Designing out the friction

Krina Rathod, product designer at Smartstream, discusses bringing a fresh UX perspective to asset servicing, the value of questioning legacy workflows, and how better design can improve efficiency, usability, and operational resilience

Can you give us an insight into your personal journey into the asset services industry? Why did you decide this was the career for you?

My path into the asset services industry was not the traditional finance route. I trained as a user experience (UX) designer, working across business to business (B2B) and business to customer (B2C) software as a service (SaaS), doing a lot of feature exploration and user testing for data-heavy, dashboard-style products. What drew me to asset servicing was realising how much of the industry still runs on legacy interfaces and manual workarounds, even though the underlying problems that are reconciliation, reporting, and data accuracy are genuinely complex and interesting from a design perspective.

Joining Smartstream felt like a chance to apply UX thinking somewhere it has historically been underinvested in, for users who are highly skilled but often working with tools that fight them rather than help them. Designing for that kind of environment is a different muscle than consumer apps, and I wanted to test myself against it.

What aspects of your job do you enjoy most?

I enjoy the research and testing side most: watching someone use a product I have worked on, seeing where they hesitate or build workarounds, and turning that into something measurably better. There is a real sense of impact when a redesign shaves minutes off a process that gets repeated hundreds of times a day.

I also enjoy the scale of impact here compared to some consumer products I have worked on before. A small improvement to an operational workflow does not just help one person once, it gets repeated hundreds of times a day by teams handling significant volumes of activity, so the cumulative effect of a good design decision is much bigger than it might look on the surface.

Being fairly new to the industry, how does your experience compare to those who are more established? Are there pros and cons?

The obvious con is I do not yet have the depth of domain knowledge that colleagues who have been in asset servicing for a decade have. I am still building my mental model of the processes and the "why" behind certain workflows.

The upside is I do not take any of it for granted. Established colleagues sometimes stop noticing friction because they have adapted to it; I still notice it, and I ask "why does it work this way?" more often than someone who is used to the answer being "it's always been like that".

Have you noticed any misconceptions about the asset servicing industry?

The biggest one is that it is very dull. There is a huge amount of genuinely hard technical and design problems: real-time data, exception handling, systems that have to be both rock-solid and adaptable to constant regulatory change.

Is there anything in the industry you would like to see evolve or change?

I would like to see more investment in the actual user experience of operational tools, not just the data and compliance layer underneath them. A lot of platforms are built outward from the data model rather than from the person who has to act on that data under time pressure.

I think there is a real opportunity for design to reduce operational risk, not just make things look nicer, fewer manual errors, faster exception handling, less reliance on institutional memory.

What is the training process for a new employee? Was it beneficial to your role and those now in the same position?

My onboarding started with business context rather than jumping straight into tools. Understanding what the products actually do and why they matter before touching a design file. From there, I was given small, real pieces of work early on rather than sitting through weeks of pure training, which helped me start contributing and learning by doing.

Regular check-ins throughout meant any gaps in my understanding got caught and addressed quickly rather than piling up. It was genuinely useful, and I think it is a good model for anyone new to the industry. You learn faster by being trusted with real work early, as long as there is a safety net of feedback to catch you.

In terms of your career, where do you see yourself in a decade?

I would like to grow from designing individual products to shaping design strategy more broadly and helping define how financial infrastructure should be designed as a discipline, not just solved project by project. That means thinking beyond a single interface to how design principles, research practices, and usability standards get embedded across an organisation's whole product suite.

What advice would you give to young graduates entering the financial services field?

Curiosity and a willingness to ask 'why' are often more useful than prior domain knowledge, at least at first. Get close to real users early, even informally. The fastest way to understand a complex industry is watching someone actually do the job, not reading about it. And be patient with yourself as depth in financial services takes time, but the fundamentals of good design (empathy, clarity, testing your assumptions) transfer everywhere. ■

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