



**Hiring for UX Without a
Design System Background?
Rookie Mistake.**

“They had a strong portfolio.”

“We liked their visual work.”

“They don’t have design system experience—but we can teach that, right?”

Sure. You can teach it.

But if your product is built on a system—and nearly every modern product is—hiring a designer without system fluency is like hiring a developer who’s never touched version control.

This is the rookie mistake too many teams make when scaling design: hiring for aesthetics without evaluating systems thinking.

Let’s talk about why design system experience matters more than you think, what it actually signals about a candidate’s capability, and how to stop sabotaging your product with hires who look great on paper but crumble inside constraints.

Simon Carson

www.carsonharris.co.uk

+44 07498 396 710



What a Design System Actually Represents

Let's be clear: a design system isn't just a Figma file with buttons and colors.

It's a shared language—between designers, engineers, and product teams.

It's:

- A visual ruleset for consistency
- A code-backed implementation system (via component libraries)
- A UX governance structure for decisions, contributions, and evolution

When a designer understands systems, they can:

- Move faster
- Collaborate more effectively with engineering
- Scale their decisions beyond a single screen

When they don't?

They go rogue. They reinvent. They fragment your UI and burn cycles fighting the grid.

Why Lack of Design System Experience Is a Hiring Red Flag

✗ They've Only Designed In Isolation

Designers who've never worked inside a design system often:

a design system
isn't just a Figma
file with buttons
and colors.

-
- Treat every screen as a blank canvas
 - Overuse custom styling
 - Ignore accessibility and responsiveness
 - Hand off files that devs can't implement efficiently

✗ They've Never Dealt With Constraints

Working within a design system requires:

- Navigating legacy decisions
- Making trade-offs between ideal UX and real-world code
- Prioritizing scalability over novelty

This is real product design—not portfolio fantasy.

✗ They Can't Think in Patterns

Modern UX isn't about inventing new layouts. It's about:

- Reusing
- Extending
- Modular thinking

A designer who doesn't think in patterns creates design debt, not product clarity.

What Design System Fluency Actually Signals

When a candidate has real design system experience, they're not just "pixel sharp." They're:

✓ Systems Thinkers

They ask:

- "What's the component for this?"
- "Is there a token for this spacing?"
- "Can this pattern scale across our use cases?"

They understand how to operate within structure—and how to evolve it when needed.

✓ Partner-Oriented

Design systems are cross-functional by nature. Designers who've worked with them know how to:

- Collaborate with engineers

- Raise PRs to a component library
- Respect the implementation reality
- They don't just "throw it over the wall."

✓ **Focused on Velocity, Not Novelty**

They prioritize:

- Consistency
- Reuse
- Speed

And they know that "done with the system" often beats "perfect but custom."

Hiring Without System Experience—Common Pitfalls

Here's what happens when you skip this signal:

1. You Hire a Stylist, Not a Product Designer

They create beautiful mockups. But when asked to reuse existing components or follow grid rules—they resist.

2. Handoff Friction Goes Through the Roof

Dev teams spend hours reinterpreting designs. Engineers patch inconsistencies, or worse—ignore specs entirely.

3. You Accumulate UX Debt Faster Than You Can Ship

Inconsistent padding. Inaccessible color contrast. Custom modals everywhere. Over time, your UI starts to rot.

How to Interview for Design System Experience

Don't just ask "Have you used a design system?"

Everyone says yes.

Ask them:

- "What's a component you extended or contributed to?"
- "How did you handle a UX need that didn't fit the system?"
- "Have you worked with engineers to evolve the system?"
- "When did you choose not to follow a design system—and why?"



You're looking for:

- Real-world trade-offs
- Cross-functional communication
- Comfort with constraint

Yes, You Can Still Hire for Potential—If You Know How

Not every great designer has design system experience. But if you're hiring someone without it, you'd better validate:

- Can they learn systems thinking quickly?
- Do they default to structure or to blank-canvas creativity?
- Are they eager to learn from devs—not just dictate to them?

Give them a design challenge that involves:

- Reusing a component set
- Designing in a modular way
- Thinking about responsive layouts

You'll find out fast if they can grow into the role—or if they'll fight your system every step of the way.

Not every great designer has design system experience.

Don't Just Hire for Taste. Hire for Scale.

Your design system isn't a limitation.

It's your UX operating system.

And hiring designers who don't understand or respect it?

That's like hiring backend devs who don't understand APIs.

So if you're hiring for UX and not testing for system fluency—you're not just making a rookie mistake.

You're setting your product up to fail at scale.

Need Help Structuring a UX Hiring Process That Prioritizes Systems Thinking?

At Carson Harris Associates, we help fast-growing product teams design interview loops that uncover not just visual talent—but system-savvy, scalable UX designers who thrive in real-world teams.

If you're scaling UX and need help avoiding common hiring traps, let's build your process the smart way.

We connect ambitious companies with UX and UI professionals who don't just make things pretty—they make things work. Whether you need user researchers, product designers, or UI specialists, we help you hire talent that understands design is about solving problems, not just adding polish.

Ready to hire designers who solve problems, not just decorate them? Let's talk. I help teams find UX/UI talent with brains, not just Behance bait.

Don't settle for portfolios that impress but don't convert. Work with a partner who knows the difference.

Simon Carson

Carson Harris Associates Ltd

+44 07498 396 710

sc@carsonharris.co.uk

www.carsonharris.co.uk



About Us

Carson Harris Associates was founded by Simon Carson in 2004 as an executive search firm specialising in UX/UI, software engineering and app development.

Simon has over 30 years of experience in the industry, having served previously as the Sales Director of US based, Management Search International. As Managing Director of Carson Harris, Simon oversees our business development and client relationship management, and is on hand to provide one to one guidance on all aspects of the hiring process.

Our delivery teams are based in London, Dublin, and Nairobi, and our consultants have hands-on experience in their specialist fields.

With collaboration always at the heart of what we do, our partner companies now range from startups to globally recognised brands.

At Carson Harris, we've got a proven track record of consistently securing desired outcomes for the companies we work with.

Generating CVs and portfolios is the easy part of recruitment. Understanding the talent behind them is where Carson Harris excels. We give our partners solutions rather than options.

Carson Harris Associates Ltd,

www.carsonharris.co.uk

+44 07498 396 710

Testimonials

“We’ve been using Carson Harris for over five years now, since our early startup days, and they’ve been an integral part of our journey. From the outset, they became our first choice for product and UX roles—two areas that are absolutely crucial to the success of our company. Their deep understanding of our needs and ability to deliver top-tier talent has been key to our team’s growth”

Hemal Vaghela

“Carson Harris have been on our PSL for many years and always one of our first go to’s for software devs and UX designers. They build proper relationships and the calibre of candidate they provide is always top notch. I’ve dealt with dozens of agencies over the years and Carson Harris will always be one of my favourites for the professionalism they provide as well as the relationships I’ve built with them. Could not recommend them more highly!”

Sarah Lamontagne

“ I have used Carson Harris for both perm and contract placements and wholeheartedly recommend them. I always feel incredibly well taken care of and like I am their number one priority. The quality and speed of the short-listing is unmatched and the way they understand how to pitch my company and to manage the candidate flow is great. No-nonsense, refreshingly honest recruiters.”

Adina Kuse