

ODAD Collaborator Sessions 2025

Key Insights & Community Definitions

On Data And Design

Year in Review: January 2026

About the Collaborator Sessions

In 2025, ODAD launched its Collaborator membership tier – creating space for active members to shape the future of information design together. Two collaborative sessions brought together information designers from across the globe to define our profession, identify our unique skills, and articulate why our work matters.

Sessions held:

- Session #1: Foundation & Community Building
- Session #2: “Why Visualizations Matter” – Defining Our Profession

Format: 60-minute Zoom sessions + Miro board collaboration

Outcome: Foundation for an Information Design Manifesto

Approach: Rather than presenting individual opinions, these sessions aimed to synthesize collective insights into generalized statements that could serve as working definitions for our profession. The goal was to find common ground and articulate what we intuitively know but rarely express clearly.

Methodology Note: From Individual to Collective

These sessions used a specific methodology: individual contributors first shared their perspectives through structured questions, then the group worked to find common patterns and synthesize collective insights. The goal wasn't to average opinions, but to identify the shared truths that emerged across different viewpoints.

This approach recognizes that while each information designer's path is unique, common themes exist that can form the basis for professional definitions. By moving from individual statements to collective synthesis, we create working definitions that represent the field rather than any single practitioner.

The definitions presented here aren't final or complete. They represent a snapshot of collective thinking in 2025 and will continue evolving as the community grows and our understanding deepens.

Key Finding: We Built This Profession Ourselves

A striking discovery emerged early: of the 12 participants, only one had formally studied “Information Design.” The others came from:

- Political Science & International Development
- Business Informatics
- Analytics & Business Intelligence
- Fine Art & Visual Communication
- Systemic Design
- Graphic Design
- UX Design & Media Informatics

What this means for the moment: Information design isn’t something you study (currently programs developing) – it’s something you construct from diverse knowledge domains. This diversity isn’t a weakness; it’s our strength.

Defining Information Design: Collective Insights

Core Definition

Through extensive discussion and synthesis, the group converged on several key aspects of what information design fundamentally is:

Information design makes complexity understandable and manageable. It's about translation – understanding your audience and making information comprehensible to them. But it goes beyond mere translation: information designers often shape the content itself. By gaining deep knowledge of a subject, we become co-creators of knowledge, not just visualizers of data.

The impact of good information design is that people truly understand. Without it, we face the largest problem in communication: the illusion that communication has taken place. The quality of information design can be measured by how many “aha!” moments it creates – those instances when someone moves from confusion to clarity.

What Makes Information Design Distinct?

Different from Graphic Design:

Information design isn't just about making content look appealing. The work involves deeper engagement with content that is typically more complex and less flexible than in traditional graphic design. Information designers structure information, make editorial decisions, and often deliver greater value for internal processes than purely aesthetic design work.

Different from Data Analysis:

While data analysis focuses on extracting insights from data, information design encompasses presentation and interpretation in visual ways that allow audiences to draw their own conclusions and determine their own calls to action. Information designers combine the analyst's interest in content with the designer's understanding of what works for users. Compared to graphic designers, information designers have the patience to analyze complex content. Compared to analysts, they possess knowledge about what design approaches work effectively for different audiences.

The Political Dimension:

The group recognized that information visualization functions as a political tool – it enables people and institutions to debate, make decisions, and ultimately act on reality. This power comes with responsibility, as visualization can be used to illuminate or to manipulate.

The Process Philosophy

The group identified a shared approach that could be summarized as: transforming question marks into exclamation marks. Information design distills the essential from the complex and presents it in ways that are understandable, compelling, appealing, and memorable. The goal is not just that the message is received, but that it stays with the audience.

Essential Skills: What Information Designers Need

The Universal Skill: Curiosity

One finding emerged with remarkable consistency: **curiosity** is the foundational skill of information design. Nearly every participant emphasized this, making it the single most important competence identified.

Curiosity in this context means more than casual interest. It's a perspective – a way of looking at information with passion for learning new things, questioning, and challenging oneself. It enables the continuous learning that information design requires, as each project demands understanding new domains.

The Skill Synthesis

Beyond curiosity, the sessions identified several essential skill categories:

Analytical Capabilities:

- Structural thinking and pattern recognition
- Critical thinking (recognizing that data representations are always “selections” that include some things and exclude others)
- Ability to analyze both text and numbers
- Understanding of data, statistics, and potential biases

Creative Capabilities:

- Design understanding across graphics, systems, typography, and interaction
- Ability to simplify and abstract in appropriate ways
- Creativity in finding new ways to visualize data
- Spatial imagination

Communication Capabilities:

- Storytelling skills
- Empathy with audiences
- Active listening
- Ability to transform abstract concepts into tangible visual forms

The Unique Balance

What distinguishes information designers is the ability to hold seemingly opposite qualities in balance: being highly structured while also designing with intuition and feeling. Making content decisions while designing, rather than treating design as a separate, downstream activity.

This combination of analytical depth with creative expression, technical skill with empathetic communication, creates a unique professional profile that can't be reduced to either "designer" or "analyst."

What Motivates Information Designers

The “Aha!” Moment as Primary Reward

The most consistent motivation identified was creating clarity – that moment when patterns emerge from messy data, when insights become visible, and when audiences move from confusion to understanding. This “aha!” effect represents both the goal and the reward of the work.

The Learning Process

Information designers are motivated by their own learning journey. Transforming data into visuals is like observational drawing – the process itself deepens understanding. Each project serves dual purposes: it creates understanding for the audience while expanding the designer’s own knowledge.

Making a Difference

Beyond the immediate satisfaction of clarity, information designers are driven by the belief that their work creates positive change. The goal is to help people understand complex connections, to make better decisions, and ideally to become better informed citizens and decision-makers.

Good information design connects people through shared understanding. It combines the pursuit of beauty with the pursuit of knowledge, recognizing that these aren’t separate goals but intertwined values.

Creative and Intellectual Satisfaction

The work offers satisfaction similar to creating a well-crafted novel or piece of art – the pleasure of knowing you’ve reached an audience and potentially made a difference. There’s joy in the craft itself, separate from the impact, though both matter.

The Impact of Good Information Design

Immediate Outcomes

Understanding and Engagement:

When information design succeeds, people genuinely understand the content – not just superficially, but in ways that enable them to discuss it, question it, and apply it. Well-designed information motivates people to engage with topics they might otherwise avoid.

Active Use:

Successful information design becomes a tool that people actively use. Graphics become communication instruments that audiences point to, reference, and use to explain their own perspectives.

Long-term Effects

Memorable Mental Models:

Good information design creates images that people store in their minds. These become the mental models they return to when thinking about a topic. When these visualizations are fact-based, they help spread accurate knowledge over time.

Sustained Value:

The true reward often comes not immediately after project completion, but when a product continues to function well over extended periods. When projects inspire others in the field, that represents another form of long-term impact.

Functional Improvements

Decision Quality:

Information design brings clarity and meaning to complex data, helping people see, understand, and decide better. In practical applications like wayfinding or data interfaces, good information design improves user experiences across multiple dimensions: usability, enjoyment, speed, precision, and comprehension.

Call to Action:

Effective information design evokes reactions and prompts lasting discussions. It can create powerful “so what” effects – moments when understanding converts to action that gets shared and acted upon.

The Challenge of Measuring Impact

The group wrestled with a fundamental challenge: how do we measure the impact of information design?

The Attribution Problem:

There are significant attribution challenges when measuring communication tools' impact. How do you determine what exactly convinced someone, especially when a design might be one of many influences?

Beyond Traditional Metrics:

The group suggested that information designers might need to look beyond Human-Computer Interaction metrics to social sciences for frameworks on measuring communication impact. Impact measurement itself needs to be designed – it's not something that automatically emerges.

Accepting Anecdotal Evidence:

Perhaps information designers need to accept that evidence of impact is often anecdotal: a satisfied client, compliments from target audiences, before-and-after examples that demonstrate change. These qualitative measures, while not scientifically rigorous, represent real value.

Collective Themes and Working Definitions

1. Translation as Core Function

Information designers translate complexity into clarity, making information accessible across different audiences, contexts, and knowledge levels. This translation isn't mechanical – it requires deep understanding of both the content and the audience.

2. Content Creation, Not Decoration

Information design isn't about making existing content prettier. It involves shaping content, making editorial decisions, and often creating new knowledge through the synthesis and structuring process.

3. The “Aha!” Moment as Quality Metric

Understanding can be measured by the number of “aha!” moments created. This serves as both a goal and an evaluation criterion – when we create that moment of sudden clarity, we know we've succeeded.

4. Curiosity as Distinguishing Competence

Curiosity isn't just helpful – it's the foundational capability that enables everything else. It drives the continuous learning required to work across diverse domains and motivates the deep engagement with content that distinguishes information design from other disciplines.

5. Political and Ethical Responsibility

Information design influences decisions and shapes perceptions. This power can be used for transparency and understanding, or for manipulation and control. Recognizing this dual potential brings ethical responsibility to the work.

6. Learning Through Making

Information designers learn by doing. Each visualization project teaches about new domains, and this continuous learning feeds back into better design work. The process of making visualizations deepens understanding for both the designer and the audience.

Looking Forward

The Collaborator Sessions demonstrate what becomes possible when information designers create space for collective reflection. Rather than everyone figuring things out independently – as most of us have done throughout our careers – we’re building shared knowledge, common language, and mutual support.

This is just the beginning. As more voices join these conversations, our collective understanding will deepen. The definitions will sharpen. The resources will multiply. And most importantly, the isolation that many information designers feel will be replaced by connection to a community working to elevate the entire profession.

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Basel, Switzerland | Darjan Hil

These insights belong to the community. Use them, build on them, share them forward.