

VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS JOURNAL

Fall 2018

Volume 54

Number 2



Key Managerial Skill Sets in Graphic Design Education

*Gregory S. D'Amico, Ph.D.
Rochester Institute of Technology*



Acknowledgements

Editor

Dan Wilson, Illinois State University

Editorial Review Board

Cynthia Carlton-Thompson, North Carolina A&T State University

Bob Chung, Rochester Institute of Technology

John Craft, Appalachian State University

Christopher Lantz, Western Illinois University

Devang Mehta, North Carolina A&T State University

Tom Schildgen, Arizona State University

Mark Snyder, Millersville University

James Tenorio, University of Wisconsin–Stout

Renmei Xu, Ball State University

Cover Design

Paravi Das, C.S. Monroe Technology Center, Leesburg, Virginia
Instructor, Pam Smith

Page Design, Formatting, and Prepress

Lorraine Donegan, Janet Oglesby, Can Le

Printing, Bindery, and Distribution

Harold Halliday, University of Houston
University of Houston Printing and Postal Services

About the Journal

The Visual Communications Journal serves as the official journal of the Graphic Communications Education Association, and provides a professional communicative link for educators and industry personnel associated with design, presentation, management, and reproduction of graphic forms of communication. Manuscripts submitted for publication are subject to peer review. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or the views of the GCEA.

Article Submission

Please follow the guidelines provided at the back of this *Journal*.

Membership and Subscription Information

Information about membership in the Association or subscription to the *Journal* should be directed to the GCEA First Vice-President.

Reference Sources

The *Visual Communications Journal* can be found on EBSCOHost databases.
ISSN: Print: 0507-1658 Web: 2155-2428

GCEA Board of Directors

President – Lexa Browning-Needham

J. B. Johnson Career & Technical Center
at Alton High School
4200 Humbert Rd.
Alton, IL 62002
(618) 474-2205
president@gceaonline.org

President-Elect – Thomas Bell

Millersville University
40 E. Frederick St.
Millersville, PA 17551
717-871-7220
presidentelect@gceaonline.org

First Vice-President (Publications)

Pradeep Mishra

Arkansas State University
P.O. Box 1930
State University, AR 72467
(870) 972-3114
firstvp@gceaonline.org

Second Vice-President (Membership)

Can Le

University of Houston
312 Technology Bldg.
Houston, TX 77204-4023
(713) 743-4082
secondvp@gceaonline.org

Secretary – Laura Roberts

Mattoon High School
2521 Walnut Avenue
Mattoon, IL 61938
(217) 238-7785
secretary@gceaonline.org

Treasurer – Dina Vees

Cal Poly University
Graphic Communications
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
805-756-1127
treasurer@gceaonline.org

Immediate Past President – Malcolm Keif

Cal Poly University
Graphic Communication
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
805-756-2500
pastpresident@gceaonline.org

Key Managerial Skill Sets in Graphic Design Education

by Gregory S. D'Amico, Ph.D. • Rochester Institute of Technology

Introduction

The graphic communications industry is going through a period of transformative change fueled by the digitization of printing technology and the emergence of digital communication alternatives to print, and impacting all media solution providers (Paparozzi, 2016). As Bondy, Peterson, and Webb (2015) state, "The mandate for change in the graphic communications industry comes largely as a result of significant advancements in technology that are enabling new communication modes that threaten the historical print-centric business model" (p. 139).

In response, the industry is utilizing new technology to make its services more responsive and bundle them with non-print media to provide clients with integrated service offerings that provide the most effective combination of media to reach their strategic objectives. As a result of this competitive adjustment by service providers, printing company sales and graphic design professionals are assuming expanded duties and responsibilities, no longer simply filling clients' requests, but serving as their marketing and communications advisors and, therefore, interacting with clients on a level far above that of traditional print buyer to marketing executive (Paparozzi, 2016).

The print salesperson, once needing expertise only in the print, binding, and, perhaps, mailing processes, must now also be fluent in numerous marketing methods, from print to email, webinar, social media, and even event marketing, and be able to advise which methods to use in combination with print. Similarly, the graphic designer is now called upon not only to provide effective visuals for marketing via print, but must be equipped to provide clients' marketing teams with advice on what mix of marketing and communications media should be used and how they should be implemented (Paparozzi, 2016).

According to Bondy (2016), a 'high-margin differentiator' which will allow the service provider to benefit is to be able to provide a 'high-touch value-add project management' capability which will deliver measurable results to the client. Bondy (2016) asserts, "Incorporating a variety of design, data, and content services into your service offerings will expand the breadth and depth of the projects that you can tackle as well as increase production efficiency" (para. 20).

The changes in graphic communications technology and workflow have been impacting the world of graphic design for some time. More than 20 years ago Swanson (1994) recommended that, "as the estimated 2000

Table 1: Literature search results in Key Managerial Skill Sets in Graphic Design Education

	Bridges (2012)	Cheung (2016)	Du (2015)	Dziobczenski and Galeotti (2017)	Dziobczenski and Person (2017)	Majithia (2017)
Communication	•			•		•
Marketing		•	•	•		
Problem Solving			•	•		•
Teamwork	•			•	•	•
Strategic Thinking		•			•	
Adaptability						•
Client Relationship				•		
Project Management				•		

graphic design programs in the U.S. pump out more graduates that there are jobs in traditional graphic design and corporate design departments...each school would reason in fairness to its students it must do a better job of providing entry-level job skills so its graduates have a chance in this competitive job market” (p. 55–56).

More recently, the Alliance Sector Skills Council (2011) stated that there is a call for creative industries to employ graphic design graduates with ‘hybrid skills’ from three areas, namely:

1. Multi-skilling (various design, software, and technical capabilities);
2. Multi-platforms skills (familiarization with all potential production platforms);
3. Management/business skill sets.

The first two ‘hybrid skills’ areas essentially encompass traditional skills—design and production—but expand them to cover new technologies, outputs, and processes. The third, however, is a relatively new area that few current graphic design programs require of their students. This paper focused on one of the recommended management/business hybrid skills area and sought to identify the key managerial skills required in graphic design education today. Based on the results of this preliminary study, subsequent studies could be done to determine whether those key skills are actually being taught in current graphic design curricula and whether their inclusion is a factor in students’ career success and advancement.

Method

This study was conducted building upon an established systematic literature review of critical success factors in retrieving the articles identifying key factors (Santisteban & Mauricio, 2017).

A search of Google Scholar and Proquest databases was conducted. Databases were searched by subject keyword based on the following criteria:

1. Must appear in a peer-reviewed journal, doctoral dissertation, or conference proceeding.
2. Must contain subject keywords including ‘graphic designer’ or its equivalent, ‘education,’ and ‘skill sets’ or its equivalent, such as ‘skills’ or ‘capabilities.’
3. Must have been published within the past five years.

The review was limited to peer-reviewed journals, doctoral dissertations, and, conference proceedings. Omitted were books, book chapters, and, articles in the trade press.

The search returned six articles that met the above criteria. Identified in the literature were eight skill variables: communication, marketing, problem solving, teamwork, strategic thinking, adaptability, client relationship, and project management. Table 1 summarizes the results of the literature review.

For purposes of this preliminary study, the four variables that were identified in half or more of the articles have

been categorized as primary factors. The four variables identified in fewer than half of the articles have been categorized as secondary factors.

Primary Factors

The four primary factors were communication, marketing, problem solving, and teamwork.

Communication. Communication is cited in the articles as a significant managerial element for graphic designers. Included in this category is the ability to express oneself clearly and concisely in terms of written and oral skills (Bridges, 2012). The author's research identifies the broad competencies graduating graphic design students from accredited design schools are required to satisfy. These competencies include not only the ability to solve communication problems, from identification and research to analysis and outcome evaluation, but also the ability to develop a description and response to appropriate audiences the communications solutions must address, taking into consideration a number of disparate factors involved in design decisions.

Having professional briefing and presentation skills to both internal and external stakeholders was also indicated (Dziobczenski & Galeotti, 2017) – classified under the broad heading of 'client relationship skills,' abilities that included client relationship and leadership skills – as was the ability to communicate the 'why' and 'how' of a concept as part of an interconnected story, express unity in thought, and read and interpret data (Majithia, 2017).

Marketing. Marketing is another vital area of understanding for graphic designers. A familiarity of marketing, sales, and branding principles is an important factor in order for graphic designers to function in today's business environment, where viewing graphic design as an artistic or strictly visual endeavor is unlikely to satisfy the demands of a commercial client in a competitive marketplace (Cheung, 2016). It is also critical for graphic designers to have a sense of marketing and commercial thinking, possessing the ability to develop ideas that can be applied to practical design initiatives and an awareness of current communication trends (Du 2015). Dziobczenski and Galeotti (2017) emphasized the need for designers to connect their work with current marketing trends and branding, and have an understanding of what the market expectations are for design professionals – what was termed a key element in graphic design education.

Problem Solving. Problem solving is also a primary managerial skill set for graphic designers and goes far beyond solving visual design or artistic problems and extends to expertise in solving practical business problems and offering appropriate and applicable solutions to complex problems and issues found in the real world of contemporary cultures and commercial market demands (Du, 2015, Dziobczenski & Galeotti, 2017). It was also noted that those designers who gain the ability to solve problems will increase their value to their employers by being able to recognize business opportunities. Such individuals are future-oriented, self-motivated, and are willing to collaborate, responding quickly to opportunities for expanding the influence of design (Majithia, 2017).

Teamwork. Teamwork, the ability to interact successfully with others – especially the ability to effectively communicate a visual message by virtue of the collaboration of the designer and the client, with both keeping the recipient of the message in mind – was noted as yet another primary skill set for graphic designers and classified as a crucial ability that fell under the broad heading of disposition, a requisite soft skill (Bridges, 2012, Dziobczenski & Galeotti, 2017). Interpersonal, or teamwork, skills were found to be most important for designers who fill internal positions within organizations as they might be more involved collaborating in development projects than those who work outside of the company, such as freelance designers, who may more often be enlisted to offer a design fulfillment role, clearly defined by the client, rather than an original conceptual solution (Dziobczenski & Person, 2017).

Majithia (2017) found that "there is an increased demand for those who can collaborate/connect and work in trans-disciplinary teams"—moving more towards a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach rather than strict career specialization— "while understanding the importance of individual roles and responsiveness in an engaging and collaborative learning environment" (p. S1526). Also cited was the need for greater emphasis on developing designers "who act more as consultants than as pure designers (as they are traditionally described)" (p. S1526).

Secondary Factors

The four secondary factors were strategic thinking, adaptability, client relationship, and, project management.

Strategic Thinking. It is indicative of the changing, and increasingly strategic, role of the graphic designer that Cheung (2017) found that it was important for there to be a practical aspect to design in business, noting that there has long been an overemphasis on the importance of aesthetics, styling, and visuals. Dziobczenski and Person (2017) stated that graphic design educators “might want to prepare students for more senior positions by training them to work in a more integrative and strategic way” – and pointed out that although the general design skills required did not vary greatly in advertisements for junior or mid-level positions, “requirements for business orientation were more common for mid-level positions than junior positions” (p. 48-50).

Adaptability. Majithia (2017) recommended that, as we move into an uncertain and complex graphic design world, “it is not difficult to infer ...that the future is looking at young professionals that can adapt and learn quickly,” picking up “nuances of change” (p. S1527). Majithia (2017) also emphasized the need for designers to display empathy for their colleagues as part of the adaptability process, pointing out that they should be socially responsible and people-oriented, comfortable with both technology and thinking out of the box, and citing empathy as one of the most important skills for navigating “this new complex landscape—resolve conflict, collaborate in teams, align interests, listen effectively, and make decisions where there are no rules or precedents” (p.S1527).

Client Relationship. Dziobczenski and Galeotti (2017) found that graphic design graduates would gain an advantage in the job seeking process – and perhaps even in laying the basis for founding their own companies – by acquiring a client relationship skill set as part of their studies, noting that some professionals seem more focused on skills for an autonomous career, perhaps as freelance designers, rather than a collaborative profession.

Project Management. Project management expertise – adherence to deadlines, defining responsibilities, establishing milestones, and working within budget constraints – was also perceived as another factor that would give graphic design graduates an advantage in seeking employment (Dziobczenski & Galeotti, 2017). The design function is no longer a discrete activity in which the designer provides a visual element in isolation but part of an integrated effort that requires an ability to coordinate goals and campaign objectives.

Implications and Future Research

This research study focused on identifying the key managerial skills required in graphic design education today. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, eight key managerial skill sets were uncovered, namely: communication; marketing; problem solving; teamwork; strategic thinking; adaptability; client relationship; and, project management. Interestingly, graphic design programs today seem to focus on the technical and artistic dimensions of graphic design, but employers appear to want more.

Any graduate of a graphic communications or graphic design program is expected to possess the requisite artistic and technical skills to produce commercially acceptable design for print and, increasingly, for alternate media. However, graphic designers no longer sit isolated in a low-light office or cubicle producing attractive, printable files. Today’s designer is expected to work as part of a company team finding solutions for its clients’ communications, marketing, and/or branding needs. The designer must be able to interact successfully with other members of the team, as well as with client executives in preparation and production of an effective strategy for achieving clients’ objectives. The ability to think strategically, communicate clearly, and adapt readily to the demands and needs of a wide variety of client industries and goals is as important as a keen eye and up-to-date technical proficiency.

As this study indicates, educators responsible for formulating graphic design curricula must be aware of the new roles graphic designers must fill today and ensure that their institutions include sufficient managerial courses and cover essential skill sets such as those identified in this research to provide its graduates with adequate managerial preparation. Clearly, a graphic design program that limits its offerings to courses in computer technology and artistic design seems to offer inadequate preparation for a graphic design career in today’s business world.

Opportunities for future study exist in further validation of the need for the skills identified in this study. The author’s future research will examine, through primary interviews with leaders in the graphic communications industry and graphic design education programs, the relevance of each of the managerial skill sets identified and future research will also determine if there are

any additional key managerial skill sets that should be included in graphic design education programs. The key managerial skill sets identified in this study will form the basis for a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule in the next phase of this research.

References

- Alliance Sector Skills Council. (2011). *Sector Skills Assessment for the Creative Industries of the U.K.* Retrieved October 19, 2017 from http://www.oph.fi/download/144895_LinkClick2.pdf
- Bridges, A.W. (2012). Identification of perceived 21st Century graphic design skills, content knowledge, and tools needed in an effective university-level graphic design program Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, N.C.
- Bondy, C. (2016). Drupa 2016 is behind us. Now what? *What they think.com*. Retrieved October 22, 2017 from whattheythink.com/articles/81796-drupa-2016-behind-us-now-what/
- Bondy, C., Peterson, W., & Webb, J. (2015). *Unsquaring the Wheel*. Rochester, NY: RIT Press.
- Cheung, B.P.S. (2016). Professional graphic design knowledge in Hong Kong: From graduate to professional. *Communication Design*, 4(1), 1–2.
- Du, J. (2015). Restructuring Chinese post-secondary graphic design curricula to create greater compatibility with design careers in China today. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (10019482)
- Dziobczenski, P.R.N. & Galeotti, A.A.R. (2017). Preparing design students for the market. An initial investigation on the required knowledge and skills for graphic designers in Brazil. *The Design Journal* 20 (sup 1), S1241-S1249.
- Dziobczenski, P.R.N. & Person, O. (2017). Graphic designer wanted: A document analysis of the described skill set of graphic designers in job advertisements from the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Design*, 11(2), 41–54.
- Majithia, R.K. (2017). What's next in design education?: Transforming role of a designer and its implications in preparing youth for an ambiguous and volatile future. *The Design Journal* 20 (sup 1), S1521–S1529.
- Paparozzi, Andrew. (2016). *State of the Industry Report*. Alexandria, Va.: Idealliance, 27.
- Santisteban, J. & Mauricio, D. (2017). Systematic literature review of critical success factors of information technology startups. *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal* 23(2), 1–23.
- Swanson, Gunnar (1994). Graphic design education as a liberal art: Design and knowledge in the university and the "real world." *Design Issues* X(1), 53–63.

Visual Communications Journal Submissions Guidelines

Submittal of Manuscripts

- » All manuscripts must be received by the editor no later than **December 15th** to be considered for the spring Journal or by **June 15th** to be considered for the fall Journal.
- » Submit papers and correspondence to:
Dan Wilson, dan.wilson@illinoisstate.edu
or check www.GCEAonline.org for contact information for the GCEA First Vice-President.

Types of Articles

- » The *Visual Communications Journal* accepts four levels of articles for publication:
- » 1. Edited articles are accepted or rejected by the editor. These articles are not submitted to a panel of jurors. The decision of the editor is final.
- » 2. Juried articles are submitted to the editor and are distributed to jurors for acceptance/rejection. Juried articles are typically reviews of the literature, state-of-the-art technical articles, and other nonempirical papers. Jurors make comments to the author, and the author makes required changes. The decision of the review board is final.
- » 3. Refereed articles are submitted to the editor and are distributed to jurors for acceptance/rejection. Refereed articles are original empirical research. Jurors make comments to the author and the author makes required changes. The decision of the review board is final.
- » 4. Student articles are submitted by GCEA members and are accepted/rejected by the editor. These articles are not submitted to a panel of jurors. The editor's decision is final. Please be aware that poorly written student papers will be rejected or returned for editing.

Eligibility for Publication

- » Members of the Graphic Communications Education Association, or students of GCEA members, may publish in the *Visual Communications Journal*.
- » Those wishing to publish should join GCEA before submitting their paper for review.

Audience

- » Write articles for educators, students, industry representatives, and others interested in graphic arts, graphic communications, graphic design, commercial art, communications technology, visual communications technology, printing, photography, or digital media. Present implications for the audience in the article.

Manuscript Form and Style

- » Prepare manuscripts according to the APA style.
- » Submit your paper in Microsoft Word format.
- » Call out the approximate location of all tables and figures in the text.
- » List your name, highest degree, affiliation, and title on the first page only. Article text should begin on the second page.
- » Please proofread carefully before submitting.

Figures (Graphics)

- » Number and write a caption for each figure. Include captions in a list at the end of your Word document.
- » Screen captures should be as large as possible.
- » Photos should be about 300 ppi to span one column (3-inches) or 2 columns (6.5-inches).
- » Line art should be in a vector format.
- » Tables will be formatted by the designer to fit in one column (3" wide) or across two columns (6.5" wide).

Tables

- » Set up tables in separate Microsoft Word documents, one document for each table.

Publication and Format

- » The *Visual Communications Journal* is published and distributed twice a year, in the spring and in the fall. Each article of the *Journal* is published online at www.GCEAonline.org. Provided there are at least 24 pages of content, the *Journal* will be printed and mailed to GCEA members.

Notice of Limitation

- » Articles submitted to the *Journal* cannot be submitted to other publications while under review. Articles published in other copyrighted publications may not be submitted to the *Journal*, and articles published by the *Journal* may not be published in other publications without written permission of the *Journal*.