



An Aristocracy of Our Own

Our mission is to help client companies build sustainable advantage by finding proven, as well as up-and-coming, design leaders who can demonstrate design's potential impact on their business or their clients' businesses. Design leaders' abilities and performance can have a disproportionate influence on and add significant substance to a CEO's plan to transform and reposition an organization, and profoundly affect its profitability and position in its marketplace.

To identify high potential design leaders for senior positions in visual brand design/architecture, user interface/interaction design, product innovation/industrial design and environmental

design, we look for individuals who have passion and contagious enthusiasm for what they do, are willing to step up to the plate and take responsibility for their performance and are comfortable using business vocabulary.

They tell us stories and show examples of their achievements in making complex design and business decisions that have powerfully affected product, communications, systems, services and/or customer experiences using their unique experience, knowledge, insight, judgment, instinct and desire to "make things beautiful." We ask about how their collaborative and relationship building skills with colleagues (steeped in

other bodies of knowledge, understanding and know-how), and with customers, consumers, suppliers and consultants, contributed to the results.

What attracts the aristocracy of design leaders are companies building organizations with integrated business and design strategies, ethical, positive and forward-thinking behavior patterns, top-of-their-game individuals throughout and a design talent-based competitive advantage that competitors cannot easily duplicate. This can be very compelling to potential candidates for new design leadership roles, provided location,

title, position description, level of responsibility, career path and compensation are in line with what they intend to do with their lives.

Our business's growth comes from requests for design leaders who create or direct the creation of real, intangible or virtual design accomplishments that capture attention, make emotional connections, stimulate and enable ease of use, understanding, pleasure, confidence, efficiency and originality, to attract new customers and keep existing ones for their "sponsors," aka their employers.

They must excel at analyzing information, grappling with ambiguity, solving complex problems, and doing so by joining together with others. As demand for high-value design decision-makers grows, there are fewer individuals to select from who are willing and able to undertake these complex, highly-collaborative jobs. Sometimes an organization in the virgin territory of hiring their first design leader is surprised by their expectations of higher than anticipated salary, bonus plans, stock options and grants. We educate and negotiate them through that.

Any company can cut costs and boost productivity by reengineering, automating or outsourcing, but any advantages they gain don't last very long because competitors can adopt similar technology and process improvements. The achievements of organizations bringing in and achieving design leadership are hard to copy. Some companies are in the process of assessing their designers, working on ways to improve the quality of their work, and restructuring their relationships within the organization to increase their productivity and impact on profitability and competitive advantage.

Design leaders participate in advancing new ways to speed innovations to market, discovering what customers need and/or want and developing new ways to carry messages to consumers who have migrated away from traditional media to make sales more effective. Gearing up for systemic changes like these can take several years, at minimum, so it is never too soon to start searching for or training future design leaders.

Today's businesses are looking for more problem solvers and fewer doers. Technology can replace a check-out clerk in a supermarket, but not a design leader who can proselytize

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design thinking to people throughout a company. Machines can log deposits and dispense cash, but cannot conceive of a brand identity or design an easy-to-understand way to enable consumers to manage their finances online. Technology also relieves a retail clerk from making transactions to making interactions by helping customers on the floor, becoming a critical element of experiential branding.

As Richard Florida wrote in his article, “Managing for Creativity” (*Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2005), “A company’s most important asset isn’t raw materials, transportation systems or political influence. It’s creative capital—simply put, an arsenal of creative thinkers whose ideas can be turned into valuable products and services.” (I don’t agree with many of his conclusions, but this one is a no-brainer.)

Designers have a specialized, experiential type of knowledge that informs and supports their high levels of insight and judgment, which cannot be found in any books. It is often acquired by doing design lots of different ways and learning on-the-fly, often following a non-linear track: directing design groups in consultancies; designer/entrepreneurship—starting a consultancy or designing one’s own products, manufacturing and selling them; becoming a chef; joining a technology start-up, and so on.¹ (Indeed, business schools do not consider design a critical corporate function in the way that marketing, sales, finance and operations are; these all have literally tons of books written about them.)

The experiential path—often a circuitous one, gets designers to design leadership. The path is not an algorithm, i.e., acquire this set of skills, A through Z, hit the button, and bingo you are a Design Aristocrat. It helps to have made some mistakes, had some life experience outside the exotic hothouse of design, have had relationships with leaders of any type of activity, mentors and coaches, and to have done some benchmarking.

Design leaders and up-and-comers are in short supply. For every one we recommend to our clients, we have talked to over 100 potential candidates. Why? Here are some reasons:

- **Reality:** students, drawn to design because they think it is about making things and self-expression and that solutions to problems reside inside themselves, meet reality and decide design is not for them.
- **Dumbing-down America:** fewer educated people capable of doing complex thinking and decision making.
- **Demographics:** fewer 18–34 year-olds, an increasing number of baby boomers.
- **Perception:** parents still push the brightest students towards education and careers in business, law and medicine (depends on cultural background).

1. Discussion with Arnold Wasserman, my mentor.

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- **Standard:** accrediting institutions for design education discourage innovation, and certify good and poor schools equally; there are no standards for design education.
- **Competition:** is fierce for the smartest and most talented design leaders.
- **Design management title:** does not ensure experience developing/being involved in strategy, a requirement for design leadership, and is sometimes held by non-designers.
- **Hierarchical organizations:** do not develop employee's collaborative skills.
- **Cost:** many stars are earning more than many companies are willing to pay.
- **Co-op program:** a great advantage not available to the majority of design students.
- **New design graduates aspiring to leadership:** best to start career in a strategy-led environment which they may not be qualified for, or able to find.
- **Location:** ideally, design leaders are in areas where they can gain inspiration to spark creativity and innovation; that are culturally diverse, inclusive, tolerant of new ideas and provide them with opportunities to engage with other like-minded

people; otherwise they require many travel opportunities.

- **Immigration:** no longer a source of ambitious designers who raise the bar.
- **Natural selection:** the stars of any pursuit—baseball, yacht racing, business, design—are always less than one percent of the population of the field.

The existing aristocracy of talent is frequently highly visible inside their companies and sometimes outside, if they win awards, make presentations at industry conferences, have work featured in, and are quoted by, the design and business media. They often live where they want and are employed by companies increasingly driven by ideas that include creativity, design and innovation. If they have reached a position of influence, and are being well taken care of by their employers, what would tempt them to make a change? We know. It must be an opportunity to have a more significant impact on an organization and in the marketplace than they currently have, to invent new categories of products, services and brands, to join the elite group of other talented, creative and capable people open to innovative ways to organize and work, to partner with the best outside resources, and, of course, to be compensated in a way that correlates with the value they add.

A formidable barrier that keeps design leaders where they are and prevents poaching is in companies that are creating proprietary ways to discover what customers need and want and presenting them with an ever replenishing supply of new, more effective value-added products and services. *And this is very exciting.* A rival company cannot have the same mix of interactions within its organization and throughout its value chain because the people are different, the environment is different and the reward system is different. (Rivals are not the only ones looking for design leaders.) The biggest risk in changing jobs is “swapping the devil you know for the devil you don't.” If both design leaders and organizations do their due diligence, most job changes result in positive experiences.

Recently I've been accused of being “aspirational” in my writing, meaning that things out there are not as I write about them but how I want them to be. E-mailers and callers ask for a list of companies that consider design to be an essential function (and those companies that are working on it), because they can't find any. How about Nike, Apple of course, Citigroup, JCI, Kohler, Whirlpool, Samsung, BenQ, Motorola, TTI, Microsoft, Procter & Gamble, Symbol Technologies and Nissan for starters? And smaller companies like OXO International and Lowepro. **CA**

Author's note: This article was inspired by “The Next Revolution in Interactions,” by Bradford C. Johnson, James M. Manyika and Lareina A. Yee, McKinsey consultants. The McKinsey Quarterly, 2005, Number 4, November.

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