

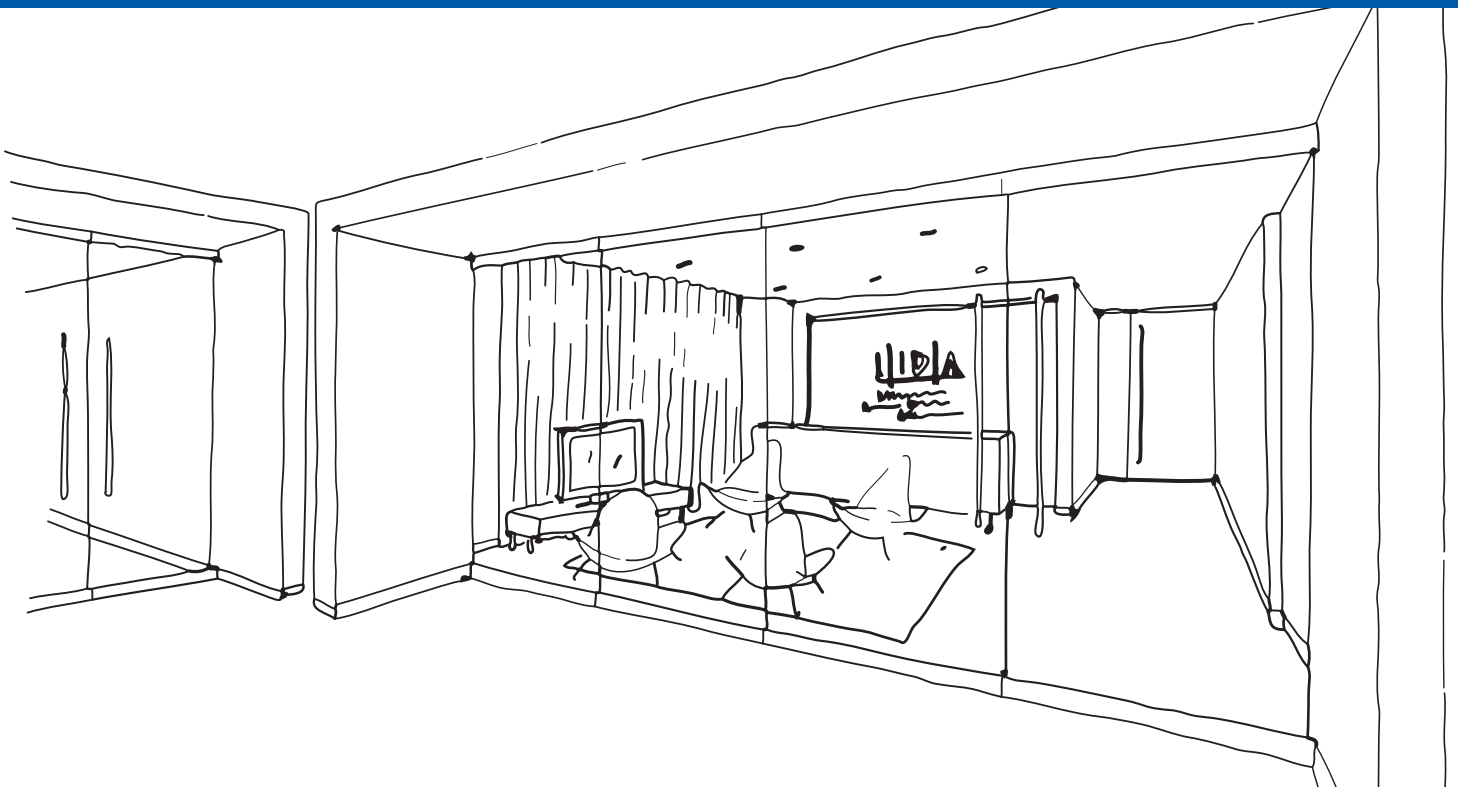
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INTERNATIONAL  
INTERIOR DESIGN  
ASSOCIATION

IIDA INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE 16  
JANUARY 4-6, 2013 / CHICAGO, IL

# LEVERAGING VOLATILITY:

Balancing Critical Issues in  
Economics, Marketing and Design





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*Volatility is going to be around forever. But if you learn how to fly in it, if you can get in there faster and better, if you can be more of a free thinker, then you can create inroads where others don't want to go. —Scott Hierlinger*

## INTRODUCTION: VOLATILITY—THE NEW NORMAL

Over a weekend in January, some 30 notable members of the A&D community—interior designers, manufacturing executives, and board members and representatives of the IIDA—convened for the 16th annual Industry Roundtable. This year's topic was volatility: its origins, its nature, and how designers and manufacturers can navigate it. Once upon a time, the term referred to a transitory phase—a volatile *period*. Now, volatility is a constant. Derived from *volare*, Latin for “to fly,” the word suggests a free fall, the feeling that life is out of control. But it's better defined as eruption, movement, flux, or simply rapid and unexpected change. As explained by Cheryl Durst, Hon. FIIDA—IIDA Executive Vice President and CEO, and the event's moderator—there's a difference between chaos, which cannot be managed, and volatility, which can.

The key to managing volatility is to embrace its permanence as a cultural and economic condition, and to see it as a positive—an opportunity to be seized. For instance, such seismic shifts tend to spawn whole new occupations: Consider the advent of marriage counseling in the wake of World War II. Or the recent sea change in the field of healthcare, which sparked job titles like “nurse practitioner” and “hospital administrator” that didn't exist a few decades ago. Volatility presents as many opportunities as challenges if we have the prescience to foresee how things will change. And if we hone the skills that volatility demands of us—flexibility, agility and adaptability among them.

Those who leverage volatility will gain a competitive edge. So how can we take the reins and be proactive? By embracing the following strategies.

# PART 1: HOW TO NAVIGATE VOLATILITY

## I. Channel your inner futurist

Getting ahead of the competition requires thinking ahead. Luckily, interior designers are inherently futurists; the very essence of design is to prototype to create spaces that anticipate the future and render existing models obsolete. A designer's purview isn't simply to ask clients what they want, it's to tell them what they did not even know they needed—and will need in the future. Yet we don't always exploit this visionary potential to the fullest extent.

To get the crowd into a futurist mindset, Saturday's program kicked off with talks by two top thinkers in our field: Perkins+Will principal Eva Maddox, FIIDA, and business journalist Rob Kirkbride of the *Monday Morning Quarterback*. In economic terms, volatility is defined as the predictability—or the lack thereof—of a financial instrument. Kirkbride offered his predictions of where contract design is headed, sharing insightful economic information (see sidebar) that put industry challenges into context for both designers and manufacturers.

But kicking things off was Maddox, who prefaced her talk by acknowledging the limitations of futurist projections in a world defined by breakneck technological change. "I'm speaking at one moment in time—and the next hour it's already different! With trend presentations, it's hard for anything to be absolute." She also cautioned that volatility accelerates change, and the nature of that change can swing to extremes. "Don't latch to an extreme but to the bigger picture, which is hard to see."

She connected the dots with a sociocultural survey of some pressing issues impacting our industry. Company mergers and evaporating jobs have brought about the loss of self-esteem and identity, both corporate and personal. Shifting demographics spark volatile workplace dynamics. An ascendance of spirituality creates a culture that values authenticity and transparency (concepts that are

great in theory but often difficult to implement on an organizational level). The "third place" between work and life leads to what she deemed "structured socialization." And disruptive technologies like Facebook and digital publishing force change in industry models—from products and services to business practices. Fittingly, as she addressed the topic of disruptive technologies, her own technology was literally disrupted by forces unknown: Unprompted, the lights turned on, her screen rolled up, her PowerPoint disappeared, and everyone had a good laugh. (Of course, as futurists, we saw it coming.)

Maddox quoted business strategist/futurist Edie Weiner's notion of the "meta-space" economy, which asserts that how we manage and use space will drive the economy of tomorrow. And not just *physical* space but also other genres:

- **Inner space**, or brain space, by which she means an understanding of what makes things tick.
- **Outer space**, and the attendant life-safety, material, and environmental issues that come into play when exploring the universe.
- **Cyberspace**, including tools like Rhino, Revit, and BIM that are already helping us realize forward-thinking spatial solutions.
- **Microspace**, i.e. how biophilia—beyond just matters of sustainability—can help transform living, wellness and even corporate environments.
- **Time space**: The cultural transition from linear time to simultaneous time forces us to lead a layered lifestyle. This "liquefied environment" requires modular thinking and solutions.
- **Design space**: Climate change will dictate a new urban design for cities, nations and beyond—from transportation to playgrounds.



- **Green-to-blue space:** Look to net-zero design as a self-sustaining model for the future.
- **Storage space:** Organizing our stuff—in closets and “the cloud”—is an ever-growing design problem.

Next, Maddox put a provocative spin on authenticity, a buzzword that’s proven to have staying power: “Whenever I’m asked, ‘How can I differentiate?’ my answer is always the same. Why do you want to be *different*? Why not be *yourself*, and connect in an honest way with your consumer? Authentic design exists where customer desire and company DNA intersect.” Finding that desire/DNA sweet spot necessitates research, as well as listening to and connecting closely with clients and consumers alike.

As for gleaning the latter, a current decline in public trust (what Gensler’s Jim Williamson, IIDA, called a “culture of questioning”) coincides with the ascendance of the Internet as a vehicle of transparency, one that enables instantaneous feedback on products and services. Exploit it.

## II. Make spaces and products for people on the move

Contending with the “third place” is another challenge ripe for creative solutions—and one that contract designers would be remiss not to take advantage of, said Maddox. Figures she referenced evince the increasingly untethered nature of the current-day worker bee: The work force just dropped to a 30-year low of 63.5 percent; the mobile work force will rise to 1.3 billion by 2015, and the number of co-working facilities doubled last year and is expected to continue growing. Such data suggest a shift to a community collective work space—what Maddox dubbed a “curated club.” That term suggests the freedom to self-select both where and next to whom we work.

This growing population of free-range workers and the nonemployed represents an expanding and underserved market. Maddox implored that

designers and manufacturers alike leverage their talents to create furnishings and work spaces that better support contemporary work styles. Kirkbride concurred: Whether or not our industry thrives—let alone survives—he said, will depend on doing just that. He conjectured that manufacturers have largely ignored the workforce paradigm shift from a tribe of office drones to a dynamic diaspora of mobile workers. “Since the birth of this industry, we’ve been tethered to the workplace by machines,” he explained. “Now, for the first time, we can choose to work *outside* the office. So why do offices even need to exist today?” As an industry, we have to figure out how to create spaces in which people want to work. We have an opportunity—but also an obligation—to reshape the way work happens. “If we don’t create a space that is better than any other space people can work in,” Kirkbride said, “they will choose to go elsewhere. And we are doomed.”

He earmarked two growth areas for manufacturers: 1) furniture that integrates technology and 2) affordable, function-intensive furnishings for the home office/small office market. “Yes, it’s harder to sell \$1,000 individual workstations for the home than it is to sell a full floor of them to a corporate

### ROB KIRKBRIDE’S ECONOMIC FORECAST

The contract furniture industry experienced constant growth from 1950—cited as the birth of the modern office—through 2000, its best year ever. Following hot on its heels was the worst year on record, setting off a chain of volatility that continues to this day, and that reached an apex in 2009. Despite that, top industry managers have done what Kirkbride deems “a pretty good job” navigating the dips and valleys. And conditions have now stabilized a bit; we’re up 25 percent in 2012—after the same-size dip in 2011. Although the current buzzword is austerity, there is cause for optimism: modest job growth, low interest rates, housing is rebounding, the China growth rate is stabilizing, corporate earnings are expected to rise, Europe could finally be bottoming out. Although the federal government has been on an austerity plan for some time, there’s rumor of a slight rebound on the state and local level. And the forecast for the construction industry is generally positive, as is the outlook for health care, retail, office and hospitality. For our industry, the growth prediction is 8-18 percent. The trick, said Kirkbride, will be convincing companies to start spending money.

client, but there's a massive opportunity that's being missed by the industry," Kirkbride said.

So what type of space does the modern, mobile workforce want to work in, and how does it need to function? How do clients need their work spaces to perform? How should such spaces be furnished? And how can we envision office environments that better support our portable-technology-enhanced work styles, rituals and habits—and, indeed, improve them? Some characteristics to consider:

## Parallel play

Implicit in Maddox's "collective work space" model is an interest in being around others. Despite the digitization of every facet of our work and personal lives—or, perhaps, because of it—face-to-face human interaction has never been more precious. But the desired mode of interaction is often more passive than active. Workers want to feel part of a community but also independent; they want to be attached yet detached. Proximate to others, but doing their own thing, like the grown-up version of toddlers' parallel play. "A lot of osmosis goes on by being in the work environment," noted Jennifer Busch, Hon. IIDA, Interface Vice President A&D Market Development. "There's just something about being connected to other people."

## Oasis

One thing that we need in our lives—and by extension, our work spaces—is a refuge from the "swirling vortex." That could mean carving out a sphere of personal space, like plugging in to an iPod or creating a zone in the office proper that provides a sense of respite. Williamson and Durst likened the vibe of last fall's Orgatec to "being in a felt womb," with enveloping furnishings that offered a tactile and sonorous experience and conjured a powerful feeling of refuge. "BuzziSpace was the mac and cheese of furniture: It was totally comfy and encompassing," Durst recalled.

This notion of sanctuary flies in the face of (and is largely a corrective to) last year's *mot du jour*, collaboration. As rising real-estate prices forced clients to devote less and less square footage to assigned private space and more to common areas, the balance may have tipped too far. "Once

upon a time, you went to a conference room to collaborate," explains Alan Almasy, Director of A+D Programs and Marketing at Herman Miller. "Now collaboration occurs out in the open, so people use the conference room for solo work."

## Mobile 2.0

As employees get more mobile vis-à-vis the office, they require more mobility *within* the office, too. They want to choose between working at their desks, a meeting room, or various types of common space at any given moment. "Although we've had mobile devices for many years now, we weren't able to take complete advantage of them because of our reliance on infrastructure," noted Doug Shapiro, Brand Manager of OFS Brands. "Now, with the cloud, we're finally untethered. You can come together to work as a team, and then break apart and work on the project individually somewhere else."

The most mobile employee populace of all is, of course, the youngest working generation: Millennials. This demographic

### PROTECTION AND DETECTION

As wireless technology like the cloud liberates us from physical infrastructure, it constrains us in other ways. With mobility come safety concerns: namely, the need to protect our data. As more companies adopt a "bring your own device" policy, malware can easily migrate from personal portable electronics to the office network. Importing contacts—generally a mix of personal and business—from one application into another is a massive security issue as well. And server farms and data-storage facilities—what we know collectively as "the cloud"—need to be protected from heat, water, dust and other antagonists.

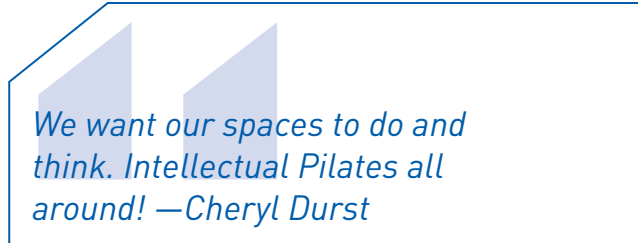
Design challenges will emanate from these issues—and so will employment. The majority of new jobs in 2013 will be in one of three areas: protection, detection and disruption. Our healthcare industry is slowly migrating from "sick care" to a preventative-care model focused on early disease detection, noted Durst. She added that 60 percent of companies are making real-estate and investment decisions based on climate; in the wake of last fall's Hurricane Sandy, waterfront locations are becoming less desirable. "We need to consider not just security as we typically think of it, but also financial, risk management, protecting IT and protecting sources from a range of risks: geopolitical, economic and ethical."

also happens to exert a disproportionately large influence on how spaces get designed—“even if we know they’re going to leave the company in three years,” said Stacy Walker, Milliken’s Director of Marketing Communications. “The power of one is much stronger than before, and that voice is influencing how we set up our spaces.” That is: for young, upwardly mobile, socially mediated technocrats.

Mobility within the workplace will be increasingly important to nurture as workers who once tele-commuted return to the office proper. In February, Internet company Yahoo—a pioneer of mobile culture—announced that staffers who work from home would no longer be permitted to do so. Although this announcement was widely interpreted as a death knell for mobility, the decision only affirms what the office proper is good for: It’s a locus of collaboration, innovation and idea sharing. In the wake of Yahoo’s announcement, other companies will no doubt be revisiting their own telecommuting policies, and as a result corporate headquarters will have to better accommodate the habits and rituals of employees used to a free-range work style.

## Agility

Now that real-estate square footage per person has seemingly bottomed out, how do we eke more function out of spaces? “It turned out that communal space takes up as much room as assigned private space,” noted Huntsman’s Sascha Wagner, IIDA. “Now, the only way to save money is for spaces to perform multiple functions.” We need spaces that are modular. That work harder. That support solo work *and* collaboration. That offer opportunities for respite *and* interaction. If we can’t do more *with* less, we need to do more *in* less. We need our work spaces to be adaptable, flexible, nimble, agile, multipurpose. And not just in the moment, but also over time: Those spaces must anticipate future needs by being reconfigurable or adaptable to suit new uses and technologies as they emerge.



*We want our spaces to do and think. Intellectual Pilates all around! —Cheryl Durst*

## III. Get your game on

Our physical surroundings will be increasingly shaped by virtual environments, a phenomenon that—like the Internet itself—is still in its infancy. “The physical environment will never go away,” said Williamson. “But the virtual might become so ideal that it will affect how the real/physical is created.” Over the course of the weekend, discussion often turned to “spaces” experienced solely online. Durst, for instance, mentioned that Colorado Technical University, headquartered next door to the Mart, is exploring how to create virtual rooms for students to meet with their online advisors. “That the space will be virtual makes it no less real, and someone still has to design that room so that it works,” she said. Further proof of the hegemony of the virtual: The online/video gaming industry is actively recruiting interior design students. In 2013-2014, an estimated 20-25 percent of interior design graduates will enter the field.

The ascendance of virtual environments complicates legal and financial issues, matters of compensation and intellectual property in particular. Designers and manufacturers need to somehow safeguard their contributions to cyberspace. Herman Miller got involved in Second Life early, licensing its products to the company for this very reason. “We realized that our designs could end up there digitally even without our consent,” Almsay says. “We wanted to protect them and ensure that we’d get comped.”

Virtuality and gaming will affect not just how spaces are designed, but also how those spaces are evaluated and held accountable. “The world of gaming is transforming business; 70 percent of Global 1000 companies use gaming theory in a business-enterprise application,” Durst says. “The idea behind it is transparency of work: It’s

a continuous feedback loop. It's converting action to outcome—to results." And what is a work space but an environment that converts action to results? "We see a strong move toward accountability for design decisions," said Sharon Folliard, Vice President of Tarkett. "We saw evidence-based design as a trend within the healthcare segment; now we're seeing an increased need for evidence in other segments as well."

For every trend, there's a countertrend, and in the case of virtuality, that foil is 3D printing. Manufacturers of this emerging technology were the three most consistent, fastest-moving stocks in 2012, per financial reporter Jim Cramer. Many attendees were already putting 3D printers to work. Rob Moylan, IIDA, mentioned that Smith Group JJR bought one for the firm's Phoenix office, and they've used it to build site models and massing for base-building projects. Shapiro mentioned that OFS Brands will sometimes enlist the technology to print small, nonstructural components to get a design to market more quickly—if they don't have time to tool plastic pieces, for instance. This fascinating technology, which is becoming increasingly affordable and accessible, will help us design 3D environments that take on new dimensions.

## IV. Be agile

### The agile employee

In the service of designing agile spaces, it's imperative that designers and manufacturers be agile *ourselves*. Shrinking budgets, shrinking firms, increasingly high (and often highly unrealistic) client expectations, and complex project briefs demand it. That's no easy task, given that humans are not inherently agile beings: We think linearly, we're completion-oriented, we are not in our comfort zone at the midpoint of the work/life dimmer switch. Shifting gears on a project-by-project basis can make us feel a bit schizophrenic: "This project needs this part of my skill set, and that one needs a different part of me," Moylan said, explaining the stress of being pulled in many directions. "It's a much more psychological way of working. You ask yourself, 'What am I going to be today?'" Too often that answer is: trying to be all things to all people. Interior designers acknowledged the pressure to be generalist/specialists—or "deeper generalists," as described by Anne-Marie Gianoudis, IIDA, of Gresham Smith and Partners. "To do our job well, we have to know such a broad spectrum of information."

Being agile can boost job security in a volatile economy. "Designers are self sufficient; we can reinvent ourselves," Maddox commented. More to the point, the first to get laid off in the recession were those who proved one-dimensional. Employees need a broad enough purview that they can capably accomplish whatever task may be thrown at them, while still having a concrete specialty that makes them unique—and thus indispensable. "If you don't have one quality that stands out," said NELSON's Scott Hierlinger, IIDA, "you won't make the cut if we have to downsize."

Or if firms or companies have to staff up, which most are anticipating doing this year. Manufacturers and designers both want hires who exhibit agility. Most value specific skills that are inborn, not trainable ("do they have in their core makeup things we can't teach them?" said one), and that are tricky to identify via the standard hiring process—i.e. a one-page resume and one-hour interview focused on the usual questions about skill set. They want employees who demonstrate

*Are you going to fit in—not just where our organization is today, but where we are headed tomorrow?*  
—Jon Strassner

leadership, passion, fit, maturity, self-sufficiency, high integrity, a strong work ethic, a sense of responsibility and ownership, an understanding of human psychology, an ability to mediate, a “bio-chemical connection” with others, and a holistic perspective. They want someone who, as Felice Silverman, IIDA, of Silverman Trykowski Associates, put it, “gets our firm DNA and culture”—an attribute that’s essential in a small office.

These attributes mirrored the results of a Society of Human Resources Management survey querying companies about what qualities they’re seeking in new hires. The top requests were brand champions, people who “fit,” doer-thinkers, and people who don’t need to be babysat but who go out and get things done.

## The agile firm

In volatile times, practitioners have to become generalists *and* specialists—and so do design practices. A firm’s services must be comprehensive in order to attract as many clients and project types as possible, yet specific enough that they become the go-to choice—which often means tailoring expertise to meet a project’s unique demands. Firms have to be large enough to offer a robust scope of services, yet small enough to offer personalized service, be quick on their feet, and not be financially overextended. They need to have breadth and depth.

All of which has affected how studios are structuring themselves. Stacy Reed, IIDA, noted that Gensler—currently 42 locations strong—is now opening smaller satellites that aren’t necessarily full-blown offices. This allows the firm a certain omnipresence while minimizing overhead and commitment to untested markets. And more practices are engaging consultants versus full-timers, whether outside experts, in-house temps, or specialists “borrowed” from sister offices. The latter is often the case for firms with multiple locations. Gresham, Smith and Partners takes advantage of its own network of staffers, spread over 17 offices, as consultants. “So if we’re working on a health-care project in one office and have expertise in another location, we’ll pull [that person or department] into the project,” Gianoudis explained.

Other firms are capitalizing on the burgeoning community of free agents (those who choose freelancing for others over being sole practitioners), assembling teams of consultants on a temporary or perma-lance basis as workloads flex. Hollander Design Group is one; Principal Viveca Bissonnette, FIIDA, explained that a small fraction of those currently working in the office are permanent. This concept makes economic sense, saving employers on costs like benefits while also mitigating the risks involved in hiring full-time staffers. Susanne Molina, IIDA, of Klawiter & Associates explained: “Because of the volatile economy, we can’t project as far as we used to; little heads-up makes it a challenge from a staffing perspective—especially for a smaller firm. So instead of making a long-term commitment to an employee, we bring in people on a project-to-project basis.”

Some designers foresee the possibility of an industry-wide shift to the kind of consultant-based model favored by the entertainment field—one that profits both employers and employees. Staffers get the security that comes with employment while being able to maintain an entrepreneurial mindset. These free agents also gain exposure to different projects, work styles, corporate cultures and the like. For firms, the boons are more than just financial: You can tailor teams to a particular job. “You can hire an expert to work on a specific project, as opposed to a fitting a square peg in the round hole”—as happens when you are limited to your stable of full-timers, Bissonnette noted.

But a freelance-based structure could prove detrimental to the health of the industry, and even hamper creativity. Professional development, succession planning and firm longevity could be compromised. Molina suggested that free agents risk obsolescence if they become too complacent: “Unless they push themselves, they won’t progress. They’ll be stagnant and become irrelevant.” Expertise and knowledge is learned on the job, passed down from mentor to mentee, boss to underling, over an extended period of time. Will we be as invested in employees, and in nurturing their development, if we know that they are not invested in *us* for the long haul—an issue applicable not only to freelancers but to notoriously fickle Millennial staffers as well?

Further complicating matters is “an erosion of talent in the field,” noted Wagner. In recessions, “people move on to other careers entirely. This creates a talent gap, specifically at the mid-level, and causes a ripple effect of problems for design firms related to career advancement, project staffing, and succession planning.” We have to focus on retaining valued staff and attracting new hires with an emphasis on the opportunity for creative fulfillment that our field offers, he concluded.

## V. Take back design

The nature of volatility demands that we be agile: as individuals, as organizations, and even—especially—as a profession. Economic pressures force us to expand the role of our practices, and clients expect our services to be all-encompassing. And to an ever-increasing degree, they are. Manufacturers are doing workplace consulting and conducting research. Designers are staffing their firms with certified change managers, project managing (although not always willingly!), building graphics departments, bringing furniture dealers into the design team, and helping clients conduct real-estate searches. They act as psychologists, mediators, futurists, branding consultants and much more.

But designers are not always so good at explaining the full scope of their expertise and services. That shortcoming becomes even more urgent to remedy as professionals in related fields get increasingly savvy about encroaching on interior designers’ territory and poaching their jobs. Even the phrase “design thinking” has been co-opted by non-designers. “You have to contend with the fact that people think they can do your job hands down,” Durst explained. “Now that we can Google or crowd-source anything, everyone thinks they’re a specialist.”

Real-estate brokers among them. Jon Strassner, Humanscale’s Director of A&D North America, explained a prototypical scenario: “The broker tells the client, ‘You can hire a design firm, and it will take six months to design your space. Or work with me, I’ll space plan for you and get you moved in within 90 days. And I’ve got a buddy down the

street with a Steelcase dealership; he’ll cut you 30 percent off.’ Creatives get muscled away, and their scope of services gets refined. Designers are being outsold by a business-savvy group of people who understand how to present their ideas and the importance of connecting on a higher level, five or six years in advance.” Thus, designers are losing jobs not just to competitive firms but also to competitors in adjacent industries who’ve been able to communicate their merit more effectively, and in tantalizingly concrete terms. “A real-estate broker’s value proposition is all dollars and cents, which is easily demonstrated,” Wagner lamented. “Our value is much harder to explain: ‘If people spend more time in the office you’ll have better collaboration and productivity ...’ It sounds like a lot of hypothesizing. But if it works, it’s more brilliant than shaving a dollar off your lease.”

## VI. Arm yourself with metrics

Luckily, there’s no need to hypothesize: The impact of design is measurable and, indeed, an increasingly popular research topic. The academic community is conducting interesting studies that result in quantifiable, objective data; Carnegie Mellon’s Vivian Loftness was but one name mentioned. Significant research is also being spearheaded by manufacturers. The problem, designers noted, is accessing all of those findings; there’s no centralized repository of current research, nor an entrenched culture of referencing it in our work. “We don’t have one place to go to for the data, the metrics,” Folliard said. Added Wagner, “As an industry, we don’t adequately capture research that explains the impact of design. There’s not enough dialogue; information is not trickling into a communal understanding of the impact of projects.”

Ah, the irony of the information age—the information is out there, but it’s impossible to find. One solution: Visit the IIDA online Knowledge Center, a constantly updated library of intel, sorted by specialty area. Another solution: Designers could seize opportunities to initiate more research themselves. Practitioners noted that they don’t typically have the resources, in terms of money or manpower, to invest in such studies. But many manufacturers do: “I work at a million-dollar com-

*The effects of design initiatives on productivity, turnover and employee morale are hard to attribute, but the impact needs to be documented.*  
—Anne-Marie Gianoudis

pany and no one is approaching me to ask about partnering on research,” Chris Stulpin, Mohawk Group’s Director of Design and Development, Architecture and Design Segment Manager declared. (Hint hint.) Might it make sense for designers to team with manufacturers, commissioning studies that are of mutual interest and benefit?

During Saturday afternoon’s presentations, manufacturers expressed the desire to be seen as a true partner in the design process and a resource in their product category and area of expertise—and not just thought of as a brand that sells products. Some comments:

*“We want to deliver real value, not just backslapping.”*

*“We consider ourselves thought leaders and experts; you come to us for information about our expertise.”*

*“We’re message-driven.”*

*“We’re a conduit for market insight.”*

*“We are an R&D research aggregator.”*

Well, then. Designer-manufacturer alliances could generate a body of research that helps both parties position themselves as experts.


The frequency with which the topic came up during the weekend intimated an opportunity for someone (IIDA? A manufacturer? A design school? An Internet entrepreneur? An independent party?) to mastermind a dynamic aggregator of information that culls and curates research by academics, manufacturers, and others—and that perhaps aligns designers with partners to conduct studies on specific topics. A brain trust, if you will.

## VII. Hire a chief engagement officer—or just think like one

Bolstered with metrics that quantify the benefits of design and that chart how quickly those benefits will pay for themselves—ultimately offsetting anything spent on design fees in the first place—firms can help market themselves better to potential clients. Alas, salesmanship doesn’t always come naturally to creative thinkers, and marketing acumen isn’t on the curriculum of most design schools. Principals, design directors, and other firm leaders too often handle business development by default, and not because they enjoy or are particularly well equipped for it. “As projects become more complex, we need more diversity in a project team,” Enrique Reyes, Industry IIDA, of Milliken Carpet, says. “It’s so important to have team members with business expertise. The reason we have ‘lost’ is because everyone else has figured that out first.”

Firms need to have someone who can engage potential clients at the C-suite level and explain the strategic advantages that design can bring to their organization. Such a staff member could help firms get into the conversation early, educating them about the manifold value of design services before they even have the occasion to relocate, expand or redesign. Because, as Inscape Executive Vice President of Marketing & Product Development Quentin Kong put it, “If you wait for the project to happen, then you’re done for.”

Practitioners cautioned that it’s essential for said salesperson to have a strong understanding of the design process, something not typically found in those lacking a hands-on design background—which is another reason that principals often prefer to handle marketing themselves, despite the time it takes away from designing. “I’ve seen it backfire when the person doing the selling is too disconnected from the practice of design,” Bissonnette said. Molina agreed. “There are two different types of people: The marketing or salesperson can open the door, get the decision-makers on the phone, but they can’t talk about what we do. And the minute you have to pass that phone to someone else, it’s a lost opportunity.”



*We have the ability to help our clients navigate difficult times. Our industry is recession-proof if we consider our skill set. —Eva Maddox*

The opposite scenario—when the discussion gets too far without the designer’s involvement—is just as problematic, everyone agreed.

An arm-in-arm conversation will ensure that the design process goes smoothly, giving clients a seamless experience from start to finish, concept to implementation. Throughout the weekend, many attendees referenced a favorite quote from Maddox’s presentation: “Flawless function is tomorrow’s great user experience.” As Silverman explained, “We are delivering the whole process: the innovation, design thinking, and the implementation of it. Whether it’s separated into the management of it and the innovation of it, we still need to sell the process better.” Williamson concurred. “How do you create a process that gets you from interviewing to winning to delivery—and then have them come back for more?” Ideally, someone in the firm is devoted to managing client relationships.

In light of these complexities, firms recognized the need for a new breed of design executive. Asked what new staff role they would most like to create in their business—a position or a department that hasn’t previously existed—Roundtable participants described what Durst termed the chief “engagement” officer: “It’s the person who can listen and connect, who hunts for leads, who can translate what they are hearing and bring it back so that the knowledge can be used in a business-enterprise way. The person who can connect everybody—on every level—that’s working with us and for us.” In short, someone to help us engage clients early and take ownership of a fuller scope of services—not only for our bottom line but in the service of better design. Indeed, broadening the scope of a practice can help accelerate the schedule, streamline the design process, and engender a more holistic approach. Firms need someone who can help clients understand that the designer’s role is not just to create agile spaces, but

also, said Bissonnette, to help organizations “get their culture there, too”—something no realtor or designer *manqué* is capable of.

Having such an executive on board could also help designers gain more time to design. “Our best value—and the most marginalized part of our day—is critical thinking, shaping solutions that can transform companies,” was one of the weekend’s refrains. Living in an age of rapid-fire technology, people tend to react in a knee-jerk manner rather than respond with thought and deliberation. And depth of thinking—time to analyze—is exactly what we need to overcome volatility, to react to changing conditions more quickly. It gives us perspective and the ability to move fast, shift gears, and take advantage of every unpredictable challenge/opportunity that’s thrown at us. We cannot afford to not be responsive organizations, to curtail our thinking.

In addition, having a “CEO” could ironically help us create a better relationship with our clients. “Everyone is looking for this ‘crafted’ experience, to be nurtured and coddled,” Williamson said. “I feel like I’m trying to curate that relationship.” Indeed, personalization and customization (along with cheaper and faster) were words that came up again and again as designers discussed what clients want. “The way I market our firm is about personal relations, going the extra mile for the client; doing things that ultimately on a fiscal book are not right, but that you do anyway because the client expects a certain amount of follow-through and personalization,” Hierlinger says. “Clients say, ‘I want this space to be about *me*.’ It’s really about making their DNA more obvious than obvious in their space, so someone walks in and sees *them* immediately.”



## VIII. Infiltrate public consciousness

In order to increase the perception, awareness and understanding of design, the selling of our talents, expertise, and services is not something that should be confined to the framework of a transaction with a potential client. Elevating the dialogue necessitates demystifying design and its impact to a broader audience, the general populace. We need to educate *and* seduce; we want people to crave spaces that inspire, connect and boost efficiency—the same way they might crave a gadget that has the same effect. “Design’s impact on the end user’s daily life is similar to that of the iPhone in terms of increases in productivity, people working remotely having a place to come together, etc.” said Wagner. “Before Apple launched the iPad, I didn’t know I needed a tablet, but now I use one every day,” Kirkbride said. “We need to find the equivalent of that in spaces, in interiors, in furnishings.” (The phenomenon of the Aeron chair, many agreed, was one shining example of a product transcending its niche, thought of as not just an “office chair” but as a must-have luxury good and a universal signifier of power and prestige.)

Designers and manufacturers were quick to point out that Apple—lauded as a brand that successfully gets under peoples’ skin—is an imperfect analogue for a design firm. “Unlike Apple, which constantly educates consumers, we don’t have the time or the opportunity to educate our potential clients until it’s almost too late—until we are pitching them on a project,” said Strasser. Clients are only interested in learning about picayune matters of design when an imminent relocation has prompted the need for design services. “By then, the client has preset notions; they’ve already been educated by someone else who doesn’t have their best interest in mind.” We are then forced to play catch-up, versus “setting the expectations,” as a company dreaming up consumer technology has the luxury of doing. Said Moylan, “By the time we meet a client for an interview, we have to pitch not only ourselves but also what we do at the same time.”

We need to change that mindset, to make people think about design more often and more expansively—to take design viral. We need to think less like a service industry and more like we are in the business of innovation. Which, of course, we are. So how do we spread the gospel of design? Perhaps via a particular facet of social media that stymies manufacturers in particular: that it engages primarily on a B2C level. Marketing executives who’ve spent their careers fine-tuning their B2B messaging remain quizzical about how a consumer-focused communication tool could translate directly to B2B sales. But social media is about behaviors and attitudes, not necessarily about dollar bills. It reflects an aspirational life: what people are thinking, feeling, wanting and craving. Social media allows you to “listen and talk back,” as Durst phrased it. It allows you to familiarize people with your brand, eavesdrop on what people are saying about you, and engage with them. Perhaps Twitter, Facebook, et al. might prove the ideal vehicle for proselytizing, to spark what Almsy called “a consumer-level craving” of design, one with significant trickle-up effects.

*We understand the value of good design, but we as an industry have not figured out how to communicate that adequately to customers. —Jennifer Busch*

## PART 2: HOW MANUFACTURERS ARE TALKING TO DESIGNERS—AND HOW THEY CAN REFINE THE DIALOGUE

Saturday afternoon's program was a special focus-group-type discussion that the IIDA coordinates every few years. Each manufacturer gave a 10-minute PowerPoint presentation describing how their company talks to the A&D community, and explaining what tools and resources—from social media to print collateral—they use to communicate their brand and showcase their products. Interior designers evaluated the effectiveness of the manufacturer's strategies and methods, offering feedback about whether the message manufacturers *think* they are communicating is actually being heard. The conversation continued on Sunday, with a more in-depth chat about what kind of information designers need to do their jobs most effectively, and through what channels they prefer to receive it.

As the weekend's discussions demonstrated, a good dialogue between designers and manufacturers is essential to the creativity and vitality of the industry. Designers are ever-more reliant on manufacturers for a high level of information about their products—and earlier on in the process. "We collaborate with furniture manufacturers in a whole new way, treating them as partners in the design process," Wagner said. "We need their depth of knowledge to sell to clients as a team, and even bring them into presentations." Sustainability awareness having raised the bar, clients are asking more complex questions not only about the technology and life cycle of products being specified, but also about a manufacturer's history, ethics and point of view. As such, designers need better intel from their industry partners to win jobs or make a business case for the direction of a project.

Although this focus-group exercise was conceived as a sidebar to the weekend's overarching investigation of volatility, there was significant overlap between the two topics. As a consequence of the recession, almost every manufacturer was grappling with branding issues, having acquired or

been merged with other companies or divisions. A shared preoccupation was determining how to effectively articulate the value of their company as a whole while still maintaining integrity and excellence in their individual brands. This preoccupation informed everything from promotional verbiage to how companies present various sub-brands and product lines in showroom and trade-show environments.

Manufacturers also expressed concern that their corporate messaging was being diluted by reps (or, for that matter, retailers), who have their own unique brands and often their own Facebook pages. Reps' ability to speak a local vernacular is what makes them capable of working with firms in their communities but sometimes leads to their going off-message. In addition, many manufacturers were vexed by issues of transparency, and how economic factors and the social media landscape complicate their efforts to be authentic. "Are you being real and allowing people to question your authority?" asked Durst. Yes, but not without some discomfort. "People have different experiences with your brand, and they put that out on the Internet—and that perception becomes real," Natalie Jones, Mannington Commercial's Vice President of Commercial Brand Development lamented.

Also a challenge was remaining faithful to their core identity as economic volatility, the information age, and other cultural changes pressure them to adapt and morph. Many have rediscovered the power of no. "Our strategy is to be true to ourselves, and not try to be something we're not," Crossville's Vice President of Sales Mark Shannon explained.

Evidence of the complicated relationship between identity and authenticity: In their presentations, many companies trumpeted a "made in the USA" message—a means to express their investment in the American economy and to tout the quality control and service advantages of domestic

*Social media customizes the filtering process. If you didn't have people plucking things out of this river of info and sending it on, it would be overwhelming. —Jon Strassner*

production. Did this appeal to designers? Most were interested (so long as the pro-American bent didn't come across as too jingoistic). But some commented that a company that promoted products made in the United States might sound disingenuous unless it acknowledges what aspects of production *are* done overseas, whether sourcing raw materials or components.

Interestingly, the 10-minute presentations themselves reminded designers and manufacturers alike that a company overview can be as helpful as granular information about just-launched products. "What I find most useful is a reminder about who you are and your core competencies," Silverman said. "So when a project comes up that we want to involve you in, we have an idea of a solution first." Williamson observed that a "reminder-overview" could benefit his own practice as well: "I learned to not assume that everyone knows the basics about your organization. When I give client presentations, I jump right into the project. I realized I should probably give more background information about our philosophy, how we mentor and grow staff, etc., so they know there's a framework of an organization behind the design."

## I. Tailor your social media messaging to each channel—and exploit cross-platform synergies

Manufacturers agreed that social media is an increasingly important facet of their brand communications, and an opportunity not to be missed. A social media manager, they mentioned, was among the positions they'd most like to create or

hire. Yet many were still unclear about—and anxious to quantify—social media's value. The general attitude was: "We use social media because we have to, but we're not sure what we get out of it." And companies were still figuring out how to use each platform strategically so that their entire message resonates across them. One of the many benefits of the proliferation of media channels is that a company's story can—and should—be told in different ways through each medium. This is an added boon for manufacturers who feel that their product is less about "being pretty" and more about functionality, engineering or ergonomics—social media being in general less visual and more information-centric than traditional print media, which tends to prioritize aesthetics.

Taking advantage of social media's cost-effectiveness and power to target interested parties, many use it to augment and in some cases replace aspects of traditional print media, like quarterly newsletters and holiday cards. (The originator of the message—whether a Tweet or an e-blast—is important, though: designers admitted that they are more inclined to open a mass e-mail sent from a local rep than from corporate headquarters, and that such missives reinforce their business relationship.) They embrace the marketing potential of Twitter, blogs, and Pinterest, felt that Facebook was great for RSVPs and event awareness, and viewed LinkedIn as primarily a résumé site but posted articles there, too. They also saw promise in new platforms and applications that connect to Facebook, such as Instagram. And many relied on YouTube and similar vehicles to distribute promotional videos. By and large, manufacturers used social media to talk about news and corporate culture, not to directly promote product. Said one executive, "We use it to talk about everything *besides* product."

Although there are personal connections that social media will never replace, there are forums happening in cyberspace that aren't happening offline. Consumers, clients and the general public are talking about your brand in the Internet ether, and that's where you can listen in and understand how you're being perceived, Wagner noted. "That's better than at a dinner party where people are being polite to you because you've invited them! Online, you get the raw data."

So what social media are designers looking at? The consensus was that they are information hungry and seeking rich content, but also time-strapped and utterly overwhelmed by information overload. Thus they seem to use social media somewhat passively as a research tool—not so much for proactive searches but as a filtering device. They like receiving little teasers, which sometimes inspire them to dig deeper. Many touted the third-party endorsement capability, using social media to pay attention to things recommended, posted, or passed along by acquaintances that they might otherwise have ignored. Bissonnette quoted from *Small is the New Big*: “If you want success, you need to touch information-hungry idea-sharing people; social media is an excellent tool to do that.”

## II. Don't abandon print collateral, but make it more evocative

Manufacturers are transitioning the bulk of their collateral from a print to digital format, using the former to direct traffic to the latter. The reasons for this are manifold, from saving printing costs to addressing ever-shrinking shelf space in design firms' materials libraries. (Interesting side note: Although libraries are shrinking, they are often migrating to the front of the house, becoming more accessible, and frequently used as meeting areas—they're smaller, but more ... agile.) “If I can print it off your website I don't need it in a binder in my library,” was a typical comment. Manufacturers have been pleased to exploit the myriad benefits of online catalogs: navigability, convenience, constant updatability, less waste, broader accessibility, etc. Cyberspace is also infinite, meaning manufacturers can create more comprehensive materials that offer a wider variety of information and photography—from silhouettes to stylized in situ shots that illustrate different applications and even mix product lines—so designers can pick and choose what they need. (And the Roundtable made it evident that every designer needs different information and visuals.)

Attendees agreed, though, that while it makes sense to transition the majority of collateral materials to a digital format, hard copies of some things are still essential. “How do you print material samples?” says IA's Julio Braga, IIDA, rhetorically. While lighting and furniture samples are generally not needed on hand, said designers, fabric and carpet samples are. (It was agreed that, if full-sized samples could be had within 24 hours, then small swatches would suffice in a catalog.) The consensus was that manufacturers should not abandon print materials altogether; some physical presence is still needed in materials libraries, even if just a slim binder. Cautionary tale: Designers confessed that their spec'ing of brands that had gone digital-only went down dramatically.

The print materials that manufacturers are creating are changing, though: thinner and more evocative, or in some cases more hardworking. Milliken, for instance, unveiled a system of biodegradable modular folders printed with soy inks. And Stulpin noted that Mohawk has been developing new types of marketing materials that have a stronger presence in space-challenged libraries, including poster-sized folios with strong graphics and brief messages that serve as a Web teaser. His experience reflected a broader trend: Print pieces, though fewer, have become more succinct and impactful—and often more conceptual—while online content has gotten increasingly robust. Manufacturers felt that the Internet allows them to offer tools and processes that better mirror how designers work and thus makes the product more easily specifiable: 3D-compatible drag-and-fly tools, LEED calculators and eco-scorecards, and click-and-drag virtual tack boards among them. Designers responded positively to those features.

Some use aggregator sites like Designer Pages and Architizer to search for products; general Web searches, all agreed, were fruitless. For that reason, many designers are investing in online libraries, so staffers can search through the firms' own portal instead of clicking through a bevy of manufacturers' URLs.

### III. Fight for face time

Direct contact—whether in person or an office, at a showroom or a trade show—remains the most effective way for designers to get specific, in-depth information about products. It's also the preferred interaction method for manufacturers, although they acknowledged how difficult it's become to schedule such appearances with increasingly time-strapped designers—who themselves admitted that the onus was on them to be more proactive about staying on top of product information.

In what forums are designers and manufacturers interacting? Here's a run down:

- The one-hour CEU. It's tough for design firms to assemble their full staff for a presentation unless it's for a CEU. But preparing for CEUs is a lot more time-intensive for manufacturers.
- The 45-minute lunch: A more informal version of the above, with a culinary incentive. After all, everyone needs lunch!
- The meet and greet. This type of event—with firms hosting a rep in their materials library or conference room, for anyone to drop by—seemed the most common. Although easy for designers to schedule, the time constraints make it a challenge for manufacturers to deliver meaty information. "We've got to break things up into manageable pieces of information ... 10-minute sound bites," one manufacturer noted. Added another, "In a formal setting, it's challenging to talk about the specifications of a project solution; you really want to give more legitimate information. We'll come back again and again, but it's a lot of work."
- The wine and cheese: Similar to the above, but often with multiple reps in attendance. The added bonus of a booze break—and the opportunity for designers to stay later for a more in-depth conversation after the workday is over.
- Showroom drop-bys. Designers come for a 90-minute "saturation." "There needs to be a lot more effort on the designers' side to

coordinate this," admitted one, who nonetheless felt such presentations were extremely valuable.

- A "speed dating"-inspired event, with 10 to 12 vendors each giving seven-minute presentations.

### IV. Trade shows are not just about sales

Trade shows are still of major importance. Noted Braga, "For designers who don't have close access to products"—i.e. who work in a city with no design center and/or few showrooms—"it's great to see so much in one place. But we are so busy and crazy that it's impossible to have a technical discussion there." They take in information by osmosis instead. Accordingly, most designers attend events like NeoCon to get a broad sense of where the industry is moving. They are still looking for stuff they can order ASAP, but they are equally interested in the progressive/conceptual/far-reaching products and staying on top of the "latest thinking." Most design firms don't bring clients to shows like NeoCon, but they do bring a range of staffers, not just senior designers—and not the same ones from year to year.

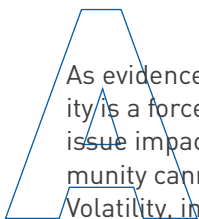
Manufacturers can find it difficult to measure the success of a trade show from a product-sales point of view. Nonetheless, they do see the myriad other advantages that shows offer: opportunities to energize, motivate, and train their sales force, have customer interaction, and reach out to their investor community among them.

The same shows appealed to both designers and manufacturers: NeoCon (and related satellite shows), NeoCon East, Healthcare Design, Greenbuild, various vertical trade shows. Discussion about the future of NeoCon—which could be endangered by the Mart's evolution from a design center to a tech hub—led to blue-sky thinking about what a future iteration might look like. All agreed that while an alternate location would change the very nature of NeoCon, it would also offer the tantalizing possibility to transcend the

limitations of the Mart. Would/should it follow more of a design show model? A European fair-ground type model, akin to Orgatec, Milan Furniture Fair and Maison et Objet? A rotating-locations model like the IIDA conference?

None of those models is quite ideal for what designers and manufacturers both seem to covet: a forum to present product but that satisfies from an inspirational point of view. Something that's ideas-oriented and inspiring but that also allows the latest innovations to be shown and seen—a happy medium between what we know as a “trade show” and what we know as a “design show.”

## PART 3: CONCLUSION: THE AGILE BRAND



As evidenced by the Industry Roundtable, volatility is a force to be reckoned with—the dominant issue impacting our profession. The A&D community cannot afford to deal with it passively. Volatility, instability and unpredictability demand a proactive response, and a particular mindset. Manufacturers and designers have to consider volatility on two levels: vis-à-vis their own firms or brands, and with respect to their audience and/or clients, who are grappling with volatility in their own distinct ways.

For our community, volatility is part and parcel of complexity. Both the design process and projects are becoming increasingly complex, which demands a level of depth and detail that has to be managed. Manufacturers and designers must become even better partners to each other, and they must interact on a real and authentic level.

All of us are facing the same conundrums: immense fee pressures, accelerated project-delivery timelines, difficulties finding the right talent, not enough time to think, too much information to think about, an overall sense of burnout, design services being reduced to a commodity, increased competition from all sides. We need to figure out how to deliver our services faster and cheaper—to satisfy our clients—and yet think more and make more money while doing so.

In volatile times, designers, their firms, and the design profession need to be agile. Brands need to be agile, too. How can they accomplish that? Here are seven things that the manufacturing community can do in the next year to manage volatility through agility:

1. Refine your brand, but don't over-complicate it. Have a clear and coherent brand proposition.
2. Be elastic. Balance a market-specific focus with an understanding of broader implications. Increased complexity leads to hybrid, multipurpose spaces and project types.
3. Captivate designers with your brand to get their attention. Speak to designers—the way they like to be spoken to. Communicate in a real and effective way.
4. Help designers deal with complexity. Provide them services and resources that go beyond product.
5. Take mobility seriously—and understand it in a more nuanced way.
6. Manage information and understand its implications. Sharing knowledge-based insights can thwart the commoditization of design.

7. Partner with designers on research initiatives.

This is what is required of designers:

1. Fight for time to think and analyze. Think big picture—and think ahead.
2. Make spaces that support how people *really* work. Support collaboration better—and solo work better. Embrace modular solutions.
3. Look for opportunities in growth industries: gaming, 3D printing, detection/protection.
4. Be agile: as a designer, as a firm, as an industry.
5. Proselytize about the value of our services—and our status as thought leaders—as a way to encourage clients to invest in space.
6. Understand that our role is as much about client service as it is about design, but don't forget that our role is as much about design as it is client services.
7. Build better relationships: with clients, with manufacturers, with other industry members.



## RESOURCES

- The World Future Society ([wfs.org](http://wfs.org)) is a fantastic source of information, a great encapsulation of what's happening in the world—and what's going to happen. This July, the Futures conference will be held in Chicago.
- *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do*, by Clotaire Rapaille. Why do people think, buy and consume—not just products but *ideas*? The updated version covers the phenomenon of global brands being replaced by microbrands that have different meaning to different people.
- *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, by James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine.
- *Small Is the New Big*, by Seth Godin.
- *Monocle: A Briefing on Global Awareness, Business, Culture and Design*
- Previous white papers: <http://www.iida.org/content.cfm/iida-annual-industry-roundtable>

## MANUFACTURER WEBSITES

[www.crossvilleinc.com](http://www.crossvilleinc.com)  
[www.hermanmiller.com](http://www.hermanmiller.com)  
[www.humanscale.com](http://www.humanscale.com)  
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