

The Future of Design Work

Designers may have talent capable of transforming the world, but they also need to know how to negotiate today's crowded, fast-evolving marketplace. As technology continues to infiltrate our lives and as our challenges and needs as a society change, so do our concepts and requirements of design. Though this may mean designers have to recalibrate their goals and expectations, it also means new opportunities—new spaces in which they can work. But where are those opportunities, and what skills does one need to take advantage of them?

Allan Chochinov, chair and co-founder of MFA Products of Design at SVA, is a partner of the New York-based design network Core77 and editor in chief of its website, core77.com, as well as coroflot.com, a career and portfolio site, and designdirectory.com, a design firm database. Angela Yeh—president and founder of Yeh IDEology LLC, a design and strategy recruitment firm—has matched designers with employers for nearly 20 years, and has lectured and taught widely on career strategies in the field. Chochinov and Yeh recently sat down with [Angie Wojak](#) (BFA 1990 Media Arts), director of career development at SVA, to discuss forward-looking career options for designers of all stripes. The following is an edited, condensed version of their conversation.

ANGIE WOJAK: Where do you see professional opportunities in design, both today and in the near future?

ANGELA YEH: There has been such massive growth in the need for design strategy and design thinking—the more conceptual, big picture parts of the design process—among businesses today. While we are seeing more and more businesses investing in industrial and product design, that growth looks incremental by comparison. And that's because there are more businesses out there offering services and product platforms than there are physical products.

It gets to the point where, in one instance, we're finding excellent industrial designers giving up their industrial design abilities to focus on the hot new category of design strategy. I was just talking to someone at Apple who was saying that it's harder and harder to find people who can conceive and draw graceful forms while still

understanding the technical, functional, mechanical aspects. That is still a rare combination of abilities that few people have and are highly sought after.

ALLAN CHOCHINOV: This is a great moment for design—and for design makers and design thinkers in particular. And although finding a combination of form-giver and strategist in the same person may be desirable, we are seeing a need for new competencies in stewardship and sustainability, decision making, business modeling and systems thinking—skills that have tremendous value in an increasingly service-based world. At the same time, we're fortifying our students for a more contemporary kind of “making”—one that incorporates sustainable materials, digital fabrication, coding and DIY, for example, as well as traditional formal skills such as sewing and food design.

And of course, there's enormous enthusiasm in the design community for socially conscious design, but it's a frustrating chicken-or-egg challenge regarding employment. We're preparing students to go out and create social impact, but organizations need to be prepared to employ them.

AY: Yes, we still haven't seen that many companies really invest in things like sustainability. But it's great to see all these schools and programs that care about it, because it's something the design community has to bring to every company that they work at. In the end, the designers have to become stewards of this charge, because sustainability, from a company's point of view, has to be profitable. If a company does not see it as profitable in some respect, they're not going to invest in it.

AC: I agree. But not everything has to be part of a traditional business economy, right? Designers have capabilities—and perhaps responsibilities—to engage in work that isn't just about the paycheck. I meet so many people in NGOs or nonprofits or in nontraditional sectors who are increasingly realizing that they need design, that design can move them to new, prosperous places. And creative people are desperate to do meaningful work and they understand that there are lots of different ways to spend one's creative life, aside from just selling more toaster ovens. We need to find more ways for these groups to meet.

AW: How would you suggest someone navigate today's job market?

AY: The design field is extremely competitive, more so now than ever. On the other hand, it is so multifaceted. The majority of the job-seekers are rushing to be hired at Apple or Google or IDEO, but for every A-tier company there are hundreds of B-tier and C-tier companies dying to be the next Apple. I always tell people: Look for the opportunities in your own backyard.

Designers should find out what's in their neighborhood, who they could help. What business is their uncle or best friend or neighbor in that they could be supporting? How many of these small businesses don't have the time to understand the value of design strategy, but could greatly benefit from it? This is another way to cut your teeth and prove your skills.

AC: So true, and to build on that, we're living in this entrepreneurial moment where people are finding it more gratifying to work for something small rather than for something large. You may not get the same starting salary, but you get something else: being in the story. And being a part of something that is growing can have satisfactions beyond being part of something that is just churning away.

AY: You have to be committed enough to be willing to relocate. If you find an opportunity that isn't in the city you've been dying to live in, but it gives you a few years of incredible experience? That work, once it's in your résumé, can't ever be erased, unless you decide to take it out.

AW: Employers often tell me that when they hire, it's essential that candidates show that they are collaborative and good team players. Allan, as an educator, how do you teach or encourage collaboration? And Angela, how can job seekers demonstrate this ability?

AC: Well, as in most schools, our students often work in groups. But we're also trying to have more conversations and training in group dynamics and how to be *effective* in a team. This year, we brought in a facilitator to do a full day of Myers-Briggs personality workshops—helping students to better understand themselves, certainly, but also helping them understand the interactions they have with each other. This gives them a new set of tools for effective team assembly and constructive behavior. They can also look back at problematic team projects from a previous semester and perhaps understand *why* they didn't work.

There is a dichotomy in design right now. There is this unbelievable pressure to “be your own brand”—to be entrepreneurial and have projects on Kickstarter and be selling on Etsy. But at the same time, it's understood that design is—more so now than ever—a team effort, that complex problems require many voices and methodologies. We're trying to navigate how to equip students to be both collaborative and self-starting.

AY: Job seekers need to be able to show emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Knowing how to diplomatically talk about challenging scenarios that you've been in is important, and it shouldn't just be in a way where you portray yourself as the savior.

I don't think I've ever had an employer not ask for a team player. But “team player” doesn't necessarily mean that the job involves working side by side with other designers. Team player means knowing that design isn't the end-all. It means knowing how to be multilingual: fluent in design-speak, business-speak, marketing-speak and so on. You still have people who go into design thinking they won't have to deal with non-designers. But that's never the case.

AC: In our program we talk about “fluencies” in the same way that Angela speaks about multilingualism. The people who can understand and meaningfully address the needs and desires of multiple stakeholders are going to be the ones who thrive in their working lives. We consider MFA Products of Design to be a leadership program, because leadership is as much about the “soft” skills of navigating and negotiating as it is about making decisions. We want to help fortify creative people to be strong but empathic. Both are essential; alone, neither is sufficient. •

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For more on MFA Products of Design, visit productsofdesign.sva.edu.