

Resilient Designers

Understanding Design in Japan



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Introduction

We are Hexagon UX, an international organization focused on providing support and mentoring to womxn and nonbinary folks. Like most design organizations, Hexagon UX typically hosts events centered around career growth and mentorship, and we were no different. However, after hosting events in Tokyo for a year and a half, we noticed that many designers often mentioned casually that they felt lost in their career path, not sure how to connect into the community or even unsure if they were actually a designer. We wondered if there might be a way for us to write these thoughts down for the community. Motivated to better understand the community we were serving, we started a research project to ask designers in Japan about their personal stories of resilience. We received responses from 36 professionals, who define themselves as designers, whom we reached through our personal networks and through cooperation with Startup Lady Japan and Tokyo Expat Network.

During this research, the coronavirus pandemic hit. Compared with the previous year, over half of our respondents said that their resilience had been challenged more or significantly more. In the middle of these transitional moments, we continued this quest, aiming to share unique stories of designers in Japan overcoming challenges with their personal, professional, and pandemic lives. With this report, we hope to inspire designers in Japan to learn from others and share their own stories of resilience.

What is resilience?

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, and challenging life experiences through mental, emotional and behavioral flexibility. Because we learnt that it also involves profound personal growth, we think it is worth keeping the definition open for anyone to build a unique concept to face individual difficulties.

What we did (to write)

First, we recruited participants via our professional networks and asked them to complete an online survey. 36 design related professionals based in Japan participated. Their nationality varied among 11 countries, the majority of which were Japanese.

We had in-depth interviews with 6 of those participants. Prior to the interviews, we asked the participants to respond to our daily prompts asking them to reflect on their own resilience as a designer. We sent 1 question per day for 5 days. In the in-depth interview, we asked details about their responses. The daily prompt included questions such as “How do you think your work will change, if at all, in the upcoming months?”, “Take a photo of your power spot, a spot you go to regain mental energy. Why does this hold meaning for you? What are other things that recharge you?”

After the interview, Hexagon UX Tokyo organizers CJ, Dorota, and Yukino took the anonymized quantitative and qualitative data and, using Miro, synthesized them into insights.

Participants overview (These questions were sent in April 2020)

How many years have you been working as design role?

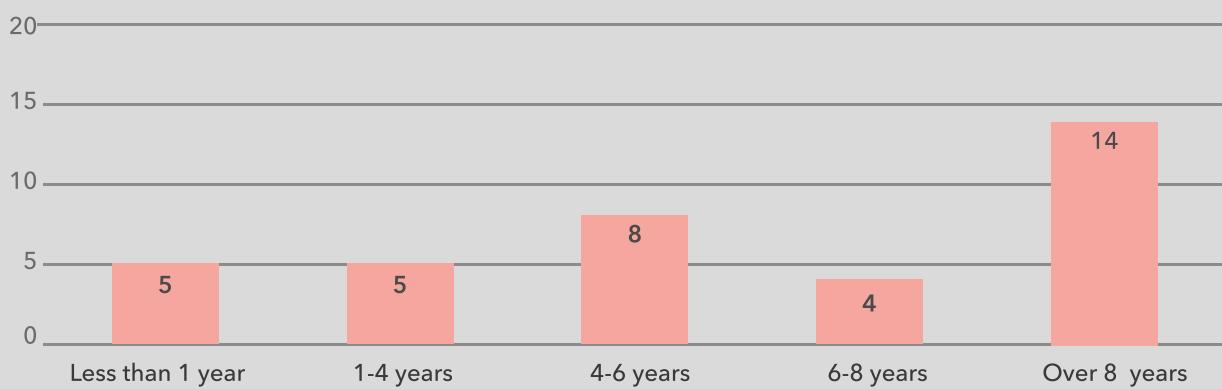


Fig 1. Participants' years of experience in design

How do you prefer to identify yourself? (i.e. non-binary, male, female, etc.)

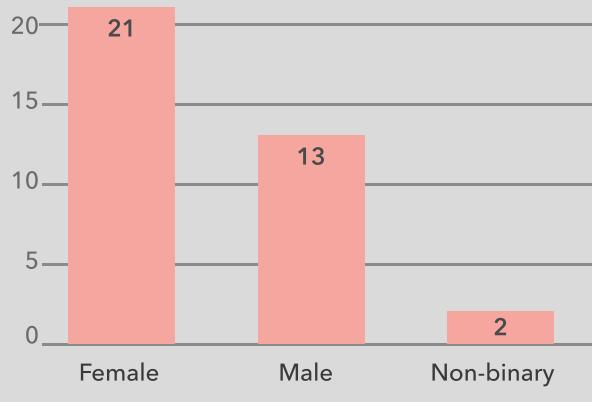


Fig 2. How do you prefer to identify yourself? (single answer).

What is the primary language you use to conduct work?

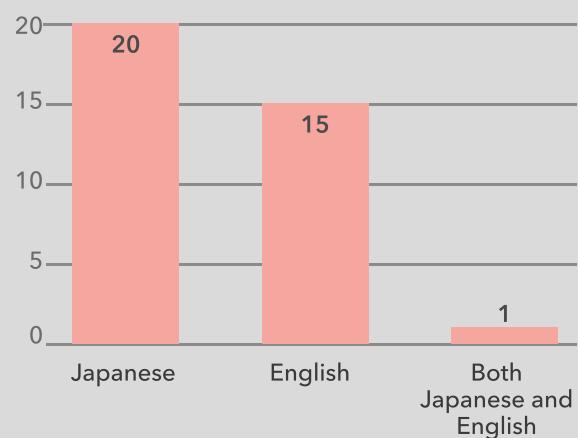


Fig 3. What is the primary language you use to conduct work? (single answer)

What is your current citizenship (i.e. what passport(s) do you hold)?

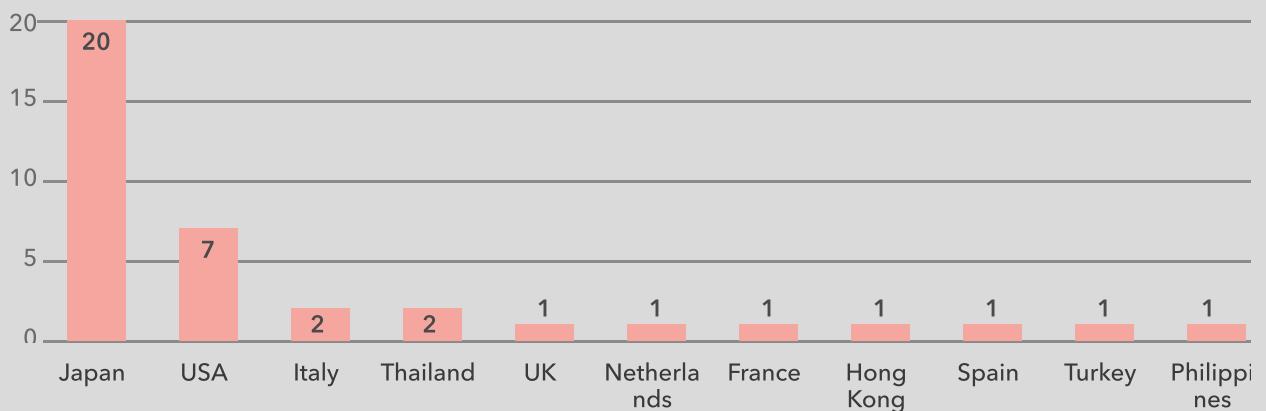


Fig 4. What is your current citizenship (i.e. what passport(s) do you hold)? (Select all that apply.)

Participants difficulty and coping strategy overview

What were the difficulty you faced?

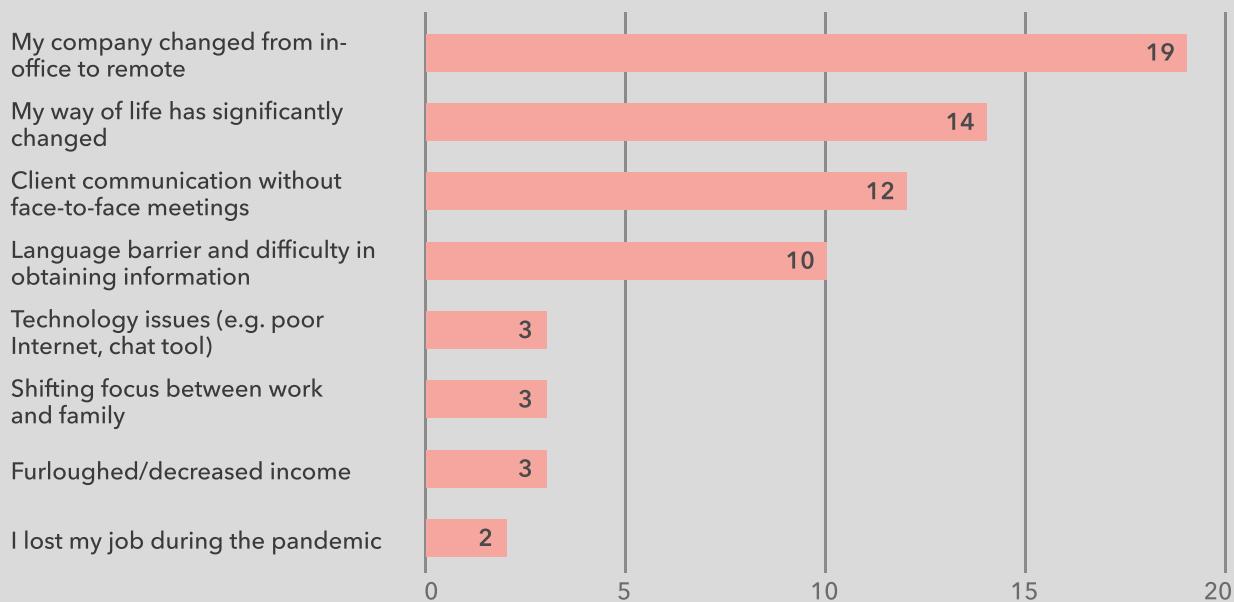


Fig 5. What, if any, have you experienced during the past three months that was challenging for you? (Select all that apply).

How did you cope with the difficulty?

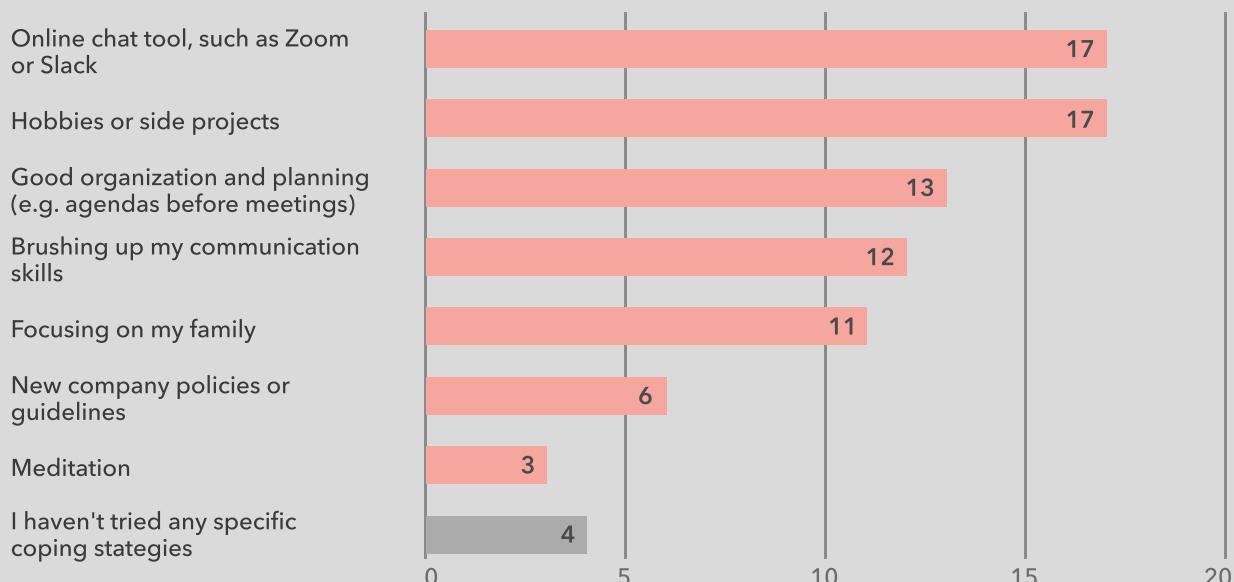


Fig 6. In these past months, what are some coping strategies that have been helping you? (Select all that apply.)

Participants resilient resource at work

Do you feel the resources you need to effectively be resilient at work?

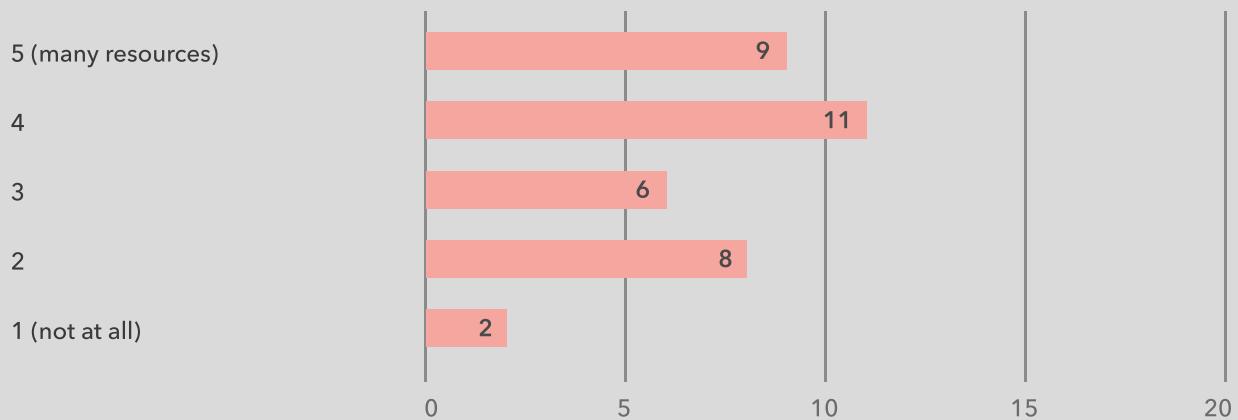


Fig 7. Do you feel like you have the resources you need to effectively be resilient at work? (1 being not at all and 5 being you have many resources.).

Tools to build resilience

Our survey began amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. Even though we decided not to highlight this event as a leading theme in our research, the impact of pandemic cannot and should not be overlooked. For example, we noticed that remote work was a common theme among all of these challenges. Many designers in Japan had to shift from working at the office to working remotely. However, we found that it was not the single direct cause of these problems. Rather, it uncovered and made worse already pre-existing problems both in the workplace and in private life. Another example is that to overcome difficulties such as their way of life changing, miscommunication and isolation (Fig.5) , the top coping strategies were “use online communication tools” and “Hobbies or side projects”, followed by “good organization and planning” (Fig.6). We understand these as flexible behaviours to adapt to a constantly-changing world.

Our data also shows that a significant group of our research participants felt like they did not have enough resources to be resilient in their work (Fig.7). In this section, we will walk through the details, pairing these difficulties and coping strategies. We hope that this serves as a blueprint for those who feel that they too, are struggling with this topic.

Strategy 1.

Cultivating your environment

Cultivate environment at work

When speaking more in-depth about how to overcome communication difficulties in their workplaces, the conversation shifted to how to cultivate a good workplace environment. Participants often mentioned cultivating a strong emotional core at work helped and gave them stability and a reason to continue working. One of the key elements of a "safe" workplace is a place where an employee feels heard, noticed, supported and free, and has policies that prioritize the employees and their family. Participants who worked in such work environments commented:

"Because I receive a lot of support from my coworkers, they are a source of comfort for me."

"I value a company where it's easy to get noticed and helped by management and mentors."

They said they "I felt heard" and "I felt like it's okay to take a day off if I need to." In some environments their work encouraged healthy conflict and had third parties to mitigate should the situation escalate.

In order to cultivate a healthy work environment, the participants shared their stories of taking small actions rather than aiming to meet a large achievement in a single step. Some small actions they took were:

- Not scheduling hour-long meetings but making frequent 30 minute discussion slots with their team. This way, they would continue to remain in sync with their teammates even when working remotely.
- When doing 1x1s, talking more about the details of their work (explaining tickets, taking design questions, sharing client requests) so that they could effectively fill in information gaps.
- Being proactive in seeking opinions from leadership, because their online environments don't communicate context.

Background Challenges: Lack of Shared Context at Work

On the other hand, we noticed participants having difficulty building healthy relationships with their coworkers. For example, the following is common under a virtual work environment:

"If I want to reach out to someone, I need to have a purpose. People expect me to have an agenda. Now it's awkward to just say hi."

We noticed that participants had difficulty maintaining relationships when:

- They were missing a shared comfort zone physically and sometimes psychologically. It seems to have been amplified in the virtual setting without regular interactions. For example, without body language or facial expressions, they worried what their coworkers would be thinking.
- They had technical issues, such as time lag and connectivity, so critically affected client communication that they couldn't engage in important trust-building discussions.
- They communicated across Japanese and English. Language barriers became more difficult to do, especially in bilingual companies. It is common in the workplace to have high context conversations. Though Japan is perceived abroad for their high-end technology and general artistic style, there is another side of Japan, the side that values "facetime" over video calling and sees drinking in a bar as a critical time where friendships are forged and deals are made. Some tech companies are trying to change this trend, but it is difficult to do so when their clients abide by these rules. The pandemic turned this culture upside-down by having "remote first" be the rule whether they had been well equipped for it or not.

Cultivate your emotional core

" Giving back to the community from which I came from helps me reconnect to my own humanity. There is so much designers can do outside of the creative industry. "

Many participants valued forging strong community bonds and making allies which was not limited to work. This community varies from design community, friends, their loved ones, and family depending on the person. Focusing on such a community gives them energy because it allows them to remind themselves they love and are loved. Giving back reminds designers about themselves and their principles, why they were inspired to become a designer, and reconnects them to their own humanity.

Background Challenges: Lack of Psychological Safety

" There is an image of 'work hard, work hard' as a Japanese designer. "

Japan is no stranger to the word "harassment." Both Japanese participants and international participants responded that they encountered harassment in their work. "Power harassment" is a term that is used when a manager uses their position above a junior to penalise them or overburden them with work. This includes treating people differently due to their gender, age or nationality to alienate them. For example, one participant reported that, "some treated our employees differently because they were female or foreigners or both. This ranged from sexist comments or unwanted advances, to just straight up being assholes."

Another mentioned subtle ways of reminding them they were still considered an "other" in the workplace. Even though such attitudes are changing in Japan, people who are perceived as "other" are still discriminated against, whether overtly or subtly, and typically this goes unnoticed or unaddressed by management. In fact, one of the top reasons for people to cultivate their own resilience was when they felt like a minority at work.

From our research, the key elements of a psychologically unsafe work environment are:

- Top-down leadership where leaders are unable or unwilling to admit they do not know what design is and as such, alienate designers from talking directly with users or overburden designers with tasks unrelated to their job.
- A culture that encourages burnout or working in the evenings/on weekends
- Aggressive feedback that personally blames designers for their shortcomings, rather than addressing the work
- Minimizing, blaming or outright ignoring abusive actions, such as sexual or power harassment in the workplace

There were designers who felt like they could not quit due to societal pressure, pressure from management and their own fear of failure. Some participants we interviewed felt that quitting work was their own personal failure. However, in most of these situations, the professionals we interviewed quit their jobs or were in the process of leaving their jobs.

The participants who did find new jobs shared that they had begun to heal from their previous unsafe workplace. When we asked them if they have any advice, they said as following:

"I thought it was a bad thing to quit when I was in high school, so I want to tell myself at that time that I can quit early and do other things."

Healthy boundaries between work and life

Mass teleworking has allowed creatives in Japan unprecedented freedom and control over their lives. Before, they went to the office because they had no option to work remotely. Because of health concerns during the pandemic, all companies had to, in some way, support remote working. Now, creatives go to the office for a change of pace or because they have plans in the evening. Accordingly, they pay more attention to where they work now than before. They try to maintain physical and mental boundaries between work and private life and this helps them switch between the two easier. For example, their work space is connected to the bedroom but separated enough that they can feel it is a different space. Or they spend more time making their living space more "livable" for them, because they are working from home.

For many participants, the home acted as an emotional core that grounded them and gave them stability. We asked participants to share locations or actions that calmed them and gave them relief. In Japanese, these are known as “power spots.” One participant said, “My power spots are looking at photos of my child and sitting on my couch. Even when I was working in the office, I often looked at my child's photo during my bathroom breaks.”

Many others mentioned nature or meditation as their healing space. We received photos of their riverside walks, their plants they grew on their verandahs, with comments that here, they can refresh themselves from their work. For many, being alone and experiencing nature re-establishes their connection with themselves.

Background Challenges: Blurred Boundaries Between Work and Private

The shift to remote work for designers has caused a blurring of boundaries between work and private life. Japan, culturally, already has poor boundaries between work and private life. Now, it is abundantly clear that when the two publics of home and work collide, they cause confusion as to when work “ends” and private life “begins.” Context-switching has become the norm and designers are worn out juggling different aspects of their life.

“Struggled to draw a line between work and non-work life. I feel like I'm working all the time especially because I have to WFH (Work from home).”

“My sleep routine has changed in a bad way. I was working late and waking up late, so sometimes morning meetings were hard to focus : (”

Strategy 2. Sense of agency

Cultivate a feeling of agency

Another important aspect of resiliency is cultivating a feeling of agency. What “agency” in this case means is a sense that, “yes, I can change this.” So what cultivates agency in others?

Our research showed that taking whatever action one can in a given situation was an important part of cultivating agency. We noted that moving the body or working on personal projects cultivated this feeling. Personal projects recharged our participants mentally and reminded them of their freedom to do things out of passion and love, not just obligation. They created a space to focus on themselves and their self-growth, and used this as a way to reflect and regain energy. Working on side projects also helped them feel gratitude for aspects of their day job that they would previously find boring or difficult to control.

If they felt they did not have the energy to work on personal projects, this was also an indicator that something needed to change to allow them room for self-growth.

“I find that working on my side projects helps me channel some of my passion into something I have more agency over, so I can view the client project more at face value and even if things aren't going perfectly, stay more focused on what is the best that I can do at the moment given the circumstances.”

This sense of agency and optimism helped our participants accept that changing circumstances are normal and helped them to become more flexible and adapt to challenges. We asked about their strategies that help them to cope with changes, and here are some of their responses:

“Resilience is how you know yourself. It's about how I know what I can and cannot do, and how I react to adverse circumstances.”

"I feel like...taking advantage of an opportunity, really finding the best in the situation. Like in surfing, if the wave that is coming is really big... you can ride with it and go somewhere you never thought you could go before. Resilient designers don't fear what people think of them. They want to raise their voice, use their environment."

Cultivate a mantra of flexibility

Lastly, we'd like to share a tip to cultivate a mantra of flexibility. Clients and requirements are always changing, as well as in product development, which goes through many changes over the course of time. Our participants told us, "it is important to remember that trust isn't just built in a day." A participant said they try to understand power structures, context around people with whom they work to navigate through and to build trusting relationships, because the system is bigger than them. Another participant recommended changing jobs frequently, growing, and doing new things to remind themselves they are never done learning.

Background Challenges: Lack of Leadership in Design

Designers in Japan tend to be self-motivated and independent, not because they are naturally so, but because companies in Japan still have difficulty understanding design outside of a visual context as well as defining realistic and achievable goals for designers. Designers at many levels "forge their own path." They feel stuck between what is the design process and what their company expects of them, because they are sometimes in conflict. And when a designer's only feedback into their work is either through school or through lectures they attend on design, they are unlikely to get feedback that helps them grow directly. The benchmark for what constitutes a good design process is hard to grasp and so to achieve.

One participant spoke of their conflict between them and their company's management:

"Management at my company misallocated me to projects and then I become upset because I am made to believe I am performing poorly because I don't have skills, not because of the misallocation."

There were times, they said, when they were put on a project without being understood what their role exactly was supposed to be. As a result, the manager judged them based on metrics that they had no say in creating. This can cause a Catch-22 in motivation, where even if the designer does perform to standards set by management, they still don't grow their skills as a designer or see their long-term design career.

When designers worked alone, they expressed frustration, especially while remote, in feeling "stuck" on either an idea or in their own careers because they didn't actively have the consul of other designers. When they couldn't find the right person to ask for help, some expressed that the only thing they could do was listen to podcasts to encourage themselves.

Some professionals ended up questioning their careers. "The ladder is much less obvious for people in my type of position. To the point where I often wonder if it's easier to change roles altogether," said one designer.

Afterwords

First, we'd like to say thank you to all participants for letting us hear their heartfelt stories and advice that stemmed from their personal journeys. These stories often contained their life learnings and personal principles.

Through this research, we noticed that designers have faced some common challenges, such as lack of context and psychological safety at work, blurred boundaries between work and private, and lack of leadership in design. We think there is no single answer to solve them all and self awareness is important to select appropriate coping strategies. We hope that sharing the tips we found through this research will help our fellow designers to find their way and help them feel they are not alone.

In closing, we'd like to share some final tips from our participants:

"Don't be afraid of being a woman in tech. There are many successful women who have opened the way."

"What is resilience? It's giving yourself the ability and permission to run away, to not just push through the pain. Remember that your core "character" is your true base as you're swaying left to right."

"Initially I thought that resilience was being able to withstand difficult circumstances, but it also includes creative adaptation. And we are designers, so we are good at this."

We'd like to express our deepest gratitude to everyone who participated in our survey. We couldn't have learned as much as we did without you. We are proud of our community here in Japan.

We hope this report encourages conversation on how to better connect and improve by sharing their own ways to creatively adapt in these ever-changing times. If you want to continue the conversation, please reach out to us or Hexagon UX.

With love,

Yukino, Dorota and CJ