FutureNow.

Print and visual communication Industry snapshot

FutureNow is an independent body that provides industry informed advice to influence skills development strategies across the Creative, Leisure and Technologies sectors. Our work assists Western Australia to be prepared with the new order skills required by the evolving economy and our changing society.

Picture perfect: visual communication mediums shape the way Western Australians see, understand, and connect with the world around them

Visual communication is design and image-led graphical information used to tell a story, communicate ideas, and persuade through information. The power of imagery and design to weave together stories and ideas underpins the continuing expansion of the visual communications industries, including print, photography, graphic design and brand management. From eye-catching infographics that simplify complex information, to captivating photographs that engage and inspire, visual communication has become a universal language that transcends barriers of culture, language, and literacy. With information overload a constant challenge, visuals offer a compelling and efficient means to capture attention, evoke empathy, and leave a lasting impact. As the world becomes increasingly visually oriented, reliance on graphical communication heightens, empowering better communication with greater effectiveness and vividness- from product packaging, to marketing campaigns, webpages and educational materials.

The emergence of the visual communication industry puts print on a path to future growth

The printing industry, long considered primarily as a manufactured goods provider, has faced a protracted decline in demand for printed materials in the wake of the digital revolution. Following an extended period of closures, mergers, and industry consolidation, a service-driven industry is emerging that is fit for the future and anticipated to grow. Analysts predict industry expansion in the coming five years, reversing the previous trend.[1]

There are over two hundred businesses offering printing services in Western Australia, including throughout the regions and in most regional centres.[2] Printers currently benefit from a generally buoyant statewide economy, where demand for labels and packaging remains strong, along with other printed products such as wayfinding and event signage, on site branding, outdoor advertising, screen printed clothing and homewares, and commercial vehicle wraps.[3] However, it is the future-proofing that industry have invested in that will drive growth and underpin future industry stability. The print industry's evolution centres around the development of wrap-around services that meet their clients' broader brand, marketing, and communications needs. In this sense, the industry is merging with graphic design, brand, and social media marketing providers to become what is termed the visual communication industry. This shift contextualises print as one of the primary mediums or technologies through which to tell stories, along with digital channels, and tools including photography, illustration, and graphic arts.[4]

Complex influences create a dynamic landscape for the visual communication industries

Beyond print, the visual communication industries include web design, graphic design, and brand and commercial design services. These industries have weathered a volatile economic market since the emergence of Covid-19.[5] Following initial uncertainty and contraction, it quickly became evident that the Western Australian economy would remain strong. This, coupled with a massive global shift to remote ways of working, drove burgeoning demand for web-based marketing and communications solutions.

During this period, graphic design graduates have adapted to the uncertainties of the labour market by increasingly pursuing freelance work instead of traditional full-time positions within WA's numerous independent design practices. This shift has contributed to the labour market shortages experienced by small-to-medium enterprises over the past two years. Moreover, the surge in demand for design services has posed challenges for large corporations in sourcing services from already overbooked studios, leading to a new trend of hiring in-house design teams within this market segment.

Industry reports indicate that these in-house roles are highly diverse, combining design, marketing, and communications skills into a single position. It is rare to find individuals who excel in all of these areas, as they require distinct skill sets and consequently, incumbents may experience high levels of stress. Nevertheless, these roles are appealing due to their generally higher remuneration compared to what smaller studios can offer.

Recently, global economic uncertainty has led to reticence among independent studio owners to recruit graphic designers to permanent positions, despite ongoing high levels of activity. Therefore currently, much work is taking place on a contract basis.

Challenges and opportunities in equal measure for photographers

The services of professional photographers have witnessed a decade-long decline in demand due to the widespread availability of high-quality in-phone cameras.[6] The post-Covid period further exacerbated this decline, particularly with the effective suspension of the wedding market, which traditionally represents the largest market segment for industry, accounting for just over a quarter of all activity. Conversely, other segments such as drone and real estate photography have experienced increased demand, fuelled by the resources sector and the booming housing market respectively. During this period, self-promotion and adaptability have emerged as crucial skills for professional photographers in Western Australia.

Print industry faces growing workforce challenges

The associated workforce for the visual communications industry can broadly be divided into creative occupations including graphic designers, photographers, illustrators, and web or multimedia designers, and, technical trade occupations including print machinists and print finishers. Print-industry graphic artists, or Pre-press Trades Workers, are creative workers situated within printing businesses. They may complete a trade apprenticeship or a vocational or higher education graphic design qualification and in this sense bridge the two spheres.

The printing industry in particular faces acute ageing workforce challenges locally and globally. A recent national survey by peak body the Print and Visual Communication Association identified that while 25% of respondents anticipate needing to recruit additional workers in the coming 3-5 years, that percentage increases to 53% in the 6–10-year timeframe.[7] This increased labour demand is driven primarily by anticipated growth and ageing workforce, with a large number of trades workers in the industry in the 50+ age group currently. These challenges are particularly acute for Print Finishers and Print Machinists, though current and projected gaps also exist for Graphic Pre-press Trades workers.

Attracting a new generation to careers in print and visual communication

To address this growing challenge, it is imperative to increase the influx of new apprentices, trainees, and graduates into the WA print industry. The sector is actively exploring various strategies to attract fresh talent, and businesses that have successfully adapted to modernisation trends are more likely to thrive and appeal to new cohorts. In addition to embracing cutting-edge technologies, the sector is placing a renewed emphasis on diversity and inclusion, with a particular focus on attracting more women to the profession.[8] Additionally, it is adopting leading sustainability and decarbonisation strategies that extend beyond paper management to efforts including significant reductions in ink and water usage, as well as the implementation of extensive solar energy solutions.

Training and workforce strategies

Recent successful lobbying efforts by industry have resulted in the reinstatement of crucial technical print industry occupations on the Australian Apprenticeships Priority List. This achievement ensures the industry's continued access to affordable skill development and workforce solutions tailored to this segment of the workforce. Apprenticeships support industry to effectively address its evolving needs and secure a skilled workforce for the future.[9]

FutureNow has produced industry profiles and case studies highlighting the print and design industries, and is working with industry partners to complement these materials with a case study showcasing a dynamic young female apprentice.[10] The new study aims to inspire and empower women to consider the print industry as a viable and rewarding career choice, encouraging greater gender balance within the sector. These resources are intended to provide valuable insights into the industry's inner workings, showcasing its diverse range of career opportunities and the skills required to excel in this field.

In the coming year, WA industry will also explore the development of events created for the state government's Year 9 Career Taster program.[11]   These events seek to provide young students with valuable insights into the print industry and potential career paths. By offering hands-on experiences, the events aim to spark curiosity and showcase the numerous career paths available within the print industry. The sector recognises the importance of early exposure and aims to inspire and guide students towards considering print-related careers, nurturing the next generation of talent.

The visual communication industries are instrumental in shaping the way Western Australians perceive and connect with the world around them. As these industries continue to evolve and adapt to changing market dynamics, they offer promising career opportunities for individuals with diverse skills and talents. By embracing innovation, promoting diversity, and investing in skill development, the industry is paving the way for future growth and establishing itself as a vital component of effective communication in a visually-oriented world.

We would like to hear from you

FutureNow continually seeks feedback from the print and visual communication industries to facilitate workforce development, and the creation and delivery of responsive accredited training and skills sets to meet emerging sector needs. If you can contribute to this in any way or require further information, please contact:

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