

Design Without Borders: The Future of Freelancing



Foreword

With input from more than 10,000 freelance designers around the world, this report maps out an evolving creative workforce. Representing opinions and experiences of creatives in 42 different countries, this is one of the most far-reaching looks at the freelance design landscape to date, and we are thankful to our own community and the designers outside of it who took the time to share their stories and insights.

In the following pages, we look at who is freelancing; what drives and motivates this specialized group; how, why, and where they work; what challenges they face; and how they think about the future.

We show that this thriving, international talent pool is united by a common pursuit of creative freedom and personal flexibility—regardless of geography, age, gender or background. For an overwhelming majority of designers, freelancing is aspirational, not a necessity.

In their responses, designers also dispel some common misconceptions about agency life, digital nomadism and millennial stereotypes. While careers across nearly every sector become increasingly non-linear, freelancers are leading the charge when it comes to continuous self-directed learning and skills development.



“ At 99designs, we’ve always believed that design has no borders, and this data proves that this is true now more than ever. Our industry is made better by opening itself up to more voices and more diversity, and we look forward to a world where creativity meets possibility and design is truly global.”

Patrick Llewellyn
CEO, 99designs

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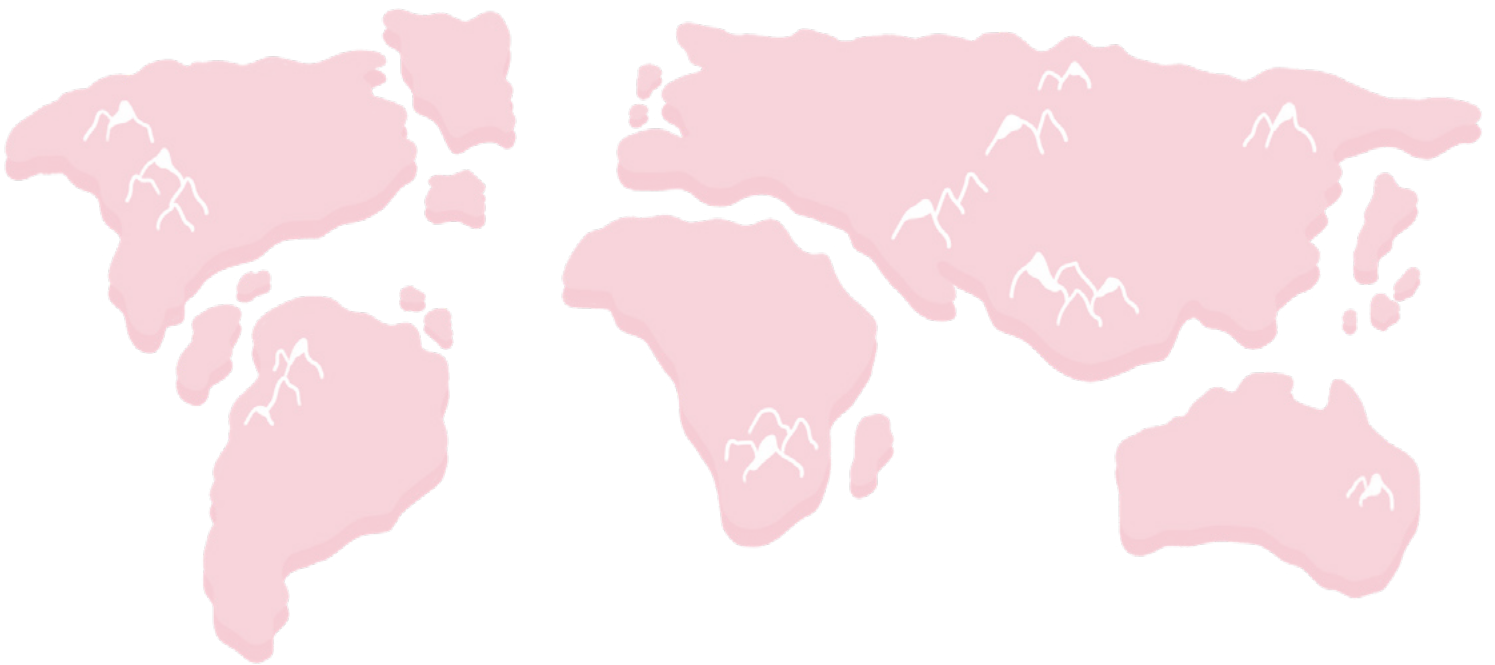
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Meet the designers

We surveyed over 10,000 freelance designers from around the world. So, who are these folks? Let's look at the professional experience of the freelance design workforce and how they trained, where they live and how they work.

Freelance design is global

Designers from 42 countries shared their experience, insights and outlook on the design industry.¹



¹Appendix Table 1: Designers by region

Designers have been freelancing forever, but millennials made it mainstream.

Freelancing has been a mainstay of the creative industries for decades. We found that more than 25% of designers over 40 have been freelancing for at least 20 years.

However, it should come as no surprise that millennials and their massive influence on global culture have made self-employment the new normal. While they weren't the first generation to embrace freelancing, 30-39-year-olds (34%) and 25-29-year-olds (27%) are the largest group of freelance designers in the world. Gen Z is not far behind with 23% of freelancers under the age of 25.²

Younger designers are rejecting traditional employment more than the generations that came before them. They are embracing freelancing earlier and doing so in increasingly bigger numbers.



Older in America. Freelance designers over 50 are much more likely to be from the USA than any other country. About 25% of all designers in this age group are from the United States.

² Appendix Table 2: Freelance designers by age

Designers are diverse

The design and technology industries both face vital challenges when it comes to diversity. To better understand the demographics of freelancers, our survey included an optional section for designers to self-identify.

Globally, 68% of freelance designers identify as male, 28% as female, though this breakdown varies significantly from region to region.³ Asia, Europe, South America and Africa have a higher percentage of freelancers who identify as male, but in North America and Australia, the female freelance workforce leads the charge.



³ Appendix Table 3: Gender identity by region

Minorities: One in four freelance designers identified themselves as part of a minority group based on ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability.

Discrimination: One in five designers said they have experienced discrimination based on their minority status in a professional situation.

Working parents: 31% of designers are parents or claim dependents under the age of 18, and over half of them are the primary caregiver in their family.

“I have Asperger’s syndrome. Many of us are drawn to the arts. There are a lot of people on the spectrum working in design.”

Respondent 6942, Uruguay

“I have 7 kids (5 home-schooled) and a grandbaby. I freelance full-time. If I can make it work, anyone can.”

Respondent 6826, United States

Designers are well-educated...

Over 40% of freelance designers have an undergraduate degree in a design-related field, and 9% have a postgraduate qualification (MA or PhD).

One in five designers have completed a technical certificate program in design, and another 15% have completed part of a degree program.⁴

Of the designers with a design-related degree, 42% also consider themselves self-taught in some way. In addition:

- **54%** learn skills online
- **49%** learn on the job
- **24%** completed a technical certificate program
- **11%** had an apprenticeship

⁴ Appendix Table 4: Formal design education by region

...and they're always upskilling.

The majority of designers report continuous learning throughout their careers. In fact, nearly half of designers cited “the opportunity to learn new skills” as one of the best things about freelancing.

40% of freelancers say they learn new design skills on the job, while more than 60% have taught or are currently teaching themselves new skills and techniques that they use in their work.

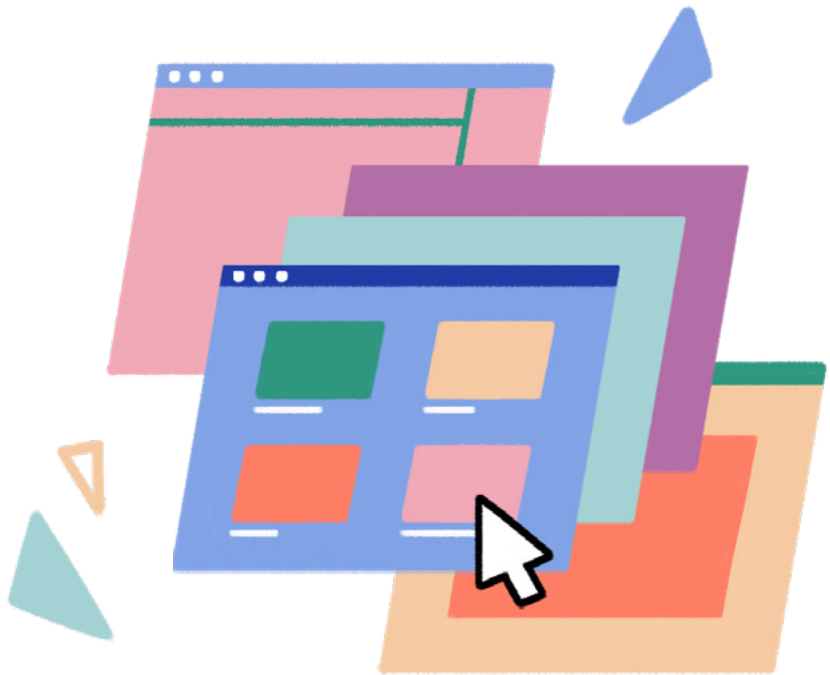


Upskilling online is the future

Technology is enabling a new wave of upskilling, with online learning leading the way when it comes to picking up new techniques.

- **74%** learn by watching YouTube tutorials and experimentation
- **33%** learn by participating in online classes
- **18%** learn new skills by attending in-person training or classes

Which is to say: there's more than one way to get an education.



“Even if you don’t have the resources to go to college, it doesn’t mean you can’t be a graphic designer. Nobody should make you feel less for not having the same opportunity as them.”

Respondent 1277, Venezuela

Education and success

Despite the high proportion of designers with formal training, only 15% of designers said formal design education is crucial to career success. It isn't necessary at all according to 23% of respondents, while 36% had no firm opinion.

The importance (and necessity) of continuous learning throughout designers' creative careers might be responsible for their overall ambivalence about whether formal design education leads to industry success.



Have experience, will work.

While plenty of junior designers are freelancing, a quarter of freelancers have more than a decade of experience in the design industry.⁶

“Freelancing has its stress, but not like working for an agency does.”

Respondent 3272, United States



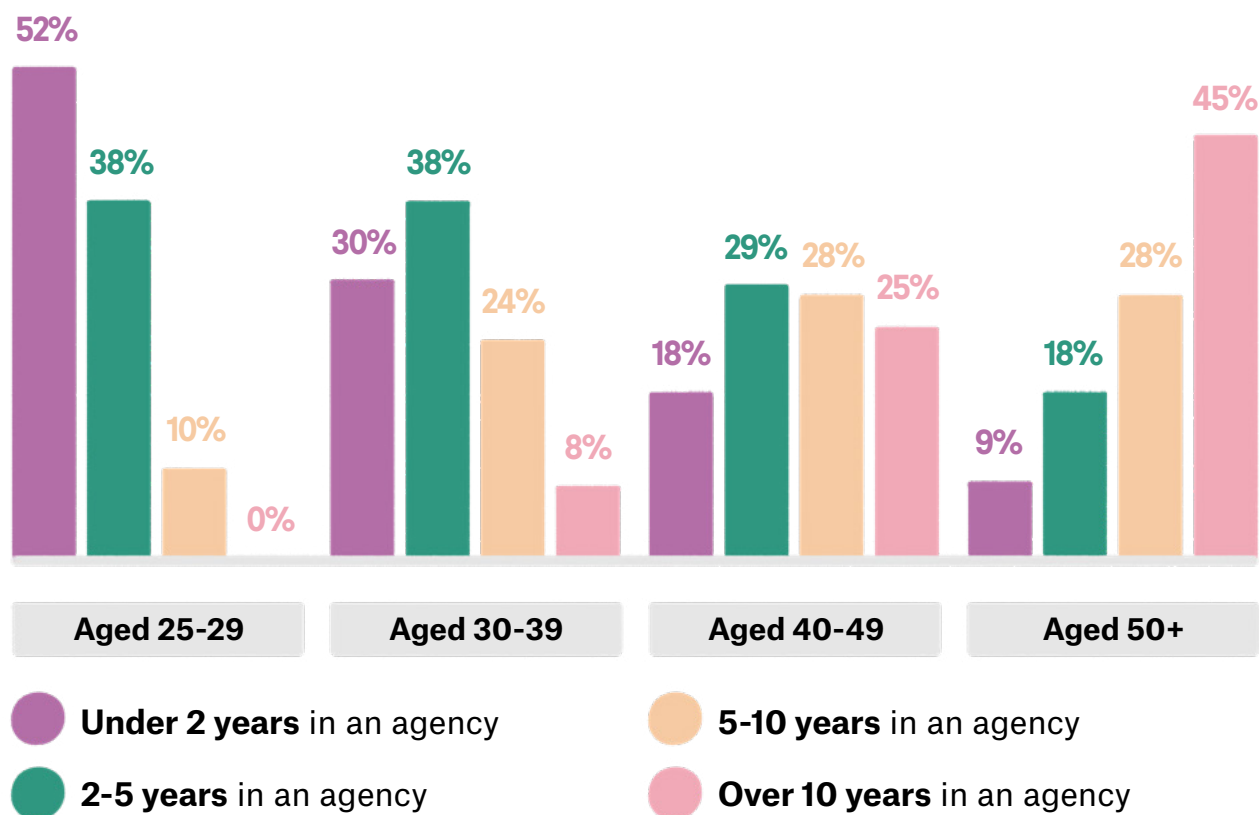
⁶ Appendix Table 5: Industry experience in years

Over 40% of freelance designers have worked in an agency, and more than half of these designers would be considered senior staff. 16% have between 5 and 10 years of agency experience, and another 9% have more than a decade.

However, generational differences emerged regarding how long designers stick with agency life. The older the age group, the longer designers tended to have stayed in an agency environment.⁷



Adiós agencies! A majority of designers under 30 (52%) are ditching their agency jobs after just two years, much earlier than previous generations. Because there are many more viable opportunities, freelancing is less risky and more common.



⁷ Appendix Table 6: Designers with agency experience

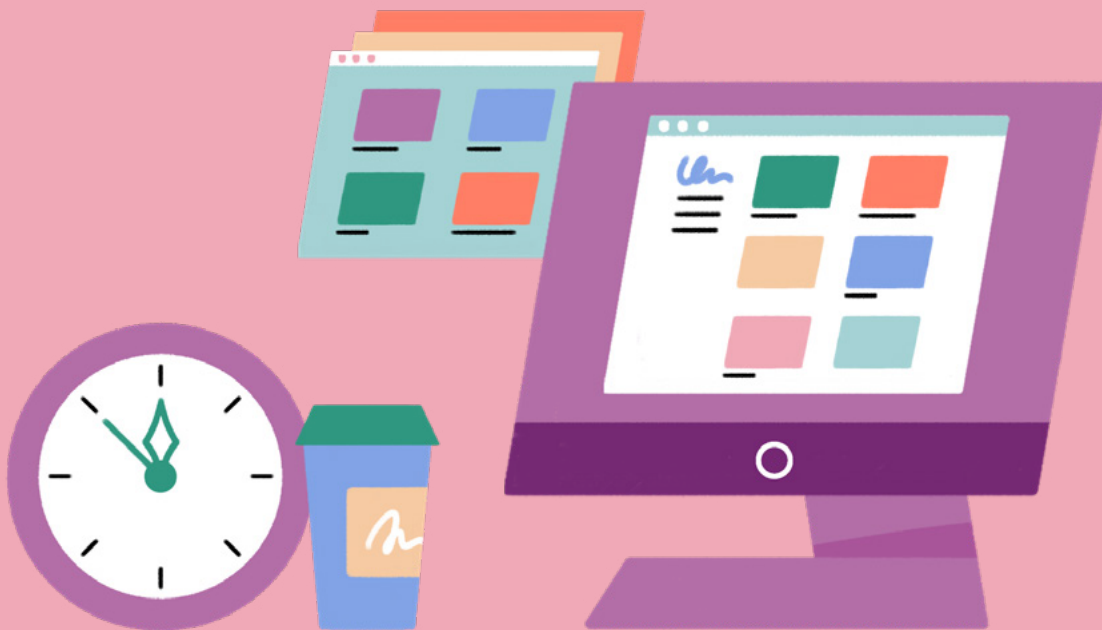
Two types of workers

Our survey revealed that freelance designers fall into two major groups: over two-thirds (68%) work only in the design industry, while the remainder (32%) also work in other industries and in other roles.

Nearly a quarter of the people who work exclusively in the design industry are moonlighting as freelancers alongside their day job.



Online opportunities. 84% of freelance designers said they had an account on one or more online freelance platform. Designers working full-time in the industry were slightly more likely to have an account (86%) than designers also working in another industry (80%).





Freelance designers who work in other industries have extremely varied jobs. Respondents work in more than 35 industries: retail, publishing, architecture, construction, finance, healthcare and more. Day jobs include everything from pharmacist and au pair to soccer player and even lion tamer! That amounts to a lot of specialist skills and insights to sit alongside their design expertise.

The most common fields of alternative work outside of the design industry are:

20%

Arts & entertainment

20%

Digital products & services

17%

Marketing

15%

Education

14%

Social media



Designers are using their creative powers for good

Alongside their design work, freelancers also:

Do design favors for friends and family

65%

Teach design skills to others

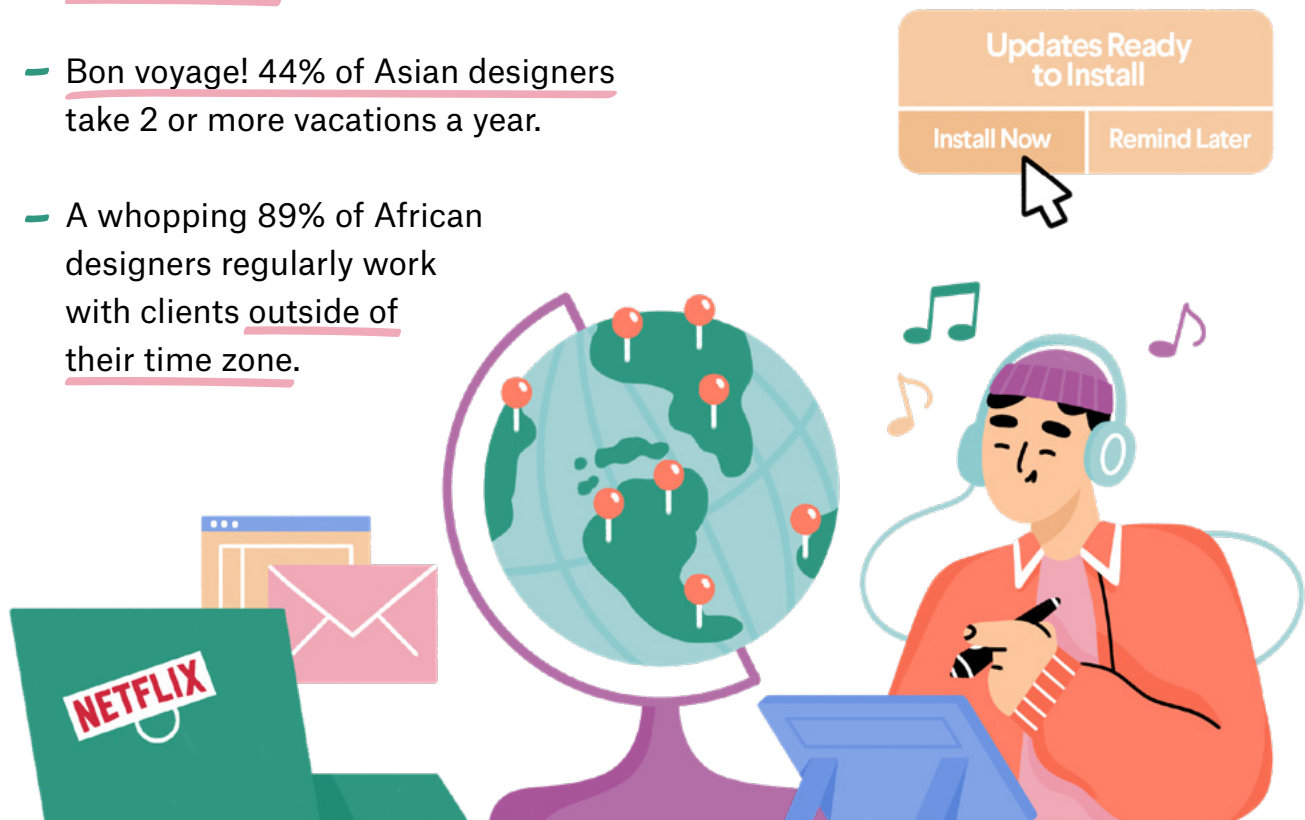
22%

Do pro-bono design work for not-for-profits

20%

Portrait of a freelancer

- Across the globe, designers prefer...
Wacom (62%) to iPad (38%)
Email (69%) to in-person meetings (31%)
- More than 70% of North American and Australian designers prefer Instagram over Behance for showcasing their portfolios.
- The majority of designers (63%) may be extroverts, but Aussies (64%) and North Americans (58%) would much rather Netflix-and-chill than network and schmooze.
- 83% of South Americans do their best work to a beat.
- European designers are more likely to work with a partner than the rest of the world.
- Bon voyage! 44% of Asian designers take 2 or more vacations a year.
- A whopping 89% of African designers regularly work with clients outside of their time zone.



The reality of freelance life

Across the board, freelance designers are motivated by the promise of freedom and flexibility. Their hours and workplace locations are extremely varied, and there's a wide range of work available for them. The vast majority of designers work with international clients, and many collaborate as part of a team. All of these things result in high levels of creative satisfaction.

But designers also face many personal, financial and client challenges that can make self-employment less than ideal.

“Freelancing is not an ‘on-the-beach with a drink and laptop’ style of work.

I chose design, tried, hustled, cried, hustled and hustled, and I’ve reached quite high now. But life is still not so sexy.

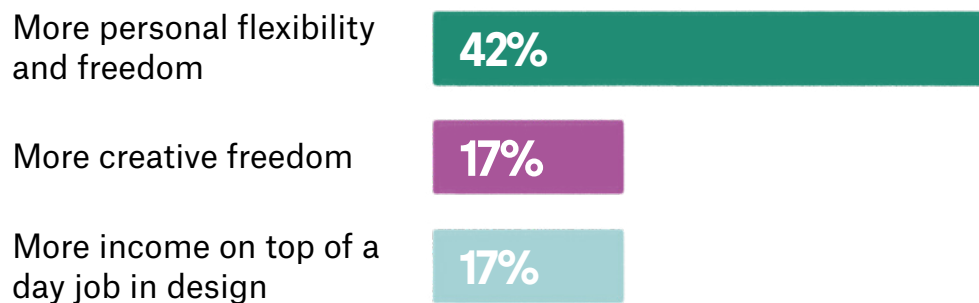
My dream as a designer is to create meaningful products for the world, hire a badass team, and spend time with my family.”

Respondent 6942, Uruguay

Freelancing can pay off big, but it's not always easy.

When we asked designers what motivated them to start freelancing, the number one reason for designers across every region and age group was freedom and flexibility.

The top 3 reasons designers choose to freelance:



“I’ve been traveling the world for the past year and that wouldn’t be possible without freelancing.”

Respondent 7876, United States

Just 5% of designers said they freelanced because they couldn't find other steady work. Freelancing is something that the vast majority of designers aspire to, not something they're driven to by necessity or because there's no other option.

➔ **Lucrative and loving it.** Nearly a third of designers (31%) say they make more money freelancing than if they worked somewhere else.

When it came to voicing the best things about freelance life, designers were very consistent across age and geographical lines:





While freelancing does offer the promise of a flexible schedule, creative freedom and extra income, many designers encounter significant issues being self-employed in the industry.

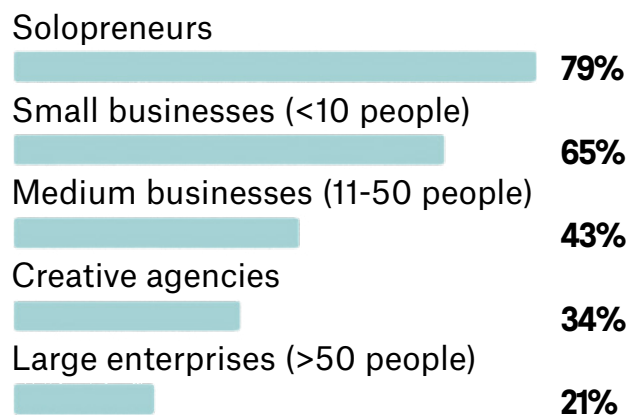
The top challenges facing freelance designers:

- **37%** have a hard time finding new clients and projects
- **34%** don't believe they're being paid what they're worth
- **26%** struggle to collect payments from clients
- **24%** have trouble negotiating rates with clients
- **21%** feel isolated from their peers

Designers work in every industry

From solo entrepreneurs to large corporations, businesses from every industry imaginable tap into freelance creative talent as a vital resource.

Who are designers working with?



Designers reported working with clients in more than 35 sectors, with these industries being the most popular:



The client acquisition game

Freelance success only comes when designers can find new business leads. The number one source for new clients is online platforms (57%), though referrals (24%) and social media (11%) are also key channels for client acquisition.

In North America (48%) and Australia (47%), designers are most likely to find work through referrals. Older designers tend to receive more client leads through their existing network. Designers under 29 report just 21% of leads coming through client and peer referrals, compared to 38% for designers over 50.⁸

Because of their wide-ranging client base, designers report to a variety of different contacts within organizations, which means that they must be comfortable and skilled at communicating and collaborating with all seniority levels and roles within a business.



Success on social. Designers under 29 say social media provides 14% of new leads compared to just 6% for those over 50.

⁸ Appendix Table 7: How designers find leads

Freelancers are not lone wolves

It's easy to imagine freelance life as a solitary endeavor with 77% of designers working primarily out of a home office. However, collaboration is still king. The majority (68%) of freelancers work as part of a team at least some of the time. Only around a third of designers (32%) said they never pair up to get work done.



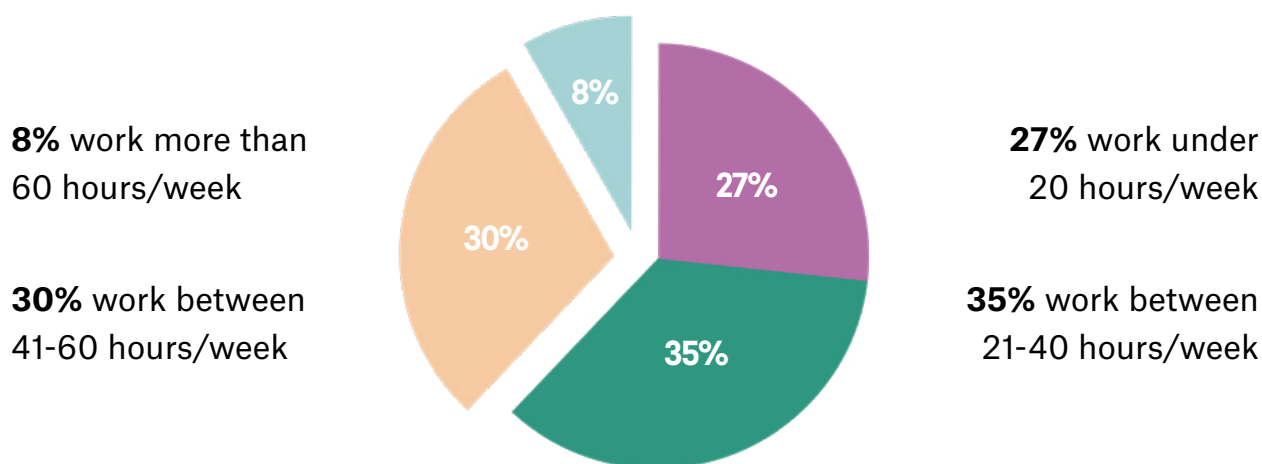
Most often (62%) designers form remote teams with other freelancers in their personal network, but 31% work with teams assigned to them by a client.



Life partners and work partners. 21% of designers work with a spouse or domestic partner.

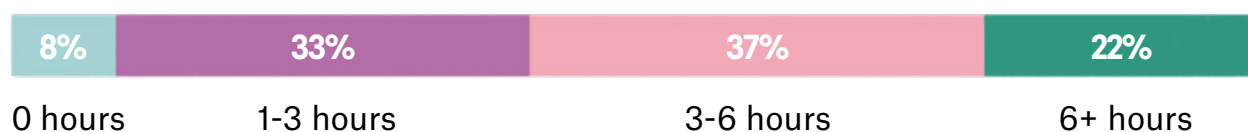
Regular hours aren't really a thing

When it comes to the weekly grind, over a third of designers work full time (more than 40 hours) on their freelance projects, but there's a huge range of schedules.



Because freelancing offers flexibility, designers make the most of this control with a variety of daily schedules.

Daily hours worked outside of 9am-5pm:



The moonlighting majority. Only 8% of designers said that they do all their work during normal working hours between 9am - 5pm.

“I only work at nighttime. I’m not really a morning person.”

Respondent 9243, Indonesia

Balancing work and life

Freelancers work hard, but they also take leisure time seriously. Over a third of designers take two or more vacations per year, with another third taking at least one vacation every year.

Asian (44%) and European (39%) designers take the most vacations—at least two a year. In North America, South America and Africa, around a quarter of designers say they rarely or never take a vacation.

Many designers identified work-life balance as one of their biggest challenges.



What is your work-life balance?

It's complicated.

“I love designing, but sometimes I need a break. If I work constantly, I fear I'll start to hate what I do.”

Respondent 9243, Indonesia

It's crucial to mental health.

“Balance means having the freedom to step away from work to take care of yourself and your relationships.”

Respondent 4182, Brazil

It's a journey.

“Work-life balance is a process, not a place.”

Respondent 3841, Nigeria



Working globally is the norm

Thanks to technology, 85% of freelance designers work with clients outside of their own time zone. The ubiquity of online platforms and tools means that international creative work and collaboration is absolutely the new normal.



43% of freelance designers have lived and worked abroad.

More than a quarter (26%) have worked in over three countries, and 6% have truly embraced the nomadic life by working in more than ten different countries.



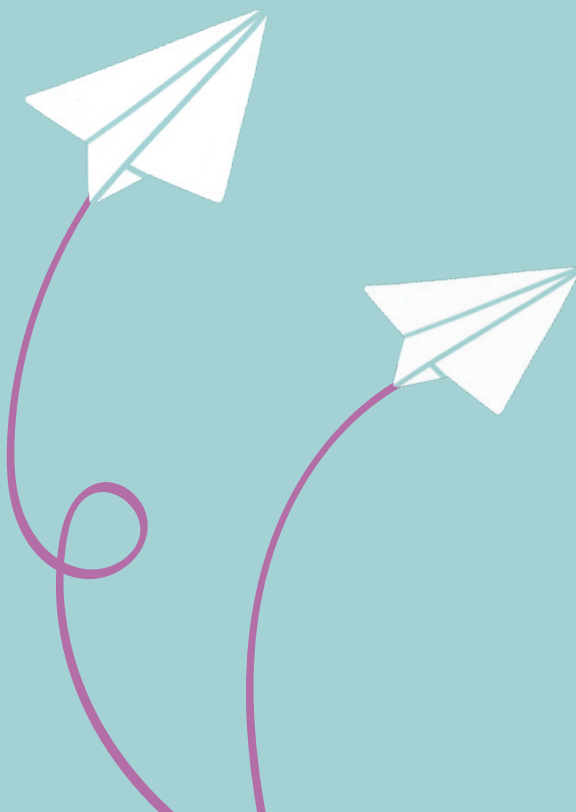
Certain regions of the world have more world-travelers than others.

In Asia, designers are more likely to have travelled and worked in other countries than designers from any other region. 36% of designers in Asia have worked in 3 or more countries, with 11% having worked in 10+ countries.

Designers in North America are the least likely to travel and work with 73% of designers having only worked in one country. Only 9% have worked in 3 or more countries.



Digital nomad? While many see the “digital nomad” as a millennial phenomenon, designers have embraced travel as an integral part of their career across the generations. Across every single age group, between 6 and 7% of designers have worked in 10 or more countries.

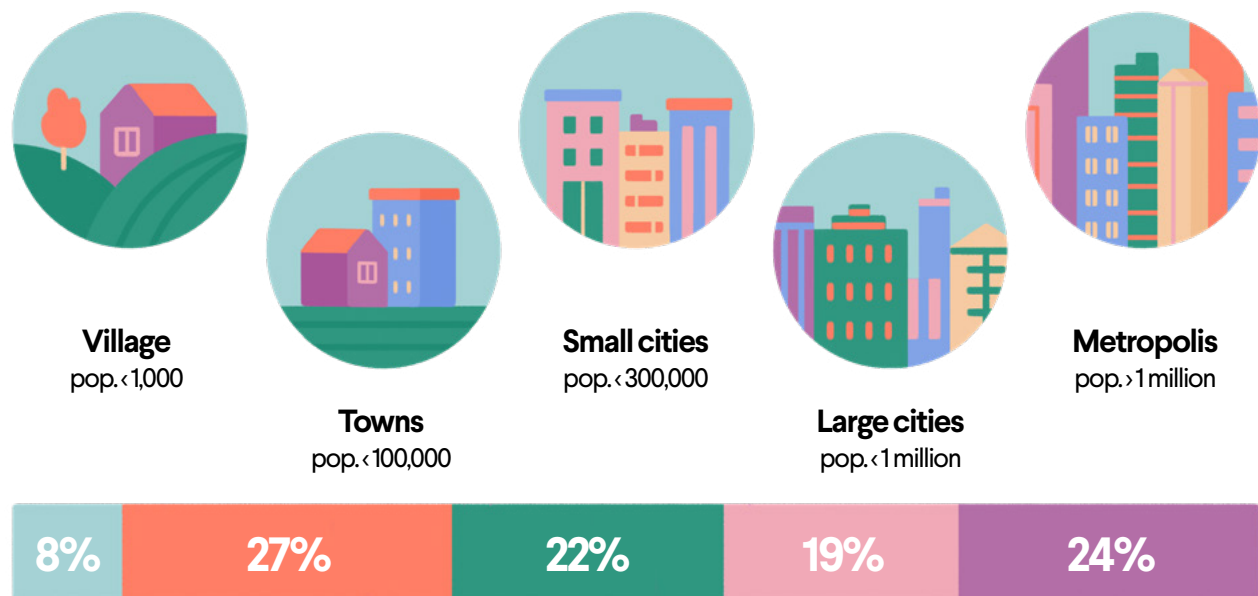


Designers live and work everywhere

Traditionally, creative industries have clustered around capital cities and major metropolitan areas.

Today, accessible technology has democratized access to creative work, and designers can now live and work in a variety of locales.

In fact, the majority of freelance designers (57%) live outside of their country's main metro areas.



The creative scene. More than half of designers live in a community with an active art and design community.

“I design because it brings me happiness. Design is a way to express myself and create function.”

Respondent 7645, United States

The emotional impact of freelancing

Here's some good news: the majority (78%) of freelance designers reported being satisfied with their current professional situation, though many (65%) admit there's some room for improvement.

While designers clearly love the flexibility and freedom freelancing offers, there's still an emotional cost: 21% of freelance designers report feeling isolated, and 12% feel that they are spread too thin and are burning out.

Burnout levels are very similar across every geographical region and age group, except for designers over 50, who are about half as likely to be feeling burnt out (6% vs. 12% of designers overall).



The gender breakdown. Almost twice as many male designers (14%) report being completely happy with their work situation than female designers (8%).



Many designers also report experiencing both imposter syndrome and creative block at various stages in their career.

- Creative block hits about one in five designers on a regular basis. A lucky 17% never experience it.
- Imposter syndrome affects 14% of designers regularly and 39% occasionally.
- Age and experience have a positive impact on both imposter syndrome and creative block. As a designer's age increases, the likelihood of experiencing both imposter syndrome and creative block decreases.
- Female designers are more likely to frequently experience imposter syndrome than male designers (19% versus 12%), but the opposite is true when it comes to creative block. Men (20%) report experiencing creative block more often compared to women (13%).



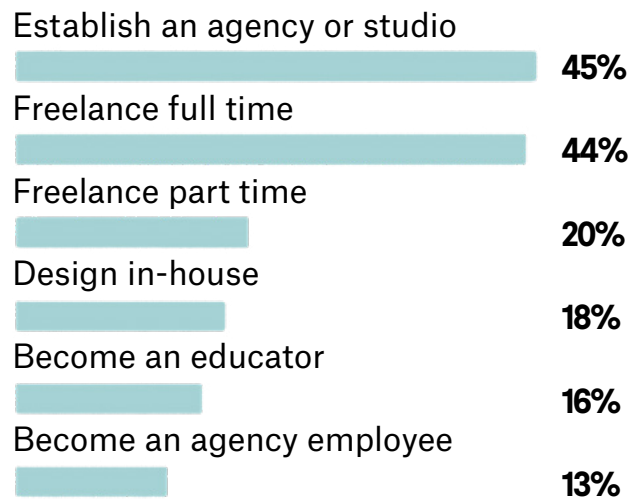
Feeling down, down-under. Designers in Australia are more likely to report experiencing imposter syndrome than designers in other regions: 34% say they often feel like this and 38% occasionally.



What's next? The five year plan and the agency conundrum.

When asked about their future aspirations, freelance designers responded with five year plans that were remarkably similar, irrespective of age or location.

In the next five years, designers want to...



Given that most designers left agencies before the two year point, and younger generations are quitting agencies earlier than ever before, it's notable that so many want back into the game but only as the boss. With so many freelancers (41%) having previous agency experience, this suggests that designers recognize the best place at an agency is at the top.

“Design will always be a way to shape the world around us; it will never become irrelevant.”

Respondent 6685, Russia

A future outlook

Change is coming. Designers are ready.

When it comes to identifying the challenges facing the industry, and the skills that designers feel are the most important for the future, the response is clear. Designers are not only aware of global issues and how quickly things change, they're also equipping themselves to make a difference outside of the design industry bubble. Their adaptability and inherent creativity empowers them to be agents for change.

Designers identified the most important skills for the future as:

1. Adaptability to new technology
2. Openness to social change
3. Design research
4. Communication
5. Ability to work in multidisciplinary teams



Empathy is essential. 30% of designers from South America flagged empathy as one of the most important skills for the future of the design industry.

Designers identified the biggest challenges facing the design industry as:

1. Ethics in design
2. Lack of diversity
3. Trademark concerns
4. Design's influence on the environment
5. Automation

“Designers have to investigate, be critical, impartial, and understanding.”

Respondent 10303, Mexico



Conclusion

Our survey has uncovered a wealth of knowledge about the work and lives of freelance graphic designers from all over the world.

There is no such thing as a typical freelancer. They're parents and refugees, entrepreneurs and artists. Whoever they are and wherever they might be, they're united by their unrelenting drive to dream big and create a better future.

Freelancers confirmed technology is changing how we work. Designers are ditching agency life faster than ever before, as freelancing becomes less risky and offers more viable opportunities for growth and creativity. More than half of freelancers are joining forces and forming remote collaborative teams. Designers of all ages are turning to online platforms to bring in new clients. And, of course, working remotely is the new normal. In other words: have wi-fi, will create.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Perhaps the biggest discovery of our survey is that there is now a multi-talented, creative workforce spread around the world that is committed to learning and adapting to any challenge it may face. With their digital savvy and global awareness, designers are well-equipped to take charge of the future of freelancing. Their flexibility and creativity empowers them in an unpredictable industry that continues to evolve.

But no matter where the industry is headed, one thing is certain: design truly has no borders.

Credits

Special thanks to the designers who made the execution of this report possible.

Anya Perepelkina, also known as **Wildanya**, is a Russia-based graphic designer and illustrator. She specializes in funky, aesthetic character illustrations.

Cristina Dascalu, also known as **CriDascalu**, is a designer from Bucharest, Romania. She specializes in illustration, character design, matte painting and UX design.

Methodology

This online survey was conducted by 99designs between June 11th – 21st, 2019 and distributed via email, social media, and industry-targeted ads on Instagram. 11,204 designers responded from the following regions: Asia (3,294), Europe (2,390), North America (933), South America (552), Africa (437), Australia (70), Unknown (3,528). Quotes have been pulled from open responses.

Appendix

Table 1. Designers by region

Breakdown of designers by continent	Top 3 countries by number of respondents
Asia: 43%	Indonesia, India, Bangladesh
Europe: 31%	Serbia, UK, Italy
North America: 12%	USA, Mexico, Canada
South America: 7%	Brazil, Colombia, Argentina
Africa: 6%	Morocco, Egypt, South Africa
Australia: 1%	Australia, New Zealand

Table 2. Freelance designers by age

Age group	Percentage
Under 25	23%
25-29	27%
30-39	34%
40-49	12%
50+	4%

Table 3. Gender identity by region

Continent	Identify as male	Identify as female	Identify as other	Prefer not to answer
Asia	82.38%	14.27%	1.16%	2.20%
Europe	60.28%	37.01%	1.10%	1.61%
North America	45.77%	51.33%	1.69%	1.21%
South America	65.56%	32.30%	1.55%	0.58%
Africa	77.63%	18.60%	1.89%	1.89%
Australia	37.88%	60.61%	0	1.52%

Table 4. Formal design education by region

Continent	Undergraduate	Postgraduate degree in design-related field	Technical Certificate program
Asia	30%	6%	24%
Europe	45%	14%	16%
North America	66%	6%	16%
South America	55%	8%	35%
Africa	30%	5%	24%
Australia	52%	3%	27%

Table 5. Industry experience in years

Total industry experience	Percentage of designers
Less than a year	12%
1-4 years	34%
5-9 years	29%
10-14 years	14%
15-20 years	7%
20+ years	4%

Table 6. Designers with agency experience: age and tenure

	Aged 25-29	Aged 30-39	Aged 40-49	Aged 50+
Under 2 years in an agency	52%	30%	18%	10%
2-5 years in an agency	38%	38%	29%	18%
5-10 years in an agency	10%	24%	28%	28%
10+ years in an agency	0	8%	25%	45%

Table 7. How designers find leads by age group

Group	Personal referral (peer and client)	Social media	Online freelance platforms
Under 29	21%	14%	58%
30-39	26%	9%	58%
40-49	33%	6%	53%
50+	38%	6%	45%



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