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Guide To:

Building a Design System Community
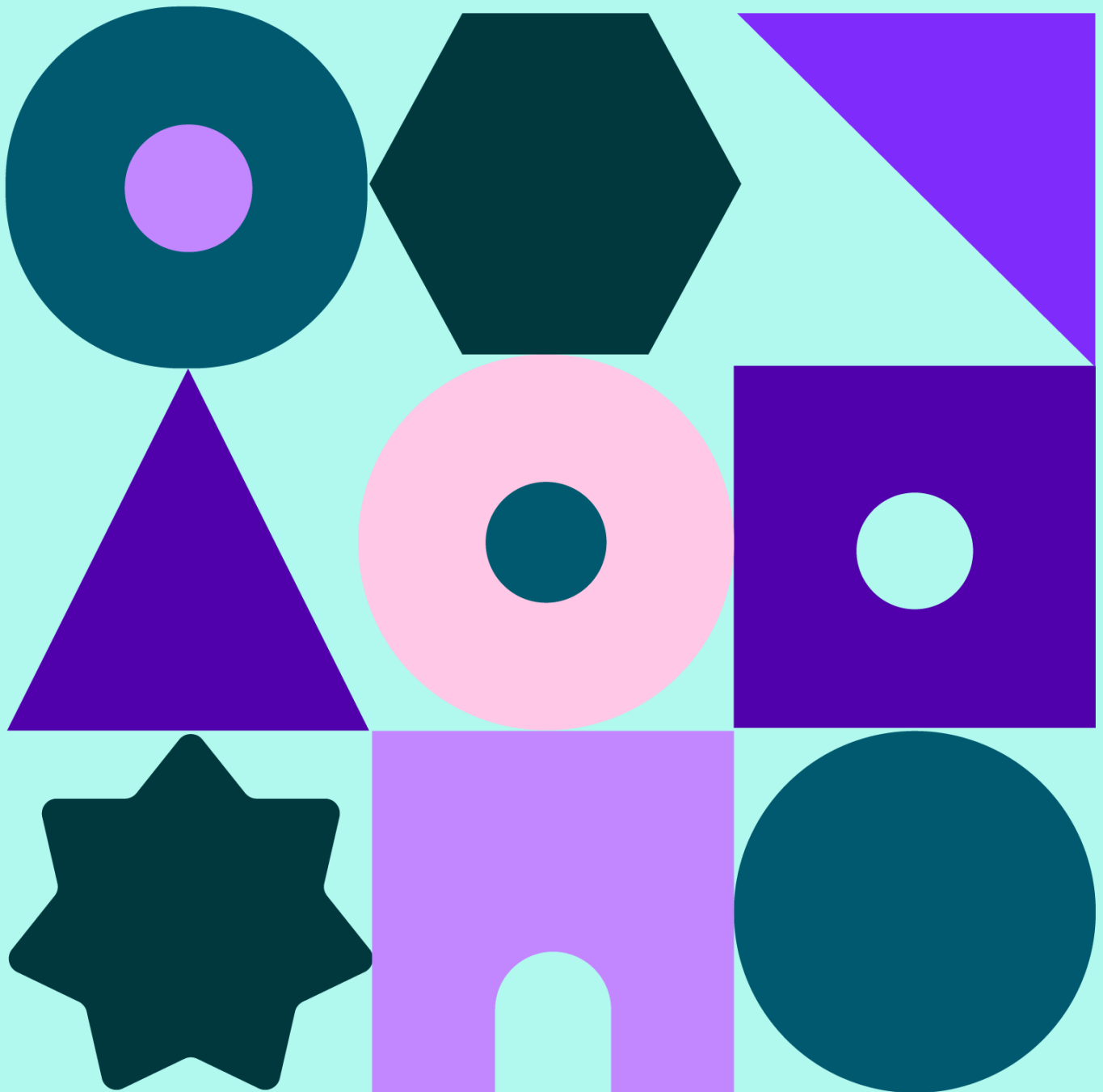
Table of contents

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100% of the Fortune 100—brands like IKEA, Slack, and Netflix—use InVision to build products customers love. And our design system platform, DSM, helps product teams manage design systems at scale. Interested in a demo from a design system expert? Let's talk.

Intro—duction

Creating a design system can be overwhelming, especially if—like at many organizations—it starts with a small team dedicating only a couple of hours each day to the effort. But even small teams can have a big business impact with the right processes and supports in place. This is where design system communities come in.

While you may not start with a large core team of design system makers, you have an entire organization that's likely willing to help, if they're aware of the value they will get from it. From sustainable growth to higher adoption of your design system, building these communities provides numerous benefits, including the unplanned but equally important outcome of bringing people closer together.

In this guide, you'll learn what a design system community is, and the importance and benefits of developing one at your company. We'll also walk you step-by-step through the process of identifying, recruiting, and keeping supporters motivated as your system evolves. And we'll back up all of our recommendations with real-world success stories and tips on how InVision Design System Manager helps your community last.

This guide is for —

design system makers who want to scale their initiatives in a sustainable way by building a design system community and establishing a company-wide design culture. It's also for **collaborators** and **key stakeholders** outside of the core group who may have heard about design system efforts at their company, and want to learn why (and how) to get involved.

What is a design system community?

DESIGN SYSTEM
STAKEHOLDERS

DESIGN SYSTEM
COLLABORATORS

DESIGN SYSTEM
MAKERS
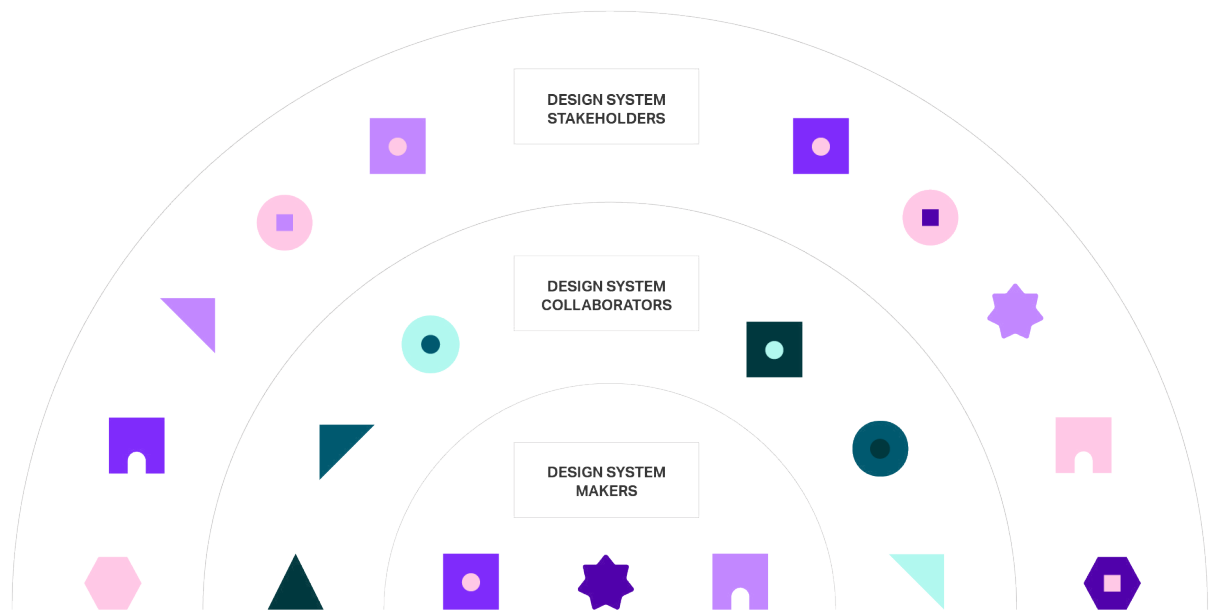
Your design system is only as good as the people who use it. That's why it's important to have a community of supporters who will advocate for and invest in the system right from the start. A design system community is made up of everyone who is going to influence the design system as it grows, making decisions around what should be included and how it gets interpreted for different brands or products.

It starts with your core team of **design system makers**–a small group of visionary designers and developers who care about creating consistent product experiences and doing excellent, sustainable work. While they likely will not start out working full-time on the design system, these are the people who will help develop the system strategy and keep it moving forward. The wider community of **collaborators** and **stakeholders** surrounding the core group will include product managers, executives, marketers, copywriters, QA, and others who might be interested in supporting a design system. We'll go into greater detail about the critical role these individuals play later in the guide.

Why build a design system community?

Many times, design system makers are so focused on creating components and styles for the system that they overlook or put off developing the people side. But building a community should happen simultaneously—you can create all of the greatest components in the world, but if no one uses them, those efforts are wasted.

It's better to have one component that everyone uses, than a whole library that no one uses.

By encouraging organic buy-in early on, a community also prevents your design system from forming unintended silos. People know the system is being built with them rather than being handed to them. Getting people from different functions and teams to participate ensures you are actually solving the problems you set out to solve—designing at scale and creating efficiencies from the start.

Finally, building a community can help your efforts succeed by encouraging sustainable contribution. An active group of collaborators takes the pressure off the core team, extending their energy and impact by spreading around the workload in a sustainable way.

How to build a design system community
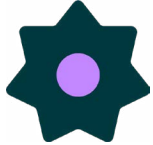
01

Define your stakeholders

In addition to the design system makers (your core group), you'll need to identify potential collaborators—supporters of the project across the organization—from executives to practitioners. Rather than immediately seeking executive support, start by having conversations with colleagues on other teams to identify advocates at the individual contributor level. This often happens naturally during the research phase of building a design system, as you talk with other teams about components and patterns. We provide more tips below on starting the conversation.

According to our Design Systems Handbook, here are some of the main roles you should recruit for your community:

Designers

to develop the visual elements to be used in your design system.

Front-end developers

to create modular, efficient code that brings those designs to life.

Product managers

to make sure the system is in line with customer needs. It's important they're on board, as they decide which design system components to incorporate into their product UIs.

Accessibility experts

to keep you aligned to standards, such as web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG).

Content strategists

who set the voice and tone of your system.

Researchers

to help you better understand customer needs.

QA/Performance experts

to make sure your design system loads quickly across devices.

Leaders, including VPs and directors,

to champion and align the vision throughout the company, including up to executive leadership.

Executives

to provide support, such as budget for a platform like DSM, headcount, and promotion across the business.

Identifying your stakeholders is a critical first step in managing a successful project or product launch. You need to know who is most invested in the end result, who needs to be involved, and to what degree. This is equally true for launching your design system.

Consider going through a **stakeholder identification exercise.** This will help you better understand community member roles and therefore designate responsibilities appropriately. And with a clear view of potential community members, you can identify people who are most likely to join the movement.

stakeholder identification exercise

DESIGN SYSTEM AREA OF INFLUENCE

Who / Title	Role in the Design System	Department	Planning	Design	Build	Adoption	Promotion	What impact do they have on adoption?
[Colleague Name] Title	eg: Implement all design systems components into the code repository	Engineering			●			eg. As a front-end dev lead, {colleague.name} promotes standards in the dev team and can relay feedback that they may discuss

Complete this exercise on your own using our template in Freehand.

Identifying stakeholders and recruiting supporters

NICK HAHN

DIRECTOR, DESIGN SYSTEMS
CONSULTING, INVISION

When the design system team for [IBM Cloud](#) sought collaborators for their community, they didn't start with a top-down approach. They built a framework using stakeholder mapping to reach out across the organization and identify their biggest advocates.

Nick Hahn, Director, Design Systems Consultant for InVision, previously served as Design Principal for IBM Cloud. Rather than going straight to executives to gather support, the team at IBM built connective tissue horizontally across the organization to start building community.

Using fun, purposeful events helped the team create awareness, increase collaboration, and inspire people to join the design system initiative. For example, they would hold happy hours in their building, bringing together 50-60 designers and developers from across the organization. The design system team asked participants to bring screenshots of their UIs to the event so they could uncover unknown UIs in their audit.

The IBM team was also able to have meaningful conversations during those events with both developers and designers, gauging their level of interest in the system, and ultimately recruiting people to become part of it.

NICK'S TAKEAWAY:

"Most people think their UI components needs are unique, but I've found that 80% or more are shared requirements. We need to help teams see their common needs."

InVision DSM Tip: Permissions

Once your stakeholders are defined and on board, give them the corresponding DSM permissions so they can correctly participate. Permissions serve as an important implementation of your team practices. It's important to accurately align your stakeholder responsibilities with their corresponding DSM permission.

This ensures all design system makers can access and edit the content they are responsible for, and prevents users from making changes to the system that haven't gone through the approval process.

Admins
There should only be a couple of admins in your library. These individuals run the day-to-day management and add other contributors to DSM.

Editors
As the main role for contributors, editors can add documentation, code, links, and Sketch library files to the system. They can also release new versions.

Viewers
This is the role most commonly used for design system users. These people don't need to edit the system, but they do consume components in the Sketch plugin, for example.

You can also make your web monument side visible to anyone within your InVision organization—password protected, or fully public.

If you're interested in learning more, you can talk to one of our design system experts today.

02

Start the conversation

The easiest way to find out if someone is interested in supporting your design system is to simply ask. Be transparent about your intentions and talk to people in their own language, such as discussing metrics they care about, how the system affects their work, and how it will make their jobs easier.

Here are some example metrics from our Guide to Building an MVP Design System:

Product leaders
care about higher quality, sustainable consistency, and speed for future iterations.

Design leaders
want to spend more time on big picture user experience work, and less time moving pixels—plus keeping consistency between products and teams.

Development leaders
want more speed without compromising quality. Tools and processes that increase efficiency ultimately help decrease developers' frustrations.

Demonstrating value with your MVP

ALEXANDRIA DEROSA

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, HOSTGATOR

JOE STUTZMAN

SENIOR DESIGN LEAD, HOSTGATOR

As the team at HostGator worked to create their system with InVision DSM, they used a variety of ways to shore up support from stakeholders. One of the things the team found most effective in moving their system forward was to build a minimum viable product (MVP) design system and use it as a basis for discussion.

"You have this proactive piece. You got it to a good starting point," said Alexandria DeRosa, Creative Director for HostGator. "You can now bring that MVP to the table to convince leadership, and when it comes down to collaboration and getting other teams on board, you can use it with them, too."

When speaking to product managers in particular, she advises showing the design system, finding out what they're working on, discussing how your teams can collaborate, and asking how the design system team can help. Having these conversations early can establish design as the owner of the system and help keep everyone moving in the same direction.

And while building the MVP is something designers can do on their own in DSM, Joe Stutzman, Senior Design Lead for HostGator, adds that it's still important to talk with developers early about your design system plans.

"You should start your conversations with dev the minute you start the design system," said Joe. "You don't want to build components and later not understand how they're going to integrate."

ALEXANDRIA'S TAKEAWAY:

"If you're a designer building your MVP, you're going to break it several times. You'll need to have those conversations and try those different collaboration routes. It's probably not going to be the best the first time around, but just keep going."
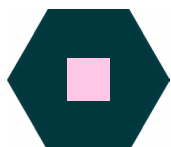
03

Win over the skeptics

While collaborators play a critical role in the long-term success of your design system, they may not feel that the process of building and scaling the system is truly inclusive. In order to break down silos and promote the benefits of a design system community, it's critical to understand why some may be hesitant to join. Here are several common misunderstandings about design systems that could prevent skeptics from getting involved, and our recommendation for the best ways to alleviate their concerns:

Designers think it will stifle their creativity.

Remind fellow designers (and yourself) that a design system means freedom to work on bigger problems. While they may think it will inhibit their creative freedom or even replace them entirely, spread the message that the design system is changing their jobs for the better, elevating designers from bricklayers to architects solving big picture problems for the business and your customers. Designers will get to spend more research time with customers, building empathy, and helping shape the roadmap, instead of re-pixelating the wheel again and again.

Developers view the design system as a tool for designers only, so they don't see what's in it for them.

Reinforce the benefits a design system provides developers, and back it up with data, such as time saved. Such benefits include: (1) Developers often work on the other side of the globe (or just the building) from designers. A design system keeps everyone in lockstep, no matter their locations. (2) Developers care about quality, speed, and efficiency. A design system gives developers

the opportunity to integrate their own tools into a streamlined, cross-functional core that helps smooth out the design process for everyone involved.

People believe that only a small group runs the creation of the system, it feels elitist, or it's closed off to the larger group.

At its best, a design system should function much like a government—by the people, for the people. While you have "elected officials" who are implementing the day-to-day decisions, the design system is intended to serve the individual contributors who use it, not the makers. The processes you define around the system ensure this holds true.

Some believe the system may be built by a different team for a different product, and isn't 100% relevant or accurate for other product groups.

It's unlikely any design system will fit every need of every person at the beginning, if ever. But the purpose of a design system is to bring these groups closer together, with a unified vision. A first iteration of the design system might be geared towards one product. But even then, other groups can find value, use it as a reference, and reuse existing components rather than recreating the wheel.

In addition to bringing people together to discuss how a healthy design system dramatically improves productivity, it's important to emphasize that a community gives everyone a say in the system, and helps them feel valued. It can also help cross-functional partners like designers and developers collaborate more closely—and with greater transparency—by providing common ground and better defined pathways to work together.

Building a link between dev and design

SCOTT ARNOLD

PRINCIPAL DESIGNER,
MOTOROLA SOLUTIONS

NATHAN BABCOCK

DESIGN SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT
PARTNER AND SENIOR UX
ENGINEER, MOTOROLA SOLUTIONS

Motorola Solutions is a great example of how a community can bring designers and developers together. To build trust and increase collaboration with dev teams across the company, members of the core design system team visited developers around the world, asking questions, learning how they work, and understanding their needs.

Scott Arnold, Principal Designer on the design system team, and Nathan Babcock, his design systems development partner and Senior UX Engineer, made the visits together. They gave dev teams a reason to care about the design system by speaking in terms they could relate to, such as time savings and efficiencies.

By framing it in this way, the developers were able to immediately see how a design system could benefit them, said Scott. "They realized that a design system could enable them to focus on what they love to do by getting overhead out of the way."

Their efforts also helped spark a community for front-end developers—a welcome, yet unplanned result that's helped fuel a company-wide design culture.

SCOTT'S TAKEAWAY:

"It's not our job to try to dictate what everyone needs. We catalog what's already out there and Dewey Decimal it, and in the process we get an understanding of the teams we're trying to help."
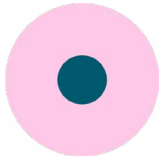
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Keep the excitement going

While people may be enthusiastic about your design system at the outset, it's important to keep the momentum going throughout the project. Here are some ways to do just that.

Create a brand around your design system.
Take a page from product teams and employee resource groups which often have their own logos and names. Create a sense of brand and belonging around the design system by giving people a chance to name it. Then vote on and celebrate the finalists.

Make the message contagious.
Create T-shirts with your design system logo as an in-club item you can use to invite potential contributors and collaborators into your community. When other people ask what the logo on the t-shirt means, they then learn about the design system and may ask to get involved. Win-win.

Discuss your design system regularly.
Have routine design system touchpoints and communications without burning people out, such as 10-minute stand-ups at the end of existing meetings.

Hold scheduled design critiques.
Invite developers and designers into an all-hands meeting for a component critique. Talk about how a component isn't working, and how it can be made better.

Create a guild.
Gather 20 or 30 designers and developers that consistently contribute to the system. Meet every two weeks to discuss components. Have senior-level stakeholders manage these guilds, record minutes, and share out to the organization.

Stay transparent.
Keep your documentation site updated by including information around which components are being built, when they were last updated, active components and how they're used, and upcoming projects.

Create a dedicated communication channel.
This could include formal surveys, a ticketing system, or Slack channels. Dedicate one Slack channel to answer ongoing design system questions and provide updates, and another to share articles and best practices around design systems

Hold events to promote, recruit, and get people contributing.
IBM Cloud invited 60 designers from across the world to participate in a virtual and in-person design-a-thon. Designers got to work with colleagues from across the company who were passionate about the same sets of patterns covering nearly 200 products. The one-and-a-half day event delivered significant design system buy-in and a huge number of designs, which team members could then provide feedback on. Participants became some of the most dedicated design system community members.

InVision DSM Tip: Version control

When it comes to a design system, there's a direct correlation between recognition and adoption. Providing recognition—especially for individual contributors who submitted feedback or ideas—ensures users will continue to feel a part of the design system's evolution and serve as evangelists among their teams. It's an easy and frictionless way to further ingrain the system across the organization.

When releasing a new version of the system, take advantage of release notes to give shoutouts to everyone who contributed to the release.

Someone responsible for creating a new component that was promoted into the system? Give them credit! This encourages continuous contribution and gives credit where credit is due.

These notes will always be visible in DSM's version history, so people can feel the value of their system contribution indefinitely.

If you're interested in learning more, you can talk to one of our design system experts today.
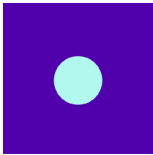
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Share your story

Prove the value of your efforts, and potentially secure budget to continue building, by sharing your community success story with senior leadership. In addition to talking about the efficiencies, consistency, and compliance you've created, communicate the value of the design culture you helped build by sparking community outside of the design system initiative.

But remember, you and your team aren't just efficiency makers. You're change makers, transforming the organization and its culture in a meaningful way.

Sample script for demonstrating value:

"We're already spending X developer hours and X designer hours to get X product out the door. If we invest just 5% more energy and incorporate our work into a reusable system, we could save ourselves half the time down the road."

From InVision's Building an MVP Design System

Improving collaboration with a single source of truth

WESLEY MARTIN

CREATIVE OPERATIONS
MANAGER, PRICELINE

When Priceline's leadership made it a priority for their teams to more easily collaborate, the travel brand turned to its design system, built with DSM. By connecting all of their design, product, and engineering touchpoints across the world, they were able to improve collaboration and communication across various functions and their family of brands.

"InVision DSM is the number one tool I use to communicate quickly between both my design team and our developer partners," said Wesley Martin, Creative Operations Manager for Pipeline.

Because designers and developers are now working from a single source of truth, they can also more easily adapt to changing customer behaviors and improve the experiences they deliver.

> **Wesley Martin**
> Creative Operations Manager, Priceline

WESLEY'S TAKEAWAY:

"Having a design system in place also allows us to hyper-focus on the product and customer experience, which is essential for success in the travel space."

Con— clusion

Many feel like they can't get started with a design system because they lack dedicated resources. But we've seen teams succeed in building a sustainable design system by leveraging what resources they have to build a community that not only shoulders some of the work, but likewise ensures greater adoption of the system in the long-term.

Once you make the decision to move forward in building a design system, it might be tempting to dive in and start creating components, but success depends on both people and design. By identifying your stakeholders, getting a conversation started, keeping up momentum, and sharing your successes, your design system will thrive long after you and your core team have moved on. And you'll leave behind a design community and culture that stands the test of time.

Wherever you are in building your community, we're here to help. Our team of Design System Consultants can provide more best practices and guidance on ensuring your design system is supported with a community of collaborators. And with InVision DSM, we can ensure that the community, just like your design system, is set up for long-term success.
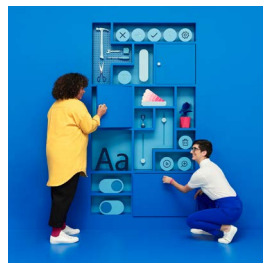
in DSM

Reach out to InVision **to discuss how we can support your design system efforts.**

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