



FROM PORTFOLIO TO OFFER

The Practical Job Search Guide for Designers

From Portfolio to Offer

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The advice in this book is general guidance for creative job seekers. It is not legal, tax or financial advice; for decisions about contracts, tax or pay, check the rules where you live and work.

Current pay figures from published salaries: workwithus.work/pay-check

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ABOUT US

WorkWithUs is a curated index of creative jobs. Since 2017, every role on it has been picked by hand: in in-house brand and product teams, at studios and agencies, from junior to director level.

The team behind WorkWithUs brings many years of international experience from both sides of the hiring table, in design and in recruiting. We have worked for numerous agencies and for large tech companies such as Apple and Google: as designers, art directors and creative directors who built and led teams, and as recruiters who found the right people for creative and design teams in Europe and the United States. So we know what makes a recruiter keep reading a CV, and what makes them stop.

This book is what we would tell a friend who asked us for help with their search: plain advice, from both sides of the table, without the jargon. We hope it helps you find work you enjoy.

The WorkWithUs team



INTRODUCTION

A short book for designers and other creatives who are looking for their next role, or for their first one.

Looking for creative work is a job in itself, and nobody teaches it. Design school teaches you to make things. Your first jobs teach you to make them with other people, under deadlines, for clients. But the work of finding the next job, of showing what you can do to a stranger who has two minutes, of asking about pay without feeling awkward, of saying yes or no to an unpaid task, is something most people learn by trial and error.

This book brings together two views of hiring (see "About us"): that of recruiting for creative and digital teams, and that of many years of design work and leading teams. Since 2017, we have also curated creative jobs for WorkWithUs: roles in in-house brand and product teams, at studios and agencies, from junior to director level. The book started as a series of short guides on that site. Here, each of them has been expanded into a full chapter, with practical examples, phrases you can adapt and a checklist at the end.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

It is written above all for graphic, brand and product designers early or in the middle of their careers: people looking for their first role, their second or third, or a move from agency to in-house. Motion designers, illustrators, art directors and others whose work is shown in a portfolio rather than described in a CV will find most of it applies to them too, and so will anyone going freelance.

If you have hired designers for years, you will know much of what follows. Where the advice differs by career stage, the chapters say so.

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK DIFFERENT

There are many good books about design careers. This one has three things that are harder to find in one place.

- **Both sides of the table.** Most advice comes either from designers or from recruiters. This book is written by both: one of us has spent years deciding which applications move forward, the other years making the work and leading the teams that hire.
- **Built for the search itself.** Every chapter ends in something you can use the same day: a structure, a wording to adapt, a checklist. The book follows the order of a real search, from reading the market to the offer.
- **Written with the current market in view.** It covers what AI tools change for designers, how published salary ranges work and what to ask when there is none. Where it describes the market, it draws on the roles we curate, and says so.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANISED

The chapters follow the order of a job search, but each one stands on its own. Read the book from start to finish once, then keep it nearby and return to the chapter you need.

INTRODUCTION

- **The market.** Where the roles are, which skills are asked for, what AI tools change in design work, and what creative roles pay, including how to read a published salary range.
- **Your material.** A one-page CV and portfolio case studies that a busy reader actually reads.
- **Applying.** What to ask about remote, hybrid and on-site work before you apply, and how to write to a studio that is not advertising a role.
- **Interviews.** How to present your portfolio in an interview, and how to judge and handle design tasks.
- **Working freelance.** How to set a day rate you can live on.
- **Putting it together.** A simple routine for running your search week by week.

TEMPLATES AND WORKSHEETS

Some chapters work best with something to fill in. A CV template, a case study worksheet, a day-rate calculator, an application tracker and an invoice template are free to download at workwithus.work/book.

A NOTE ON AI

AI tools are changing parts of design work, and they come up at every stage of a search: on your CV, in your case studies, in interviews, in design tasks and in how you price freelance work. The chapter "Design and AI: what changes, what stays" looks at the topic as a whole, and five other chapters end with a short section, "And AI?", on what it means for that step.

A NOTE ON NUMBERS

Markets move quickly, and pay figures go out of date within months. This book therefore explains how to find and read numbers rather than printing them. Where a chapter describes the market, the observation is dated. Observations about the market come from the roles in our own job index, which is a curated selection, not the whole market. Rules of thumb are marked as such. The examples with figures, such as the day-rate calculation, are illustrations of a method, not data.

Current pay figures from published salaries are on the Pay check page at workwithus.work/pay-check.

ONE PIECE OF ADVICE BEFORE YOU START

Most of what follows comes down to one idea: make it easy for the other person. The person reading your CV, opening your portfolio or answering your email is busy, and usually on your side. Give them the important thing first, in plain words, and they will give your work the attention it deserves.

Part one

THE MARKET

WHERE THE JOBS ARE

READING THE CREATIVE JOB MARKET

Which skills are in demand, where the roles are, and what that means for your search.

Most people search for jobs the way they scroll a feed: open a board, read the newest posts, apply to whatever looks close enough, close the tab. That works sometimes. It works much better when you first step back and look at the shape of the market you are searching in: which skills keep coming up, which cities have the roles, which levels companies actually post, and how quickly good roles disappear.

This chapter is about reading that shape. It draws on what we saw across the roles in our job index, WorkWithUs, in autumn 2026, and it shows you how to make the same kind of reading yourself, wherever you look for work. The specific observations will age. The method will not.

WHAT A JOB INDEX CAN AND CANNOT TELL YOU

No list of jobs is the whole market. Every board, newsletter and index has its own focus. The roles we curate are in-house brand and product teams, studios and agencies, from junior to director level. That is a fair view of that kind of work, but a curated index is a selection, not a full picture of the market. It leaves out a great deal: roles filled through referrals, freelance work that never gets posted, internships that only appear on a university notice board, and jobs at companies that simply do not advertise.

This chapter therefore gives you no counts or shares. They change every week. The current picture of our index, by skill and by country, is at workwithus.work/guides/where-the-jobs-are, recalculated with every new role.

Keep that in mind whenever you read patterns into postings. A public job list tells you:

- which skills companies are willing to describe and pay to find
- where the posted roles are, by city and country
- which work modes are offered (on-site, hybrid, remote)
- which levels companies post publicly
- how long roles tend to stay open

It does not tell you how many people apply, what the hidden market looks like, or which companies are about to hire before they post. For that you need conversations, which we come to later in this chapter.

READING SKILLS

When you count roles by skill, count each role under every skill it lists. A role for a brand and motion designer counts for brand and for motion. This matters, because it shows you not just the big categories but the combinations companies ask for.

In the roles in our job index in autumn 2026, brand and product design were the largest groups by far. Two things stood out behind those numbers:

- **Brand roles at tech companies.** Many brand roles were at tech companies that are evolving their identity, building templates and guidelines, and designing launches. That is steady, repeated work: a company that has just changed its identity needs people to roll it out, maintain it and extend it.

- **Product roles that want two skill sets in one person.** Many product roles asked for interaction and visual skills together. A product designer who can only wireframe, or only polish, is competing for a narrower slice of roles than one who can do both.

Watch the small numbers too

The smaller skill groups are easy to overlook, and they are often the most useful signal. In our index, motion, 3D and illustration rarely had many roles of their own, but they showed up inside brand and product roles again and again, as the second or third skill in the description.

That tells you something practical: these skills can be what separates two otherwise similar candidates. If you can show motion, even in a few short clips, it is worth making it visible in your portfolio. A brand system shown with a ten-second animated logo sting or a product flow shown with a short prototype recording says more than a line in your skills list.

How to read skills in any listing

You can do this exercise with any set of postings, from any source:

1. Collect twenty to thirty roles you would genuinely consider, from whatever boards you use.
2. For each, write down every skill named in the title and the first half of the description. Ignore boilerplate further down.
3. Count how often each skill appears, counting a role once under every skill it names.
4. Mark which skills appear as the main skill and which only appear as a second or third one.
5. Compare the list with your portfolio. Which skills do you have but not show? Which keep appearing that you do not have at all?

The second question is usually the more useful one. Most designers have skills they never put in front of a hiring team, because the work sits in a folder or was a small part of a bigger project.

READING LOCATION AND WORK MODE

Where the roles are shapes your search as much as what they ask for. In the roles in our job index in autumn 2026, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom led, with a long tail across Europe. In the US most roles were in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area; in Germany most were in Berlin. Hybrid was the most frequent work mode, and fully remote roles were mostly at software companies.

What this means in practice:

- **If you live in or near one of the larger hubs**, you have the most roles to choose from, and the most competition for each one. Your portfolio and first message need to be sharp.
- **If you live elsewhere**, do not assume remote roles will fill the gap. They exist, but in our index they were concentrated at software companies, so they suit some profiles (product, brand at tech companies) better than others.
- **If you are open to moving**, a short list of cities with steady demand for your skill gives your search a clear focus.
- **Hybrid roles still have a location**. A hybrid role in a city two hours away is usually not a realistic option, however few office days it asks for. Read the work mode and the location together.

For the questions to ask about remote and hybrid setups before you apply, see the chapter "Remote, hybrid, on-site: what to ask before you apply".

SENIOR IS THE NORM, JUNIOR IS RARE

In our job index in autumn 2026, most roles with a stated level were senior or higher. That surprises many people early in their careers, and it can be discouraging if you read it the wrong way.

It is partly how companies hire. They post the roles they find hard to fill, and experienced people are hard to find. Junior hiring often happens through internships, referrals and graduate programmes, which rarely reach public job lists. So a low number of junior postings does not mean there are no junior jobs. It means

most of them are found another way.

If you are early in your career, do not rely on public postings alone. Use them for something else: to find studios and teams whose work you like, and then write to them directly. A studio that is posting a senior role is a studio that is busy, and busy studios sometimes take on juniors, interns or freelancers without ever advertising.

A worked example

Say you are a junior graphic designer and you have looked at thirty postings over a month. Two of them were junior roles, and both closed before you finished your application. The other twenty-eight were mid-level or senior.

Those twenty-eight are not useless. Write down the companies and studios behind them. Strike out the ones whose work you do not care about. You might be left with eight or ten. Those are your direct-approach list: places that are clearly hiring, in your field, whose work you like. Write to each one with a short, specific message, as described in the chapter "What to put in your first message to a studio".

A message to a studio that just posted a senior role might look like this:

Hi Marta,

I saw you are looking for a senior designer, which I am not yet, but I wanted to introduce myself in case a junior or intern place opens up. I graduated this summer and have been working on identity projects for two local cultural organisations. Your recent work for the city library is what made me write, especially the signage. Here is my portfolio. Would you keep me in mind, or tell me if there is a better time to get in touch?

Best, Jonas

It is honest about the level, it shows real interest, and it asks a simple question.

TIMING: WHY SPEED MATTERS

As a rule of thumb, good roles are often gone within a few weeks. A posting you bookmark on Monday and plan to answer "properly" in a fortnight may already be in its final interview round by then.

That does not mean rushing out weak applications. It means having your materials ready before you need them, so that applying is a matter of tailoring, not starting from scratch:

- A current CV (see the chapter "A designer's CV: one page, no gimmicks").
- Two or three case studies in good shape (see the chapter "How to write a portfolio case study that gets read").
- A short first message you can adapt in ten minutes.

With those in place, you can answer a good role within a day or two of seeing it.

A simple routine

Check your sources twice a week, on fixed days. As a rule of thumb, twice is enough to catch new roles while they are fresh, and few enough that searching does not take over your week.

1. Narrow each source to your city or work mode and your main skill.
2. Open only the roles you would genuinely consider. Skip the rest without guilt.
3. For each one, decide on the spot: apply this week, add the company to your direct-approach list, or ignore.
4. Keep a simple running list: company, role, date seen, date applied, next step.
5. Once a month, read back through the list and look for patterns. Which skills, cities and company types keep coming up?

That monthly look-back is where you do your own market reading. After two or three months you will know more about your corner of the market than any general report can tell you.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR SEARCH

Bringing it together, here is how the patterns we saw in our index in autumn 2026 translate into action:

- **If you are a brand designer, look at tech and AI companies.** In our index they hired for identity work again and again: launches, templates, guidelines, extensions of a new identity.
- **If you are a product designer, show both interaction and visual work.** Many roles wanted both in one person.
- **Show motion if you can do it.** Even a few short clips can set you apart, because motion showed up inside so many brand and product roles.
- **Early in your career, use postings as a map, not a door.** Find studios you like through what they post, then write to them directly.
- **Read work mode and location together.** Hybrid was common; fully remote was mostly at software companies.

COMMON MISTAKES

Treating one board as the whole market. Every source has its own focus. Use two or three, and remember that much hiring never reaches any of them.

Applying only where you match every line. Job descriptions are wish lists. If you match the core of a role and can show it, apply. The skills listed further down are often the nice-to-haves.

Ignoring the second and third skills. The main skill in a title tells you the category. The secondary skills tell you what makes a candidate stand out.

Reading patterns from too few roles. Five postings is an anecdote. As a rule of thumb, look at a few dozen before you change your

portfolio or your plans because of what you see.

Letting the search take over. Checking boards every hour does not find more roles. A fixed routine leaves you time to improve your work, which helps more.

CHECKLIST

- ☐ Pick two or three sources that cover the kind of work you want, and accept that none of them is the whole market.
- ☐ Collect twenty to thirty roles you would consider and count the skills they name, including the secondary ones.
- ☐ Compare that list with your portfolio: show the skills you have but hide, and note the ones you lack.
- ☐ If you can do motion, add a few short clips to your strongest projects.
- ☐ Read location and work mode together, and decide which cities and setups are realistic for you.
- ☐ Have your CV, two or three case studies and an adaptable first message ready before you need them.
- ☐ Check your sources twice a week on fixed days, and decide on each role straight away.
- ☐ Keep a running list of roles and companies, and review it once a month for patterns.
- ☐ If you are early in your career, build a direct-approach list from the studios behind senior postings and write to them.