
Design Industry Voices 2009

How it feels to work in British design
and digital agencies right now.

Report published 3 December 2009 by Fairley & Associates,
Gabriele Skelton and On Pointe Marketing.

The headlines:

1. Significant numbers of staff responsible for day-to-day client satisfaction are planning their exit when the recession ends.
2. Respondents agree on what attributes are important to them personally in an agency.
3. Perceived delivery gap between important agency attributes and agency performance is a major factor in reaching decisions about whether to stay or go.
4. Those intending to leave perceive crucial deficits in their agency's performance in the psychosocial work environment.
5. One-fifth of respondents write their thoughts about work on social networking sites.

1. **Significant numbers of staff responsible for day-to-day client satisfaction are planning their exit when the recession ends.**

- Nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents are either definitely or possibly intending to change job when the recession ends.
- 36% of directors, 53% of managers and 47% of coordinators and assistants intend to change employer when the recession ends, compared to only 19% of the executive team.
- Strategists are least likely to change employer (21%). Designers (43%), account managers (44%) and those working in other roles in the agency (36%) are most likely to leave.
- Of those intending to leave, about three quarters (73%) intend to stay in the same field. The rest either don't know or intend to do something different.

Implications:

A substantial change in those responsible for the day-to-day client relationships and satisfaction may have an impact on the agency's ability to service and farm existing clients and seize new business opportunities as the market begins to pick up. There is also a risk of losing knowledge and experience. Agencies are likely to face the need for financial and time investment in the recruitment and training of new talent.

2. Respondents agree on what attributes are important to them personally in an agency.

- There is broad agreement among all respondents on what attributes are important to them personally in an agency.
- All attributes are highly rated but there is an order of what is most to least important (see table one below).
- Respondents' position, area, age, gender or length of service makes no major difference to the rank order.

Table one: attributes ranked from most to least important for the whole sample.

1.	Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	100.0%
2.	Trusts employees to make decisions	99.4%
3.	Values ideas and opinions	99.3%
4.	Supports professional development and growth	99.0%
5.	Does work that is stimulating	98.9%
6.	Shares information and knowledge openly	98.8%
7.	Has a strong sense of teamwork throughout the organisation	98.8%
8.	Has high expectations of its employees	98.8%
9.	Is quick to change in reaction to new situations	98.7%
10.	Appropriate workload for staffing levels	98.5%
11.	Has a good pay and benefits package	98.4%
12.	Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	98.3%
13.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	97.9%
14.	Keeps employees up to date with information about our business performance	97.8%
15.	Clear strategic goals	97.6%
16.	Management team with the experience to lead during a recession	96.9%
17.	Rewards people for going the extra mile	96.1%
18.	Attempts to provide job security	95.3%
19.	Provides training	92.5%
20.	A brand that is compatible with my own values	91.8%
21.	Helps employees to manage stress	91.7%
22.	Focuses on farming existing clients	88.8%

Implications:

Across the industry, people agree on what makes a good agency. Good performance in these areas will be necessary for talent to consider the agency as a preferred employer both in terms of retention and recruitment.

3. Perceived delivery gap between important agency attributes and agency performance is a major factor in reaching decisions about whether to stay or go.

- The delivery gap is the difference between how important an attribute is to the respondent compared to their perception of how well their agency currently performs in relation to that attribute.
- Discontented respondents who intend to change job perceive a bigger delivery gap than those who wish to stay:
 - The median delivery gap is: 19% for all respondents; higher for those intending to leave (36%) than for those intending to stay (13%); an average difference of 23% between those intending to leave and those intending to stay.

Table two: perceived delivery gap, overall and those intending to leave versus those intending to stay.

	Agency attributes	Perceived delivery gap			
		Average (all)	Intend to leave? Yes	Intend to leave? No/ don't know	Difference of opinion between those intending to leave and those intending to stay
1.	Focuses on farming existing clients	7.8%	13.5%	6.8%	6.7%
2.	Has high expectations of its employees	8.2%	13.5%	5.9%	7.6%
3.	A brand that is compatible with my own values	5.8%	15.6%	2.5%	13.1%
4.	Holds people accountable for the quality of the work they produce	20.7%	32.4%	17.3%	15.1%
5.	Values ideas and opinions	13.3%	23.6%	8.1%	15.5%
6.	Trusts employees to make decisions	22.7%	34.4%	17.3%	17.1%
7.	Does work that is stimulating	11.4%	23.6%	6.0%	17.6%
8.	Has a strong sense of teamwork throughout the organisation	17.2%	29.7%	11.0%	18.7%
9.	Keeps employees up to date with information about our business performance	16.1%	29.0%	9.7%	19.3%
10.	Attempts to provide job security	17.2%	27.0%	7.6%	19.4%
11.	Management team with the experience to lead during a recession	14.7%	27.0%	6.7%	20.3%
12.	Has a good pay and benefits package	22.9%	38.5%	13.5%	25.0%
13.	Provides training	20.2%	55.4%	28.3%	27.1%
14.	Clear strategic goals	20.2%	37.2%	9.7%	27.5%
15.	Appropriate workload for staffing levels	33.6%	52.7%	24.5%	28.2%
16.	Shares information and knowledge openly	22.2%	40.5%	12.3%	28.2%
17.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	31.5%	49.40%	20.3%	29.1%
18.	Is quick to change in reaction to new situations	22.6%	41.9%	12.7%	29.2%
19.	Supports professional development and growth	40.6%	60.1%	28.3%	31.8%
20.	Helps employees to manage stress	35.4%	55.4%	22.8%	32.6%
21.	Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	27.4%	49.0%	14.3%	34.7%
22.	Rewards people for going the extra mile	39.3%	63.5%	24.1%	39.4%
	<i>Median difference</i>	18.8%	35.8%	12.5%	22.7%

Implications:

Respondents value the same attributes in an agency employer. Those wishing to leave do so because they perceive the agency's performance to be worse than their colleagues who wish to stay. Agencies need to drive consensus of opinion in how well they are performing against valued attributes with all their employees.

4. Those intending to leave perceive crucial deficits in their agency's performance in the psychosocial work environment.

- For those intending to leave the attributes where the delivery gap is greatest are in the psychosocial work environment (job demands, job control and workplace support/training).

Table three: attributes with greatest perceived delivery gap for those intending to leave (beginning at the attribute ranked 16th).

16.	Has a management team that demonstrates strong leadership skills	49.0%
17.	Provides feedback that helps improve my performance	49.4%
18.	Appropriate workload for staffing levels	52.7%
19.	Helps employees to manage stress	55.4%
20.	Provides training	55.4%
21.	Supports professional development and growth	60.1%
22.	Rewards people for going the extra mile	63.5%

Implications:

To retain talent agencies need to nurture their employees. This may also improve their perception of the leadership skills of their management team. Jobs with high demands and high control are generally considered the most rewarding whereas jobs with high demands, low control and poor workplace support are worst for mental and physical health.

5. **One-fifth of respondents write their thoughts about work on social networking sites.**

- Nearly one-fifth (19%) of all respondents write their thoughts about work on social networking sites.
- The split was fairly even across the different levels of seniority within agencies. There was some evidence that more designers and strategists (23% and 21% respectively) than account management (15%) or other members of the agency (13%) have written personal thoughts about work on social networking sites.

Implications:

Agencies attract people who are comfortable writing about their work on online social networking sites. By narrowing the perceived delivery gap among employees the agency may increase positive word of mouth, which can help to grow the agency's reputation internally and externally.

Quotes

“Quite a few wonderful colleagues made redundant. Am I safe???”

A 40-49 year old woman who has been with her company for more than five years and intends to stay.

“Clients now expect us to cut our fees and costs by 30% in some cases, but not to cut our hours of working methods to address these cuts – the effect is longer working hours, tighter turnaround times, for less. This is affecting our health, mental as well as physical and design integrity. If we continue to drive our suppliers and employees to meet client/procurement we possibly come back from this?”

A 40-49 year old female account manager who has been with her company for more than five years.

“Extra workload. No extra benefits. Little thanks for working hard. Grumpy management. Backstabbing. Anger every day, mixed with anxiety. An exacerbation of the ‘them and us’ culture between account handling and creative.”

A 30-39 year old male designer at director level who has been with his agency for less than two years and definitely intends to leave to do something different when the recession ends.

“It [the recession] has put people throughout the industry under a greater pressure. Under this added pressure, often people make unusual or inappropriate decisions. I constantly see us spreading ourselves too thinly, achieving nothing, upsetting valuable employees and current clients. People are becoming very disillusioned with working here.”

A 30-39 year old female designer at manager level who has been with her agency for less than three years and possibly intends to leave to work in another agency when the recession ends.

“I think this recession has highlighted too many examples of bad forward planning and financial management on the part of the smaller agencies. In all cases in this area, the management teams appear to have been taken by surprise by the degree of the slow-down i.e. thought they could weather it by simply sticking their heads in the sand and waiting for work to arrive... Maybe it was just all too good for too long and we all got complacent.”

A 30-39 woman working freelance in account management.

Methodology

We asked people who work within design or digital agencies to anonymously share their views on how it feels to work within their agencies right now.

The research was carried out online between 15-24 October 2009 by Fairley & Associates, working in collaboration with Gabriele Skelton and On Pointe Marketing.

567 of a possible 4746 people invited to participate did so (12%), all of whom are either clients or candidates of Gabriele Skelton.

The majority of questions were statements where respondents were asked for their point of view on how important an attribute is to them personally (very important, quite important, not important, not sure) and how well the agency they work for currently or most recently is performing in relation to each of the attributes (very well, quite well, not well, not sure).

About the participants

Management function: 19.2% are on the executive team, 40% are director level, 25.6% managers, 3% coordinators, 3.2% assistants and the remaining 9% describe themselves as 'other'.

Role: 45.9% are designers, 8.3% strategists, 13.9% work in account management, 8.3% in production, 7.2% new business/marketing, 5.8% human resources, with 10.6% classing their roles as being in other parts of their organisation.

Employment status: 94.6% of respondents are permanent employees; 5% are freelancers and 0.4% currently not working.

Length of service: 46.3% of participants have been with their employers for more than five years; 8.5% less than five years; 13.2% less than less than four years; 13% less than three years; 10.5% less than two years; 8.6% for less than a year.

Location: 97.5% are UK based; 1.1% work in mainland Europe; 1.4% in the rest of the world. For the purposes of analysis we used only the responses of those based in the UK.

Age: the majority of respondents were aged 30-50 (42.9% aged 30-39 and 36% 40-49), 7.6% are 18-29 years old, 12.3% 50-59, 1.3% over 60.

Gender: three-fifths of the sample were male (61.5%) and two-fifths female (38.5%).

About us

Fairley & Associates works with companies and agencies to effect change, solve immediate business challenges and build long term capabilities in brand, marketing and engagement. Our clients report greater traction within their organisations and in the marketplace.

www.fairleyassociates.com

Gabriele Skelton is a specialist design and digital recruitment agency. We're matchmakers; we connect the right candidate with the right client to create something new. We love working with creatives, account handlers, consultants and thinkers, techies and developers. It's about making the right connections to get the right reaction - unusual combinations that make the magic happen - that's what we mean by chemistry.

www.gabrieleskelton.com

On Pointe Marketing works with agencies to build external and internal reputation to drive the business development pipeline and retain and attract talent. We create business and brand-led marketing plans and ongoing implementation consultancy. In a world where agencies sometimes wear the worst shorn shoes, On Pointe Marketing is the cobbler.

www.onpointemarketing.com