

5 reasons to hire a designer in 2026

In the AI era, the tools can already do the old job

hepton

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AI is a paintbrush. You still need a painter.

The problem is what most founders now quietly believe, which is that they can paint. And honestly, look at what’s in front of you. One bloke built a product with no design team and sold it to Wix for around \$80 million, six months after he started. You can’t make this up.

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This is written for founders and hiring managers, and it assumes you know you need design without being able to say what good looks like. That’s a normal position to be in, you’ve not failed. It’s the reason this is worth an eight-minute read.

I’ll be the first to admit that anything where you need speed, something super quick that looks okay and blends in, you probably don’t need me. Go ahead, use AI. I’m not going to pretend the design job market isn’t shrinking because of it. But companies aren’t cutting the job as it is now, they’re cutting it as it was ten years ago, and I don’t blame them. That job from ten years ago IS the one AI does now. What’s left is a different job, and here are the five parts of that job.

To understand the pain your users actually feel

1

AI can record it. It can't predict it.

Every usability study I've ever run has been a humbling experience. You can watch an assumption everybody agreed on before lunch fall on its arse.

Not because they're careless. Because they turned up with a life nobody had imagined, and the product didn't fit it. A model can watch that happen and describe it back to you afterwards. It can summarise the transcript faster than I can. What it can't do is know in advance where a person will hesitate, because it has never wanted anything, waited for anything, or given up on anything.

And the pain is usually invisible to the person feeling it. They've stopped noticing. They put up with it, the way everyone put up with changing a CD in the car, or peeling the sticker off an apple, until somebody took it away and they felt the relief.

In 1985 Coca-Cola changed its formula on the strength of taste tests with nearly 200,000 people, then reversed it in 79 days. All those people told them which one tasted better. Nobody asked them how they'd feel about the old one being taken away, and that turned out to be the only question that mattered. The tests measured a preference and missed the pain completely.

Try this

Sit behind one real customer using your product for ten minutes and say nothing at all. No demo, no call, no prompting. Write down every moment they pause. That list beats your next roadmap meeting.

To know what's right, not what's fashionable

2

Fashion comes and goes like a trend.
The data always catches up with it.

Right means it kills the pain the person actually has, and gets them to what they came for at the lowest cost to them. You can check it. You can measure it, and I can even be proven wrong, which is what makes it a pain killer rather than a preference.

Evidence

The most fashionable thing you could put on a homepage in the 2010s was a rotating carousel. Everybody asked for one. When one university measured theirs properly, across 315,665 rotations, about 1% of visitors ever clicked one, and 84% of those clicks were on the first slide. It was on every brief for a decade and almost nobody touched it.

Erik Runyon, Carousel Interaction Stats, January 2013.

A model is trained on what already exists and on what got shared. That is a very good description of fashion. It'll hand you what's popular, quickly and competently. I always say "what's popular and what's correct are two different things."

I've said this before and I'll say it again. AI is a seriously powerful tool, and on its own it's absolutely shite at designing things.

This is the part of my job that looks the least like design. Most of it is working out what the person is really trying to get done, and then refusing to build what everybody else already built.

The giveaway is always the same. Fashionable answers arrive with a reason that's really a comparison. Right answers arrive with a reason that's really a person. And the fashionable answer is usually the one nobody had ever checked.

Try this

Open your own product on your phone. Find one thing on the first screen that exists because it was in fashion when it was built. There will be one. Decide whether it earns its place today.

To hold the whole thing, not just the output

3

A product has to feel like it was made by one mind.

Somebody has to be holding the whole shape of it and how the parts connect.

Evidence

In 2008 the BBC set out to rebuild how it made programmes, end to end. Six years and £125.9m later, the Digital Media Initiative was cancelled having delivered almost nothing anyone could use. The National Audit Office went looking for why, and found it in one line: the BBC never appointed a single point of accountability, and split responsibility across divisions instead. Nobody was holding the whole picture, so nobody saw it coming apart. £98.4m of that came straight out of the licence fee.

National Audit Office, Digital Media Initiative, January 2014.

Try this

Name the person accountable for how your product feels as a whole. Not just for a screen or a component. If you can't, hire a designer. That's the new job.

That's mostly invisible when it's working, and unmistakable when it isn't. When nobody holds it, every piece passes review on its own and the whole thing still doesn't add up.

It gets disjointed, it doesn't quite work, and it gets put down and forgotten. Worse, six months later nobody can tell you why any of it is the way it is, because it isn't solving one problem. It's solving the problems of five different people who never even met in real life.

AI is quite good at screens. What it can't do is look at the whole picture and anticipate the problems a user is going to hit along the way. It has no idea what happened on the screen before, and no stake at all in what happens on the screen after.

This is the oldest known failure in software, and the people who investigate it afterwards keep writing down the very same sentence.

Fred Brooks ran the team that built IBM's OS/360. In 1975 he wrote that conceptual integrity is the most important consideration in system design, and that it's better to leave good features out than to ship a product full of good ideas that don't agree with each other. Fifty years on, the tools have changed completely and the failure hasn't.

To argue with you, and own the call

4

An AI will agree with you. It will also disagree with you.
Both cost it nothing.

When a designer tells you your product is wrong, they take a risk. That's exactly why they're worth listening to. There are real stakes in it.

Evidence

Air Canada's chatbot told a bereaved passenger he could claim a discounted fare after the fact. In reality he couldn't. In tribunal, the airline argued the chatbot was effectively responsible for its own statements. The tribunal called that submission remarkable and held the airline liable. Somebody always owns the call, and it's never the AI.

Moffatt v Air Canada, 2024 BCCRT 149, February 2024.

Try this

Think of the last time somebody told you that you were wrong about the product, before you spent the money. If you can't remember one, you know you need a product designer on the team.

The pattern is always the same. Somebody argues for testing the thing before it ships. They lose. Then, after launch, there's a rebuild and a scramble of patches, a pile of features nobody wanted, and a complaint load that turns up and never leaves. All of it was avoidable and you could have saved a tonne of cash.

This isn't a hunch about the tools, either. The labs building them have published it themselves. Anthropic's own researchers found leading assistants systematically tell people what they want to hear, and that human raters sometimes prefer a convincing wrong answer to a correct one. OpenAI pulled a version of its own model and described it, in its own words, as overly flattering.

You're now surrounded by things that agree with you. Even the tools agree with you. Increasingly, so does everyone on your payroll. The scarce thing in a company these days isn't skills any more, it's one person who will review what you've decided and look you dead in the eye and tell you it's crap while it's still cheap to change. That's what a designer's job is in 2026, and it takes years to master.

To innovate, with AI as the paintbrush

5

The brush doesn't paint.
The person holding it does.

If what you want is a slightly better checkout, use AI. Really, use it. That work is a given now and it isn't what I'd want to be doing with your money.

If what you want is a way of checking out that nobody has seen before, one that becomes the thing everybody else copies for the next five years, that's a different job. That's designing for the need whether the technology exists yet or not. A model trained on what already exists can't reach for that, because there's nothing there to reach for.

On Mortgage Hub I worked on a lending product in a 250-year-old industry, where a decision in principle came back in three seconds and the full application collapsed from weeks into hours. On Marlowe I designed the first consumer interface for executing financial smart contracts. Neither one existed to copy.

So when people ask how I work now: I delegate to AI at almost every step. I'm the CEO of my own department. It does an enormous amount of the work, but none of the deciding. It gets me to "OK" quickly, and then I spend the rest of the day getting from "OK" to great, which is the part you actually hire a product designer for.

There's good research showing people produce more original work with AI in their hands, and the same research shows their collective output becomes more similar to each other. The tool raises the floor. Somebody still has to raise the ceiling.

Researchers gave sixteen experienced developers real tasks in code they'd worked in for years, and let them use AI on half. Beforehand they expected it to make them about 24% faster. Afterwards they believed it had. It actually made them 19% slower. Small study, and the tools have moved on, so take the gap rather than the number: expert people, in their own code, could not tell how fast they were going.

Try this

Next time something AI-assisted feels fast, time it properly against the last comparable thing you did without it. Most people are surprised, and not in the direction they expect.

The job changed. The advert didn't.

Go and read the role you're about to post, and ask how much of it a tool could do this afternoon for the price of a coffee.

Then write the role you actually need.

This role.

Somebody who can feel the pain your users feel. Who knows right from popular. Who holds the whole thing together. Who'll argue with you and own the call. And who can build the thing that isn't even a twinkle in anyone's eye yet.

If you'd like to talk one of these through against a real candidate, a portfolio or a real brief, feel welcome to book a free 30-minute call with yours truly.

[Book a call](#)

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