

UX DESIGNER (USER EXPERIENCE)

MAGDA ENSURES HER COMPANY’S WEBSITE DESIGN IS EASY TO UNDERSTAND AND INTUITIVE TO INTERACT WITH

“Guys, have you thought about this before? Could this scenario on the website happen?” Magda asks in a meeting with the tech team. She looks at the Post-It notes on her wall presenting possible scenarios that could happen if a customer were to press a button on the website.

As Principal Experience Designer at Verizon, Magdalena Wistuba’s role is to ensure that everything in Verizon’s website design is easy to understand and use. This includes research, conducting user testing and brainstorming everything that could go wrong—so she can fix it before it happens. Magdalena, who goes by Magda, and her team keep the site accessible, easy to understand, and visually interesting.

LOTS OF TRAVEL SPARKS AN IDEA

Born in Chile, Magda and her parents moved between Chile and the United States for a few years before finally settling down in Houston, Texas. Her parents are both doctors who traveled for work, but finally relocated to do cancer research at the Texas Medical Center. Magda attended the first two years of high school



FOR THE RECORD

EDUCATION

HIGH SCHOOL:

M. B. Lamar High School

Houston, Texas

Colegio San Juan Evangelista

Santiago, Chile

COLLEGE:

Rice University

Houston, Texas

B.A. in Cognitive Sciences

GRADUATE SCHOOL:

School of the Arts Institute

Chicago - Chicago, Illinois

Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design

INTERNSHIPS:

Thirst - Chicago, Illinois

WORK HISTORY

Principal Experience Designer at Verizon - *New York, NY*

Lead Experience Designer at Verizon - *New York, NY*

Senior Design Consultant at Moment (acquired by Verizon) *New York, NY*

Design Consultant at Electronic Ink *Philadelphia, PA*

Design Consultant at IA Collaborative - *Chicago, IL*

Graphic Designer at Thirst *Chicago, IL*

Search Specialist at Aducent *Austin, TX*

YOU MIGHT LIKE THIS CAREER IF:

You might like this career if: You enjoy design, making things easier and better for people, and continuing to learn about new technologies.

You need to be familiar with a good number of design disciplines (graphic, product, web) as well as design thinking. It helps to be familiar with the Adobe Creative Suite.

Helps to have an interest in psychology, research, data analysis, computer science, and asking questions.

in Santiago, Chile at Colegio San Juan Evangelista and finished the last two at M. B. Lamar High School in Houston.

For Magda, all this travel at a young age sparked her interest in design. While she waited at the airport, coming or going from Chile, Magda would look at all the signs to try to understand even the basics of how her life was changing. “When you’re at the airport and you’ve left all your friends behind, the only things that you have are these cold signs telling you where to go. And then you get on a plane, and the only way you know you’re somewhere new are more signs telling you where to go,” The signs guided her transition into a big life change and helped her understand design as a form of communication for public good.

According to Magda, having immigrant parents meant that she grew up with a

pretty high bar of expectations. As a high schooler she was very focused, always a good student, and loved math and logic. “We all collectively assumed I’d go into science, research, or a medical field,” But on the side, Magda was always looking for ways to fit more art classes into her high school schedule. “I took all the advanced art classes they offered, but it still was just a hobby to me, which is why I was surprised to end up working as a professional designer.”

Magda’s high school offered an International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB). Her high school’s IB program and unconventional method of teaching gave her an edge—instead of following a curriculum with set topics, Magda’s teachers allowed students to explore their own ideas and be self-driven. “It wasn’t as much ‘do you want to paint with oils?’ but ‘what do you want to make?’”

EXPLORATION AND INTERESTS IN SCIENCE

As a high school student, Magda made an agreement with her parents that she would go to the school with the best reputation that also offered her the best financial aid package—for her, that school was Rice University in Houston. Rice is ranked within the top 20 best overall schools in the U.S. News and World Report, and since her parents lived in Houston, she could greatly reduce her cost by living at home.

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB)
a two-year educational program that allows students to gain college credit

As a freshman at Rice, Magda had a chance to explore her many interests. Because her parents worked in research, science and logic was always part of her upbringing. She knew she wanted to make that a part of her career. Magda also knew she was interested in working

“I took all the advanced art classes they offered, but it still was just a hobby to me, which is why I was surprised to end up working as a professional designer.”

with and better understanding people, so she set out to explore the different ways she could combine all of these interests. She thought that might be in the research and academics field, but that's not very specific. She took science classes so she could do pre-medicine and logic classes for pre-law, while she also really enjoyed an introductory psychology class.

Magda was realizing that there was more to life than science. In college as an undergrad everything was all about formulas and getting the answers right in a lab. She knew that if she wanted to expand beyond the sciences, and pick up some of the art classes she missed taking in high school, she'd have to go to graduate school.

CONVINCING HER PARENTS TO SUPPORT HER DREAM

After getting her bachelor's degree in cognitive sciences, Magda's parents were set on sending her to medical school. But by now, she knew more and more that what she loved most were her art classes, so she made a deal with her parents and told them that she would go to graduate school for art but that she would make sure she could turn it into a lucrative and rewarding career. "When I chose to go to grad school for visual communications, that's when I formally told my parents, 'I'm quitting your dream of me going to medical school and doing my dream.' I was very proactive about that because I think they were terrified." With her

parents' blessing, Magda continued her studies as a graduate student at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, getting her Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design.

At graduate school, Magda started right away to keep her promise to her parents. She didn't wait to finish school to start working on design jobs. Her first was to make an invitation for a big, public open studio event at her graduate school. Hired by the graduate department office of communication, Magda's initial task was to simply create a Facebook image and postcard. She wasn't confident in her visual communication skills, but an artist friend guided her with his design experience,



MAGDA PRE-EMPTIVELY SEARCHES FOR PROBLEMS ON THE WEBSITE AND IN OTHER TECHNOLOGIES

In order to make sure a user's experience goes well, Magda and her team map out a user's ideal journey on the website or in other experiences, like in a store, and rework each step to see if there is something that could go wrong. If there is, she and her team fix the problems before launch.

and together, he as the artist and she as the designer, the two of them created a design that took off. What was initially just a Facebook image and postcard became wall-sized posters and elevator signage. Then they hired her again to create a directory of student information, and after that, some coding for an HTML newsletter. She would get each of these jobs because each time she went to the office to turn in a file, she would just ask, "Oh, what's going on? I think I can help you." From there on out, the jobs got bigger. Magda was hit with a realization: as a designer, she wasn't just creating art for art's sake: she was helping communicate and amplify messages.

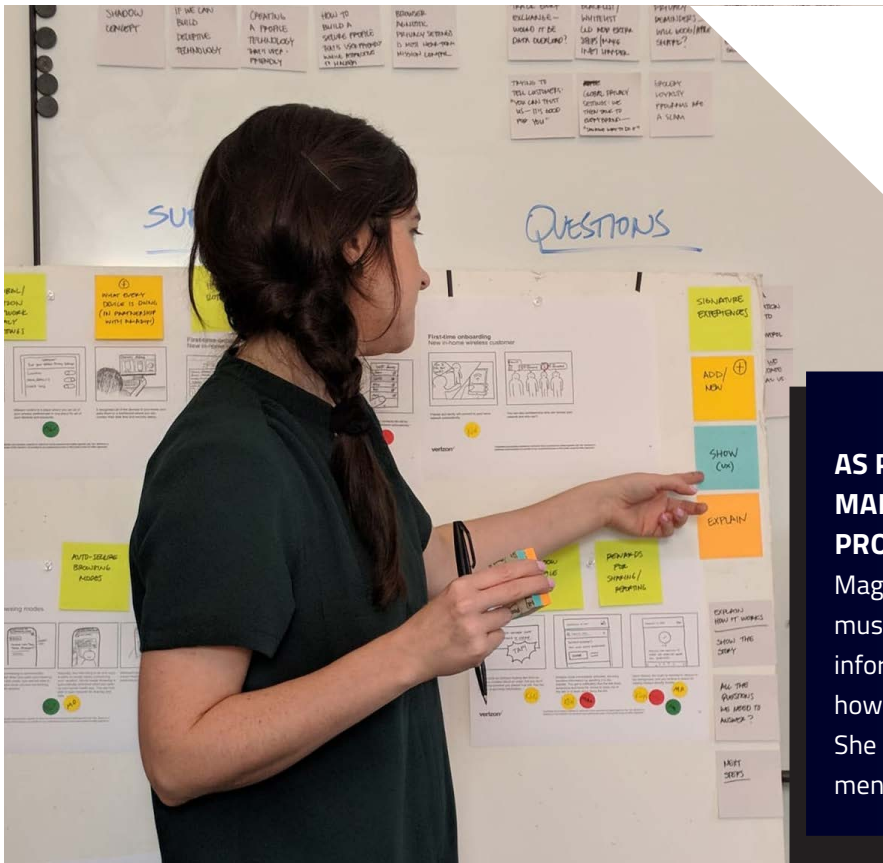
MAKING A DESIGNER

One of the more formative experiences for Magda was her time spent at an independent design studio in Chicago, called Thirst. The owner of Thirst had given a lecture at the school, and Magda found it interesting, so she reached out to a professor, who recommended her to the company. Magda worked at Thirst for a few years while in graduate school as an intern and after graduate school as a graphic designer.

Magda's experience at Thirst was difficult, demanding, and rewarding. Each of the five people who worked at the small studio were decorated with awards and medals. "The bar was so

high, and I had so little experience. I was the first to show up, last to leave, and I still didn't get it right, but they knew I was trying," Magda learned to work quickly and creatively under immense pressure. She learned that sitting around and waiting for inspiration wasn't going to work; she just had to create—and fast. "I remember my boss [principal designer Rick Valisanti] had this piece of paper on the fridge that said 'make good decisions fast', and he was like, 'That's it! That's all I need you to do.'" As a mentor, Valisanti taught Magda that wherever she went, she should look for a mentor who would advocate for her.

After a while, Magda started feeling like she wasn't applying the full range of her skills just doing graphic design. Her background in cognitive science helped her understand how our minds work in relation to design, and how design could make things easier to understand things.



AS PRINCIPAL DESIGNER, MAGDA MANAGES DESIGNERS AND PROJECTS
 Magda determines who the designers must meet with, what kind of information they need to gather, and how they can accomplish their goals. She guides designers and offers them mentorship as well.

It wasn't enough to know that red text on black background is hard to read—she wanted to explain why that is, using research and data to find a solution. She wanted to organize large-scale user studies, but she knew that Thirst was too small of a studio to provide those opportunities to her.

Magda packaged her graphic design and behavioral research skills into user experience (UX) design consulting—a way to look at design using research to make it more useful and desirable. By putting her previous education in research together with her design education and experience, she was able to find a job as a design consultant at the IA Collaborative in Chicago.

A year later, she moved to Philadelphia to be with her partner, who was attending graduate school. A year after that, she moved to New York to work at Moment, a firm that valued curious designers. Unfortunately, Moment had a policy of hiring people at the entry level as a design consultant. So even though Magda had more experience than an entry-level designer, she accepted the

position because she was excited about the company. “It was a place that seemed to value things like Bauhaus. It was a place where I could be challenged, satisfied, and intellectually motivated.”

However, ten months into the job, there were talks of Verizon acquiring Moment, and Magda worried her level of experience would be lost in translation at Verizon. She talked to her manager and called to attention her years of experience, advocating for herself. It worked because on the day of the acquisition, Moment promoted Magda to Senior Design Consultant to accurately reflect her skill set and secure her path to advancement.

At Verizon, Magda became Lead Experience Designer, where she impressed her director right out the gate. Magda was immediately thrown into an intense project with a big client and then another. Magda recalls her director being impressed. “I remember my director saying, ‘Wow, this is the first time I’ve been on a project where I didn’t participate in research’ — that was because my colleague and I did all of it.” She made sure to show she was capable and contributing. “Even though my role was to do X, I always ask my colleagues if I could help with Y.” A year and a half later, she was promoted to Principal Experience Designer.

WHAT IS DESIGN THINKING?

Design thinking is a process that involves problem-solving through design. Often, design thinking is focused around being ‘human-centered’, meaning it is focused on making sure it addresses core human needs and issues. It also includes researching, prototyping, and user testing to make sure designs actually meets users’ needs.

According to the Interaction Design Foundation, the five steps of design thinking are:

1. Empathize—Research Your Users’ Needs.
2. Define—State Your Users’ Needs and Problems.
3. Ideate—Challenge Assumptions and Create Ideas.
4. Prototype—Start to Create Solutions.
5. Test—Try Your Solutions Out.

For more information about design thinking, visit: www.interaction-design.org

Bauhaus

(rhymes with “cow house”)

a German art school operational from 1919 to 1933 that combined crafts and the fine arts. The school became famous for its approach to design, which attempted to unify the principles of mass production with individual artistic vision and strove to combine aesthetics with everyday function.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Editor's note: This interview took place in July 2020 during the CoVid-19 pandemic when all non-essential workers were ordered to stay at home.

Since most of Magda's work can be done with a computer, she is able to work from home during this time and keep a mostly consistent 9-hour work day. Before CoVid-19, Magda commuted to work, worked with plenty of people, and would sometimes stay late.

"It's nice that I have the ability to bounce between projects. I'm always learning about new software components or things."

As a principal experience designer, Magda oversees projects and the designers who work on them, often giving them a bit of mentorship. Magda's day can vary greatly depending on the project, but it usually starts with a team standup—a short, standing meeting where each member of her team discusses what they're doing for the day.

On Mondays, the team sets goals, and every other day they talk about what they're doing to meet those goals. Some days, Magda and her team give design presentations for overseas development teams, so her day could start as early as 7 a.m.

Once a month, developers push code for updates, tweaks, and modifications, so

Magda's calendar is structured around these events. In the two to three months leading up to the event, it's up to Magda and her team to test to make sure it is user-friendly, error-free, and meets the requirements of the different teams.

First, Magda and her team brainstorm about what they want to do and design it, often by placing sticky notes on a wall to organize their thoughts. They create the ideal journey for a user first and then rework each layer to consider what

could go wrong. While they do this, the team has to juggle a few considerations: what the company's business-side requirements are, how users would or could respond, and whether or not it will work with technology.

In her role, Magda determines what meetings need to happen, who the team needs to talk to, what they must learn, and how they accomplish it. For example, the business team would inform Magda of the targets they want to hit; the technology team would send her the requirements for platform constraints; and the research team would send requirements from the user base. During these meetings with different teams, Magda presents possible scenarios that could come up and pitches them

possible solutions. "You try to address what's probably going to happen but also the things that might not but could happen."

These projects are usually grouped into one of three types: creation, evolution, or vision. A creation project is something the team needs to build from scratch because it does not yet exist. For example, building a piece of functionality into a program or service that already exists. An evolution project is refreshing, updating, or evolving something that already exists. And in a vision project the team sets a long-term goal for what they want to do to, essentially, ask the company for a budget for said project.

Usually, Magda's not working on all three types of projects at the same time, but it can happen. Projects typically last anywhere between three weeks to a year. Magda enjoys the variety. "It's nice that I have the ability to bounce between projects. I'm always learning about new software components or things."

functionality

the range of operations that can be run on a computer or other electronic system

If you ask her, Magda's favorite part of the job is user-testing to make sure things work. "You're designing for thousands of people, so if you design something that doesn't work, the design flaw impacts thousands of people."

FUTURE PLANS

In the past five years, the design world has changed a huge amount. Technology that didn't exist now demands designers to create for their platforms—for example, iWatches weren't around a few years ago, but designers had to keep learning new technologies to keep up with the changing landscape. The field of UX design was barely around when Magda graduated from Rice. "I remember asking profs about design, and they were like 'no, it's just decoration,'" Now, UX design is

everywhere, and there's a high demand for people in the field.

As for Magda's next step, she isn't sure yet. If she stays at Verizon, the next step would be a design director/executive. If she were to advance within the company, she wouldn't be doing the daily activities of a UX designer as much because she would be managing a competent team and trust they were doing it well. "When I first started as a designer, I saw one graphic at a time, then one project at a time. Now, I'm managing projects and

managing people who manage projects. Getting more experience under my belt and tackling multiple things in parallel."

Whatever it is she does in the future, she wants to make sure she stays in touch with others in the design industry and broaden her understanding of the field. Fortunately, Verizon has a budget for continued education, so Magda is figuring out what kind of data science and design classes to take. For someone who loves school, that's a huge plus.

DATA FILE

UX DESIGNER DOT: 141.061-018 O*NET: 15-1255.00 HC: AES COMPUTERS AND TECH

WORK DESCRIPTION

Design digital user interfaces or websites, apps, and video games. Develop and test layouts, interfaces, functionality, and navigation menus to ensure compatibility and usability across browsers or devices. May evaluate web design following web and accessibility standards, and may analyze web use metrics and optimize websites for marketability and search engine ranking. May design and test interfaces that facilitate the human-computer interaction and maximize the usability of digital devices, websites, and software with a focus on aesthetics and design. May create graphics used in websites and manage website content and links. Interview users and analyze results.

WORKING CONDITIONS

In office. Some work may be sedentary with many hours spent working at a computer. Risk of eyestrain and carpal tunnel syndrome. Working from home, or remotely, are possibilities.

PLACES OF EMPLOYMENT

Corporations; video game and media companies; Website, app, or technology based startups; government agencies; colleges and universities;

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Associate's or bachelor's degree in a range of areas can be useful, from arts or graphic design, psychology, sociology, data science, or even computer science. A portfolio is usually required to indicate your training and skill level. Continual training to update skills as technology advances is required.

JOB OUTLOOK

Above Average. Most new technology, websites, apps, and video games require a UX Designer. Projected 8% growth through 2029.

SALARY RANGE

\$34.88 hourly, \$72,560 per year, depending on experience, education, employer, and location.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Develop critical thinking when you use websites, apps, and technology. Is there something that frustrates you, like where a button is placed, or how you can't find the information or function you want? How would you make it better?

Practice building your own websites, thinking about how you would organize the information in a navigation menu. Or would

you allow users to interact with the website in different in unique ways?

You can start working on a portfolio and become an expert on Adobe software like illustrator, XD, or others. But even if you aren't there yet, UX design can be done with a paper and pencil to draw out your plans for an app, website, or other technology interface.

You can focus more on the art, the computer science, or the psychology and research side of things, but skills in all those areas will be helpful.

LIFESTYLE/HOURS

UX designers usually work regular business hours, although some companies allow flexible schedules and working from home options for tech-related careers.

MORE INFO

The subject of this biography is not available to answer personal inquiries.

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