
Design Industry Voices 2010

How it feels to work in British design and digital agencies right now.

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Gabriele Skelton and On Pointe Marketing.

The headlines:

1. Over half of respondents (55.7%) intend to change job within a year, compared to 38.4% last year.
2. Staff are more discriminating about what they expect from their agency than they were in 2009.
3. The perceived delivery gap (the difference between the perceived importance compared to perception of how well an agency currently performs in relation to an agency attribute) has widened over the past year.
4. Age has an impact on what is considered important and how performance is perceived in an agency.
5. Owners and executive teams disagree that their agency 'has good pay and benefits package'.

1. Over half of respondents intend to change job within the next year.

- 55.7% either definitely or possibly intend to change job in the next year. Last year it was 38.4%.
- Of those who intend to change job, 70.4% plan to stay in the same area of work, 13.3% plan to do something different and 16.3% don't know.
- Respondents who have no intention to change job or don't know if they will change job rank the agency's performance higher than the majority of respondents across all agency attributes (see table one).
- Last year 94.5% of respondents were in permanent employment, 5.0% freelancing and 0.4% out of work. This year 69.4% of respondents are permanent employees with 26.0% freelancing and 4.6% currently not working.

Table one: *whole sample's perception of agency performance compared to those who answered 'no' and 'don't know' to the question 'Do you intend to change job in the next year?'*

	Agency attributes	Average (all)	Intention to change job (no/don't know)
1.	Values ideas and opinions	35.8%	49.1%
2.	Does work that is stimulating	31.0%	44.6%
3=	Has a strong sense of teamwork throughout the organization	30.1%	41.3%
3=	Trusts employees to make decisions	30.1%	43.6%
5.	A brand that is compatible with my own values	26.2%	38.3%
6.	Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	25.6%	34.3%
7.	Shares information and knowledge openly	23.4%	32.0%
8.	Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	22.5%	34.6%
9.	Clear strategic goals	18.8%	27.7%
10.	Has a good pay and benefits package	18.2%	27.6%
11.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	16.4%	27.6%
12.	Supports professional development and growth	15.8%	25.4%
13.	Rewards people for going the extra mile	15.5%	24.5%
14.	Appropriate workload for staffing levels	15.0%	21.0%
15.	Helps employees to manage stress	10.3%	17.1%

Implications:

With over half of respondents considering a move, it has never been more important for agency management to engage all staff to build reputation, retain talent and protect client relationships. The increase in freelancers means more people are regularly working at different agencies and these people can create or break agency reputations through word of mouth, potentially impacting on future recruitment.

Quotes from respondents:

“The industry is under financial pressures and organisations are adding to these by continually undercutting each other. This affects the quality of the work being developed and the well-being of those asked to deliver it. Agencies need to be able to do more with less – completely fair and a widespread occurrence in business. However, firms are not adjusting their processes and approaches to do this – the expectation is that people should just work longer for less. This is an unsustainable approach that is building to latent hostility to employers and causing churn which is exacerbating the original issue. However, large firms, especially those owned by holding companies, seem to care little about the long-term impact and lack of intellectual capital this creates for them.”

Male account manager, aged between 40-49, who has worked on a permanent contract for his current agency for less than four years.

“A lot of company owners are under the delusion that their employees want nothing more than to work late nights and weekends ‘for the cause’. The majority of people that I know in the design industry work ridiculous hours and have no work/life balance. Friends I know suffer stress and exhaustion, all under the belief they should be enjoying themselves because they have a vocational job. Also, for some reason which I’ve never figured out, design is the only industry where nobody ever says ‘no’ to the client. If you said to a plumber ‘I want this finished by the morning’, he’d probably laugh his head off. But in design, account handlers simply say ‘Yes, yes, yes’. I made the decision to become self-employed six years ago and I’ve never looked back. Despite still loving the work I do, I sincerely hope never to have to work full-time in the design industry again.”

Male freelance designer, aged between 30-39.

“It’s better to be freelance. Much less stress, and better pay.”

Male designer, aged between 18-29, who is on a permanent contract and has been with his agency for less than a year.

“I might go freelance to be able to do more creative work.”

Female designer, aged between 30-39, who is a member of an executive team on a permanent contract and has been with her agency for under five years and sometimes writes her thoughts on social networking sites.

“...agencies seem to be continuing to reduce in size, the days of the large agency seems to be numbered. This means that the role of the ‘good’ freelancer is ever more important. Across the industry there seems to be a lack of really good freelancers who have a wide range of experience.”

Male agency owner and designer, aged between 40-49, who has worked for his agency for less than a year and sometimes writes his thoughts on social networking sites.

“I, like many, am considering leaving it after 20 years. I’ve been in middle management for over 7 years, I’ve had no pay rise for 2 years yet my work load has increased 30% in that time, meaning no time to give any of the care it deserves. Everything is rushed and every client still wants more for less. The management at the top still seem to be maintaining their lifestyles at the expense of their staff. Senior management within the industry really need to look at what’s happening beneath them in the majority of SMEs and in the larger agencies, we all know they are certainly not immune from these symptoms even if they profess in the media publications that all is well. We are losing the people with knowledge and practical skills, at the expense of keeping strategy and planning. Who’s going to be left to do the work and pass on knowledge to the next generation if all the production managers, traffic managers, studio managers and account directors that are being pushed further and further leave the business?”

Male production manager, aged between 30-39, who has worked for his agency for less than four years and sometimes writes his thoughts on social networking sites.

2. **Staff are more discriminating about what they expect from their agency than they were in 2009.**

- There is a 42.9% difference between the highest ranked attribute (82.1% for ‘values ideas and opinions’) and lowest ranked attribute (39.2% for ‘helps employees to manage stress’) that respondents consider ‘very important’ in an agency.
- In 2009 the difference was 11.2%, with the highest ranking at 100% (‘has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills’) and the lowest ranking at 88.8% (for ‘focuses on farming existing clients’, which is no longer included in the survey).
- This year the lowest ranking attributes are for stress management, brand compatibility with respondents’ values, holding people accountable, appropriate work levels and feedback that helps respondents improve performance (see table two).

Table two: ‘very important’ attributes ranked from highest to lowest for the whole sample for 2010 compared to 2009.

	<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Importance 2010</i>	<i>Importance 2009</i>
1.	Values ideas and opinions	82.1%	99.3%
2.	Does work that is stimulating	77.2%	98.5%
3.	Has a strong sense of teamwork throughout the organization	72.1%	98.8%
4.	Rewards people for going the extra mile	71.1%	96.1%
5.	Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	70.3%	100%
6.	Trusts employees to make decisions	68.2%	99.4%
7.	Shares information and knowledge openly	66.0%	98.9%
8.	Has a good pay and benefits package	62.7%	98.4%
9.	Supports professional development and growth	62.1%	99.0%
10.	Clear strategic goals	62.0%	97.6%
11.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	61.2%	97.9%
12.	Appropriate workload for staffing levels	59.5%	98.5%
13.	Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	57.3%	98.3%
14.	A brand that is compatible with my own values	40.8%	91.8%
15.	Helps employees to manage stress	39.2%	91.7%

Other facts about what is important to respondents in an agency in 2010:

- Account management rank ‘a brand that is compatible with my own values’ higher (49.5%) than the average ranking (40.8%).
- Strategists rank ‘clear strategic goals’ as being of higher importance (72.7%) than the average ranking (62.0%).
- Women rank four agency attributes as being of higher importance than men (see table three).

Table three: ‘very important’ attributes ranked higher by women than by the whole sample.

	<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Importance men</i>	<i>Importance women</i>
7.	Shares information and knowledge openly	60.1%	74.3%
11.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	57.7%	66.2%
14.	A brand that is compatible with my own values	36.3%	47.3%
15.	Helps employees to manage stress	35.7%	44.0%

Implications:

Last year every attribute was considered important. This year respondents seem more realistic and discriminating, with a focus on being able to make a contribution to stimulating work in a team environment where there is a strong leadership that rewards people for going the extra mile. Account management need to believe in the ethos of their agency to do their work successfully.

Quotes from respondents:

“As designers, we work in a challenging and very demanding industry where expectations are (quite rightly) high. However, our industry suffers from the fact that it is the norm for designers to be continually expected to work considerable additional hours well beyond their contractual commitments. Whilst this potentially enhances the quality of work in an individual’s portfolio, it primarily benefits the company and their clients, and designers are seldom recognised for this commitment, where most companies take it for granted. The accompanying stress that designers can feel often has a marked impact on their creative output and their lives outside of work. As rewarding as it is to be in the design business (and it really is), we must better respect our talent and promote better working practices.”

Male designer on the executive team, aged between 40-49, who has worked for his current agency for less than two years.

“I am based in the US. After working in the UK for the past year, I have noticed several key differences, at least in London. 1) Women are still undervalued and often poorly treated in the workplace. 2) Pay in the UK is far below what one would expect in the US. 3) Personal space as not valued. 4) Alcoholism is institutionalized in the workplace.”

Male freelance designer, aged between 40-49, who has worked for his current agency for less than a year.

“It is difficult for female designers after having had children to get into the work market again, to be on the same or higher level than what she was on before she had children, as it seems to be too much extra complications for the employer. Design agencies would rather choose a designer without a young family. Despite the facts that the female designer has a very good education and work experience, being a mother puts her at the back of the line... It was a set back to choose to stay at home, as working would not be a practical option, since the working hours (9am-6pm) would not allow me to pick my children up in time, and the wage would only go to paying off the child care bills.”

Female designer, aged between 30-39, who worked for previous agency for five years and is now a stay-at-home mother.

“Does not support women in the workplace; particularly poor conditions and attitude to those with children. A mentality and work ethic that is very 80s/90s, based on sitting at a desk until late (even if work is not being done). Women (especially mothers) have a strong (if not stronger) work ethic and often work far harder in order to ensure the job is done within the time they have available. Deeply chauvinistic industry! It is an industry that has few women at the top because of the poor conditions and opportunities for women as they progress, have children etc. Something needs to change.”

Female strategy director, aged between 40-49, who has been with current agency for less than five years on permanent contract.

“It’s extraordinary that there is no clearly defined career structure in this industry. You stick around long enough and you may or may not rise through the ranks – it seems to depend on so many indeterminate factors... very often on the whim of the business owner... Should one even encourage the idea of ‘career’ or ‘structure’ in a creative industry? Who knows...?”

Male design director, aged between 40-49, who has been with current agency on permanent contract for less than a year.

“There are still too many designers who see themselves as artists rather than as consultants whose aim should be to meet the business targets of their clients rather than to win awards. Staff on the account management side are often conscientious types – all too frequently I hear of people working in AM [account management] who have been overloaded with work, not given adequate support and then suffer from work-related stress. The culture of unpaid work experience and unpaid overtime does not sit well with me. I think too many people are taken advantage of.”

Female new business/marketing manager, aged between 30-39, who has been with her current agency for less than a year.

3. The perceived delivery gap has widened in the last year.

- The delivery gap is the difference between the perceived importance of agency attributes and the perception of how well the agency actually performs against those attributes.
- There is a wide range between the attribute with the smallest perceived delivery gap and the highest gap: -14.6% for 'a brand that is compatible with my own values' to -55.6% for 'rewards people for going the extra mile'.
- The most important attribute ('values ideas and opinions') has a large delivery gap (-46.3%). The lowest delivery gap (-14.6%) is for one of the least important attributes ('a brand that is compatible with my own values').
- In 2009, the lowest delivery gap was -5.8% for 'a brand that is compatible with my own values' (2010: -14.6%) and the highest delivery gap was for 'rewards people to go the extra mile' at -39.3% (2010: -55.6%).
- The length of time the respondent has spent in the agency does not impact on their perception of which attributes are important in an agency or perceived performance.

Table four: perceived delivery gap ranked from highest to lowest.

<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Importance to respondent</i> <i>% rating 'very important' (rank)</i>	<i>Agency Performance</i> <i>% rating 'very well' (rank)</i>	<i>Delivery Gap</i> <i>% rating 'very well' - % rating 'very important'</i>	<i>Delivery Gap Ranking</i>
Rewards people for going the extra mile	71.1 (4)	15.5 (13)	-55.6	1
Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	70.3 (5)	22.5 (8)	-47.8	2
Values ideas and opinions	82.1 (1)	35.8 (1)	-46.3	3=
Supports professional development and growth	62.1 (8)	15.8 (12)	-46.3	3=
Does work that is stimulating	77.2 (2)	31.0 (2)	-46.2	5
Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	61.2 (11)	16.4% (11)	-44.8	6
Appropriate workload for staffing levels	59.5 (12)	15.0% (14)	-44.5	7=
Has a good pay and benefits package	62.7 (9)	18.2 (10)	-44.5	7=
Clear strategic goals	62.0 (10)	18.8 (9)	-43.2	9
Shares information and knowledge openly	66.0 (7)	23.4 (7)	-42.6	10
Has a strong sense of teamwork throughout the organisation	72.1 (3)	30.1 (3=)	-42.0	11
Trusts employees to make decisions	68.2 (6)	30.1 (3=)	-38.1	12
Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	57.3 (13)	25.6 (6)	-31.7	13
Helps employees to manage stress	39.2 (15)	10.3 (15)	-28.9	14
A brand that is compatible with my own values	40.8 (14)	26.2 (5)	-14.6	15

- Perceived agency performance for all attributes is poor. At best, just over one third (35.8%) and at worst only one in ten (10.3%), rate their agency as performing ‘very well’.

Table five: ‘very well’ performance ranked in order from highest to lowest ranking for the whole sample.

	<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Performance</i>
1.	Values ideas and opinions	35.8%
2.	Does work that is stimulating	31.0%
3=	Has a strong sense of teamwork throughout the organization	30.1%
3=	Trusts employees to make decisions	30.1%
5.	A brand that is compatible with my own values	26.2%
6.	Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	25.6%
7.	Shares information and knowledge openly	23.4%
8.	Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	22.5%
9.	Clear strategic goals	18.8%
10.	Has a good pay and benefits package	18.2%
11.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	16.4%
12.	Supports professional development and growth	15.8%
13.	Rewards people for going the extra mile	15.5%
14.	Appropriate workload for staffing levels	15.0%
15.	Helps employees to manage stress	10.3%

- The number of employees writing their thoughts about work online has increased. This year 26.9% of respondents write their thoughts about work on social networking sites. In 2009, it was 18.8%.

Implications:

While respondents may be more realistic about what is important to them in an agency, their perception of how their agency actually performs has got worse and is generally poor. Rewarding people for going the extra mile remains the biggest concern. Agency bosses should take heed that their employees feel their ideas and opinions are not valued, with a high delivery gap of -43.6%. It is worth noting that being new to an agency, or a freelancer, does not mean the person will have a different point of view of how well the agency is performing compared to long-term staff. This all matters to an agency’s reputation because more people than ever are sharing their thoughts about work online.

Quotes from respondents:

“A lot of people in the design industry especially project/account managers talk up their skills. There seems to be a genuine lack of great proactive and well-trained project/account managers... There are a lot of ‘yes men’ in the culture who bow down to clients without supporting the creative strategy... Designers end up doing half the job of the project/account managers, thus increasing stress levels, leaving less time for creative strategy and increasing the power the client has in the creative industry. We are professional specialists. Clients come to us to do a specific job. We as agencies need to work as a team and nurture them through the creative process and advise the best possible solution.”

Female designer, aged between 30-49, who has been with her agency for less than five years.

“I feel creatives in general are having less influence and input as they become facilitators for the many layers of strategic management now involved within branding projects. The result is a general blandness and ‘karaoke’ design – poor imitations of previous good design. I have also been noticing quite a few well-paid, successful creatives are leaving larger agencies to start-up on their own to rediscover ‘pure design’ based on their design intuition and decision-making.”

Male designer, aged between 40-49, who has been working on permanent contract for his current agency for less than four years.

“Creative skills – intuition, a broad knowledge base, discerning thought process – used to be something of value. More recently it’s becoming no more than a commodity, driven by clients and even some creative managers with the attitude of ‘we can all do this, what’s so special about you?’ If we ourselves don’t place enough emphasis on quality of thought and a sense of craft (and that goes for strategic as well as creative output) then what hope is there of educating clients? To put it simply, it’s not much fun anymore....”

Male designer on the executive team, aged between 40-49, who has been with his agency on permanent contract for over five years.

“I’m a freelancer and all the agencies I’ve worked for in the last 18 months seem to be responding to the economic downturn by promising clients work with unrealistic budgets and improbable deadlines. But it’s a false economy as stress and anxiety levels go through the roof and the staff suffer as does the quality of work delivered. The phrase ‘digital sweatshop’ comes to mind and the attitude of the management tier seems to be ‘suck it up and take it’.”

Male, aged between 30-39.

“There are very few careers that give the opportunity to experience the gratifying joy of seeing the pure delight on clients’ faces when they are presented with beautifully crafted, considered, innovative solutions that meet and exceed their briefs, strategically and aesthetically... Creative happiness should be high on any agenda in order to provide the fulfilment designers and client managers crave. High standards of output across the board need to be achieved and maintained.”

Female freelance strategist, aged between 40-49.

4. Age has an impact on what is considered important and how performance is perceived in an agency.

Age affects how four specific attributes are perceived by respondents in terms of importance:

- Importance of doing ‘work that is stimulating’ decreases with age.
- Under 30s rated ‘supporting professional development and growth’ as being of higher importance than other age groups.
- Importance of ‘clear strategic goals’ increases with age.
- Over 50s perceive ‘holding people accountable for the quality of the work they produce’ to be of higher importance than other age groups.

Table six: selected ‘very important’ attributes where responses differ by age group from whole sample.

	<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Whole sample</i>	<i>Under 30 years</i>	<i>30-39 years</i>	<i>40-49 years</i>	<i>50+ years</i>
2.	Does work that is stimulating	77.2%	87.1%	77.2%	74.1%	73.7%
8.	Supports professional development and growth	62.1%	75.8%	62.8%	49.3%	62.1%
10.	Clear strategic goals	62.0%	48.5%	61.7%	65.6%	69.7%
13.	Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	57.3%	48.5%	55.8%	59.6%	64.8%

Age affects respondents’ perception of agency performance in seven of the fifteen attributes:

- Over 50s perceive their agencies to be delivering significantly better on ‘trusting employees to make decisions’ and on having ‘a brand that is compatible with my own values’ compared to other age groups.
- Respondents over 40 rate performance of ‘clear strategic goals’ higher than those under 40.
- For the four attributes about pay, providing feedback, supporting professional development and rewarding people, those under 30 and over 50 rate delivery higher than those between 30 and 49.

Table seven: selected 'very well' performed attributes where responses differ by age group from whole sample.

	<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Whole sample</i>	<i>Under 30 years</i>	<i>30-39 years</i>	<i>40-49 years</i>	<i>50+ years</i>
3	Trusts employees to make decisions	30.1%	29.9%	28.4%	28.3%	42.6%
5	A brand that is compatible with my own values	26.2%	21.6%	21.2%	27.7%	48.5%
9	Clear strategic goals	18.8%	16.5%	16.1%	22.8%	20.6%
10	Has a good pay and benefits package	18.2%	20.6%	16.9%	17.6%	22.1%
11	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	16.4%	20.8%	13.3%	16.1%	16.4%
12	Supports professional development and growth	15.8%	26.8%	12.2%	13.1%	22.1%
13	Rewards people for going the extra mile	15.5%	20.8%	13.3%	14.7%	19.7%

Implications:

We think there is likely to be a link between seniority and age. Perhaps it's not surprising that certain areas such as supporting professional development and growth becomes less important as people grow older because they will have more years of experience. What is more surprising is that the importance of doing work that is stimulating decreases with age. In a sector often cited for retaining employees because of their love for creativity, agency management may need to reconsider how staff motivations have changed.

Quotes from respondents:

“HR management is more than ever a fundamental tool in ensuring effective understanding and management of the complex, niche, expert and diverse personalities that make individuals and creative agencies incredibly successful. In 2011, with an ever demanding and competitive skills market in London, savvy agencies need to recognise the return the HR agenda brings when it’s firmly integrated within their business operation and strategy.”

Female HR manager, aged between 30-39, who has been with her agency less than four years on a permanent contract.

“It’s a very young industry and I wonder where people go to past 40 years old.”

Female account director, aged between 30-39, who is a permanent employee of her current agency for less than two years.

“Not enough design companies offer real learning environments for the graduate designers and by the time they actually do get a role in a design company their brilliant ideas have been squashed out of them. We need more mentorship and less emphasis on the money rewards and just doing what the client expects.”

Female designer who has owned her current agency for five years or more.

“It’s very hard to start out. My first year and a half out of art school was a stressful and difficult experience of no one replying to emails, very few jobs available (it was the height of the recession) and when you did get a placement you were undervalued and underpaid. I think that the arrogance of a lot of agencies makes them believe that people working for them should be so thankful they have a job (with them) so the need to pay them properly isn’t necessary. When you have just graduated, moved to London, got rent to pay and debts to pay off being offered £100 a week is ridiculous. You have a degree, can do the job, and do add value. I think there should a ban on this behaviour.”

Female designer, aged between 18-29, who has worked for less than two years on permanent contract with current agency.

“Too much emphasis on agencies hiring ‘bright’, which is a euphemism for ‘young’. As an older worker in internet, have been working in the industry for 15 years, and now it’s difficult to get work as most shops are focused on having a young, bright, ambitious team.”

Male production manager, aged between 40-49, on a permanent contract with current agency for less than two years.

5. Owners and executive teams disagree that their agency 'has good pay and benefits package'.

- Owners and executive teams perceive a difference in how their agency performs in relation to 'has good pay and benefits package': average ranking is 18.2%, owners' ranking is 22% and executives' 13%. Regardless, performance is low.
- Owners perceive performance to be better than the average ranking for seven of the fifteen attributes and executive teams for five of those seven.

Table eight: variance of opinion on agency performance by position compared to whole sample.

	<i>Agency attributes</i>	<i>Average (all)</i>	<i>Difference of opinion</i>
1	Values ideas and opinions	35.8%	Owners 44% Executive team 39%
3	Trusts employees to make decisions	30.1%	Owners 44% Executive team 35%
5	A brand that is compatible with my own values	26.2%	Owners 36% Executive team 35%
9	Clear strategic goals	18.8%	Executive team 28% Owners 24%
10	Has a good pay and benefits package	18.2%	Owners 22% Executive team 13%
13	Rewards people for going the extra mile	15.5%	Owners 22%
15	Helps employees to manage stress	10.3%	Owners 18%

Implications:

Agency leaders believe performance to be better than the rest of staff for almost half of the attributes. There appears to be a disconnect between senior staff and the rest of the workforce. Despite this difference of opinion, performance for all attributes still remains poor. Perception is reality. Leaders need to share their vision for the business and perceptions of performance so that all staff may have a common view.

Quotes from respondents:

“Tough industry that is getting tougher. Difficult to make money. Difficult to win work without over-investing. People working in the agency, however, remain committed and determined even when things are difficult. All credit to them.”

Male owner and in new business and marketing, aged between 40-49, who has worked for five years or more for his current agency.

“As an industry it relies far too much on goodwill by employees to go the extra mile, working long hours for very little in return. The long-term benefits are solely for the business owners and it breeds discontent and eventually the loss of good staff who will put up with it for a certain amount of time but not forever.”

Male executive team member and designer, aged between 40-49, who has been with current agency on permanent contract for less than five years.

“Many creative business founders are creative or entrepreneurial and often lack the commercial and management skills/experience/understanding that would help them implement effective business practices. Small creative businesses need role models and champions that can help them realise what they need to do to achieve their ambitions. There doesn't seem to be anyone who fulfils this; the DBA tends to be quite 'corporate' in their approach, which can alienate the small creative business while the Design Council is pitched at helping other industries. Design Week doesn't really cover business development other than in their insight pieces, and Brand Strategy is no longer with us, and that tended to focus on client side brands rather than on creative business brands.... Maybe there is another body or organisation that has been set up to help, but I haven't come across it.”

Female, aged between 40-49, who works in new business and marketing who is currently unemployed.

“I find it disturbing that people who have only worked for themselves think their way is the only way to do things! I think there's a mix of arrogance and naivety with some people at the top. They've no idea of the reality at the coal face!”

Female account management member of the executive team, aged between 40-49, who has been with her current agency in a permanent role for less than four years.

General industry quotes from respondents:

“At the moment my biggest bugbear is pitching. It has always been an issue but now we are being asked to pitch for work for every job – sometimes against up to 9 other companies. Brilliant if you win, but so much energy, time and money wasted if you lose. It’s a new reality in a credit crunched society and could ultimately have devastating effects on the industry.”

Female design director, aged between 30-39, who has worked for current agency for more than five years.

“It’s not the industry that it was and it is a far less exciting place to work. I worry that many of our clients are over reliant on things like consumer research, very few seem to have an opinion of their own these days.”

Female designer and member of the executive team, aged between 40-49, who has been with her current agency for over five years.

“It has become increasingly difficult to establish a value proposition in the eyes of clients. A creeping commoditisation of what we do is having a detrimental effect on the business, morale and results. Nowhere does this manifest itself more than in the pitch culture and process which more often than not these days is expected to be for free.”

Male member of the executive team in account management, who has been at his current agency for less than a year.

“The clients are getting weaker when it comes to decisions, when it comes to being courageous creatively and conceptually, budgets are less and less realistic, lead times/planning often non-existent. Account management are afraid in these troubled times to stand up to clients and let us, as experts, advise and guide. The result is often rushed, ill-thought through and/or cheaply executed.”

Female designer, aged between 50-59, who is currently freelancing.

“The design industry as a whole is often undervalued by clients. Why? Maybe one of the reasons are too many agencies willing to do free and cheap work in order to kick start a client relationship. Who can blame them in this economic climate but I believe our whole industry suffers devaluation because of this. Creative ideas are valuable assets, assets that make global brand owners rich and famous! Surely we are making a rod for our own backs if our industry continues to give away valuable ideas for nothing.”

Female marketing and new business member of the executive team, aged between 40-49, who has worked for current agency for less than two years.

“When I was at college, there was great emphasis placed on taking time and care to produce skilled and beautiful design. Now it’s how much crap can we fling through the design team as fast as possible. There’s a view that everything will only take 5 minutes to do like we can push a button and design comes out. Quality and rationale is not seen as important – just get it out quick, dirty and cheap. Grrr!”

Female freelance designer, aged between 40-49, who has been with current agency for less than a year.

Methodology

We asked people who work within design or digital agencies to anonymously share their views on how it feels to work within their agencies right now.

The research was carried out online between 5-15 October 2010 by Rachel Fairley of Fairley & Associates, Professor Stephen Platt of University of Edinburgh and Dr Claudia Martin of Scottish Centre for Social Research, working in collaboration with Gabriele Skelton and On Pointe Marketing.

893 of a possible 11,352 people invited to participate did so (7.9%), all of whom are either clients or candidates of Gabriele Skelton. The sample size is larger than 2009.

The majority of questions were statements where respondents were asked for their point of view on how important an attribute was to them personally (very important, quite important, not important, not sure) and how well the agency they work for currently or most recently was performing in relation to each of the attributes (very well, quite well, not well, not sure).

About the participants

Management function: 18.4% are owners, 5.9% are on the executive team, 17% are director level, 22.6% are managers, 36% are in non-management role.

Role: 57.7% are designers, 7.4% strategists, 13.8% work in account management, 6.8% in production, 4.1% new business/marketing, 1.8% human resources, with 8.4% classing their roles as being in other parts of their organisation.

Employment status: 69.4% of respondents are permanent employees; 26% are freelancers and 4.6% currently not working.

Length of service: 25.9% of participants have been with their employers for more than five years; 7.7% less than five years; 9.1% less than four years; 12.6% less than three years; 13.9% less than two years; 30.8% for less than a year.

Location: 94.2% are UK based; 5.8% work outside the UK. For the purposes of analysis we used only the responses of those based in the UK.

Age: the majority of respondents were aged 30-50 (43.7% aged 30-39 and 31.2% 40-49), 0.1% are under 18, 14.1% are 18-29 years old, 9.9% 50-59, 1.0% over 60.

Gender: three-fifths of the sample were male (59.8.5%) and two-fifths female (40.2%).

About us

Fairley & Associates works with companies and agencies to effect change, solve immediate business challenges and build long-term capabilities in brand, marketing and engagement. Our clients report greater traction within their organisations and in the marketplace.

www.fairleyassociates.com

Gabriele Skelton is a specialist design and digital recruitment agency. We're matchmakers; we connect the right candidate with the right client to create something new. We love working with creatives, account handlers, consultants and thinkers, techies and developers. It's about making the right connections to get the right reaction – unusual combinations that make the magic happen. That's what we mean by chemistry.

www.gabrieleskelton.com

On Pointe Marketing works with agencies to build external and internal reputation to drive the business development pipeline and retain and attract talent. We create business and brand-led marketing plans and ongoing implementation consultancy. In a world where agencies sometimes wear the worst shorn shoes, we are the cobbler.

www.onpointemarketing.com