



— CONFERENCE RECAP 17 SEPTEMBER 2026

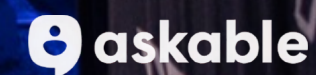
THE INFLECTION POINT

DDX'26 San Diego

UC San Diego Park & Market

Design & Product Leaders Exchange on the Future of Digital Innovation

WITH



— IN BRIEF

ONE DAY, THREE STAGES, ONE QUESTION

If AI can produce “good enough” design on demand, what is the job of a design and product leader now?

Twenty-five leaders from Adobe, Google, IDEO, Webflow, Otter.ai, Target, Netflix, Careem, TaylorMade, Marvin, Dscout and the Obama White House took the question to a room that came to argue back. Don Norman opened the day; three enterprise design leaders closed it by comparing the expectations of the role with its reality in 2026.

25 SPEAKERS ON STAGE	3 STAGES IN PARALLEL
3 · 6 PANELS · WORKSHOPS	9 TABLE TALKS
300+ LEADERS REGISTERED	3,000+ DDX ALUMNI WORLDWIDE

— WHAT THE ROOM AGREED ON

THE FLOOR ROSE. THE CEILING DIDN'T MOVE.

Good is free
now. **Great**
is the job.

Taste, judgment and a durable
point of view are what AI cannot
generate.

Research stops
being a project
and becomes
a pulse.

When teams ship weekly,
episodic studies arrive after the
decision.

Design leaves
the screen:
decisions,
systems,
organisations.

Value is measured by influence
on what gets built, not by
deliverables.

The human
stays
irrational, **and**
irreplaceable.

AI can read the deck. It cannot
read the room.

Context is the
asset. **The**
experience is
the business.

Tools change weekly; structured
knowledge compounds.

Good is free now. Great is the job.

Richard Ward called the “death of design” narrative backwards: when everyone can clear the bar for good, the differentiator is knowing what great looks like. Kevin Wong went further: AI has not changed design, it has exposed how little depth most organisations were designing with. At the tables, Jaleesa Chagan framed the edge as a shift “from capability to conviction”.

 Richard Ward, Otter.ai

 Kevin Wong, Webflow

 Jaleesa Chagan, GAIN



2026 EVIDENCE

91%

of designers use AI for design tasks every week, up from 54% a year earlier.

Designer Fund, AI in Design 2026, May 2026

AND YET

49%

of US consumers say generative AI has made content quality worse.

Gartner, June 2026

Research stops being a project **and becomes a pulse.**

Prayag Narula made the case for always-on research. Harriet Swan and Katie Niles showed it in practice with TaylorMade’s AI caddie, CHIP: exploratory research to decide what it should say and do, A/B tests to find what moved engagement, and evaluative research to catch what the tests could not, inconclusive results included. Bhavik Gandecha’s table put it in one line: AI moves fast, research still has to lead.

 Prayag Narula, Marvin

 Harriet Swan, GAIN

 Katie Niles, TaylorMade

 Bhavik Gandecha, Dscout



2026 EVIDENCE

8 → 22%

of organisations call research “essential to all levels of business strategy”, nearly tripling in a year.

Maze, Future of User Research 2026, March 2026

THE GAP TO CLOSE

37%

say AI has contributed to enterprise EBIT, unchanged, while 80% say it improved their own productivity.

McKinsey, State of AI 2026, August 2026

Design leaves the screen: **decisions, systems, organisations.**

Chris Gielow asked designers to stop designing screens and start designing decisions, and to measure their value by influence on what gets built. Twisha Shah-Brandenburg took it a level up: AI transformation succeeds or fails on fragmented systems, invisible labour and unclear ownership, so the brief is now the organisation itself. The closing panel compared the expectations placed on enterprise design leaders with the reality of the role.



Chris Gielow, UX Speakeasy



Twisha Shah-Brandenburg, Target



Diana Tobey, IDEO



2026 EVIDENCE

21 →
41%

of designers now do development work; developers doing design rose from 44% to 60%.

Figma, 2026 AI Report, June 2026

AT THE TOP

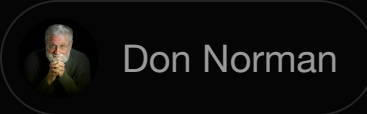
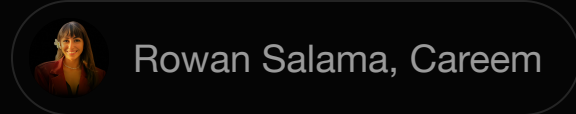
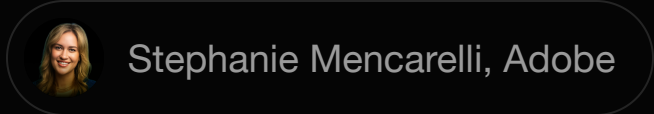
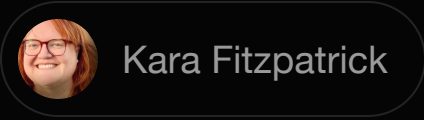
72%

of CEOs say they are now the main AI decision-maker, double the prior year.

BCG, AI Radar 2026, January 2026

The human stays irrational, and irreplaceable.

Don Norman opened on the state of humanity-centred innovation. Rowan Salama reminded the room that the rational user most products are designed for does not exist, and that AI’s best use is understanding the “beautifully irrational” ways people decide. Stephanie Mencarelli argued that as machines generate more, human originality becomes the scarce resource, which is why joy, not productivity, was her metric. Kara Fitzpatrick: AI can read the deck, it cannot read the room.

-  Don Norman
-  Rowan Salama, Careem
-  Stephanie Mencarelli, Adobe
-  Kara Fitzpatrick



2026 EVIDENCE

82%

of research practitioners say interpreting nuance and emotion remains a job for humans.

Maze, March 2026

THE TRUST PROBLEM

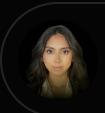
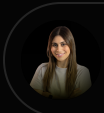
50%

of US consumers prefer brands that do not use generative AI in customer-facing content.

Gartner, March 2026

Context is the asset. The experience is the business.

Diana Wolosin’s “context engineers” argued that models change weekly while well-structured knowledge compounds; AJ Azzi’s MCP roundtable showed the same from the tool side. Scott Robinson asked who we design for when an agent is the one browsing and buying. The Experience Economy panel drew the conclusion: digital experiences are no longer a layer on the business, they are the business.

-  Diana Wolosin, Netflix
-  AJ Azzi, Askable
-  Scott Robinson, FreshForm
-  Ann Kostopanagiotou, Mondo Robot



2026 EVIDENCE

20 →
77%

AI agents’ success rate on real-world tasks, up from 20% in 2025.
Stanford HAI, 2026 AI Index, April 2026

THE EXPERIENCE GAP

43%

of customers are willing to interact with a brand’s AI agent; 78% of organisations expect agents to handle half of support within 18 months.
Adobe, 2026 Digital Trends, February 2026

— IN THEIR WORDS

“The next era of innovation will not belong to the companies that automate the fastest, but to those that intentionally design systems in which humans and intelligent technology can learn, adapt, and make better decisions together.”

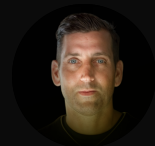


Twisha Shah-Brandenburg

Principal, Target
Workshop “From Optimizing Interfaces to Designing Organizations”

— IN THEIR WORDS SPEAKERS ON THE FUTURE OF INNOVATION

“Democratized tools didn't lower the bar for great design. They raised it, because now everyone can clear the bar for good.”



Richard Ward

Chief Design Officer, Otter.ai

“As AI becomes more capable and generates more machine output, human originality becomes a scarce resource. We need to protect and foster the conditions where humans can continue to create original ideas.”



Stephanie Mencarelli

Vice President of Design, Adobe

“While AI can read a deck, a doc, a website, your emails... it can't read the room. AI is a tool, just like the internet was a tool. It may augment us, but it can never replace us.”



Kara Fitzpatrick

Director of Design & Product, Obama White House

“Research must shift from slow, episodic projects to an always-on practice that stays one step ahead, helping teams see around corners, make better decisions, and know where to invest next.”

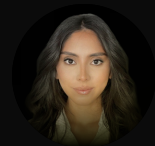


Prayag Narula

Co-founder and CEO, Marvin

— IN THEIR WORDS SPEAKERS ON THE FUTURE OF INNOVATION

“The winners of this era will be those who invest in curating and structuring their context and their knowledge, because tools change every week, but context never gets old.”



Diana Wolosin

Sr. AI Systems Architect, Ads · Netflix

“We can use AI and emerging technology not to remove the human from the process, but to understand human behavior better and design for the beautifully irrational ways people actually think, behave, and make decisions.”



Rowan Salama

Lead Product Researcher, Careem (Uber)

“The real competitive edge shifts from capability to conviction. Having a clear point of view, and the trust it builds, becomes the actual differentiator.”



Jaleesa Chagan

Senior UX Researcher, GAIN

“Digital experiences are no longer a layer on top of the business — they are the business.”



Ann Kostopanagiotou

Managing Director, Mondo Robot

— IN THEIR WORDS SPEAKERS ON THE FUTURE OF INNOVATION

“The future of design belongs to those who move beyond creating interfaces and toward shaping decisions.”



Chris Gielow

President, UX Speakeasy

“We are starting to think about designing webpages not just for users, but for LLMs.”



Harriet Swan

Director of UX Research, GAIN

“Embracing the AI transformation is incredibly exciting because the book on how we design for it isn’t finished yet — we’re the ones actively writing the chapters.”



Brandon Burlington

Staff UX Designer, Google

“Good design has always been about staying close to real people. The future of innovation is about embracing speed without losing that.”



Lauren Hughes

Lead Product Designer, Dscout

— THE DAY THURSDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2026

GUGGENHEIM THEATRE

10:00	Welcome Tad Parzen (BCCA), Sebastian Gier, Scott Robinson
10:15	The State of Humanity-Centric Innovation Don Norman · fireside chat & Q&A
10:45	Industry insights from the global DDX series Sebastian Gier
11:30	F*** Productivity: Make Space for Creative Joy Stephanie Mencarelli, Adobe
12:15	Drive, Play, Eat: designers shaping our culture Panel · Scott Robinson, Elizabeth Yeongmin, Diana Tobey, Kara Fitzpatrick
14:00	Design Isn’t Dead, It’s Just Getting Harder to Be Great Richard Ward, Otter.ai
14:30	Design Didn’t Change – AI Just Exposed What Was Missing Kevin Wong, Webflow
15:30	Closing the Design-to-Dev Gap Scott Robinson, Alexander Danilowicz
16:00	The Rise of the Experience Economy Panel · Ann Kostopanagiotou, Twisha Shah-Brandenburg, Diana Wolosin, Dave Rowley
17:00	Expectations and realities of being an enterprise design leader today Panel · Lauren Hughes, Stephanie Mencarelli, Kevin Wong

FORUM SPACE

11:30	The User You Designed For Doesn’t Exist Rowan Salama, Careem (Uber)
12:15	Always-On Customer Research for the AI Era Prayag Narula, Marvin
14:00	From AI Experimentation to Agentic Transformation Brandon Burlington, Google
14:30	Ship an AI feature that actually works for your users Harriet Swan (GAIN), Katie Niles (TaylorMade)
15:30	Stop Designing Screens. Start Designing Decisions. Chris Gielow · workshop

EXECUTIVE SPACE

11:30	Service Design / Service Jam Brian LeDuc, Grace Rieger LeDuc · workshop
15:30	Playful Career Experiments for Thriving in the AI Era Diana Tobey, IDEO · workshop
17:00	From Optimizing Interfaces to Designing Organizations Twisha Shah-Brandenburg, Target · workshop
18:00	Happy Hour Hosted by Marvin & Dscout · Lobby

TABLE TALKS IN THE BREAKS

Your Customer Is Not Human Scott Robinson, FreshForm · 11:00
The Rise of Context Engineers Diana Wolosin, Netflix · 11:00
AI: Enhancing Experiences or Adding Complexity? Brianna Koch, SDXD · 11:00
Are Relationships Part of the Work? Alex Diener, Dexcom · 15:00
AI Interviews: Hype or Here to Stay? Prayag Narula, Marvin · 15:00
Shipping AI features that work for users and business Jaleesa Chagan, GAIN · 15:00
Play Your Hand: an MCP Roundtable AJ Azzi, Askable · 16:30
Human-Centered Design in the Age of AI Jordi Morillo, Insulet · 16:30
AI Moves Fast. Research Still Has to Lead. Bhavik Gandecha, Dscout · 16:30



— THE ROOM PHOTOS BY DESMOND CHUA AND NICOLE GOSÉ



Drive, Play, Eat panel



Park & Market atrium



Rowan Salama



Table talks in the breaks



Don Norman signing



Happy hour by Marvin & Dscout

— MADE POSSIBLE BY

- FreshForm
- BCCA
- Don Norman Design Award
- Marvin
- Dscout
- GAIN Conversion
- Askable
- Mondo Robot
- J.S. Held
- Edenspiekermann
- Appsfactory
- San Diego Design Week
- Friends of Figma San Diego
- SDXD
- UX Speakeasy

— THE SERIES CONTINUES

SAME EXCHANGE, NEXT CITY

MIAMI 25 September 2026	LONDON Late 2026	TOKYO 12 February 2027	DUBAI Early 2027	SAN DIEGO '27 Early-bird tickets: luma.com/ddx-sd27
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— SOURCES ALL EXTERNAL FIGURES PUBLISHED IN 2026

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DDX, programme and roles as published at ddxconference.com/sd-agenda; speaker statements from their DDX submissions.