

## Adaptability (predictability-lover vs craving change)

“I can deal with new situations, but struggle when we experiment with the design process.”

Some people are great at dealing with new situations and some struggle. But designers also have to contend with scale: designers may face larger changes in process, methodology, or project structure.

The Web design business contends with its own methodological trends. Back when I started in this business, for example, design teams touted their elaborate and extensive user research techniques. The pendulum has since swung the other way, such that the buyers of design services may expect less user research.

Design teams themselves may generally remain true to a particular methodology or process. Others may relish experimentation with new techniques. Designers must understand how well they cope in each of these circumstances.

### The Extremes

- **Predictability-lover:** The designer becomes anxious or defensive when confronted with changes in circumstances or when challenged to change her process.
- **Craving change:** The designer becomes anxious when performing the same process, dealing with the same project, or experiencing the same circumstances over and over again.

## Assumption threshold (go-getter vs patience of a saint)

“I didn’t have a lot to go on, so I filled in some of the blanks myself.”

Designers almost always work with an incomplete set of inputs. They find themselves making assumptions to fill in the holes of their knowledge. Every designer has a threshold, a level of input he needs in order to produce anything of value. Designers must understand their thresholds: How much input do they need on a design challenge in order to attack the problem meaningfully?

This isn’t to say that when presented with only an objective, great designers can produce great designs. Great designers understand what level of input is required for a particular problem. They understand when filling in assumptions crosses the line from responsible progress to irresponsible.

### The Extremes

- **The go-getter:** At this end of the spectrum, designers eagerly fill in details to avoid losing momentum, potentially at the risk of getting things very, very wrong.
- **The patience of a saint:** At the other end, designers won’t pursue a task unless they have all the inputs they think they need, making them thorough but slow.

## Defining the challenge (unable to define vs. jumping into conclusions)

“I can summarize the project in three points...”

Even with limited or distracting information, some designers are great at seeing the design challenge. They can understand the project’s objectives and see the steps required to devise a solution. Stakeholders rarely express exactly what they need (nor should they be expected to). Requests are muddled by misinformation, lack of information, the wrong kind of information, or simply ignorance—not knowing what’s needed. Some designers can see all through the mud to zero in on the design challenge.

### The Extremes

- **Unable to define:** At one extreme, designers struggle to characterize or summarize the design challenge based on limited inputs. This compromises their ability to generate a solution—either a process for approaching the challenge or design concepts that address the requirements.
- **Jumping to conclusions:** At the other extreme, designers make irresponsible and rampant assumptions to fill in holes, ultimately misunderstanding the challenge.

## Dogmatism (dogmatic vs. complaisant)

“Proper methodology calls for...”

Some designers demand strict adherence to methodology. They insist that people follow the letter of the method exactly. They stall projects that deviate from the textbook methodology. They confront designers who have employed the methodology in a different way.

What’s perhaps more dangerous about methodological dogmatism is the belief that a particular methodology is one-size-fits-all. Dogmatic designers don’t compromise their process, but they also don’t acknowledge that their process isn’t appropriate for every project.

My characterization here implies that I prefer a middle-of-the-road approach. My experience with dogmatic designers suggests that they more often than not introduce roadblocks to the design process. Successful collaborators defend their process and don’t compromise lightly, but must acknowledge the need for a flexible approach. Different projects have different needs, and a good design process accommodates the nuances of a project.

Methodology seems to be the most typical victim of dogmatism, but there are countless religious wars in design. Besides methodology, designers can be dogmatic about

- **Tools:** Some designers swear by a certain tool for rendering design concepts. Their conviction runs so deep they see other tools as vastly inferior or even “incorrect.”
- **Techniques:** Narrower than methodology, a technique is a way to solve a specific problem or accomplish a specific task. As with methods, designers may have strong opinions about where and how certain techniques are applied.
- **Project management:** Some project participants (even designers) feel strongly about how the project is structured, organized, and managed.

### The Extremes

- **Dogmatic:** At one extreme, designers feel very strongly about specific topics, and they constantly seek opportunities to educate people about the right way of doing things.
- **Complaisant:** At the other extreme, designers have no opinion about method, tool, technique, or any other part of the design process.

## Giving and getting recognition (cheerleader vs. the critic)

“I notice when my colleagues don’t give me credit for my contributions.”

Creative work, one might argue, thrives on recognition. Designers get paid, sure, but what keeps them going is the ability to point at a product, a building, a Web site, or something and say, “I did that.” In projects involving many designers, each likes to feel the glow of recognition.

Like the other traits in this list, recognition isn’t so black and white. Some designers thrive on every acknowledgement, and others need the occasional nod. I’ve rarely encountered the designer who doesn’t need his contributions recognized at all. Given the nature of the work, it’s always safer to provide the recognition than not.

I’ve conflated giving recognition with getting recognition because they’re similar processes, not because they necessarily go hand in hand. Experience shows that people who crave recognition are no better or worse at giving it.

### The Extremes

- **The cheerleader:** People at one extreme immediately greet someone’s work with positive enthusiasm.
- **The critic:** At the other extreme, people immediately identify all the problems with someone’s work.

## Level of abstraction (abstraction maven vs. reality wizard)

“I like working with the frameworks and the concepts.”

One way of looking at design is as a process of increasing the focus on a set of concepts. By the end of the process, the “design” is a product fully in focus, but initially it’s a blurred mess. At the blurry end, designers work with very abstract ideas, very broad concepts. Like working with the more abstract concepts of mathematics, design at this end of the spectrum can be difficult to grasp. At the focused end, designers work with very concrete decisions. At this end of the spectrum, the ideas are easy to picture because they’re concrete, but there are many of them.

Every designer has a comfort zone. Some like playing at the more abstract end, manipulating concepts to establish an underlying structure or framework for the product. They can anticipate how the abstractions will work into definitive interactions or spaces or features, but they prefer operating with concepts. Others are more comfortable mired in the concrete. This isn’t a distinction of big picture vs. details, though it might correspond with that. Abstractions can have endless details, too. It is instead a question of material. Is this a designer who prefers pushing specific design elements around the page or pushing boxes representing concepts around the page?

Designers end up working at all levels of abstraction. Rarely can a designer work only at one end and “outsource” the rest of the work. Great designers understand where they need help to work out the abstract or the concrete.

### The Extremes

- **Abstraction maven:** At this end of the spectrum, designers are more comfortable thinking about the underlying concepts of the project. They prefer thinking through structures and concepts that are elegant and serve to unify the project’s requirements.
- **Reality wizard:** At the other extreme, designers prefer to deal with the concrete aspects of the product itself. They prefer making decisions about the reality of the product, even if those decisions aren’t elegant and require compromise.

## Project load (dedicated vs. diversified)

“Anything above four projects and I start to flail.”

With some exceptions, every designer must balance more than one project. Even those working for one organization or one client have several different streams of work happening at once. These vary in scale, scope, and duration. Designers may play different roles on different projects, and have different levels of commitment. They may work with different teams, for different stakeholders. Or, they’re working with the same people in different capacities. Even for two projects, it’s a lot to keep in one’s head.

Designers have project load thresholds. The more designers know and understand about the nuance of their thresholds, the better. So, knowing that I become less effective when I have more than three projects on my plate is good. Knowing that my ideal mix of projects is one large and two medium is better.

### The Extremes

- **Dedicated:** At one end of the spectrum, a designer thrives when she has one and only one project to focus on.
- **Diversified:** At the other end of the spectrum, a designer thrives when she has many things going on.