

# Which Path Is for Me?

## The Emerging Role of VP of UX

By Chelsey Glasson and Ian Swinson

**Salesforce.com** has a long history of creating usable and useful products for our customers. To continue to expand the breadth and depth of our offerings, we realized we needed a strategic leader to manage innovations across our UX team and the company. We began to outline the responsibilities for this role, and looked at VP of UX roles across a variety of industries for inspiration. We interviewed twelve VPs to better understand best practices for UX leadership.

### Top 5 Career Insights

#### 1. The path to VP of UX is often more organic than premeditated.

One question that is inevitably asked during job interviews is, “What are your career goals for the next five to ten years?” Performance reviews, teachers, and even inquiries from family and friends tend to encourage one to establish a long-term career plan. Despite this encouragement (and sometimes, frankly, pressure), none of the VPs we spoke with stated that they consciously told themselves early and mid-career that their ultimate goal was to become a UX leader (for example, UX manager, director, or VP). This was very much contrary to what we were expecting.

*“I don’t know that it was a conscious decision to pursue the management path. I realized what I like doing is making decisions. When you are an individual contributor you*

*get too busy with the details of projects, and I wanted more impact overall. I also wanted to create an environment where designers and researchers who work differently than the rest of the company can thrive.”*

—**Kaaren Hanson,**  
**Design Innovation VP, Intuit**

*“When I was starting in my career, I wasn’t aiming to be a manager. At the time, I had never even thought about laying out career goals. I just kind of started doing more of the management tasks for the team because I was good at them, and it went from there.”*

—**Matthew Holloway,**  
**User Experience Design VP,**  
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Instead of having a predefined and targeted career path, the people we spoke to

reported that becoming a VP of UX was an organic process of growth. After making the switch to management, the transition to VP was a non-event because the role came so naturally for them—they were already doing it. Most had been acting as a UX executive in some capacity for quite some time prior to being officially hired into the VP role.

Becoming a VP through osmosis could be partially explained by the fact that during their rise to the executive level, there were no UX VPs in existence. We think, however, that there is more to this story. Our interviewees were unusually patient and exploratory in their career development, which gave them the unique multi-disciplinary perspective, insights, and skillset required to be a successful UX VP.

#### 2. Taking time to explore and grow before committing to the UX leadership path is essential.

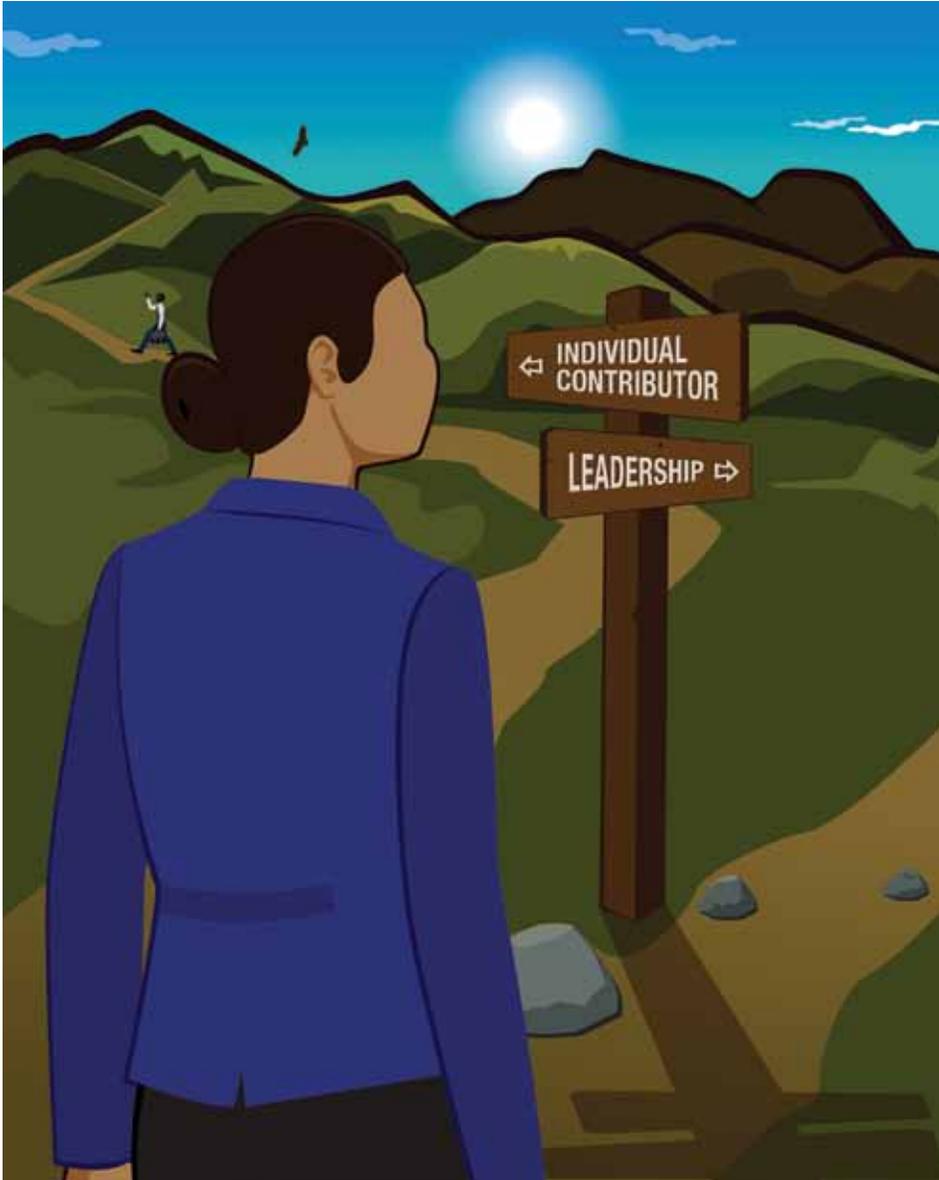
Almost everyone we spoke with explicitly stated that the UX VP role should not be the de facto goal when thinking about your career path, and that UX professionals tend to commit themselves to the management/executive path prematurely and for the wrong reasons. According to several interviewees, recent college graduates who are ambitious to enter the industry and make their mark quickly are especially guilty of making premature leadership commitments. In fact, one VP shared a story of two recent graduates being fired for being too aggressive in trying to influence the types of decisions that are made at the executive level!

*“I think you have to try and figure out what you like. A lot of people out of school think they have to be managers because they assume that’s the only option to get ahead. But you have to have credibility before being a*

## Who Did We Interview and How?

The twelve UX VPs we spoke with are based in Seattle (2), Boston (1), and the Bay Area (9). The size of the companies they work for range from 140 employees to more than 2.5 million, and the markets they represent include software, consumer electronics, financial services, publishing, and data management. We purposely excluded UX VPs who work for consulting agencies due to the substantial differences in how corporations and agencies operate.

The range of time our interviewees have worked as UX VPs varies from as little as two months to nineteen years, but most have more than five years experience. We knew a few of the VPs prior to interviewing them (through industry events), and recruited the rest via LinkedIn or professional connections. Some of the interviews were conducted remotely using Skype, but most were conducted in person.



manager. People should spend time becoming an expert in a particular area first.”

—Catherine Courage,  
User Experience VP, Citrix

Most of our interviewees proved themselves as potential UX leaders by becoming an expert in a domain and then slowly experimenting with projects, responsibilities, and subjects outside of their immediate comfort zone. In fact, it seemed that those who experienced the least amount of growing pains when first promoted into a management role were the ones who had taken the most time to explore when they were individual contributors. Interestingly, many of our interviewees had several years of experience in professional roles outside of UX.

“Go deep and become a master of your craft, and then start running the customer experience elements of projects. In other words, manage entire teams of customer experience professionals of all specialties at the project level. And then keep working your way up. Always have a broad perspective of other roles, too, like product management and technical roles. And then step up for any management opportunity that comes your way across the enterprise.”

—Mark McCormick,  
Customer Experience SVP,  
Wells Fargo

According to one UX VP, setting career goals prematurely can be more *harmful* than beneficial. This is because doing so encourages a narrow viewpoint that prohibits the development of the broad lens and multifunctional perspective that

UX leaders—who work with diverse professionals and competing organizational requirements—need. She also shared with us that premature career goals can result in motivations that are not in alignment with organizational goals:

*“I have found that setting title-based career goals for myself can be problematic. I begin to focus on attaining the title rather than doing what’s right, and find myself acting insincerely. (For example, trying to attend a specific meeting because it’s the sort of meeting that ‘Directors’ attend.) But if I don’t have a plan, I naturally start to fill in the gap where the gaps need to be filled.”*

—Rochelle King,  
UX and Product Services VP,  
Netflix

### 3. Being an individual contributor and UX leader are similar, but different.

Our interviewees reported that yes, there are similarities between being a UX individual contributor and a UX leader, such as requirement gathering, research, storytelling, listening, and general design thinking skills.

The *biggest* difference between the two roles that emerged was that in order to be an effective UX leader, one has to be comfortable being hands-off with certain elements of projects. (Sounds easy, right? Wrong, according to our interviewees). You have to be able to let go of the spotlight and project details. You have to be selfless. It’s not about the power or recognition—it’s about your impact in elevating your staff so that they can manage project details successfully. You’re also the ultimate person responsible when things go wrong, so every once in a while, it is also about being able to graciously take the fall.

*“Being a designer, you want to design everything. A big realization for me after going into management was that I couldn’t just concentrate on designing products, but on the program that would enable great products to be designed. My focus is now on designing teams and processes, as well as product strategies.”*

—Matthew Holloway,  
User Experience Design VP,  
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Yet another difference that emerged when comparing the UX leadership and individual contributor roles is that, in order to be a successful UX leader, you have to be a strong translator of information across and between the

various levels of an organization. You have to be able to digest business requirements and high-level strategic initiatives, and deliver them in a language that makes sense and motivates a UX team. You also have to be skilled at advocating on behalf of research and design initiatives to stakeholders with little or no domain expertise. This requires business insight well above what is required of individual contributors.

*“When you become a VP, you become a translator. That’s a great word to describe what I do: a translator of business problems into design opportunities. I am more exposed to executives and able to translate business problems as design opportunities in a way that is compelling and inspiring to the cross-functional team.”*

—Sara Orloff Khoury,  
User Experience VP, Walmart  
Global eCommerce

*“UX management requires a set of aptitudes across three dimensions: an aptitude for process—how things come together; an aptitude and passion for developing people rather than projects; and an aptitude for business that enables you to explain the value proposition of customer experience and user centered design, as well as understand business problems and business levers.”*

—Mark McCormick,  
SVP Customer Experience,  
Wells Fargo

These and other differences are important to keep in mind when evaluating your career path because...

#### 4. Being a good designer or researcher at the individual contributor level doesn’t guarantee you will be a good UX leader (or that you would enjoy a leadership role).

When a company is looking for management talent, the easiest process is to promote from within the organization. This usually means promoting the top performer in an individual contributor role.

*“Usually those who get promoted into management are those who are doing a really great job as individual contributors. They were working on the coolest and biggest projects. But when you get promoted to manager, you no longer get to work on the coolest and biggest projects. You get to pick up the pieces.”*

—Rochelle King,  
UX and Product Services VP,  
Netflix

Unfortunately, as the UX VPs we spoke with reported, just because you’re a good individual contributor does not mean you will make a great leader, or enjoy the role change associated with being a manager or executive. This is why it is so important to explore and volunteer for leadership assignments prior to committing yourself to the leadership route.

Remember, once you commit yourself to the leadership path, it could be difficult to go back to an individual contributor role. (Have you ever heard of someone having a hard time getting a job because they are over-qualified? Or, perhaps they can’t get a job because they are under-qualified because their hard skills have atrophied after being a manager or above?)

#### 5. The advice and feedback of a good manager or mentor should be carefully considered in defining your career.

A priority question we planned to address with this research project was, “How do you ultimately know if you have what it takes to be a successful VP of UX?” The overwhelming answer was, “Ask others.” In most of the career development stories shared during our interviews, the path to becoming a manager and executive was more of a pull than push; their superiors knew they were management material before they did.

*“I wasn’t aiming for the transition at Apple. When I first joined the group, I was going to be there only for a quarter because I was finishing my Masters and thinking about a Ph.D. As I was finishing up at Apple, my advisor said, ‘No, you’re not going to get a Ph.D.; you build products and Apple is the perfect place for you.’”*

—Matthew Holloway,  
User Experience Design VP,  
Shutterfly

#### But What Does This All Mean for My UX Career?

Here are the three takeaways we hope you have gleaned from our five insights:

- Become an expert in a particular domain, and then give yourself ample time to explore prior to jumping onto the UX leadership path. Also, listen to, and learn from, your coworkers outside of UX. Remember, a key ingredient to being successful as a UX leader is having a multi-disciplinary perspective.
- Think you want to be a UX manager or executive? Try the role on before making a commitment. Start with small management projects and gradually move into more

responsibility. Don’t forget that there are *more* career opportunities for individual contributors than UX leaders—don’t make the mistake of thinking that the leadership route path is the only option.

- As you are experimenting with management or executive tasks, repeatedly ask yourself, “Is this for me? Is this motivating and fulfilling?” And, seek the feedback of a mentor or manager to help answer these questions. The management and executive paths are not for everyone!

#### Want to Learn More About the UX Leadership Path?

Arnie Lund recently published a fantastic book entitled *User Experience Management* that offers practical advice for those new and established in UX leadership roles (see UX 11.2 for a review of the book). Catherine Courage also wrote an insightful article titled *From 0 to 365: My First Year as a Design Executive*, in which she shares her experiences at Citrix. The article was published in Volume 6, Issue 1 of the *Journal of Usability Studies*. Finally, check out a video of Ian Swinson’s presentation at MX Conference 2012, including additional insights from our VP of UX research project: <http://mxconference.com/2012/>.

#### We’ve Only Just Begun

In conducting research for this project, we discovered there is very little published information available to help UX professionals make smart and informed career decisions. More exploration of the topic needs to occur so that the responsibilities and experience of UX professionals at various points in their careers are more transparent. That’s why one of the authors, Chelsey Glasson, has taken on a challenge of guest editing a UX issue devoted to the theme of UX careers. The issue will be published in the first quarter of 2013. **UX**

#### About the Authors



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