

— A 2026 REPORT ON AMERICA'S SMALL BUSINESSES

STATE OF SMALL BUSINESS.

A national study of America's small businesses in Design and Make finds a clear shift toward independent work and small teams – across every part of the workforce that builds the physical and digital world.

FOREWORD

A PICTURE OF ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S **FASTEST-GROWING** SEGMENTS OF THE SMALL BUSINESS ECONOMY.

This report focuses on the people who design and make the physical and digital worlds – and the growing number of small businesses they are starting.

What we found, based on a national study of professionals and small business owners across these industries, points to a clear pattern: more people are planning to leave corporate roles to start their own businesses, independent work is becoming more common, and small firms are growing faster than the broader small business economy.

Together, these trends signal a shift in how work gets done across **Design and Make**.*

A NOTE ON SCOPE

* **The Design and Make industries** are comprised of architecture, engineering, construction, and operations; design and manufacturing; and media and entertainment.

~300M

PEOPLE EMPLOYED
WORLDWIDE (WEF)

\$30T

PROJECTED GLOBAL
VALUE BY 2027
(STATISTA, OXFORD
ECONOMICS & PWC)

AT A GLANCE · FIVE NUMBERS THAT DESCRIBE A SHIFT

FIVE NUMBERS THAT DESCRIBE A SHIFT.

The independent professional across Design and Make is rising – outpacing the rest of the small business economy in both formation rate and stated intent – even as those running existing businesses describe a working life dominated by overhead instead of craft.

<p>FINDING 01</p> <p>~1 in 5</p> <p>Design and Make professionals (18%) are considering leaving their job to start their own business in 2026 – six points higher than the broader economy.</p>	<p>FINDING 02</p> <p>80%</p> <p>of small business owners in Design and Make say they struggle to balance running the business with doing the actual work.</p>	<p>FINDING 03</p> <p>~10%</p> <p>growth in solopreneur and micro Design and Make firms in 2025 – almost 35% faster than across all industries.</p>
<p>FINDING 04</p> <p>~60%</p> <p>of small business owners in Design and Make say current tools are too complex or not designed for smaller teams – seven points higher than the broader small business economy.</p>	<p>FINDING 05</p> <p>36%</p> <p>of the Design and Make workforce now operates as freelancers or contractors, outpacing the broader workforce by 3 points.</p>	

FINDING 01 · CORPORATE DEPARTURES · 2025 ACTUAL VS. 2026 STATED INTENT

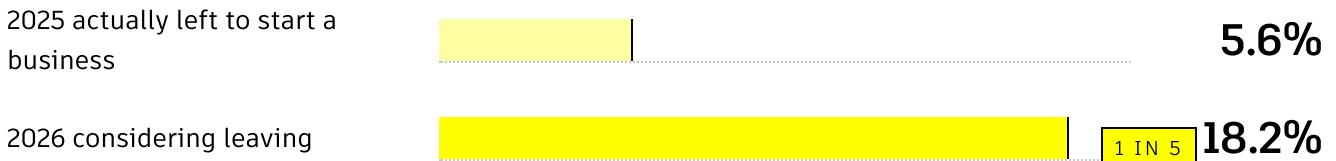
THE GREAT RESIGNATION MAY HAVE FADED FROM HEADLINES – BUT NOT IN DESIGN AND MAKE.

Nearly 1 in 5 Design and Make professionals (18%) say they are considering leaving their corporate job in 2026 to start their own business – higher than the 12% across the broader workforce. This suggests continued momentum toward independent work across these industries – potentially signaling the next wave of small business formation in Design and Make.

01

FIG. 01 · SHARE OF CORPORATE PROFESSIONALS · 2025 ACTUAL DEPARTURES VS. 2026 STATED INTENT

DESIGN AND MAKE



ALL INDUSTRIES



■ 2025 ACTUAL
 ■ 2026 INTENT · D&M
 ■ 2025 ACTUAL · ALL
 ■ 2026 INTENT · ALL
 +6 PT GAP ON 2026 INTENT

The 2026 intent figure of **18.2%** sits well above the 5.6% who actually departed in 2025 – and 6 points above the broader workforce considering the same move.

FINDING 02 · SHARE OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS WHO STRUGGLE TO BALANCE RUNNING THE BUSINESS WITH DOING THE WORK · 2026

SMALL BUSINESSES STRUGGLE TO GET TO THE WORK OF DESIGNING AND MAKING.

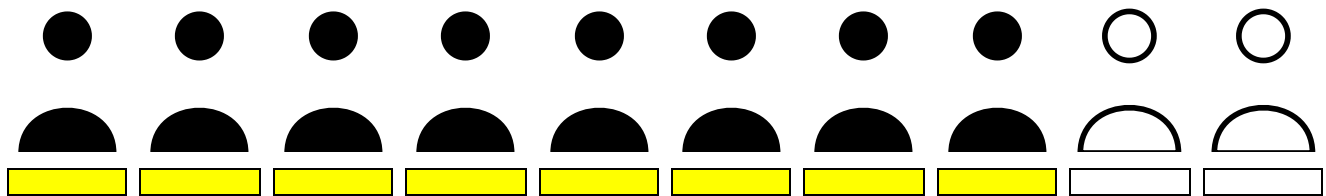
02

Across every industry, small businesses are squeezed by overhead. Those building the physical and digital world are squeezed harder.

FIG. 02 · SHARE OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS WHO STRUGGLE TO BALANCE RUNNING THE BUSINESS WITH DOING THE WORK · 2026

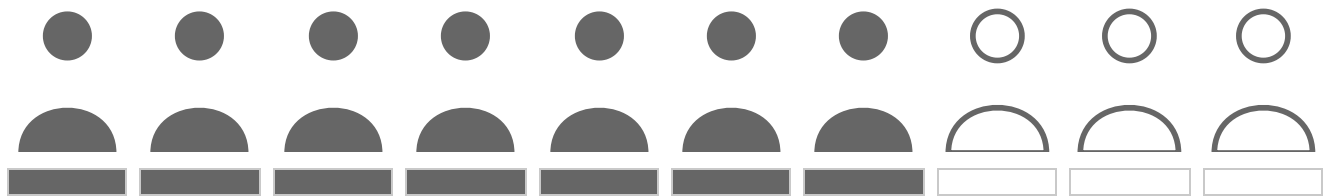
DESIGN AND MAKE

80.9% STRUGGLE TO BALANCE



ALL INDUSTRIES

69.4% STRUGGLE TO BALANCE



DESIGN AND MAKE ALL INDUSTRIES

+11 POINTS · +16% RELATIVE GAP

More than 4 in 5 small business owners (~80%) in Design and Make say they struggle to balance running the business with doing the actual work – compared with nearly 70% across all industries.

For small teams, that often means managing clients, sourcing materials, handling compliance, and running day-to-day operations on top of delivering the work – compressing the responsibilities of a larger firm into a much smaller team.

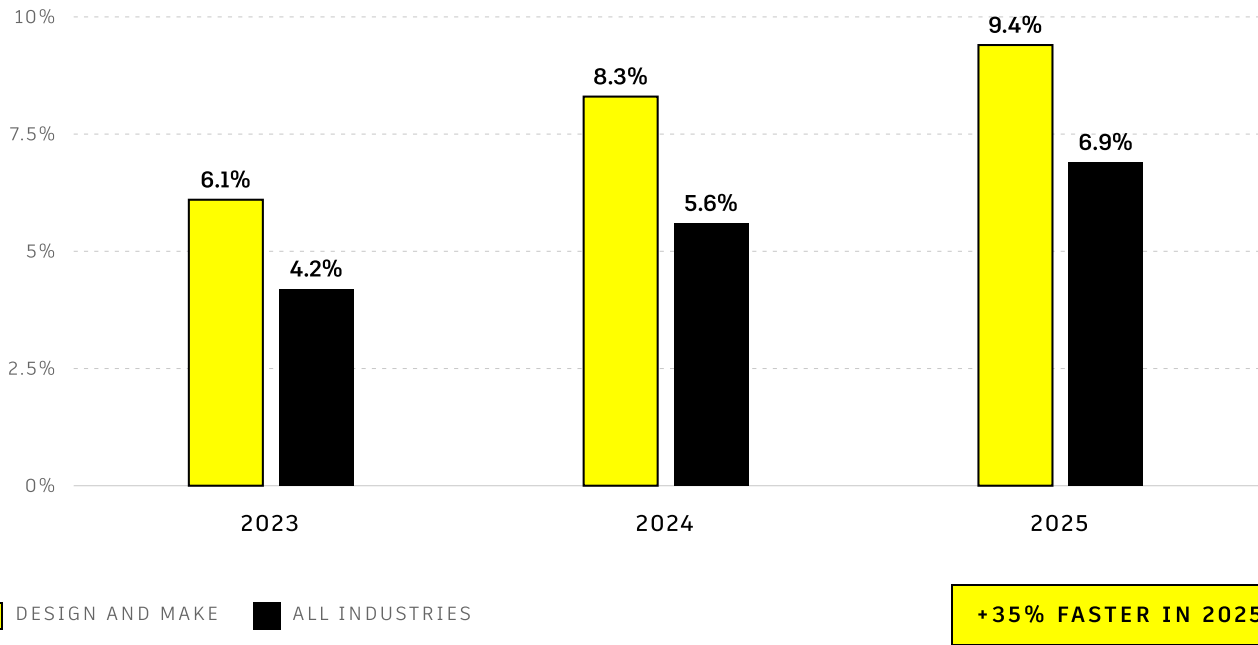
FINDING 03 · YEAR-OVER-YEAR GROWTH IN SOLOPRENEUR AND MICRO FIRMS · 2023-2025

SOLOPRENEUR AND MICRO FIRMS ARE OUTPACING THE BROADER SMALL BUSINESS ECONOMY.

03

Solopreneur and micro firms in Design and Make grew nearly 10% in 2025 – almost 35% faster than the rest of the small business economy.

FIG. 03 · YEAR-OVER-YEAR GROWTH IN SOLOPRENEUR AND MICRO FIRMS (1-9 EMPLOYEES) · 2023-2025



Across all industries, solopreneur and micro firms grew at a rate of about **7% in 2025**. In Design and Make, growth has been consistently higher across the past several years, pointing to a sustained gap between these industries and the broader market.

These findings point to continued expansion among smaller firms in sectors often defined by project-based work and operational complexity. The pattern holds across three years of measurement, with Design and Make outpacing the rest of the small business economy every year.

FINDING 04 · SHARE OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS WHO SAY CURRENT TOOLS ARE TOO COMPLEX OR WEREN'T BUILT FOR SMALL TEAMS · 2026

MOST SMALL BUSINESSES SAY THE TOOLS THEY RELY ON WEREN'T BUILT FOR THEM.

04

Nearly 60% of small businesses in Design and Make say the tools they rely on are too complex or weren't built for small teams—seven points higher than the broader small business economy.

FIG. 04 · SHARE OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS WHO SAY CURRENT TOOLS ARE TOO COMPLEX OR WEREN'T BUILT FOR SMALL TEAMS · 2026

+7 PT GAP →

DESIGN AND MAKE

Tools too complex / not for small teams  **59.1%**

ALL INDUSTRIES

Tools too complex / not for small teams  **52.1%**

 DESIGN AND MAKE  ALL INDUSTRIES

+14% RELATIVE GAP

The tools-fit gap is consistent across every segment in the data, but Design and Make professionals report it most often.

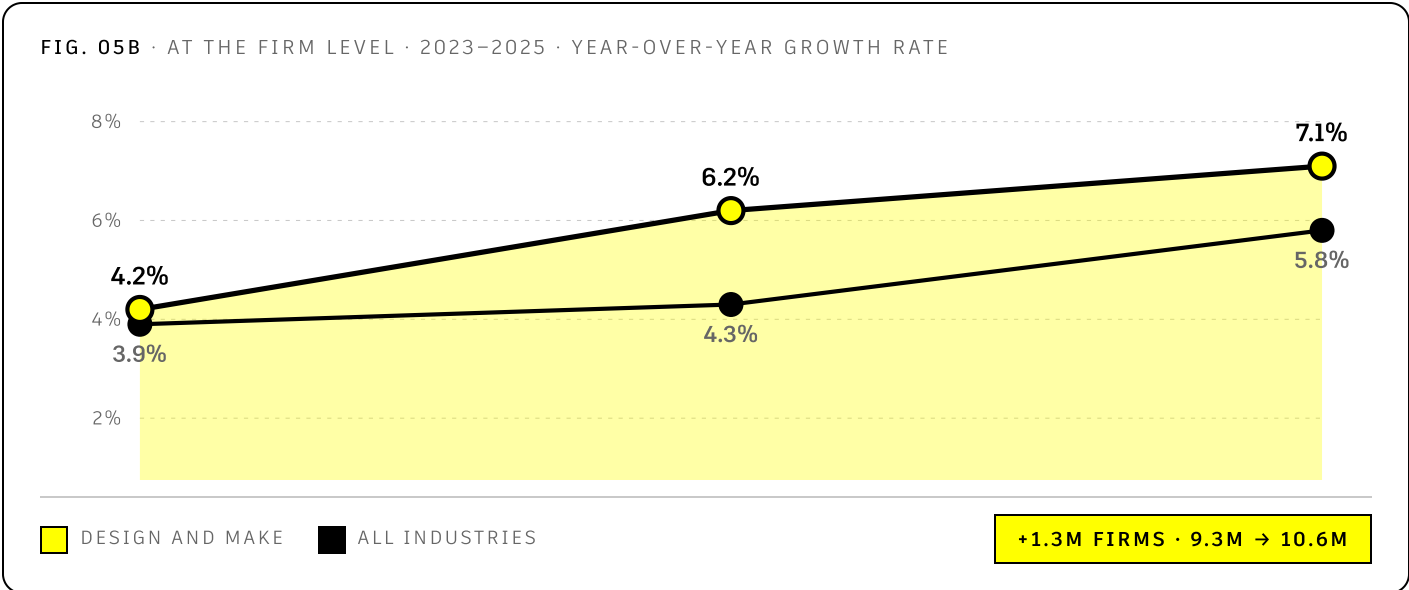
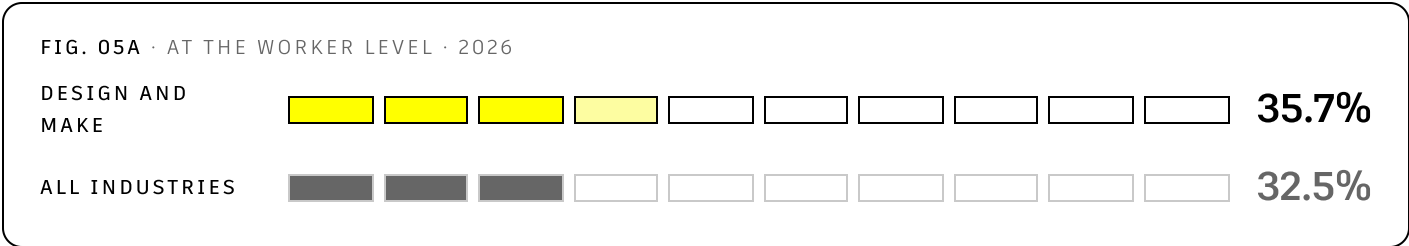
As professionals move out of larger firms, start their own businesses, and take on the full scope of the work, they are doing so with workflows originally designed for much bigger organizations.

FINDING 05 · INDEPENDENT WORK ACROSS DESIGN AND MAKE · WORKER-LEVEL AND FIRM-LEVEL VIEWS

A DESIGN AND MAKE ECONOMY INCREASINGLY BUILT ON SMALLER, MORE INDEPENDENT UNITS OF WORK.

05

More than one in three workers (36%) in Design and Make industries is engaged in freelance or contract work – higher than the 33% across the broader workforce.



The shift toward independent work shows up across the data. Small businesses in Design and Make have grown for three consecutive years, expanding from **9.3 million firms in 2023 to 10.6 million in 2025** – an addition of roughly 1.3 million firms. Across this period, Design and Make has outpaced the broader small business economy's growth rate every year, with the gap widening from **0.3 percentage points in 2023 to 1.3 percentage points in 2025**.

Together, these patterns point to a Design and Make economy that is increasingly built on smaller, more independent units of work.

IN SYNTHESIS

THE SHIFT TO INDEPENDENT, SMALL-TEAM WORK IS HERE.

A

The shift toward independent work is continuing in Design and Make.

While it may have slowed in some sectors, more professionals in these industries are planning to start their own businesses – pointing to sustained momentum.

B

The smallest firms are growing faster.

Solo and micro firms in Design and Make are growing faster than the broader small business economy – a pattern that has remained consistent over the past several years.

C

The infrastructure hasn't caught up.

The same small businesses driving growth are also the most likely to say their tools weren't built for them. This segment is growing alongside that gap, pointing to a clear opportunity to better support how these teams actually work.

METHODOLOGY & SOURCES

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH.

Autodesk's *State of Small Business* report was developed in partnership with third-party analytics firm **GlobalData**. The analysis draws on GlobalData's proprietary US business and employment tracking data to evaluate growth trends in small businesses and freelance work over the past three years. GlobalData estimates small business formation using a range of sources, including business filings with state registries, proprietary entrepreneur surveys, trademark and patent filings, and job listings. These inputs are analyzed to estimate both the total number of small businesses and the pace of new business formation.

Note: small business figures include non-employer firms and sole proprietors. In addition, GlobalData surveyed **1,881 US-based professionals and small business owners** across a range of industries – including small business owners within architecture, engineering, construction, product design, manufacturing, media, and entertainment – to assess sentiment, challenges, and opportunities within the Design and Make economy. Both surveys for Design and Make and all industries used identical methodology.

Key definitions from GlobalData: *Small businesses* are classified as those with 1–99 employees. *Solopreneur and micro firms* are classified as those with 1–9 employees. *Freelancers and independent contractors* are individuals who actively provide labor, skills, or services to clients or customers on a project or contract basis, outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship, whether as their primary livelihood or alongside conventional employment.

ALL FINDINGS · SIDE BY SIDE

FINDING	ALL INDUSTRIES	DESIGN AND MAKE	RELATIVE GAP
Corporate professionals who left to start a business (2025)	3%	6%	+73%
Corporate professionals considering leaving to start a business (2026 intent)	12%	18%	+49%
Small business owners who struggle to balance running the business with doing the actual work	70%	80%	+16%
Small business owners who feel tools are too complex or not built for small teams	52%	59%	+14%
Small business owners who find adopting new technology difficult or time-consuming (2026)	63%	71%	+12%
YoY small-business growth (2025)	6%	7%	+23%
YoY solo / micro firm growth (2025)	7%	9%	+35%
Workforce engaged in freelance or contract work	33%	36%	+10%

AUTODESK FOR SMALL BUSINESS

MAKE
ANYTHING.

FOR MEDIA INQUIRIES

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VISIT

autodesk.com/smallbusiness

CITATION

State of Small Business report,
Autodesk, May 2026.