

The Freelance Evolution

99designs

designed by Shwin

This year's report captures the insights and shared experiences of more than 11,000 freelance designers in 147 countries. We are thankful to both our own community and the designers beyond it who have shared stories of creative connection, personal growth and extraordinary resilience in a year that turned the whole world upside down.

As the predictable became volatile for communities everywhere in 2020, millions of people encountered significant emotional and economic strain. But as our personal and professional lives collided in new and unexpected ways, we also saw the freelance design industry adapt and thrive.

Many designers have found better work-life balance, and an overwhelming majority have mastered a new professional skill during the COVID-19 pandemic. Others have fostered industry connections online, and having the kids at home has (somewhat surprisingly!) fuelled and improved the creative process for many parents around the world.

While freelancers themselves haven't changed, the world around them has. The global shift to remote work has radically altered the way we collaborate, and designers report significant improvements in client communication and flexibility. Half of those surveyed expect to earn more this year than in 2019, and there are promising signs that companies will embrace more remote freelance talent as a result of lessons learned this year.

As international and domestic borders slammed shut thanks to the pandemic, opportunities for freelancers opened up online. The way the world thinks about "work" has fundamentally shifted; there is greater empathy stemming from shared experiences, and an openness to new ways of doing things. The time for freelance creators is now—the world is waiting.

— Patrick Llewellyn, CEO 99designs



Foreword

01

An industry snapshot: the face of freelance

- Introducing the revolution
- Who is freelancing
- How they're freelancing
- Motivation for freelancing

4

02

Now vs. then: how 2020 challenged everything

- The 2020 difference: an introduction
- Challenges due to the pandemic
- The Job reshuffle
- Satisfaction levels
- Impact on income
- Shifting hours
- Finding balance

5

6

9

10

14

15

17

20

22

23

26

03

Creativity through a crisis: riding the COVID-19 curve

- Creativity during COVID-19: an introduction
- Chaos fuels creativity
- Parenting in a pandemic
- Emotional impact and connection
- Social good
- Education and upskilling
- Learnings from lockdown
- Changes in client behavior

28

29

30

31

34

36

39

45

46

04

Future focus: the rise of freelance design

- The legacy of the pandemic: an introduction
- Remote work democratizing design
- Design doesn't do travel bans
- New to the industry
- Freelancers and shape-shifting agencies

49

50

51

54

56

60

05

The next decade: the future is freelance

- The epic start to 2020: an introduction
- Challenges facing the industry
- Designer confidence
- Conclusion
- Designer bio and methodology

64

65

66

68

71

72

Contents



An industry snapshot: the face of freelance

**We surveyed over 11,000
freelance designers across
147 countries, to gauge
their 2020 experience.
And 1 thing became clear:
we are in a world where
freelancers thrive.**

With 2020 officially shattering predictability in the workplace, businesses across the world looked to the way of the freelancer: adapting to uncertainty by embracing flexible and remote working models.

While many industries experience evolution, freelancers could soon be seeing their own revolution.

This report not only reflects the challenges faced by creative professionals, it highlights their shared stories of connection, personal growth and remarkable resilience during one of the biggest global crises the world has ever seen.

Amidst the chaos, freelance designers have come out stronger and more optimistic about the future than we could have ever predicted.

Who is free- lancing

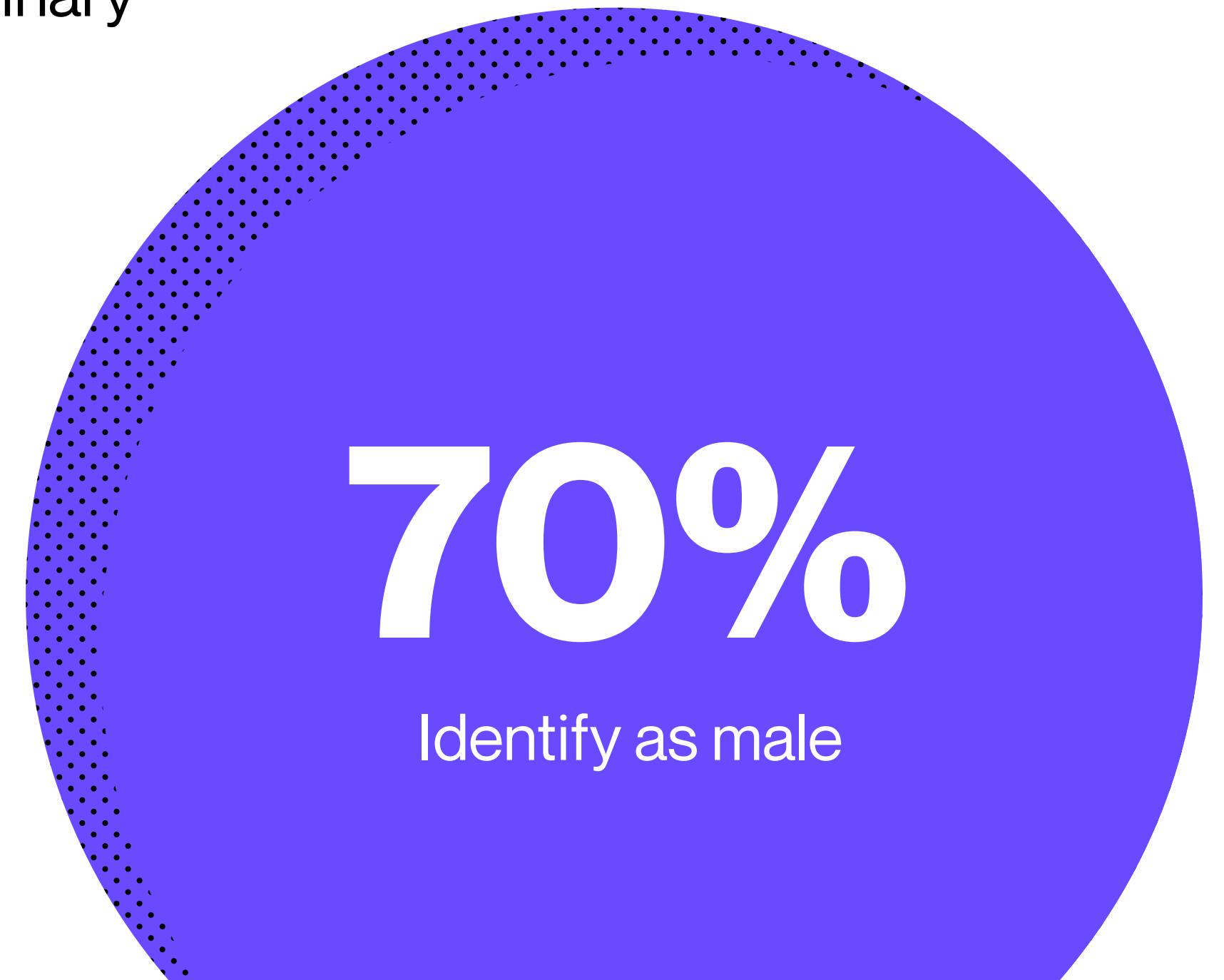
Around 1 in 3 freelance designers identify as a minority based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, mental or physical impairment.



2%
Identify as non-binary



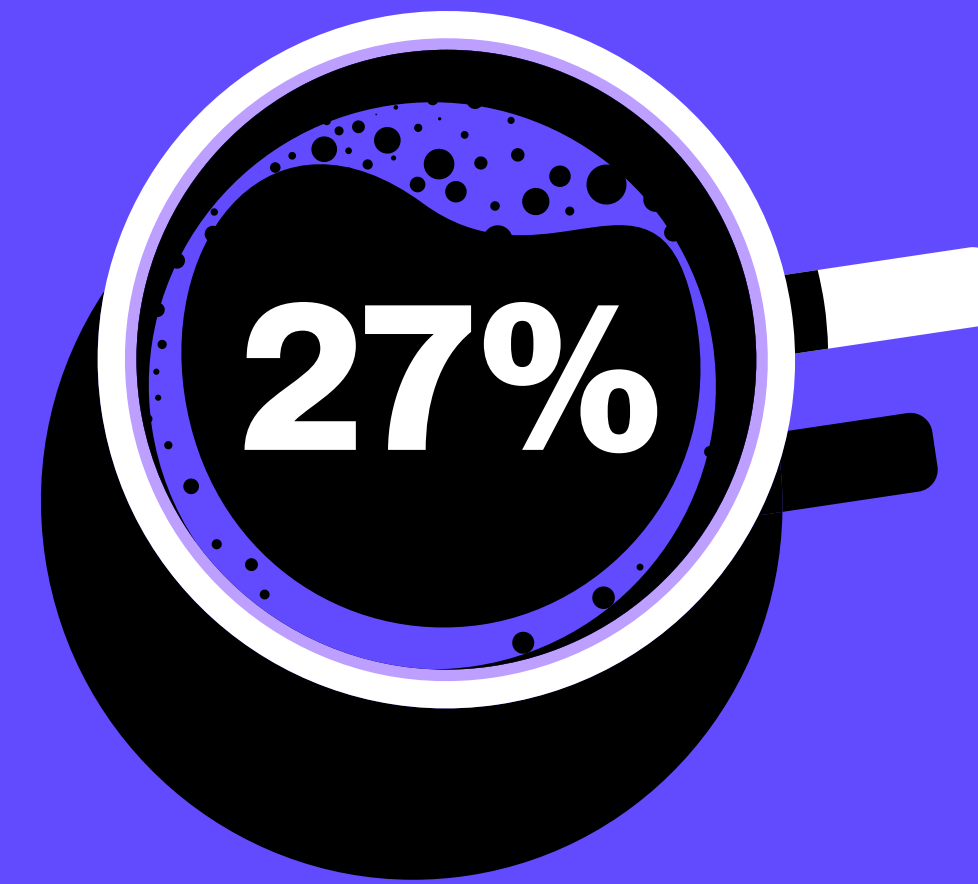
Identify as female



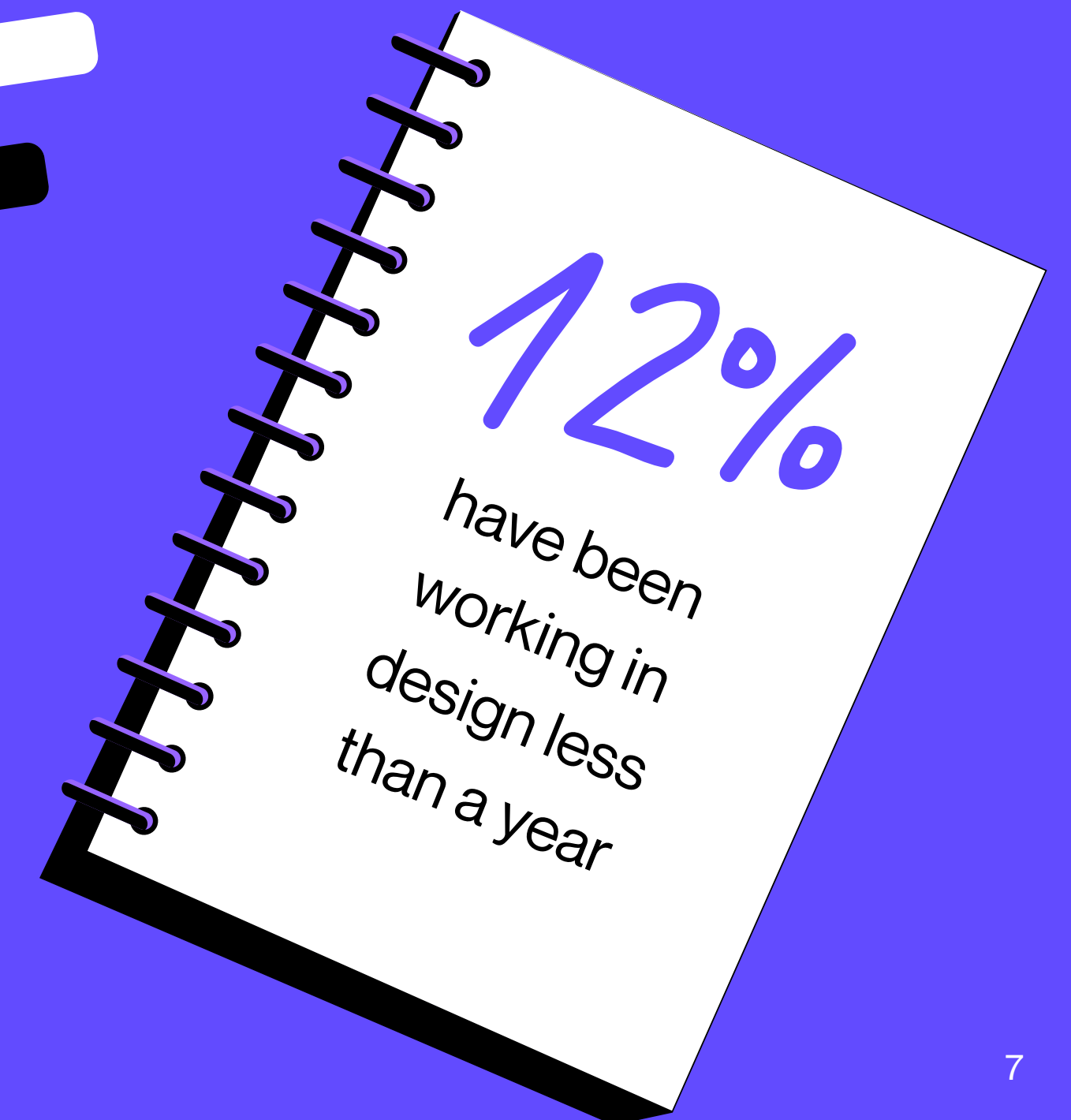
Identify as male



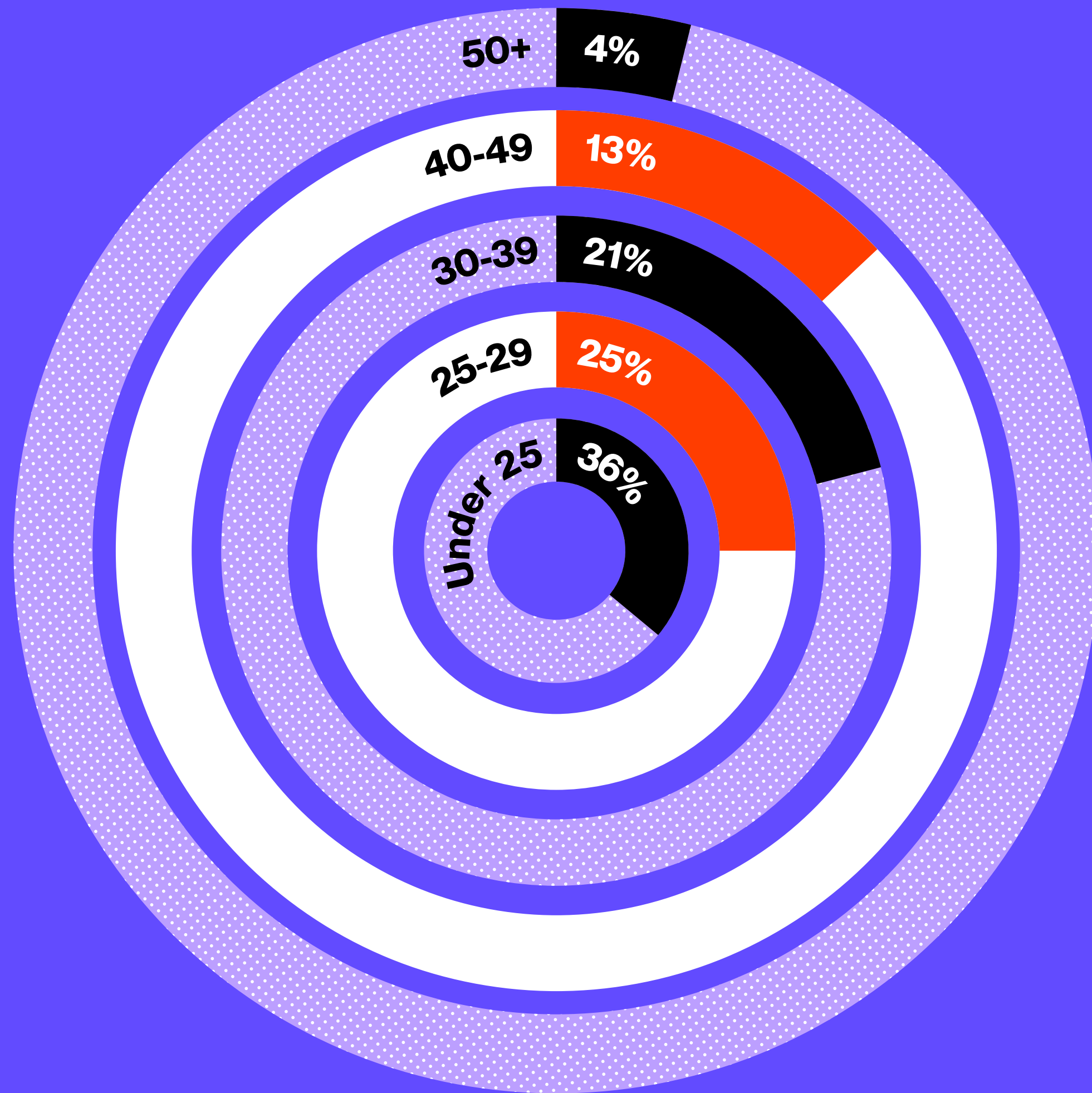
While designers of all ages and backgrounds are embracing the freelance way of working, Millennials are leading the way.



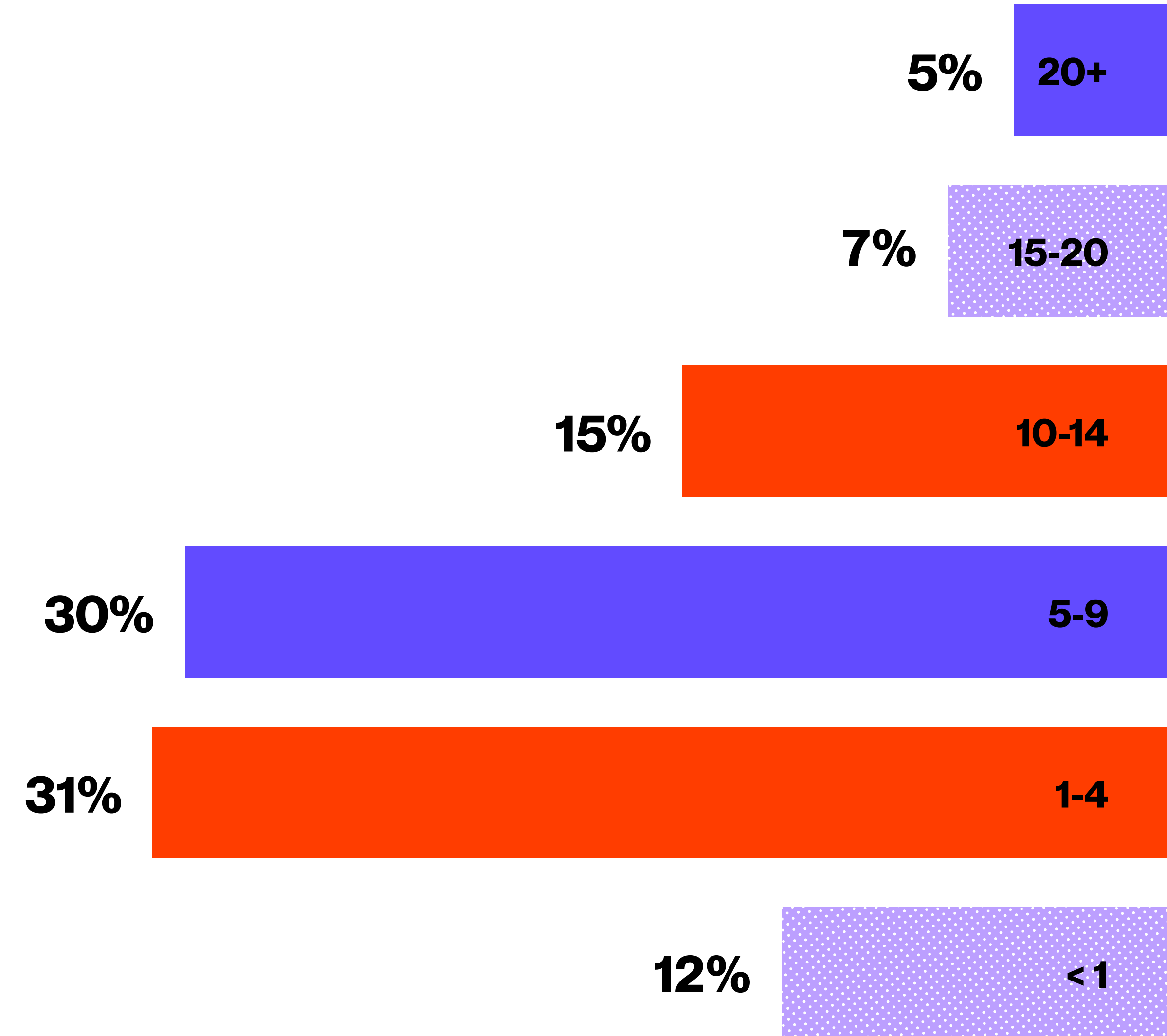
have been working in design for more than a decade



Age of freelancers



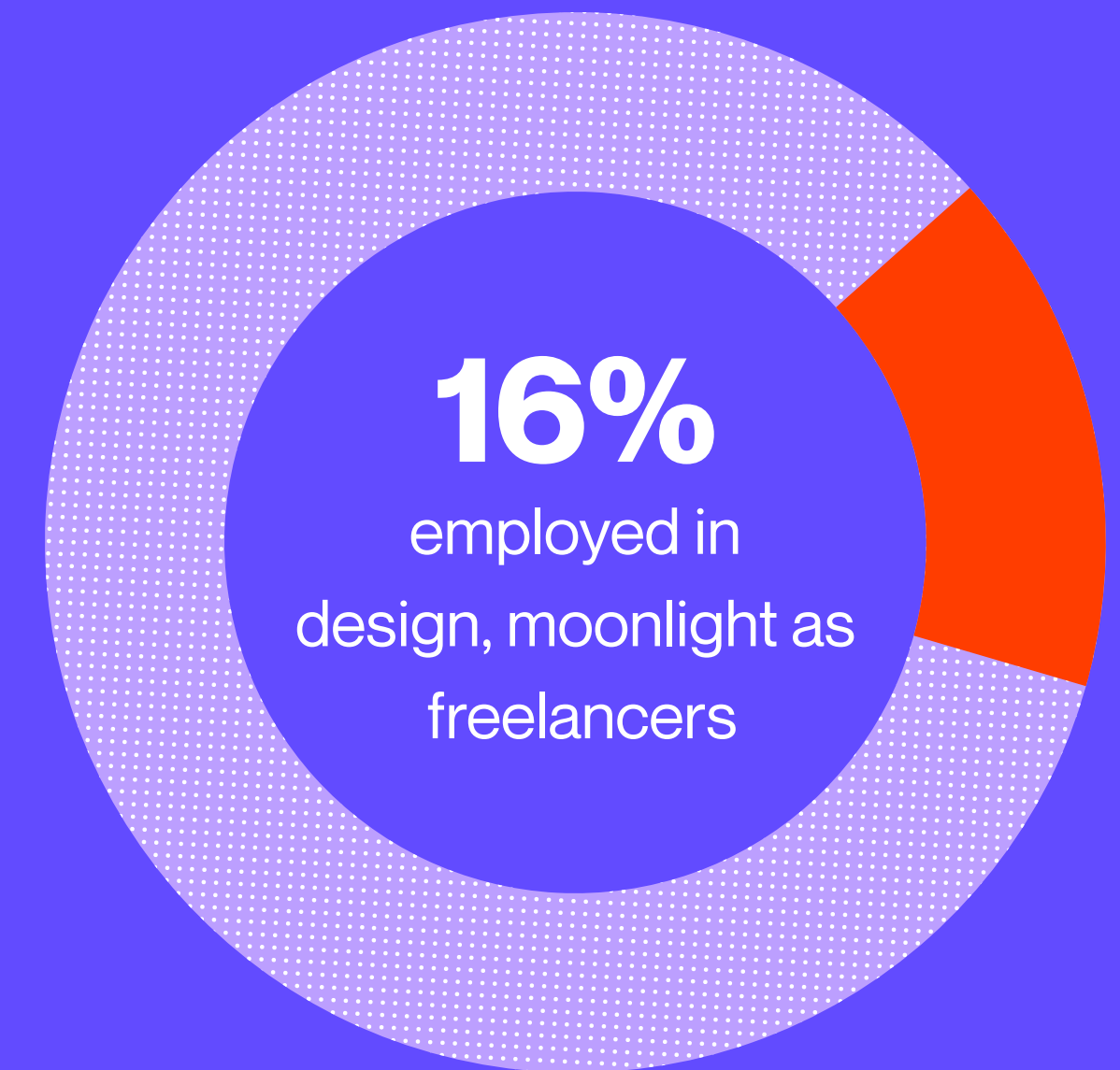
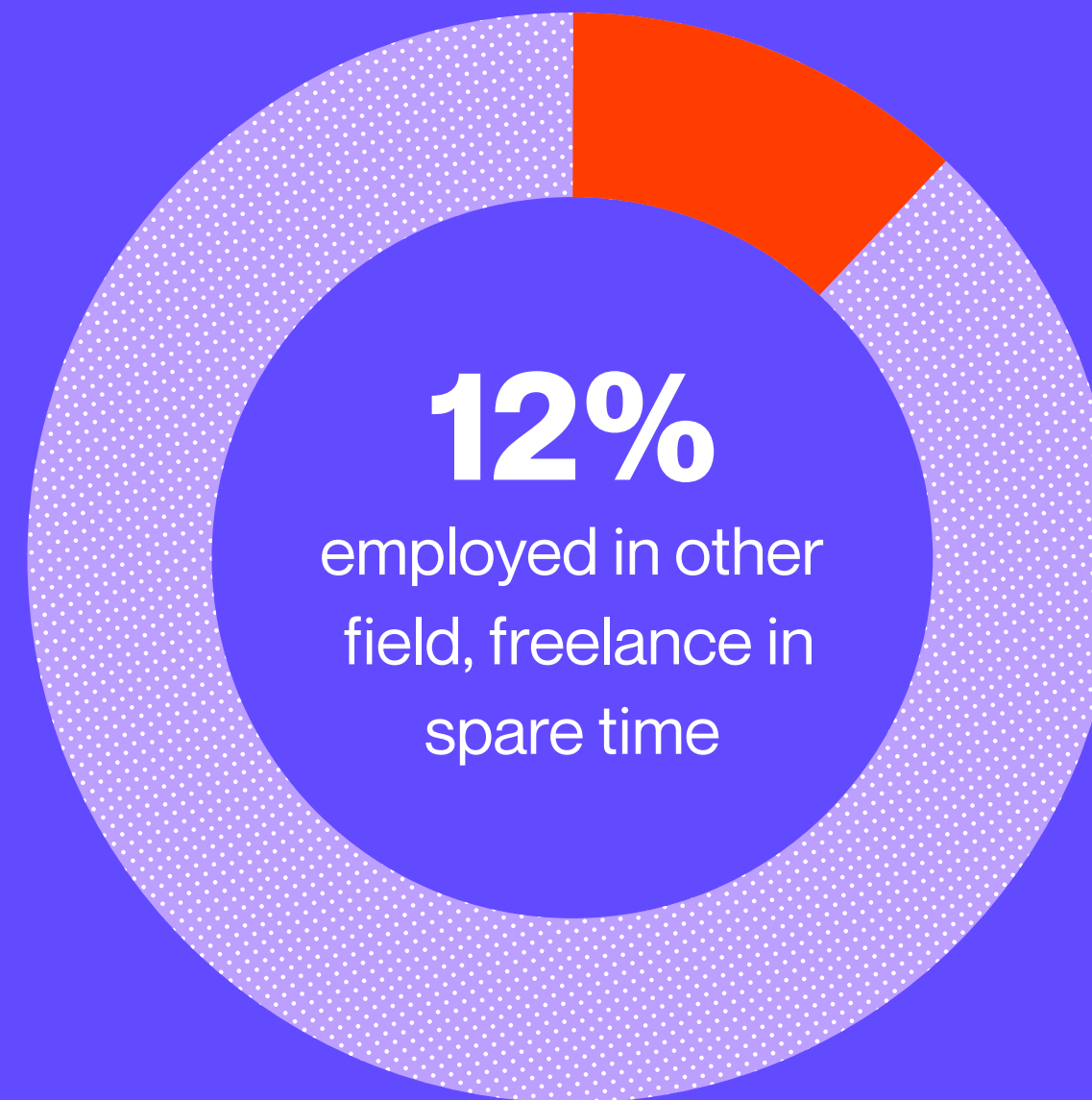
Years of industry experience



How are designers freelancing?

There are many ways to make freelancing work around an individual's schedule and responsibilities.

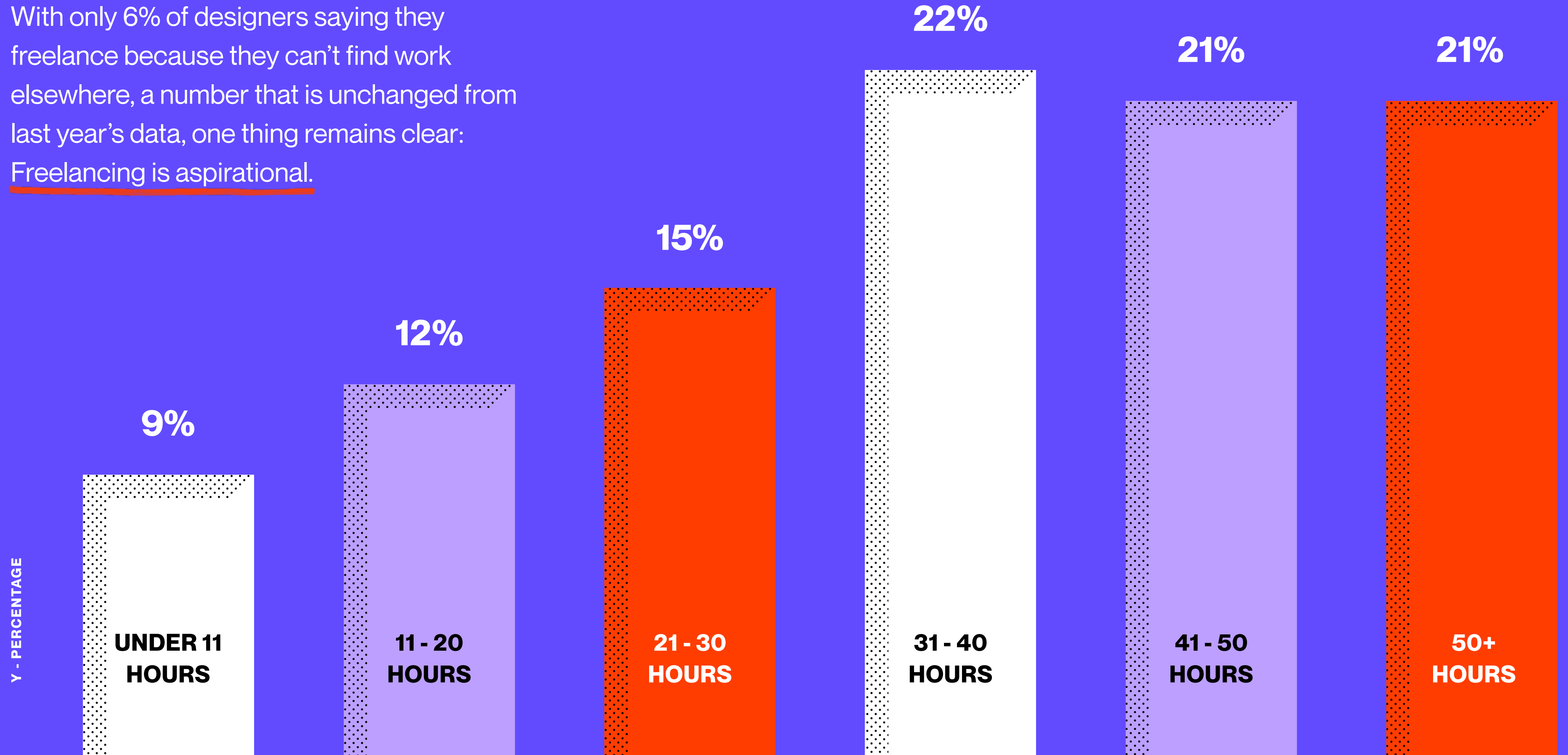
So it's not surprising that freelancers report having extensive professional expertise beyond the field of design; architects, musicians, photographers, translators, developers, and even nurses and doctors are all finding unique ways to bring freelance design into their world.



With freelancers choosing their hours, yet again, flexibility and freedom are the key motivators in 2020.

With only 6% of designers saying they freelance because they can't find work elsewhere, a number that is unchanged from last year's data, one thing remains clear: Freelancing is aspirational.

X - HOURS WORKED PER WEEK



AN INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

The top 3 reasons designers choose to freelance are:



Additional income on top of their primary job (19%)



More personal flexibility and freedom (39%)



Creative freedom that wasn't available in their previous job (14%)

“

Working 9 to 5 (usually even more) never really suited me although I've had 5+ years of office experience. As a freelancer I have the freedom to organize my work schedule, and also decide on the projects to take on.

 DESIGNER #40795, TURKEY

”

02

Now vs. then: **CHALLENGED**
how 2020 ~~changed~~ everything

What a **difference** a year can make.

Marked by a global pandemic that upended lives and transformed societies, 2020 was the year that nobody saw coming. *(Or wanted/needed/asked for...)*

So what impact has it had on designers compared to last year?

From significant hardships as a result of the pandemic, to better pay and improved work-life balance, the challenges of 2020 also brought about some unexpected rewards.



Changes to freelance work

As the world shifted to remote work almost overnight, 1 in 5 designers picked up more freelance projects than normal during the pandemic. However, COVID-19 posed some significant challenges that impacted designers in a negative way.



Challenges designers faced during the pandemic

27%

Clients have cut budgets

26%

At least one project cancelled or put on hold

36%

Difficulty finding steady work

22%

Ghosted by at least one client

THE
Job changes
RESHUFFLE

Around half (48%) of freelance designers experienced a change of employment status during the pandemic. And even though around a quarter (26%) of freelancers lost a salaried job in 2020, just 16% received financial support from their government.

42%
have been actively
looking for employment

14%
lost a full-time job

10%
lost a part-time job

2%
were furloughed

THE TROUBLES

THE TRIUMPHS

6%
graduated from
a design program

4%
were hired for a
part-time position

3%
were hired for a
full-time position

2%
were awarded
an internship

In addition...

14%

of designers have been asked to take on additional responsibilities at work

8%

have had to relocate during the pandemic

Around a third
(32%)

have considered taking on additional work outside of design as a result of hardships related to COVID-19

When designers were asked how happy they were with their current situation, we saw a shift towards dissatisfaction in 2020 compared to last year—which is understandable given how challenging the year has been for the world at large.



Even so, there was a 3% increase in the number of freelancers who were very satisfied with their professional circumstances, which is a promising sign of the times.

SATISFACTION LEVELS

Professional satisfaction levels: 2019 vs. 2020

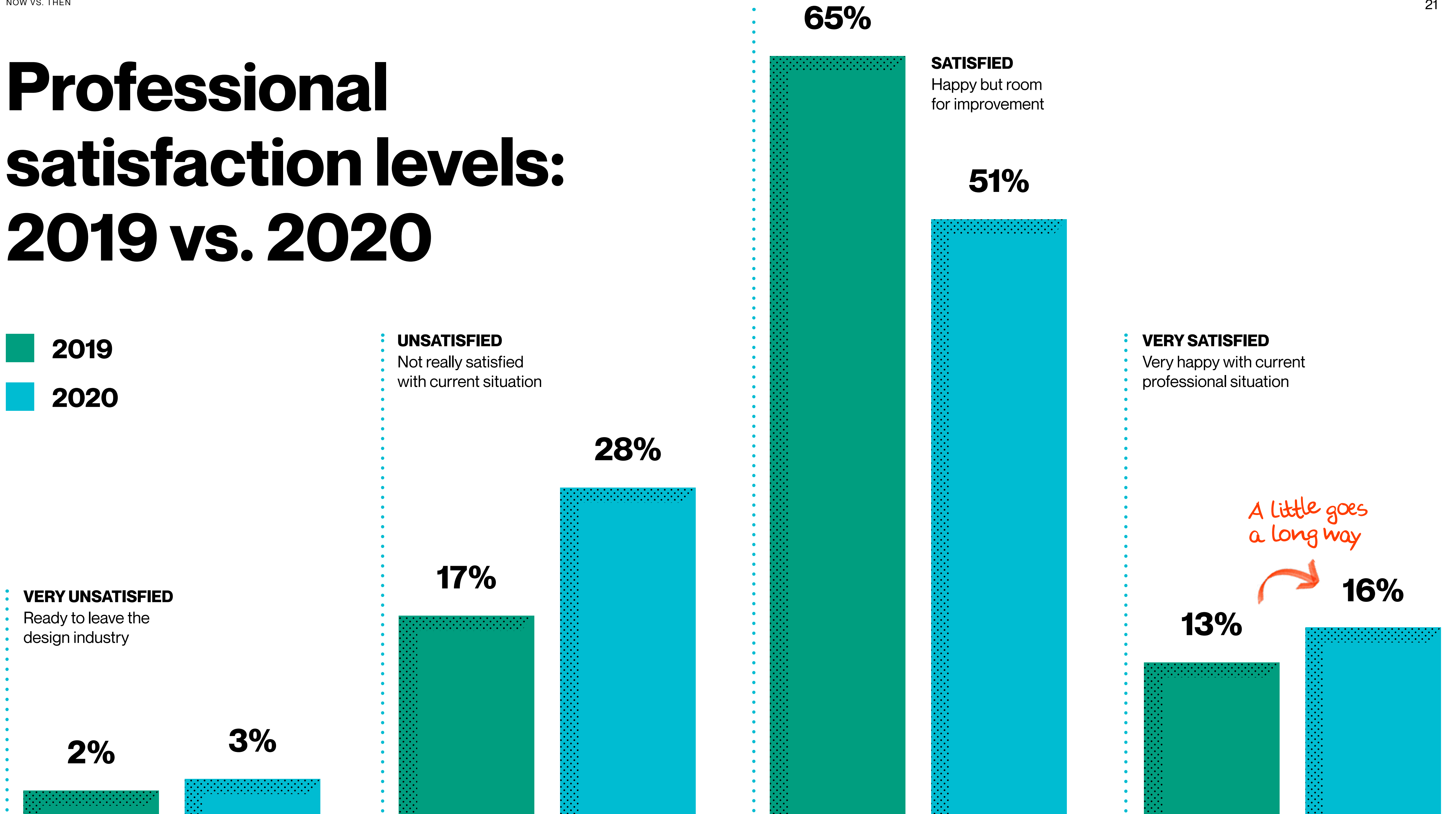
2019
2020

VERY UNSATISFIED
Ready to leave the design industry

UNSATISFIED
Not really satisfied with current situation

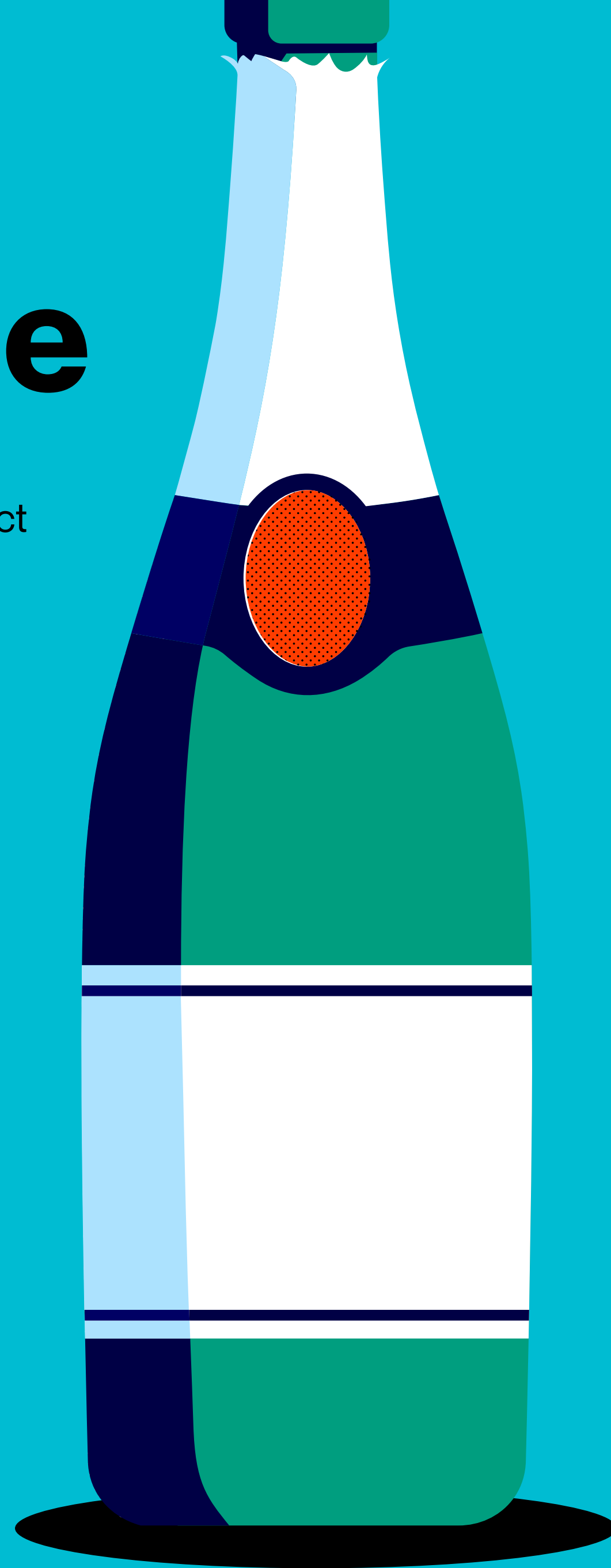
SATISFIED
Happy but room for improvement

VERY SATISFIED
Very happy with current professional situation



Impact on income

While over a third of freelancers expect to earn less than they did in 2019, despite this year's challenges, 2020 still gave us something to celebrate...



49%
expect to earn more in
2020 than they did in 2019



15%
expect their income
to stay the same



24%
of this group expect their
annual income to increase
significantly

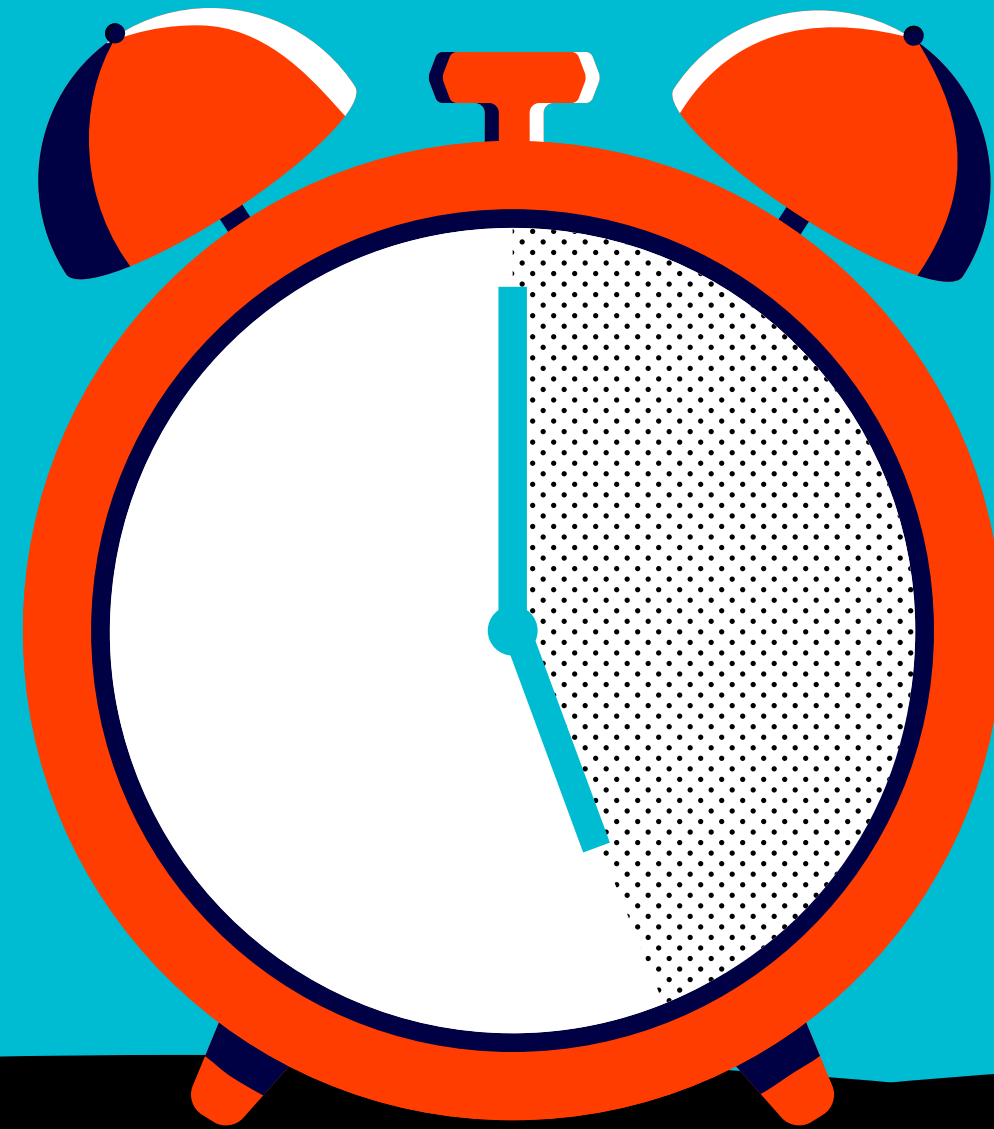
SHIFTING HOURS

Freelancing provides the flexibility to work incredibly varied schedules (after all, this is the number one motivation for designers wanting to freelance in the first place). So it's no wonder that less than 5% constrain themselves to a typical 9 - 5 day.

When we asked designers about the impact of COVID-19 on their working hours, the responses were vast and their reasons were varied—from fluctuations in work volume to family responsibilities.



How the pandemic affected designers' working hours



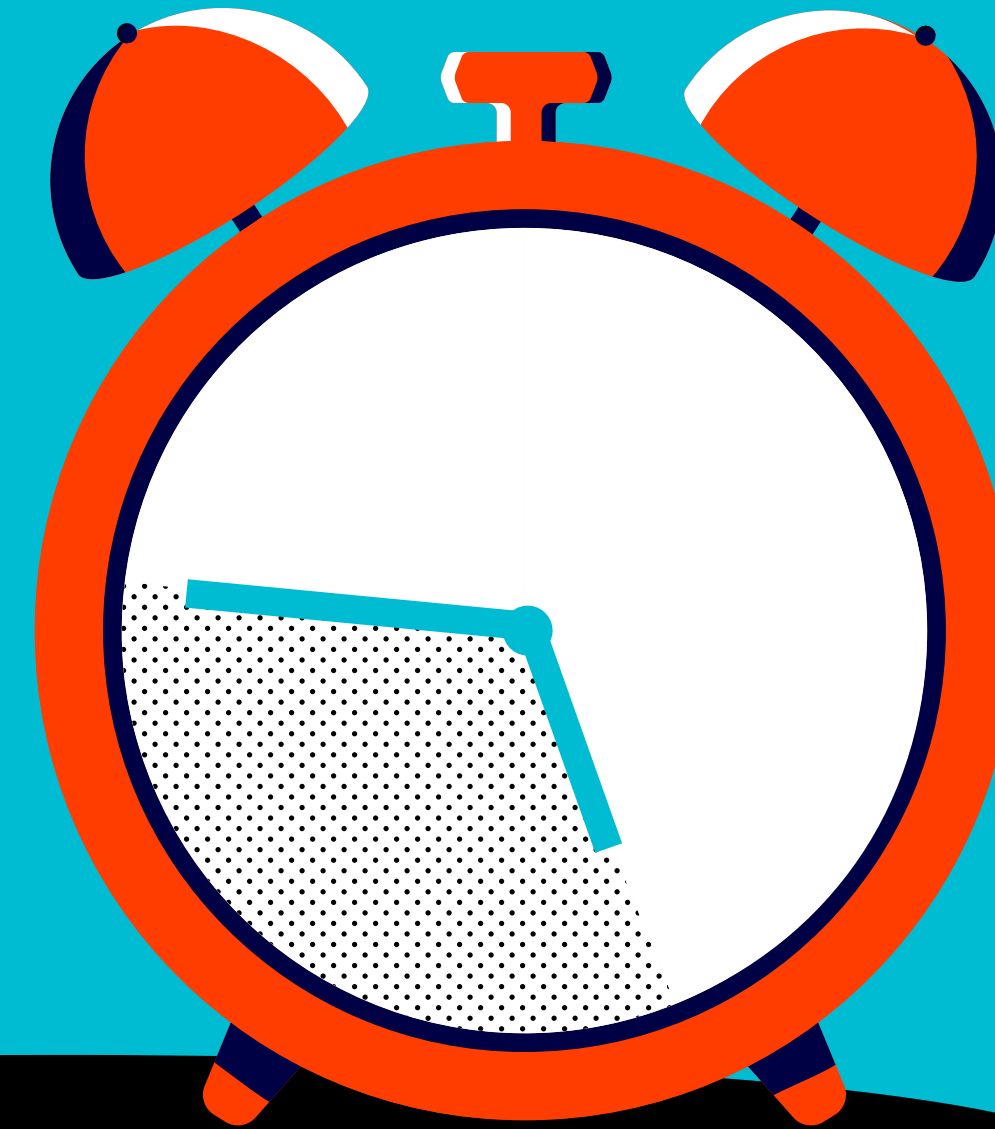
44%

said they're working shorter hours than they were before the pandemic



23%

said their hours were unchanged



33%

said they're working longer hours than they were before the pandemic

While some designers found it difficult to create boundaries between their personal and professional lives during the pandemic, 42% actually found that their work-life balance improved in 2020 compared to 2019.

FINDING BALANCE



“

I'd rather earn less and spend less than earn more and spend two hours commuting or be subject to the corporate ladder. Been there, done that, and I am in a moment in my life where I want to love my work and be proud of it.

 DESIGNER #8675, MEXICO

My income decreased slightly, but it was my own choice. I'm spending less money and have the opportunity to spend my time with my one year old baby boy. So I chose to lay off some clients and optimize my work process instead.

 DESIGNER #9893, BRAZIL

Most jobs don't consider that employees spend more time at work than they ever will with their families. I would rather work for myself to maintain a healthy balance.

 DESIGNER #3881, UNITED STATES

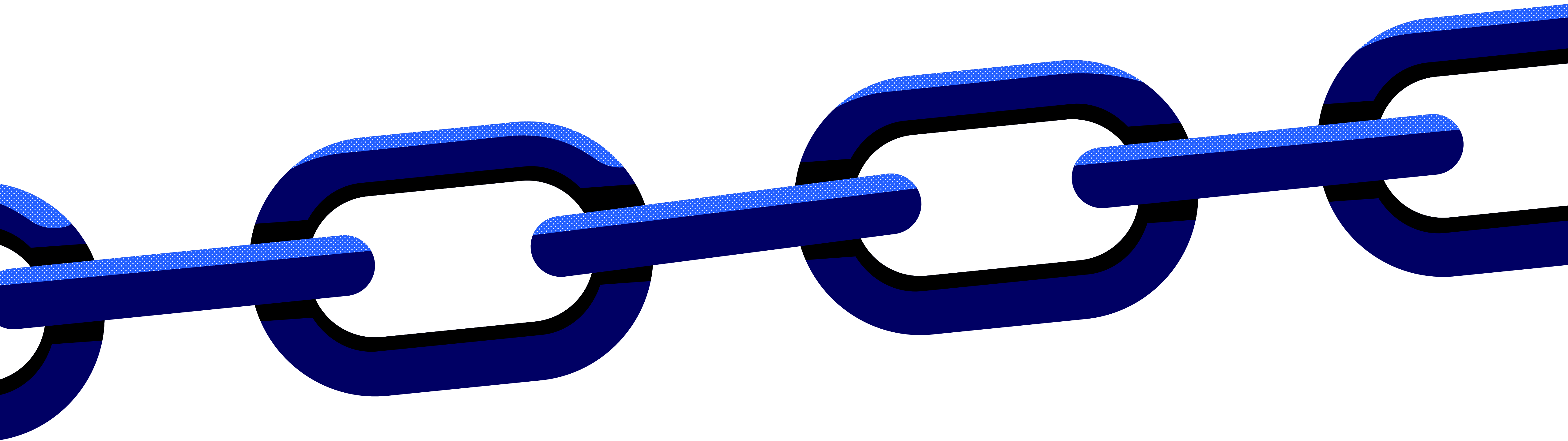
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**Creativity through a crisis:
riding the COVID-19 curve**

Even though the majority of freelance designers were already working from home, as **lockdown orders came into effect around the **world**, life became very different—and fast.**

Yet despite the air of anxiety sweeping across the globe, many designers shared stories of strength, connection and personal growth—proof that even through a crisis, creativity thrives.

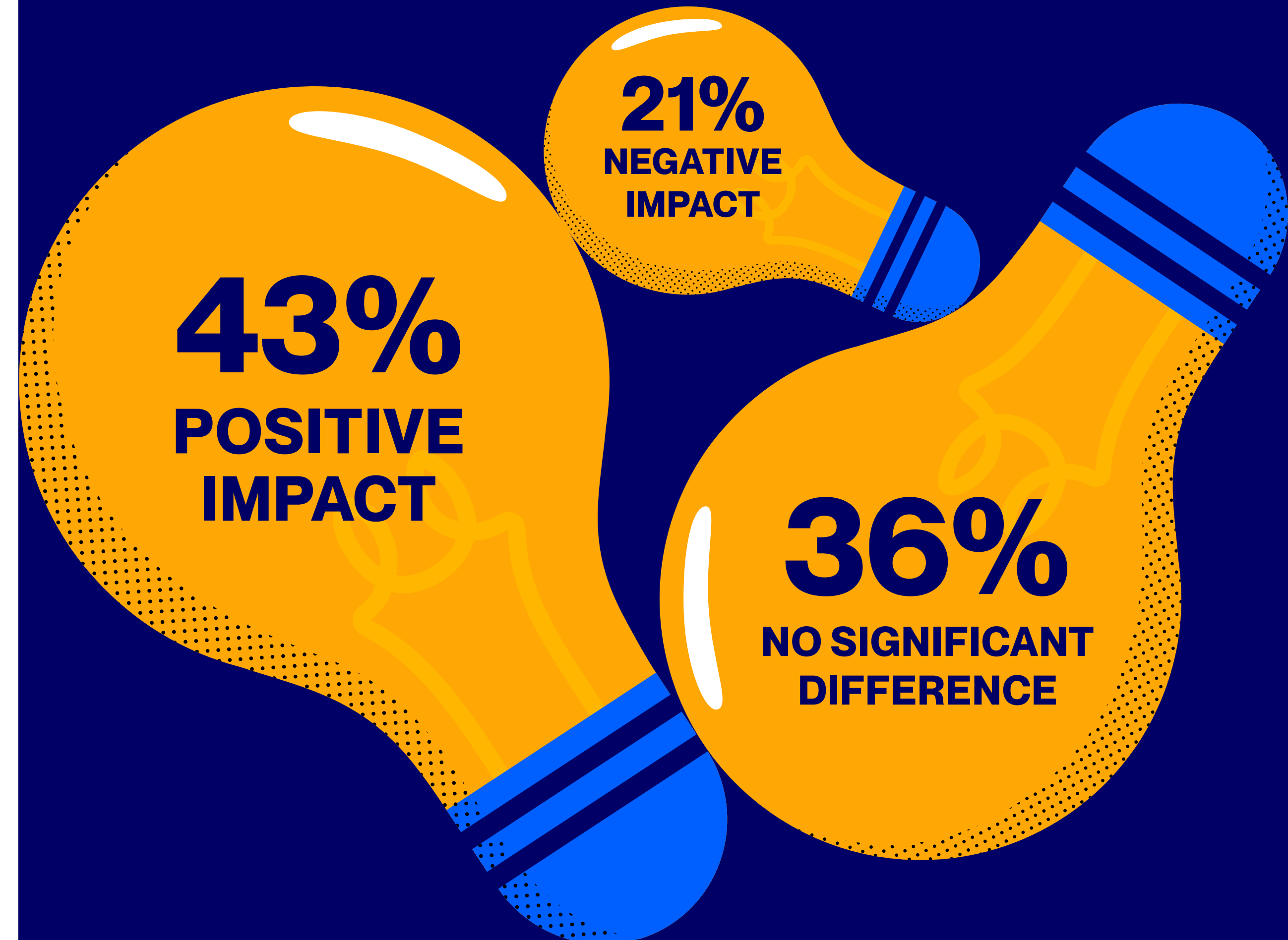


CHAOS ~~Company~~ fuels creativity

As a result of the pandemic, many designers found themselves competing for peace and quiet (and a bit of space) as whole households suddenly had to work and study from home together.

Yet surprisingly, being on top of each other brought creatives out on top!

When we asked designers how having other people in their work space had impacted their creative process, most said it actually had a positive effect. It just goes to show how valuable the presence of others can be for creative workers—whether for inspiration, as a sounding board, or a welcome distraction, grab hold of your people and keep ‘em close!





Parenting in a pandemic

child-rearing superheroes

This year has been particularly challenging for ~~parents~~ around the world, with 48% of freelance designers needing to balance extra childcare, distance learning and homeschooling responsibilities on top of their normal work. As a result, 24% reported working less hours because they were taking care of family members.

However, when we asked designers how having their children at home affected their work lives, the responses were surprisingly positive.

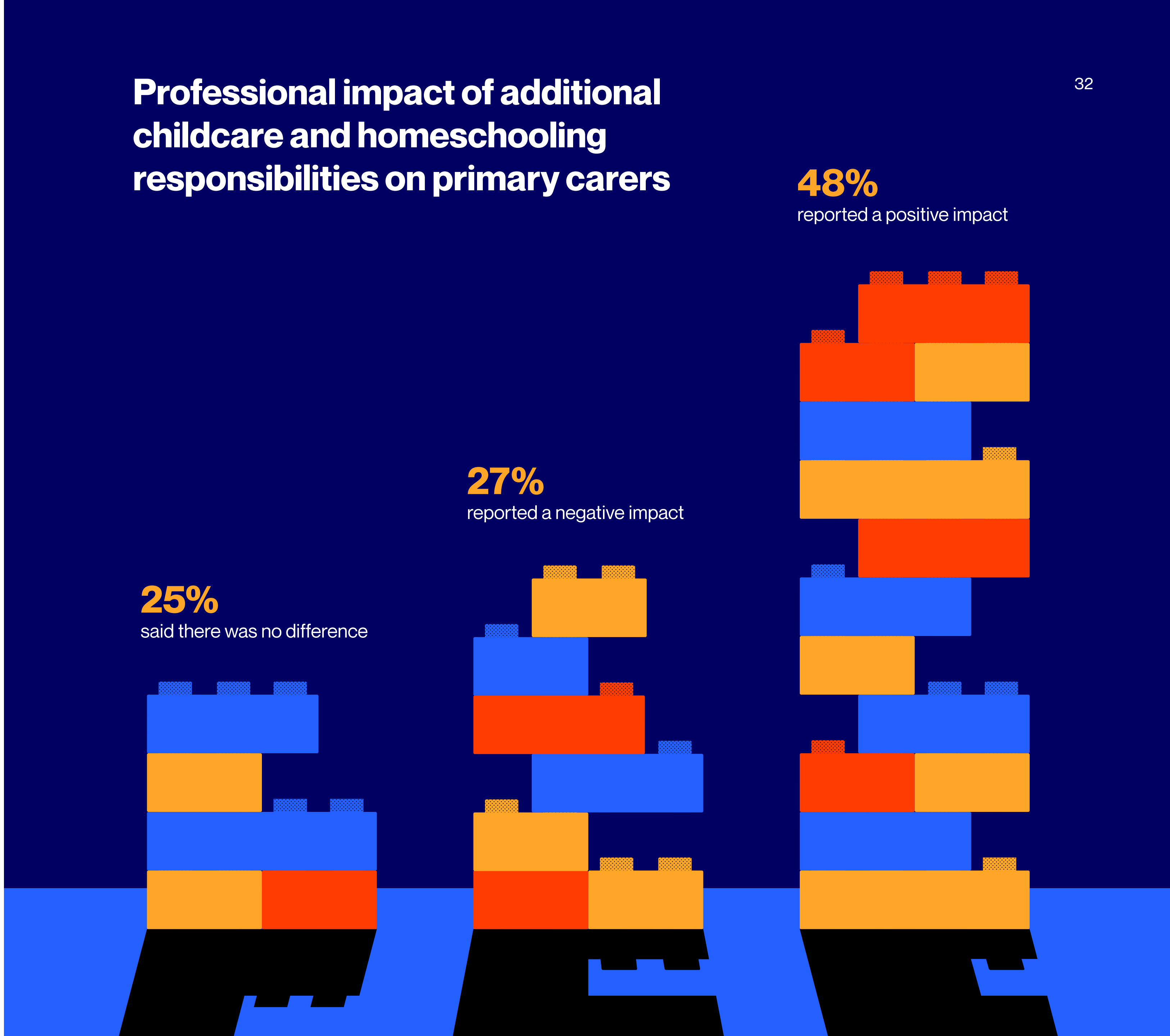
While many primary carers found juggling responsibilities exceptionally challenging during this time, around half felt the experience had impacted them in a positive way professionally. (Who'da thought those little rascals could also be a source of inspiration!)

Professional impact of additional childcare and homeschooling responsibilities on primary carers

25%
said there was no difference

27%
reported a negative impact

48%
reported a positive impact



At first glance, the 48% of primary carers who report a positive impact may seem unusually high, but many freelancers are already pros at flexible working, fitting it in around families, different schedules and careers. (Considering that doctors and nurses found time to design, clearly it's a craft worth fighting for!)



Equally, many freelancers had other adults at home to share the load for the first time.

Combine this with the fact that 52% of parents said having family around helped their creative process, we start to see a more complete picture.

Time with family is life's finest luxury. Not having to commute has given me an extra hour or two with my children every day.

 DESIGNER #4361, UNITED KINGDOM

Emotional impact and connections

2020 has been an incredibly stressful period, both collectively and personally, for millions of people around the world. When we asked freelance designers how the emotional strain of the pandemic affected their work, many shared experiences of depression, anxiety and trouble focusing. Online connections however, proved to be a light in the darkness.



While 23% of freelancers reported feeling isolated from their peers, around a quarter said that they made new industry contacts during the pandemic (thanks to online forums, social media and freelance platforms).

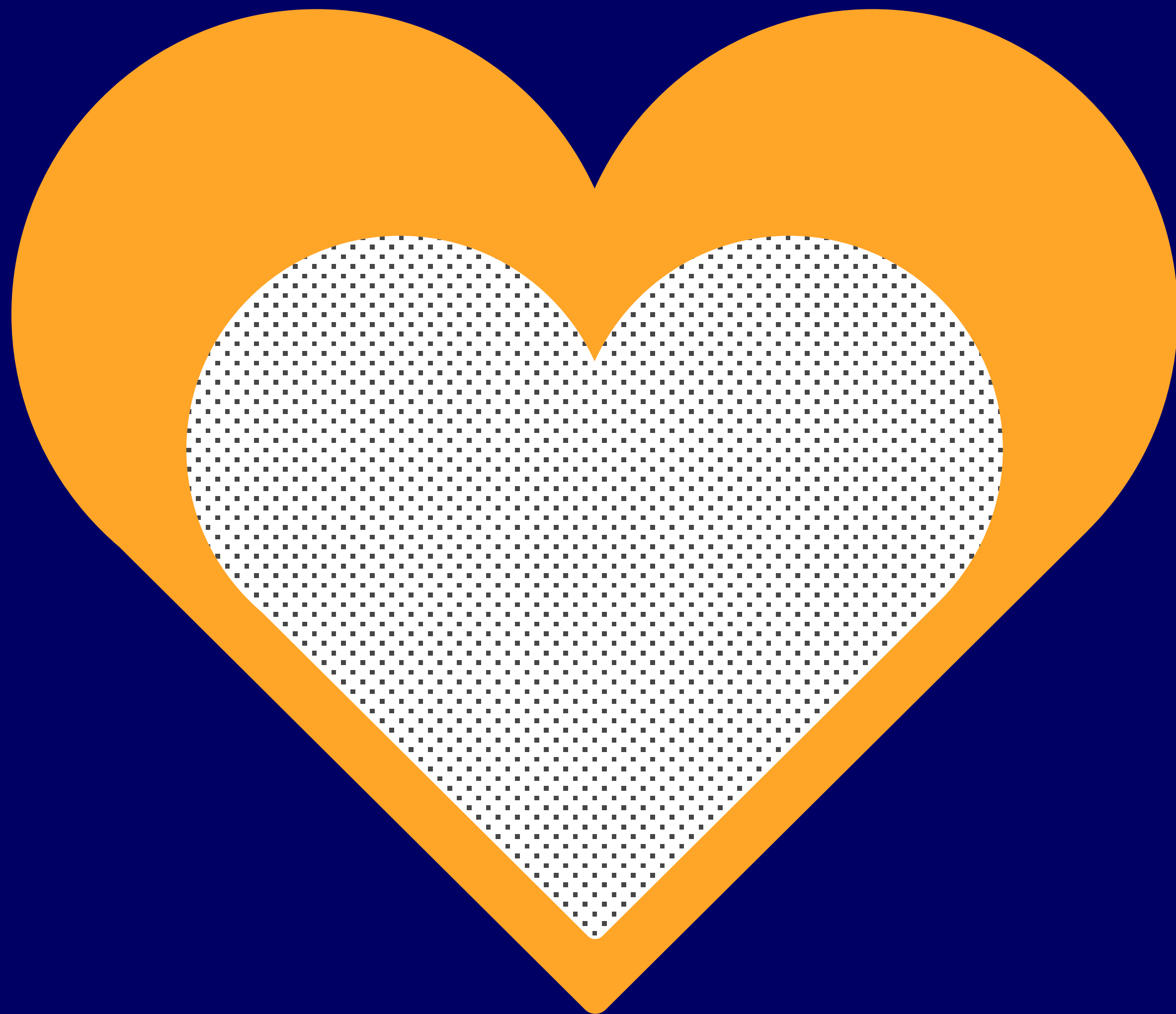


Designers working for social good

It's been a turbulent year both personally and professionally, but that hasn't stopped *loads of* designers from being generous with their time and dedicating it towards a good cause.

I often design logos for industries engaged in charity, and I always make them for free.

 DESIGNER #1868, INDONESIA



38% of designers reported doing creative work for a social justice organisation or charity in 2020

—and 70% of that work was done pro bono.

Designers in their twenties were the most generous with their time, with 44% of under thirties working on a philanthropic project of some kind in the past 6 months (compared to 30% of designers in their forties).

“


I quit my job at a toxic agency two weeks before COVID hit. The pandemic forced me to take the time I needed to recover, and gain perspective about the role of design. It should be less about money and more about helping spread the right messages (helping people, animals, and the environment).

 DESIGNER #3159, CANADA

”

Education & upskilling: living, working & learning online

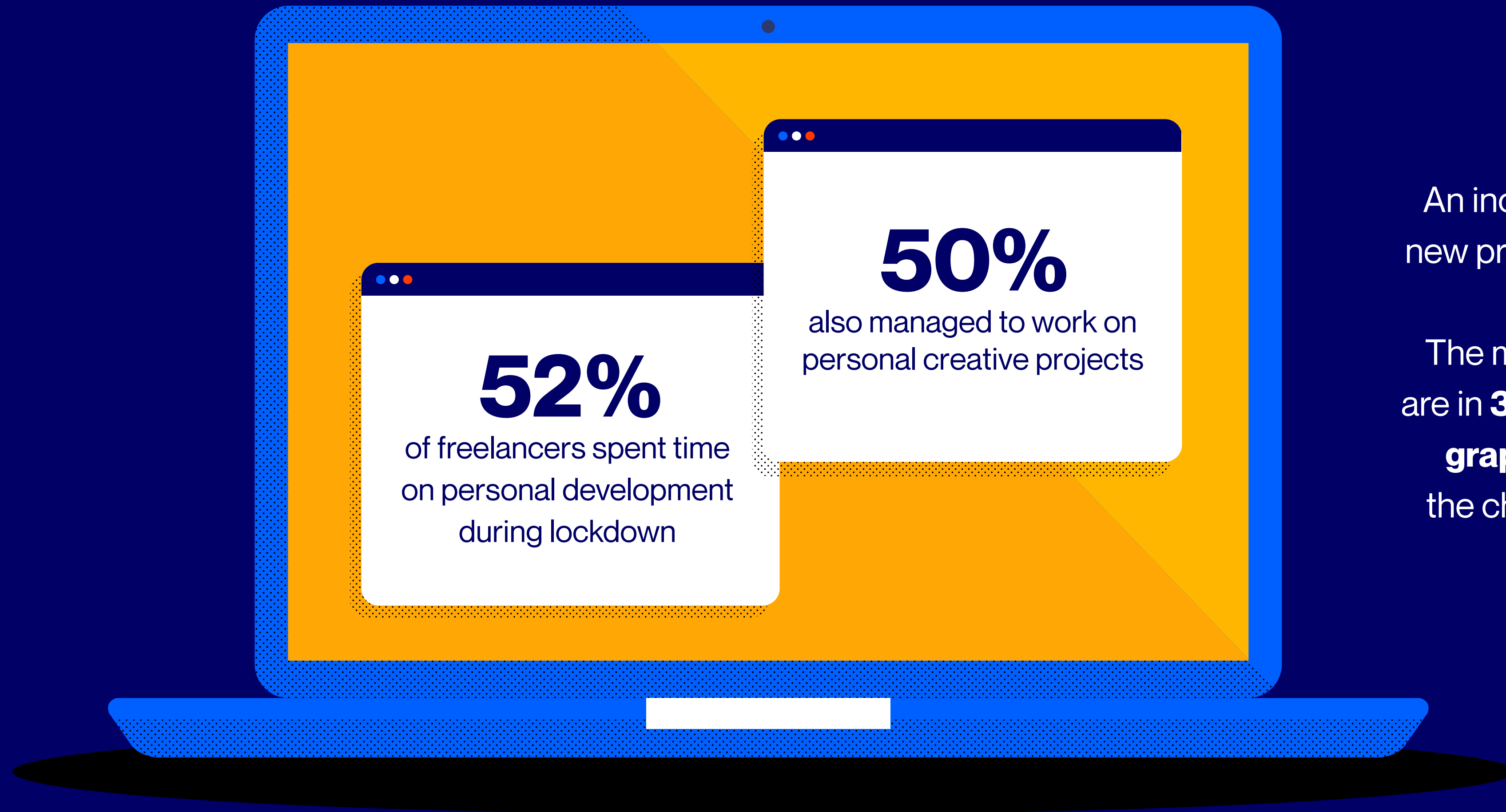
Another positive thread in the story of 2020 was found in designers' personal and professional growth during the pandemic.



With more than 10 years experience, I am still trying to improve my design skills. Because no one is 100% perfect in this creative industry.

 DESIGNER #2361, INDIA





up from 60%
in 2019

An incredible 81% of designers learned a new professional skill during the pandemic.

The most popular skills being developed are in **3D animation**, **UI design** and **motion graphics**, with online learning leading the charge as the most common way for designers looking to upskill.

How designers learned new skills

Given the levels of continuous self-development in the industry, it's not surprising that the majority of designers (68%) consider themselves self-taught in some capacity—even amongst those with formal qualifications.

Never underestimate the power of video tutorials!

72%

learned new skills primarily using YouTube tutorials

60%

learned new skills through experimentation

36%

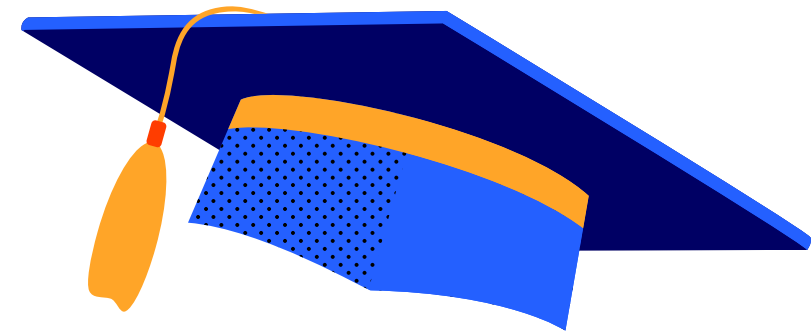
upskilled using online courses (e.g. Skillshare and Coursera)

“

With easy access to tutorials, there are many emerging designers. So what counts is the diversity, flexibility and the engagement of my work.

 DESIGNER #8410, BRAZIL

”



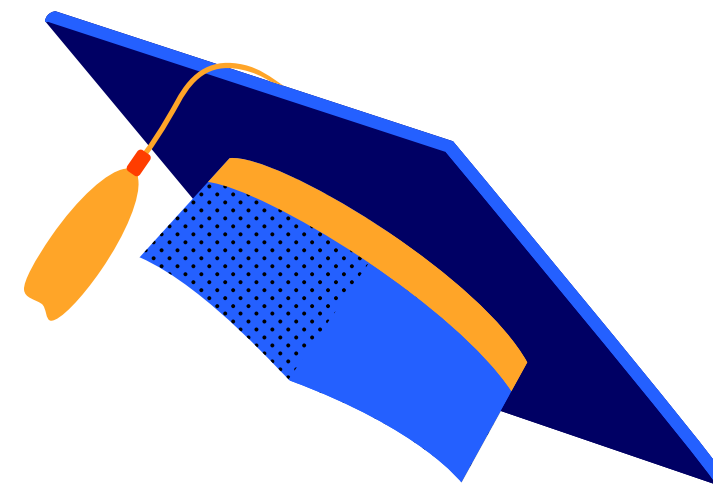
29%

Undergraduate degree in design



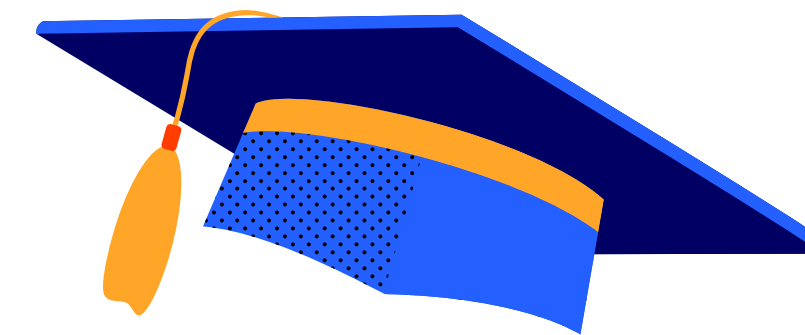
23%

Technical or certification program



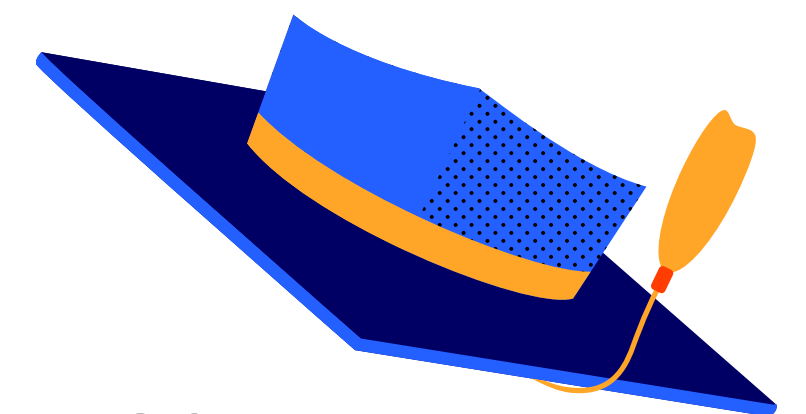
17%

Postgraduate degree in a design-related discipline



19%

Currently completing an undergraduate degree



12%

Apprenticeship


In spite of all this training, it's worth noting that only 1 in 5 freelance designers believe that a formal education is crucial to succeed in the industry; 25% don't think it's necessary at all, and over half don't feel strongly either way.

“

I've felt the pressure to go out of my design field of expertise. I'm trying to add to my skill list each and every single day.

 DESIGNER #5392, INDIA

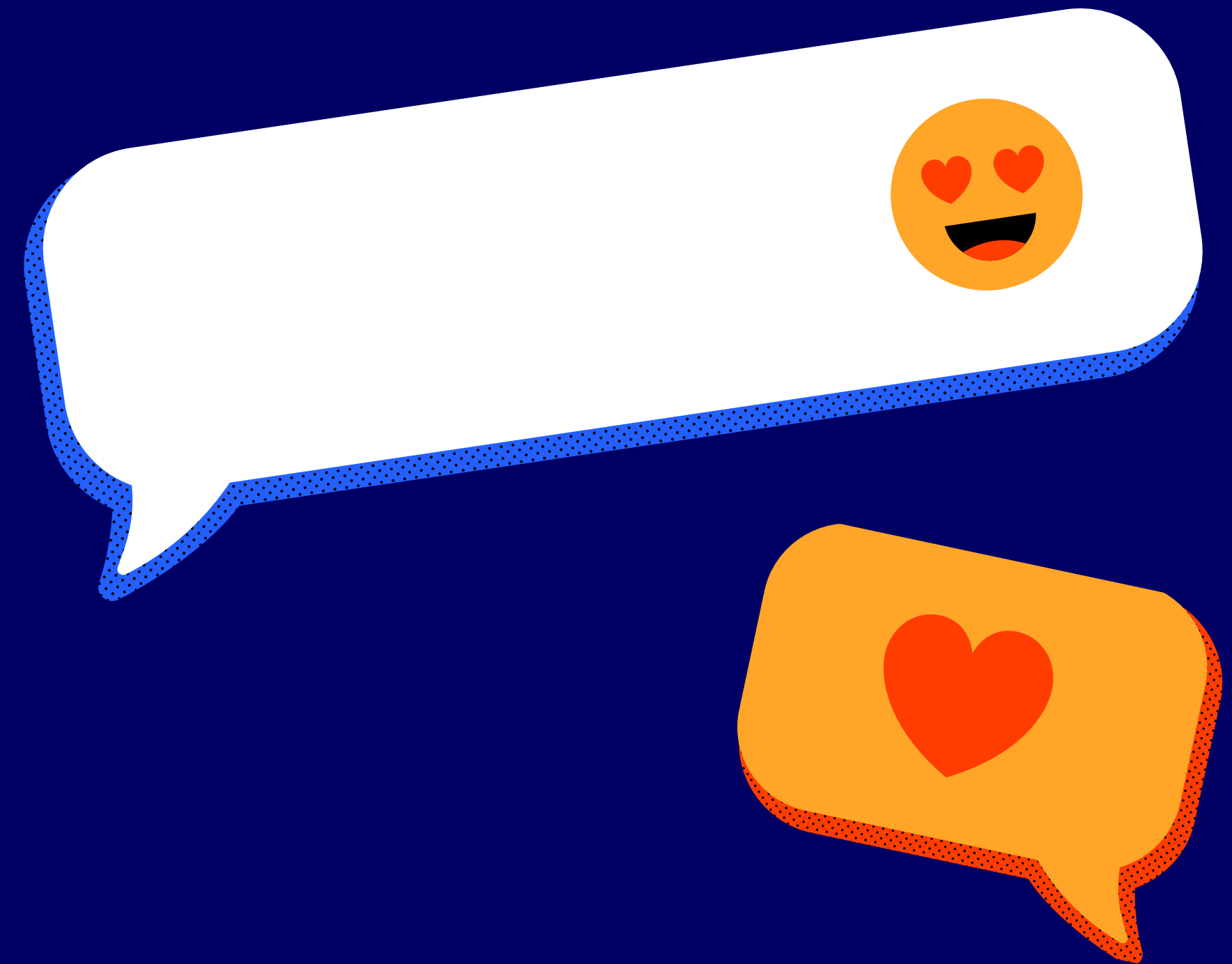
There is so much to learn beyond design in order to be a successful freelancer: soft skills such as how to write a quote, how to write the first response when a potential client contacts you, how to price your services, how to conduct a consultation—and how to close the deal.

 DESIGNER #4469, UNITED STATES

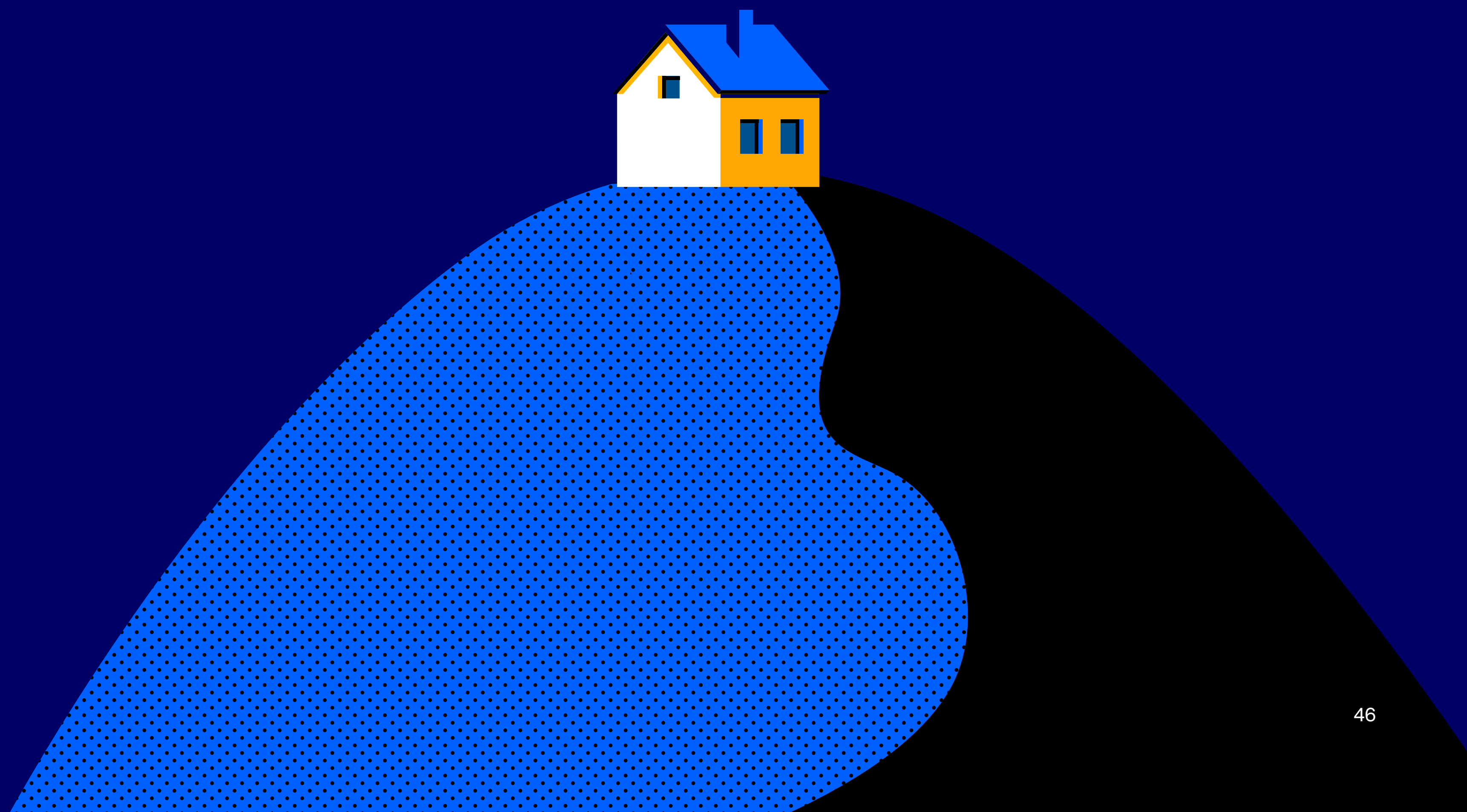
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Learnings from lockdown

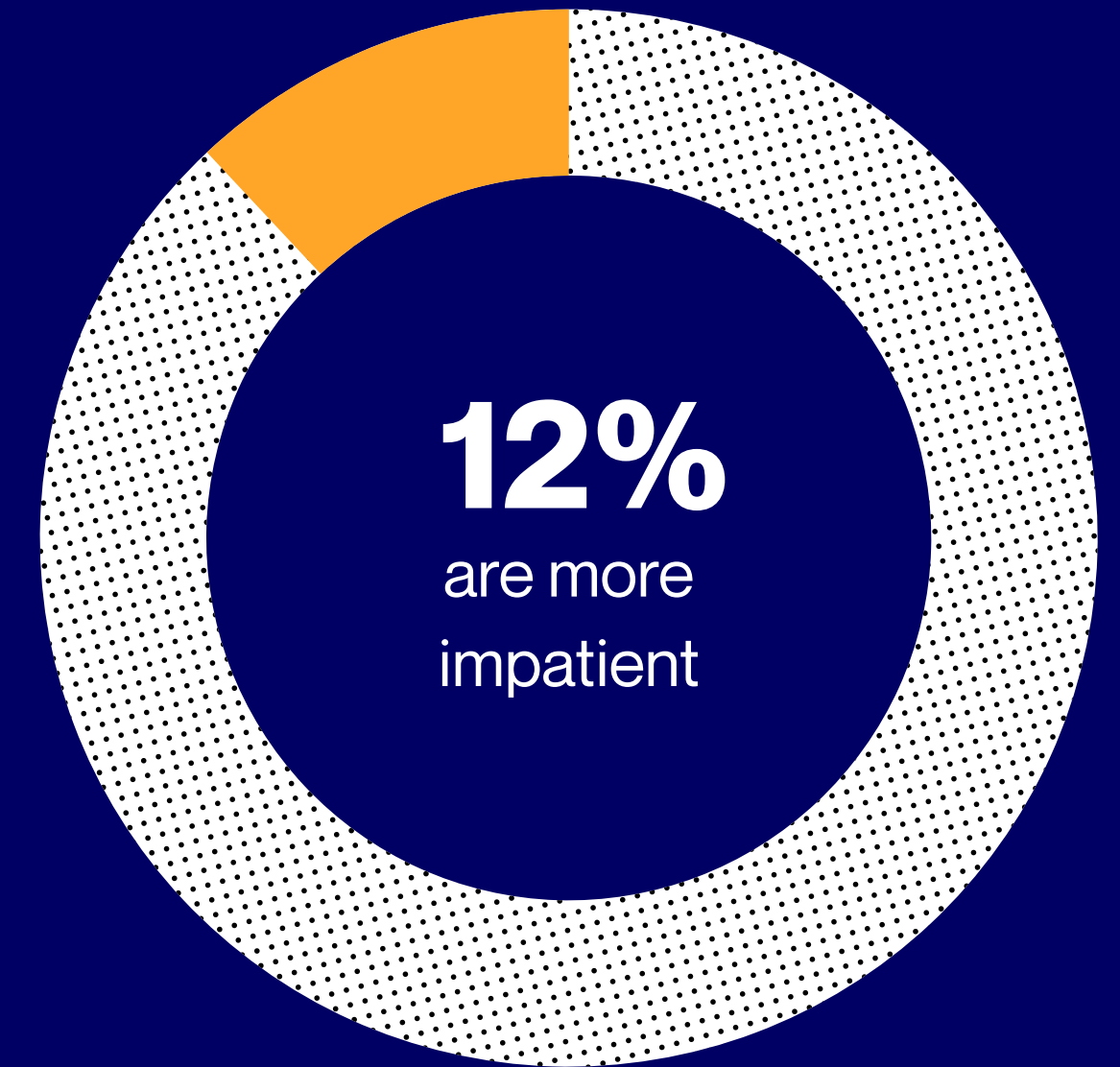
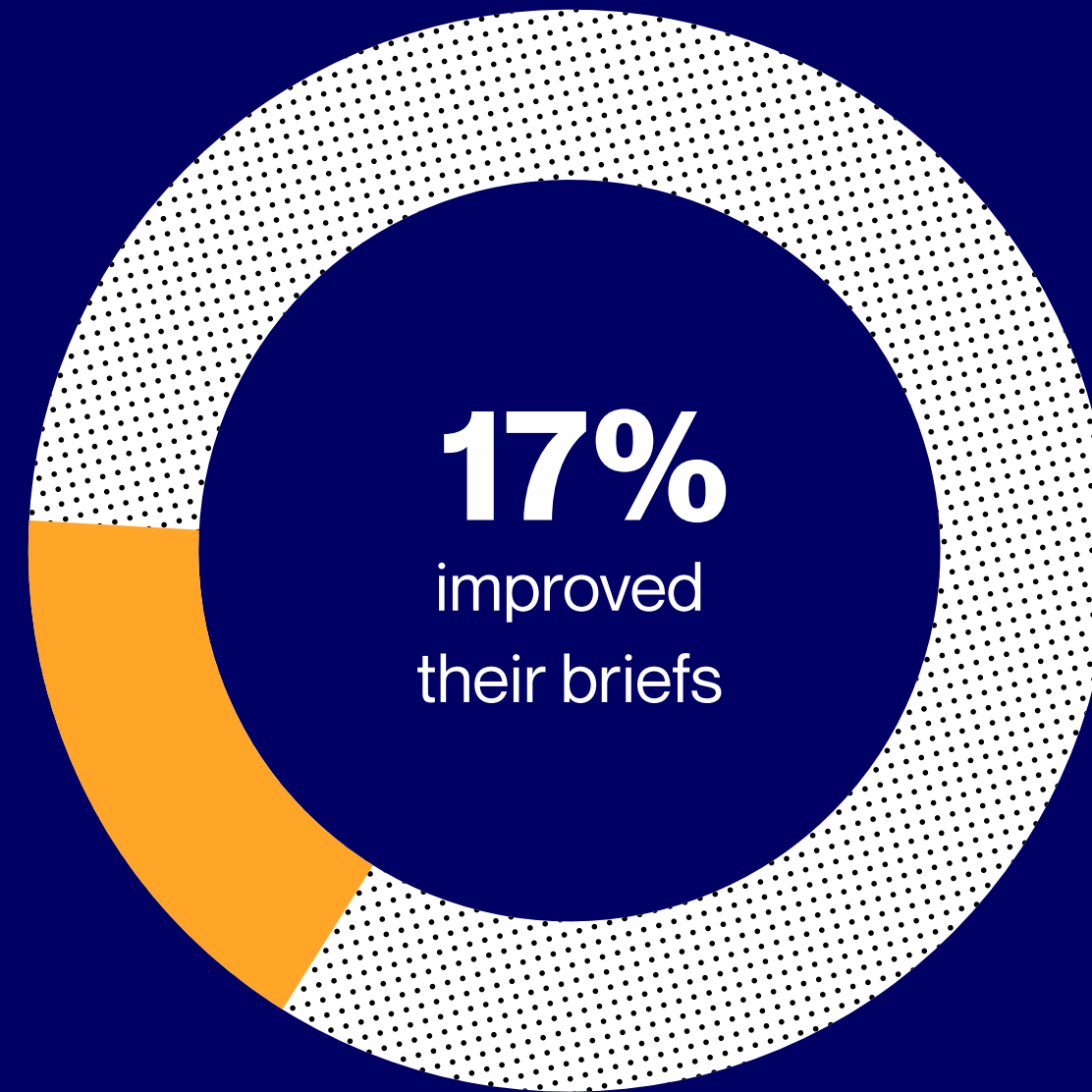
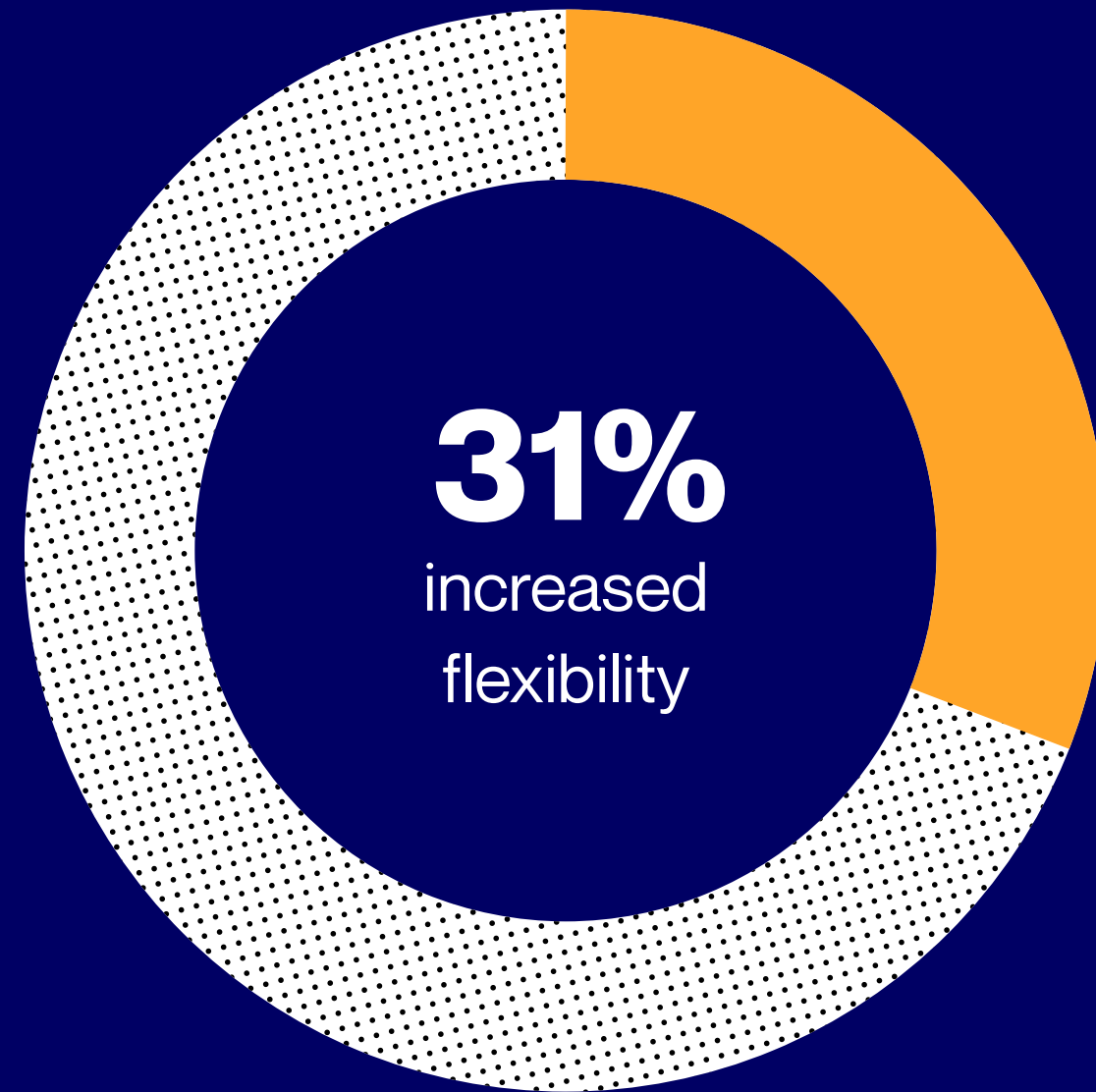
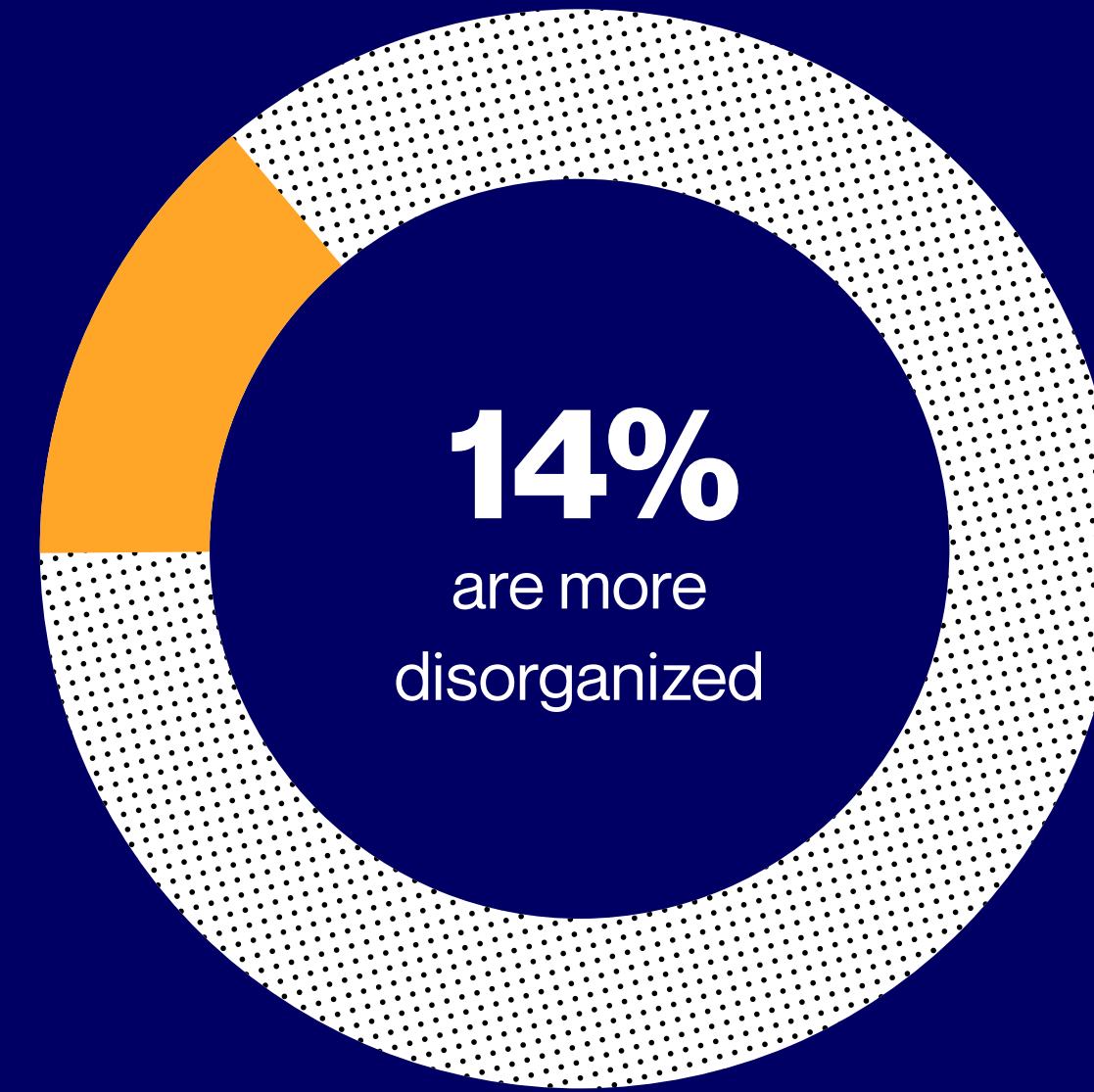
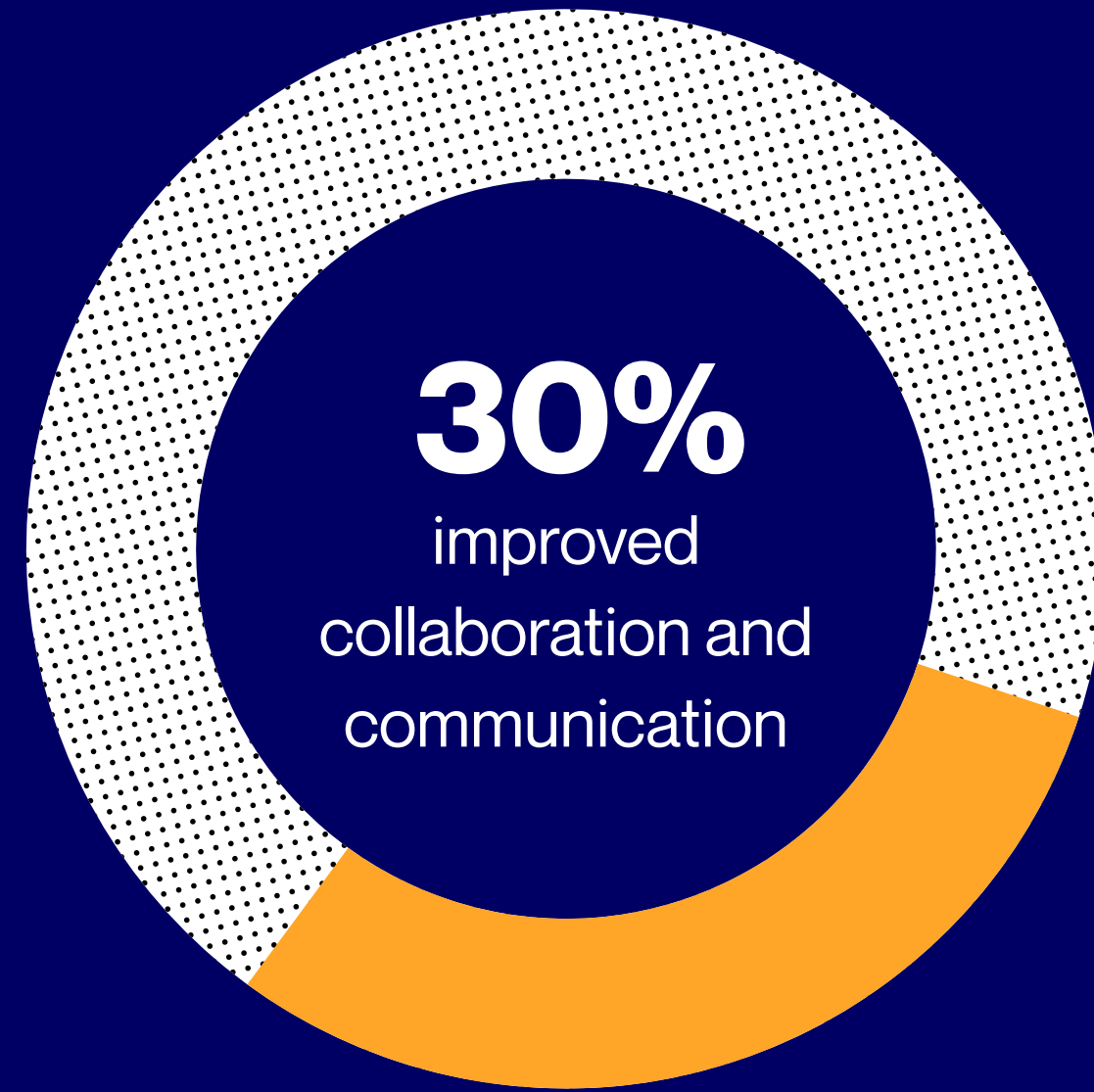
As businesses around the world embraced remote work out of necessity, silver linings emerged for those already attuned to this way of working. Designers across the globe reported improvements in client collaboration and communication compared to before the pandemic. They also expect to see a significant increase in opportunities as a result. Now that's progress!



77% of freelance designers expect clients to be more willing to hire remote freelancers as a result of working remotely themselves during the pandemic.



Changes in client behavior since the pandemic




“

The pandemic has been the first real blow to the traditional 9 to 5 “be at the office” mentality, which has been outdated for at least a decade. I believe clients will see that freelancers working remotely often offer much quicker and better results.

 DESIGNER #9272, ROMANIA

Doing things remotely will prove to be the new industry standard. It makes getting clients, signing contracts, and payment faster.

 DESIGNER #80992, UNITED STATES

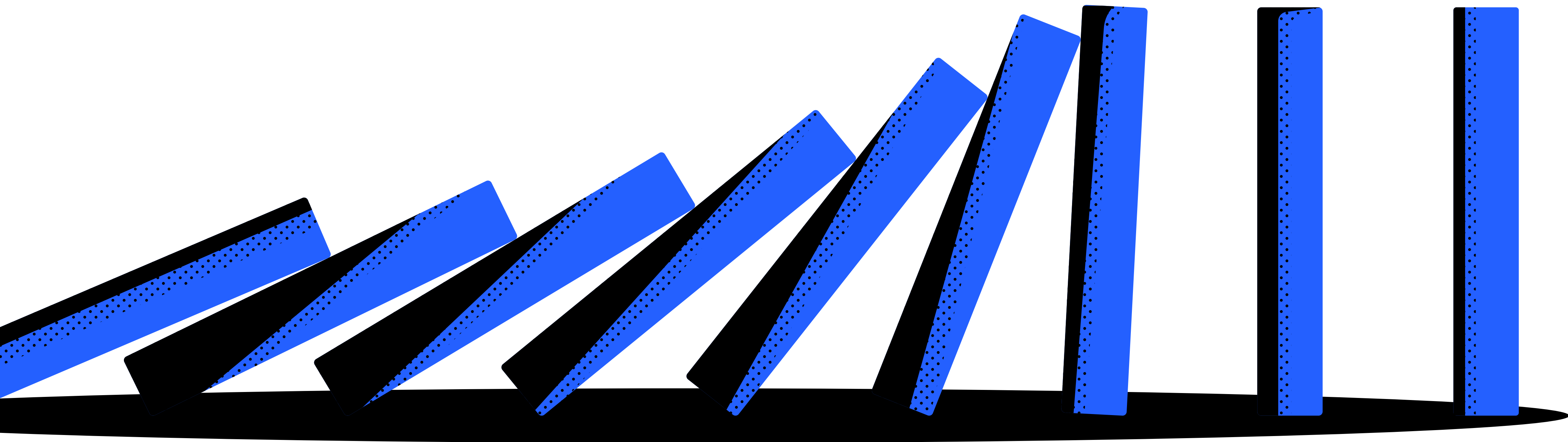
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Future focus: the rise of freelance design

The **legacy** of the pandemic will continue to **shape** the design industry for many years to come.

As remote work promises to improve accessibility and allow for a more diverse global creative workforce, the opportunities for freelancers are, in many ways, better than they have ever been before.



Remote work democratizing design

Online platforms have been levelling the playing field for years, but a global shift towards remote work has the capacity to radically change the landscape of the industry forever.



78%

of freelance designers
live outside of their
countries' major cities

36%

live in places where
the population
is <100,000


With 41% of designers saying they would consider moving to a smaller town or regional area if companies embrace remote work permanently, the idea of a more geographically distributed workforce is within reach. Given that creative industries traditionally cluster around capital cities, the potential for greater accessibility and diversity of talent is hugely exciting – both for the design industry and regional communities themselves.

“

Overall, as a designer in a post Soviet country, I never thought I could work with people from all over the globe and feel so happy and satisfied.

 DESIGNER # 30217, LATVIA

Freelancing has given my life new meaning. I can do what I love and work with clients all over the world from the comfort of my own home.

 DESIGNER #9472, AUSTRALIA

”

Design doesn't do travel bans

2020 has seen international and domestic borders slam shut. But this hasn't stopped designers collaborating across time zones, countries and continents.



“

I think I need to travel and visit other countries to develop both as a creative individual and as a human being.

 DESIGNER #7098, INDONESIA

Working from remote locations may help clients find better options to match their budget. It also gives them more choices to explore how widely creative minds are spread across the globe, and how it's not difficult to build trust and get reliable work.


 DESIGNER #4956, INDIA

”

New to the industry

Of all the years to embark on a design career, 2020 has been... well, a doozy. *a non-starter*
rough

But that's exactly what more than 1,000 designers who responded to our survey have done. So what can we learn from this group of tenacious creatives embarking on their professional journey in the midst of a pandemic?



I became a designer after 50 and realized that this is exactly what I want to do all my life. Life experience gave me the courage to radically change my life and give me the carte blanche in a new profession.

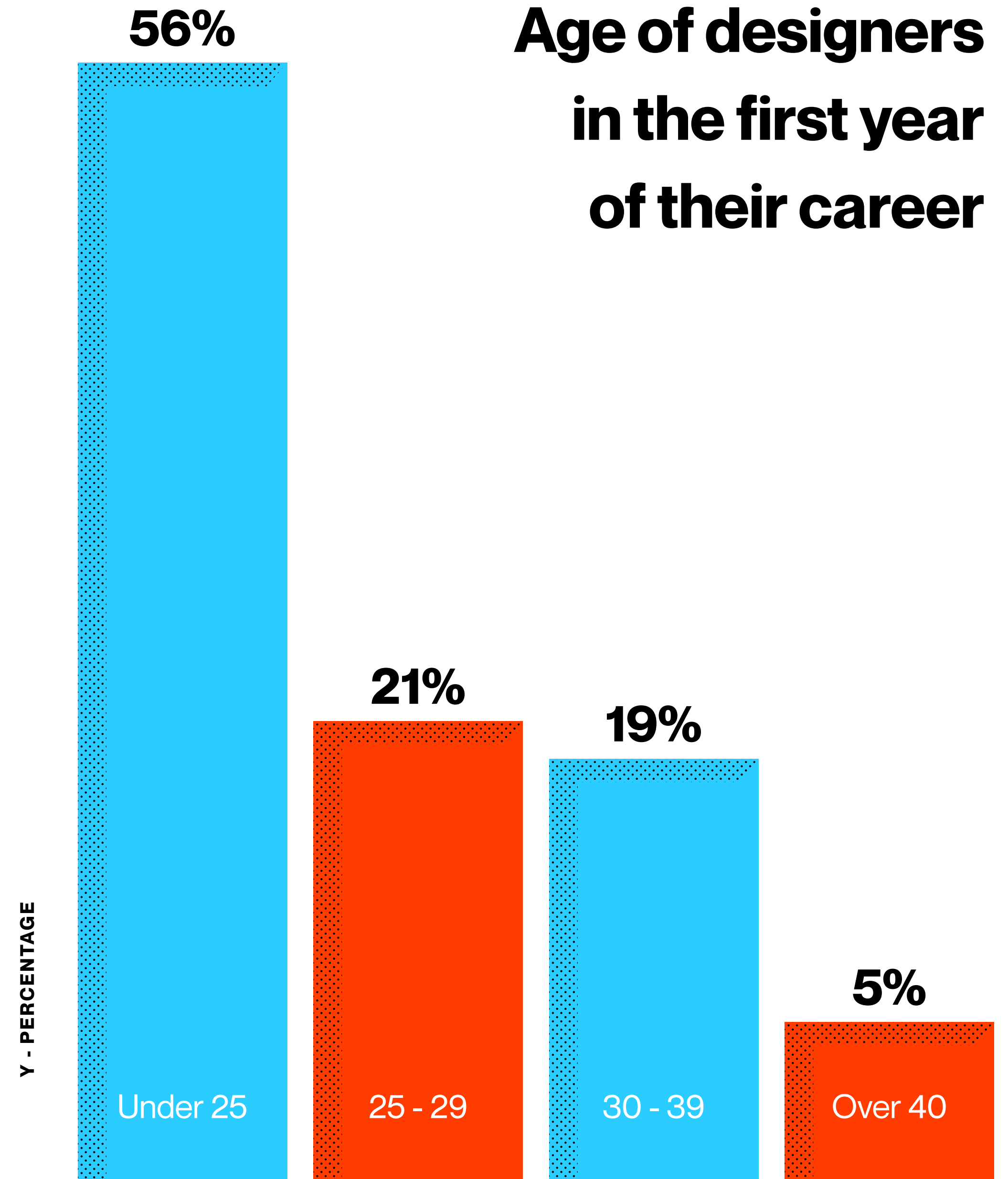
 DESIGNER #2000, RUSSIA



Lesson #1 Age is just a number after all

While the majority (56%) of new designers are under 25, there's a diverse mix of age groups due to a variety of career changes and pivots.

Age of designers in the first year of their career




Lesson #2


It's a tough job market


Getting a strong start in a new career is difficult at the best of times. So it's not surprising to learn that during the pandemic, 26% of new designers lost a job and 3% were furloughed.

42% of this group were actively searching for employment over the past 6 months, but only 9% were hired for a salaried position and 4% were awarded internships.



Since graduating in December I have sent out approximately 50 resumes during the pandemic and only got one interview from there.

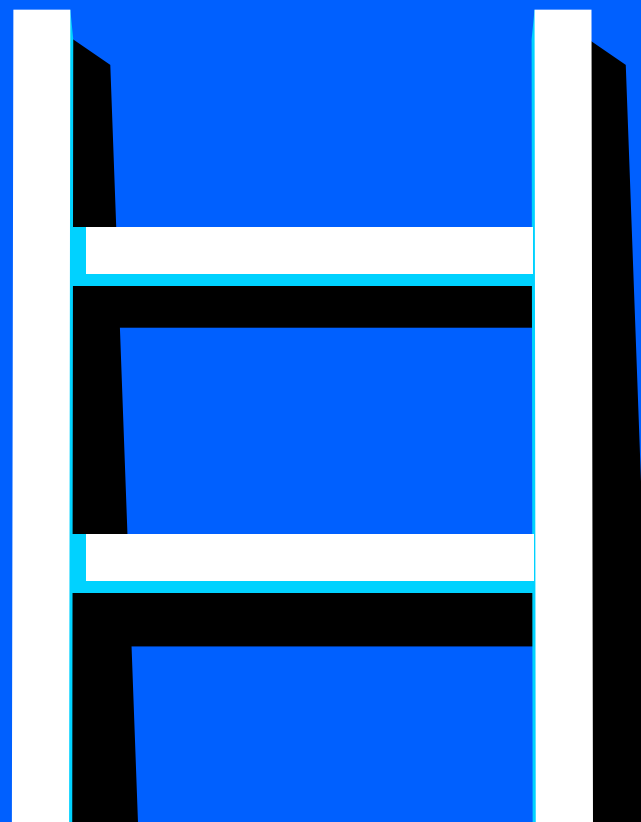
 DESIGNER #5348, CANADA



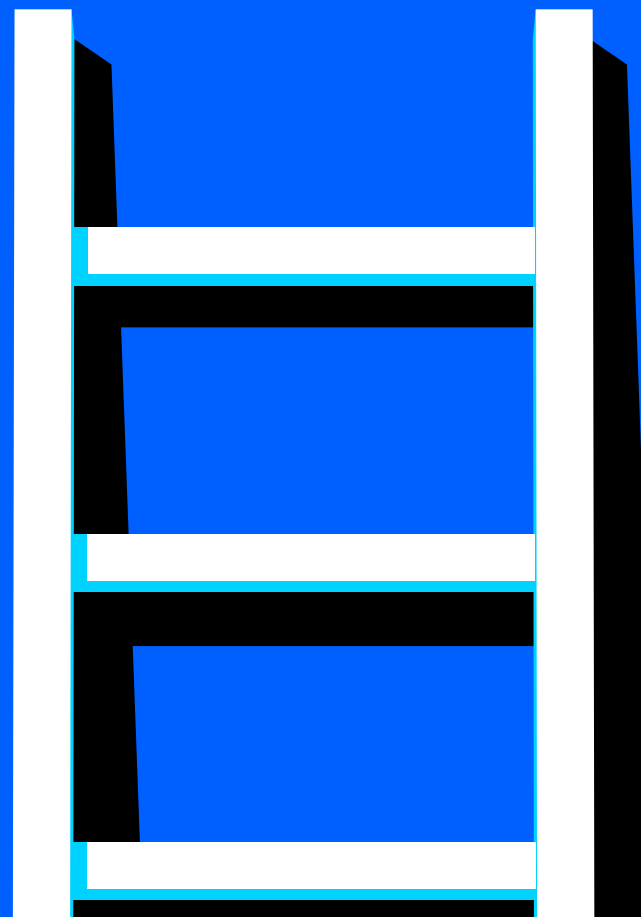
There were also signs of how changes in the industry landscape will shape designers' careers for years to come.

65% of new designers said that their 5 year plan has changed as a result of COVID-19, while future career goals varied for new designers.

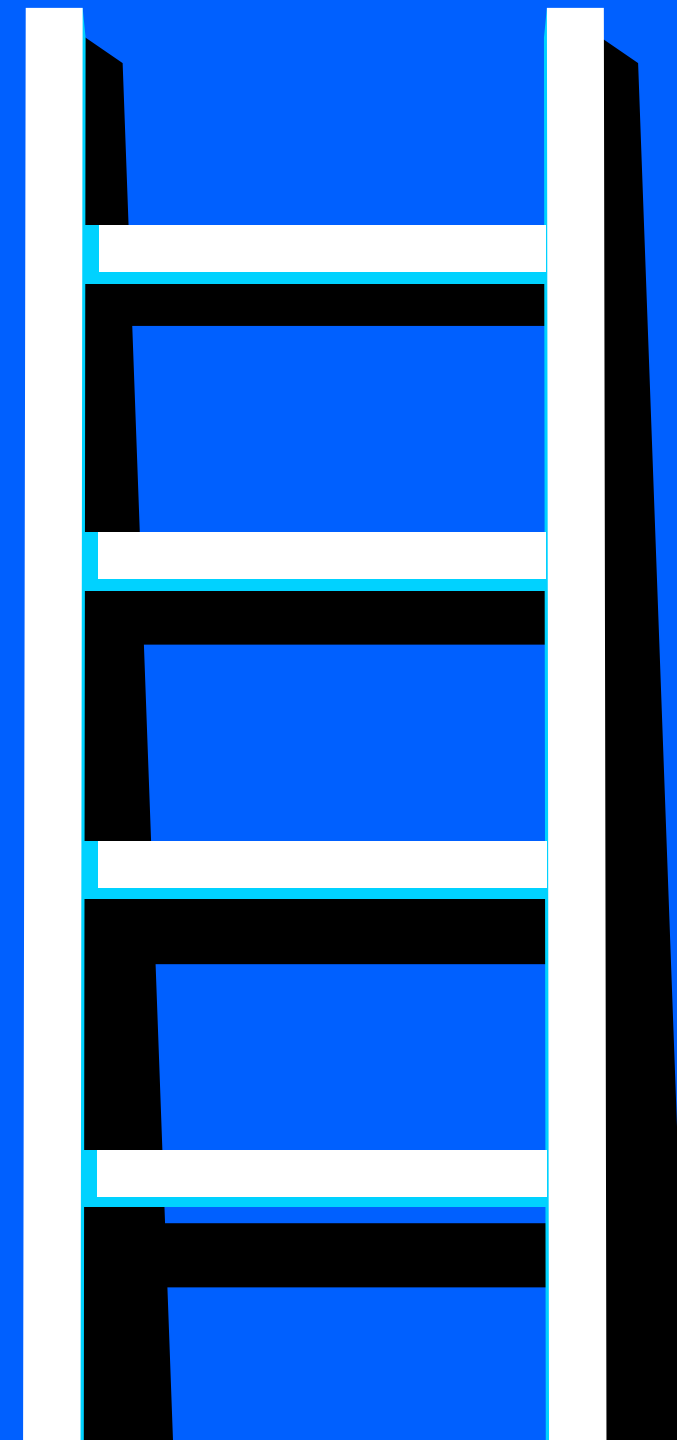
17%
want to be a salaried employee
for an in-house brand



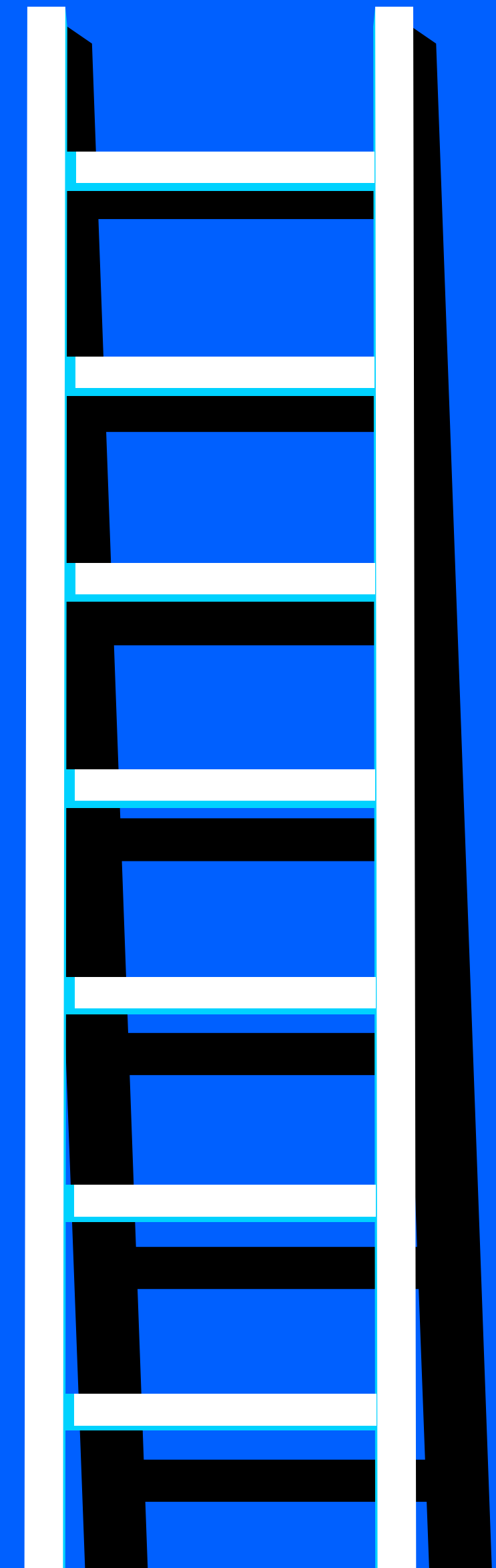
19%
want to be a salaried
employee at an agency



30%
want to run their own
agency or studio



49%
want to freelance full-time,
and 24% want to freelance part-time



Freelancers and shape-shifting agencies

With 1 in 3 designers currently working with agencies, how will the rapid changes we are experiencing impact this segment of the industry?

15%

Working a part-time salaried role

30%

Working a full-time salaried role

55%

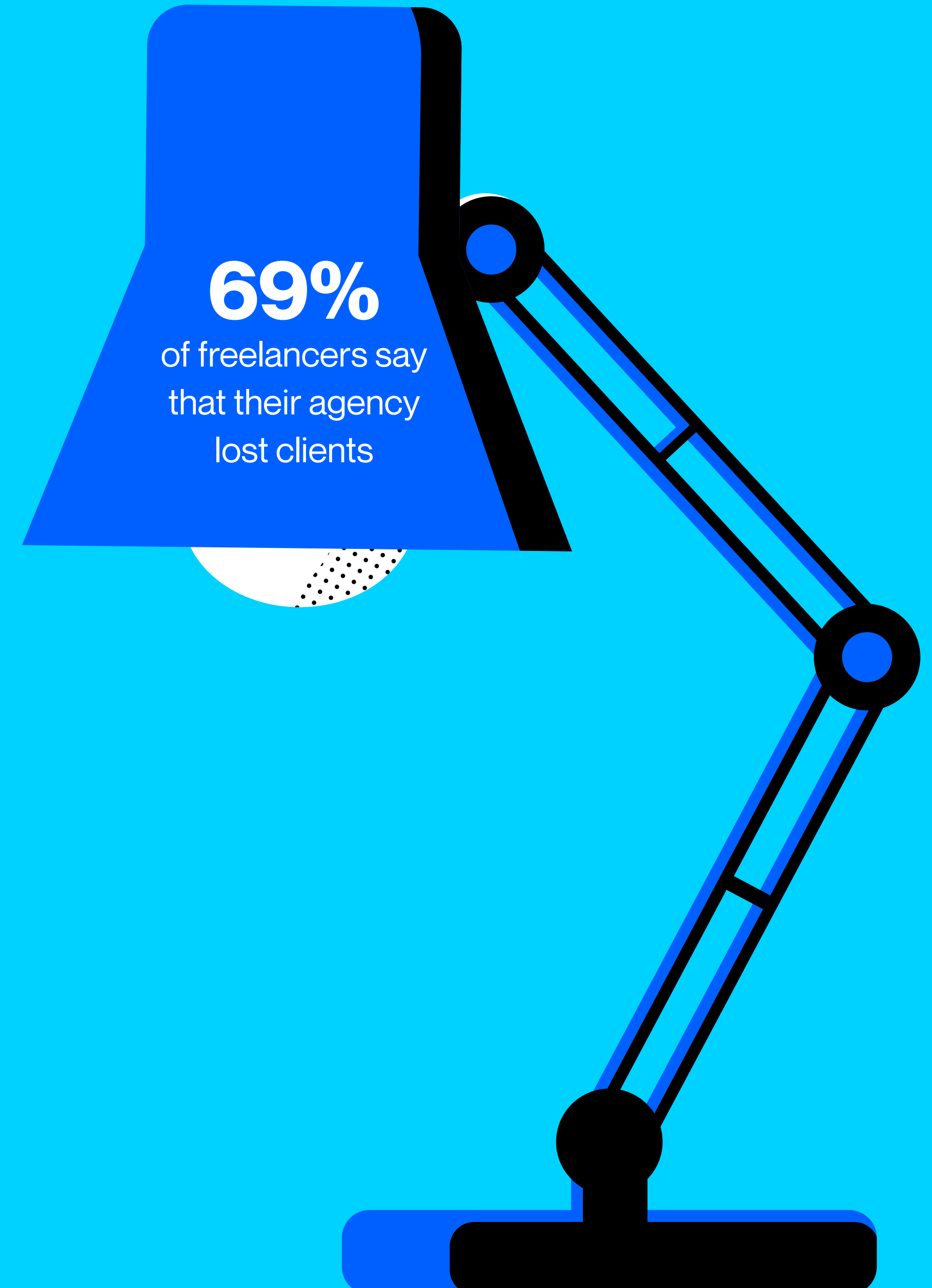
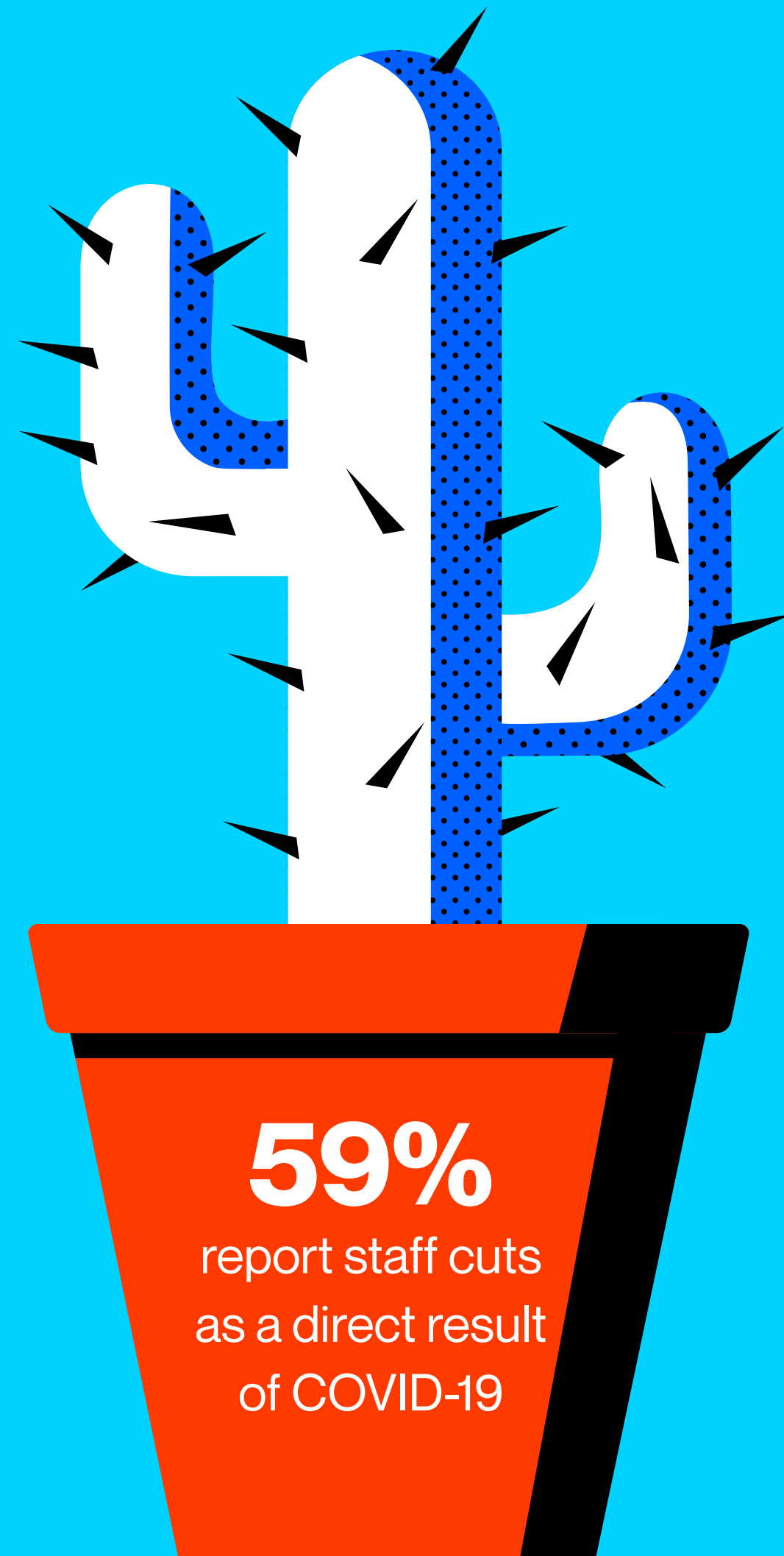
Freelancing for one or more agencies

Y - PERCENTAGE

Even though there are significant challenges facing agencies, 44% of freelance designers rank them as their favorite type of client.

When looking at designers who are currently working with agencies, it's a pretty even split between freelance and salaried contracts, with many employees moonlighting as freelancers after hours.

However, like many other industries, agencies have also been hit with hardships created by the pandemic.



Freelancers join forces for the future

With 75% of designers expecting agencies to be more open to working with remote talent as a result of the pandemic, there are opportunities for significant increases in diversity. Combine this with the fact that $\frac{2}{3}$ of freelancers are already working in a team some of the time, a world of remote creative agencies formed by freelancers might not be far out of reach.

57%

work with other
freelancers in their
network

44%

want to establish their
own agency or studio in
the next 5 years

21%

are part of a family
business, collaborating
regularly with a domestic
partner or relative

“

I'm optimistic that in the near future there will be a new era of entrepreneurship with a flexible work cycle. There will be an 'open-chain networking' work system—where freelancers join hands to achieve one goal (while each still maintains their freedom, flexibility, and reliability).

 DESIGNER #3168, INDONESIA

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06

**The next decade:
the future ~~is~~ of freelance**

2020 marked the start of a new decade, and what a start it was!

But while there are still significant challenges facing both designers and the industry at large, there is a sense of optimism in the air thanks to the huge, global opportunities that will emerge on the other side of the pandemic.

We asked freelance designers from around the world to identify some of the most important challenges facing the industry today and in the years to come, and the responses were remarkably consistent regardless of geography, gender and age:

- The ethical role of design (38%)
- Accessible design, usability and inclusion (34%)
- The environmental impacts of design (33%)

CHALLENGES FACING THE DESIGN INDUSTRY

Diversity within design is also a considerable challenge facing the industry in many different forms.


While freelancing does create significant opportunities for many creatives, 31% of designers who identify as part of a minority group still said they have experienced discrimination during their freelance career.



Even in light of all the challenges facing the industry today, freelancers feel the future is bright on both an industry and personal level.

Designer confidence

Although I'm facing challenges related to COVID, work and life, as well as the future of the design industry, I'm very optimistic about my capabilities that develop day by day. I see a bright future for myself in design.

 DESIGNER #200187, MOROCCO



A whopping 98% said they were optimistic about where the industry is headed in the next ten years (Heck yes!) while only 2% of freelancers said they weren't at all.

Freelancers are also confident of how they fit into this picture. 63% said they are extremely confident about their own future success, while less than 2% said they weren't.



Even if there are difficulties after the pandemic, I haven't thought about changing my profession. The freelance industry may be quite challenging and sometimes even a bit disappointing, but I have an optimistic mindset of its current and future state.

 DESIGNER #4376, BULGARIA



“

Designers are creative problem solvers,
so as individuals, we will survive.

 DESIGNER #9231, MEXICO

”

Staying true to the theme of 2020, this year's survey revealed a multitude of **unexpected insights** about the lives of freelance creatives.

At a time when the entire world faced social and economic lockdown, freelancers found ways to upskill, earn more, and improve their work-life balance.

Even though freelancers reported feelings of isolation and high levels of emotional strain during the pandemic, they were able to channel that energy into helping both themselves and others through pro bono projects, philanthropic work, and making new professional connections online.

When they (like most) were forced to juggle family schedules and responsibilities on top of their work, freelance designers leaned into the chaos and found that the more company they kept, the more creative they felt. They also found a new kind of synergy with clients as the widespread adoption of remote work meant communication and collaboration improved—making the concept of a more distributed creative workforce a real possibility in the near future.

Yet the biggest insight revealed by our 2020 designer survey is this: when the unexpected turns the world upside down, freelancers don't succumb to feeling trapped and powerless—they adapt and thrive. In a year of fewer freedoms, the world opened up for freelancers.

Conclusion

Designer bio

Shwin is a British-born graphic designer based in Vietnam. A self-taught talent, he joined 99designs early on in his career to learn new techniques and build on his skills. While he admits to never winning contests initially, Shwin has seen significant growth on the 99designs platform. Now with nine years under his belt as a professional designer, his career has seen him break into London working for some of the city's biggest agencies and clients. Specialising in branding and illustration, Shwin believes diversity is key, so he never shies away from a new challenge.

In taking on this project, Shwin felt it had great potential for creativity. By combining his flair for beautifully crafted illustrations with new, experimental brush styles, he breathed new life into the information. And the end result? A colorful and edgy expression of technical data that you can't take your eyes off.

Methodology

The research for this report was conducted by 99designs between July 20th and August 3rd 2020. The online survey was distributed via email, social media and industry-targeted ads on LinkedIn and had 11,362 qualified respondents from the following regions: Asia (6,058), Europe (2,663), North America (712), South America (728), Africa (618), Australia (74), Unknown (809). Quotes have been pulled from open responses.

