

EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCE OF BUSINESS PRACTICES ON THE SAUDI ARABIAN DESIGN ECOSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia's design ecosystem is rapidly expanding, with many early-career designers starting their own studios. Despite strong design and technical skills, they face major challenges in business development. This paper, part of a larger PhD project, explores these challenges across five Saudi cities: Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah, Jazan, and Tabuk/Yanbu. Semi-structured interviews with fifteen designers reveal a clear gap in soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and mentorship when compared to hard skills like technical and operational knowledge. Nearly 71% of respondents viewed soft skills as essential for long-term business growth. The findings highlight the need for improved training in management and entrepreneurial thinking, especially in communication and project planning. Participants also reported a lack of collaboration and networking opportunities, both of which are critical for securing and executing projects. These insights support the need to reform design education in Saudi Arabia by aligning curricula with business practice. Equipping designers with both design and business skills can strengthen the ecosystem and contribute meaningfully to the country's growing creative economy. This paper contributes to the understanding of what is needed for the creative industries to thrive in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Design ecosystem, Saudi Arabia, knowledge and skills, business development, design education

1 INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia's design ecosystem has grown rapidly, led by early-career designers who are starting their own studios and small businesses. This growth supports the goals of Saudi National Vision 2030, which promotes economic diversification, entrepreneurship, and the expansion of creative industries, spotlighting 'the design economy' [1]. However, despite strong design and technical skills, many designers face challenges in sustaining and expanding their businesses due to a gap between design education and real-world business skills need for success [2]. This gap is particularly evident in areas such as idea commercialisation, which has been identified as factor in design start-up success [3]. As a result, many early-career designers enter the field unprepared for the realities of running a business [4, 5]. Although creative entrepreneurship literature highlights the value of combining design and business knowledge [6], limited literature has explored this issue in the context of Saudi Arabia's design economy.

Existing models such as Design Thinking [7] and the Business Model Canvas [8] highlight the importance of combining creativity with strategic business thinking. These frameworks focus on skills like empathy, collaboration, and value creation. These are also reflected in the findings of this study. However, little is known about how early-career designers in Saudi Arabia understand or apply these principles in the context of starting and growing design start-ups.

This paper explores the skills and knowledge needed by early-career designers to establish and grow successful design businesses in Saudi Arabia. Based on interviews conducted in five cities, the study investigates gaps in the design ecosystem through the question: '*What knowledge and skills are needed to achieve a successful design business?*' By identifying these needs, the research aims to bridge the gap between education and practice, and to support early-career designers to thrive in Saudi Arabia's evolving creative economy. The study offers practice-based insights that may inform education, support programmes, and policy in the region.

2 SAUDI ARABIA'S DESIGN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Saudi Arabia's design ecosystem has experienced rapid expansion, driven by economic diversification initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to foster the growth of creative industries [1]. Despite government initiatives, such as the Ministry of Culture's funding opportunities and incubation programs to support emerging designers, there remains a critical gap in design education, particularly in preparing graduates for the entrepreneurial and real-world business [9]. Higher education in Saudi Arabia is aligned with national development goals, aiming to meet industry needs and support economic growth through innovation [10]. In the creative industries, designers are not only expected to master technical skills but must also develop entrepreneurial and business management skills to succeed in today's competitive landscape [11]. Yet, traditional curricula in design education often emphasised hard skills over other skills [12], leaving graduates well-prepared in design but unready for business management. This disconnect is challenging for early-career designers in Saudi Arabia, who must navigate regulatory frameworks, build networks, secure funding, and balance design goals with business realities [13]. These challenges are not unique to Saudi Arabia. International research has shown that design entrepreneurs frequently face barriers related to risk, financial literacy, competitive positioning, and limited business experience [14].

In the Saudi context, a recent report by the Ministry of Culture [9] highlighted concerns within the sector: 38% of design businesses expressed dissatisfaction with the alignment between academic programmes and market expectations, while 71% criticised the relevance and availability of training centres [9]. These findings mirror the skill variations reported in this study, suggesting that differences in educational exposure and institutional support may contribute to uneven levels of entrepreneurial readiness among design graduates. This highlights an urgent need for curriculum reform and post-graduate development programmes that integrate business knowledge, soft skill training, and ecosystem awareness into design education.

3 METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Research Design

This study is part of a broader PhD study that explores the challenges faced by early-career designers in establishing and sustaining design start-ups across five regions of Saudi Arabia: Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah, Jazan, and Tabuk/Yanbu. This study is not to generalise but to provide in-depth, context-specific insights using a qualitative case study approach. This paper focuses on one question from the larger project, which is the exploration of skills and knowledge, guided by the question: *"What knowledge and skills do you need to achieve a successful business?"* A qualitative approach was adopted to explore participants' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to explore individual stories [15]. This method was particularly effective for understanding the contextual and practical aspects of skill development in the Saudi design economy. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: active in the local design market for between one and five years, representation of both genders, engagement across a range of design disciplines including interior, product, and graphic design, and operation of a business by at least one individual, either as an independently run business or a small team.

The selected cities reflect key economic regions. Due to the limited number of active designers in Tabuk, two participants were selected from Yanbu, a city with a similar design and business environment.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted between August 2023 and May 2024. To support open communication, all interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participants' native language. Each lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide developed from literature on design entrepreneurship, business skills, and creative education. The guide was piloted with one designer and refined before data collection. To ensure participants could express themselves freely and comfortably, all interviews were conducted in Arabic, their native language.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in Arabic to maintain authenticity [16]. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step approach, including familiarisation, coding, theme development, and reporting [17]. Coding was conducted manually and inductively. To strengthen rigour, memo-writing was used to document analytical reflections. Themes were refined through review and discussed with a peer researcher. These steps helped ensure transparency and trustworthiness in the analysis process.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview aimed to identify the skills and knowledge required for successful design start-ups in the Saudi Arabian ecosystem, based on insights from 15 designers across five Saudi Arabian cities (Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah, Jizan, and Tabuk/Yanbu). The responses revealed a divide between soft and hard skills. Although technical skills are important, nearly 71% of responses pointed to soft skills like client interaction, communication, collaboration, and consultation as key to business success and long-term growth as shown in Figure 1.

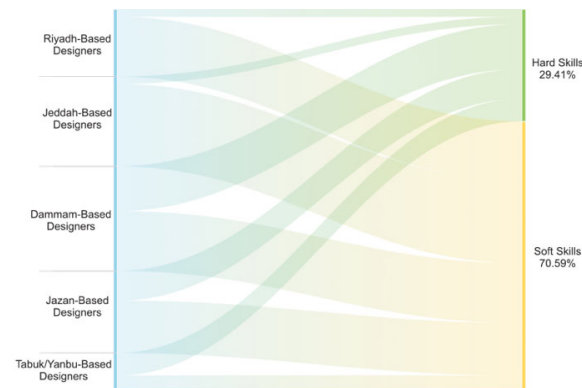


Figure 1. The Percentage of Soft and Hard Skills

4.1 Soft Skills

Soft skills were frequently highlighted as crucial to the success of design start-ups. These skills primarily relate to interaction with clients, mentorship, business management, communication, and collaboration, which are essential for navigating the complex entrepreneurial landscape in Saudi Arabia, as shown in Figure 2. These findings align with existing literature, which underscores the role of interpersonal skills in business success within creative industries [18]. Similarly, research on interior design interns finds that practitioners value soft skills like attitude and communication more than technical ones [19].

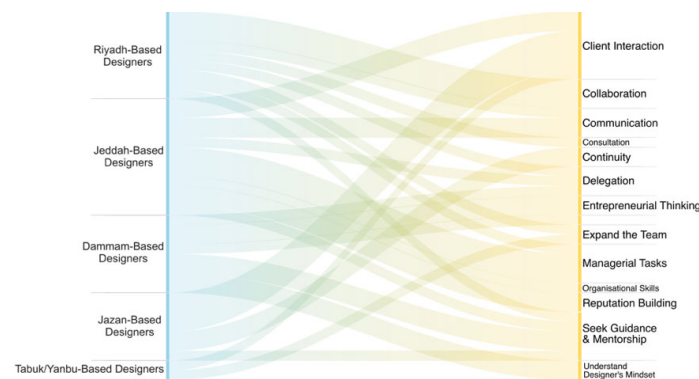


Figure 2. Soft Skills Themes

4.1.1 Client interaction and Communication

Effective client communication emerged as a significant factor in running a successful design business. For example, Jizan-based designer (Respondent 10) highlighted the need to improve face-to-face meetings with clients to better understand their requirements and manage expectations. Similarly, another Jizan-based designer (Respondent 12) stressed the importance of building trust, stating: *“Communication with clients. Initially, the client lacks credibility and does not believe everything... earning the client’s trust.”* These experiences illustrate that communication extends beyond simple information exchange; it involves fostering credibility and ensuring client confidence. These findings align with a study by Gaglione & Gaziulusoy [20] that suggests that clear and engaging communication helps designers customise business concepts to the client’s needs, and achieve successful results in design businesses [20]. It also resonates with prior research, which suggests that client relationships contribute to business retention and growth in creative enterprises [14].

4.1.2 Seeking Guidance and Mentorship

Mentorship play a key role in business development. Jeddah-based designer (Respondent 5) shared how mentorship helped him navigate pricing strategies and contract negotiations: *"I have someone I consider my godfather... He teaches me how to price my designs correctly."* Similarly, Dammam-based designer (Respondent 9) emphasised the importance of mentorship beyond theoretical knowledge in decision-making: *"We might need some guidance—not just knowledge. We need someone to tell us where to go."* Additionally, Riyadh-based designer, (Respondent 1) mentioned engaging with senior consultants to develop specific skills: *"Consultants who allow designers like me to book specific consultation... benefit from the information they have."* These accounts highlight that mentorship, and consultation in bridging knowledge gaps helps entrepreneurs make strategic choices with confidence. This aligns with literature on entrepreneurship, which suggests that mentorship provides experiential learning that formal education often lacks [21]. Furthermore, access to consultation professionals aligns with entrepreneurial ecosystems, which emphasises expertise as a critical factor in start-up success [22].

4.1.3 Managerial and organisational skills

Many designers highlighted the need for managerial and organisational skills to sustain and scale their businesses. A Jeddah-based designer (Respondent 6) noted that combining design with management knowledge elevates one's level and leads to unexpected growth: *"If someone had solid managerial and organisational skills, they would definitely rise to the top."* Similarly, a Riyadh-based designer (Respondent 2) admitted struggling with managerial tasks, and the need for a dedicated manager: *"I struggle with managerial tasks... There needs to be a manager whose expertise is management, while my expertise is design..."* These insights aligns with research by Bridgstock [18] who suggest creative graduates often require additional training in business skills to succeed as entrepreneurs [18]. The creative industries often suffer from these gaps, with individuals often having strong technical skills but lacking business know-how to scale up [18].

4.1.4 Collaboration and Entrepreneurial Thinking

Collaboration in the Saudi design ecosystem remains limited. A Riyadh-based designer (Respondent 3) shared that his offer to partner with a product design start-up was declined: *"I offered them what I wished someone had given me... But they turned down the collaboration."* Jeddah-based designer (Respondent 6) noted the importance of referrals and word-of-mouth: *"They [clients] become one of the people who bring you more clients."* Riyadh-based designer (Respondent 2) found delegating difficult: *"I try to do everything myself, and that's a mistake."* These examples suggest that expanding collaboration and networking could create more business opportunities. This is supported by other scholars who highlight the value of networking for growth [23]. Other soft skills mentioned included studio and team expansion. Some participants aimed to grow their team and explore branding, emphasising complementary skills for business longevity.

4.2 Hard Skills

Hard skills, including technical design abilities and business operations knowledge, were also highlighted as critical. Results showed that hard skills accounted for 29.41% of responses, primarily in project management, marketing, and costing as illustrate in Figure 3.

4.2.1 Project Management and Business Development

The transition from a start-up to a thriving business requires structured development. A Dammam-based designer (Respondent 9) shared how a project management course significantly improved their business knowledge since 2020: *"We took project management courses... I see business development as having evolved significantly."* Similarly, Jizan-based designer (Respondent 10) acknowledged that while project management was initially a challenge, it became a vital skill over time: *"We graduate lacking project management skills, but with experience and mistakes, we have gained many skills."* Meanwhile, Jeddah-based designer (Respondent 6) who completed a short project management course, emphasised that client loyalty and efficient execution are key to business success. The findings align with research highlighting the importance of project management and development for Designer-Entrepreneurs [14].

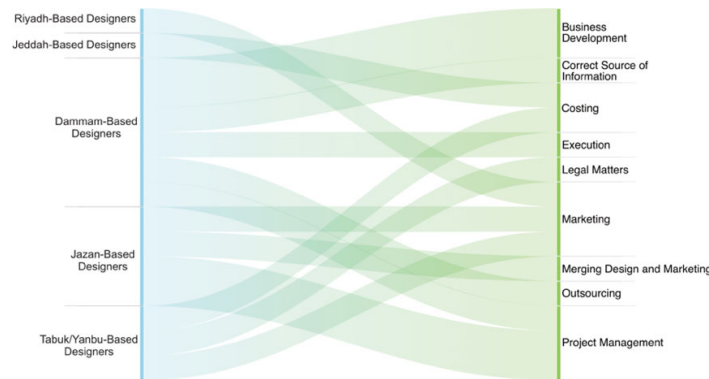


Figure 3. Hard Skills Themes

4.2.2 Marketing Skills

Marketing skills were widely recognised as essential for business growth. A Jizan-based designer (Respondent 11) emphasising that successful marketing is more than just promotion—it involves crafting a brand story: *“I am focusing a lot on marketing because I’ve started to understand it more and recognise the importance of marketing on a deeper level.”* Same designer also noted the significance of integrating design with marketing efforts. Participants’ insights into integrating design with marketing efforts align with research on design-led innovation, where effective brand storytelling enhances client engagement [24]. This finding is consistent with studies by Zulfikar, which highlight that successful branding and marketing strategies differentiate businesses in competitive markets [25].

4.2.3 Costing

Financial planning and execution play a critical role in a business’s success. A Jeddah-based designer, (Respondent 5) learned the importance of accurate pricing from his mentor, while a Yanbu-based designer (Respondent 15) emphasised aligning pricing with client expectations: *“...What do they want? Do they have ideas? This helps me determine the price.”* Meanwhile, Dammam-based designer, (Respondent 9) highlighted difficulties, particularly when working with contractors who struggle to interpret a designer’s vision: *“The execution side feels a bit limiting... people [contractors] need to understand that if you’re designing something customised for a project, someone has to execute it exactly as it is.”* These findings suggest that effective project coordination and financial planning are key to bridging the gap between design intent and successful implementation. This finding aligns with research by Elmansy [16], which found that financial planning is often a weak point among creative entrepreneurs in the Middle East [13].

While participants shared common themes, differences emerged in how designers prioritised certain skills. This variation may reflect factors such as educational background, access to support programmes, professional networks, and business maturity. For example, designers in cities like Riyadh and Jeddah may have had more exposure to mentorship and training, while others relied on informal learning. These findings support earlier observations about gaps in Saudi design education, where uneven business and entrepreneurial preparation contributes to varied levels of readiness.

5 CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the skills and knowledge required for the success of design start-ups in Saudi Arabia by addressing the question: *“What knowledge and skills are needed to achieve a successful business?”* The findings highlight the importance of both soft and hard skills in supporting entrepreneurial growth within the design sector. While soft skills such as client communication, collaboration and mentorship were strongly emphasised, hard skills related to project management, marketing and costing were also considered essential for business sustainability.

These insights offer valuable direction for aligning design education programmes with real-world market needs, and for enhancing professional development pathways for early-career designers. However, it is important to recognise that the findings are based on qualitative interviews with 15 designers from five cities, representing a range of disciplines and regional contexts. Differences in skill priorities were observed, which may reflect variation in educational background, regional access to resources or institutional support. Further research is needed to explore these root causes more

systematically. Nonetheless, the study provides a practice-based perspective that can inform future initiatives aimed at supporting Saudi design entrepreneurs as they build sustainable and resilient businesses.

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