

*These profiles suggest the nexus of business and design within an academic context. Read why these students feel their hybrid expertise gives them an edge.*



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# Meet the New Hybrid Designers

by Michael Eckersley and Jeremy Alexis

In recent years, design has gotten a good deal of attention in the popular business press. Such attention goes beyond branding and product innovation, and extends to the idea of design thinking as a means of general innovation, from services and systems to business models. For seasoned designers, the attention is most welcome, if a little jarring, after years of dealing with misunderstanding and resistance to design as anything but peripheral to core business issues.

Speaking before an audience of designers in 1993, writer and educa-

tor Peter Gorb<sup>1</sup> described a “huge river of misunderstanding between the design world and the business world.” At that event, Gorb was introduced by Earl Powell, then-president of DMI, as “the father of design management,” given his pioneering efforts both in corporate management and later as a management professor at the London Business School. Having worked for many years building bridges between design and business,

1. Peter Gorb, “The Design Management Interface,” Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario, 2003. Edited transcription of a talk given before an RGD conference held approximately in 1993.

Gorb urged designers to narrow the gap by gaining fluency in the language of business. That river of misunderstanding has narrowed since the time of Gorb’s remarks. Some bridge-building has been done, but today there are still many on both sides of the river who remain content working old familiar ground. However, there is a new generation coming along who see the world differently from their predecessors, and who view the gap between business and design less as a problem and more as a curious anachronism.

### Challenged orthodoxies

The gradual emergence of design as an important strategic input to business has raised the stakes for design management, widening expectations of what designers uniquely have to offer, particularly with regard to the work of innovation. Despite the economic motivations for businesses to innovate, there are relatively few professionals skilled in such work. So when such popular business gurus as Tom Peters<sup>2</sup> assert that “design... has become central to enterprise strategy” and that “design is only secondarily about pretty, lumpy objects and primarily about a whole approach to doing business, serving customers, and providing value,” people listen. Paying special attention are students, young managers, and professionals-in-training looking at a 30-plus-year career stretching out before them, and wanting to build competencies that are relevant and sustainable. Some of these up-and-comers who might have earlier gone the MBA route are now looking at graduate school in design. They are coming to design school out of diverse educational backgrounds. They are fewer in number than their more “vertically trained” design peers,

2. Tom Peters, quoted by Brigitte Borja de Mozota in *Design Management* (Allworth Press, 2003), p. 72.

and they will learn a lot from them. Yet the roles they will eventually play won't necessarily be strictly a design role. In fact, they are the face of a new class of designer, ones who can draw on multiple specialties.

A long-standing orthodoxy in the design profession is that an undergraduate degree from a top design program is required for success in the field. The nature of craft-based train-

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ing (and the master/apprentice relationship) was best suited to people fresh out of high school, ready to define their career and lifestyle as designers. When the tools and methods of the profession (for instance, laying out type, preparing working engineering or construction drawings) were analog and highly manual, late nights in the studio and shop were often the only way to learn. Moreover, just about every position in the field was required to have expertise in design tools and methods. Even managers were expected to have design train-

ing, and it was assumed a lead design architect, for instance, had spent his or her formative years drawing stair details.

Things have changed. Many tools and methods once core to our value proposition as designers have been digitized, simplified, commoditized, or made redundant. New methodologies are core to the evolving forms of design practice. The complexity of the problems we face demands more of us, not just technically, but intellectually and creatively. Even great design managers can no longer be experts in all the tools and methods used in the course of their projects. In this new context, a four-year undergraduate degree from a design school may not be the only (or even the best) way to prepare someone for a career in design.

We know that design knowledge, skills, and abilities are not all of a piece, but can be expressed and applied in a host of ways in different problem contexts. These comprise what Illinois Institute of Technology professor Charles Owen<sup>3</sup> calls “a wide range of creative characteristics, as well as a number of other special qualities of distinct value to

3. Charles Owen, “Design Thinking: What It Is, Why It Is Different, Where It Has New Value” (speech given at the International Conference on Design Research and Education for the Future, Gwangju, China, 2005).

decision makers.” Owen asserts that such design thinking characteristics include conditioned inventiveness, human-centered focus, environment-centered concern, ability to visualize, tempered optimism, bias for adaptivity, predisposition toward multifunctionality, systemic vision, view of the generalist, ability to use language as a tool, affinity for teamwork, facility for avoiding the necessity of choice, self-

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governing practicality, and the ability to work systematically with qualitative information. Chris Conley<sup>4</sup> and others offer their own take on design’s new core competencies. But it appears that a new model of design education is emerging that is well rooted but not steeped in the past, with a pedagogy built around these integrated competencies. Course subjects, projects, and products reflect the broadened expectations of design and designers.

It is a sign of a maturing profes-

sion that we can now accept people from varied backgrounds into design school. Both IIT and Kansas offer graduate design programs that accept nondesigners. Though such practice is not yet the norm for design schools generally, the knowledge and experiential diversity that these people bring to programs is valuable. We have learned important lessons about their abilities, their transition issues, their unique learning needs, and their professional prospects after graduation. Many of them have changed careers or career focus, which is no small challenge in a profession as fluid and young as design.

Recently, we interviewed six “hybrid designers” with whom we have worked at various times over the years. Some have graduated and have found good careers; others are still in school. We wanted to better understand their motivations for going to design school. We also wanted to get their thoughts about what was easy and what was hard about the design school experience.



Yujie Guo

**Current:** Graduate student, Interaction Design, University of Kansas

**Prior:** UI Designer at C2 Microsystems and MiNO Wireless

**Education:** BS, Computer Science, Beijing University

**Why design school?**

Working as a GUI designer with only a computer science background, I felt pressure to gain the kind of formal design training that would enable me to advance professionally and compete for better positions.

**What were your expectations of design school, and how has your experience compared?**

I expected the courses would focus on improvement of individual abilities. But the courses have focused more on collaborative skills and team design

4. Chris Conley, “Leveraging Design’s Core Competencies,” *Design Management Review*, Summer 2004.

efforts. Also, I discovered that design touches a much wider variety of fields than I originally thought.

**Of the skills and understandings developed in your previous career, which ones were the most helpful in design school?**

The skill to collect ideas and thoughts rapidly helps a lot in design school. My notebooks are full of diagrams and sketches that capture and record my thoughts and inspirations in class or in daily life.

**Of the skills and understandings you've gained in design school, which do you think will be most relevant and valuable in your career?**

Communication: the ability to research, interact, and collaborate with team members and users to accomplish design goals.

**How do you think employers will regard your design experience?**

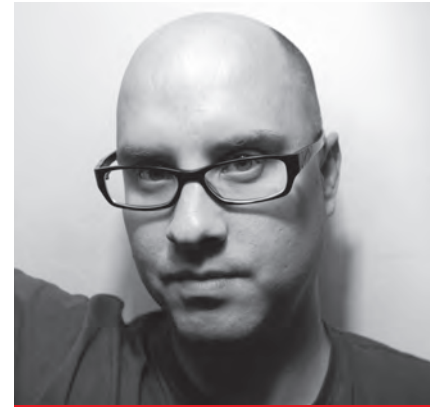
Employers are looking for someone they can trust. They understand the importance of improving user experience, but they are confused about how to accomplish it. Interaction designers can help provide leadership.

**What is the best part of design school?**

The courses are well designed and all the materials are carefully chosen. In class you learn not only from the professor but also from classmates who are from different backgrounds and who share their thoughts very openly.

**What advice would you give to someone thinking about changing careers to become a designer?**

Get real-life experience as a designer first. Take on every opportunity to practice. Get an internship or a part-time job. When you do decide, then you can start planning to get a formal design education. ■



Doug van der Molen

**Current:** Senior User Experience Designer, Google

**Prior:** Multimedia Specialist, Calvin College

**Education:** BS, Calvin College; MDes, Illinois Institute of Technology

**Why design school?**

While in college, I scraped together \$2,500 and bought a Macintosh computer and began teaching myself how to make websites. I realized I had a knack for design, but I wanted more-formal training. I thought design school would give me the formal design training I was looking for.

**What were your expectations of design school? How did your experience compare?**

At first I was frustrated with the assignments, which seemed ambiguous,

and similarly, the expectations were only loosely defined. At first this was frustrating—I wanted the professors to tell me what I had to do and how to do it. However, as I progressed in the program, I realized that this freedom, though frustrating at times, enabled me to explore different ways of solving problems using the design methods I was being taught.

**What was the best part of design school?**

Two things. First was the feeling of empowerment. I felt empowered to create and design things that could change people's lives. Second was the value of the relationships I formed during my three years at IIT. Those two things were worth the price of admission.

**How did your potential employers react to your design experience?**

Most of the potential employers I interviewed with (Microsoft, Yahoo, Adaptive Path, various start-ups) had no problem with my design experiences. I made sure that my course work and portfolio demonstrated my ability to bring value to these organizations.

**What advice would you give to someone thinking about changing careers to become a designer?**

Make sure you're all-in. ■



Zachary Jean Paradis

**Current:** Director of Digital Strategy – Sapient

**Prior:** Producer at a media company

**Education:** Social science and anthropology, University of Chicago; MDes, Illinois Institute of Technology

**Why design school?**

I became interested in design late in my undergraduate career, but it was not until I was working for a media start up that was “planned” by a graduate of IIT that I realized I could learn a more integrated, strategic approach to the profession.

**When you were making the decision to switch careers, did you have any concerns?**

Yes, I also applied to and got into MBA programs like Kellogg. The MBA was

attractive because at the time there was a near-guarantee of a high-paying job, and the schools had a tremendous number of industry contacts. Going to design school was a risk.

**Did you find any challenges working with people with a traditional design background?**

This may be controversial to say, but people who are taught traditional, tactical design are often not comfortable in ambiguous situations, like solving complex problems. The main challenge was that they wanted to jump immediately to synthesis, and did not want to spend time doing analysis (which, based on my liberal arts background, was where I initially felt most comfortable).

**What advice would you give to someone thinking about changing careers to become a designer?**

Be flexible and adaptive. Someone making a career change needs to understand that they may end up in a different position than they originally envisioned. This requires you to have an expansive view of the design process. Don't think “I am going to be a designer.” Think “I am going to be part of the design process.” ■



**Brian Smith**

**Current:** User experience, DST Systems; PhD student, architecture and design, University of Kansas

**Education:** BA English, Washburn University; MA, English, Kansas State University

**Why design school?**

I needed both professional discourse and community. Being for the most part self-taught, I wanted design school rigor to fill any gaps in my understanding.

**What were your expectations of design school, and how has your experience compared?**

Because my previous graduate school experience was research and synthesis oriented, I expected more debate and discussion.

**What is the best part of design school?**

Applying theory to practice. Almost everything I've been introduced to in school I have applied to work projects, and this has greatly accelerated my experience and understanding.

**Of the skills and understandings from your previous career, which ones were most helpful in design school?**

Close reading, knowledge of rhetorical models, software development and design, information architecture.

**Of the skills and understandings gained in design school, which do you think will be most valuable in your career?**

The ability to apply design methods and processes to any problem is critical in my new career. My skills are relevant, timely, and at times, seem prescient.

**What types of jobs did you look for during your job search?**

I didn't look for design jobs. Rather, I created a design role for myself in my division that eventually grew into managing a user experience team.

**How did your colleagues receive you when you started? Has your relationship changed over time?**

There was occasional tension within some groups. But I was able to introduce design to them as a complementary and collaborative process that produces better results. Leaders saw the business value I brought the company and realized that design was a missing element that was critical to their business strategy.

**What advice would you give to someone thinking about changing careers or shifting career path toward a design role?**

Have the courage to reach out to all the disciplines and personalities in your company—to be the bridge, the integrator, the collaborator. ■



Angel Stahl

**Current:** Network planner, Ericsson; graduate student, interaction design, University of Kansas

**Prior:** Network planner, Sprint

**Education:** BS Journalism in advertising/marketing, University of Kansas

**What's your background?**

I've worked for 16 years within a telecommunications network planning, design, and engineering environment. I do everything from microscopic analysis of program architecture to macro data trending. I form traffic scenarios and hypotheses, as well as design system requirements. My skill set is valuable—a rare amalgamation of analytical, conceptual, and architectural thinking.

**Why design school?**

Though my skill set is unique, I felt the need to broaden my competency base. I saw a description of the human factors course at Kansas, and fell in love with the idea of interaction design. I wanted to be a part of it.

**What were your expectations of design school, and how has your experience compared?**

I didn't know what to expect. I just knew instinctively that this field has all the makings of revolutionizing the way we approach virtually everything we do in a traditionally Six Sigma environment. I have been encouraged to use my mind in ways that I haven't been able to before, learning about new approaches to work-related problems.

**Of the skills you developed earlier in your career, which ones were the most useful in design school?**

Three things: brainstorming, persistence, and listening.

**Of the skills and understandings you've gained in design school, which do you think will be most relevant and valuable in your career?**

Instead of joining the traditional design world, my intent is to bring interaction design into network engineering and planning.

**How receptive have your employers and colleagues been to your design study?**

So far my employers have been skeptical—but they are intrigued. My current team-mates are beginning to demonstrate similar design-centric behavior.

**What do you see as your future?**

**What do you hope to achieve?**

To rock the network industry. Enlightenment!

**What advice would you give to someone thinking about graduate study in design?**

"What are ya waiting for?" Life is too short to wonder. You'll never look at the world in the same way. ■



Jennifer Lee

**Current:** Student at the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology, graduates in May 2010

**Education:** BA in ethnic studies, Brown University; MA in curriculum and teaching, Teachers College (Columbia University)

**What's your background?**

Went into education (teaching)—taught in Colombia, Argentina, and also the New York City public school system: elementary school, and eventually high school history (I worked with late-entry immigrant students). I am state-certified to teach pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade in New York.

**Why design school?**

In the schools where I worked, there was quite a bit of creativity in thinking about how to help students learn more effectively. However, there were limits to the ability to make a lasting change beyond the school. I felt drawn to be thinking about these problems at a bigger, system level.

**What were your expectations of design school, and how has your experience compared?**

I was pretty open as far as my expectations went. What has been nice is that I actually (believe it or not) have gotten more concrete skills out of this program than I had been expecting—a good foundation in basic design skills, communication, and so on. I'd never touched or even heard of the Adobe Creative Suite before I got here.

**What was the best part of design school?**

It's a rare opportunity to have so much flexibility to focus solely on doing what I realize I enjoy most—thinking through a problem and figuring out how to tackle it. And working with so many like-minded and talented colleagues who really love doing this too.

**What advice would you give to someone thinking about graduate study in design?**

Trust your intuition—if you do go into design, you're going to have to do a lot of that anyway. And while you're in design school, you'll pick up the skills you need to help your decision make sense to the rest of the world by the time you get out of here. ■

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