

## 5. Research insights

### 5.1 Design CEO - There are not enough Design savvy CEO's/ Executives that understand the value of Design

This insight generally describes a corporate context where there aren't enough design savvy CEO's/ executives that understand the value of design. This came up very early in the conversations, and none of the interviewees denied it though not everyone considered it the most important justification. Some scholars have speculated that strong top management support is required to elevate a function's status (Webster, 2005), but is such support inevitably conducive to design acquiring higher status?

Many are familiar with the Steve Jobs + Jonathan Ive powerhouse at Apple, but when you think of other large corporations that embrace design and have opted for not having a Chief Design Officer, you wonder if that would make a difference. Satia Nadhela at Microsoft has great design leaders like Albert Shum and Ralf Groene, and Sundar Pichai at Google has Ivy Ross and Andy Berndt, surely there is more than one way to lead by design, but what if it does require a strong bond between a CEO and a trained design executive at the highest level of the company? Now at Logitech, the duo Bracken Darryl (CEO) and Alastair Curtis (CDO) are being hailed as the new powerhouse 'Logitech quadrupled its profits with one big design idea' (Wilson, M., 2020), but is it because they are in the same consumer product category as Apple and that world needs another power duo? One of the interviewees who places senior designers in large organizations commented about a Chief Design Office and CEO partnership, "John inspires design, but doesn't necessarily facilitate it. He has a great relationship with the CEO, but he doesn't have a second in line that makes him look good. How solitary the leader's job, the CEO just left, will the company stand for design in the same way?" <sup>11</sup>. This was repeated time after time by many of the interviewees, "it all

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<sup>11</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 24. Design Executive in largest global beverage company (Appendix C)

comes down to the CEO, but these folks never learned anything about design at school. Exceptions are in luxury brands, they are the only ones that give power to creativity' <sup>12</sup>.

One of the interesting reflections was that, not only having a good CEO was important, but also issues with timing and strategy around personal goals, an expert in this domain with a book written about it stated "I really do think that it's on the rise, and it's going to take some time, and that in order for designers to be successful every person I interviewed said they cannot be successful if they don't have a CEO who doesn't believe in the power of design. if you Join a company intending to change the CEOs belief system, ain't going to happen, you'll set yourself up for failure. The average amount of time you're going to be in a company is two to five years at the max, average people are in in and out of companies with between two and three years, so you have to ask yourself, what kind of impact can I make within that three-year period and if part of your job is to convince the entire company and people above you that your valuable, that is not a good use of your three years" <sup>13</sup>.

There are good examples of design savvy CEO's, and the way they talk about design and the actions they embrace say a lot about their commitment. In an interview to the Harvard Business Review, the CEO of Intuit Scott Cook described how he recognized the value of design and committed to it (Smith, B., 2015). Scott, who describes himself as not having much formal design education, shows how important design became to their operation and how impactful it was to their success.

Mark Wilson wrote an article in Fast Company in 2015 titled 'The CEO of the future is a "designer-in-chief" (Wilson, M., 2015), and in it he states that "A century ago, the CEO was a fearsome whip-cracker. Fifty years ago, he was motivator dangling corporate incentives. And now, according to the 2015 Wolff Olins Leadership Report, the CEO has evolved into something new: The designer-in-chief of corporate culture, a mentoring figurehead who gets into the trenches with his employees and inspires them to create the next great innovation.... The new CEO is almost like some sort of rebel general, inspiring small guerrilla-style teams

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<sup>12</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 22. Innovation consultant and experienced board member (Appendix C)

<sup>13</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 19. American multinational information technology company (Appendix C)

to dream up new products or experiences. They rally the troops rather than outright command them. They empower their employees to think and work like designers, observing problems or scouting trends, and developing coordinating solutions that don't get lost to bureaucracy.”

One of the **Design CEO**'s that everyone is looking at right now is Jim Hackett, who was at Ford until recently, but who was a CEO with Steelcase, a company known for its' deep relationship with IDEO. In an article published in the Detroit Free Press titled 'Anxiety builds among Ford employees. Hackett says that's fair, but he's confident' (Wall Howard, P., 209), the author states that “Hackett describes himself as "a conductor in an orchestra, getting everyone to play their independent music in a coordinated way”. He added, “I want to think about the problem”. Hackett's role is very clear to those who get it, Lodge-Jarrett said. “He challenges us in the elements of our culture that need to shift. He brings that design-thinking, human-centred approach.” The Business Insider says of Jim “Hackett is something of a CEO intellectual, popular in Silicon Valley and a proponent of what's sometimes called "design thinking," a discipline that stresses looking at problems from many different points of view to develop more complete solutions. But the one-time University of Michigan football player and athletic director is no egghead. Calling himself a "huge proponent of a healthy balance between thinking and doing," he said that although deep contemplation in the pursuit of good strategies is worth it, a CEO "can't enjoy endless hours walking in the desert, thinking about things.”” Unfortunately, the unrest described by the Business Insider 'Ford's new CEO has a plan to reinvent the company — but it may not be enough to please Wall Street' (Debord, M., 2017) came true, Jim Hackett left Ford in August 2020 (Ford, 2020).

Though this hypothesis is very focused on a design savvy CEO, it is important that other executives are design savvy, especially if they are able to work closely with design delivering impactful results to the bottom line. In an article published by the Design Museum Foundation titled 'Designing in Blue, how IBM Adopted Design at Scale' 2018, a senior designer in IBM and speaking of his experience with Phil Gilbert as his manager stated:

*I met Phil when we were both asked to talk with the executives running IBM's software business about how to improve the design of our products. At that meeting, I immediately recognized that Phil was a rare executive who not only understood design deeply, but, even more importantly, was also an exceptional leader. I told him as much as we left the meeting, and I added that if he could win backing for a new design initiative, he could count on me to help him make it happen. I told him that even if we didn't agree on every detail, his leadership would make all the difference, and I would give him my full support. At that same meeting, Phil had already identified a very basic problem, the lack of designers on many teams. He proposed that, as a rule of thumb, every product team should have, on average, one designer for every eight developers writing code. Having previously been the sole designer on a high-performing team of about eight developers, this made sense to me. In fact, it felt like a minimum benchmark. This target skills ratio proved to be a powerful organizing idea. It made the scale of the problem immediately clear: it was obvious that it would take several years to fill the gap. At the same time, it allowed an incremental approach where we could focus initially on getting a few teams enabled with the right skills. If that worked, we could scale up to more teams over time. The ability to articulate a view of the overall target state, combined with a focus on delivering meaningful outcomes right from the start, framed our initial approach. (Design Museum Foundation, 2019)*

Another designer turned CEO that is cited often is Mark Parker from Nike, in 2018 Chief Executive magazine ran an article about Mark titled "A Designer at heart, CEO Mark Parker helps Nike hit It out of the park" (Kuehner-Hebert, K., 2018). In it they describe Mark as a "designer by heart, Nike Inc. CEO Mark Parker has helped the Beaverton, Ore. sports footwear, apparel and equipment company post stellar financials by not only encouraging continuous product innovation, but also by volunteering his own successful design ideas... In 2006 Parker was appointed CEO, and the success of Nike in recent years can be traced to that date,... Parker assumed the top post and led the way for Nike Air and a multitude of industry-breakthroughs in product design, Nike's profits have increased 57

percent and the company's market capitalization has more than doubled. Indeed, Park still continues to make his mark on design, as one of three members of HTM, a three-person design collaboration, alongside designer Tinker Hatfield and creative consultant Hiroshi Fujiwara, that functions as Nike's core R&D team. Since launching in 2002, the trio has launched over 30 limited-edition shoes".

In general, it is important to recognize who are the CEO's of the companies one desires to work in, and work with as a CDO. In a long research piece by the Darden Business School and published under the name 'Fortune 100 CEOs: What We Can Learn From Their Stories About Making It to the Top' (Darden, 2020), this is how they describe what they had learned about the CEO's they looked at:

- 80% worked in the same company for more than 10 years
- 9% worked there for more than 40 years
- Graduate level, 89% of the F500 don't come from ivy leagues schools
- Top 10 schools, good institutions but not the most visible
- Experience matters
- Patience to wait for 40 years
- 54% had Graduate degrees, a variety of degrees
- A lot of MBA's, MA's, MS's, 5% PhD
- 7 CEO's graduated from Harvard, 5 Penn, 3 Columbia...
- These brands enabled them to go work for these companies
- Some companies where it is very helpful to have a degree related to the business, Tech needs Tech (Apple, Google, IBM, ...). In contrast others don't Goldman Sachs/ History, Anthem/ Psychology, Lowes/ Marketing, Target + Nike/ Political Science. You might need to learn that language...
- Different functions, 25% started in operations, 22% finance, 17% engineering, 13% sales & marketing, ... all the different functions. That might be where they start, but they bounce between different functions before they reach there... there is no right path
- Doug McMillan/ Walmart, worked in all business segments, need to understand deeply the areas. Many paths to success, but be happy, it makes you more successful, competent, capable.
- Do not follow the salmon, find your own path.

After going through the research, we believe that, though a smart and supporting CEO is important for many other areas represented in the C-suite, like a two-time global CDO has put it in his interview, “while the CEO may not fully understand in detail the inner workings and impact of other areas like Finance, legal and even Marketing, they do not question the fact that they are essential and need open representation in the C-suite. With design, lack of understanding of the inner workings and impact, and lack of recognition of why designers might do a better job at representing design than any other professions, leads to considering design non-essential at that level, and there aren’t enough examples, cases, data to prove him or her wrong”<sup>14</sup>. So, it is our belief that this hypothesis, a design savvy CEO, is indeed an important one that needs addressing, and because data shows the CEO is indeed more impactful in choosing the TMT than other executives and/or Board of Directors, this is directly impacting the fact that there aren’t more designers in the C-Suite of large corporations.

## **5.2 Necessity - There is no need, design is already represented, these corporations are at the top of their game**

This insight generally describes a corporate context where there is no need for a designer in a C-suite position, design is already represented in some shape or form by one or more executives, these corporations are at the top of their game so it is arguable that they don’t need a designer in this position.

There are certain elements to this insight that makes it nuanced. There is 1) the need for design in the company, 2) the need for design representation at C-suite level and 3) the need of a designer representing design at the C-suite level. Though it was stated by some of the Interviewees that some sectors (consumer goods, technology,...) may need design more than others (banking, insurance,...), general consensus is that this opinion might be seeded in definitions of design closely associated with form giving and aesthetic qualities of physical objects and spaces, not necessarily with the opportunity exploration and strategy potential of design. There are plenty of cases of the importance of design in banking (Intuit, Capital One,...) and in Insurance (InsurTech, New York Life), many times led by smaller companies and start-ups upsetting the status quo of larger corporations,

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<sup>14</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 26. Global executive search and advisory firm specialized in Design (Appendix C)

leading them to foster and support start-up eco-systems to create some level of endogenous breeding of design innovation (Bonzom, A., & Netessine, S., 2016).

In general, the majority of data collected pointed towards a reality where no present day CEO or Executive in a large corporation would say design is important, so the discussion is more focused on how it is represented in a C-suite (design alone, or design+another, or another area+design) and, if it is represented by a designer or a representative of design. So, even if the representative does not bear design in the title, it ends up coming down to what other area is leading the aggregation of areas (engineering+design, innovation+design, customer experience+design, etc.). But like one of the Interviewees that two of his bosses grow to be large company Chief design Officers said “I have zero shadow of Doubt that design should be managed by designers. I know that design should not be managed by non-designers” <sup>15</sup>.

The same experienced VP of Design said “I think there are maybe alternatives to having a design on a C-Suite because you can have successful design teams in-house the achieve the result without needing that C-Suite position, or there is the consultancy model where design and design thinking is absolutely having an effect, but it's not necessarily through having a seat at the C-Suite. There's a limited number of positions you should and could have on a C-Suite, and there are other ways for design to have influence, some of it probably comes back down to that necessity. Is it important? I think that it is the perception that it's important. And then I think on the other side of it is, there are not enough examples of it yet, and if you can only quote five, you know, okay. It's not broken and there's not enough cases of showing what a difference it makes to make everybody think they need to do it” <sup>16</sup>.

In general, one can argue that design needs to be present in all corporations independently of their sector, customized to the sector and company. It can also be argued that design needs to be represented at the C-level, independently of the mode of representation. What remains open to discussion is the need for a designer representing design at this level, and while the results of the surveys and conversations point towards benefits of design being represented by a designer,

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<sup>15</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

<sup>16</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

reality is there is not enough evidence of the impact of this type of design leadership, not enough examples of the differentiated impact and results.

The argument of necessity was also looked at from the perspective of reality, the reality of the C-suite and what needs to happen for changes to occur, what designers need to do to make that change happen. An experienced designer coach commented “If you cannot express, build a case for that need in a company, and that if you do that, then the company will become more competitive or profitable whatever, then it will not happen”<sup>17</sup>. But there were very strong words about the importance of having a designer in the C-suite, such as these expressed by a two-time Chief design Officer, “do I believe that it is better for design to be represented by a designer? You bet, no doubt. I still very strongly believe (this is based on experience and based on the people that were not necessarily designers, leading design in various structures), that we have a more, not just positive from the point of the designers themselves, more valuable result, we have an input and delivery to the company which is more worthwhile than if we had it delivered or led by a non-designer. We can deliver that over a few years, not just over a couple of quarters. As a trained designer it's built into my curriculum, it's built into the fact that I have spent at least a number of years studying design, and therefore being more naturally prepared, it's wired, I can do it”<sup>18</sup>.

**Necessity** also tends to be an excuse for lack of readiness from the part of the corporation, an SVP in charge of customer insights in a large financial institution (PhD in organizational psychology) put it this way when questioned if her corporation had a Chief design Officer, “No. we’ve proposed it in the past but got the message the organization wasn’t ready for it. A very large part of the business has posted a head of consumer experience which will include branch experience as well as digital and call center that’s as close as we have gotten so far. I’m on the B2B side so that won’t affect my organization”<sup>19</sup>.

To confirm what we had collected from other means of research, we mapped the organizational chart of a number of F50 organizations to understand where

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<sup>17</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

<sup>18</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 16. Large American multinational corporation specialized in medical devices (Appendix C)

<sup>19</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 12. Corporation leader in robotic products in the health domain (Appendix C)



design was positioned, what areas were representing design, and where were the highest-ranking designers 'Figure 24'.

Regarding **Necessity**, and after all the data and insights collected throughout the research, it is our understanding that all corporations need design (capital D), reaching strategy and operations, physical and digital, discovery and delivery. This does not mean that some corporations in certain areas who might be less user/customer facing (eg.: Oil and Gas) need less design, or a different type of design (service design, communication design, design for diversification and differentiation, to name a few), but we have not found evidence of an area represented in public large companies as in F500 that doesn't need design in some shape or form. The question then might be, is it important enough to be at the C-suite level, singular enough to justify a seat onto itself (design+other areas), and why would a designer be more qualified to lead design than anyone else. Depending on the case, might not make sense to have design in the C-Suite, and if it is represented in some sort or fashion, might not require a unique seat, but it is our understanding that if it is represented, and if it is a unique seat, it should be a designer because we have sufficient evidence that says that designers are better qualified at representing design in a unique seat at a C-Suite level, and this despite how hard it might be to find the right designers for the job.

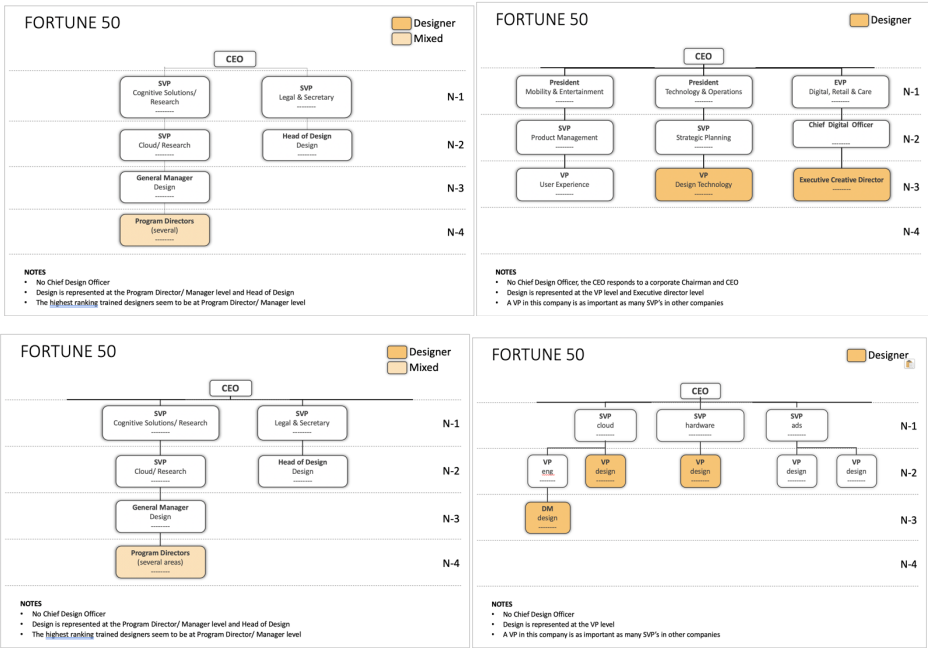


Figure 24 - Position of highest-ranking designer in 4 examples of F500 organizations. José dos Santos 2020

### **5.3 Effectiveness - This is not the best/ right place for designers to lead design, too many distractions**

This insight generally describes an argument that the C-level position is not the best place for designers to lead design, that there are too many matters and practices that impact design's effectiveness in the company, too many so-called distractions. The term effectiveness was purposefully chosen instead of efficiency, following a classic definition the effectiveness is about doing the right things, while efficiency is about doing things right. There is a component to this hypothesis which is cited by a few designers, that being in the C-suite stops them from being 'close to the ground', and from 'crafting their practice'. A few also used this insight to question if it was needed for a designer to be at this level to be effective, and thus spurring a large conversation about models of design leadership (centralized v. distributed, autonomous v. integrated).

The general consensus from interviews and the data from the surveys points towards a correlation between being in the C-Suite with being able to model the direction, format the action, impact the deliverables and results of design in a different way, a more effective way. The arguments that design management at the C-Suite level stop designers from being more hands-on in design is similar to many other professions, and it is above all a matter of choice by those that agree to embrace the managerial route in large corporations. Like one of the interviewees with C-suite experience "on **Effectiveness**, Yeah, I think you have to because that's where the resources are assigned, the direction is assigned...it's not the only one, but you got to think it wouldn't do any harm. In the C-Suite they're talking about five to ten-year plans, and those plans might be just growth through acquisition, or growth through expansion into new markets with existing products, or new product development and a big push to implement a new technology. In each of those are quite different, and if you're not going to be there for those types of discussions, you're just going to end up with what you get and you're going to have to play catch-up so I tend to agree with you"<sup>20</sup>. This vision was corroborated

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<sup>20</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

by another two-time Chief design Officer, “the middlemen, the middle person, the middle woman who may be the person sitting at the board level representing design among potentially other functions that need to be represented, needs to be a darn good advocate. The alternative to sitting at the board is to have a number of levers and direct access to the decision maker or makers, a representative who is fully not just sold to the idea of design, but fully committed to the idea of design”<sup>21</sup>.

I asked an experienced designer coach if he thought the C-suite might not be an effective place for a designer to sit, and he replied: “I don't agree, because if you are not sitting there, you will not get the mandate that will allow you to be effective lower in the organization. In most companies, if you don't have a design sit at N-1, those that sit there will not use design to make strategic decisions. Efficiency (doing things right) does not require a presence at this level, but effectiveness (doing the right things) does. Design must sit at N-1, if not today certainly in the future, some see it already, some look away, some put their heads in the sand, but modern companies will get challenges that need design competence and design thinking mindset to solve real problem that the world is facing already, and that companies will face as well’<sup>22</sup>.

All that we have learned in this research is that, as long as we agree on the definition of effectiveness, that of producing a decided, decisive, or desired effect (Merriam Webster), then being a member of the TMT focused on design’s priorities, plans and impact cannot be deemed as not effective, that being the case would require explanation on why is design different from any other areas in the corporation that are represented in the C-suite. Designers that prefer to stay a few levels distanced from the C-suite because they believe this is a more effective way to manage design might be confusing their love for the craft of design with what is really better for design and for the corporation itself, if such a designer does not understand that the activities of the TMT impact the effectiveness of design and require the presence of design (and designer) to discuss, prioritize, define and budget design, then perhaps this designer is not the right designer for this job.

Yes, there may be lot of ‘distractions’ and uninteresting conversations in the C-Suite, and in many cases very focused on a certain type of discussions

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<sup>21</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 16. Large American multinational corporation specialized in medical devices (Appendix C)

<sup>22</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

(quantitative and short termism), and quite often complex (systems) and hard to deal with (hard decisions), but if design (and designers) want to be a part of the solution, they need to embrace being a part of this team, accepting all that comes with it, perhaps engaging in changing how the C-Suite works from inside. We heard from a few of the interviewees that they would like to be a member of the C-Suite but “in their own terms”, and we believe this is the wrong approach, change will not likely come from the outside, but from within. **Effectiveness** is tightly connected to the measurement of effectiveness, and therefore to the discussion of metrics that attest the many ways design impacts positively organizations, this for us in an area of mixed scope of action, between designers and CEO’s, embodied by the question McKinsey asked in the second phase of their research on the business value of design “Are you Asking Enough From your Design Leaders” (McKinsey & Co., 2020).

Another model that has been used to discuss a corporation’s performance, this one very popular in the last 17 years, is the Net Promoter Score (NPS). This simple but apparently effective key performance indicator is here to stay, and though many designers don’t see it as such, it is indeed a designer’s metric, it’s about customer love and loyalty, it’s open source, and its simple. But in reality, and inside corporations, designers are still not using NPS as a design KPI, not knowing how to impact directly its outcome, how to create a link to good design practices. There are many exceptions, at Intuit chief product and design officer Diego Rodriguez says, “I can log in at any point and see the verbatims coming in. It’s very grounding and humbling” (Colvin, G., 2020).

There is one extra insight that did not come out in the research per se, but we believe there is something to it that deserves further exploration. It’s one of those uneasy topics among designers and it is connected to Donald Norman’s ‘fork in the road’ between craft and strategy, it is that traditionally the flow of designers into managerial track (and academics) was justified by many designers as lack of craft quality, basically, that those that can’t design become managers. Craft designers have voiced in explicit and implicit ways that there is a certain lack of respect for designers that don’t design, while recognizing the benefits of a good manager, there is a possibility that designers prefer to be managed at the highest level by

someone who is a trained, professional manager who is not a trained designer, perhaps a design champion as described by Charlie Hill/ IBM (Design Museum Foundation, 2019). It could be craft designers believe it's really about the results, a good design manager might be able, in their mind to deliver better results than a designer turned manager that is incapable of making real changes. The Peter Principle (Wikipedia) of promoting designers to become managers beyond their capability might be at the heart of this, while some companies have created a track that allows both Craft and Strategy designers to move up in their career all the way up to VC, the majority of companies only have one track for career growth, the strategy one leading to management. So, this becomes an issue, a hard one to assess because this would require designers to have this open conversation about a possible lack of trust and respect of craft designers towards non-craft designers, this fueling discussions about design thinking and design doing as two opposite sides of design. The corresponding author also has anecdotal data collected throughout his career that many craft designers, especially the really talented ones in crafting formal solutions with a high degree of aesthetic quality, though essential to the design process and recognition, become sequestered by their own talents and rely far too much on them, stopping them from evolving in many different directions, it seems that once they are recognized as being exceptional craft designers, they will stick to that. On one side, it's a good thing that one recognizes what they are good at and builds on that, on the other that proves to be a limited survival strategy because that talent becomes commoditized and the career hits a glass ceiling in an age where it is not easy to go out and explore other alternatives anymore, so many of these craft designers find themselves stuck in organizations and disgruntled because others that do not possess their qualities get promoted and thrive.

#### **5.4 Desire - Designers don't want/ aspire this role, stops them from crafting their practice**

This insight generally describes an argument where designers don't want, don't aspire this role, it comes with a number of unwanted responsibilities and impact in the personal life and ethos of a designer (see **Ethos**). Interestingly enough, what

many non-designers described as a lack of desire in line with Aesop's fable of the 'Fox and the Grapes' (there are many who pretend to despise and belittle that which is beyond their reach), did not match the response from the senior/ mid-career designer survey which seems to state that designers do want the position. This is despite the fact that several of the conversations with design leaders have pointed towards a real concern about unwanted but expected levels of accountability and a concern about lack of preparation for the job. The contradiction that was felt by us is that many designers voiced that a presence of a designer in the C-Suite was necessary for the growth and impact of design, but they were unsure and hesitant about taking on the role. Not having the desire for this position, and the necessary persistence to get it and the resilience to keep it came through as a real insight towards the scarcity of trained designers at this level.

While many things have already changed and will change even more in the years to come, regarding large corporations, many designers when describing and thinking of large corporations, still align very much with the depiction of Gordon MacKenzie's 'Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace' 1996' (Mackenzie, G., 1998).

This insight scored very high in designers and non-designers, like one experienced manager put it "the number of designers in my career who said I want to be a design manager, I want to be a design director, and when you either explain what that entails, that it is increasingly the people management track versus the individual contributor track, you know, that's a little fork in the road that they either then do it and don't like it, or now I don't want it because I don't feel prepared and I don't want to spend my time doing that"<sup>23</sup>.

One other very experienced manager whose boss is the Chief Digital Officer and always reported to the Chief Technology Office, and Chief Medical Officer said he loved it, it would all be connected, driving consistency, experiences. Furthermore, when asked "why not report to CEO? because he would be sucked by his vortex, enough of his boss's meetings, would do it if there was a chance though"<sup>24</sup>. A researcher that did some relevant work in the domain questioned

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<sup>23</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

<sup>24</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 14. Large American telecommunications company (Appendix C)

”executive position is important, but it might also be the case of being more executive and disconnected from the design process actually makes it harder to have that direct concrete benefit that we see teams having”<sup>25</sup>. Christopher Simmons in an article published by Adobe/99U in an article titled ‘...How designers get a seat at the CEO table’ 2014, candidly discloses that not everyone is destined to be a leader, or wats to be, and that is fine (Benton, D., 2014).

This is perhaps one of the most crucial insights impacting our core inquiry of ‘why there aren’t more designers in the C-Suite of the F50’, the answer being that they don’t want to, they do not desire, aspire to be in that position, some for personal reasons (work/life balance), some for professional reasons (waste of time). There is no fault, or harm in not wanting to be in this position and role, design needs one and all to succeed, and this role may not be more important in the scope of things than any other designer doing her job in a corporation. We believe this challenge, this journey is not for all designers, but the ones that set their eye on this really need to desire the position, they need to do it for the right reasons, embracing all that comes with it, they need to do so with passion and persistence, and they need to endure what it takes to get there. Nonetheless, and as a word of caution, what designers need to avoid is continuously commenting on their personal lack of impact in their organizations because they are not listened to, taken into account, because they are not a part of the C-Suite, while not wanting to deal with all the requirements and expectations of being at this level. And this needs to happen early in life, so there is time to access the gaps and build their experience and curricula in a way they will be ready for the challenge. This sidliner critical positioning of designers in large corporations and in the media at large, without accepting that, contrary to what they might believe, they are not ready and prepared to be at that level, they have not done what is required to be chosen to be at that level, and they insist in acting like there is a high level of cluelessness or lack of knowledge and understanding from others, or minimizing the requirements of the job, almost a personal vendetta towards design. This does not help design and has created a perception witnessed by the corresponding

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<sup>25</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 26. Global executive search and advisory firm specialized in Design (Appendix C)

author and many others, that of designers loving to nag about the fact that they are not included, while not doing enough to be included.

### **5.5 Access - Designers are not selected for the job, not invited, not mentored and groomed for it**

This insight describes a context in which designers are not selected for the job, not invited, not mentored and groomed for it. While many designers cite this as a true insight impacting the reality described by the question we pose, this is seen by non-designers as a typical complaint of a group of people that don't try hard enough to get these jobs, several of them citing 'nagging' and 'complaining' designers as a typical attitude from designers. But a three-time Chief design Officer put it bluntly "there is a hierarchy mismatch, it could be the same number of years of experience, but one is a business leader and is a VP and the designers is a director, there is a bias"<sup>26</sup>. We asked why they were not being taken into account, his answer: because designers haven't been given opportunity to prove themselves at that level, their role has not been validated, customer centricity has not been taken seriously, we are still into technology mode, experience in this domain is new.

But a designer coach with plenty of experience was quick to voice what many say about this topic: "totally disagree. What sits behind permission, is fear. Why do you say we don't have permission, because they fear the CEO, they fear to talk with the guy, to go into the room, maybe get beaten the first time and get back the second time and improve Etc. Fear is a big driver for not development of people in general"<sup>27</sup>.

There is a hand full of specialized design and creative executive search boutiques in the US, and a few more throughout the world, many stemming from the same outfit or mentor. These people, because many of them relate to the job as people placing designers via personal relationships, are hired by some corporations to fill their top-level design positions, we have no data to prove how many design executives are placed via internal promotion and how many come via

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<sup>26</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 13. Large American multinational financial services company (Appendix C)

<sup>27</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)



executive search, but these companies boast a pretty hefty placement history. The other executive seats are filled by internal promotion or executive placement, but it looks like these executive placement companies, large multinationals with offices throughout the world, don't have designers in their databases. In a conversation with a director in one of the 4 top executive placement corporations in the world, he stated that some engagements start HR/ Business leader or functional leader, that marketing may not mean education in marketing and work experience more important (common exception is engineering because of the required technical detail). They tend to privilege career success and experiences, and pay attention to what kind of companies has the person worked with, roles and responsibilities. He also talked about how academy companies (like Philips) are important. While these companies may not be the major obstacle for the scarcity of designers in C-Suite positions in large companies, the fact that they don't have designers in their databases and therefore don't understand how to place them, leaves designer executive placement in the hands of the specialized companies, which in itself makes the whole selection and placement process special in nature, less streamlined like with other executives.

One other conversation, in this case with a design coach, when asked if he believed the reason executive search companies did not have designers in their database was because there was no demand for it, he said "you are right, if there is no demand from the market, they don't have designers in their databases. Future employers will be the McKinsey's and Accenture's of the world, and then they will end up in the databases, because that's where they traditionally look for candidates for the corporations' <sup>28</sup>.

Michelle de Tulio in an article titled 'What Does it take to be a design Leader?' (DiTullo, M., 2017), states "recently throughout the business press, there have been countless articles about CCOs and CDOs and their value. Large companies like Coca Cola, Pepsi, 3M, Electrolux, and Hyundai have added these positions over the last few years. Most people behave like this is a remarkable new development. It has been the right of the professional practice of design to have a

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<sup>28</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

seat at the table since the inception of the industry. We just stopped demanding it.” So perhaps it is all just about demanding it!

Throughout the research, access did come out as a potential justification to the reality of designers in the C-Suite of large corporations, though there are different realities behind what we clustered as access. When we speak of not selected for the job, not invited, not mentored and groomed for it, while there a number of components to this state of affairs that are squarely in the scope of action of designers – applying for the jobs having acquired the right level of preparation and experience to make them the best candidate, or even designers choosing to have a mentor who is versed in executive matters and may support the necessary growth of the designer – others may require joint work with entities in the market that provide access and grant the right support to anyone aspiring to reach the C-Suite. So, executive recruiting companies like the ones continuously named as top ranking in their field (Forbes, 2020) need to start having a better understanding of the phenomena of design at the C-Suite level, while making an effort to search, identify, qualify designers to be in their vast databases. And design executive search companies perhaps need to do more, in a conversation with a CDO placed in a large global design executive search, he mentioned that he believe the recruiting agency was basically asked to fill the position, they reached out to him and pushed him towards the finish line. He didn't feel they asked all the necessary questions (eg.: how many salary levels were there in the company and what was the promotion and growth history for someone in design), they didn't prep him or the company about design and his expectations (eg.: while a director at his level when hired is given a certain type of attention, he landed in a large room, with no team, and effectively had to write his own job description and path to growth).

## **5.6 Preparation - Designers don't have the right education and training, skillset, mindset.**

This insight describes an argument where designers don't have the right education and training, skillset, mindset. While these elements are all different in nature – education what you get in school, training what you can get throughout your career (hands-on/ academia), skillset embodies hard + soft skills and result

from natural and apprehended means, and mindset which is more related to a set of attitudes closely related to ethos – they all seem to stem from education choices which might be built on values and core beliefs, much more than structural limitations. A global executive search and advisory firm lead asked an important question ‘If the future is about learning, are designers good at learning (self-propelled learners), and can they design a new way for people to learn faster, better, effectively?’ (Cheng, B., 2019). Another experienced coach stated “you have to get ready to get into that position, because if you are in that room, then the people in that room talk maybe of an hour five minutes about design and the other 55 minutes about other things which may be unrelated to design, but the expectations are that if you are in that room that you have an opinion and knowledge about other areas as well. And most designers don't want that, don't get it, don't understand it, or are not able to do it, or a combination”<sup>29</sup>.

The Design Census 2019 focused on ‘Understanding the State of Design and the People Who Make it’ paints a picture of everyone that is active in the design arena in the US, who is actively participating in the design economy in some fashion (“student, educator, freelance, permalance, self-employed/small business owner, full-time agency designer, and full-time in-house designer, plus an option for those currently unemployed) and an expanded set of design disciplines that reflect how new technology is broadening the roles of designers.” (AIGA, 2019, p.5). The same study presents what they call ‘path to education’ and conclude that Bachelor’s degree is still the most prevalent path (justifying our interest in understanding design education starting at the Bachelor level), while online training and other workshops and training being on the rise. One piece of data that aligns with our own data from the senior designer survey is the lack of designers doing PhD thesis, researching design via a thesis like this one ‘Figure 25’.

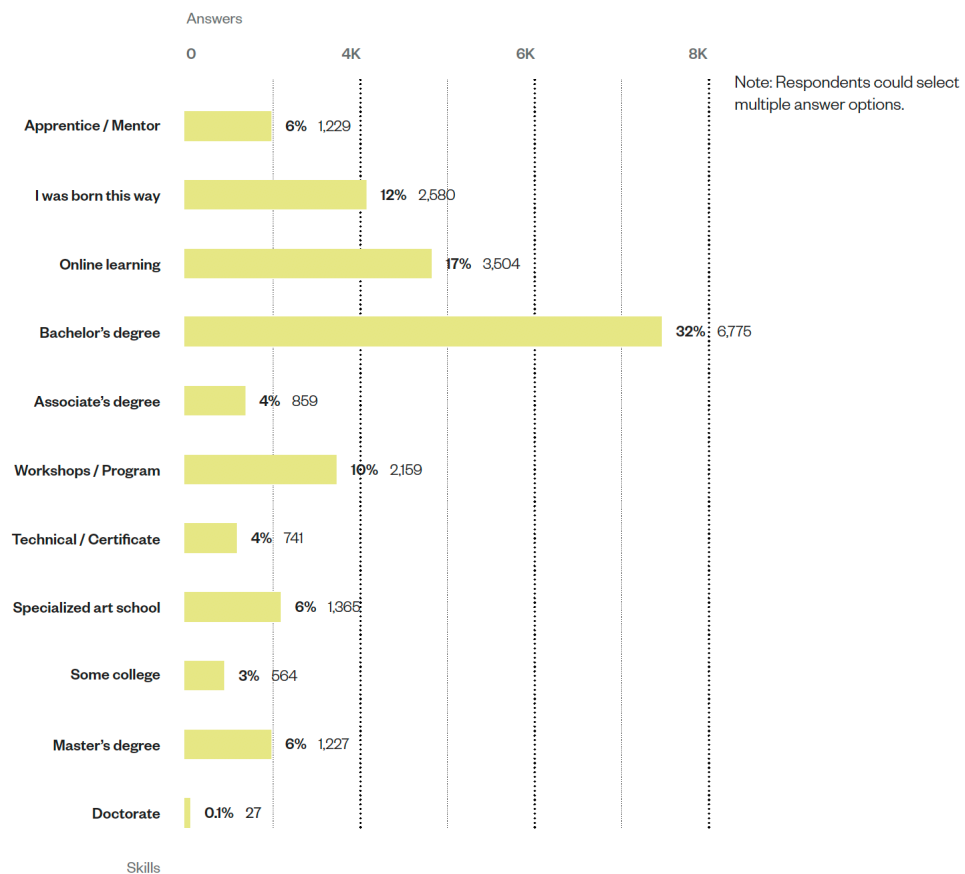
The element of lack of preparation given by corporations, but also pursued by designers on their own, is an important topic, like a two-time experienced Chief design Officer put it “we don't have the cross functional training, we today market leaders that become business group leaders, which is what you need to do in

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<sup>29</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

order to have the right credentials. So, preparation is a big thing, because if you don't have preparation you don't have permission' <sup>30</sup>.

Design school was a big topic of conversation, one of the interviewees with experience in training designers after they leave design school stated that 'it's very simple, design schools do not educate designers to lead. There are very few schools that do a little bit about this, but most design schools are about design doing, maybe a little bit about managing design, but not how to lead design. And that's not a bad thing, because if you're going to lead design, you need to know how to design' <sup>31</sup>.



This year we honed in on education experience with an expanded set of 11 answer options that better represent the increasingly alternative paths to education sought by designers. (Previous censuses provided just three options: no degree, college degree, and advanced degree.)

Bachelor's degrees are still the most prevalent, with online learning and other workshops and programs on the rise. Hats off to the designers who were "born this way." 🎉

Figure 25 - Path to education, Design Census 2019

<sup>30</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 16. Large American multinational corporation specialized in medical devices (Appendix C)

<sup>31</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

It is known that designers are used to taking on new challenges in areas that are new to them, and they are accustomed to learning enough to be able to come in with suggestions and recommendations that reveal a healthy mix of naivety (in a positive sense) and acquired knowledge, along with hybrid expertise stemming from experience in different sectors. So it is highly unlikely that they would not be able to learn new subjects and acquire new knowledge, even if these were more of the technical or scientific area, there is nothing intrinsic in the nature of a designers that would make them less suitable to learn certain things in lieu of others. A researcher with relevant work in this domain stated “what I understand about people who get elevated that level of leadership is they have some experience showing responsibility for profit and loss in some form, and designers still have a weak spot just in that particular area. Data that I recently saw on our survey indicates is that most design functions are kind of stuck at talking about design in terms of usability and customer satisfaction still and that being able to connect the lines between designs contribution and profit and cost savings is still a really rare skill. So, I think that this fundamental lack of P&L ownership almost by definition means design leaders are not going to be considered at C-level”<sup>32</sup>.

But the reality described by a few non-designers and the data collected from the senior/ mid-career designer survey suggests that beyond design education that might have some known shortcomings, designers are not betting on their own preparation, further education beyond design related skills, which in turn affects their experience and subsequent access to C-suite level positions. Like a lifetime design coach categorically stated “we have educated >500 designers worldwide about design and business, successfully most of them after finishing training got more responsibility, more budget, more people, more everything. In Europe there are 17 Masters and BA's in design, but none of those schools and none of those professors teaching there are people who have done this in reality....So, it's not only the low quality of the design schools, because you could say let them focus on design doing, it's also the fact that designers don't look for education after that”

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<sup>32</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 26. Global executive search and advisory firm specialized in Design (Appendix C)

<sup>33</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

One of the continuing debates is about design thinking, all the positive and negative that has come from the growth of it as a training topic, confused often with a complete and bona fide design degree. As one of the experienced managers put it “now, in both cases I think it's changing for the better. People are seeing that having design thinking type skills - you know, a number of business courses now that are promoting design thinking and problem solving and how that's what shapes a company - is happening, but it's non-designers that are grabbing that and then going away and getting a six month or a two week course and they're coming back and saying I'm a designer, that really pisses me off big time, but that happens. Then I think on the other side as you've got a few people that are out there are senior design leaders inside corporations who do a good job, but there's not enough of them and even the ones that are there, I don't know if they're promoting the work they do or they're promoting themselves”<sup>34</sup>.

One of the topics we pursued in the conversations with some of the interviewees was the MBA finding, if designers that did an MBA felt that it had the right return on investment, if it allowed them to evolve in their careers the way they somehow expected, planned. While all that did an MBA expressed that it was important, fundamental to their professional career, none of the ones we engaged described it as a deal breaker, and the exercise above mentioned revealed that out of the 4 design executives, 2 did an MBA and 2 didn't, while 2 other did and changed sectors. An experienced design manager stated that “I don't think just turning up and saying I've got a master's in design and I've got an MBA is going to get you a seat at the table. It will help you, but you'll still accepted you have to get in and work your way up in my opinion”<sup>35</sup>. Another one, a designer that did an MBA, asked why he had done it and his response was to break his own complex that he couldn't do numbers, and something he discovered, that everything is possible if you can deal with each function of the company at a time. The future of the MBA was also a topic of discussion, and someone with a lot of business experience in this domain stated “because when everybody believes in that mindset, they all lead from the same perspective which then does not create differentiation in the marketplace, it's like following a false God. An MBA might

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<sup>34</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

<sup>35</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 12. Corporation leader in robotic products in the health domain (Appendix C)

have been appropriate for many, many years, but now if you can look at the people that you admire, who are those CEOs that stand out that we admire and track their story, I don't know this for sure, but I have an I have a hunch they all didn't do MBA's”<sup>36</sup>. In an article published in AXIOS by Shane Stavisky titled ‘The death of the MBA’ (Savitsky, S., 2017), he mentions that “U.S. graduate business schools — once magnets for American and international students seeking a certain route to a high income — are in an existential crisis. They are losing droves of students who are balking at sky-high tuition and, in the case of international applicants, turned off by President Trump's politics. Why it matters: The once-venerated MBA is going the way of the diminished law degree, pushed aside by tech education. Graduates of the top 25 or so MBA schools still command the elite Wall Street and corporate jobs they always did, but the hundreds of others are scrambling, and some schools are shutting down their programs. Survivors are often offering new touchy-feely degrees like "master of social innovation." The value of an MBA is uncertain: MBA grads are facing shifting expectations from employers with more options than ever. "Especially for someone who might be 25 or 30, they're leaving with an MBA, and there's a question from employers, 'Well, you've got an MBA, but what else can you do for me?'" said Michael Prebil of the think tank New America”.

We engaged Gjoto Muratovsky PhD, author of many publications on design in business context, and asked him the core question of the present thesis, why aren't there more trained designers in the C-Suite of the F50, to which he replied “that’s because MBA degrees are still seen as prerequisite for these kind of positions. Also, not all trained designers are suitable for such roles. Running a company requires a different type is skillset to what a traditional designer might have. An advance understanding of design thinking certainly helps, but additional corporate experience and professional development might be necessary. Especially for F500 companies”. When we shared opinions and data about the decline of the MBA, Gjoko replied “you do not need an MBA to do a start-up. But it’s an entirely different story if you want to run a major corporation. You simply need to understand how things work on that level. It’s complex. And MBA for

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<sup>36</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 19. American multinational information technology company (Appendix C)

businesspeople is what an MDes is for designers. Now, if you have many years of experience in either area, you probably don't need a masters. Your experience and results in the field will speak for themselves. But you need to spend a lot of time climbing the ladder. Also, you need to understand that CEOs must perform on a quarterly base in America. That's how Wall Street operates. They don't really have much time to be creative and develop long term strategies when they have to report profit every 3 months - or they will lose their jobs. It's much more complicated running a Fortune 500 company than a start-up or a small / medium size company. There are lots of variables in question and the CEO is just one of these variables. Designers would probably be better on a VP level, with a focus on driving long term innovation, while the CEO focuses on short term wins”.

According to the Engineering Management Institute, “engineering is the most common undergraduate degree of the F500 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). It has been for some time. Approximately one third of CEOs majored in engineering and only 11% graduated from business school.” ‘Why Engineers Make Great CEOs’ (Forbes, 2014). This might be another insight that impacts access to Designers to this selective group, a strong engineering, highly technical group of CEO's might not see Designers as prepared to take on the challenges of the C-suite. The article identifies top characteristics that make Engineers particularly qualified (attention to detail, engineers know other engineers, understanding technology, responsibility and perseverance), nothing about human centric characteristics. In the last characteristic, perseverance, the author describes what many could review as a description of design’ “engineers are constantly up against a wall. They're told it won't work, the market is too small, or an idea has been tried before. To succeed within this environment, engineers by nature must be stubborn and enjoy solving problems; difficult problems”.

Then there is the issue of Wisdom, seen by many as the most important element in management. In ‘Management Half-Truths and Nonsense: How to Practice Evidence-Based Management’ the authors go back to Plato to explain the origins and importance of wisdom, suggesting that “wisdom means "knowing what you know and knowing what you don't know" (Evidence et al, 2006, p.3), especially striking a balance between arrogance (assuming you know more than



you do) and insecurity (believing that you know too little to act). This attitude enables people to act on their present knowledge while doubting what they know. It means they can do things now, as well as keep learning along the way” p.52.

In the Design Census 2019 (AIGA, 2019), on the topic of “What do designers think about the future of the industry”, the report states that designers are still fighting the good fight to prove they deserve a “seat at the table,” despite the ongoing acquisition of design talent by businesses and consultancies. Since 2004, large consultancies and corporations have acquired more than 100 independent design-related companies, with around 60% of those acquisitions occurring since 2015 (Maeda, J., 2019), design might be more valuable than ever, but its place in the corporate hierarchy is still uncertain. We are reminded of one of the statements made by a design coach with a lot of experience, that stated future design employers will be the McKinsey's and Accenture's of the world.

**Preparation** was indeed a top insight to explain the scarcity of designers in the C-Suite of large corporations, and this was brought up as a top reason from both designers and non-designers. Design education must change to adapt to the changing environment of corporations and society, perhaps this coming decade and impacted by the disruption Covid-19 has brought to all parts of society including education, design education too will see a dramatic change. If we consider the teaching of design to non-designers in different educational settings (London Business School 40 years ago with Peter Gorb, Stanford D-School founded in 2005) an experiment, we have to perhaps agree that it has turned into a successful one, perhaps too successful according to some. On the other hand, if we consider the teaching of other ‘languages’ to designers, like business, management, marketing, via Masters in design Management and in design thinking or similar (Wu, S., 2017), we might be forced to accept that perhaps this was not as successful, but we have not done this research and cannot in good faith make this statement. If in the future (as perhaps already in the near past), an MBA will not hold the keys to the C-suite, then one might ask if there is some secret recipe. Not to our knowledge, while a bachelor's degree may well be in one of the design/ architecture/ art schools that exist, and even if they change and bring in earlier basics and knowledge of business, management and marketing,

the issue of preparation is much more connected to decisions after the Bachelor's degree and include a combination of formal training and hands-on training and experience in taking on missions, jobs that might not align nicely with a typical, traditional design career.

## **5.7 Scarcity - There aren't enough qualified designers with the right experience in the market**

This insight was added because several of the interviewees stated that, if the F50 companies decided all at once to hire a new designer for an executive position in their C-suite, that they would have a very hard time because there were not enough qualified designers with the right experience in the market, that many of the most qualified designers leave the workplace in the 45-50 age group to pursue personal projects (Jonathan Ive to lead his design consultancy), many times not related to design per se (grow a vineyard like...).

The IES:NCES recently reported that in 2016–17, over two-thirds of the 1.0 million associate's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions were concentrated in three fields of study: liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities (387,000 degrees); health professions and related programs (186,000 degrees); and business (122,000 degrees). Of the 2.0 million bachelor's degrees conferred in 2016–17, more than half were concentrated in five fields of study: business (381,000 degrees); health professions and related programs (238,000 degrees); social sciences and history (159,000 degrees); psychology (117,000 degrees); and biological and biomedical sciences (117,000 degrees), and while we have no data to prove this scarcity of qualified designers, there is data about the number of designers being trained and launched into the market, according to the same source, in 2017, just in US colleges, there were 20,127 Bachelor degree graduates (1st/ 2nd major) in design & Applied Arts (IES:NCES, 2020).

There is data suggesting that F500 may be employing directly around 500,000 designers (if indeed IBM had at a certain point 2,000 designers in HR training the company in design thinking (that number since then has gone down), this is a 500,000 people company, not counting with all the other designers in communications and digital, we may assume that the average ratio might be

something like 1:200 (some like Apple might have more, and some like Berkshire Hathaway a lot less). Albert Shum/ Microsoft said he has 500 designers, the ratio of 1:200 seems to hold. The estimated designer population among the F50 might be around 50.000, not counting all the external design subcontractors and agencies.

A retired high level design executive told my interviewee “Bob doesn't know what happens to people who get past mid-career in design because it seems to be vanishing from the field after about the age of 45 and there just aren't a lot of people left around in a field, that's kind of why there aren't more of them in the executive roles, so the question that's like in the direction of where do they go, what's actually happening to the senior designers and if they're not that many if there is a lot of attrition from the field”<sup>37</sup>.

We asked a designer that did an MBA, groomed himself, invested to reach what seemed to be the highest position in a large company, why had he left after a few years, he stated “I had the feeling that I was reaching my goal when hired by ‘X’, but all those guys they were working for themselves, they were not the founders of the company, even the family people didn't know anything about the product and the user, they were accountants”<sup>38</sup>.

Kevin McCullagh from Plan, in an article called ‘Design Leadership in Flux’ (McCullagh, K., 2016), stated that “design leaders have long complained that they cannot find the right talent. But a number of findings have made it harder. The rate of flux can be bewildering: As the range of design problems widens and shifts, so does the range of skill sets required to crack them”, suggesting that there is indeed a scarcity and the reasons might be tied to the complexity of the job to be done.

Nevertheless, one other interviewees with a very deep knowledge of the design market, stated “I don't think so, I don't have the data, could be because of designers idealistic view of the world, not sure if there are more or less designers than lawyers and engineers, but I don't think so. I could list 200 people in the 45/50-year-old range that should be in the database of the recruiting companies.

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<sup>37</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 26. Global executive search and advisory firm specialized in Design (Appendix C)

<sup>38</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 22. Innovation consultant and experienced board member (Appendix C)

Maybe not that many, design is a young profession and many companies don't have this position established, but I don't agree' <sup>39</sup>.

There is data out there that suggests that, at least in graphic/ visual design domains where AIGA has its community, this is a reality. Below graph from the Design Census 2019 and the comment of the publishers with their interpretation “The drop off rate for full-time employees working inhouse or at an agency (as well as contract/permalancer workers at the same companies) is around the four-year mark, which is when many designers reportedly tend to stagnate” p.19 ‘Figure 26’

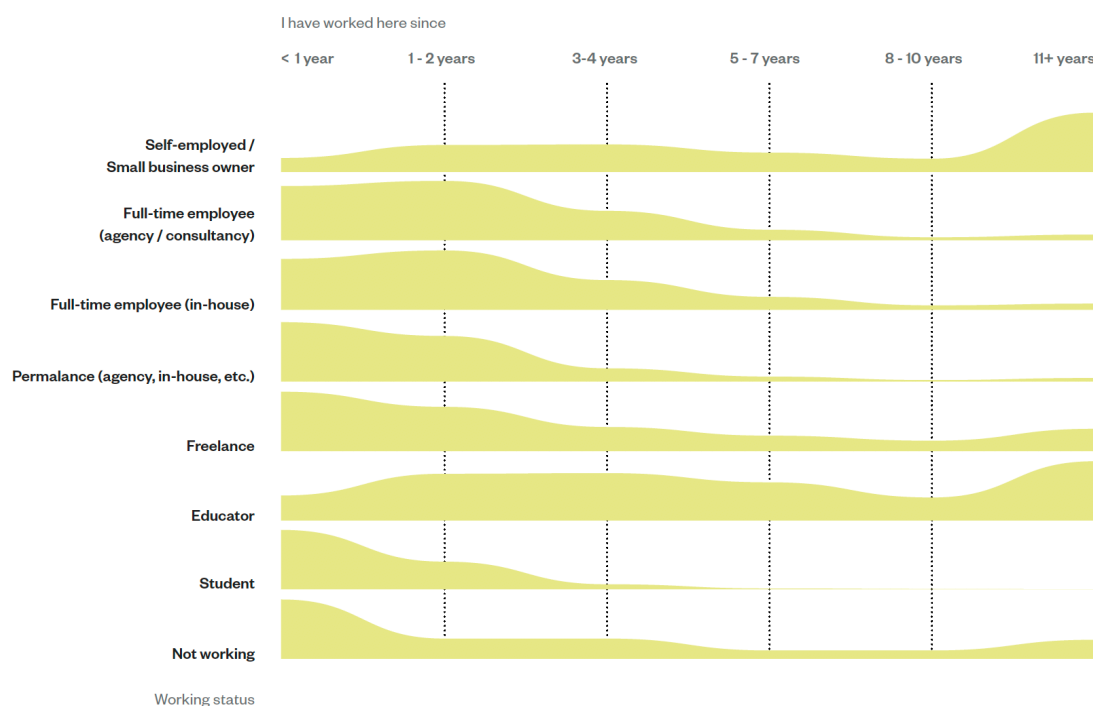


Figure 26 - Designer working status, Design Census 2019

Further research may go into this topic, not only in establishing if indeed there might be a true scarcity of trained designers for leadership positions in large corporations, which we do believe there is, but in establishing reasons that can explain the phenomena. One of the places to start will be in the number of trained designers/ architects/ artists in schools at the Bachelor level, compared to say graduates from engineering, marketing, business and management related studies, while data we have seem to suggest there is a gap, what we could not define is the size of the gap. Another place to look would be at what age are

<sup>39</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

designers entering and leaving large corporations, because the amount of time they spend in a large corporation might signal issues like complacency or tiredness. The age they leave large corporations and what happens next is also an interesting area of research, qualification of the urban myth that designers are leaving to pursue more worldly, socially and personally type of projects (the vineyard). One thing we believe we can establish, it is that scarcity might be the culmination of other insights before this, starting with a lack of desire to be in a C-Suite position, followed by lack of investment in the right preparation, not enough exposure to experience and consequent lack of interest in fighting for the top positions when offered the access. If indeed there is a scarcity of designers ready to take on this type of position, then the industry will resort to others that, despite not being trained designers have demonstrated that they can learn just enough to become great design managers.

#### **5.8 Flexibility - Designers tend to stick to design, no experience in managing other areas**

This insight describes an argument that designers tend to stick to design, they reveal no experience in managing other areas, and this being something that defines the necessary flexibility for anyone to get a position in the C-suite of a large corporation. We have all heard the inspiring examples of CEO's that started in a low wage area in the company and do a multitude of jobs gaining experience before he/she reaches the top echelon of the corporation (Stettner, M., 2018). Several examples are used for executives, where they might start as an engineer, but might take on a job at managing a group of people and knowledge area that is not associated with their training, and then might take on a country/ market/ segment, while delivering results and accumulating experience in many different domains. In the research domain, this is many times called job rotation and has been identified as one of the oldest and most powerful ways for leaders to develop, research studies show that many managers consider job experiences as the primary source of learning (McCall et al, 1989).

In an interview Chris Callani/ designer and CEO of Wake, 'Former Facebook Designer Reveals How to Become a Designer Founder' (Laurinavicius, T., 2016), he states that "My path to being a designer and founder was a result of just saying

“yes” over and over again. I kept taking on more projects, different jobs, and eventually I started to learn more about my strengths. I kept focusing more on what I wanted to do. I met and worked with people who inspired me. And from there, the momentum just kept building.” In an article published by the New York Times titled ‘How to Become a C.E.O.? The Quickest Path Is a Winding One’ (Irwin, N., 2016), the author states that “experience in one additional functional area improved a person’s odds of becoming a senior executive as much as three years of extra experience. And working in four different functions had nearly the same impact as getting an M.B.A. from a top-five program.... In effect, the increased ability to collect and analyse such troves of data raises the possibility that in the future we’ll be able to better understand what types of education the workers of the future most need, how companies can best recruit future star performers and how individuals can position themselves to benefit from shifts in what skills the modern economy most rewards”, and cites many examples that represent one common way to collect experience across functions, by pursuing opportunities that are adjacent to, yet different from, existing expertise. The same article presents data on how chief financial officers stated their role had expanded beyond traditional accounting and finance-related work, most commonly into human resources and information technology. While other data, this time related to MBA students, stating that those that remained specialists received fewer offers and lower starting bonuses than those who had worked across various specialties.

This lack of experience might be rooted in comfort zones that designers have and might dictate how they deal with new experiences outside their domain, like a two-time Chief design Officer puts it, “In my opinion a big reason, we don't want to lose the whatever it is, the fire but also maybe the sexiness of being a designer. Jony Ive can keep on wearing his white or black t-shirts, go anywhere and nobody cares, but we know that if we become C-Suite level, we probably need to start dressing differently as well and having a slightly different outlook on things. This is a very important reason, that goes beyond education”<sup>40</sup>.

One could argue that design, being such a bridging activity between different knowledge and functional areas in companies, impacted by and impacting on

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<sup>40</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 16. Large American multinational corporation specialized in medical devices (Appendix C)

many different areas in the pursuit of delivering complete customer experiences, does not need to rotate jobs and/or change domains in order to gain experience. Not only that, but the experience a senior designer accumulates doing his job is just as relevant and unique, as one of the most experienced Chief Design Officer puts it, “history favours the bold, being subversive with goodness in the heart. Doing the right thing that we know it is true, doing it off the grid. The first three years was bashed, ‘what the hell are you doing’; but you are the one that told me to never take NO for an answer. Same leader that threatened in the past are the champions. If you want to do the work, you need the bloody nose, but for good reasons”<sup>41</sup>. One other interviewee talking about a well know 3-time Chief Design Officer, ‘he speaks the language of the C-suite, he also has someone with him that makes a great team, together they are capable of communicating the vision and execute it’<sup>42</sup>.

We were curious about the career moves, linearity and steps taken by designers that remained focused in design, and designers that started out in design and then changed areas, in this case both of the subjects moved to the Finance area after an MBA and never came back into design, one of them reaching a C-Suite position in a large F-500 company, but not in design (not even aggregated to his job).

One of the interviewees, a designer and design coach with a critical eye towards designers, when asked about experience stated that “it is linked to education and preparation, experience in a career becomes impossible if you don't invest in education, designers say you need to think out of the box but they keep themselves in their box. If they prepared themselves more, learned new things and said to the organization that they wanted more responsibility, that would happen just like with other people’<sup>43</sup>.

We did some qualitative via public information in LinkedIn profiles, mapping the careers of 4 designers in executive positions and 2 that started out in design and moved areas, a small sample and focused on design careers solely, without much to compare to when it comes to executive careers, though we believe from

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<sup>41</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 14. Large American telecommunications company (Appendix C)

<sup>42</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 24. Design Executive in largest global beverage company (Appendix C)

<sup>43</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

anecdotal stories that executives pride themselves in making many career moves, laterally and across the board, and that becomes a part of who they are and why they are able to reach the C-Suite.

**Flexibility** allied with experience is indeed an important, if not the most important insight in response to our question, both explicitly and implicitly. While experience in itself is a result of doing something for a very long time, what we are discussing here is the cumulative experiences resulting from job rotation, hence the term flexibility and not experience. While some could argue that experience is crucial for any other job, let alone a job in the C-Suite of a Fortune 50 company, what is meant by experience in the case of design is an interesting debate because of the nature of design, touching different areas of the service offering which in turn exposes designers to many different areas of learning. Far more than rotating jobs in areas other than design, we believe an accumulation of experiences in the design area but within different design specialties is positive, a trained industrial designer will gain from managing a team of digital designers, while adding design research and establishing strong links (even if not as a manager) with other areas like branding and marketing. This lack of flexibility might also impact the perception that a designer might not be able, capable of managing others in areas other than design, and in many cases where the corporation decides to have design aggregated with other areas, there might be a hesitation in hiring a designer for the job. Of course, at that moment, it probably crosses the mind of a CEO that sending a manager trained in other domains to a design thinking weekend bootcamp just might do it, while the idea of sending a designer to a business, management or marketing weekend bootcamp might not cross his/her mind.

## **5.9 Advice - Management consultancies and advisory boards don't influence CEO's positively about the value of design**

This insight resulted from a discussion with some design executives on the reasons why in so many cases design is ill positioned to change the fate of the company by design, and the fact that many Board of Directors and Consultancies don't understand and advise on design adequately. It is also true that advice can and often comes from within, in a research undertaken by the Centre for Executive



Succession of the University of South Carolina (Wright et al, 2017), they listed the top confidants of the CEO and any and all of these are responsible for advice to the CEO and may suffer from the same lack of understanding of the value of design in business ‘Figure 27’.

### Confidants to the CEO



Figure 27 - Confidants of the CEO, Wright et al 2017

Nevertheless, this topic is much centred on external advice. The term widely used to describe how a large organization is organized is a Blueprint, a schematic high-level definition of how the organisation is supposed to function depicted in many cases in a number of organisational charts and supportive explanations of the benefits of such layout. This exercise is majority of times top down, in particular moments of the company (mergers & acquisitions, spin-offs of parts of the company, etc.), done by a small group of high level executives, in the case of large public companies consulting the Board of Directors and in many cases consultancies specialized in this type of efforts.

In an early conversation with a two-time design executive in large corporations, he stated how important it is to have more designers in the Board of Directors of large corporations, so they can advise executives and CEO’s on the importance

and business value of design <sup>44</sup>. Similarly, someone with a vast research and a published book on the topic, stated “If you talk to executive search companies, ask them about board level, why aren't there more designers sitting on boards. That is the next level to shoot for” <sup>45</sup>.

In a later conversation with a long tenure design executive in a global corporation, she stated that “they had just received a new blueprint in the last three years and it was all wrong in the way it positioned design in the corporation, revealing no understanding of the way design worked” <sup>46</sup>.

In the last 10 years, consultancies have gone on a shopping spree for design companies, according to John Maeda’s highly respected ‘Design in Tech’ report (recently been renamed CX Report), it would be a fair expectation that all this M&A activity by consultancies, many times responsible for advising CEO and Board of Directors of large companies on their future Blueprints, would render their advice more insightful and constructive as to the role and value of design in large companies, but that does not seem to be the case. Anecdotally, the corresponding author has lived first hand a situation where a member company of a large consultancy was installing business innovation practices in a large corporation without bringing design into the conversation, when questioned and since it was known they had a large design army in their group, the answer was that their company was very large and they hadn’t had a chance to integrate design in all their operations. In another conversation with a senior designer who was part of one of the design companies bought by a large consultancy, when asked if he had seen signs of strong, positive integration of consultancy practice with design, his answer was categorically ‘No’.

The global consulting market was in 2019 \$188 billion, and Gartner stated what John Maeda has repeatably called out, that digital (design) companies have been the primary drive of growth among the top 10, and that there are clear signs of rising demand in technology consulting. The reason why we have not called this insight consultancy is because there are many other components to the consultancy services, we are particularly interested in the advice component of

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<sup>44</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 11. Three-time Chief Design Officer with experience at Board level (Appendix C)

<sup>45</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 20. Design Leadership book author and Executive (Appendix C)

<sup>46</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 10. Large multinational home appliance manufacturer (Appendix C)

consulting, the service that supports top down, CEO driven projects traditionally given to outside recognized consultancies that, in many cases, help the CEO and Board of Directors do what they intended to do any way. This type of service can have many shapes, but one that we have focused on are corporate blueprints, as described by McKinsey in their article 'Getting organizational redesign right' (Aronowitz, S., 2015). We believe that, despite the large swath of acquisitions of design companies in the last ten years, these top consultancies do not understand the value and impact of design, and in the case of McKinsey who has done extensive research in the business value of design (by the designers), they have companies under the McKinsey umbrella that provide innovations services to large corporations without integrating design, and this is a fact witnessed by the corresponding author and confirmed by some of the interviewees. This insight incorporates all elements that might turn into CEO advice, be it consultancies, the members of the Board of Directors, and other CEO's. If there are not enough executives in the C-suite that have experienced the impact of design in large corporations, with designers at the helm sitting in C-Suite positions, these executives who tend to later become members of several Board of Directors will not adequately advise CEO's on the topic. If there are not enough CEO's in large companies experiencing the power of design and designers, enough Steve Jobs's, Braken Darrel's and Jim Hacket's out there, it is hard for that advice to flow to interested and curious CEO's.

But designers cannot sit and wait for this reality to change, that is why we have created the meta-model later presented later in this thesis, as a cyclical virtuous circle of impact, a wheel of consequences of sort, that could in time improve this reality.

### **5.10 Ethos - What makes a designer a designer is at the same time seen as an asset and a liability**

As previously described in 2. Literature Review, it's "an association of values that generically characterize designers, and though some attitudes and behaviours observed in designers might correlate with their ethos, there is no implicit or explicit causation. ... We have described these as a balance between two sides of the

continuum, tensions between two distinct approaches, assuming that designers are capable of embracing and delivering both sides, but when ‘push comes to shove’ designers will typically feel more comfortable in one side of that continuum”.

Mind you that designers are very critical about themselves, and like a designer coach put it “the personality of a designer is probably one of the root causes for the current situation, designers are autistic, not empathetic, not good storytellers, not good listeners, not good collaborators, characteristics that you need a top score if you want to be in that boardroom. Though a lot of designers say they are all this, I totally disagree with that and this is based on teaching >500 design leaders or designers and design managers around the world having worked with designers and design leaders of number one or number two in the world. This is my opinion, they are bad storytellers, not empathetic, arrogant, not good collaborators, not good listeners, they are bad influencers, and they point at the bad marketeers, bad R&D people, bad engineers, but they don't understand them and they don't have the knowledge to counter arguments from those functions”<sup>47</sup>.

The list of 10 core beliefs we gathered are not meant to be exhaustive, they are also not scientifically plotted, nor resulting from a deep study in designer behaviour and attitudes. They are put together as a list of tensions that have come up in many different pieces of data and conversations like the one above, it shows up in a structured manner (though organized differently) in the research done by a group of researchers when they created a questionnaire to measure design thinking mindset (Dosi et al, 2018), and in reality may be a different list depending on who is putting it together. What we believe is that there is a moment in the life of a designer when she needs to question herself what she believes and what she wants out of her career, and in that precise moment, defining these tensions and figuring out what they want to do about establishing a better balance between them is crucial, and we identify this as the starting point for a designer. We did not use **Ethos** as one of the listed insights to interviewees, after we asked them ‘top of mind’ what they believed to be the factor(s) explaining the core question in this research, we shared a number of insights but not **Ethos**, because we believe that

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<sup>47</sup> Qualitative Research – Interviews: 1. World leader in designer training & coaching (Appendix C)

it could become a conversation about biases and assumptions, which we know exist, but that in itself is not the sole answer to the question we have been asking.