

Graphic Design Labour: GenAI and Gig Work

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Introduction

Born creative, restless, and stubborn, I was confronted with the harsh realities that it would be challenging to be fulfilled by working a job, and even harder to find a stable income by pursuing my more fulfilling interests. Graphic design is a prospect I was interested in and told I had a promising talent for in high school. I eventually chose to pursue a more open-ended degree in sociology, but without a plan post-graduation, I find myself drawn back to pursuing a career as a graphic designer. In this paper, I will analyze the current and projected graphic design job market in British Columbia. I will probe some potential labour issues related to the use of generative artificial intelligence and freelancing. I will then discuss my core values for labour, how a graphic design career could align them, and what circumstances might conflict with my values.

Labour Market Overview

Graphic design is the art of conveying information and brand identity through visual art. Graphic designers often work with companies to conceptualize and create advertisements, logos, websites, and other resources that help companies attract new and returning consumers by maintaining a recognizable appearance. Skilled designers use colours, fonts, and compositions to evoke particular emotional responses that serve the brand needs of the company, organization, or individual (Job Bank, 2025).

The median salary for a full-time graphic designer in British Columbia (BC) is \$65,175 annually, or \$31.25 per hour (Job Bank, 2025). This seems reasonable if not for the cost of living in BC. The Job Bank (2025) reports good prospects for graphic design employment for Vancouver Island and the coastal regions, moderate prospects in the Kootenay, Cariboo, and

Thompson-Okanagan regions, and limited prospects in the lower mainland. By staying on or around Vancouver Island my chances of finding work are heightened but easily cancelled out by the increased cost of living. For BC as a whole, graphic designers have rather limited prospects for full-time work and salaries for part-time labour are unlikely to compensate for living expenses solely (Job Bank, 2025).

Graphic designers commonly work for designing or advertising firms that companies hire to outsource the development of visual resources. Firms provide designers with a stable income, benefits, and an influx of client contracts. Some labour unions and guilds exist to protect the rights of graphic designers, illustrators, and photographers, including against theft of copyrighted work and intellectual property (CAPIC, 2022; RGD, 2024). Graphic designers work in person or online as the majority of the labour can be conducted on a computer, including correspondence with clients. Many graphic designers are self-employed which presents extra challenges of having to network and advertise skills to attract potential clients (Job Bank, 2025). This can mean freelancers may have greater autonomy as workers but have increased labour demands and less income stability.

Graphic design firms will usually require a university degree in visual arts or other formal post-secondary graphic arts degree, in addition to related work experience and a personal graphic design portfolio of high-quality works which display talent and capabilities (Job Bank, 2025). As a sociology major, my (projected) Bachelor's degree would serve as little more than decoration as I would need to spend more time and money getting a graphic arts degree or certificate. Graphic designers are also required to be licensed or certified to conduct business as freelancers or firm employees (Job Bank, 2025).

Labour Issues

There are a few big issues facing graphic design labourers at the moment. As gig workers, many designers experience challenges relating to job prospects and long-term revenue (Song et al., 2025). As creative workers, designers face the stigma held by many white-collar professionals toward the value of art and artist labour (Pitts, 2020). Without the support of a firm or guild membership, graphic designers are tasked with undercutting their own experience and talent to charge clients less than they deserve (Pitts, 2020; Song et al., 2025). A Freelance graphic designer often bills for the hours they spent working on the final product. They will not bill them for the years of education they spent developing their skills or the years of experience that allowed them to effectively apply these skills (Pitts, 2020). Graphic design is a complex art form in large part because of its commercial element undercutting the artistic value of the artwork. Art made to serve a purpose is subject to be treated as nothing but its purpose and only compensated for the labour of its production but not the emotional labour of its conception (Pitts, 2020).

Far too few professional institutions value the labour of graphic designers. These sentiments against art are exemplified by the rise of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in the digital marketing space (Hwang & Wu, 2025). GenAI works by compositing available data and images online into patterns and replicates those patterns to create new images. Artificial intelligence (AI) models are still new but the nature of the algorithms works by reproducing what works and avoiding what does not, meaning AI gets more precise and competent over time (Hwang & Wu, 2025).

AI is becoming more prevalent across the board but is especially harmful to artists and designers whose work is often used to train GenAI models to replicate styles and techniques. Little policy exists to protect the intellectual property of digital artists from being used to train GenAI. As AI expands and learns, graphic designers are in a difficult position where their skills and labour are being overlooked and replaced by GenAI images (Hwang & Wu, 2025). It is faster, cheaper, and easier to get a desired image by typing some prompts into an AI image generator than by contracting a graphic designer. For brands who cannot afford to work with real artists or value the saved profit over the quality product it makes sense to use GenAI (Hwang & Wu, 2025), but for graphic designers and illustrators who rely on their skills to make a living the use of AI is a threat to their livelihood (Fleischmann, 2024).

Despite social and environmental impacts, GenAI is not going away anytime soon. Many in the graphic design field are interested in learning how to have it work for them instead of protesting its existence. AI is not the first technology that seemed to threaten the nature of graphic art, leading some graphic designers and educators to figure out how GenAI can be used in conjunction with traditional design skills to maintain high-quality work while saving time when possible (Fleischmann, 2024; Hwang & Wu, 2025).

Gen AI operates by a human inputting a prompt for the AI to create based on its understanding of the patterns related to the words used (Hwang & Wu, 2025). If the prompt calls for a “cartoon shrimp on a white background” the AI will reference its database of every available image related to “cartoon” as well as “shrimp”, “white”, and “background”; compositing these patterns together to generate a new image that incorporates the key terms. These image generator models have been improving rapidly in the last few years of public access but are still not as competent at interpreting prompts as a human designer. There is a mild skill

requirement for effectively using GenAI as it is unlikely to understand subtext, typos, slang, or indirect language in prompts which affects the accuracy of the output (Hwang & Wu, 2025).

Graphic design students are generally open to the use of GenAI in art and are seeking education to better utilize it in professional settings (Fleischmann, 2024). Public discourse around the use of GenAI is mixed with many consumers expressing disdain for AI art as a lazy and shallow ploy for companies to avoid paying trained artists. Artists' labour is already devalued by companies (Pitts, 2020) and for clients who are concerned more about expenses and deadlines instead of quality and talent, graphic designers have a hard time competing with GenAI (Fleischmann, 2024).

With already high demands for education and experience portfolios, getting started in the graphic design profession is an uphill battle against AI and stigma towards creative fields. Limited job prospects in BC and freelancing mean less income stability even for situated designers (Job Bank, 2025). If GenAI improves enough in the next few years, graphic designers' skills may be mostly obsolete in favour of AI image generation manipulation skills.

Values Reflection

My future career must align with my core values for labour so I can feel at least partially fulfilled from the work that will occupy most of my life. A career in graphic design appeals to me because it seemingly meets the criteria I am interested in with a reasonable path to achievement from where I am in my life now. Acquiring an arts degree is an obstacle but more manageable than many other career paths.

A graphic design career would enable creativity within my labour, a value I consider important to preserving my passion and individuality throughout my professional life. I do not

consider myself especially talented in any fine arts mediums and lack the time, materials, or inspiration to dedicate much free time to fulfilling this value. I have always enjoyed graphic art and for the few projects in university that I have been able to use graphic design, I felt much more emotionally in touch with the labour process and outcome than from writing academic papers.

Another labour value developed from years of studying sociology is the need for my work to feel altruistically purposeful. I recognize the complex systems of structural injustice involved with any practice of labour under capitalism, and cannot be emotionally satisfied if the labour I contribute to society does more to perpetuate harm than combat it. As a graphic designer, my work would seldom inspire significant social disruption one way or the other, but I do not imagine the work of creating digital art or its application toward consumers would often contradict my ethical obligations. A successful graphic design career would enable me to only accept contracts with clients whose business practices and social policies align with my ideals.

Autonomy over my time and labour is important to career fulfillment. I operate best with a scheduled routine and a stress-free environment to work in. I can imagine being satisfied working for a design firm as long as I am treated fairly by my employers and am allotted some flexibility for my time management. I can also imagine enjoying the freedom that comes with being self-employed as a freelancer. It may be tricky to find a middle ground for either option that allows a consistent, manageable stream of profitable work without sacrificing my autonomy over my labour and time.

My core values must align with my labour practices. A career in graphic design could achieve this, but there are lingering labour issues that may complicate the balance of fulfilling

work and adequate compensation. Gig work presents more autonomy as a worker but less stability than a structured profession (Song et al., 2025). I have a disdain for the use of GenAI in art and could imagine being expected to use it to stay on top of labour demands would lead my work to stray from my creative and moral values.

Conclusion

The murky prospects associated with graphic design gig work are not ideal for full-time income (Song et al., 2025). Considering the time and money needed to gain the applicable qualifications, a graphic design career is not guaranteed to pay off (Job Bank, 2025). GenAI may not yet be capable of stealing graphic designers' jobs, but new designers are willing to implement it in their work (Fleischmann, 2024; Hwang & Wu, 2025). I consider the rising acceptance of AI foreboding harmful changes in how graphic art is made and commissioned. AI images take less time and skill than traditional art, which allows GenAI curators to undercut traditional graphic designers. I have a lot to think about as I enter the final stretch of my degree. I hope to revisit the graphic design job market in another year and reassess the relevance of GenAI and the prospects of exercising labour without compromising my values.

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