

8-minute read

Design

Hiring

Business

5 things to look for

when you're hiring a senior product designer in 2026

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Good hasn't changed. The proof of it has.

A good product designer in 2026 is the same person they'd have been in 2016. What changed is that the polish, the artefacts and the case study that used to prove it can now be produced by anybody, in an afternoon.

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This is written for hiring senior to lead. I wouldn't expect a junior to think this way, and these things have to be taught, so go easy on junior to mid. But the five points here are a seniority test. A junior who does two of them is promising. Somebody calling themselves senior who can't do four of them isn't senior, whatever the title says.

None of the five are about AI, and that's deliberate. If a designer thinks like a founder, the tools are already theirs and they found them before you asked. AI is the reason you can't tell any more. It isn't the thing you're looking for.

Can they tell you **why**?

1

You shouldn't have to ask. The what, the who and the why should arrive without you prompting for any of it.

The best interviews feel like being told a story. You come out understanding a problem you didn't know existed ten minutes ago.

When I present Mortgage Hub to clients, I don't open on the app. I ask whether the person I'm talking to owns a home, and then I ask what it was like setting up the mortgage. The answer is the same every time, and it's never a happy one. Only then do I say that it now takes minutes. They've felt the problem before they've seen a single screen, which is the whole job.

When you're hiring, a red flag is that there's nothing to go by. The work goes up and you get walked through what's on it, this is the dashboard, this is the settings page, and you come out the other end knowing what it looked like and nothing about why any of it exists. That designer may well have done good work. They just can't tell you which parts of it were theirs. They won't help you feel the pain that the solution is the pain killer to.

Try this

After the next portfolio walkthrough, write down the problem in one sentence without looking at your notes. If you can't, they didn't tell you. Then ask yourself whether they ever asked you about what your needs were while they had the floor.

You don't need to know anything about design to check this one. Did they make you feel the problem, or did they only show you the solution? A real case study names the problem, who had it, what they personally decided, what they decided against, and what happened afterwards. It survives one follow-up question. Screenshots of finished websites are a slideshow, not a portfolio.

Do they know what **good** looks like?

2

Unique, memorable, easy to understand. If they can't tell you why something's good, they're guessing about their own work.

You can't reliably judge the craft, and you don't need to. Judge your own reaction instead, because that one you can trust.

Evidence

Non-experts can't reliably rate design quality. A 2023 study in the Creativity Research Journal had 135 people evaluate award-winning designs. Expert agreement held up.

Novice agreement was, in the authors' words, potentially problematic. And the people in between, the ones with some design training but not a lot, scored with the novices rather than the experts.

Creativity Research Journal, 2023.
Link to be confirmed before publication.

Here's what a good portfolio does to you. You think, I've never seen that in a portfolio before. Or, that's cool, I want that on my site. Or you look up and realise you've just enjoyed reading about a project in an industry you have no interest in. Best of all, you think, that's exactly what I've been telling people my product needs, and now I've seen it I want it. If you felt none of that, that's information, and it's information you might want to act on.

Then look at the range. A product designer's portfolio should show you their process for research and definition, the UX and the UI, the storytelling, the animation, and the decisions they made along the way. If you're only seeing two of those, the gap isn't in their skills. It's that they think design is a department you hand things to. It isn't.

This is also where the portfolio does the work for all five of these. It isn't one of the things to look for. It's where you look for them.

The thing I care about most here is harder to say and easier to check. You should be able to come across a good designer's work somewhere else, with their name nowhere near it, and think, that's theirs. I can tell they made that. That recognition is judgement made visible. It means the person has their own way of looking at the world and it survives contact with a brief, a design system and somebody else's brand guidelines. There are processes and conventions and best practice, and there should be, but people are not interchangeable and their work shouldn't be either. If three projects in a portfolio could have been made by three different people, there's nothing underneath them.

One practical consequence. A product designer whose portfolio is a Dribbble page or a Behance page shouldn't be in consideration. That was a fair position five or 10 years ago when building a site meant hiring a developer. The skills gap is bridged now. Anyone can build their own thing, so choosing not to is a decision, and it's the same decision as not having a view.

A digital product designer without a website in 2026 is like a Formula 1 driver without a car.

Try this

Open three projects from the same portfolio and cover the client names. Could you tell that the same person made all three? If you can, they've got a way of seeing things that's their own, and that's the thing you're hiring. If not, they execute whatever they're handed.

Evidence

Knowing what good looks like is the same muscle as knowing what good evidence looks like. Design's two most quoted numbers, the 100x cost of a late bug fix and the \$100 return on \$1 of UX, trace to the same source: an IBM staff training course that closed in 1982 and published nothing.

The Register, 22 July 2021.

[theregister.com/2021/07/22/bugs_expense_bs](https://www.theregister.com/2021/07/22/bugs_expense_bs)

Did they solve the **right problem**, or just the one they were given?

3

They don't always have to have found the problem. But they must know what it was, why it existed and whose pain it is.

This is the most valuable thing a designer does, and it's the hardest of the five to fake.

Evidence

The National Audit Office, on 25 years of digital programmes going wrong. The failures came “often resulting from decisions on technology being taken too early, before the business problem is properly understood.”

The challenges in implementing digital change, 21 July 2021.
nao.org.uk/press-releases/the-challenges-in-implementing-digital-change

Glacier Drop started as a brief to run a token airdrop. That was the job as written, and doing it well would have looked like success. But the real problem was that a standard airdrop lets everybody claim at once and sell immediately, which takes the value of the thing you've just spent a year building and removes it in an afternoon. So what shipped wasn't an airdrop. That isn't solving the brief well. It's refusing the brief and replacing it with the right one.

The Boots Opticians lens hub was the same shape. The ask was a refresh, make it look better. The actual problem was that customers couldn't choose the right lenses, couldn't understand what they were paying for, couldn't tell whether they were saving money and couldn't do any of it quickly. No amount of looking better was going to touch any of that.

They don't always have to have found it themselves. Sometimes you inherit a well-framed problem and the right move is to get on with it. But they have to know what the problem was, where it came from, and whose pain it is.

The opposite of this is a designer who has never once challenged a brief. Never asked how well anyone actually knows the customer. Never asked what the problem is, because the brief arrived with a solution already in it and questioning that felt like being difficult. Their work will look completely fine. That's precisely what makes it expensive, because fine work aimed at the wrong problem costs exactly as much as good work aimed at the right one, and you find out eighteen months later.

The good news is that you don't need to understand a single research technique to check this. We're human. Pain is part of being alive, and you have been a customer of something badly made more recently than you'd like. When somebody describes a real problem, you recognise it, because you've felt some version of it yourself. When they can't, you'll notice that too. Trust that.

Try this

Take the last brief you wrote and ask what problem it solves, then ask how you know that's the problem. If the answer is that somebody senior said so, you've just found the thing you need a designer to push back on.

Evidence

Two thirds of well-argued ideas don't work. Microsoft measured its own, by controlled experiment at scale: roughly a third improved the target metric, a third did nothing, and a third made it worse. The value isn't in building. It's in choosing.

Kohavi and Thomke, Harvard Business Review, September 2017.
hbr.org/2017/09/the-surprising-power-of-online-experiments

Do they talk about how it should make people **feel**?

4

Delight is the most said and least meant word in this industry. Anybody can say it. Few can tell you how they'd get there.

This is the one nobody else's hiring advice mentions, and it's the one a founder can hear the absence of most easily.

Evidence

Feeling predicts behaviour better than approval does. Park and colleagues found brand attachment beat brand attitude strength at predicting actual purchase behaviour. Feeling is a commercial variable, not a soft one.

Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci, 2010.
journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1509/jmkg.74.6.1

Try this

Ask a designer what they wanted somebody to feel, then ask what they did to the design to get it. The first answer is available to anyone. The second one only exists if they actually did the work.

Mortgage Hub was built for brokers and lenders. They're the ones using it, they're the ones on the screen all day, and they're not technically the people it was designed for. The person at the heart of it was the customer, who never touches the thing at all. Faster, cheaper, more accurate, and ultimately good enough that a customer would go looking for a lender who used it. That's an ambition about how somebody feels, and it's also a commercial strategy. They're not separate.

When it's missing, a designer talks about what's on the screen and nothing else. The what, never the why or the who. And if you've seen a good portfolio earlier the same day, you'll notice the difference physically, because you didn't get the same feeling from this one and you won't be able to explain why.

The trap is that this one is easy to fake with vocabulary. Anybody can say they wanted users to feel confident. The real ones give themselves away three ways: they can tell you how they'd get somebody to feel it, through the problem and the person and what they're actually curing; they have measures for satisfaction and not only for shipping; and they know the difference between a success story and a launch.

Do they think like a founder?

5

If you only check one thing on this entire list, check this one.

Everything else on this list can be taught. This one mostly can't, and it's what separates a good designer from the rest.

What I want to see is at least one self-initiated project. It doesn't have to have worked. It can be unfinished, it can be a failure, and if it turned into a business, better still. Because to make something nobody asked you to make, you have to use every skill you have, get help with the ones you haven't, and think about every part of it rather than the part you enjoy. It's almost always the best work in the portfolio, and their personality is all over it, because they had the problem themselves and worked out that if they had it, other people did too.

Emily Brooke left physics to study product design at Brighton. Cycling up to a junction, she wished she could be five yards ahead to warn the traffic, and thought she could project herself there instead. That was a final year project. It ended up on every bike in London's hire fleet.

Mine is smaller. I kept journalling on long distance walks and no notebook survived the weather, so I designed one that did, and now it's a business.

Not everybody has a side project, and that's fine. You'll still see it in the work. There'll be a range of projects across different parts of life for different kinds of people, because founders gravitate towards problems and they don't much mind which industry the problem lives in. And the work will be a genuine step forward rather than a tidier version of what was already there.

When it's missing, the portfolio is small pieces of somebody else's much bigger puzzle. Nothing is an invention. They won't talk about the effect any of it had on a person's life, and they won't seem particularly excited that the job lets them make somebody's day better, which is the main reason to do it.

What that costs you is not obvious for a while. Good work still gets done and you'll get through the quarter. You just won't have a designer at the front of your business arguing for something better, and you'll never see the version of your product that person would have built. You'll have hired a pair of hands, and pairs of hands are the one thing that stopped being scarce.

Try this

Next portfolio that lands, don't try to judge the design. Just look for something they built that nobody asked them to build. That single question will tell you more than an hour of interview, and you can answer it in about ninety seconds.

Same animal, better camouflage.

Technology changes every week.
Human beings don't evolve that fast.

So stop looking at the artefacts and start looking for the person.

Can they tell you why. Do they know what good looks like. Did they solve the right problem or just the one they were given. Do they talk about how it should make people feel. And do they think like a founder.

If you'd like to talk one of these through against a real candidate, portfolio or a real brief, feel welcome to book a free 30-minute call with yours truly.

[Book a call](#)

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