DESIGNFOREVER JOURNAL

The Boom Heard Around the World

DesignForever Editorial

The Boom Heard Around the World

DesignForever Editorial · August 14, 2026

In November 2022 a chatbot learned to finish your sentence. By February 2026 **ChatGPT had about 900 million weekly users** – more than double a year earlier. Stanford's 2026 AI Index says generative AI reached **53% of the world's population in three years**, faster than the personal computer or the internet over the same window. Enterprise spending on the stuff **tripled in one year**, to **$37 billion** in 2025.

> **That is not a product cycle. That is a labor-market event that arrived wearing a chat window.**

The boom did not "come for design." It came for the **invoice attached to the first draft** – the stock photo, the icon set, the print layout, the social graphic, the studio mood board that used to take a week and a junior.

> **Taste is still expensive. A picture of taste is now free. The crafts that sold pictures of taste are the ones on the floor.**

This is the blast radius, craft by craft. The figures are public. Where they are a survey or a forecast, they are labeled as such.

11th

fastest-declining job worldwide, per employers: graphic designers. WEF Future of Jobs 2025. Two years earlier they called the same job "moderately growing."

–7.7%

U.S. wage-and-salary graphic designers, May 2024 to May 2025. Adobe's compilation of BLS OEWS. One year. Not a decade.

$42,520

median pay for U.S. photographers, May 2024. Two-thirds are self-employed. BLS.

–12.4%

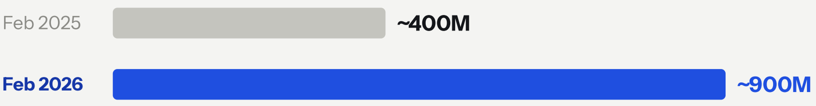
desktop publishers, 2024–2034. The print-layout job the BLS still bothers to name. National average is +3.1%.

The boom, without the poetry

ChatGPT is the loudest instrument, not the whole orchestra. Adobe's Firefly models had been used to make **more than 24 billion assets** by the June 2025 mobile launch. Canva closed 2025 at **265 million monthly users**. Midjourney became the aesthetic default for people who never opened a camera. Gartner puts all AI spending – chips, data centers, software – at **$2.59 trillion in 2026**.

The World Economic Forum, surveying a thousand employers across 55 countries, said AI investment had increased **nearly eightfold** since ChatGPT launched. **41% of those employers expect to cut jobs** as the tools get better at the skills they currently pay humans for. **47%** said they would try to move people into other roles instead. Both can be true. Both are already happening in the visual trades.

One year. More than doubled.

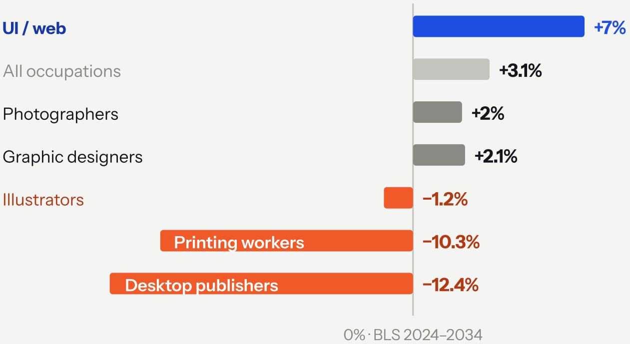


TechCrunch / OpenAI, Feb 2026. Stanford HAI: genAI hit 53% of world population in three years — faste
Enterprise genAI spend: $11.5B (2024) → $37B (2025). Menlo Ventures.

The adoption curve is not an argument. It is the reason a first draft stopped being a billable event.

The official U.S. jobs numbers will not scream. The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not do screaming. What it does is put a **lid on hiring** in the visual occupations while naming generative AI as the reason. Employers, asked the same question by the WEF, put graphic design on the **decline list for the first time**. Those two statements look like a contradiction. They are not. The BLS is counting seats that still exist. The WEF is counting seats employers no longer want to refill.

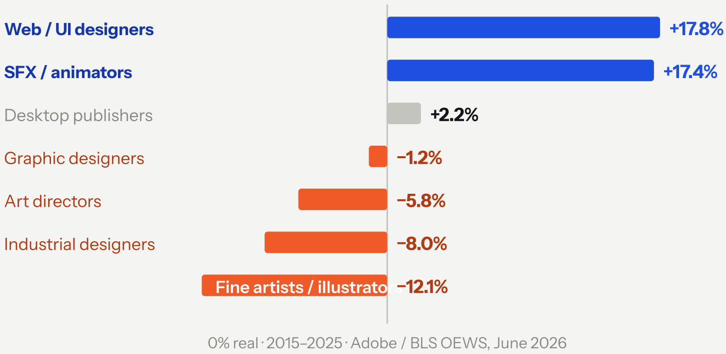
Who still gets hired. Who does not.



The split is not “creative vs technical.” It is systems that have to keep working versus pictures that only have to look finished. BLS Employment Projections, 2024–2034. Printing workers: occupation group 51-5100.

Pay tells the same story in a colder register. Adobe's June 2026 compilation of BLS wages – *The Economic State of Creative Professions* – restated a decade of medians in 2025 dollars. **Five of nine creative occupations lost real purchasing power** from 2015 to 2025. Fine artists (the bucket that includes illustrators) took the steepest cut. The two occupations that **beat inflation** are the ones closest to product: web/UI designers, and special-effects artists and animators.

A decade of "raises." Inflation kept the money.



Nominal pay went up almost everywhere. In 2025 dollars, most of the visual trades are poorer than they were in 2015. The boom did not invent that. It arrived on top of it.

Photographers: the first market AI was allowed to eat

Stock photography was the canary, and everyone heard it, and the agencies still tried to merge anyway.

Getty and Shutterstock announced a **$3.7 billion** "merger of equals" in January 2025 as a defense against generated imagery. In July 2026 Getty's board walked away. The UK's Competition and Markets Authority would have forced a full divestiture of Shutterstock's **editorial** business. The CMA was not worried about generic commercial stock. It said that market was **already under pressure from Midjourney,** DALL·E, Adobe, and Canva. Editorial – a human at a red carpet, a stadium, a crime scene – was the part worth protecting.

> **A regulator writing that sentence is as close as policy gets to an obituary for the lifestyle-stock shoot.**

Days before the deal died, Getty signed a multi-year deal to surface licensed photos inside ChatGPT. The strategy is no longer "out-merge the machines." It is **license the library to the machines**, then argue about whether the 600,000 contributors see any of it. Contributor payout terms on that deal have not been published. That silence is the story.

Shutterstock's Q2 2026 revenue was down 17% year on year. Getty still bans AI-generated contributor uploads. So does Shutterstock. That is a quality wall around a shrinking well. It does not refill the well.

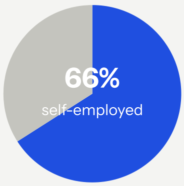
The people in the well:

	Figure	**Source**
U.S. photographers, 2024	151,200	BLS OOH
Projected, 2034	154,000 (+2%)	same
Median pay, May 2024	$42,520 – $20.44 an hour	same
Self-employed	66%	same
Openings per year	~12,700, mostly replacement	same

Sixty-six percent freelance is not a lifestyle choice. It is the structure of the trade. The BLS wage number does not include the self-employed. The median is already the employed floor.

What still books a photographer in 2026 is **a real person, in a real place, on a real date**. Weddings. Court. Sport. A founder who has to look like herself on the homepage. Product that has to exist in a hand. Everything else — “diverse team laughing in a loft,” “empty highway at dusk,” “abstract wellness” — is a prompt. The CMA already said so.

Two-thirds of photographers have no employer



Photographic services 17%
Publishing / broadcasting 4%
Arts, entertainment 3% · Retail 2%

BLS OOH, Photographers, 2024. Median $42,520 does not include th
The CMA: generic stock is already a generative-AI market. Editorial is

A trade this freelance does not get a layoff headline. It gets a quieter thing: the phone stops ringing for the jobs a prompt can fake.

Icon artists and illustrators: the grid was the first thing the model learned

There is no Bureau of Labor Statistics line for “icon designer.” The people who draw 24-pixel marks for a living sit inside **graphic designers** and inside **fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators**.

That second bucket is the bloodiest number in Adobe’s table. Real median pay for fine artists fell **12.1%** from 2015 to 2025. In a single year, May 2024 to May 2025, the reported median dropped from **$60,560 to $55,490** — **–8.4% nominal**. Adobe warns the sample is small (about 11,220 wage-and-salary workers). Small samples swing. They do not usually swing eight percent down in a year while every adjacent design occupation is flat to up. Employment in the broader projections count goes from 26,500 to 26,200 over the decade (**–1.2%**).

Illustration was the first craft the image models were *good at*, because the training set was the open internet of art: ArtStation, Behance, every named style a prompt could summon. Sarah Andersen, Kelly McKernan, and Karla Ortiz sued Midjourney in 2023 for exactly that reason.

McKernan said the top search result for their name had become an AI image made in their style. The lawsuit is the moral argument. The market argument is simpler: a client who used to commission a spot illustration for $800 now generates twelve options before lunch and picks one.

Icons are worse, because icons were already a commodity. The Noun Project, then Phosphor, then every Figma plugin, then Adobe Illustrator's **text-to-vector**. An icon set is a grid, a stroke weight, a corner radius, and a rule about metaphor. A model can fake three of those four. What it cannot do – not yet, not reliably – is keep the fourth across 200 symbols so the "settings" gear and the "download" arrow belong to the same family when you print them at 12 pixels. Clients do not know they are buying the family. They think they are buying the gear.

So the working icon artist in 2026 is not competing with other icon artists. They are competing with a project manager who typed "minimal line icons, navy, 24px" and got something that survived the standup. The jobs that remain are the ones where **inconsistency is a bug**: a product system, a wayfinding program, a brand mark that has to be a trademark. Mood is free. A system still has a name on the invoice.

Print designers: the occupation the government is already retiring

Print design did not wait for ChatGPT to get into trouble. Magazines folded. Newspapers shrunk the art department. Packaging held on because a box still has to exist. What AI did was take the **layout labor** that had already moved to InDesign and make a first pass of it in a prompt.

The BLS still names the leftover jobs:

Occupation	2024	2034	Change
Desktop publishers	5,000	4,400	–12.4%
Printing workers (group)	212,100	190,400	–10.3%
Prepress technicians	26,200	22,300	–14.6%

Occupation	2024	2034	Change
Printing press operators	150,200	138,000	–8.1%
Binding and finishing	35,800	30,000	–16.1%

Desktop publishing is the smallest creative occupation Adobe tracks: 3,350 wage-and-salary workers in May 2025, down from 4,000 a year earlier. Four hundred openings a year, and most of those are people leaving. The WEF put printing workers on the same fastest-declining list as cashiers and ticket clerks.

A print designer who still has a job in 2026 is usually not "designing print." They are owning a **physical system**: a menu that has to survive a Saturday night and a new wine list, a form that has to take a signature, a pack that has to run on a press with a real ink limit, a poster that has to be the same object in two languages. The PDF-from-a-prompt crowd does not know about bleed, or about what happens when the headline grows 40% in German. That ignorance is the remaining moat. It is a narrow moat.

We wrote the layout half of this in Layouts that never break. The labor half is: if your value was making the first InDesign file from a brief, the brief now has a generate button.

Graphic designers: the lid, then the drop

Here is the sentence the Occupational Outlook Handbook actually printed:

> **Automated design tools, such as artificial intelligence (AI), may reduce the need for companies to contract with freelance graphic designers.**
>
> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook

Not "may reduce the need for graphic design." **Freelance.** The employed in-house person who owns the brand system is the one the BLS thinks still gets a desk. The contractor who used to take the overflow – the social set, the one-off flyer, the "can you just make this look nice" – is the one the forecast is quietly deleting.

The headline numbers look almost kind. Graphic designers: **265,900** jobs in 2024, 271,500 in 2034, **+2.1%**, against +3.1% for every occupation. About 20,000 openings a year, almost all replacement. Median wage **$61,300** (May 2024 OOH) – a bachelor's-degree job that pays like a cautious tradesman.

Then look at the wage-and-salary count, which excludes the self-employed: 214,260 in May 2024, 197,830 in May 2025. **–7.7% in one year.** Adobe flagged it. The projections program and the wage survey are different instruments, and they disagree on the level. They do not disagree on the direction of the last twelve months for people on payroll.

The World Economic Forum, asking employers rather than statisticians, put graphic designers as the **11th fastest-declining role globally by 2030**. In the 2023 edition of the same report, the job was "moderately growing." Two years. The report says the drivers are generative AI and "broadening digital access" – which is a polite way to say Canva. UI and UX designers sit on the other side of the same survey: **8th fastest-growing**. The industry did not vanish. It **split**.

Designer Fund's Q1 2026 survey of 900+ tech designers found **91% using AI weekly**, up from **54%** a year earlier. That is not a hobby. That is the new floor of the job.

We covered the template-market half of this – Canva, Envato, Firefly, the $16.9 billion generative-design forecast – in What AI did to design templates. The human half is shorter: **volume production left the building.** Art direction did not.

Design studios: they sold the workshop. The workshop is a prompt.

The famous studios spent twenty years productizing “design thinking.” Then the consultancies bought them, the clients hired the designers in-house, and the workshop became a feature in a chatbot.

IDEO cut 32% of its staff in 2023 and closed Munich and Tokyo. Headcount had already fallen from about **725 to about 500** before that cut. **Pentagram** is still 24 partners, still independent – the exception that proves the rule, because it sells named authors, not a process deck. frog lives inside Capgemini Invent. Fjord lives inside Accenture. Lunar lives inside McKinsey. The independent studio became a capability on a much larger invoice, and then the invoice found a cheaper first draft.

We mapped that twenty-year arc – IBM’s 375 to 1,600 designers, the McKinsey Design Index, who still owns themselves – in [Design studios in the age of AI](). The boom did not start that story. It ended the part where a room full of people could bill for *generating options*. Options are what the models are for. Studios that still have a line around the block sell **judgment, systems, and liability**. Studios that sold a week of Post-its and a slide called “Next Steps” are competing with a subscription.

The split, in one table

Craft	What the boom took	What still invoices
Photographers	Generic stock, lifestyle, “a photo of”	Editorial, events, real product, real faces
Icon artists	One-off marks, “an icon of,” mood-board sets	Product systems, 200-mark families, trademarks
Illustrators	Spot art, style-of, editorial headers on a budget	Named authorship, books, work a lawyer can defend
Print designers	First-pass layouts, poster-from-a-prompt	Press-aware systems, bilingual sheets, packaging
Graphic designers	Freelance volume, social sets, “make it look nice”	Brand systems, art direction, production that

survives edits | | Studios | Workshops, option decks, junior first drafts | Authorship, strategy that can be wrong, files that ship |

The WEF's two lists are the same table. Graphic design down. UI/UX up. Pictures of competence got cheap. Interfaces that have to work on Tuesday did not.

What the boom actually was

> **It was not intelligence. It was collapse in the cost of a plausible first artifact.**

A photographer's first artifact used to be a contact sheet. An icon artist's was a page of pencils. A print designer's was a tissue overlay, then an InDesign file. A graphic designer's was three directions. A studio's was a workshop. Each of those artifacts had a price because making them required time from someone who had made them before.

The models ate the artifact. They did not eat the **decision**, the **system**, or the **liability**. A generated photograph cannot testify. A generated icon set cannot stay consistent at 12px across a release. A generated poster cannot take next week's German headline without someone who understands type. A generated brand cannot survive a lawyer. A generated workshop cannot sit in the room when the CEO hates the thing.

> **The cruel part is that a lot of working people were never paid for the decision, the system, or the liability. They were paid for the artifact. That work is not "evolving." It is gone.**

If you make pictures of layouts, the boom already happened to you. If you make **working documents** – type with a range, lists that grow down, a brand kit you state once, a file that exports – you are in the half of the table that still has a column on the right. That is the whole business, and it is why we built the marketplace the way we did.

The boom was heard around the world. The echo is quieter: a freelancer who used to book three stock jobs a week booking one, an icon artist redrawing a generated set so it can ship, a print designer asked to "just make the AI version print-ready," a studio junior who used to be the options engine and is now the person who checks whether the options are usable.

> **That junior is the job. The options were never the job. We just used to get paid as if they were.**

Sources

Figures are attributed in place. Primary and near-primary:

- TechCrunch / OpenAI, February 2026 – ChatGPT ~900M weekly users, up from ~400M a year earlier
- Stanford HAI, *AI Index 2026* – generative AI to 53% of world population in three years; 71% of organizations using it in at least one function (2024)
- Menlo Ventures – U.S. enterprise generative-AI spend $11.5B (2024) → $37B (2025)
- Gartner – worldwide AI spending $2.59T in 2026
- World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs Report 2025* – graphic designers 11th fastest-declining role; UI/UX 8th fastest-growing; 41% of employers expect AI-driven headcount cuts; AI investment ~8× since ChatGPT; printing workers on the decline list

- U.S. BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook — Photographers (151,200 jobs, +2%, $42,520 median, 66% self-employed); Graphic Designers (265,900, +2%, $61,300, freelance named as AI-exposed)
- U.S. BLS Employment Projections / Monthly Labor Review, 2026 — generative AI as a demand constraint on design; printing workers 212.1k → 190.4k (–10.3%); prepress –14.6%; press operators –8.1%; binding –16.1%
- Adobe, *The Economic State of Creative Professions*, June 2026 (BLS OEWS) — real wage changes 2015–2025; graphic-designer wage-and-salary employment 214,260 → 197,830 (–7.7%) May 2024–May 2025; fine artists –12.1% real / median $60,560 → $55,490; desktop publishers –12.4% outlook; UI designers +7% / +17.8% real
- UK CMA / Getty–Shutterstock, July 2026 — $3.7B merger terminated; CMA: generic stock already pressured by generative AI; editorial protected
- Getty / OpenAI, June 2026 — licensed Getty images in ChatGPT search
- Shutterstock Q2 2026 earnings — revenue –17% YoY
- Adobe Newsroom, June 2025 — Firefly >24 billion generated assets
- Designer Fund / Foundation Capital, *AI in Design 2026* — 91% of tech designers using AI weekly (from 54%)
- Fast Company, October 2023 — IDEO 32% cut