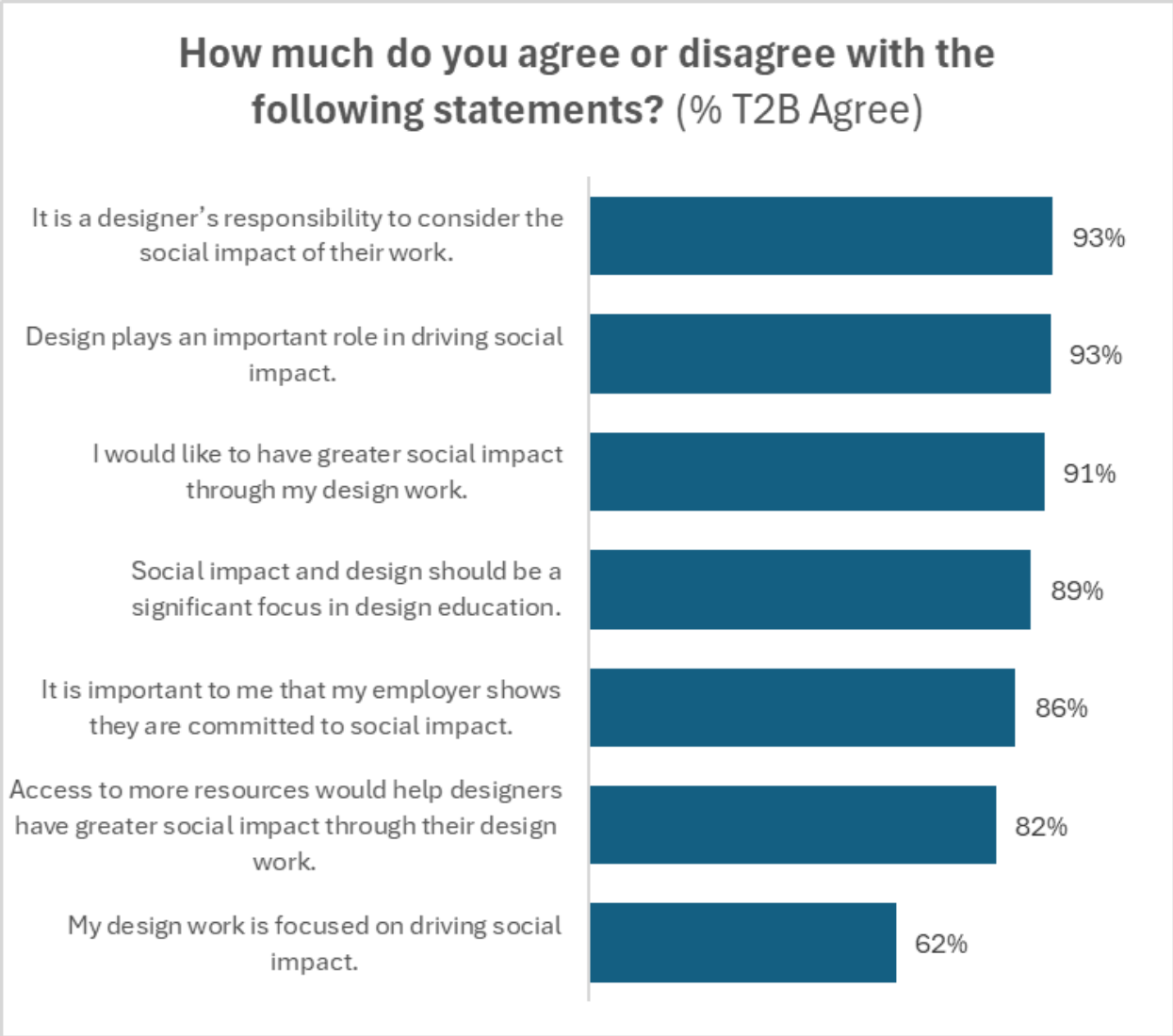


# Analysis of CoDesign Perspectives

## Close-Ended Responses to Key Questions

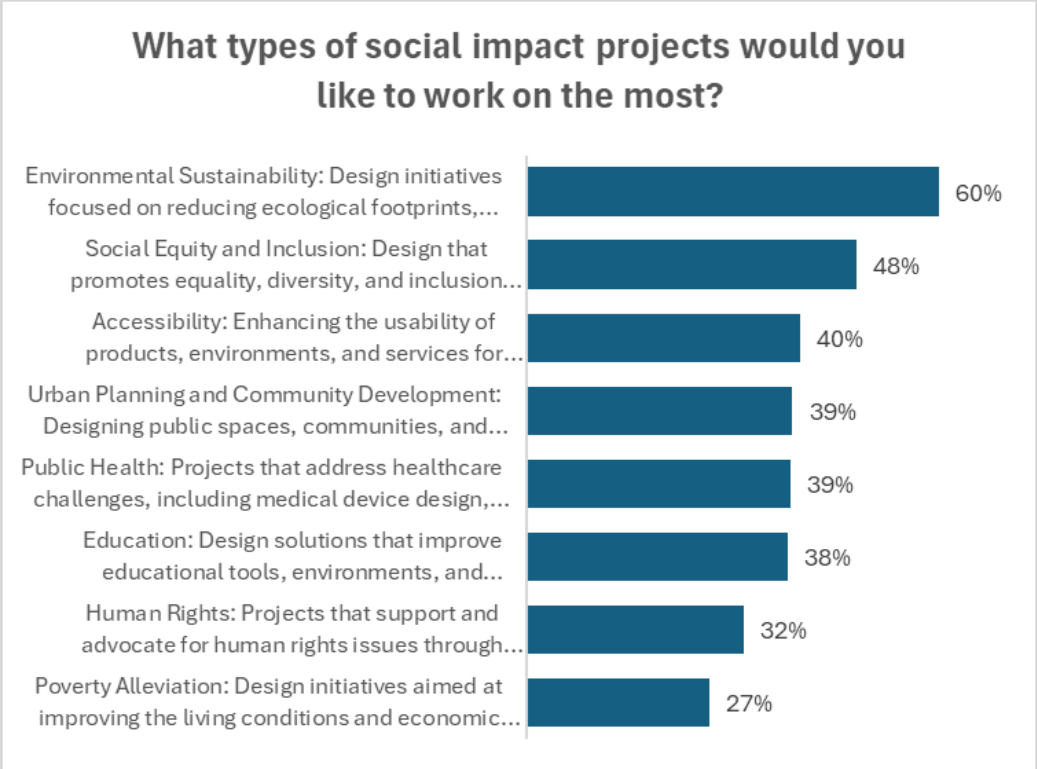
The impact of one’s work is a deeply held responsibility of designers, who recognize that design plays an important role in driving social impact, and 9 in 10 would like to have greater social impact through their work. Yet there is a sizable gap between those who aspire to greater impact (91%) and those whose work is currently focused on it today (62%)



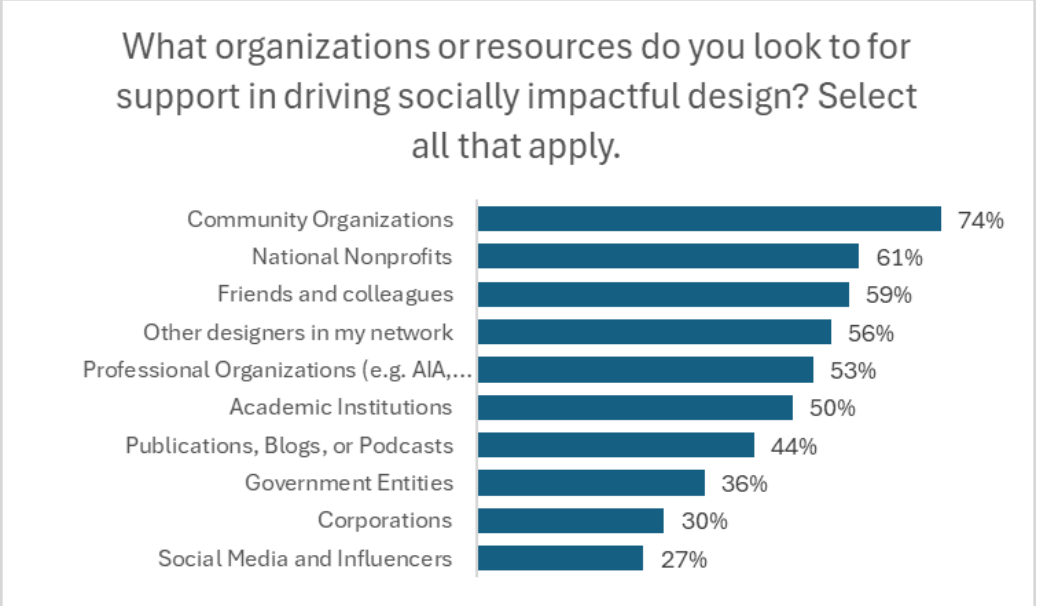
Environmental sustainability is the most universally appealing type of social impact projects designers surveyed would like to work on, followed by social equity, accessibility, community

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development, public health, and education. While human rights and poverty alleviation are also of interest to approximately one in three designers, they lack the broad appeal that some of these other issues have.

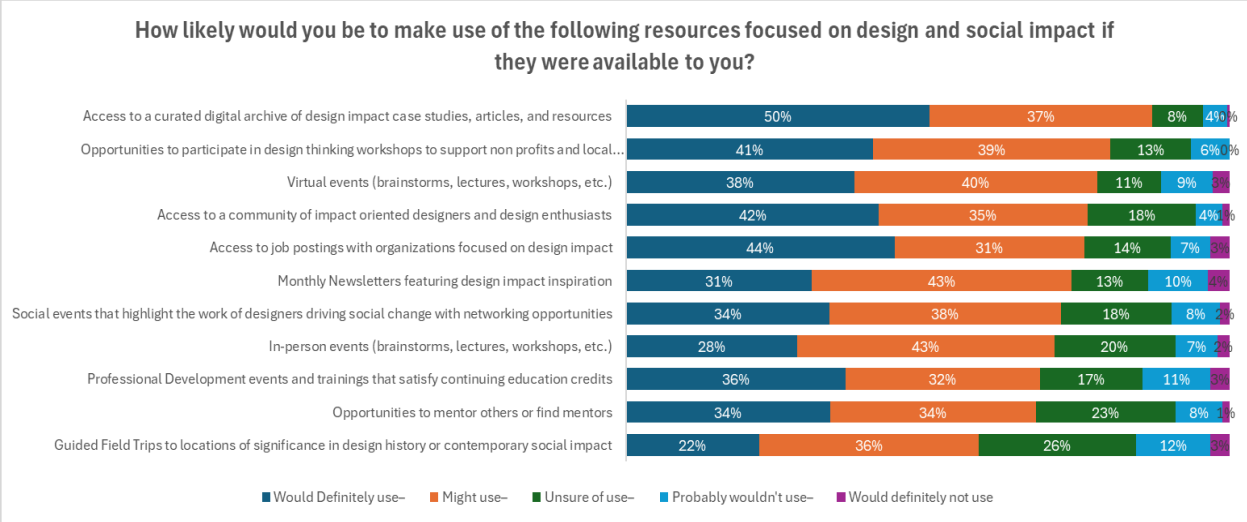


Community organizations, national nonprofits, and personal networks are where people look today for support in driving socially impactful design.

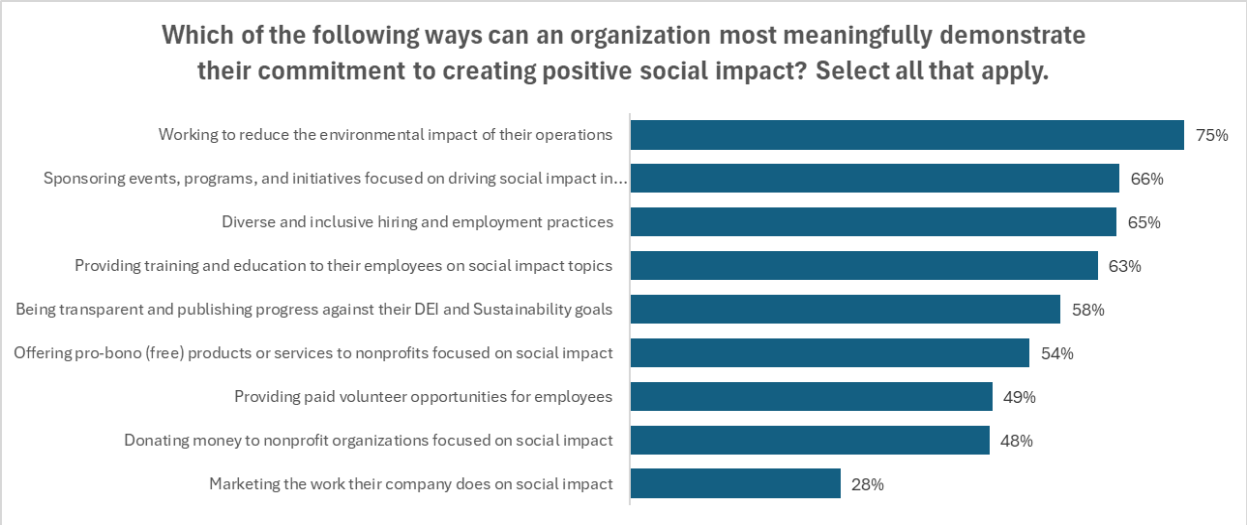


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People are hungry for resources and express a greater interest in utilizing curated digital resources, accessing social impact-oriented jobs, attending virtual events, and finding a sense of community.



Organizations can demonstrate their commitment to creating positive social impact by getting their own house in order first (reducing their environmental impact, inclusive employment practices, and providing training/education to their employees on social impact as well as paid volunteering opportunities) Sponsoring events, programs, and specific initiatives is more impactful than offering pro bono services or simply donating money to nonprofits. Less than a third of respondents think marketing their social impact is a meaningful demonstration of their commitment.



## Key Learnings from Open Ends

### What motivates you to be involved in design projects with a social impact?

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- **Desire to Make a Positive Difference** – Respondents overwhelmingly expressed a drive to use design for good and **help others or communities**. Many feel passionate about solving real problems and improving lives through their work. *“I love knowing that I can put my skills to work to solve systemic issues, and fundamentally make some element of my fellow Americans’ life better.”* Others noted that contributing to the **“greater good”** or **“leaving the world better than I found it”** gives their work meaning.
- **Alignment with Personal Values and Purpose** – Designers are motivated when projects **resonate with their core values**, beliefs, or personal experiences. They want their day-to-day work to reflect issues they care about (such as equity, sustainability, or social justice) and to feel a sense of purpose. As one put it, *“Design projects with a social impact align with my values...Knowing that my work can contribute to equity, inclusion, and well-being fuels my passion and sense of purpose.”* Many described social impact design as *“more fulfilling and meaningful work”* than purely commercial projects.
- **Escaping the Profit-Only Mindset** – A common theme was finding relief from the typical corporate, profit-driven environment. Working on social impact projects offers an **alternative to “making money for companies”**, allowing designers to feel their efforts aren’t solely about revenue. *“It feels good to step outside of my daily ‘make money for companies’ day job,”* one respondent noted. Designing for social good *“feeds the soul”* and provides *“meaning to my skillset beyond ‘making money to survive.’”* This sense of working on projects with intrinsic value energizes many participants.
- **Community Engagement and Collaboration** – Several respondents are inspired by the **collaborative, community-centered aspect** of social impact work. They value partnering with diverse stakeholders and co-creating solutions *“with the right people in the room.”* One designer shared, *“There’s something magical about a team united by the goal of making life better through design.”* The opportunity to **work closely with communities** and *“amplify underrepresented voices”* was cited as highly motivating and rewarding.
- **Sense of Responsibility and Ethics** – Many see socially conscious design as an ethical obligation of the profession. They feel **responsible to use their design skills for good**, citing a *“moral obligation for designers to support and uplift communities with their work.”* Some mentioned that all design has impact (whether intentional or not) and thus *“all design should have social impact – anything else seems wasteful.”* This sense of duty and stewardship, driven by the influence of design, motivates them to seek out impact-focused projects.

## **What are the biggest challenges or barriers the design industry faces when it comes to creating more social impact?**

- **Funding and Profit Pressures** – By far the most cited barrier is the **lack of funding and economic incentives** for social impact work. Respondents noted that socially impactful projects *“aren’t usually profit-generating,”* so businesses are hesitant to invest. *“Money talks – and that’s often the biggest hurdle,”* one person explained, observing that

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companies prioritize quick profits over “lasting social good.” Tight budgets and the need to “**make money**” mean social impact initiatives often get cut or remain underfunded.

- **Business Mindset & Leadership Buy-In** – A related theme is the difficulty of **gaining support from decision-makers** in a profit-driven corporate culture. Many designers feel executives and clients don’t recognize the value of design for social impact, seeing it as a “*nice-to-have*” rather than essential. “*We’re caught in a system that rewards short-term gains,*” one respondent noted, making it hard to argue for long-term social value. Designers struggle to convince leadership to prioritize social outcomes, especially when impact is hard to quantify in traditional ROI terms.
- **Time and Resource Constraints** – Fast timelines and limited resources in the industry leave little room for consideration of social impact. Respondents mentioned tight project schedules that focus on deliverables and “*quick, measurable outcomes,*” with no bandwidth for extra research or community engagement. The **soft costs of design (time for research, inclusive design, etc.)** are often the first to be cut. “*It’s difficult to spend the time needed upfront...we can’t always dedicate the capacity to those aspects,*” one designer explained. Social impact work, which often requires deep understanding and iteration, is squeezed out by rapid development cycles and lean teams.
- **Lack of Awareness and Education** – Many felt the industry at large lacks **knowledge and frameworks** for integrating social impact. Design education and professional training often overlook social responsibility, leaving designers unequipped to tackle societal issues. “*Many designers are not equipped with the knowledge or frameworks needed to address critical societal issues,*” one respondent observed. Similarly, non-design stakeholders (clients, executives) may not be aware of design’s potential beyond aesthetics or marketing. This gap in understanding makes it challenging to incorporate social impact practices in mainstream projects.
- **Structural and Cultural Barriers** – Broader systemic issues were also highlighted. The **dominant culture of capitalism** in business can be at odds with social impact goals (“*capitalism...social impact is often easy to cut away if it takes too much time or money*”). Bureaucracy and siloed practices within organizations slow down socially driven innovation. Some noted the design industry’s **lack of diversity** as a barrier: homogeneous teams may overlook marginalized perspectives and needs. Additionally, there is often no industry-wide standard or accountability (unlike licensing in architecture, for example) to enforce ethical or impact-driven practice. All these factors contribute to an environment where, as one participant put it, “*we have conflated capitalism with cruelty,*” making it hard for socially impactful design to flourish.

## What are the biggest challenges or barriers you face when trying to integrate social impact into your design work?

- **Limited Time and Bandwidth** – On a personal level, designers struggle with **time management and workload** when adding social impact to projects. Many respondents

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pointed out that after meeting core job responsibilities and tight deadlines, there's little time left to engage with communities or do extra research. *"My workload is insane... I can barely keep up with what needs to be completed,"* one designer confessed, *"so there hasn't always been support for this way of thinking. We just have to solve for functionality and get it done."* Even those passionate about impact find it difficult to *"make time for design research methods when people are focused on quick outcomes."* In short, **competing priorities and heavy workloads** often push social impact considerations to the side.

- **Financial and Career Pressures** – Many respondents noted personal financial constraints that limit their ability to pursue social impact work. Designers often **need to prioritize paying work**, which can conflict with taking on lower-paid or volunteer social projects. *"I worry that designers are asked to do work 'for the love of it' by nonprofits... but I still need to make a living,"* one person explained. High student debt or family responsibilities can force designers to choose better-paid commercial jobs over impact-driven roles. There's also concern that focusing on social impact could jeopardize job security or career advancement in companies that don't value it. *"If I push too hard on social impact work... I risk being the first on the chopping block during layoffs,"* shared one respondent, underscoring the **personal risk** some feel when championing these issues at work.
- **Lack of Organizational Support** – Designers frequently cited **minimal support or interest from their employers or clients** as a major barrier. If the company or client doesn't have social impact goals, individual designers find it hard to integrate those considerations on their own. *"Some of our existing clients don't have social impact priorities,"* one respondent noted, *"and defining what 'social impact' means for each client is important."* Others mentioned having to *"convince decision-makers that investing in social impact isn't just a feel-good bonus, but crucial for meaningful design."* Without leadership buy-in, attempting to add social value can feel like swimming upstream — designers might not be **empowered to change the brief**, allocate budget, or engage stakeholders around social outcomes.
- **Misalignment with Project Scope** – Several respondents pointed out that not every project obviously lends itself to social impact, making integration challenging. For example, a designer working on an internal B2B software tool felt *"social impact doesn't seem related to what I do in any meaningful way."* In such cases, designers are unsure how to incorporate social good into the design process. This theme highlights a **lack of clear avenues or methods to infuse social impact in everyday design work**, especially when the project's goals are purely commercial or technical. Without guidance, impact considerations may feel bolted on or unrelated, leading some to *"generally keep the two separate"* (work vs. social impact efforts).
- **Resource and Access Constraints** – Integrating social impact often requires **extra resources or connections** that individual designers may not have. Respondents mentioned challenges in reaching the right communities or end-users to involve in the design. *"More direct access to real people/communities of need for design research*

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*input*” is needed, as one person wrote. Others talked about lacking teammates with expertise in areas like fundraising or implementation, which makes it harder to turn socially good concepts into reality. In some cases, geographic location was a barrier (e.g. limited local opportunities or resources). Overall, without institutional support, designers face a DIY scenario – needing to find partners, data, or funding themselves – which is a tall order alongside their regular duties.

## What do the organizations you look to for leadership on design and social impact offer that you find valuable?

- **Knowledge Resources and Inspiration** – A major theme is the wealth of **educational resources, case studies, and ideas** these communities provide. Designers greatly value access to articles, toolkits, frameworks, and examples that help them learn how to do socially impactful design. *“The websites are full of resources... background as well as steps to take,”* noted one respondent, adding that webinars and written pieces by diverse thought leaders are easy to fit into their schedule. Many mentioned **case studies and success stories** as especially motivating: seeing how others achieved positive change *“shows me how to recreate it myself with my own work,”* and offers proof-points to convince stakeholders. In short, these organizations act as **knowledge hubs and inspiration sources**, from practical guides on design methods to visionary stories that spark new ideas.
- **Sense of Community and Network** – Respondents highly value the **community-building aspect** of these organizations. Being part of a network of like-minded designers and social change practitioners provides moral support, collaboration, and the feeling that *“it takes a village to do this work.”* Many cited **connections and relationships** as key offerings – the chance to meet others, share experiences, and even find mentors or partners. *“Professional organizations provide a network and support, as well as opportunities to make an impact,”* one person wrote. These communities create a **supportive space** where designers can exchange knowledge, brainstorm, and not feel alone in trying to push for social good. This camaraderie and shared mission *“encourages me to continue”* despite challenges.
- **Guidance and Best Practices** – Another common theme is the **guidance and thought leadership** these organizations offer. Respondents appreciate that leading institutions set standards and publish best practices for integrating social impact into design. *“They create and maintain the standards by which design can be socially impactful,”* observed one designer. Many benefit from **frameworks, templates, or workshops** that translate high-level ideals into actionable design approaches. For example, one respondent pointed to a network’s workshop on sustainable web design, which introduced new techniques they could apply immediately. This kind of **practical advice and methodological know-how** – whether through toolkits, training sessions, or expert talks – is seen as extremely valuable. It helps designers improve their skills and approach projects with proven strategies for impact.

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- **Opportunities and Platforms** – Surveyed designers also cited the **opportunities these groups create** – both for projects and for amplifying one’s work. Some organizations help **connect designers with causes or clients** in need (e.g. matchmaking platforms, volunteer design opportunities), effectively opening doors to do more social impact work. *“These groups often have the connections, resources and access needed to make change happen at a local level,”* explained one respondent. Others mentioned that professional networks and events give them a platform to showcase socially focused projects or to find collaborators. In addition, several noted that certain bodies (like grantmaking or funding organizations, and certification programs like B Corporations) offer **financial or credibility benefits** – for instance, funding for social design initiatives or recognition that helps justify impact efforts.
- **New Perspectives and Inspiration** – Many respondents value how these organizations expose them to **diverse perspectives and fresh ways of thinking**. By featuring voices from different backgrounds or disciplines, these communities broaden a designer’s horizon on social issues. *“Social media and influencers in particular help me learn about new perspectives, especially following people who are different from me... Professional organizations provide... opportunities to learn from others’ experiences,”* one participant noted. Designers find inspiration in **“stories of change... and how they did it,”** which can shift their mindset or approach. Simply knowing that *“others care and are making an effort”* in various sectors (environment, civic tech, accessibility, etc.) is motivational. This exposure helps keep the **creative momentum and optimism** going, reinforcing why social impact design matters.

## What is missing from what these organizations offer?

- **Funding and Practical Support** – The most frequently mentioned gap is the lack of **financial and tangible support** to implement social impact work. Designers feel that while ideas and frameworks are plentiful, there is often *“no structured way for designers to find organizations that need their help”* or get paid to do this work. **Compensation for designers** is a big concern – many noted an emphasis on “giving back” can unintentionally ask designers to volunteer their time. *“Often it’s compensation...social impact work [comes with the assumption] that a designer should carry the weight when many creative people are also struggling,”* one respondent wrote. Similarly, respondents want to see **more funding opportunities, grants, or resources** to actually carry projects forward. *“They don’t always have the ability to secure funding... It takes funding to make a project tangible,”* explained one designer. In summary, bridging the gap from concept to reality is hard without money, and currently these organizations often inspire but **don’t provide enough financial pathways or project execution support**.
- **Actionable Guidance & Follow-Through** – Many respondents commented that they need **more concrete, hands-on guidance** beyond high-level principles. They appreciate frameworks, but sometimes *“it is a lot of fluff”* or theory without step-by-step help on implementation. What’s missing are **detailed roadmaps, toolkits, or case**

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**studies with outcomes** that designers can directly apply. One person wished for “a *step by step process to success – a roadmap of tasks to making a social impact a reality.*”

Others noted a lack of focus on what happens after initial design: how to **measure long-term impact and maintain projects over time**. “*O&M – what happens after the project launches and how can it be sustainable, agile, resilient?*” is often not addressed, leaving designers unsure how to ensure lasting impact. Overall, respondents seek more “**actionable steps**” and follow-through support (like impact metrics, post-project evaluations, and concrete examples of implementation) rather than just inspiration or broad frameworks.

- **Accessibility and Inclusivity** – Another theme is that current offerings are not always **accessible to everyone who needs them**. Some resources are locked behind paywalls or geared toward large organizations, making it hard for small studios or individual designers to benefit. “*Often the resources are tailored to big corporations...and the price of access is very high,*” one respondent noted, arguing that smaller firms and independent designers (who may have the most potential to drive grassroots change) are left “*in the dark.*” Affordable education and open-access materials are lacking. Additionally, a few respondents pointed out gaps in **diversity and representation**: they want to see a broader pool of collaborators and more voices from marginalized communities in leadership roles. While progress has been made, there’s a call for these organizations to do more to **include diverse perspectives and newcomers** – for example, easier entry points for beginners or underrepresented designers to get involved.
- **Collaboration and Unified Effort** – Designers sense that the landscape of social impact design support is still somewhat fragmented, with many groups pursuing similar goals but not working together. “*I often find many of these entities have the same goal, but they don’t collaborate,*” one participant observed. What’s missing is a “**collective power**” or unified platform that aggregates efforts. Respondents imagine having a centralized directory or community hub where knowledge is shared openly across organizations. They also wish existing organizations would use their influence to drive broader change (for instance, **advocating to government or industry at scale**). “*A stronger, louder voice to be heard by corporations and governments*” is needed, as one person put it. In essence, designers want more **cross-pollination and joint action** – whether it’s standardizing impact measures across the field, bridging gaps between design, philanthropy and development sectors, or making it easier to connect designers with projects and each other.
- **Career Pathways and Incentives** – Finally, respondents noted a lack of clear **career development opportunities** in the social impact design space. Even though communities exist, it remains challenging to make socially impactful design a sustainable career. “*We need jobs right now...This work deserves to be paid at the same rate as corporations,*” one designer urged, highlighting the need for actual roles and business models that support designers financially. Mentorship and guidance on “**centering one’s career on socially impactful design while also making a living**” are scarce.

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Likewise, tools on how to persuade employers to value social impact (essentially building the business case for it) would fill a gap. One respondent summed it up: *“How can you make money with social design? Why does it make sense from a business perspective? – That’s what’s missing.”* In short, designers seek more institutional backing that rewards social impact work – whether through **market incentives, recognition, or integrating impact into job expectations** – so that doing good and doing well can go hand in hand.

## Conclusion & Insights

Across the survey responses, a few overarching themes emerge. First, designers are **deeply motivated by purpose and values**, craving work that positively impacts society and aligns with what matters to them. This passion, however, encounters headwinds in an industry structured around profit and speed – **financial pressures, tight timelines, and a lack of organizational buy-in** consistently hinder the integration of social impact. There is an apparent tension between designers’ drive to *“make a difference”* and the **systemic constraints** (like funding shortages and corporate mindsets) that make it difficult to do so within their jobs.

Another key insight is the importance of **community, knowledge sharing, and support**. When designers connect with peers and access resources through professional networks, they are empowered – gaining new ideas, feeling less isolated, and learning practical methods. Yet, these communities need to evolve to serve practitioners better: respondents call for **more accessible, actionable, and sustained support**. In particular, there are opportunities to provide:

- **Practical Toolkits & Training** – Designers seek detailed guidance (beyond inspiration) on how to integrate social impact into their work and measure outcomes. A professional development program could create toolkits, curricula, or workshops that teach concrete skills – from engaging communities under tight budgets to making the business case for impact.
- **Career and Funding Opportunities** – There is a hunger for avenues that make socially impactful design financially viable. Initiatives like grants, fellowships, or new job frameworks (e.g. social impact design residencies or “impact designer” roles) would address the current lack of compensation and recognition. The design sprint can brainstorm ways to partner with organizations or funders to **embed designers in social impact projects with proper pay**, or to help companies reward impact-focused efforts internally.
- **Unified Platforms and Partnerships** – Given the fragmentation noted, a central platform or coalition could help **connect designers with projects, communities, and each other**. This might look like a matchmaking network for social impact design projects, or a knowledge hub that aggregates case studies, standards, and events across organizations. Collaboration with entities in other sectors (government, nonprofits, academia) is also a key opportunity – designing cross-disciplinary programs

that bring designers into policy-making or community leadership spaces, for example, could amplify impact at scale.

## Opportunities

Overall, the survey reveals both **enthusiasm and frustration**: designers are eager to contribute to social change, but often do so in spite of the current system, not because of it.

For the upcoming design sprint, this means the goal should be twofold. **First**, tap into what motivates our community – their passion for meaningful work and community – to ensure any program feels relevant and energizing. **Second**, address the pain points by building solutions that reduce barriers – whether that’s through education (to increase skills and confidence), structural support (funding, toolkits, leadership engagement), or networking (to strengthen community and collective voice). By bridging the gap between designers’ aspirations and the realities they face, the professional development initiative can empower more designers to integrate social impact into their practice, ultimately driving more positive change through design.

Based on the survey findings, here are **four key areas** where professional development programs could be impactful.

### 1. Practical Skills for Social Impact Design

**Key Challenge:** Designers lack actionable guidance on how to integrate social impact into their work beyond high-level inspiration. They need concrete methods and best practices.

*Why it matters:* Designers need more than inspiration; they need tactical skills and structured approaches that can be applied in real-world settings.

### 2. Career Development & Job Opportunities in Social Impact Design

**Key Challenge:** Designers struggle to find paying work in this space and need support in navigating career paths that integrate impact.

*Why it matters:* Many designers feel social impact work is financially unsustainable. Programs that help them **find paid opportunities, advocate for impact in corporate settings, and connect with hiring organizations** will make a lasting difference.

### 3. Access to Funding & Business Models for Social Impact Work

**Key Challenge:** Many designers struggle with funding and business models that make social impact design financially viable.

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*Why it matters:* Many designers want to do impact-driven work but can't afford to do it for free. By providing funding pathways and business guidance, programs could help designers make impact-oriented design financially sustainable.

## 4. Power in Numbers

### **Key Challenge:**

Designers committed to social impact often feel isolated in their efforts—lacking both internal support within organizations and access to broader communities of like-minded peers and stakeholders. This isolation hinders their ability to lead, advocate, and scale impact.

### **Why It Matters:**

Social impact design doesn't thrive in silos. Systemic change requires a coalition of collaborators—from different sectors, disciplines, and organizational levels—working together. Yet, many designers lack the tools, networks, and authority to catalyze this change alone.