if they're imposed by stakeholders who haven't actively participated in the project.

So, although late-arriving stakeholders can be welcomed if they trust and are deferential to the progress that's been made so far, you should head off late-arriving and hidden stakeholders who might derail the project. This requires some effort up front to determine who should be active stakeholders on the project. The group of active stakeholders must consist of people who are in a position to contribute to the project; they must also be vested with the trust and authority of the other potential stakeholders.

This means that a manager who assigns a subordinate to represent her interests in the project must trust him to make decisions in her stead, must be available to him if he should want her input, and must be committed to working through him and never around him. It also means that departments and business units that decline to participate actively in the project must place trust in those who are actively participating. This usually means the group of active stakeholders needs to be strongly representative of the diverse domains and interests within the organization so all interests can trust that they will be well represented.

### **Authority in rank**

It can be difficult when some of these hidden and late-arriving stakeholders are senior managers and executives in the company. Many projects start off as initiatives of lower-level areas of individual departments, but then grow in prominence as they near completion and their ability to significantly impact the business becomes more apparent. Senior managers tend to tune in to the project as it nears completion, and to have strong opinions and interests that weren't present as the project ran its course. They also hold prominent positions in the company, so existing stakeholders and the project leader have difficulty challenging their demands. Or they represent departments

that want to take over management of the project and profoundly redirect its course. Companies that are large, highly political, and bureaucratic are particularly susceptible to these issues.

It's therefore important that the group of active stakeholders is backed up by sufficient authority in rank to insulate the project from this type of problem. If the project mandate is delivered by senior executives, the project is more likely to be well insulated against incursions by less senior managers. But if this isn't the case, you need to secure some high-level backup early in the project. This may be accomplished by seeking out the executives who aren't necessarily able to actively participate in the project themselves but are likely to be affected by the product outcome. Spend time with them to find out what practices, information, and people they feel must be in place in order for them to fully trust the process without participating in it. You'll need to get them to explicitly commit to trust the process and to lend their support, should other executives start to meddle.

## **Collaboration and Decision Making**

Though stakeholder participation in the beginning of the project is mostly structured in the form of in-person workshops, their participation through the rest of the project is much looser. It's not necessary—though it may at times be useful—to bring everyone together in person for every decision. Stakeholder schedules are likely too busy to allow for many in-person meetings.

It's important to figure out early on how collaboration and decision making will work for the project. The momentum and success of the project depends on stakeholders rapidly answering questions, providing guidance, and deciding on course adjustments to respond to discoveries and risks. Some method of collaboration should be agreed upon and put into effect early in the project. It doesn't really matter what that method is, so long as your stakeholders will use it; orderly, consistent collaboration is the goal, and every company and stakeholder has a different approach to this. You need to make it clear that stakeholders must tune into and participate in the discussions and decisions that happen during the project. Stakeholders must understand that if they don't actively participate and respond, they're forgoing their rights to affect those decisions later on and they may begin to lose the context necessary to contribute to future discussions and decisions.

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