

WHITEPAPER

Design systems as a strategic brand & business proposition



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1.

Keeping your brand
consistent in a world
that never hits pause

Speed is essential for anyone who wants to stay in the digital game. Brands need to continuously launch new products, campaigns, and content across multiple channels. And that's a necessity, as customers expect a consistent and intuitive experience.

In this context, many organizations run into the same **pain points**. Developers keep rebuilding the same elements from scratch, new products and campaigns drift away from existing brand expressions. Design, development, marketing, and creative teams seem to be speaking different languages.

All these issues create a series of **challenges** for organisations. Challenges that directly impact both brand and business:

CHALLENGE	IMPACT
Speed to launch	A slow time-to-market doesn't just limit innovation and revenue growth, but also the responsiveness of campaigns and content creation.
Consistence	Inconsistent UX or brand expressions push back conversions, weaken trust, and hurt recognition across all channels.
Scalability	It's hard to support digital growth or multi-touch campaigns efficiently without running into fragmentation.
Quality control	More bugs and visual inconsistencies reduce accessibility and undermine brand perception.
Team co-operation	Design, development, marketing, and creative team silos lead to miscommunication and delays.

Design systems as a **solution**

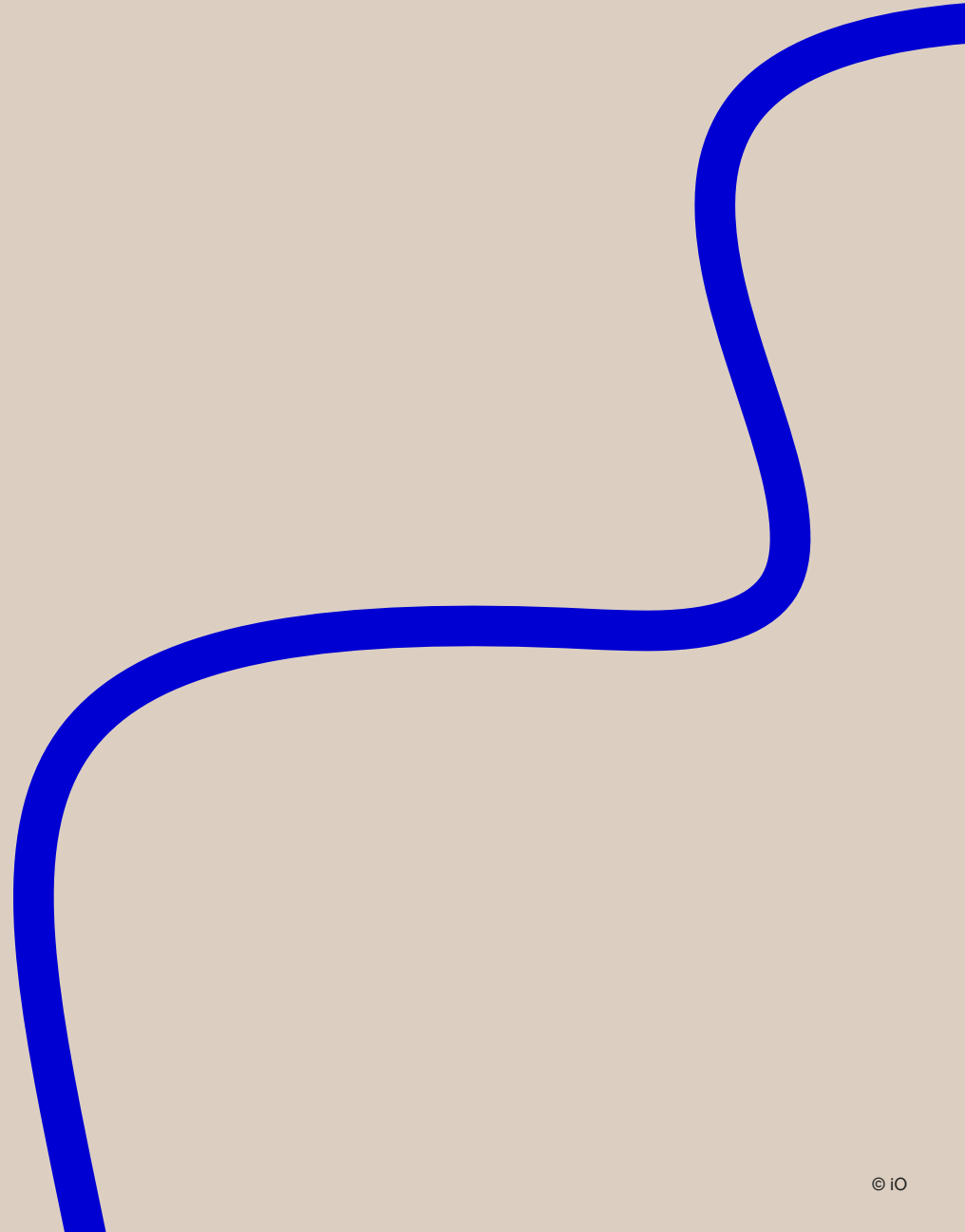
Design systems offer a structural solution to these problems. They form a **modular set** of building blocks, guidelines, and processes that can be used by design, development, content, marketing, and creative teams alike.

A well-crafted design system translates your brand strategy and values into **every touchpoint** of the customer journey. From buttons to banners, from interfaces to campaigns: a design system ensures each element is a consistent expression of your brand—**visually, functionally, and in terms of content**.



2.

What is a **design system**?



A design system is much more than just a collection of styles or components. It is a **modular, dynamic system** that helps you translate your brand strategy into consistent, efficient, and scalable communication and interfaces.

By managing all reusable building blocks, guidelines, and tools in one central place, you create:

- **Visual consistency** – clear style guidelines and components, including uniform typography, colours, spacing, and icons.
- **Functional consistency** – shared interaction patterns such as buttons, forms, and navigation.
- **Brand recognition and coherence** – every touchpoint contributes to your brand equity.
- **Cross-team collaboration** – designers, developers, marketers, and content experts work in a shared 'language'.

This way, a design system strengthens your brand at every stage of the customer journey. It is **not just an operational tool but also a strategic one**: your brand values, personality, and tone of voice are translated into concrete rules, components, and patterns.



2.1 Design system vs. brand guide

A traditional brand guide or style guide is a **visual guideline**, not a building system. It includes elements such as logos, colour codes, typography, and tone of voice. These are, of course, important for brand consistency, but several things are missing.

- **No components**: you can't build a working user interface with it.
- **No context**: it often doesn't explain when and why a certain element should be used.
- **No tooling or integration**: a brand guide usually lives in a PDF or slide deck and isn't connected to Figma, Storybook, or development processes.

While a brand guide defines how the brand looks, a design system ensures the brand is applied correctly, relevantly, and consistently everywhere. Even at high production volumes and across multiple teams.



2.2 Design system vs. pattern library

A pattern library is a **collection of frequently used UI elements or interaction patterns**, such as tab navigations, modals, or form layouts. But unlike a design system, it is more of a toolbox without instructions:

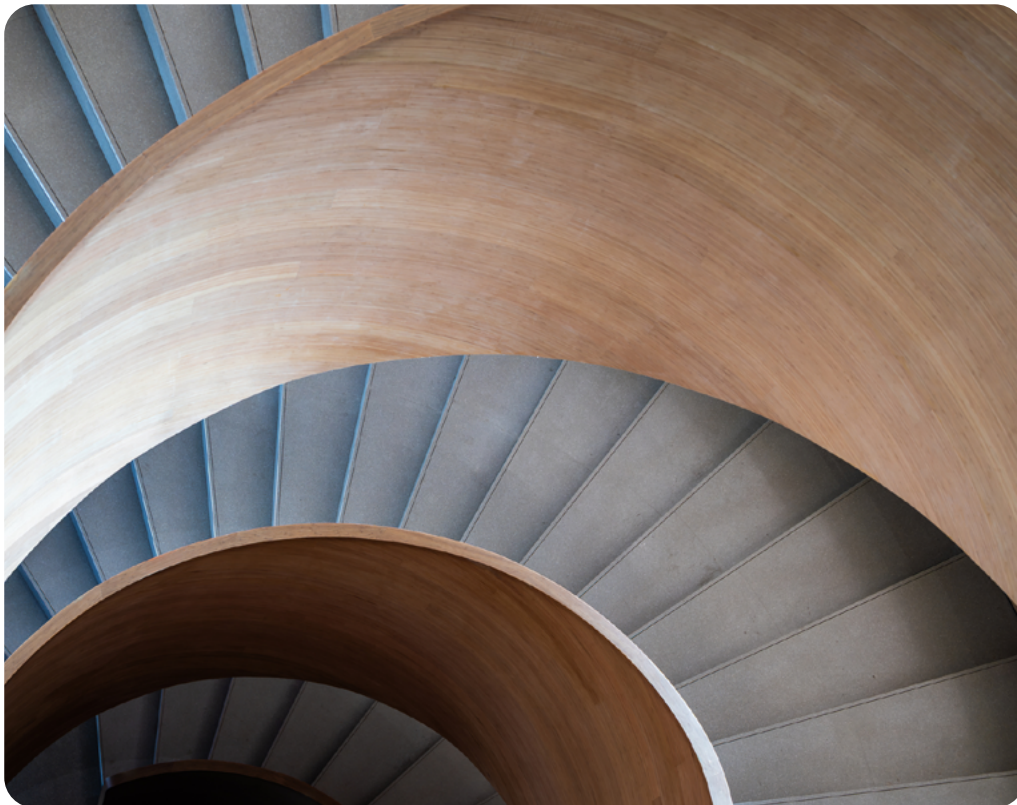
- **No documentation or rationale** – why choose pattern A over B? That specific context is often missing.
- **No version control** – pattern changes are often implemented ad hoc and inconsistently.
- **No ownership** – there is usually no team responsible for maintenance or governance.



2.3 Design system vs. Figma

Although it is an essential design tool, having [reusable components](#) in Figma is not yet a design system. Without linked documentation, tokens, and so on, it remains just a design file.

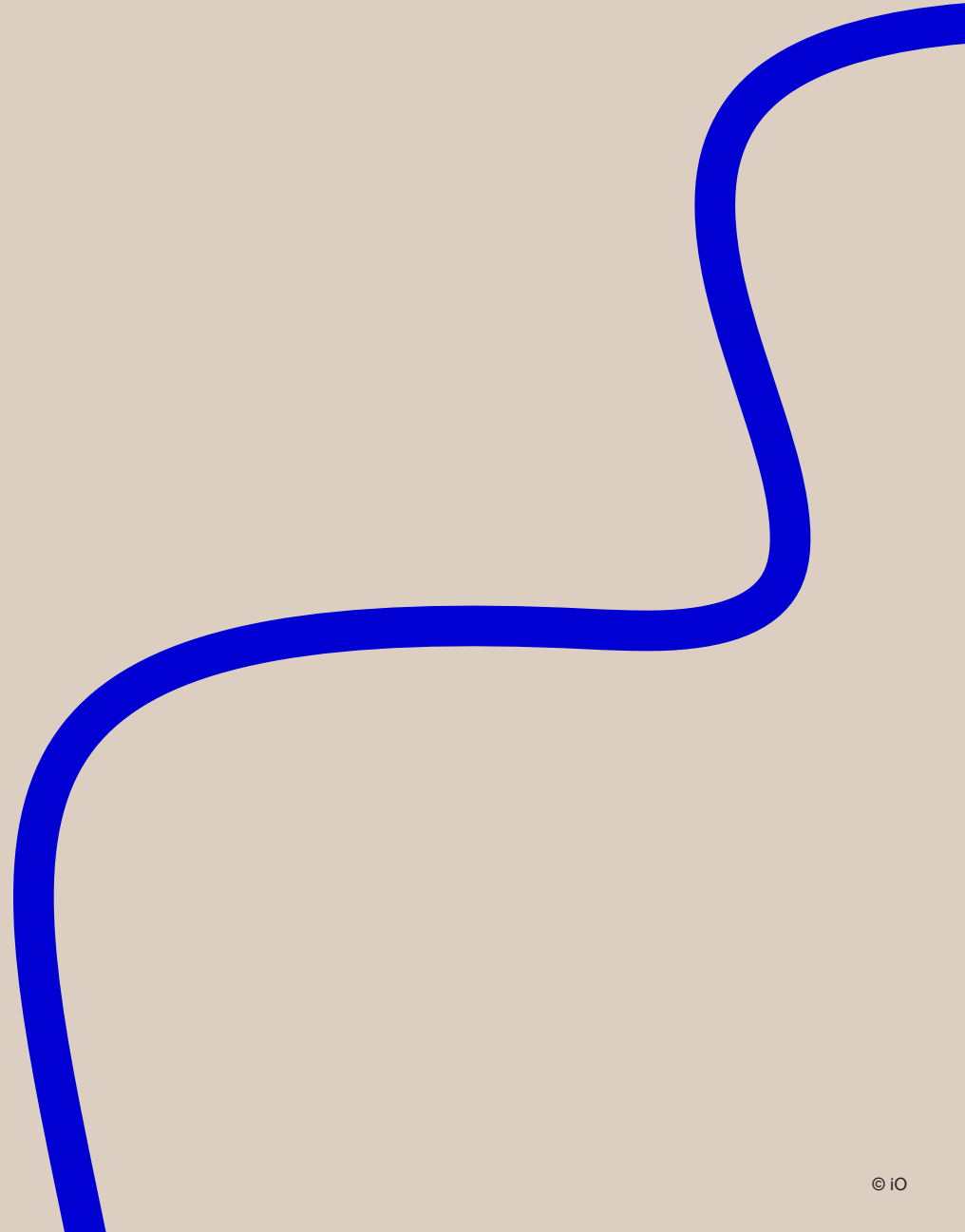
What makes a design system unique is that it combines all style elements and adds [governance, documentation, and tooling integration](#). This makes it not just a tool for design, but a fully operational and strategic system that ensures brand and user experience at scale.



	BRAND GUIDE	PATTERN LIBRARY	 FIGMA	DESIGN SYSTEM
Visual guidelines	✓	?	✓	✓
UI components	✗	✓	✓	✓
Interaction patterns	✗	✓	?	✓
Documented usage	✗	?	✗	✓
Governance & version mgmt.	✗	✗	✗	✓
Tooling integration	✗	✗	?	✓

3.

Advantages of using a design system



3.1 Bridging the gap between marketing, creation & technology

Although design systems often start within development, their true power lies in **cross-functional adoption**. In agile and DevOps-driven organisations, but just as much in fast-moving marketing and creative teams, a design system acts as **a bridge between disciplines**.

From this perspective, a design system is not a constraint but **an accelerator**:

- It closes the gap between strategy, creation, and execution.
- It shortens the time from idea to launch.
- It strengthens brand identity across every channel.
- It provides room for creativity within controlled boundaries.

Branding

Integrate brand values into every touchpoint, from product to campaign.

Performance teams

Optimise easily thanks to clear design tokens and guidelines.

Content creators

Work within visually and functionally recognisable frameworks.

UX/UI

One library of tested components and patterns.

Creative

Room for creative variation without breaking the brand.

Development

Streamlined code and design handoffs, with less rework.

Marketing

Develop banners, emails, social posts, or video formats faster and more consistently.

3.2 Strengthening your business & brand value

A design system is more than just a tool for designers or developers. It is a strategic instrument that **adds direct value** to both **your business and your brand**.

On the business side, it delivers **time savings and cost reductions**. With reusable components and tokens, teams can design and develop faster, with fewer errors and less duplicate work. New features and campaigns go live more quickly, and the **scalability** of international growth or multichannel campaigns is significantly improved.

For your brand, the impact is just as substantial. Consistent brand experiences drive **higher recognition, greater trust, and a better customer experience**. Your brand stays relevant and credible because new campaigns and products are rolled out faster and more consistently. Every detail contributes to the same brand story, strengthening the loyalty and preference of your (potential) customers.

Effecten die we internationaal zien (Zeroheight Design System Report 2025, McKinsey Design Index)

50%

Up to 50% faster development and testing time when building new features.

<50%

Less than half the number of bugs thanks to the use of standardised components.

30%

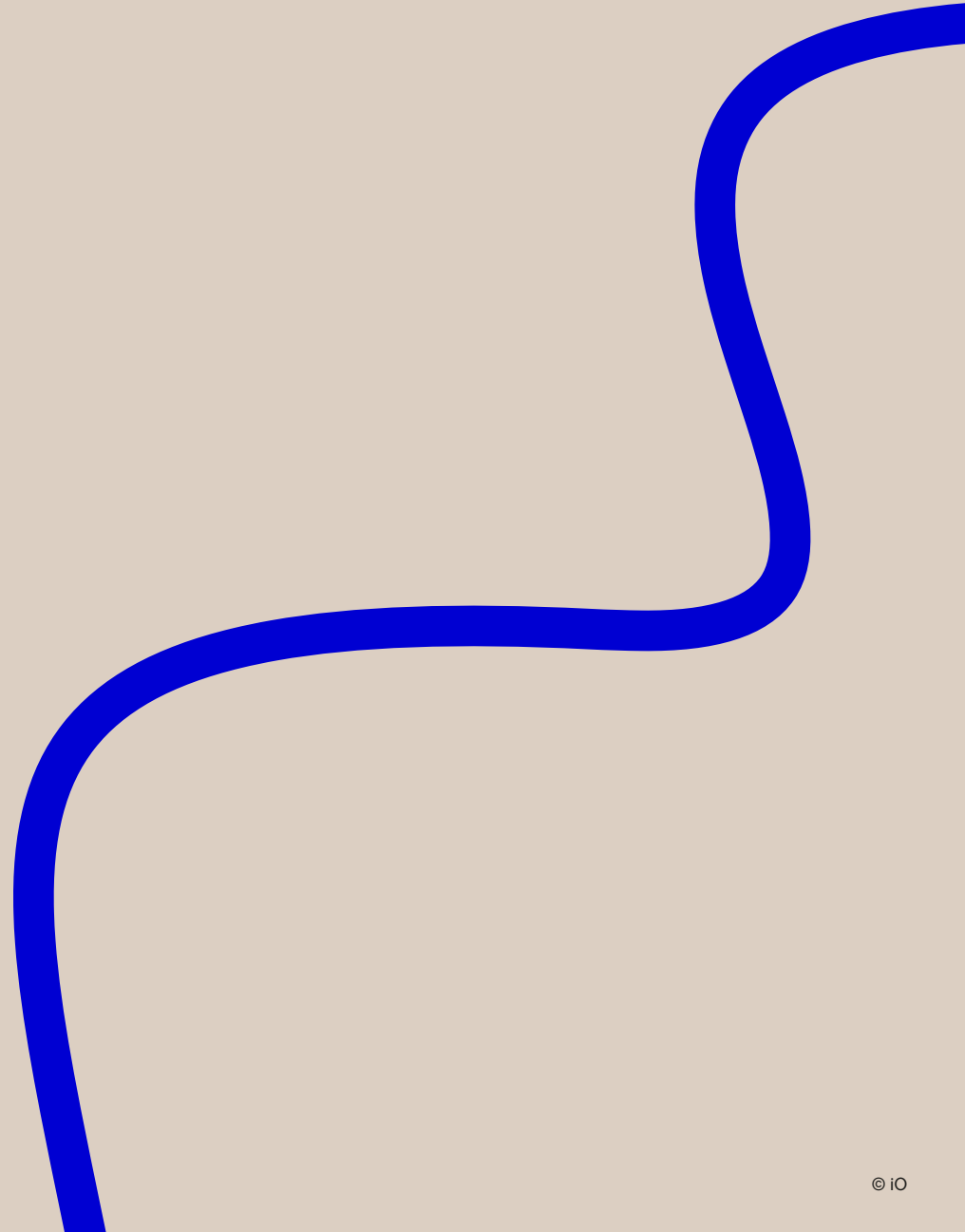
Up to 30% higher customer satisfaction scores (CSAT/NPS) through consistent UX.

40%

Up to 40% reduction in duplicate work across cross-functional teams.

4.

The importance of governance



A design system doesn't maintain itself. It needs to **grow, be maintained, and be monitored.**

Without clear governance, the system becomes fragmented, underused, or outdated. And that leads to inconsistency, frustration, and wasted investment.

Good governance ensures that the design system:

- stays current and usable for all teams.
- serves as a single source of truth.
- grows along with your organization, technology, customer needs, and brand strategy.



How **governance** keeps design systems effective

Governance is the set of roles, processes, guidelines, and tooling that ensures:

Admission & management of components

Which components are allowed in the system? Who decides on new additions, updates, or removals?

Version control & change log

Teams need to know which version of a component they are using, what changes have been made, and what is backward compatible.

Review & approval flows

Every change to a component is reviewed by a multidisciplinary team (design, development, accessibility, etc.).

Documentation & rationale

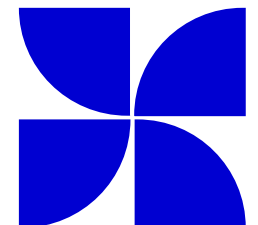
Components include not only the 'what' (code and visuals) but also the 'why' and 'when.' – This helps teams make thoughtful decisions that align with brand strategy.

Accessibility

Governance ensures that all elements meet accessibility guidelines.

Ownership & community

A successful design system is a shared responsibility. Governance encourages ownership and contributions from the community.





Tip: build a complete governance framework

In many organizations, governance is set up mainly from a technical perspective, but the brand and creative dimension is just as important. A complete governance framework ensures:

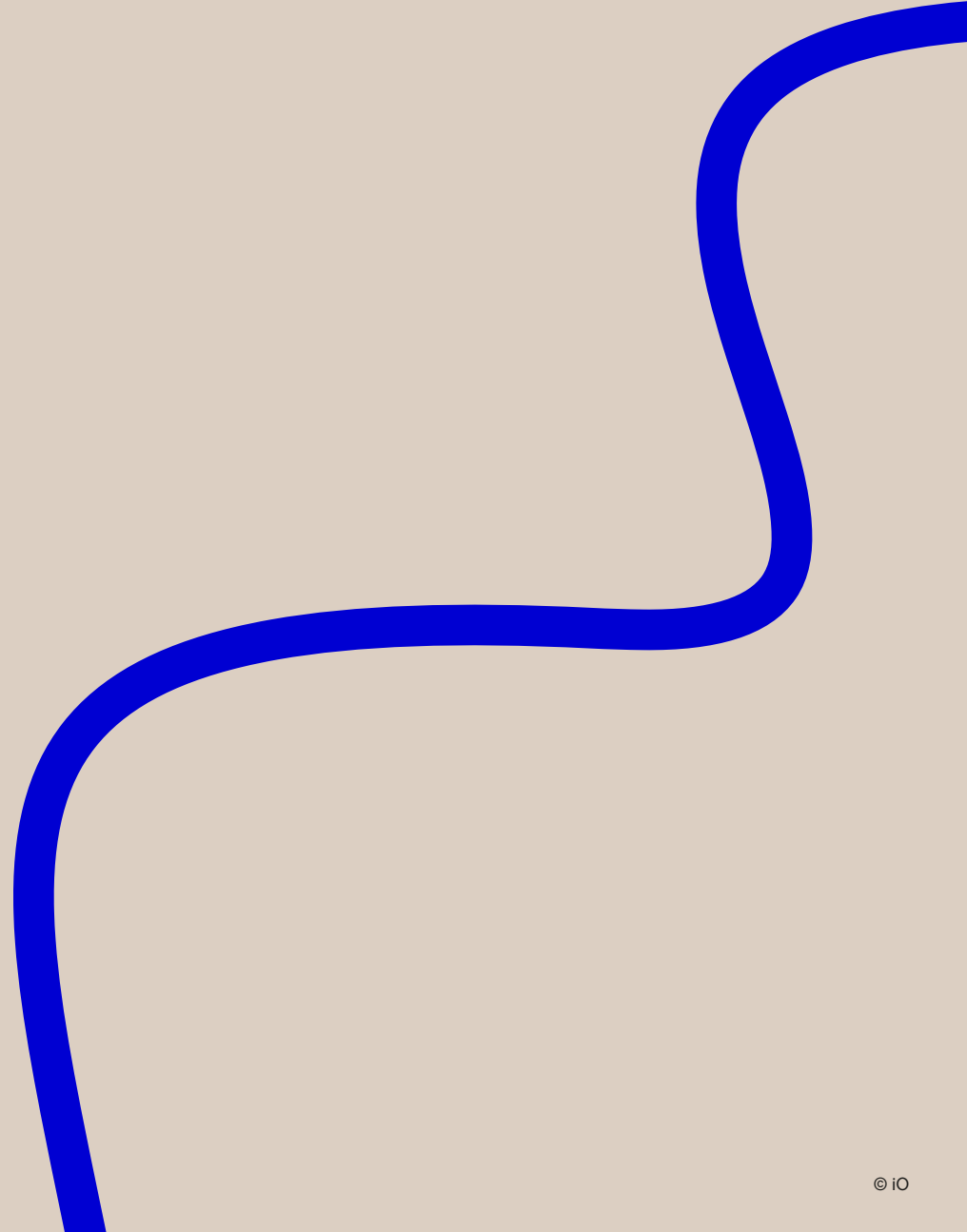
- **Brand identity** – every update is checked against brand values, tone of voice, and visual identity.
- **Creative freedom** – flexible rules clearly define where and how creative work can vary without diluting the brand.
- **Campaign consistency** – formats for campaigns, social, and email are maintained just as carefully as UI components.
- **Collaboration between marketing and tech** – brand leads, marketers, designers, and developers make decisions together on major system changes.

What could go wrong without governance?

Without solid governance, components emerge in isolated silos, leading to **duplicated work and inconsistent use**. Insufficient maintenance causes components to become **outdated**, while teams lose trust in a system that no longer feels reliable. The result is a fragmented ecosystem where teams fall back on old ways of working—the very issues a design system is meant to solve

5.

Tooling: the
backbone of every
design system



A design system only truly delivers its value when supported by the right tooling. We've listed the **key tools** that enable collaboration, documentation, reuse, and updates in conjunction with a design system:

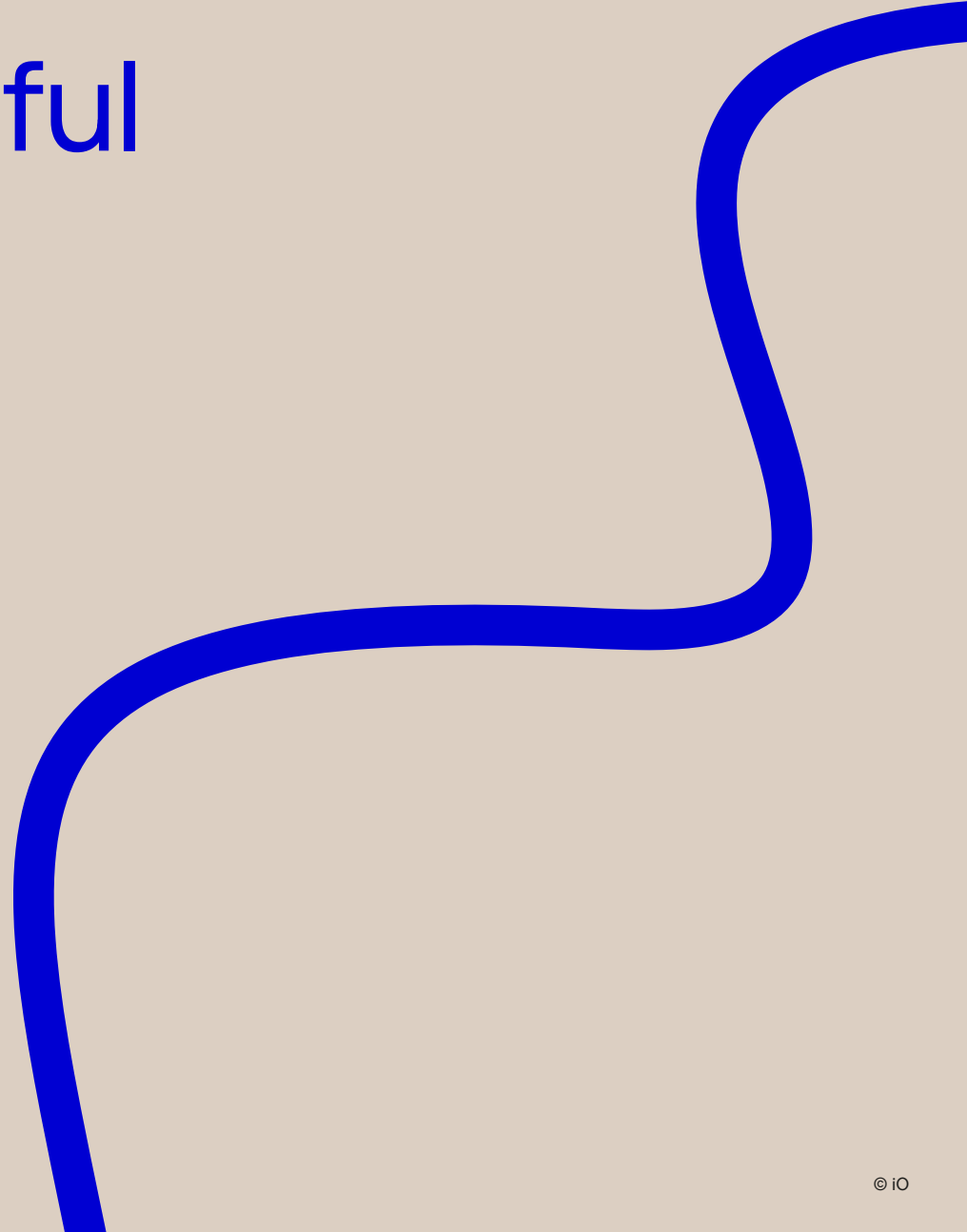
TOOL	WHAT DOES IT DO?	BRAND & BUSINESS VALUE
Figma	Figma is the standard for UX/UI design. It allows you to visually design components, make them reusable, and maintain them. Thanks to variants, auto layout, and design tokens, translating designs to development becomes easier and more consistent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One visual source of truth for design teams prevents deviations in your brand expressions. • Iterate faster and apply consistently across campaigns and products. • Easily scale brand expressions across multiple channels and markets.
Storybook	Storybook is an open-source tool for developing, testing, and documenting UI components. Developers can build and preview components outside of the app, with live code, states, and interactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality assurance: every UI component is tested and documented. • Maintains consistent brand appearance and interaction: regardless of project or team. • Speeds up time-to-market: fewer faulty implementations.
Zeroheight	Zeroheight connects design tools (like Figma) and code documentation (like Storybook) in a user-friendly documentation environment. This allows you to manage guidelines, components, and content all in one central place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible to all stakeholders, including marketing and creative teams. • Makes the brand story and guidelines visible and actionable in daily work. • Closes the gap between brand strategy and technical execution.



TOOL	WHAT DOES IT DO?	BRAND & BUSINESS VALUE
Design tokens	Design tokens are the smallest reusable design values (such as colours, spacing, and fonts) that can be automatically translated across different platforms. Tools like Style Dictionary or Tokens Studio help manage and synchronise these tokens.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures your brand appearance is identical across all platforms. • Reduces errors during updates and speeds up design-dev handoffs. • Supports international or multi-brand rollouts without diluting your brand.
CI/CD & versiebeheer (Git)	Through Git and CI/CD tools (like GitHub Actions, GitLab, or Bitbucket), the design system is maintained as if it were a software product: with branches, reviews, releases, and change logs. This allows updates to be rolled out in a controlled way to all connected products.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases the reliability of brand expressions and functionalities. • Ensures changes are implemented in a controlled and consistent manner. • Makes collaboration between teams scalable and predictable.

6.

Building a **successful** design system



Experience shows that the most successful design systems **start small and are built step by step**.

A minimum viable design system with basic components is often enough to create buy-in and demonstrate value. By working **iteratively** and incorporating **short feedback loops**, the system grows alongside your organisation and the market.

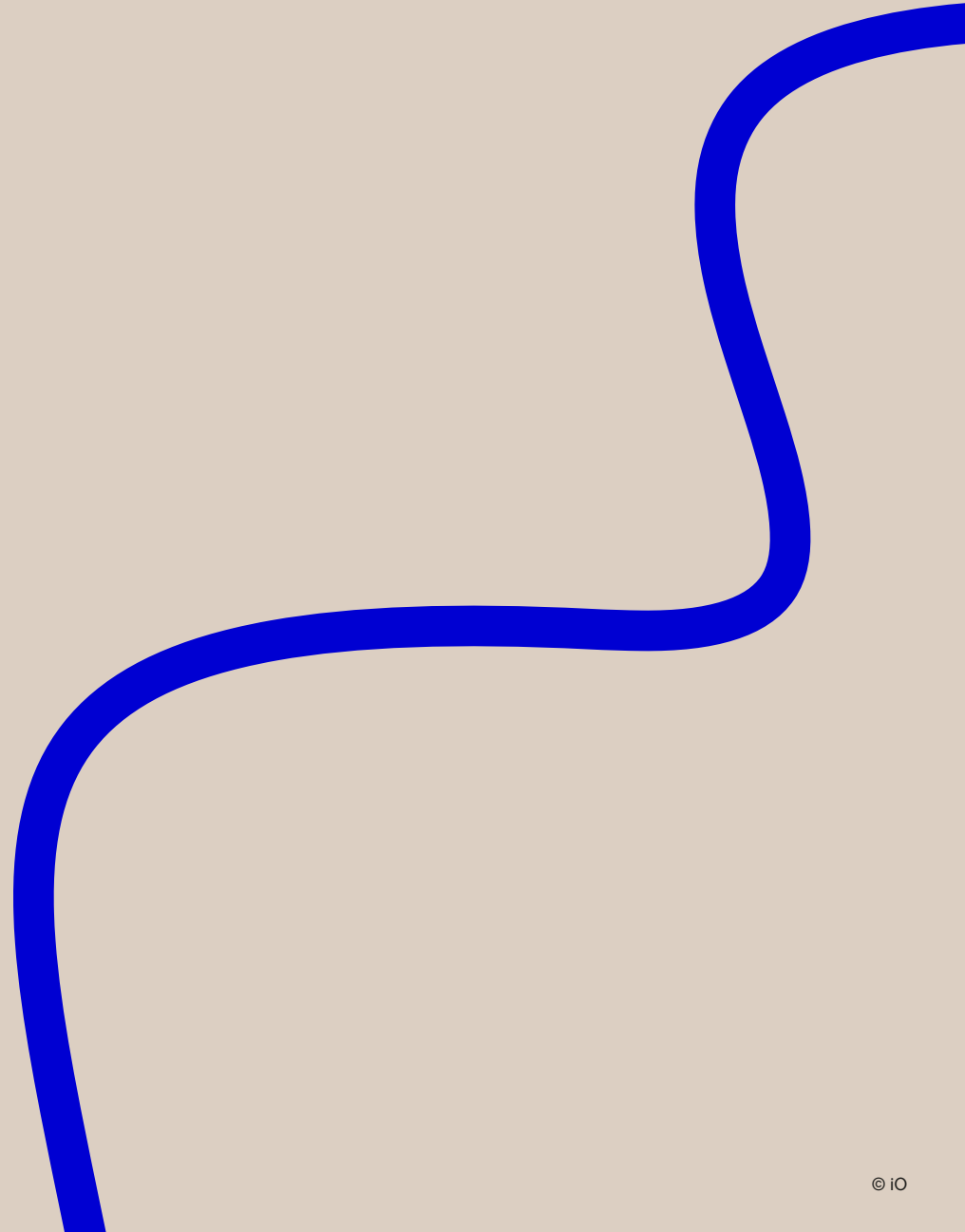
Internal champions also play a key role in adoption. They ensure the system is actively used and promoted, even outside design and development teams. **Training and clear documentation** help make the system part of daily practice within your organization.

Measuring impact is essential at all times. By tracking **KPIs** such as component reuse, design-to-code lead time, and brand consistency across channels, the value of your design system becomes visible and demonstrable. This makes it clear that the system not only drives efficiency but also strengthens **your brand and business value**.



7.

Bebat case



CASE – BEBAT

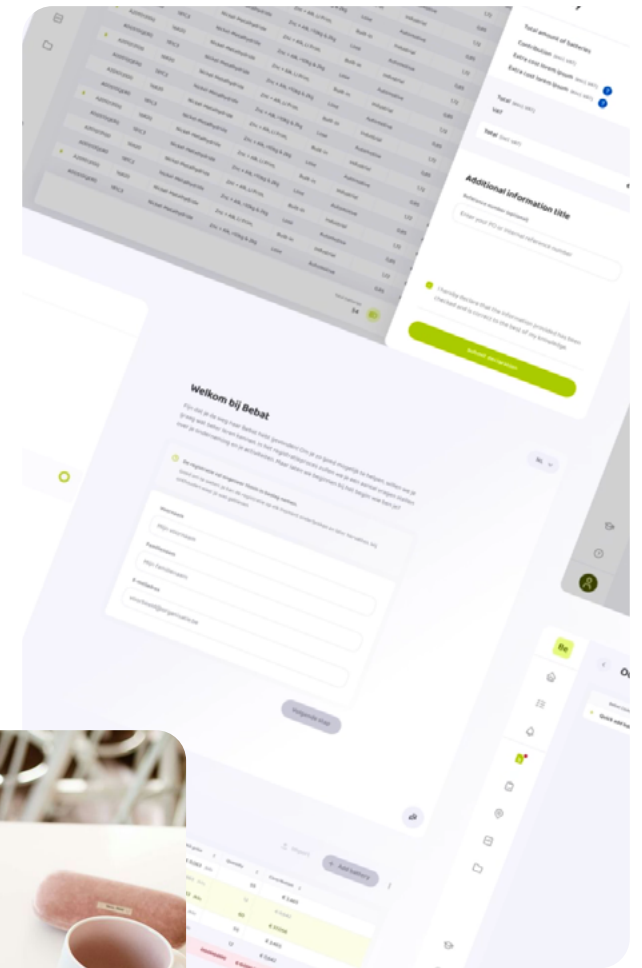
Bebat, the Belgian organisation responsible for battery collection and recycling, had the ambition to consistently translate its brand values – sustainability, reliability and social relevance – across all digital touchpoints.

Together with iO, a design system was developed that serves as the strategic backbone for all digital communication and campaigns. The system combines reusable components, clear documentation and governance, enabling marketing, design and development teams to work faster and more consistently.

The impact is clearly measurable:

- Accelerated time-to-market for campaigns and digital tools.
- Consistent brand experience across educational apps, corporate communication and marketing campaigns.
- More efficient collaboration between teams thanks to one shared set of building blocks and guidelines.

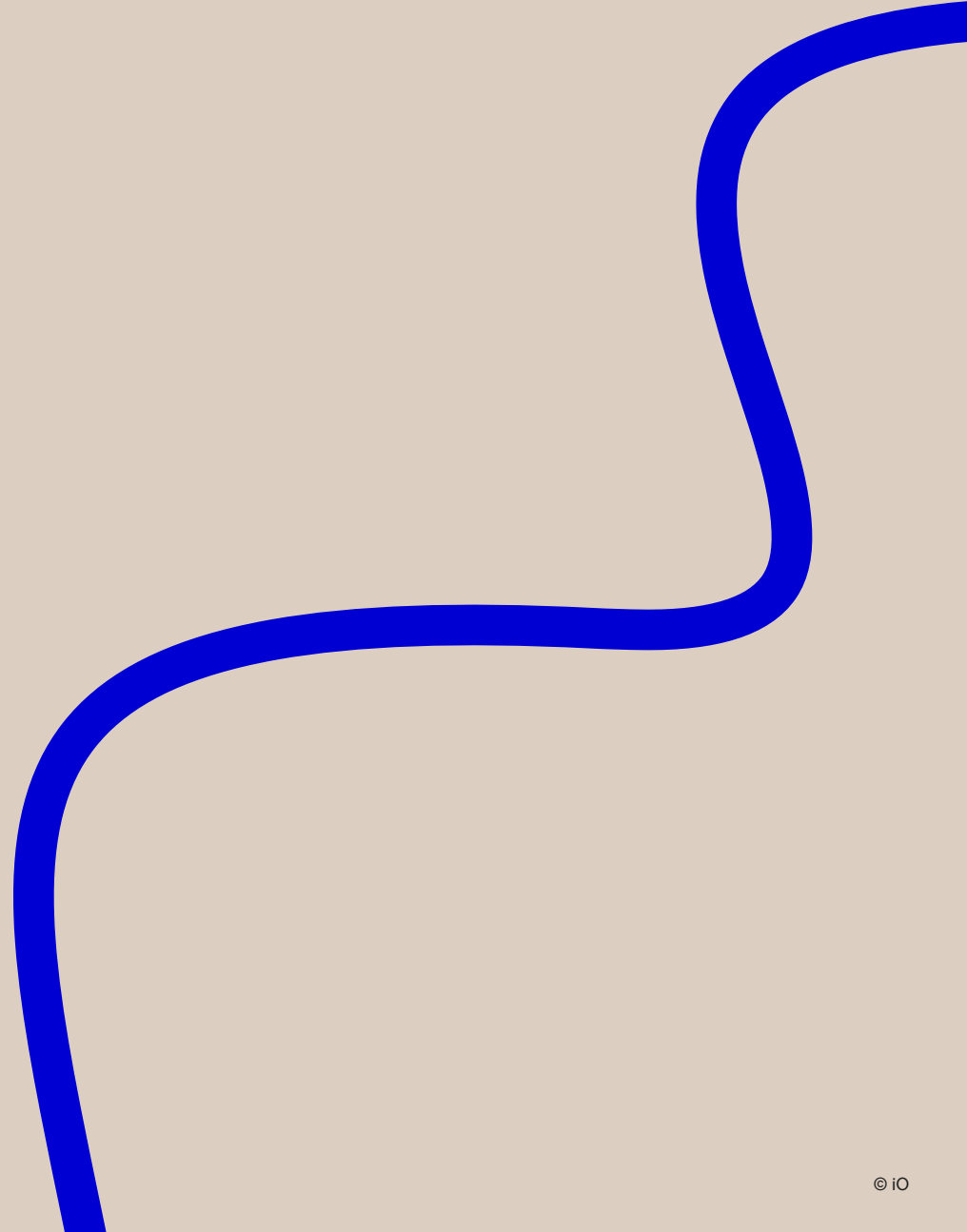
With this design system, Bebat proves that non-profit organisations also benefit from a scalable, systematic approach. It enables them to powerfully and recognisably translate their social mission to every digital channel, thereby strengthening both brand value and impact.



[More about the case →](#)

8.

Ready to
get started?



Before you start building a design system, it's important to assess whether your brand and organization are ready for such a system. The checklist below provides insight into the **minimum requirements** for a successful start:

Brand strategy	You have clear brand values, a vision, and a defined tone of voice.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visual identity	Your logos, colours, typography, and icons are available in digital formats (SVG, Figma).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Components	An initial set of reusable UI components (buttons, input fields, cards, etc.) is available or defined.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Design tooling	You have fully operational Figma libraries with a component structure (Auto Layout, Variants).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Design tokens	Standardised design tokens exist for colour, spacing, typography, etc. (manually or via tooling).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Documentation	Basic documentation or a rationale is available for each component (when, why, how to use).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accessibility	WCAG 2.2 guidelines are applied at both visual and interaction levels.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Team alignment	Agreements exist for collaboration between design, development, and content teams.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Governance structure	Ownership, change processes, and version control are defined	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technical integration	Connection to your development stack (Storybook, Zeroheight, Git) is possible or planned.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Start project	You have chosen the first MVP application (e.g., login flow, landing page, or campaign format).	<input type="checkbox"/>

How iO helps you, from strategy to execution

Our approach combines strategy, creativity, technology, and measurability in one integrated process, always starting from your brand and business goals.

A design system only delivers value when **strategy**, **creative execution**, and technology blend together. That is exactly where iO makes the difference. We combine strategic brand development, creative execution, and technical implementation in a **single integrated process**.

1. Intake & audit

- Assess the current brand and system maturity.
- Analyse your brand identity, visual assets, existing components, governance processes, and technical integrations.
- Determine the starting point: expand, onboard, or fully integrate.

2. MVP design system

- Set up the first working system with reusable components, tokens, and documentation.
- Integrate brand principles, tone of voice, and visual guidelines into the technical building blocks.
- Apply it first to a visible flow or campaign to demonstrate impact.

3. Governance structure

- Define roles and responsibilities across all disciplines.
- Establish processes for changes, approvals, and updates.
- Set flexible rules to enable creativity.

4. Adoption & training

- Provide training for internal teams and external partners.
- Integrate the design system into onboarding processes for new employees.
- Create an internal design system community to encourage usage and innovation.

The result?

- A **consistent brand identity** that is recognisable across all channels and products and inspires trust.
- **Accelerated workflows**, allowing marketing and tech teams to deliver faster and with higher quality.
- **Creative freedom** without compromising brand consistency, thanks to flexible but well-governed frameworks.
- Direct, **measurable impact** on your ROI, customer satisfaction, and brand perception, supported by data.

In conclusion

A design system is **not a luxury but a necessity** for organisations that want to **innovate faster without compromising their brand**. It provides a scalable foundation that allows your brand identity to be consistently expressed across every channel and touchpoint.

Investing in a design system now not only builds more **efficient processes** but also strengthens your **brand value** and **customer trust**. This cements the foundation for **sustainable growth**.



Jonathan Danko
Design Director, iO



If you want to learn more about design systems, how to implement them, or how to optimise your existing system, our experts are ready to help.

[Get in touch with Jonathan →](#)

Blenden expertise for optimal experiences

iO is one of Europe's leading digital agencies and home of ambitious people, organisations and brands. Since 2005, we deliver marketing that performs, content that connects, and platforms that scale - all seamlessly integrated across data, media, AI, infrastructure and digital operations.

Brand, business & experience design

We bring your brand to life, shaping every user's experience while connecting them with your brand and business.



Digital platforms

We build technology teams, architecture, and platforms from simple to complex, helping you to digitise your services and develop customer loyalty.



Marketing programmes & campaigns

We reach your target groups on the right channels with the right tone of voice. Accelerating your brand growth through tailor-made full-funnel marketing.



Creation & content production

We create content that shapes your brand experience and attracts users. Our experts advise, plan and create photo, audio, text and video content.



Cloud, data & integration

We make your IT, data and marketing infrastructure scalable. Integrated with the right cloud partnerships and data set-ups.



Transformatie & consulting

We support your transformation, deliver CX impact through service design, and develop digital knowledge across your teams.





Experience is everything

