

Chris Strahl:

Hi, and welcome to the Design Systems Podcast. This podcast is about the place where design and development overlap. We talk with experts to get their point of view about trends in design, code, and how it relates to the world around us.

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Hey, everybody. Welcome to the Design Systems Podcast. I'm your host, Chris Strahl. Today I'm here with Francesco Cutolo. Francesco is at Klarna. Now, Klarna is an organization that has a design system, it's fairly mature, and what we're going to be talking about today is a little bit different.

When we talk on this podcast, we usually are talking about people that are building design systems or have built a design system and want to talk about their story of how to get there. And while it's not always rosy, it's usually something that exists inside of a well-supported organization that is intentionally growing its design system practice.

In this case, we're going to talk about how you build a design system in the middle of a crisis. And so, in the spirit of not letting any good crisis go to waste, Francesco's here to talk about that story.

Welcome to the program.

Francesco Cutolo:

Hi, Chris.

Chris Strahl:

So, tell me about Klarna.

Francesco Cutolo:

Yeah. Well, I think by now lots of people knows Klarna. It's one of the largest private FinTech in Europe, and it's seen a huge growth in the past three, four years. Basically do all the microeconomic shifts that happen in the world. In spring, Klarna as many other companies, seeing a huge restructuring on people, on also how we operate, especially on markets and products that we wanted to ship.

So many things changed, and the science system was... I wouldn't say central in that we are not that important in such a huge ecosystem like Klarna. But we definitely see different attitude lean toward the systemic work and how our way to... And by our, I mean my team operates and advocate constantly for efficiency, for optimization, and try to reduce costs in terms of effort, resources, and try to connecting the dots and try to let people collaborate more to avoid overlaps.

Back in the days, when a company is in a hyper growth mode, you see that overlap at duplicated work or wasted work sometimes is not only allowed, it's even encouraged so many startups or scale up. You see that, oh, that's okay doing rebranding every 10 months. Who cares?

Chris Strahl:

So you had this organization that you were a part of that was this incredibly fast-growing company that was a FinTech startup, everything's going great. And then all of a sudden the macros of your environment change, and you have this moment where you realize that the company needs to cut. And

you are in this position where you have built this way of working around the design system along with your team that is really integral to the overall success of the digital product.

What did it look like before the news hit, that there was going to be an operational reduction?

Francesco Cutolo:

Yeah. It was quite... In the sense that we tried, at least, to bring teams together or trying to create a shared direction, that it was very difficult to achieve when you move crazy fast, when you have the pace that it's okay to do overlap at work, to do duplicated work, and maybe never set up a good strategy or a good vision when it comes to systemic thinking for the next 12 months.

Because you need to think about now, you need to think for the next quarter, and try to enlarge and go horizontal, like new markets, new countries. So the previous iteration of the design system was highly technical and mostly on support to the teams. It wasn't something to anticipate the needs of designers and developers.

Chris Strahl:

So it was all about how do I build more product faster, because you have all of this effort and energy going towards, like I need to go capture this market. I need to be in this vertical, or I need to be over in this other part of FinTech.

And the way you do that in the design system is by building a bunch of things that people can pick up and just run with.

Francesco Cutolo:

Yeah, it was pretty much like that. And of course, it's still ongoing in the sense that we are still trying to get along and try to use the keyword of optimization or the keyword for efficiency in the sense that we, in a very paradoxical situation, now we are front and center of how we can move with the same speed and maybe ship even faster, but with less resources in less time, but with a more strategic thinking.

Chris Strahl:

Gotcha. So that's really what the change happened. So tell me about that moment when you're sitting there and you're realizing that the team you've built and the way of working that you had been using for a fair amount of time at that point, was pretty stable.

What went through your mind when you realized that you were about to face a pretty dramatic change?

Francesco Cutolo:

Actually, it was not something that happened overnight, I have to say. It was mostly we were doing some short-term actions or trying to solve short-term problems with our eagle-eye perspective. Because sitting in the science system, we tried to put our hands and our feet in what was happening in different teams in different units.

So basically, it was easier for us to get buy-in or be listing it when it comes to, please slow down on this side, we have to clean it up a little better, this thing or this other thing. Then again, the buy-in was easier to get and it was easier and easier the longer we were...

Like put yourself, make our way into the product. And on the other side, of course, on the higher floors of the company, and I will say in the general landscape of the digital industry, things were changing.

So then again, I don't think it was an actual cause and effect situation, but it was more like two timelines that started to overlap in the right timing, I guess. And something that happened quite gradually, I have to say.

Chris Strahl:

So, talk to me a little bit more about that buy-in. So when you talk about having buy-in, that really allowed you to make the changes to the design system to support this new operational landscape of the business.

What did that buy-in look like? How did you build that clout that allowed you to really... Maybe not effortlessly, but seemingly without a lot of friction, make a lot of change the way the design system operated?

Francesco Cutolo:

I will start from afar with a nice story. This is a metaphor or an example that I use in different places, in several occasions. Every medium article about design system, or maybe the majority of them, they always start from the same premise. The premise that you are doing something from scratch. When you think about how many articles we read about color systems or color scales, they always start with the premise that you are starting from scratch. You're doing the gray scale and all the functional cores and the non-functional cores from scratch.

And this is something that happens very, very rarely. And put this in a real situation. A team started to create new screens or new patterns with a different background. We are going from a white background to a gray background. And that thing got validated and more teams, they started to copy/paste that thing because it works. And they try to stay consistent with that new thing that you never systemize or your design system never... It doesn't support that.

So if you just open a... Then again, an article or a book or something like the most popular thing that you get is that yeah, you are starting to redo the entire color scale, test the accessibility, maybe you redo the entire gray scale with use original luminance, color modes, whatever.

Chris Strahl:

Sort of ignores the reality of what's already out there in product.

Francesco Cutolo:

Yeah, yeah. It's about timeline. To do something like that, of course it takes three to four months. It takes a full quarter to redo the entire colors, distribute them, stress test them on a larger scale, especially for a company the size of Klarna.

Something like this will never get the buy-in you need. So you have to figure it out, something that it works. Now it works in the span of a couple of springs or maximum amount of work, and you try to patch the leak on that thing, and that thing only.

And this is something that we did on a regular basis for almost a year. So many little creases like that. And this is something that get us the bind that you asking me. So it was a very long answer.

Chris Strahl:

Yeah. So you brought the ability to have these real immediate solves for pain. And those real immediate solves for pain, they weren't let's go re-architect the design system, or let's go re-architect color or rethink the way that our app should function at a core level. It's hey, we have this very particular need and if we're able to provide this quickly, it'll show up as being valuable right away.

How did you go about identifying those things? Were those brought to you, or were those things that you know had folks on your team or inside the organization that were UX professionals or engineers saying hey, if I just had this? How did people surface those?

Francesco Cutolo:

I'm not going to lie, this is something that took us almost a year and likely... And this is the best bit of luck that we got, is that we started doing this even before the entire crisis or reorganization almost two years ago. We started from the fact that the discovery of these new things, or the discovery of what product teams were doing, was very passive.

It was something like, oh, by chance or by luck, I just discovered that this team is working on something completely new, that probably, if it's going to pass, if it's going to be validated, it will be a major shift in a huge part of the user experience. And it was very passive.

We work it for almost a year on trying to turn around the situation and get us, as I said before, get our eyes and our feet into product teams and try to create routines that help with us to get visibility of what's going on into the product. We started from a situation where we didn't have any visibility, especially of some core products.

Chris Strahl:

So how did you go about making that change? Cause this sounds like really the crux of how you were able to adapt in the crisis was just this real good understanding of what your product needed.

Francesco Cutolo:

We are not here to do design police, or we are not here to constrain you with the science system, the classic mindset that when a design system doesn't get that traction that you want, people start to see the science system not as enablers, but as a constraint for creativity, for pacing, for your OKRs, whatever.

So we just started to put ourselves in a position that we just wanted to see what is going on. Please involve us in what's what's happening and creating some kind of... I like to call it fake official announcements or fake routines in the sense that, oh, we going to have design system reviews or we going to have office hours, so please book some time with us so we can see what you're working on.

And those kind of routines, they felt as official things that the teams was doing. So with the help of the design operations or with the help of the group of people that you can surround yourself, the famous, the science system advocates or ambassadors, there are multiple ways to call it.

So, it's very people based. Most of the actions that we did were just manually and people-based.

Chris Strahl:

So you went from this world where everything was fast and furious. It was build, build, build, build, build. And then all of a sudden, it was this shift and... I guess all of a sudden is the wrong way of putting it. Over time during this crisis, it shifted towards not just build for building's sake, but really to think

strategically based on your knowledge of the products and your window into what the products were really needing, into this very, very tactical implementation of things that provided value immediately.

Talk to me about that balance between strategy and tactics. Because, you're still shipping, you're still trying to deliver on these incremental bits of value, but in a very different way. And how did you balance that need for real tactical wins inside the organization and the buildup of that clout and buy-in with the overall strategy of where the design system was headed?

Francesco Cutolo:

There is this Italian saying that I use a lot, and I don't think the translation, it gives the right importance. But in Italian, we say it's singing and carried across at the same time. So basically, it refers to during when Jesus carried the cross on his shoulders and is making a sacrifice, he is doing the heavy work and he cannot sing.

So this is something that people in the crowd does. And you cannot do both at the same time. And it's literally a situation where we need to fix some very short shit storms, at the same time we need to squeeze our time, we need to use the other half of our time to prepare the plan for the long term. The example that I did before on gray background or very small things, or maybe some visual assets work or even just restart some things with the brand, brand and products is still quite disconnected on the communication point of view.

So doing some little works that just gets you visibility out already in the mandate. And at the same time, when you finally have access to that room, you can sit at the table of maybe some critical work like that. You maybe have already something ready to show them what's your long-term plan. And they say, oh, okay, so you know what you're doing. And I'm talking, of course, to have a model already or the science system networking ready or even a shared roadmap with other teams if your system is something in between the centralized and distributed model like us.

We're still in the... Somebody calls federated model, but yeah. I'm not a fan of that term. So when you present those kind of long-term plan and where you wanted to go, it's easier of course to, oh, okay, so you are the person to reach out when I have to fix something, and maybe I can even be your supporter, your fan. When it comes to the big moment like this, the big reveal of, okay, this is where we want to go with our model, we want to move from a very flexible integrated solution to something more modular.

Okay, I know what's in your head. I know what's your cooking, because yeah, the science system in a black box, working in a back-up meeting, totally the worst decision we could do.

Chris Strahl:

So it's interesting because you have really high stakes. You're in a situation where there's headcount reduction, your resources are ever more constrained, and so everything you have to do has to be geared towards maximum impact.

And somehow, you figured out a good balance between considering what you can do immediately that provides that impact, vis-a-vis these quick wins, but also have this almost predictive mindset of what's coming, so you can be well prepared there and show up to catch that ball as it's thrown to you.

Talk to me about how you did that balancing act? Because this is really fascinating to me. You're probably hyper-focused on what value can we provide this week, but also really trying hard to think about what is coming three months from now that I should be preparing for so that I'm ready when it hits. How did you find that balance?

Francesco Cutolo:

I don't know if this is very personal interjective. We just went rogue. We tried to work under the radar, especially because... Then again, an organization with dead sides, with thousands of people, with hundreds of designers leaking this information, it is almost like leaking up the reveal of a product or something.

You cannot provide false information on overpromises on stuff. Maybe I did. We did this mistake a couple of times. We tried to get the hype and try to overshare what we were trying to achieve. And then of course, this is something that will never happen for six months and then people get back to us. But I was thinking that you are going to launch this, we are going with the local systems and this is something that later we just discovered, we'll never work. We don't have the resources, we don't have the setup to do that.

So I would say that is just something that maybe it's the only thing that you actually can afford to work without sharing too much or just working in a vacuum in your black box. And at least on the educational material, I would say. It's not the proposal, it's quite easy to present the educational material.

Okay, I will start from the very beginning. What is a design system model? What are the examples of a good design system network and showing the excellence in our industry, in our field. And that's where you have to really start and you cannot go into technicalities. You have to always stay a little bit above and that's probably the hardest part, but it's also maybe the part that you don't have to involve too many people. You just try to squeeze your time on that.

Chris Strahl:

It's interesting how much parallel that has to a lot of the way we think about things in a startup, right? The whole idea of being in stealth mode while you're building something that gets to a level of completeness or readiness that it's ready to go to market or sharing a roadmap, but also having a bunch of things that are ideas that maybe aren't on the roadmap but are things that you want to be able to do and trying to understand how people respond to those things.

I think there's definitely a balancing act between this idea of what do you promise in a crisis, and what are you realistically able to accomplish and how that affects your credibility? And that management of that credibility, I assume was, again, paramount to you continuing to receive buy-in for you and your team.

Were there any moments where you were really concerned about your viability and the ability to keep going?

Francesco Cutolo:

Everybody feel this moment at least once. Is that, okay. This is too much to fix, or this is too much to build on top of the legacy we have, so we should definitely start from scratch. It's mostly okay, probably trying to shift what we have another side or trying to create a new mindset, a new culture about system thinking. It's quite impossible, so let's maybe start from scratch with something new.

But usually it creates more hazards than benefits. So if I ask me now, it's definitely more viable to build on what you have, especially because there is always somebody that will stick to your product, especially on big numbers. Then again, on a big organization, a huge community like the one we have, you will always find at least a couple of big supporters, diehard fans that you never disappointed. So you can try

to build on the people that they actually want to stick with your product, no matter how fluid it is or how updated it is.

Chris Strahl:

Yeah. Has this experience changed your philosophy around tech and design debt? I think that what you just talked about, the idea that it may feel easier to throw it all away sometimes and start over, but the real answer is that's usually more of a hazard than a benefit. Sticking with those people that are your diehard fans playing to your base maybe if you will, has that opinion changed at all throughout this process?

Francesco Cutolo:

In our situation, we were starting with a strong code foundation, and this is something that I strongly believe. The design system, it's the three pillars. It's still design code and content, and it was just acting like crazy to just ditch and start from scratch and you could lose the three of them, all the three pillars, at least one of them is there and it's quite mature and it only needs some support from the other twos.

So yeah, that's why we stick it with the decision of keep building on what we have. But yeah, definitely there was a moment that's okay, that's too much to handle. We need to start... Or at least when you miss a lot of high-level intangible resources like techniques or a good pattern library. Those high level things that really create the direction that you wanted to share with the others teams. You only have a bunch of the tangible elements of data science system, classic UI heat and react library, whatever.

But you feel that is always missing the bigger part of the pyramid, of the hierarchy. And you say, we cannot just working like crabs and reverse engineering, starting from the components. We need to start fresh with a new mindset, a new culture and new principles, and start building that.

But it's not working like that, in reality.

Chris Strahl:

It reminds me of hierarchy of needs, right? And so, you're anchored very deeply in those foundational concepts because ultimately you had to have something that continued to secure that buy-in and really prove that value in the organization.

And that anchor for you all was code. You just had a robust coded system, and that was something that it sounds like you held sacred, because you could have rebuilt it and through this crisis there was even maybe an opportunity to say, we need to rethink all this.

But ultimately that core is something you decided not to change. Now, looking back on that decision, do you feel like that was the right call?

Francesco Cutolo:

We still need to find out, I guess, but definitely help it to at least to gather one of the audience, the 33% of the customer base of the design system, so developers already on board. I think it would be even more difficult to just stick with new code base or new mental models to try to show with them. It could have been even more complicated. So, one-third of the audience was already there and we just kept them.

Chris Strahl:

How has that changed the culture of the way your team operates? Because I think a lot of this does relate to major culture shift. Anytime there's a big operational change like this, the organization was on one pathway, it's now on another. Right?

And that pathway may be really close to the pathway it was first, but that changes the culture, that changes the mindset of people. That changes, oftentimes, the mental math that we all do around what our jobs are.

Talk to me about that shift in culture. Do you feel like your adaptation of the design systems team was thoughtful towards that and aligned with that shift in culture, or do you feel like it kind of ran counter to it?

Francesco Cutolo:

Yeah. No, I mean, my design system persona, let's say, is mostly support and be the best customer care I could be as a teammate. And this is something that I try to share and I think I succeed the most. When I joined the team almost two years ago, it was mostly the shift happening from being a component provider with a very strict model on the design system. So we're just providing the UI kit, providing the code, and then everything else, the entire guidance on governance of the design system, it was just missing.

It was on behalf of the units for just the product teams. And we tried to move that from the product teams to the design system, because people were craving for direction or at least for a unified direction, so they started to reach out to us. And they had someone to get support for any kind of questions. That goes from the code to design to even sometimes questions that were not related to the design system, but are mostly on tooling or just something that... On collaboration and cross collaboration between units.

So, it get us talking about buy-in and crisis, a very huge authority on, oh, okay, this is the central hub on how I can just execute faster, how can I do it faster? So this is the change in mindset in that we brought fresh in the team.

Chris Strahl:

It sounds like, at least for now, the situation you find yourself in is one where the changes you've made have been largely successful. You've been able to ship a lot of valuable product, you've been able to support this culture, you've been able to have this great balance between the short-term value and the long-term strategic wins.

What's next? Oftentimes, as macros are likely to change again in the world in the next 12 months, how are you preparing for that next change that you're going to see?

Francesco Cutolo:

Well, I read a very interesting thing today. It's a great reminder that change is the only constant in our life. So we are coming from a couple of very big changes, organizational, but also executional, like the change on the visual language or so many on changes at the same time. So we cannot avoid the next change, but we could just find ourselves a little bit more prepared on this, especially on advocate more that this is something that will keep happening on a regular basis.

So on what's next, we only need to get the long-term plan a reality. It's mostly, you cannot just keep the hype over and over. You cannot be one of those video games company that's just announced something

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like eight years before. So piece by piece, we just wanted to fill all the boxes when it comes to, okay, we can provide something that really help new joiner, a veteran, a designer, a coder, a content designer. Great baseline for every unit.

And especially the complexity at Klarna is the broad range of different products from B2C, B2B, to website, to email design systems, or libraries. So, this is the major challenge. How can you just provide something that will help anyone in so many different ways? And this is probably our next step.

Chris Strahl:

I love the focus on fundamentals and just understanding that if those fundamental things are strong in your design system, you'll continue with that buy-in, and you'll continue to be able to execute on that balance of tactics and strategy.

Well, Francesco, thanks so much for being on the program today. Thanks for sharing a very vulnerable story about navigating a crisis, and I just want to say I really appreciate your perspective.

Francesco Cutolo:

This is our very skewed perspective on how we didn't get yet to all those fancy things that you read on automation or internal plugins, were still on that operational style. Then again, it's probably a very old style of doing the science system. Still very manual, very people based, but it was the best way to keep it human.

Chris Strahl:

Awesome. Well, hey, this has been a wonderful podcast. Let's have you back on again in about a year and see where things are at.

Francesco Cutolo:

Yeah, would be great.

Chris Strahl:

Take care, everybody.

That's all for today. This has been another episode of the Design Systems podcast. Thanks for listening. If you have any questions or a topic you'd like to know more about, find us on Twitter, @TheDSPod.

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Have a great day.