



Our Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Innovative Product Design

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Growing up, I always enjoyed being creative and believed my ideal job would satisfy my love of innovation and dreaming up new ideas. I had read about working in cross-functional teams that inspire their members to think outside the box, and I fancied something similar for my own career path. Little did I know, I had something even better coming my way!

John Lennon summed it up crisply and cogently: "Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans." His words eerily came true when the world entered an unprecedented period of global uncertainty and, subsequently, fewer opportunities for many, including those of us graduating and entering the working world. Despite the challenging circumstances, I was fortunate enough to find a job soon after my graduation that was the right fit for my passion and personal values.

I joined Cerence toward the end of September 2020 as a User Experience (UX) Researcher, part of a global, multidisciplinary team with great enthusiasm and aptitude known as the DRIVE (Design, Research, Innovation and In-Vehicle Experience) Lab. I was amazed to see how so much was being accomplished in one place! In no time, I was a part of it, and it quickly became clear that the secret ingredients to this group's success are team effort and communication.

In a multidisciplinary team like the Cerence DRIVE Lab, each person brings their expertise, competence, viewpoints, and natural modes of thinking to the table. Soliciting varied representation in a team like the DRIVE Lab helps to evaluate and challenge any design decisions in distinct ways. For me, this approach has helped me to expand my parallel thinking and deliberate thinking in directions that I might not usually go. Having a Master of Design (M.Des) degree, I, like most designers, would say that design is a subjective field. It is a dependent and overlapping strategy in most organizations that requires widespread collaboration. The typical design process includes several different approaches and decisions made by both individuals and teams to solve a specific problem. The process for one designer might be completely different from the process that another designer follows. So, to build objectivity into any given design, we usually employ two sets of checks and balances. First, a systematic process to ensure each definite stage in the process is covered. Second, feedback, which enables us to constructively question our design choices and make sure we haven't missed any details.

Taking a holistic, organizational view, design is just one of many steps in product development, working in concert with business management, engineering development, quality assurance, and more. As designers, we must incorporate viewpoints and decisions – as well as considerations of ROI, project timelines, ease of development, etc. – from other teams and disciplines. By continuously communicating and working together, we learn the challenges faced in each area, troubleshooting and tackling any issues early on.

These different viewpoints can even come from within a design team. For example, the Cerence DRIVE Lab team includes representations from various functional fields. Global in its operations, it gives way to multiculturalism, inclusivity and diversity. These varied perspectives help us expedite problem-solving and decision-making. While collaboration, communication, constant support and motivation are the foundation of any multidisciplinary, global team – especially when working remotely – the unique composition of the DRIVE Lab that makes it such a remarkable group include:

- Team members who understand the features, functions, interaction, and usability of products while maintaining a delicate balance between user-centric and company-centric approaches. (Designers and Researchers)
- Team members who ground any process by understanding what is achievable by technology and development. (Engineers and Developers)
- Team members who polish these ideas into actionable products and screen them based on what our leadership wants and thinks while mentoring, facilitating and managing the team. (Managers and Senior Leaders)

Besides the above, another unique benefit of a global team like DRIVE Lab is that work is continuously being done around the clock as we can seamlessly hand off to one another to keep things moving – without anybody needing to do late-night shifts. This multifaceted, multi-disciplinary approach keeps the productivity high and the learning boundless – and was recently put into action for our recent Cerence hackathon. Simulating a real-world product development process, we had team members from most major disciplines – engineer, manager, researcher, designer, speech expert, etc. – that were needed to realize a project in a short timeframe. Open and collective feedback was always available, keeping the workflow not only informed but also efficient.

This type of work culture gives me a sense of personal and collective accomplishment. Each day is spent creating a valuable footprint in our industry as we define innovation and possibility and work towards changing the future of connected mobility. Fostering a spirit of collaboration, respect, and innovation at heart, I feel this is the best place to be!

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