graphic design practice:
business survival skills
and behaviours

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About the Author
This research project was developed and conducted by Karen Hodgson. She holds a BFA (York University, Toronto) in Graphic Design and an MVA (University of Alberta, Edmonton) in Visual Communication Design. Hodgson is a full-time University-College Professor in the 4 year Graphic Design degree program at Vancouver Island University and Co-Chair of the Department of Art and Design. She is also the principal author of the VIU graphic design degree program proposal.

Hodgson has over 25 years of experience practicing in the field for clients that include the Government of Alberta, the British Columbia Government, the Canadian Red Cross and the University of Victoria. She has worked as a designer in Toronto, Edmonton, Nicaragua, and Victoria. In addition to teaching at Vancouver Island University for 12 years, she has taught Graphic Design at the University of Alberta, Camosun College, and NSCAD University (formerly Nova Scotia College of Art and Design).

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abstract

This report describes the results of a qualitative regional survey of graphic design practice business skills. Specifically, the author collected information from practitioners about studio business survival skills, interpersonal skills, and workplace behaviours and attitudes that are valued by the practitioners.

Fifty two experienced Canadian graphic design practitioners working primarily in B.C. were surveyed using an online questionnaire. This resulted in dense and candid commentary on the subject.

Based on the survey, common business survival themes and skills emerge. A rich set of business behaviours and attitudes needed to work as a graphic designer are reported. Perhaps surprisingly, the survey respondents value traditional and conscientious, workplace behaviours. The data also suggest that new designers may be inadequately prepared for the business tasks and behaviours of graphic design practice when they enter the field. The implications for better graphic design education in basic business skills and behaviours are noted.
introduction and method
introduction

Background to the Survey
Vancouver Island University offers a 4 year, Graphic Design degree program. The author is a full-time faculty member teaching in the Graphic Design department. As is typical in a graphic design degree, students are immersed in rigorous study of theoretical, creative, applied, and societal aspects of the discipline. In addition, the curriculum emphasizes preparation of graduates for employment. Students do real-world-type projects, juggle deadlines, participate in teamwork, learn to communicate, and prepare a portfolio for graduation. Students must also take a Graphic Design Practice course to help prepare them for the world of work. A current perspective on business behaviour in graphic design studio practice is therefore a topic of interest. What makes a studio hire one designer over another? Why do some talented designers survive in the business world while others fail? What kind of business interpersonal skills and attitudes do new designers need?

Study Theme and Purpose
Today, an abundance of practical experience and research contributes to the subject of the business side of graphic design practice. Much has been written about fees, accounting, portfolios, and theoretical and creative preparation for our world of work. Yet when it comes to business survival skills and professional business behaviour, there can be a gap between what studios expect in new hires and what an inexperienced design graduate can provide. This research project is an attempt to help bridge that gap by collecting commentary on business survival and behavioural skills from working professionals.

Study Approach
The project is a small and relatively informal, qualitative and regional survey of British Columbia (Canada) graphic design studio business practices. As such, it is intended to contribute to the knowledge base in this field of study and inform graphic design education program curricula.

This document reports on opinions and experiences of practitioners in the field. The target sample was mostly Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC) members, and the emphasis of the survey was on depth more so than breadth. Statistically these data should not necessarily be considered as provincially representative. The study is not intended to be exhaustive or all-inclusive, but rather it captures a glimpse of some aspects of graphic design business practice of interest to new designers entering the field. Rather than collect statistics on predefined practices, this investigation aims to stimulate thoughtful and open commentary from experienced practitioners in order to contribute to a conversation about the challenges of graphic design practice.

As this is an exploratory survey of a specific target sample, caution should be exercised when considering any transferability of the data and/or conclusions to other groups or contexts.
study method

Methodology
This project proceeded as follows:

1. Literature search
2. Identification of subject and research topics
3. Identification of research method and instrument
4. Identification of survey sample
5. Drafting of survey questions
6. Identification of suitable online survey software
7. Completion and submission of application for project approval to the VIU Research Ethics Review Board
8. Drafting of survey invitation and follow-up invitation
9. Development of final survey questions
10. Assembly of survey sample list
11. Learning the survey software
12. Development of the online survey
13. Launch and promotion of the survey
14. Sending a reminder invitation
15. Data collection
16. Data analysis
17. Report of findings
18. Publication of findings

Literature Search
A literature search was conducted in order to determine relevant topics warranting further investigation. Studies have been conducted in Canada and elsewhere on the following subjects: graphic design fees and salaries; portfolio and hiring expectations; and theoretical and creative preparation of graphic design students for work.

There are a substantial number of trade-type books and resources on the subject (see Bibliography and Reading List). As expected, many of these readings discuss business contracts, accounting, hiring, job hunting, job tracking, forms, marketing, profitability, assorted legal issues, and so on. Others offer candid anecdotal commentary from professionals and industry-related authors about how unprepared graphic design program graduates may be for graphic design practice. Some authors indicate that business behaviour and business knowledge are areas that students are least prepared for when they graduate.

Subject and Research Topics
As part of the research for this project, a list of typical graphic design practice topics was first assembled from the research on the subject (see Appendix 1: Business Practice Topics).

While much has been said about the necessary general skills, knowledge and attitudes required for entry into the field, less has been reported about business survival skills needed to work in a studio or agency environment, and more specifically about the interpersonal skills and behaviours needed to face the business world. In order to address this deficit, a selection of topics of interest related to these themes was distilled from the larger topic list. The shorter list was massaged, added to and grouped into related themes. As survey questions were conceived, refinement of topics was iterative.

Research Method and Instrument
The initial intention was to conduct personal interviews with experienced design practitioners in order to collect information on business survival skills and to encourage an open conversation. However, the following concerns quickly became apparent:

1. Arranging and conducting in-person and telephone interviews, with manual response entry, could take longer than time permitted for the project.
2. The number of interviews possible in the time permitted would result in a small sample size.
3. Participants might not feel free to discuss workplace-related themes in their work environment.
4. Participants might not be as open about their responses as they would be if participation was anonymous.
In order to increase the sample size and make sure participants were comfortable with the research, a decision was made to conduct an online survey. Since this busy target group spends much of their day on the computer, the online delivery instrument allowed for fast input by experienced users.

To ensure that respondents felt comfortable offering their thoughts and opinions, the survey was kept anonymous, and the questions were designed to be open-ended as opposed to prescriptive. Subjects were informed that the study was for educational purposes and that their identity would not be revealed or connected to the responses.

Participants were permitted to type in as much (or as little) information as they wished. And type they did! The outcome was not unlike a high number of quite personal interviews with a large volume of participant data to draw from.

Survey Sample
A list was assembled of over 200 potential respondents working in Vancouver Island and British Columbia graphic design firms, studios, agencies, and solo practices. The target sample was predominately derived from the publicly-available member pages of the B.C. and Vancouver Island Graphic Designers of Canada chapter website. All GDC Professional members have been pre-screened for experience, education and portfolio quality. Since not all practitioners are Professional GDC members a few additional known experienced practitioners were included in the sample list. A number of out-of-province respondents also participated.

Survey Questionnaire
To collect information on regional studio business practices, a set of 28 questions was prepared (see Appendix 1). Questions at the beginning of the survey were designed to determine background, experience, and type of practice the respondents are engaged in. The remaining bulk of the survey questions solicited opinions about business practice and behaviours. These questions were largely designed to be open text entry, as opposed to prescriptive multiple choice selections. While this approach affects response rate (and some chose to exit the survey once the multiple choice questions ended), nevertheless excellent anecdotal data were received from the majority of respondents. Questions were also oriented towards issues of interpersonal and behavioural survival skills in the studio business world.

Questions were grouped into the following sections:

1. Type of Practice
2. Studio Organization and Management
3. Designer Business Skills
4. Working with Clients and Colleagues
5. “From the Gut”

An introduction assured participants of the anonymity of responses and specified that there were no known harms associated with completing the survey. To preserve comfort and privacy, subjects were permitted to skip any questions they did not want to answer and to exit and clear the survey at any time should they wish to discontinue participation.

Survey Software and Data Storage
Survey questions were manually input into a web-based online survey software interface. Participants entered responses online at a survey webpage, and the data was electronically recorded.

While various commercial and free online survey development products exist, security and housing location of survey data are an issue. For an educational research project it was important that both cost and security were considered. A decision was made to use a WYSIWYG, PHP database survey development product called LimeSurvey (all rights reserved). LimeSurvey is free but more importantly permits respondent data to reside on a local server. The survey and data were housed on a secure server on the Vancouver Island University (Canada) Nanaimo campus. Participants were informed of the security and privacy of the data storage.

Research Ethics Review
In order to ensure ethical research practices, all faculty and students at Vancouver Island University who conduct research involving human subjects are required to submit a detailed application for project approval to a Research Ethics Review Board. This project has been approved by the University Research Ethics Review Board.
Survey Launch and Promotion
The online survey was launched in October, 2009. A URL link to the survey was included in the invitation. Email invitations to participate were sent to 204 people on a master contact list. No information connecting the individuals on the separate email list with the survey responses was recorded. A follow-up email reminding target subjects to participate was sent a week later. In addition, with the support of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC), an invitation for British Columbia designers to participate was posted briefly on the GDC Canada Enews website.

Data Collection and Analysis
Survey responses were recorded and stored in a database on the secure server. The survey software permitted browsing and exporting of the data to readable tables. A thorough set of survey questions on workplace behaviour, resulted in extensive and relatively consistent anecdotal data on the subject.

Results were examined, analyzed, and summarized by the author during the winter of 2009. The report findings and conclusions are interpretations by the author.

Responses
This project was a survey of B.C. designers. A total of 52 people completed the survey. While this is a modest number, the volume of information received from the enthusiastic participants was exceptional. Only completed surveys are considered in the data presented. In other words, only participants who completed and submitted the survey (as opposed to those who started/opened the survey but chose to exit after answering only a few questions, without clearing the survey data), are included as participants.

Relative to the 204 invitations to participate this represents one possible estimated response rate of about 25%. A small number of contacts were however deleted from the contact list as “undeliverable” and in addition a modest number of responses to the GDC web site invitation were received, so this figure cannot be considered an exact response rate.

The “incomplete” survey records were briefly examined. It appears that these subjects left the survey early once the multiple choice questions ended and the open text entry questions began. The incomplete records show that by question 8 (of a total of 28 questions), about 90% of the incomplete group had already stopped participating in the survey. This was perhaps an issue of not having time to complete the survey. There appears to be a larger proportion of Creative Directors and of subjects living elsewhere in Canada in the incomplete group.

It is also important to point out that participants were not required to answer every question in the survey, and as such that not all records were necessarily completed by every participant. Thus any reported percentage results are based on the percentage of those who chose to answer each question. Despite these expected response variables, the objective of collecting substantial commentary on business survival skills was well achieved. Note also that response percentages in the data are normally averages rounded off to a close percentage point.
survey findings
type of practice

**Type of Practice**
Respondents were asked to identify what type of design practice they currently work in. The largest proportion of participants (about 46%) report that they work in Graphic Design studios. About 25% of respondents are engaged in Freelance or Solo practice and approximately 12% are In-House designers. Only about 2% of the participants work in Advertising Agencies.

Another roughly 12% chose to classify themselves as working in “Other” types of practices including: Education, Freelance & Design Studio, Strategic Branding Consultancy, Technology Consultancy, government, or some combination of practices.

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**Studio Practice Location**
The majority of participants (about 77%) work in the Vancouver Island and Lower Mainland of B.C. region. About 52% work in the Lower Mainland B.C. and about 25% work in Mid and South Vancouver Island.

Only about 2% work elsewhere in B.C., while 17% of respondents live and work elsewhere in Canada including Saskatchewan, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and PEI.
Job Title
The largest survey group (about 46%) identify themselves as Graphic Designers. About 12% are Art Directors and 10% Creative Directors.

A full 27% choose to identify themselves by other job titles including Professor, President, Partner, Proprietor, Principal, Manager, Multi-Media Designer, Web Designer, Senior UX Designer, or some combination of the job titles.

About 67% of the survey participants have over 10 years of experience and close to 50% actually have over 20 years of experience.

Years of Experience
The survey participants have an abundance of experience to bring to the conversation about Graphic Design Business Practices. Surprisingly a substantial 48% report that they have over 20 years of experience of working in the field, and another 19% have between 11 and 20 years of experience. So, a total of about 67% of the survey participants have over 10 years of work experience.

A further 15% have over 5 years of experience.
**Location of the Work**

On average participants report that most of their work (about 63%) is done in their local area.

About 18% of subjects do work elsewhere in Canada; about 13% do work in the United States; and about 20% do International work. An average of about 43% do work on Vancouver Island and about 53% of respondents do work in the Lower Mainland of B.C. Close to 20% report that they do work elsewhere in B.C.

**Type of Work**

An average of close to 60% of subjects report that they do print work and 35% report that they do web work. Only about 5% report that they do rich-media type work, and a miniscule 2% report that they do work for hand-held devices.

Participants report that an average of 11% of projects involve illustration, and about 26% of jobs involve photography. Reportedly, about 11% of studio work is contracted out to other specialists.
studio organization and management

Studio Personnel
The first question, in the section on Studio Organization and Management, asked subjects to identify the personnel that work in a design studio. One respondent writes: “there are only two of us doing everything.” The majority of respondents agree that the following personnel typically work in a design studio or agency:

- Creative Director
- Senior Designers
- Junior Designers
- Sales Rep
- Production staff
- Owner/Partner/Principal

In addition participants identify a variety of “Other” studio personnel that include:

- 2-D and 3-D motion designers
- Production managers
- Front desk
- Photographers
- Management
- Clerical
- PR
- Marketing
- IT
- Writers
- GUI designers
- Application developers
- Accounting
- Business development
- Illustrators
- Programmers
- Account executives

Studio Management Styles
Participants were asked about their experience with studio management styles and whether they tended to be mostly hierarchical, flat, or some of both. The majority (about 61%) feel that there tends to be a combination of both flat and hierarchical approaches to studio management. About 25% see studio management as hierarchical. Cooperative and voting models were also identified as other management models.

Subjects were then asked what the challenges of working with the 2 different management styles were.

The Challenges of Working in a Hierarchical Environment
Some subjects feel that in a hierarchical environment the senior personnel got to work on the creative and larger projects while less senior personnel “only do as you are told.” Others comment on the need to be able to accept direction and criticism, the perceived lack of involvement of designers in the process, and lack of contact with the client.

The Challenges of Working in a Non-hierarchical Environment
Respondents feel that the challenges of working in a non-hierarchical environment include issues of accountability, liability, self-management, and self-motivation. They are also concerned about lack of experience, guidance, leadership, and direction. One subject points out that a designer has “creative freedom” in a non-hierarchical environment.

Studio Operation
Participants were next asked to describe how a studio actually operates (in other words, what happens to a job from when it comes in the door until it is completed and who does what, when). The data reported in this section highlight the complexity and responsibility associated with graphic design practice.

One respondent suggests that about 60% of studio work is business related (sales, phone calls, meetings, etc.), while only about 40% of the work is creative. Another complains, “It seems, almost 90% of what we do is geared around managing the process and/or the client. Very little creative is required on an ongoing basis.”
Some studios require that all client communication goes through an Art Director or Creative Director. Sometimes a sales executive manages the accounts.

Some studios hold weekly team meetings to check and track the status of projects. Others use online tracking, costing and job management software, and conduct interim billing. All participate in ongoing meetings with clients and suppliers. Many engage in ongoing networking, sales, and pitching.

**The Project Process**

Respondents are exceedingly thorough in describing the project process. While the order of the stages varies slightly and subjects indicate that each project is different, nevertheless the steps are remarkably similar. Below is a summary of the extensive 58 steps the respondents identify:

1. Contact with client by Creative Director (CD), Art Director (AD), Account Executive (AE), Sales Rep or Designer (D)
2. Assess project scope, project deliverables and studio capacity to do job
3. AD or CD or D assigns projects and tasks
4. Meet with the client with questionnaire
5. Get any necessary quotations from contract staff and suppliers
6. Prepare and submit detailed estimate and contract to client
7. Get approval and signature to proceed
8. Get retainer or deposit if client is new and/or job is large
9. Brief the team
10. Plan the project
11. Start time management program and/or time sheets
12. Meet with the client to clarify needs, goals, audience, etc.
13. Define goals and measures/criteria
14. Prepare Design Brief (CD, AD or D)
15. Create job order and/or docket and job description.
16. Schedule project and prepare time line
17. Prepare budget
18. Organize creative team (CD, AD or D selects and supervises)
19. Outsource to specialists
20. Conduct research
21. Contact and liaise with suppliers
22. Define strategic direction
23. Meet with the client with another brief
24. Get client approval to proceed in specified direction
25. Brainstorm with team based on briefs
26. Propose initial concepts
27. Verify concept feasibility with suppliers and production staff
28. Maintain digital or paper job-tracking
29. Develop concepts
30. Prepare print or web comprehensives for presentation
31. Present to client (CD, AD or D)
32. Get client approvals and/or adjustments
33. Make changes
34. Submit changes to client
35. Get approval
36. AD OR CD or D oversees production and production staff
37. Format, code and implement
38. Prepare artwork
39. Test against project goals
40. Make rounds of revisions and get signoffs
41. Consider additional goals or kill fees
42. Measure results
43. Review final proofs with client
44. Make final changes
45. Get final approval
46. Create job specifications
47. Maintain ongoing dialogue with client
48. Deliver job to press
49. Maintain quality control
50. Check press proofs
51. Deliver product
52. Invoice
53. Review project with team and/or client
54. Request client feedback
55. Archive files
56. Do collections
57. Enter awards competitions
58. “Ask in glory, spend the money.”

**Business Procedures**

Survey participants were also asked if, in their experience studios have specific business procedures that staff have to follow. An overwhelming number (close to 80% of respondents) said yes studios have specific business procedures for staff to follow.

“It seems, almost 90% of what we do is geared around managing the process and/or the client.”
designer business skills

Business Skills That Are Lacking
This section begins to get at the core of the business skills that graphic designers need. Subjects were asked at the outset, what was the biggest shock for them when they started working in the design business world, and what business skills were they most lacking. Respondents share an outpouring of business inadequacies they felt as new designers.

One respondent’s comments perhaps provide a good summary of missing business skills: “How to quote a job, Tax law, registering a business, copyright/IP law, business ethics, how to find clients, how to follow through a job through printing (the importance of sign off, checking proofs), how to write up a contract, how to write a good brief, how to present concepts, how to respond to an RFP, how to debrief after a lost RFP or a lost client. How to price jobs and bid on contracts. The cost of mistakes and how often I made them.”

This section highlights the need for better preparation of graphic design students for studio business tasks and behaviours. In summary, the responses indicate most participants clearly felt that they didn’t know about the following:

- billing
- accounting
- legal concerns
- sales
- bookkeeping
- estimating
- RFP’s
- how uninformed clients were about design.
- meetings
- budgets
- time and staff management
- human behaviour in the business world
- handling clients.

Project Management Skills
Survey participants were next asked to identify more specific business skills that graphic designers need in the workplace, starting with project management skills.

This subject’s response offers a good summary of necessary project management skills: “General project management - have a process that protects the designer and the client. How to set up a time line and budget for a job. Learn how to write a brief, how to get client approval and sign off every step of the way, how to check press proofs, how to write and sell a contract to the client, how to deliver good service, how to follow up with the client, how to deliver return on the client’s investment. How to choose good clients.”

To summarize, many respondents agree that the following project management skills are needed:

- good organizational skills
- ability to meet and juggle deadlines
- reliability
- good time management
- ability to prioritize
- flexibility
- time tracking and time keeping
- time management
- ability to deal with and manage clients
- communication skills
- project management
- ability to work in a group or independently
- job tracking
- multitasking
- writing skills
- planning
- budgeting
- estimating
- contract preparation
- knowledge of legal issues
- presentation skills
"Writing skills are essential to designers"

Business Communication Skills
Next, participants were asked what specific business communication skills they feel graphic designers need to have. One respondent offers this advice on some genuine studio business communication scenarios designers might face: “Never excuse tardiness with the fact that you were working on other projects. The client doesn’t care what else is on your plate. Do not make excuses, period. Just apologize if you’re late or if you’ve made a mistake, and do whatever is necessary to correct it or make up for it. Be brief. Do not offer up more information than necessary. Try to keep the client’s point of view in mind. Don’t overexplain, but keep in touch with the client by sending a brief update on the project, or by asking intelligent questions.”

Generally, the most common needed business communication skills identified by respondents were as follows:

- very good verbal skills
- negotiation skills
- ability to provide articulate explanations
- presentation skills
- public speaking
- selling
- listening
- explaining in non-design language
- ability to explain a rationale
- meeting communication skills
- excellent writing skills
- the ability to persuade and convince
- ability to discuss projects
- discover and communicate what the client needs
- asking questions

Business Writing Skills
When asked what business writing skills designers need, respondents were overwhelmingly clear that good writing skills are vital to successful graphic design practice. Many participants identified the following as necessary writing skills:

- excellent spelling, grammar, and composition
- proposal writing
- contract writing
- technical writing
- clear and precise writing
- resume and cover letter writing
- writing design briefs
- excellent email writing
- marketing writing
- describing services
- writing estimates
- documentation
- clear, precise, and succinct writing
- copy writing
- writing goals and objectives
- memo writing
- knowledge of business language
- proofing skills
Ethical Responsibilities

In this section, participants were asked what the ethical responsibilities of graphic designers were with respect to business practice. This question seemed to strike a nerve and of note is the general high degree of respondent conscientiousness about ethical practice. One participant uses the medical phrase of “do no harm” to emphasize the importance of ethics.

Not surprisingly (as many participants were GDC members), many refer to the Graphic Designers of Canada Code of Ethics (http://www.gdc.net/business/ethics_and_professional_practice.htm) as a good guide to ethical practices.

Subjects are particularly vehement about the importance of never doing speculative work and about not stealing design ideas. Here are the commonly identified ethical behaviours and practices:

- to “do the right thing”
- honesty and trustworthiness
- acting with integrity
- confidentiality
- respecting the environment
- treating everyone with respect
- not overcharging or undercharging
- refusing to do spec work
- knowing legal requirements especially intellectual property
- accountability
- originality
- no stealing of work or ideas
- ethical choices
- doing work for the project goals versus for yourself
- fair treatment
- honouring your commitments
- recognizing unethical communications or advertising.

“Don’t engage in speculative work! Ever!”
working with clients and colleagues

Interpersonal Skills
This section deals with the skills needed to work successfully with clients and colleagues. One of the main purposes of the study was to gather information about what kind of behavioural and interpersonal business skills are important in the studio workplace.

When asked what interpersonal skills graphic designers need, one of the most common responses is that we need a sense of humour to work in the business. One participant also states that designers should: “[d]evelop a tough skin because you’re going to need it to work in this field.” Patience, friendliness and teamwork skills are valued. Many indicate that big egos can be problematic, and one participant says that designers should be “coachable.” Another reminds us that it is important to be “awake”.

The necessary interpersonal skills commonly valued by the survey participants include the following:

- a sense of humour
- openness and willingness to learn
- strong communication skills
- speaking skills
- calmness
- getting along with people
- ability to work in a team and be collaborative
- a positive attitude
- honesty
- conflict resolution skills
- ability to take responsibility
- the ability to accept criticism
- confidence without ego.

The Challenges of Teamwork
Currently designers almost always work with a range of specialists, generalists, production people, service staff, clients, employers, and other team members. Studios expect designers to be able to work effectively with others. However, teamwork can be challenging.

One participant warns: “Sharing in the role of the creative can be difficult for designers. It is a collaboration. Designers are trained by doing projects where they have complete creative control. This does not exist in the workplace.” Learning to work with the strengths and weaknesses of individuals in a team is evidently important. Another subject says, “It’s like a family. Every time you add a new member the whole place gets shaken up. Interpersonal dynamics change; there are power struggles, etc. People are people, not just skill sets and it’s important to acknowledge and work with this issue.” The single most frequently reported challenge is dealing with “egos.”

When asked what the challenges of teamwork in the studio can be, respondents are very open about their considerable experience with this issue. Here are the most commonly reported challenges:

- differing personalities and personal styles
- disagreement
- power struggles
- hierarchy
- responsibility for mistakes or successes
- egos
- differing abilities
- interpersonal dynamics
- compromise
- flexibility
- creative control
- politics
- accepting a “joint effort” for the good of the client/project.
Attitude
Participants were asked directly what kind of attitude a graphic designer should have in the studio. Surprisingly subjects frequently said that designers need to be both open-minded and interested in learning. One could assume perhaps that they want to work with designers who are adaptable, not too set in their ways and able to keep up with change.

Positivity is also valued. Respondents report that a good attitude means a designer who is:
- positive
- agreeable
- professional
- caring
- honest
- personable
- flexible
- open to criticism
- responsible
- reliable
- enthusiastic
- wanting to learn
- client and solution focused, versus self-focused
- curious
- able to listen
- able to have a sense of humour
- open-minded
- friendly

Client Relations Skills
Subjects were next asked what kinds of client relations skills they thought graphic designers need. The most common answer to this question was “listening skills.” The importance of the client in the design business is stressed: “Graphic designers cannot work without clients. Clients provide the [parameters] from which we define solutions and push the creative boundaries. It is helpful for graphic designers to understand the client as a partner in the process.” Another participant says, “the relationship is a large part of what the client is buying.” These are the client relations skills most frequently reported as being valuable:
- friendliness
- punctuality
- listening
- selling
- understanding and empathy
- politeness
- verbal communication skills
- professionalism
- patience

Workplace Courtesies
Survey participants were asked what they thought were basic workplace courtesies graphic designers should engage in. Surprisingly, simple courtesies seem to be quite important. Responses on the subject ranged from the need to have good personal hygiene, to not borrowing tools from coworkers. One person comments that courtesies should be, “The same as in any other workplace: no bullying, no sexism, no racism, no threatening behaviour, no blowing up and belittling”. Others felt it was important to acknowledge the work of others: “Always be thankful to whoever has helped you. Send thank you notes where granted. Give credit where credit’s due, no matter who came up with the idea, the client, the receptionist, the janitor etc.” Another compares the necessity for practicing basic courtesies to behaving “Like you are visiting your favorite grandmother!” Most participants report that designers should:
- say please and thank you often
- always be respectful towards others
- respond to communications in a timely manner
- have good manners
- praise/acknowledge co-workers
- not belittle others
- have good hygiene
- use basic greetings (“good morning”, etc.)
- be polite
- avoid using studio facilities for personal purposes
- meet all deadlines
- have respect for other people’s property

“saying thank you often - meet deadlines always - return all calls and emails promptly”
Dealing with Difficult Clients
It was anticipated that in most workplaces designers are familiar with the concept of “the difficult client.” Subjects were asked for their ideas on how to deal with difficult clients. While respondents indicate that they mostly try to work through problems with the client, many also feel it is important to walk away when appropriate. Another participant suggests that often the designer is the problem not the client.

Here are the most reported strategies for dealing with difficult clients:
• be patient
• communicate with the client about the problem
• identify the problem
• address the issue right away
• focus on solutions to a problem
• be polite
• seek advice from senior personnel
• stay calm
• work with them
• be firm
• maintain sufficient communication and sound project process so as to avoid a conflict in the first place
• in some cases “fire them.”

Professional Behaviour
The Dealing with Clients and Colleagues section also addressed what constitutes professional behaviour in the studio workplace. For most participants professionalism is associated with honest and ethical behaviour and according to one respondent, “behaviour that results in the client being the hero”. Another defines professionalism simply as: “The ability to work in harmony to meet specific goals.”

Many of the subjects agree that ideal professional behaviour means:
• being ethical
• honesty
• being responsible and reliable
• having a strong work ethic and high standards
• respectful behaviour
• a focus on solving the design and/or business problem
• punctuality
• being competent, educated, efficient and prepared
• being polite and easy to get along with
• “grace under pressure”
• seeing things objectively not personally
• always meeting your commitments.

The Designer Personality
The last question in this section asked what kind of design “personality” participants enjoy working with. Responses are similar to others in this section. Common themes such as honesty, friendliness and sense of humour begin to emerge as valuable personal qualities for the design workplace.

Typically respondents report that they like to work with people who have the following characteristics:
• easy-going and easy to get along with
• friendly
• professional
• creative
• enthusiastic and energetic
• willing to learn
• honest
• a good communicator
• accurate
• intelligent
• competent
• has a good sense of humour
• calm
• responsible
• collaborative
• positive
• fun
• open-minded
• hard-working.

“Find out what is really bothering them. Listen to them, make them feel heard and fix it. If they are just terrible people, fire them.”
“from the gut”

Business Survival Skills
The “From the Gut” section provides an opportunity for participants to give candid views from personal experience, about what is needed to survive in the world of design business. Subjects were first asked what business survival skills they wish they had been taught before they started working. The answers yield perhaps the most comprehensive list of key business skills designers need in the workplace.

Here are the most common responses:

• accuracy
• how to explain concepts
• paperwork
• accepting rejection
• speaking and presentation skills
• financial operations
• client and human psychology
• how to say no when you need to
• client relations
• self-promotion
• accounting and bookkeeping
• how to set up a business
• pricing and estimating
• time tracking
• writing proposals, briefs and contracts
• that the needs of the client and business take priority over self
• budgeting
• cash flow and balance sheets
• marketing
• project management
• selling
• how to find a job/work/new clients
• communication skills
• a personal “organizational system”
• “business speak” versus “personal expression”
• invoicing

Cautions for New Designers
Survey participants were next asked what cautions they would offer to new graphic designers upon entering the business world. The reported cautions range from “Don’t be too big for your britches” to “Have an outlet for the stress or you’ll crack,” to “Just try your best. …It’s a great job.”

One subject offers this heartfelt view of graphic designers and the working profession: It “is hard on the body in the long term. The very qualities that often make people excellent, insightful designers are what make this profession hard for them: empathy, insightfulness, sensitivity, understanding, thoughtfulness, feeling. It is very challenging, but can also be very rewarding.”

The most frequently reported “warnings” offered to new designers are as follow:

• track your time and money from the outset
• don’t underprice yourself or work for free
• you will have to work your way up
• get deposits up-front
• “design is not always glamorous”
• keep learning (fast)
• seek help from the experienced
• join a professional organization like GDC
• design for the client/audience/design problem, not yourself
• meet all deadlines
• don’t do spec work
• there is a lot of competition
• it isn’t easy.
Business Stories
Near the end of the survey subjects were asked if they wished to share any design business stories from their experiences. The entries provided are at times amusing, surprising or just offer genuine advice. Here are a few of the responses:

• “don’t release your source files”
• “Too many…most painful ones have to do with dealing with a client that hasn’t got a clue about design and you become their teacher for free.”
• “Quitting can be a good thing when your boss is a power tripper without any good sense of design - being a freelancer has been the highlight of my 16 years of agencies - although that agency experience was essential to get me where I am now”
• “First client out of art school refused to accept an invoice for work which he thought was too low. His lesson for me: take myself seriously and value my time appropriately.”
• “The GDC Listserv is a great place for business stories - both good and bad.”
• “I lost a huge client who didn’t know about copyrights - I had a colleague who schemed behind the scenes spreading negative gossip about colleagues she wanted to get rid of - and people believed her - I worked with a compulsive liar”
• “I have rescued countless clients from bad design and bad marketing over the years.”

Final Comments
The very last question in the survey allowed respondents to enter any further comments “from the gut”, to sum up the subject of graphic design business practice. Again some optimistic thoughts and good advice are offered:

• “To me, good writing skills are very important for a designer. I often review copy from clients and will reorganize it and rewrite it (with their approval), or correct spelling errors. If you can't write, at least proofread the projects you are working on. Even if the client supplied you with faulty copy, in the end it reflects badly on the designer.”
• “love the work. love the vocation. take pride in it. I…still love what I do, and it does not break the back.”
• “I absolutely love my clients. I get the great opportunity to have a crash course in their industries and businesses when I do work for them. I get inside all their challenges and successes and reflect their goals to whatever audience I am assigned to communicate to.”
• “it can be a lot of fun. Love what you do, if not, do something else. Be passionate, and be the best that you can be. Always strive to improve on what you have done. Even if just a little bit every time, over time you can look back and see how much you have improved.”
• “Trust your gut. Always look for a good fit. Say no to clients — they will respect you more. Develop your expertise. Learn to write well. Know when to walk away. Be confident. Consider a less stressful career. Get lots of exercise. Do your best with every project. Learn from your mistakes. We all make them. They are the best way to learn. Make beautiful work. Be good to people. Relationships are the most important things in all aspects of life and business.”
• “Good luck! My biggest suggestion is to show potential employers that you have excellent organizational skills (in files, folders, versions, etc) as well as process and creativity”
• “join the GDC”
• “When I worked in a studio, I would quite often get calls from concerned parents (sometimes students) - the question was always basically the same: “can my son or daughter actually make a living doing this stuff?” I always tactfully replied that I am raising a family, paying a mortgage and enjoying my work doing “this stuff.”
• “Live well and prosper.”

“Do what you enjoy, its not about the money in the end”
conclusions
conclusions

Study respondents provide a dense and rich set of quite traditional and conscientious, values and advice related to the subject of Graphic Design business practice, skills and behaviours. Despite the acknowledged challenges of the business, participants remain positive and optimistic about the design workplace and indicate that the work is rewarding. The participants have a considerable abundance of work experience to back up their principles of business practice. At the same time, it is important to note that values are not necessarily the same as actual practice.

In the experience of most participants, graphic design studio management styles are a mix of hierarchical and flat models, each with its own challenges. Both models seem to present some challenges with respect to work-sharing. In hierarchical environments some subjects feel that junior personnel are disadvantaged in their level of involvement with the projects and clients and that the ability to deal with direction and criticism in a hierarchical studio is necessary. In a non-hierarchical model, respondents identify issues of accountability, liability, management, motivation, limited experience, and a lack of guidance and leadership as challenging.

On the subject of how a studio operates, the data clearly emphasize the enormous complexity and responsibility of work in a graphic design practice. Participants seem to be in agreement about what the specific and extensive steps in the studio work process are. There is some acknowledgement of differences in the job reporting and communication process where staff work under the direction of Art or Creative Directors. The large majority of subjects are united in acknowledging that design studios have specific business procedures for staff to follow in the workplace.

The data from the business skills questions in the survey strongly indicate that designers feel they are in fact ill-prepared for the business tasks and behaviour of graphic design practice when they enter the field. The need for better graphic design business education is evident.

Respondents indicate that they didn’t know about business basics such as accounting, legal issues, sales, pricing, meetings, and management when they started working. They especially didn’t realize how uninformed clients are about graphic design. They provide a healthy list of business skills that graphic designers need in the areas of project management, communication skills, and writing skills.

Strong common business survival themes emerge in these lists. Respondents feel that graphic designers need to be well organized, meet multiple deadlines, manage projects, time and clients, communicate effectively, write and prepare forms, proposals, briefs and legal documents, sell and present, budget, keep records, work with teams, explain, discuss and describe their work, know legal requirements, negotiate, persuade, and use the language of business. There is strong evidence for the need to have excellent writing skills and to engage in ongoing concise and effective verbal, email and written communication with clients.

When survey participants were asked specifically about the business survival skills they wished they had been taught before they began working similar themes arise. In addition to the business skills identified above, they wish they had been taught about accuracy, accepting rejection, psychology, how to say no, client relations, setting up a business, time-tracking, balance sheets, marketing and self-promotion, how to find a job, and that client/project needs supersede self-indulgence.

There is also a surprisingly high degree of respondent conscientiousness about engaging in ethical business practices. The target sample of GDC members is likely familiar with the GDC Guide to Ethical Practices and participants are especially vehement about never engaging in speculative work or stealing ideas from others. They stress the importance of honesty, integrity, confidentiality, respectful behaviour, intellectual property, consideration of the environment, accountability, appropriate fees, honouring one’s commitments and recognizing unethical practices, all impressive business ethics to subscribe to.
Throughout the survey data many emphasize how important it is to work for the goals of the project, audience and the client, not for self-interest. It is interesting that subjects with this many years of working experience maintain seemingly unwavering ethical business practice ideals, and this surely speaks well of the profession.

The large section on working with clients/colleagues uncovers key business behaviours and interpersonal skills that designers need. One of the most common remarks is that we need a sense of humour to work in this business. A recurring pattern of business challenges also surfaces. These include big egos, differing personalities and styles, the problems of teamwork, sharing of creative control, getting along with others, criticism, understanding clients, compromise, disrespectful behaviour, and how to manage difficult clients.

More importantly strong common patterns of desirable graphic designer business behaviour emerge. Respondents value surprisingly “old-fashioned” personal qualities that include friendliness, honesty, positivity, caring, being easy to get along with, competence, responsible behaviour, reliability, patience, professionalism, efficiency, a collaborative nature, enthusiasm, ethical behaviour, a good listener, open-mindedness, high standards, hard-working, and willingness to learn. Clearly these qualities are not the exclusive domain of graphic design businesses but are traditionally considered good general employee behaviours. However, (gratefully) at least one participant also reports that they do enjoy working with designers that are fun and even “quirky.”

Also a surprise, the most simple of social courtesies are considered quite important in design practice. Many participants think that saying please and thank you, basic greetings (e.g., good-morning), praise for your colleagues, good hygiene, politeness, respect for all people and property, not using studio facilities for personal purposes, not belittling others, and responding to emails and calls promptly, are required social habits for graphic design business practice. These seem to be unusually “old-fashioned” but nonetheless valuable practices.

Furthermore respondents advise that when dealing with a difficult client or situation it is important to work with the client to address the problem in a respectful and calm fashion, but that in some case it is appropriate to fire the client. Again emphasis is placed on working towards the good of the client and the project as opposed to self-indulgence.

Finally survey respondents make it clear that design is not always glamorous. They feel that one needs to protect oneself legally and financially, work your way up, never work for free, and always, always meet your deadlines. While they acknowledge that it isn’t easy, the participants remain nevertheless optimistic, encouraging, conscientious, and enthusiastic about the discipline.

Clearly in addition to existing traditional, theoretical and practical education, more preparation in basic business skills and behaviours seems warranted in order to prepare graduates for graphic design practice. At the minimum provision of opportunities for classroom discussion of basic workplace values, behaviours and attitudes should be considered. Instruction in financial, project, and client management would be useful preparation for new graduates.

Further research is needed in order to determine what constitutes useful business practice education, beyond portfolio and interview preparation and the school “critique.” In terms of further research, it would be useful to conduct a survey of design clients to ascertain what business behaviours they value in a graphic designer.

Finally the respondent data affirms the enormous complexity of the discipline of graphic design. Designers need savvy business skills in addition to outstanding creativity, talent, determination, interpersonal skills, technical skills, writing skills, thinking and analytical skills, not to mention “grace under pressure,” in order to manage the demands of the profession and be successful in the field.

“Ability to LISTEN to the client and to SELL the client on what is best in terms of design and the marketing goals.”
appendices and bibliography
Appendix 1: Business Practice Topics

These topics represent typical topics in the literature (see Bibliography/Reading List), supplemented by topics added by the author.

**Career**
- Getting started
- Choosing freelance, In-house or studio?
- Finding work
- Specialization
- Job application and documents
- Resume preparation
- Letter writing
- References
- Identifying your strengths and weaknesses
- Production vs design
- Hiring
- Interviews
- Presenting your portfolio
- Presentation follow-up
- Image: dressing the part
- What to expect in the world of work
- “Talent is not enough”
- Spec work

**Portfolio**
- Types of portfolios
- Planning a portfolio
- Preparing a portfolio
- File preparation
- Portfolio size
- Project sequence
- Portfolio layout and grid
- Showing process
- Portfolio binding
- Web portfolio
- Rehearsal
- Portfolio presentation
- Leave-behinds
- Portfolio reviews

**Business**
- Business planning
- Business models
- Mission statements
- Organizational structures
- Flat vs hierarchical organizations
- Business management
- The business plan
- Business behaviour
- Meetings
- Project management
- Job tracking
- Paperwork
- Fees and salaries
- Benefits
- Insurance
- Competition
- Overhead
- Negotiating with clients (and others)
- Business communication
- Informal vs formal communications
- Business writing
- Routine correspondence
- Bad news correspondence
- Proposals
- Persuasive writing
- Reports
- Government work
- Interpersonal skills and attitude

**Finance**
- Financial management
- Budgeting
- Record keeping
- Financial statements
- Bookkeeping
- Accounting
- Sales tax
• Income tax
• Banking
• Loans
• Credit lines
• Financial audits
• Pricing
• Making a profit
• Pricing too low
• Payment schedules
• Failure to pay
• Collections
• Credit checks
• Invoicing
• Expenses
• Estimates
• RFQ’s
• Cancellation fees
• Scheduling
• Separation of personal and business finances
• Diversification (don’t rely on 1 client for all income)

Promotion, Sales and Marketing
• Marketing strategy
• SWOT analysis
• Market analysis
• Self promotion packages
• Marketing plans
• Your literature
• Pitching
• Sales presentations
• Direct mail
• Your web presence
• Your blog
• Sales reps
• Networking
• Ongoing promotion

Legal
• Using a lawyer
• Getting it in writing
• Intellectual property
• Artwork ownership
• Copyrights
• Moral rights
• Electronic rights
• Licensing
• Standard contracts
• Agreements
• Noncompete agreements
• Confidentiality agreements
• Nondisclosure agreements
• Retainer agreements
• Deliverables
• Federal and provincial regulations
• Incorporation
• Partnership
• Researching and documenting sources
• Releases
• Trademarks
• Patents
• Termination

Working in a Studio
• The graphic design studio or agency
• Multi person shops
• Studio management
• Studio practice
• Studio roles
• Creative direction
• Staffing
• Account Managers
• Shop procedures
• Performance evaluation
• Probation
• Salaries
• The in-house designer
Freelancing
• Freelance opportunities
• Kinds of clients and industries
• Contract work
• Building a reputation
• Facilities
• Supplies
• Startup financing
• Personal branding
• Determining fees
• Scheduling
• Sub-contracting
• Consulting
• Insurance

Forms and Documents
• Record-keeping
• Project tracking
• Job dockets
• Project questionnaire
• Estimates/Quotations
• Specifying what is and isn’t included
• Contracts and agreements
• The design brief
• Stationery
• Proposals
• Reports
• Time sheets
• Invoices
• Approval forms
• Purchase orders
• RFP’s
• RFI’s
• RFQ’s
• Retainer form
• Change form
• Job schedule
• Talent release form
• Performance evaluation form
• Transmittal form
• See also: Legal

Teamwork and Collaboration
• Teamwork
• Dealing with employees and coworkers
• Criticism
• Employee performance
• Hiring out
• Collaborating on projects
• Project teams
• Partnerships

Personal
• Having a life
• Down time
• Protecting your health
• Ergonomics
• Burnout
• Creativity

The Service Industry
• Working with services
• Relationship building
• Printers
• Pre-Press
• Paper reps
• Suppliers
• Experts
• Press checks

Professional Development
• Getting involved in the creative community
• Staying current and upgrading
• Networking
• Organizations and associations
• Awards
• Speaking engagements
• Attending conferences or taking courses
• Pro bono/volunteer work
• School, grant and competition applications
• Reading and Researching
Professionalism
- Your responsibilities
- Ethics
- Spec work
- Social responsibility
- Conflict of Interest
- Pro Bono and nonprofit work
- Environmental responsibility
- Confidentiality
- Copying, cheating and honesty
- Professional conduct codes

Client Relations
- Building relationships
- Teaching clients
- Documentation
- Problem clients
- Responding to objections

Resources and Support
- Professional Organizations and Associations
- Business resources
- Mentors
- Government support programs
bibliography and reading list


“Mentoring guidebooks — AIGA | the professional association for design” 9/2/2009 <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/mentoring-guidebooks>.


