

Think Design: Executive Summary

Key Takeaways

01.

The Design Sector is a critical component of Toronto's economy, both in its own right and in the synergistic way that Design enables, promotes and supports other sectors across the City including Finance, Tech/Information, Construction and Manufacturing.

02.

Over 61,000 people in the Toronto metro area work in either a Design Occupation or at a Design Firm or both. Five in six Designers work in other industries. Total employment in the Design Sector is roughly the same as total employment in the Real Estate or Information and Cultural Industries and larger than Public Administration, Education, and Arts & Entertainment.

03.

Toronto's Design Sector is a major portion of Design across Canada with roughly 30% of the country's Design firms/employees and over 20% of Canadians employed in a Design job. Between 2016 and 2020, Toronto accounted for 56% of all Canada-wide employment growth in the Design Industry.

04.

Toronto is home to several large Design firms that are part of multi-national organizations but serve as Canadian and even global hubs and aren't just branch offices of US firms. These larger firms provide a multidisciplinary range of Design services and create opportunities for the numerous, smaller Design Consultancy firms in the city.

05.

Working in the Design Sector in Toronto presents many career opportunities and pathways. The region's thick labour market across diverse industries and the large number of firms that employ Designers generates numerous and varied opportunities that can be pursued within the region.

Report Highlights

Design is recognized around the world as a key to economic and social prosperity⁽¹⁾. Toronto is well positioned to take advantage of the economic opportunity inherent in this current Design focus with a critical mass of designers working in the Design disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, industrial, interior, graphic, fashion, planning and urban design. This cluster includes both firms specific to these disciplines and the trained and skilled individuals working in various capacities and levels of formal education across a variety of related occupations and across numerous industries. Design has an enabling synergistic impact on industries across the Toronto economy from Financial Services to Construction and Infrastructure from Entertainment to Manufacturing. The positive impact of Design is not restricted to a few firms in a small industry but is widespread.

In 2016, 51,065 people were working in a Design occupation, and 12,257 people were working (in 2020) in a Design firm⁽²⁾. While many people working in a Design occupation work in a different industry⁽³⁾ and not everyone working at a Design firm is doing Design work, some overlap exists. The 2016 Census provides the ability to estimate this overlap. 5.4% of 27,610 individuals in Professional Services in Toronto work in **both** a Design Occupation and at a Design firm. The result is 1,491 workers. Given the above estimates for occupation and industry totals, the result is an estimate for the Toronto Design Sector of **61,831 people who either work in a Design occupation or at a Design firm or both.**

1 See for example, The Design Council's "The Design Economy: The value of design to the UK" at <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/championing-the-value-of-design/design-economy/>

2 As of production of this report, the 2021 Census data with updated details on occupation and industry for Toronto's workers has not been released. An update to this report with those numbers and updated job posting numbers will be released at the end of 2022.

3 "Occupation" and "Industry" are defined here according to Statistics Canada and the data made available. An occupation is based on the job that someone is doing while industry is determined by the firm in which they are working. "Design Sector" is used to identify those in a Design occupation or working at a firm in the Design industry.

Figure 1. Toronto's Design Sector

61,831 people work in Toronto's Design Sector in a Design occupation, at a Design firm, or both.

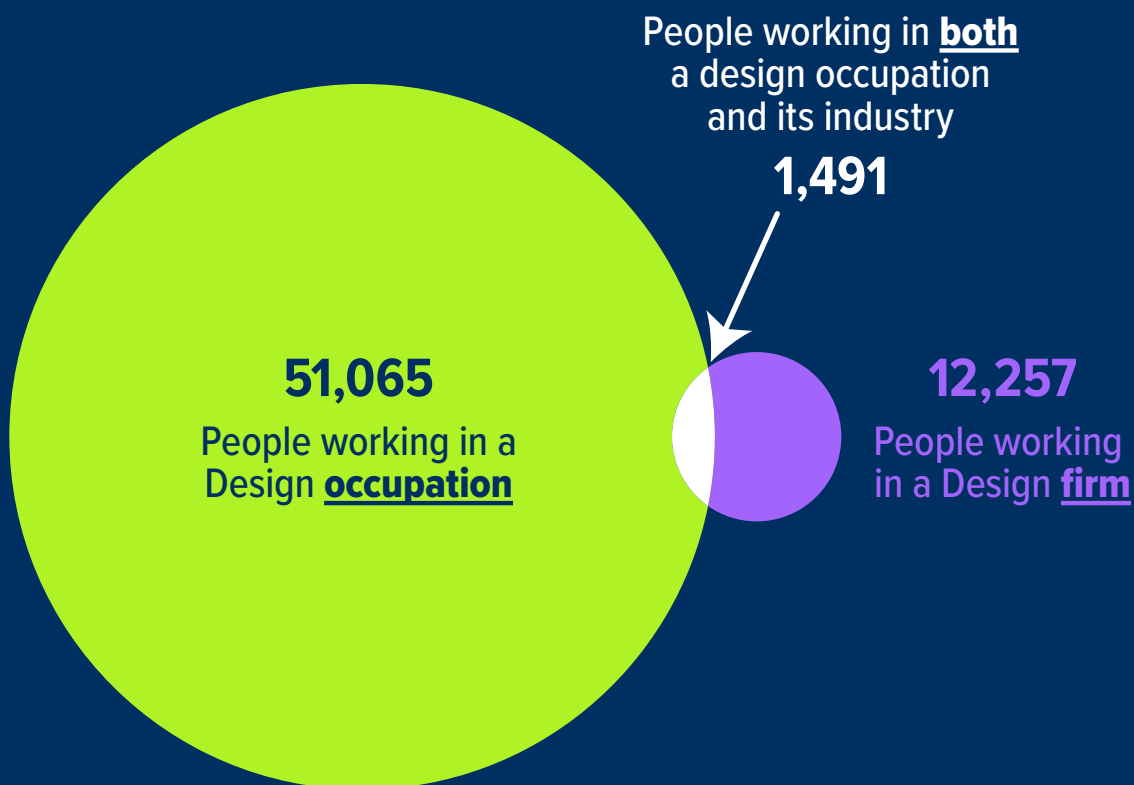


Table 1 shows where the Design Sector would rank among Toronto's industries by total employment size. (All numbers are from 2016 for comparability.) The Design Sector is roughly one-quarter the size of the region's largest industries (Retail and Manufacturing). It is roughly the same size as the Real Estate, Information, and Public Administration industries. It is larger than Education and Arts/Entertainment. Because Design is cross-sectoral, some Designers work in all these industries. By understanding how the total Design Sector includes more than just a few companies in some specific industries, a more complete picture is revealed.

Table 1. Toronto's Industries by Total Employment Size

Industry Title	NAICS Code	Estimated Total Employment
Total		2,247,979
Retail trade	44–45	250,920
Manufacturing	31–33	227,928
Professional, scientific and technical services	54	189,682
Accommodation and food services	72	180,733
Health care and social assistance	62	177,366
Finance and insurance	52	176,554
Administrative and support, waste management and remediation services	56	171,387
Wholesale trade	41	171,221
Construction	23	139,611
Other services (except public administration)	81	95,590
Transportation and warehousing	48–49	88,032
Management of companies and enterprises	55	80,715
Real estate and rental and leasing	53	67,744
Design Sector		61,831
Information and cultural industries	51	61,358
Public administration	91	59,505
Educational services	61	46,526
Arts, entertainment and recreation	71	44,517
Utilities	22	6,387

(Canadian Business Counts, 2016)

Specific Takeaways

This report presents a complex quantitative and qualitative view of Toronto’s Design Sector, its current state, trends, challenges and potential. Below are summarized some of the key takeaways from this report for specific audiences—the “so what does this have to tell *me?*”

Policyholders

- To leverage the appreciation and economic potential of the true business value of Design across all industries, Ontario should implement a tax credit for Design work similar to Quebec⁽⁴⁾. This has been considered in the past but the potential should be considered again.
- While the planned reduction of “Canadian experience” requirements includes Design professionals and should help reduce barriers to entry for those with international education, credentials and experience, it will not eliminate all barriers as things like membership fees and other financial requirements could be equally as challenging for new Canadians.

Design Professionals

- Employment prospects in fields related to construction, transportation and infrastructure are especially promising but also across all industries. Working in the Design Sector in Toronto presents many different opportunities to pursue your career. Those with at least some experience (5+ years) are especially in high demand.
- The mix of both small (more focused) and large (more international) firms and the wide variety of industries hiring Designers offers opportunities to expand flexibility and experience.
- Employment in Toronto offers a slight wage premium over the rest of Canada but not sufficient to offset the higher cost of living.

Independent Design Professionals (Freelancers)

- Design firms are very busy. Many are catching up on work that was delayed during the pandemic, but many companies are not making permanent employment commitments. As a result, demand for freelancers has increased.
- At the same time and after experiencing two years of almost completely remote work, companies are recognizing the challenge of fully incorporating freelancers and their contributions into their projects.
- In addition to demonstrating exceptional Design skills, freelance Designers should use their portfolio to demonstrate the “softer” relational/client skills, project management skills, and more complete understanding of the full product lifecycle and value chain — don’t just be an outstanding Designer, be an outstanding Designer that demonstrably knows how to get things done.

4 <https://www.revenuquebec.ca/en/online-services/forms-and-publications/current-details/co-1029-8-36-7-t/>

New Canadian Design Professionals

- Ontario is looking to change the “Canadian experience” requirements⁽⁵⁾. Those changes will be helpful but are not yet implemented.
- Mentorship, internship and other work-related opportunities are helpful but can be difficult to find. Be persistent and keep looking and asking. More is being done “in principle” than actuality, so you will find many people talking about this and how important it is without creating new opportunities. However, some progress is being made.
- Language (English) both written and spoken was frequently identified as a challenge in hiring new Canadian Design professionals. Improving this can be especially difficult when working remotely and not in the same office as others. Look for opportunities to strengthen English skills and to demonstrate those skills to potential employers who can draw unfortunate conclusions after just a few spoken sentences.
- The local Colleges provide a variety of different credentials that can be obtained in a short period of time and for minimal cost that can facilitate Design employment opportunities. While a more technically focused certificate may not result in full employment in your trained profession, the skills are in high demand and can help to get your “foot in the door”.

Small Design Companies

- You know what you do. You do it well. You know what you can bring to clients and to larger firms in need of your specific expertise. Keep it up.
- Think about succession planning. What happens when all your principals retire? What about just one of them? Many small firms have been acquired by larger firms to “save” the failing smaller firm and gain access to the skilled employees. Is that what happens to your firm?
- Realize the opportunity inherent in the flexibility being a small firm offers as you struggle to attract employees, and partner with larger firms to gain international opportunities and traction.
- Leverage the diversity inherent in the Toronto region and your existing employees to strengthen inclusion within your firm and realize the benefits inclusion creates.
- Start “farming” instead of “head-hunting” to improve the skills, skill base and diversity of your team. Learn how to attract employees you can grow into the positions you will need them for in the next 3–5 years. There likely won’t be enough to steal them from other firms.

5 <https://www.immigration.ca/ontario-ready-to-end-canadian-work-experience-requirement-for-several-regulated-professions>

Large Design Companies

- Continue being the Canadian and international hub for your organization and not just an office in Toronto. Part of the attractiveness of Canadian firms that are acquired by US companies, is the “Canadian-ness” which creates diversity, inclusion and international opportunities. Recognize, maintain and leverage that.
- Believe in the growth of your business and opportunities being presented and hire more permanent staff.
- Hire more students. While you might be able to steal experienced employees from other firms, it’s a “zero sum” game that won’t create winners in the long run. Without providing greater opportunities for students and ways for them to gain experience and work-integrated-learning, interest in Design professions will wane in high school students as they hear current graduates talk about not being able to find employment. Large firms are much better positioned to hire, on-board and train recent graduates.
- Press Design educators and Design post-secondary programs to educate students with the mix of Design, technical and product skills that you are desperately looking for. Provide more internship opportunities so the students develop a greater appreciation for this mix of skills and take it back to their campus and classrooms.
- Hire more new Canadians. International companies care about international not Canadian experience. Capitalize on the opportunity of being located in the preferred landing city in one of the preferred countries in the world for international Design professionals. Some are also picking Canada as a stepping-stone to the US. Large international firms can use that to their advantage. Provide ways to lower barriers for professional registration and credentialing of international Design professionals.
- Start “farming” instead of “head-hunting” to improve the skills, skill base and diversity of your firm. Learn how to attract employees you can grow into the positions you will need them in in the next 3–5 years. There likely won’t be enough to steal them from other firms.

Design Educators

(This advice is based on what Design professionals reported as gaps in the interviews. Toronto’s colleges and universities offer a wide variety of different programs and approaches to Design education and may already be meeting some or all these recommendations.)

- Create a first year foundational Design curriculum that is required of students across all Design disciplines to create a solid, unified base knowledge of Design principles and thinking.
- Intensify training in product lifecycle, technical and production skills to better meet the requirements of employers.

- Find industry partners across all industries employing Designers in your disciplines to strengthen understanding of industry needs and hiring opportunities.
- Formally partner with large employers and find ways to informally connect with small employers and the Design professional organizations to increase internship and work-integrated-learning (WIL) opportunities for students.
- Continue emphasis on increasing Indigenous, gender, racial, origin, and sexual orientation diversity and intersectionality across students to facilitate that diversity across Design professions.
- Improve and increase inclusion of equity and diversity issues within the taught practice of the Design disciplines.

Design Students

- Take courses to improve your technical, product lifecycle and production skills no matter what your Design discipline.
- Find ways to improve your “soft skills” and client/team relationship skills.
- Build a portfolio that isn’t just beautiful but also demonstrates your ability to get things done.
- Build a portfolio that tells your story.
- Find internship and other work-integrated-learning (WIL) opportunities. Work hard at doing this. Don’t give up too quickly and keep looking and pushing.
- Research the job market and industries that are hiring for your Design profession. Not all jobs are described the same way in different industries. Jobs can be posted in different ways and in different places. The better you understand the nuance of your specific desires, skills and Design profession and the hiring industries, the more likely you will be to find the right job.

Students Interested in Design

- Learn about the Design professions and occupations.
- Learn about the Design Industry.
- Learn about the different industries that hire Design professionals.
- All Design professions include some post-secondary education, but it ranges from micro-credentials to certificates to degrees to diplomas (undergraduate and graduate). Consider the tradeoffs among desire, ability, time available, money (needed and to be made), and other factors important to you. Opportunities exist and are growing across the entire Design Sector.