

The image shows two women in a professional setting, likely a design studio or office. They are leaning over a desk, looking at a document with a grid of circles. One woman is wearing a VR headset. The scene is overlaid with a large teal circle containing text. The background is a grayscale photograph of the women working. There are several colorful geometric shapes (purple, red, blue, teal) scattered across the image, some overlapping the teal circle.

The evolving role of the contemporary proposal designer

Navigating change
in the age of AI



Strategic
Proposals

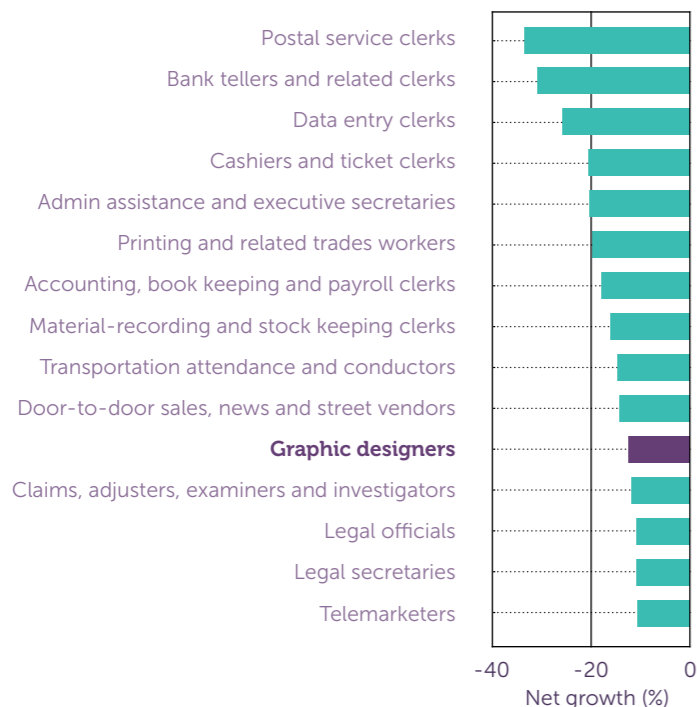
Introduction

According to the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs report* (FoJR) released in January 2025, graphic design ranks as the 11th fastest declining profession. The key factors contributing to this are the advancement of tech and economic uncertainty. While we are powerless to individually influence the economy, we can examine the rise of AI and how it affects the designer's role.

At first, we anticipated AI would handle mundane, repetitive tasks. However, we are now observing it mimic human intelligence and creative output – a development that is both thrilling and full of potential, yet it also brings a sense of unease and uncertainty about the future.

This paper explores how designers can react to these challenges, choose new skills to develop, and increase the value they can deliver to their teams.

Top fastest, declining jobs



Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2025.

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Proposal design: the last ten years

We've always been an advocate for good proposal design, recognising the impact design can have on evaluators, from influencing first impressions to making complex information more engaging and digestible.

The last decade has seen a seismic shift in the role of the proposal designer. Design has become further integrated into the process. Digital media usage has increased. Design has shifted from being a 'nice to have' to a 'must have'.

Digital media integration

As digital media took centre stage, proposal designers adapted, incorporating multimedia and video into their repertoire. This shift upgraded the bid design experience, making submissions and presentations more dynamic and engaging for the modern evaluator.

Specialised teams

The role now often requires a dedicated internal design team or the use of specialised external teams to meet the demands of complex proposals and peaks in workload.

Formal recognition

The role is beginning to gain formal recognition through certifications like the APMP graphics micro-certification and APMP UK's 'Design Excellence' award, validating the specialised skills and strategic importance of proposal designers.

'Proposal speed'

With submission timelines decreasing, the already fast-paced nature of bidding has meant designers have adapted to work to tighter deadlines without sacrificing quality.

From aesthetics to strategy

The evolution has meant a shift from mere aesthetics to a holistic view of design thinking. Designers aren't just making documents look good; they're making them work effectively, for example influencing the buyer's thinking, bringing the seller's story to life, highlighting the bidder's strengths.



But it is no longer enough for graphic designers to be confined to the final stages of proposal beautification.

Today, the contemporary proposal designer can be a strategic player throughout the bid lifecycle.

AI in design

The biggest, most disruptive force to enter the design sphere recently is AI. New tools and methods are streamlining processes and enhancing creativity. Proposal designers can now use AI to generate ideas and design elements. Now generative AI is becoming more mainstream, we can begin to understand its capabilities and limitations.

1. AI opportunities:

Automation of lengthy or repetitive tasks:

AI-assisted tools are starting to appear in our desktop apps. Integrated into existing workflows, these tools can enhance photos, remove backgrounds, apply filters instantly and even add animation. This saves time and allows designers to focus on more creative aspects of their work.

Analysis and instant feedback: AI can analyse brand elements and provide recommendations for improving brand consistency and impact. This helps designers by providing swift feedback on ways to create cohesive and memorable brand identities.

Compliance: AI can ensure that designs are compliant. This reduces the risk of errors and ensures that designs meet all necessary requirements.

Trend forecasting: AI can predict design trends and user preferences by analysing historical data and current market trends. This foresight allows designers to stay ahead of the curve and create designs that are relevant and appealing to their target audience. It may also have applications in competitive intelligence.

2. AI challenges:

Inauthenticity: AI-generated image and text can sometimes appear unsettling or unnatural. They may include elements that are perfect but are not realistic. This can lead to a perception of inauthenticity. Not the impression you want to give with your proposal.

Derivative designs: Generative AI has no original thought. Images, text and visuals are created by scraping millions of existing images from the web. This can result in content that lacks originality and may be subject to copyright issues.

Ethical considerations and bias: AI in graphic design also brings ethical considerations, such as the potential for bias in AI algorithms. Designers need to be aware of these issues and ensure that their work remains fair and unbiased

Homogenisation in design: As AI tools become more prevalent, there is a concern that designs may start to look similar, reducing the uniqueness and creativity that human designers bring to their work.

Job displacement concerns: AI's ability to perform design and user experience tasks poses a long-term threat to graphic designers. If employers believe AI is better able to replicate these tasks, it could lead to job displacement for designers.

Addressing the challenge

If proposal designers need less time to produce the same output, where does it leave the role? Designers must keep adapting.

FoJR emphasises the importance of upskilling and reskilling in response to technological advancements. The message is clear: embrace the change or become obsolete. As well as noticing the declining role of graphic designers, the FoJR also lists the most sought-after core skill among employers. Out of 26 skills listed, creative thinking is number four on the list.

AI cannot deliver the creativity that human intelligence brings

Share of employers who consider the stated skills to be core skills for their workforce.

1. Analytical thinking **69%**
2. Resilience, flexibility and agility **67%**
3. Leadership and social influence **61%**
4. Creative thinking **57%**
5. Motivation and self-awareness **52%**

Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2025.

The efficiencies in workflows that AI brings is increasing the need for creativity in the workforce. That, of course, includes designers.

Beyond tactical deliverables

As AI and templating tools like Canva become better at delivering the graphic designer's usual daily tasks, the designer must adapt to survive. This is where you apply your creative thinking skills and step into strategy.

Strategy is usually created by left-brained thinkers who apply logic, analysis, and numbers. Designers and creatives, who apply intuition and emotion, are usually right-brained individuals. This divide between logic and creativity has the potential to undermine excellent strategy or sabotage bold design.¹ When both work together, the message can be clear, coherent and memorable.

Another reason to involve designers in strategy discussions is that if they understand the strategy, it is more likely to be realised in the execution.² Relegating designers to being just document formatters and graphic illustrators creates a gap between design and strategy, and that is what the designer needs to bridge to mitigate the risk of AI to their career.

1. Neumeier, M. (2003). The brand gap.

2. Davis, D. (2016). Creative strategy and the business of design

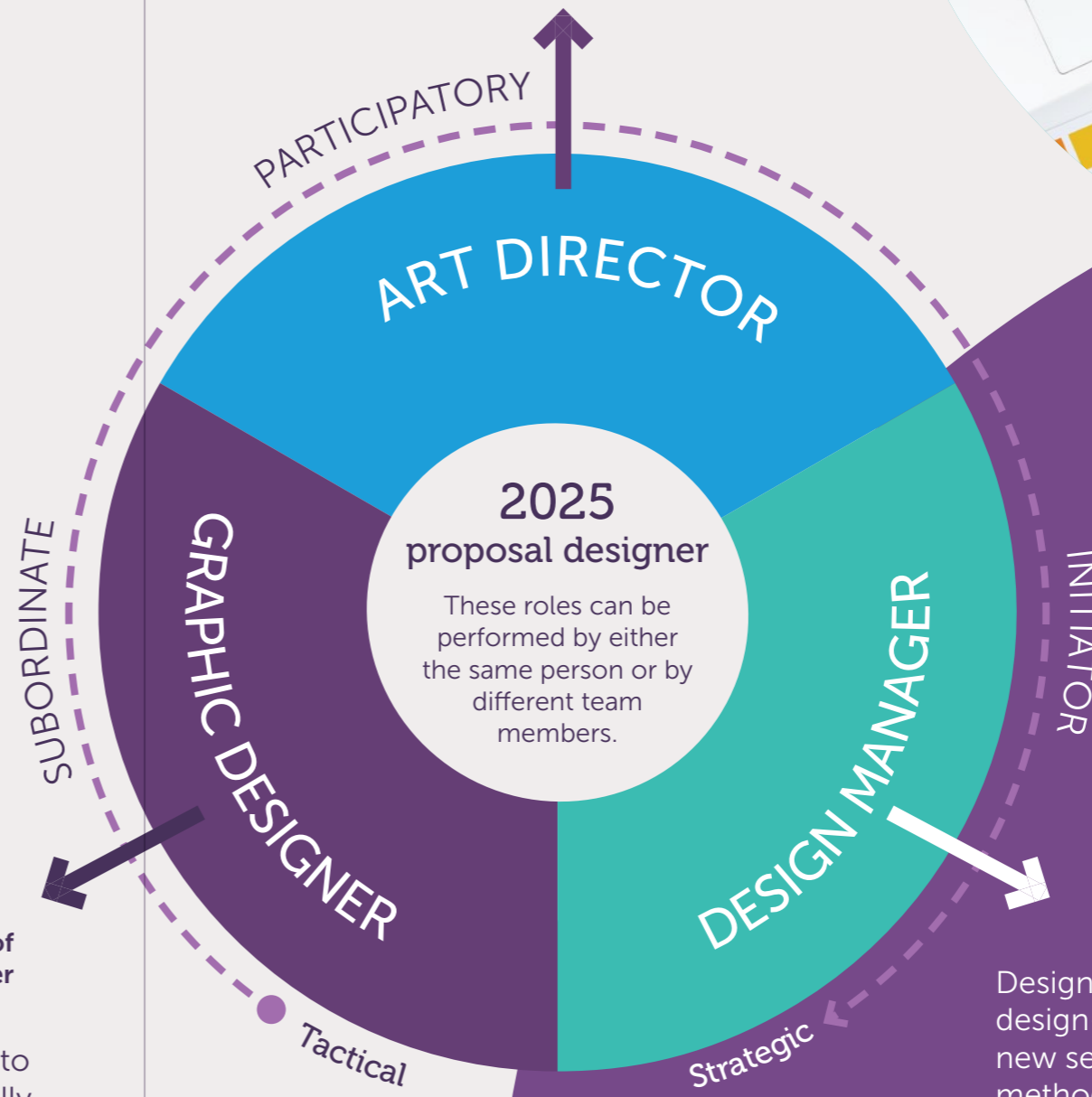
New roles for designers

Proposal designers are taking on a variety of new roles that extend beyond their traditional remit. Let's explore these emerging roles and highlight how designers are becoming integral to strategic discussions, brand development, and cross-functional collaboration. As AI becomes more capable of replicating tactical deliverables, designers need to shift their focus from tactical tasks to more strategic roles.

The role of proposal designer has now been split into three core areas, each requiring different skills and occupying distinct positions within the team hierarchy.³ These roles may be performed by the same person or different individuals, but they collectively contribute to the overall success of the team.

This model demonstrates how proposal designers can become more strategic, future-proofing their roles while staying true to their core strengths.

Already an integral part of many graphic designers' responsibilities, art directors build competitive brand images by creating unique brand concepts and embodying them in emotional brand experiences.



The traditional role of the proposal designer

Graphic designers decorate content to make it aesthetically pleasing or dynamic to interact with. As a more traditional type of designer, they create the 'look and feel'.

Design managers use design-thinking to create new services, working methods or new user experiences by discovering the needs and demands of users, understanding business strategies, connecting different parts of the organisation and connecting solutions to customer needs.

3. Cooper et al., (2017). The Handbook of design management.

The graphic designer

The role of the graphic designer is to create and refine design elements to effectively communicate an idea. The graphic designer will be involved in the design of graphics, documents, presentations, and other tactical deliverables.

Why graphic design matters:

1. First impressions

A well-designed proposal or presentation can instantly capture your audience's attention and set a positive tone for your pitch

2. Professionalism and credibility

It shows that you have invested time and effort into your proposal, which can make your business appear more reliable and trustworthy.

3. Clarity and communication

It can make complex information more understandable and engaging through the use of visuals like infographics, charts, animation and diagrams. It can highlight important aspects of your solution so they're not overlooked.

4. Brand consistency

This helps make your brand more memorable and recognisable, giving you an advantage in competitive bidding situations.

5. Emotional engagement

Visual design connects with your audience, making your pitch more persuasive and impactful, increasing the chances of winning the deal.

6. Readability and accessibility

A well-structured layout makes content easier to read and understand. It's also essential to consider the inclusiveness of your content, and a well-designed layout can significantly enhance accessibility.

Actionable strategies for graphic designers

Champion innovation in proposal formats

Experiment with modern approaches, such as interactive proposals, virtual walk-throughs, or responsive formats for better client engagement. By exploring emerging technologies, designers can craft innovative experiences that grab attention while adhering to any procurement restrictions (of which there are fewer or none pre-RFP or at the pitch!).

Turn content and data into impactful visuals

Practise identifying core messages, emotional tones, and critical data from drafts, scripts or conversations. This means distilling content into a concise framework that highlights the "must-remember" points. Add some animation and video and push the boundaries.

For example, proposal designers can master data visualisation and infographics tailored to client-specific insights, turning complex data into powerful, persuasive visuals that support the narrative without needing a rewrite.

Create proposal templates

Develop reusable, high-quality design frameworks and templates tailored to procurement standards. This saves time while maintaining strategic and visual excellence in proposals, and it emphasises the designer's role as a key asset in process efficiency.

Get the most out of AI and technology

Don't fear AI tools, embrace them to handle repetitive tasks, while positioning yourself as the expert in fine-tuning and personalising the output. Additionally, invest time in learning tools for data visualisation, interactive proposals, and analytics to showcase impact and innovation.

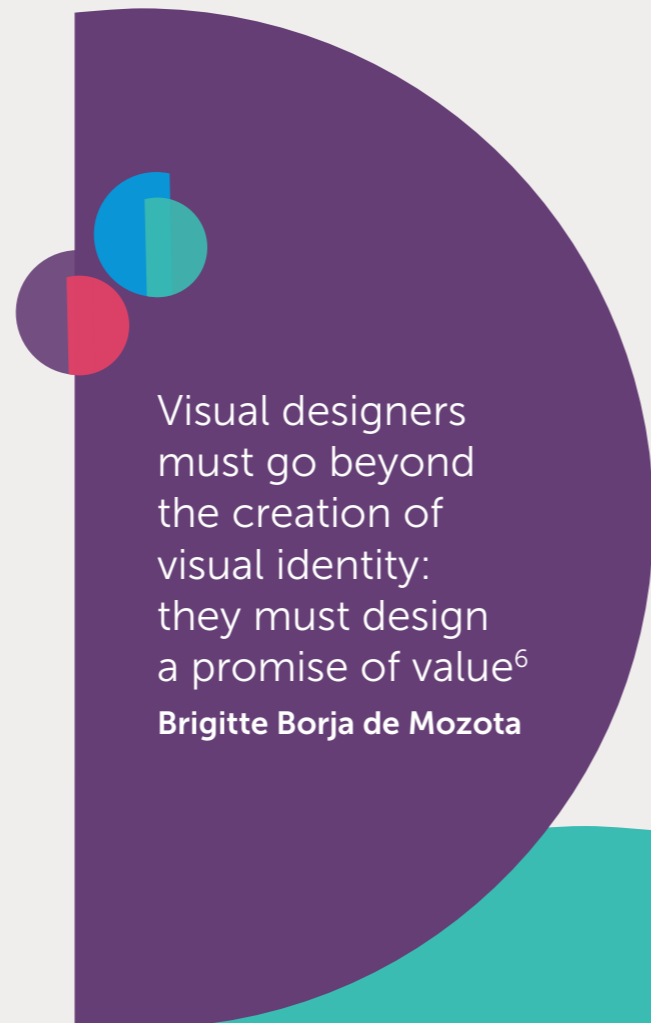
94%
of first impressions
are design-related⁴

The art director

While already an integral part of many graphic designers' responsibilities, the main role of the art director is concept generation. Taking a more strategic approach, design begins with a creative interpretation of the opportunity, focusing on customer experience and building emotional resonance.

Design and branding are powerful tools to spark emotional responses. The key is to involve the customer in a way that makes them feel good about themselves and establishing trust. By delivering valuable content and meaningful experiences, brands open the door to deeper customer engagement.

This means understanding your customer, their behaviour and decision-making, and turning these insights into meaningful brand experiences, considering communication, environment, brand identity and imagery. All customer touchpoints should be proactively coordinated to influence the appropriate customer perceptions.⁵



Visual designers must go beyond the creation of visual identity: they must design a promise of value⁶
Brigitte Borja de Mozota



Are your designers engaged across the lifecycle of the bid?



Actionable strategies for art directors

Start at capture

Begin targeting the buyer before the tender is even released, using branding and marketing, developing consistent messaging through PR, social media, or whitepapers. This is an opportunity for a designer to add value, even if the submission is restricted to an Excel spreadsheet or portal.

Seize every opportunity to position your company in your customers minds.⁷

Create proposal playbooks

If brand guidelines show you how to speak, a playbook will show you how to act. Designed to ensure consistency across teams, and inspire new ideas. Include:

- Past proposal campaigns
- Approved copy
- Types of people you work with
- Innovative solutions delivered
- Programmes you invest in

Be a storyteller

Approach pitch slides as a narrative journey. Designers can develop storyboards where each slide represents a section, ensuring that visuals flow seamlessly and emphasise the storyline being told. Focus on progression - setting the stage, presenting the challenge, showcasing the solution, and leaving a strong takeaway.

Use bid branding as a strategic tool

By looking at your strategy from a branding perspective, you can unlock your story and introduce emotional elements that logical analysis might overlook.

Creating emotional connections: Branding helps create emotional connections with your audience. It involves conducting a creative, emotional analysis of your research to complement logical analysis. This process incorporates creative problem-solving tools, encourages collaboration, and builds emotional connections.

Tailoring to specific needs: In bidding, the target audience is selective, often consisting of a handful of evaluators and stakeholders. Tailoring your branding approach to align with their specific needs and expectations demonstrates a higher level of customer focus. This approach shows empathy and customer focus, which are pivotal in securing a win.

Consistency and trust: Consistent branding reflects your win themes and hot buttons, creating a consistent script for stakeholders and the internal project team. This consistency breeds trust and ensures that your messaging is clear and aligned with your brand identity.

Understanding and tailoring to your audience can increase marketing effectiveness by up to

60%⁸



5. Lockwood, T. (2009). Transition: [How to Become a More Design-Minded Organization](#).

6. Borja, B. (2003). Design management: using design to build brand value and corporate innovation.

7. Wheeler, A. (2013). Designing Brand Identity

8. Neilson (2023). Annual Market Report

The design manager

Here, design's role goes beyond simply conveying a message—it actively creates solutions that address needs. McKinsey identified that companies considered the best design performers increased their revenues and shareholder returns at nearly twice the rate of their industry counterparts.⁹

Moving design beyond aesthetics means designers can help shape the strategy using creative problem-solving techniques. Design can act as a connector, promoting interdepartmental dialogue, teamwork, and creativity. It can serve as a conduit for good ideas and their communication. Elevating design to this level requires both business and design to become more aligned.

For strategic design to be effective, designers must collaborate with cross-functional teams and advocate for design both within and outside the organisation. Designers need to speak the languages of both business and design, consider different perspectives, and be well-informed about commercial considerations.⁵

By shifting the focus from just formatting and aesthetics, design managers can become key contributors in understanding the client's needs.

Mindset¹⁰

- Focus on people
- Driven by curiosity
- Visualise and show
- Experiment and iterate

Skills required

- Design thinking
- Workshop facilitation
- Relationship building

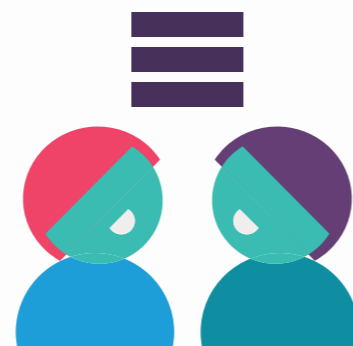


Use design-thinking as a problem solving tool

The two primary design tools for creative problem solving are divergent and convergent thinking. Divergence generates many solutions and convergence narrows them down to a shortlist.

Other design tools that could be useful to your proposal team include:

- Co-creation
- Customer journeys
- Empathy maps
- Value propositions
- Storytelling
- Brainstorming
- Visual thinking



Offer competitive intelligence through design

Analyse competitors' proposal designs, procurement trends, and evaluation formats. Use these insights to design proposals that stand out, adhere to restrictions, and align with the expectations of evaluators. Designers can position themselves as the go-to experts for ensuring a competitive edge. Find your CI through:

- End-customer feedback
- FOI requests
- Brand guidelines and annual reports
- Hypothesise with Generative AI

Be empathic. Develop a deep understanding of client needs

Find out who your audience is. Your intended audience will be very select, you might even know their names. Find out about them, what have they been working on in their organisation? What do they talk about on LinkedIn? Is there anyone in your network who knows them?

Use AI tools to help you profile your audience, and collaborate with the account managers and sales teams to gather their insights too. Develop personas, refine your designs, and create a proposal tailored to their needs and preferences.

The role of the proposal designer has evolved significantly over the past decade. From integrating digital media and gaining formal recognition, designers have become essential players in the proposal process. The rise of AI presents both opportunities and challenges, requiring designers to embrace new tools while maintaining their unique creative contributions.

By evolving into a strategic partner who contributes to winning deals, rather than just assembling documents, proposal designers can ensure their roles remain indispensable.

Design-driven companies have outperformed the S&P Index by

219%
over 10 years.¹¹

Be a strategic visual communicator

Deep dive into your organisation's brand and understand how it can work for the client you are targeting. Work with marketing to understand current campaigns and develop new campaigns that target the buyer. Collaborating with marketing makes sure the messaging is consistent across the business.

Become a facilitator for cross-collaboration

Especially important if you have remote workers or contractors on your team, collaboration can improve engagement and focus the team on a common goal.

Act as a bridge between teams like sales, operations, and SMEs during proposal development. Design thinking methods and co-creation can be used as an efficient method to design your solution or your executive summary.

Think of creating complex solution overviews, value propositions and customer journeys that would grab the clients' attention and address their pain points.



Have questions, ideas, or want to dive deeper? Contact Rachel Fisher
rf@strategicproposals.com

9. McKinsey (2023) [The business value of design](#)
10. Lewrick, M. et al (2018). [The design thinking playbook](#)
11. [Design Management Institute](#)

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