EMPOWERED TEAMS:

Accelerate Your Product Roadmap

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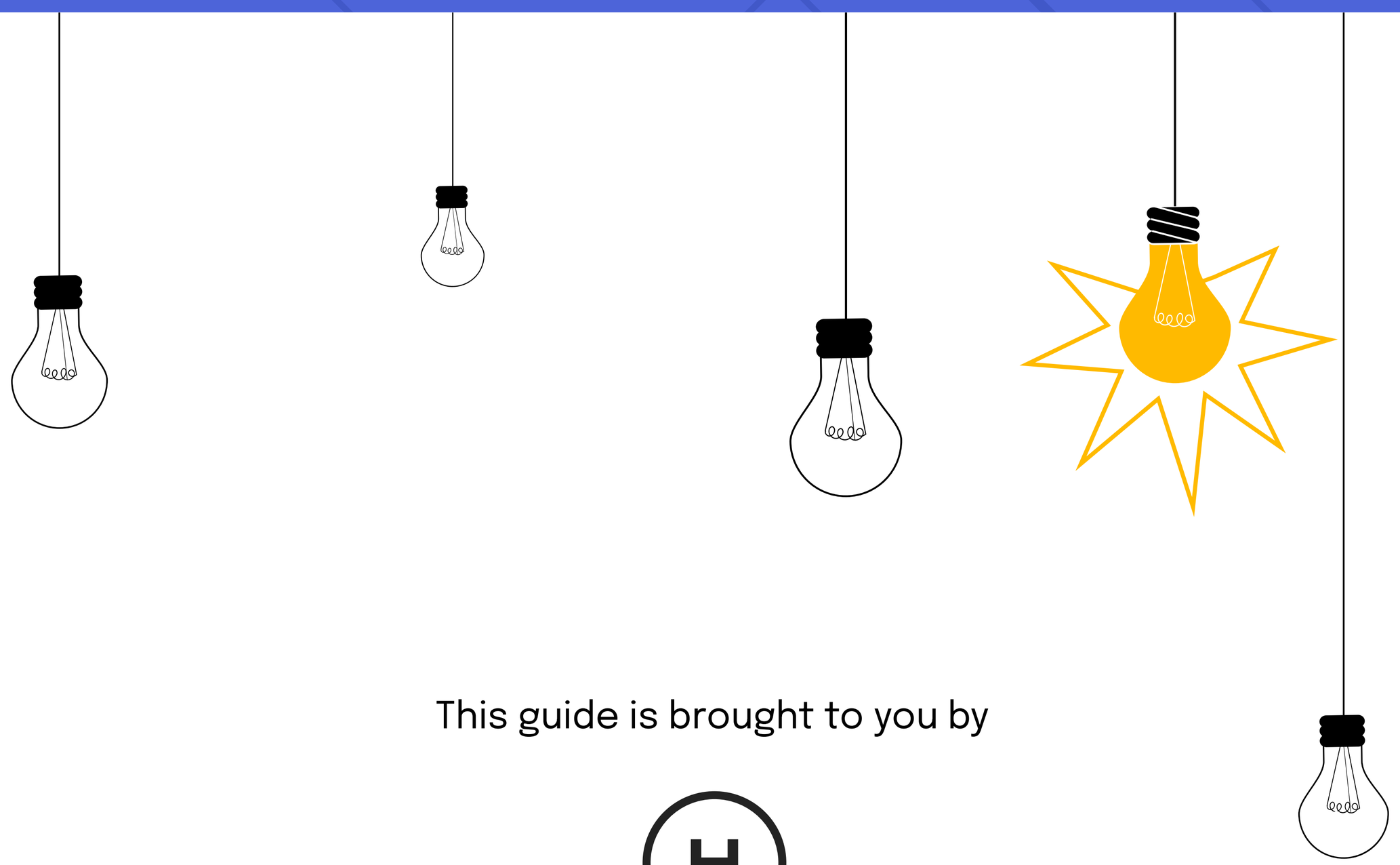
Accelerate Your Product Roadmap



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Headway

Headway is a digital product studio that partners with high-growth startups through product strategy, design, and development.

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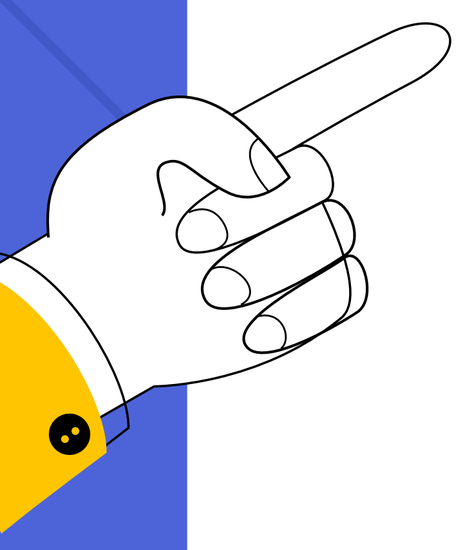

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Faster is (almost) always better, right?

Not if you sacrifice customer-oriented results for that speed. To accelerate your digital product roadmap, you'll have to think differently about your team's focus and empower them to act on behalf of your customers and business goals. Once your team has shifted their mindset to this value-focused way of thinking, it becomes a matter of working smarter, not harder, by implementing a robust design system that reduces manual decision-making.

This guide will help you:

- Not waste time and money on features that don’t create results
- Think about how to peel back layers of the features and vision you have
- Take an outcome-driven approach to product creation, instead of trying to pick a use-case for the features you’ve created
- Think more holistically about your customers and the journey they’re on through your application

01

Accelerate your product roadmap by creating empowered teams

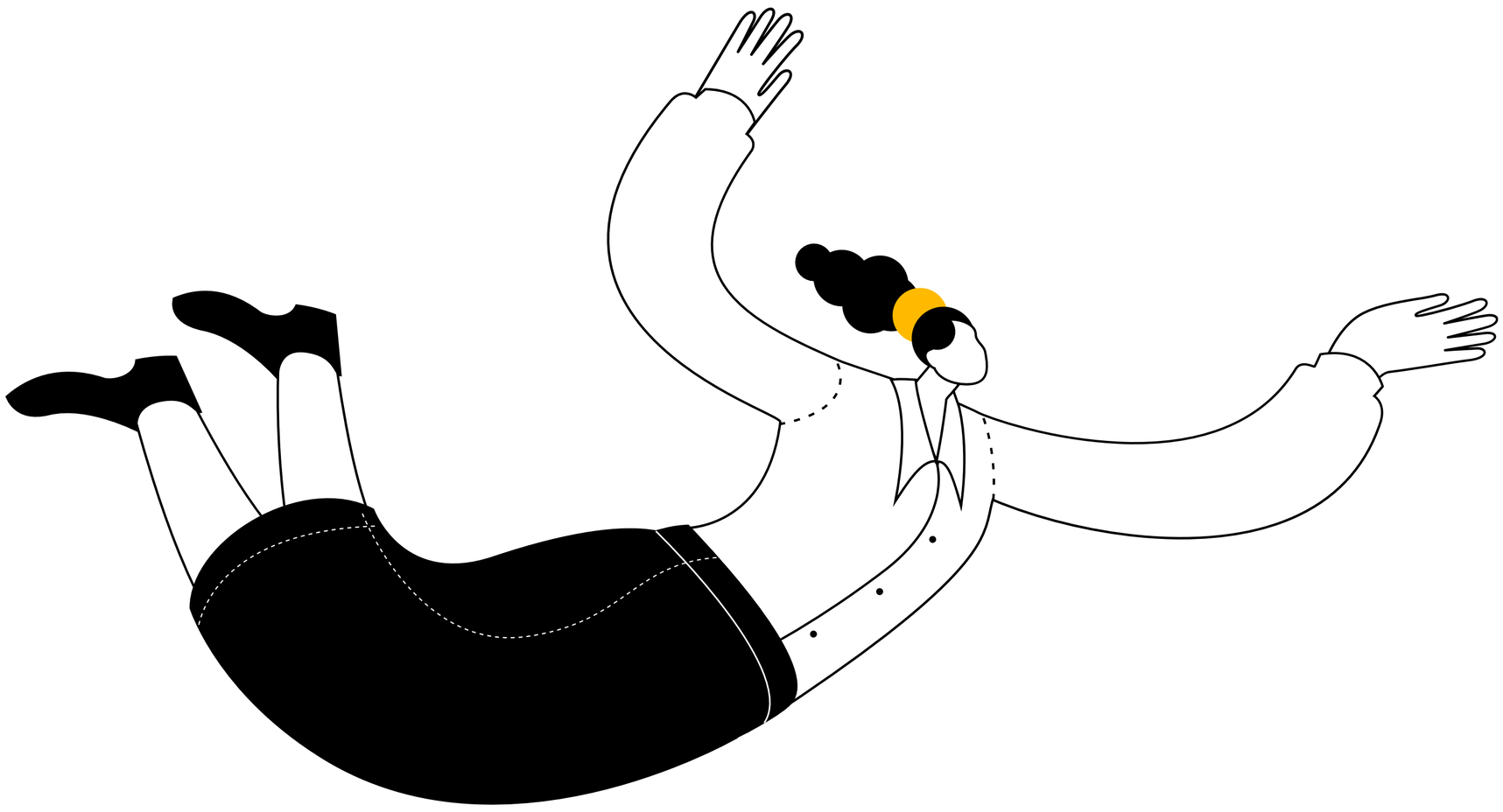
To more quickly release products and features on your roadmap, first consider an adjustment to how your team operates. An intentionally empowered team is relieved of stumbling blocks that could otherwise slow them down.

But what exactly is an empowered team?

Marty Cagan of Silicon Valley Product Group created the idea of empowered teams based on his own experiences in product development. On the surface, the phrase “empowered team” may sound obvious, but it has more nuanced than you’re likely to ascribe it.

02

Empowered teams provide more value by iterating faster



You've empowered your team to make decisions based on your team's objectives. Those priorities trickle down from the overall objective set forth by your company or team, providing a lens through which to make smarter decisions.

But it doesn't matter how thoughtful a decision is if it's not made in a timely manner. How do you speed up iteration? By understanding the value you're trying to provide as well as your customer's shifting context.

Breaking free from feature-based product development

For example, let’s say you have a new feature on the roadmap. Upon review, the team determines it would take four weeks to build. Based on the other items in the queue, the feature will take a total of five months to ship.

An empowered team closely tied to the business’ goals and the customer’s needs will think creatively about the production timeline based on the underlying goals. Upon receipt of a ticket, a member of that empowered team might say, “I know what we're trying to do here. It would take me four weeks to complete this ticket if I took it at face value. But if I'm thinking about the outcome we're trying to achieve for our customers, I can see a faster way forward. I can more quickly achieve our goal with a surface-layer piece that will take half the time to develop and ship.”

Accelerating time-to-market keeps your product relevant

By finding the shortest path to value, you also ensure that your decisions are still as relevant as possible by the time they come to fruition. After all, in the five months that ticket would otherwise have sat in the queue, the world could change in any number of ways – and with it, your customers' expectations:

- You may have new competitors in the market.
- Technology development in an adjacent field may have suddenly reset customer expectations in your space.
- The context for your product may have changed, requiring a totally different approach to future iterations.

With a feature-based team, the tickets are completed in the order they appear in the queue, with the hope that some higher-up in the company is concerning themselves with what users actually want today. The goal of an empowered team isn't just to create understanding; it's to enable them to use that information to make decisions that benefit your user base as quickly as possible.

03

To accelerate your roadmap, speed up decision making

You've successfully empowered your team to make decisions based on the highest value you can provide to your customer. With that empowerment comes the ability to iterate faster. But the faster you move, the more likely you are to encounter decision fatigue.

Decision fatigue: You've certainly felt it in the past. You're faced with so many decisions that making just one more becomes overwhelming. By the time you become mentally fatigued, your ability to make effective decisions is diminished.

The same thing happens to product teams. So the question becomes, how can you streamline the decision-making process in a way that reduces decision fatigue and eliminates dozens of unnecessary conversations? By creating a design system that anticipates and answers the questions that most commonly lead to decision bloat.

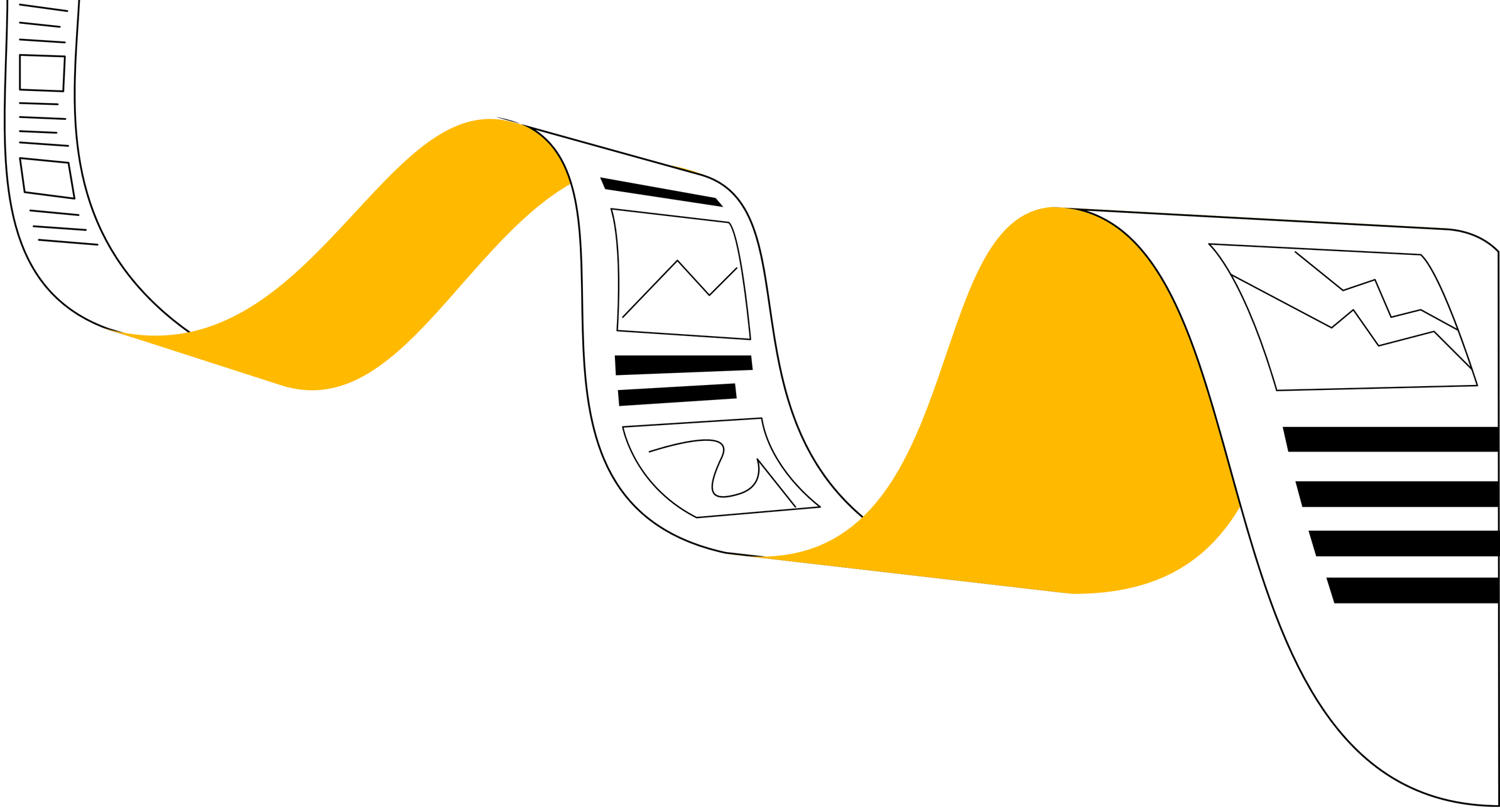
A design system in action

Headway worked with Roostify to find a way to launch new designs faster without accruing technical debt. We found that while they had a basic design system, the placement wasn't consistent and the padding was off. As a result, every mockup would result in back and forth review while going through the design process, and then proceed into a flag from the development teams. When a developer is required to question every pixel discrepancy, it adds significant time to the overall development process — and metastasizes into a plethora of redundant decision points.

To help Roostify become more scalable and product-led, we established a more robust design system, including working with them to become fully trained in the best way to implement it.

If a design discrepancy is allowed to move forward to development, it results in bloated code. That could mean fifteen variants of color for one button instead of the two it should have. Every developer who picks up related projects will have questions that must be addressed before they can continue. To solve that problem, develop a design system.

A design system is more than a design library. It's a roadmap-accelerating tool that lays the foundation for streamlined decision-making.



How to create a design system

A good design system isn’t intended to be prescriptive. Rather, it’s intended to provide principles upon which design decisions can be made. Instead of a hard-and-fast to-do list, it functions more like a checklist that guides your team through best practices.

Think of a design system like a design playbook. It doesn’t provide intel for every action you might take in every situation. That would be like prescribing specific football plays for every game at the start of a season. Of course, that would be silly. Each game and the participating players are different. On top of that, external variables — from team rivalries and injuries to game-day weather — influence how players interact on the field. And most of that can’t be foreseen.

A football team’s playbook provides plays, but it’s up to the captain to decide which one is appropriate for a given situation. Your design playbook is likewise meant to codify principles that should facilitate (not dictate) your team’s decision-making.

Remember to utilize design tokens

In an effort to streamline decision-making, remember to utilize design tokens in your design system. Design tokens are visual values that construct the foundational pieces of your designs. These items must be simple data components that can easily be consumed by your living, coded design system. Examples of design tokens are elements like colors, typestyles, spacers, shadows, and animations.

Let's take Delta Airlines as an example. If their design system (a system of utilizing reusable components of design) were utilizing design tokens, Delta would be able to automatically implement brand colors, the logo, and so forth across all their digital properties and assets. All of the information in those tokenized files pass to the web app, the mobile app, email, and marketing collateral.

Design tokens serve as a buffer that limits manual decision-making. If your brand changes, you're able to adjust one single file to carry those changes through the entire product line.

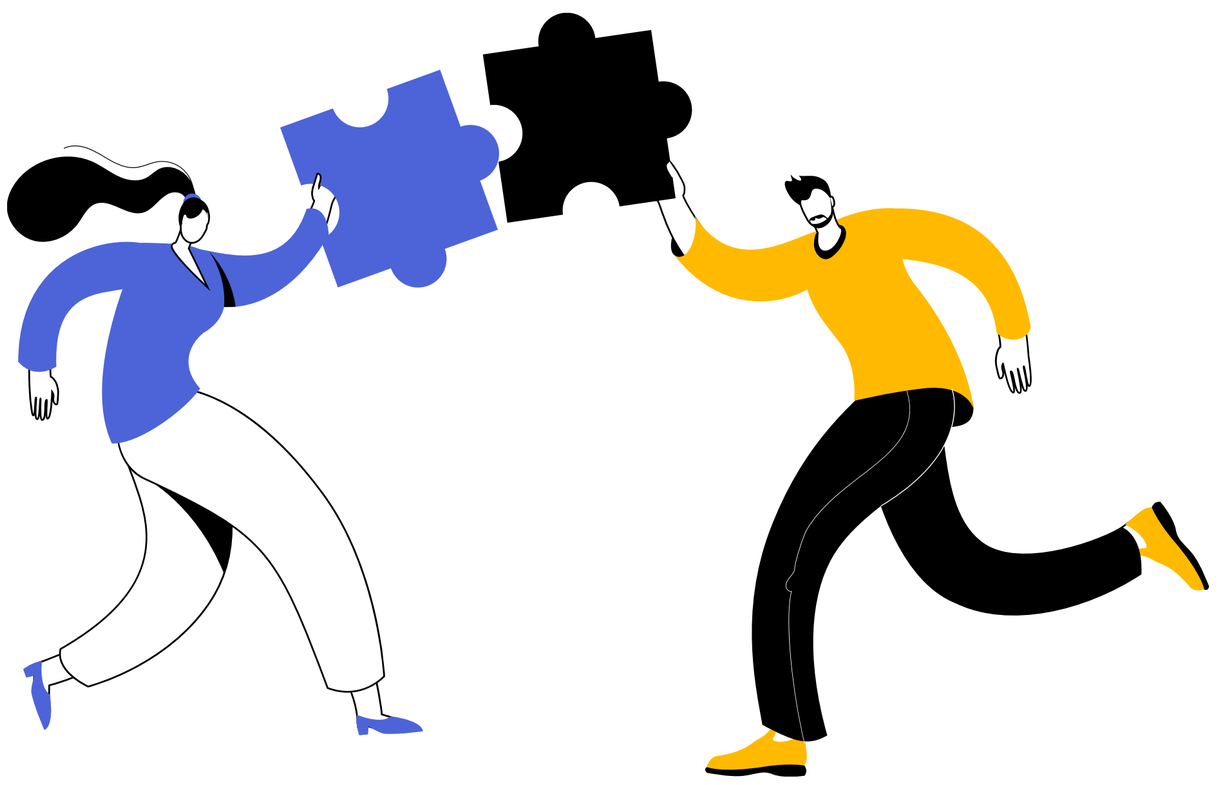
To take that a step further, remember that your design system will have similar functionality. The design system will read information from the files and ask questions like:

- How are buttons built?
- What is the appropriate font?
- In XYZ flow, is the button found on the left or the right?

All of those questions are baked into the design system and function in a "set it and forget it" manner. When you need a new flow, the decision-making process is simplified. Instead of building from scratch, you can use the pattern you already have or make adjustments as needed.

04

Craft within context



“Craft within context” is a core value at Headway. For us, that means understanding the journey our customers are on while also understanding our own internal constraints.

We’ve touched on understanding your customers’ context, but understanding your own is nearly as important. You may wish for a bigger team, faster production, higher productivity — each of these qualities sound great, but wishes don’t produce products. That’s true for Headway, and it’s true for all of the startups we work with.

Time constraints increase focus

Many teams think more time is the answer, but it's really more focus that makes a difference. We take our own advice on this — we put a cap on our own hours when contributing to your projects. Headway crew members only contribute 35 hours a week to any client's project. This is out of principle. We believe that by placing constraints around our time, we increase our ability to focus and produce quality work.

As a team, we own the outcome for you. We're going to do the essential work required to get you where you want to go. We focus. That means we don't allow ourselves to be distracted by possibilities. Instead, we focus on high-value items requiring completion and stay out of the endless debates.

Evaluate internal constraints to accelerate your roadmap

To start understanding your internal constraints, put a cap on the hours your team can work on any given project. Don't allow your team to work "as many hours as it takes." That cap will drive creativity and help you solve problems in the best possible way – which will, in turn, accelerate your roadmap.

By maintaining reasonable constraints and crafting within that context, you maintain the ability to prioritize and focus. Consider app login screens. A lot of teams insist on developing a login system with the highest fidelity possible. In other words, users can log in with email, Google, or social login. That's all nice to have, but the reality is a basic username and password system takes less time to build and pushes you closer to the goal of giving users access to your app. And it's the app itself your work should be focused on, not login screens.

Shift your perspective

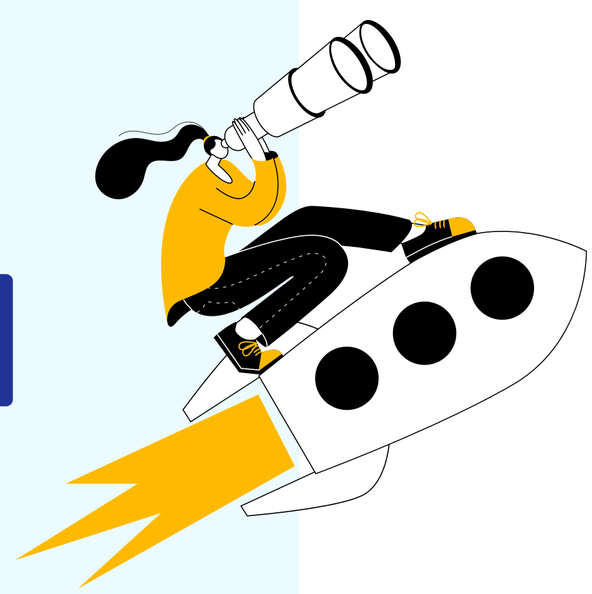
The interesting thing about accelerating your product roadmap is that it doesn't require a dramatic shift in process. What it does require is a significant shift in mindset. You're still going to develop products and build new features; you're still going to deliver them and refine them over time. What's going to change is the way you think about providing value.

Previously, you thought the most effective way to deliver value was simply to deliver features and products on an ever-faster schedule. But now that you've shifted your focus to sussing out the real value to your users, you're starting to see that shift in priority will dramatically affect how quickly, and how often, you're able to deliver noticeable value.

Ready to accelerate your product roadmap?

Schedule a Free Consultation With Us!

www.headway.io/free-consultation



We can't wait to see how we can help you move forward.

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