

Hi, I'm Mauro Porcini, PepsiCo's Chief Design Officer. Join me for our new series, where we dive into the minds of the greatest innovators of our time. With the goal of finding what drives them in their professional journey and in their personal life. Trying to uncover the universal truths that unite anyone attempting to have a meaningful impact in the world. This is In Your Shoes.

There are so many ways in which design, the approach, the thinking, the training and creativity are all central to problem solving.

I'm quoting today's guest, the Executive Director of AIGA, the professional association for design.

Bennie Johnson, Welcome to In Your Shoes.

Thank you for having me. It's incredible way to start the day. It's such a pleasure for me to have you here as well. I, we got to know each other recently when you took the position at the AIGA and we had multiple interactions and conversations and in those multiple interactions, I, I could experience the energy that you have and the passion that you have for, for this job, but I think in general for life and anything you do. So it's been really a pleasure to work with you and interact with you in the past few months.

Likewise, I mean, it's just every day I get to wake up and work in this incredible role, but to challenge, uh, this new world, right? Of how we can use, um, how I can be of service to both the larger world and the professional community as well through, through our design organization.

You have a very interesting profile. I will ask you in a second about, you know, your journey, your story, but I was reading your biography in the AIGA internet site. And it says that at a certain point of the beginning, Bennie thrives in the connection between marketing, technology, education and innovation. And it doesn't mention design at all. And you are running a design organization. Um, can you, can you tell us why you decided not to mention design in that introduction about your background?

You know, it wasn't really a decision of not mentioning design. For me, design has been one those pieces that's always been a part of everything we just talked about. When I think about innovation, when I think about my role and past experience, you know, I started in marketing and strategy, and design was always an integrated part of what we did. When I think about education, design has always been a part of it. And for me design is that nexus that we talk about where for my, my passion, my experience in career has thrived at that connecting point. When I think about the ways in which design

has been a part of my professional journey, it's that magic that I speak about of that connection point. And you mentioned your background, you just mentioned some of your previous experiences. Uh, you don't have a traditional design journey. There are many people listening to us right now that are not designers, right? Marketers or business people. Uh, can you tell us a little bit about your journey to arrive to this design position leading one of the most important professional design organizations in the country, the brand design organization by definition. Uh, but again, your journey is not the traditional design journey. How did you get here?

No, you know, my journey hasn't been traditional in, in any way. Right. And it starts off by having an interest in these areas that there weren't paths that were laid out. Right. I, I start up, I grew up in Washington, DC, went to public schools and had the great opportunity to come from public school in Washington, to do my undergrad at Yale. And you can't imagine at that time too dissimilar places. Right. But my experience and my path has really been about building those bridges, um, seeking to learn, understand taking the inputs in there and creating something new. So one of the things that I was drawn into, I was always drawn into creating new opportunities, right? Whether it was new programs to help new businesses, new buildings, renovating and re-imagining things. And so that's always been a part of my journey. So whether it's been in a for-profit company or a startup, a professional association or volunteer work that I do, one of the throughputs has been thinking about how can we make things better?

Right. And I think a lot of, you know, a strategic design ethos is in that, how do we make things better? How do we come in and have our intervention? You know, how do we help guide people, process resources, culture to make things different and by making them different for better for having that purpose. So that's always been something that's been a part of who I've been as a leader, as a person in both the community and professional spaces, how can I make things different? So I started off being drawn to, you know, brand and marketing opportunities. That's where I saw the, the space where you could come in and make something new. That moved into, you know, startup spaces. I had a great opportunity to work at many startups who were doing new ideas before they became the normal. So I spent, about 15 years ago, I ran marketing for an online education firm for kids in K through 12.

Now we think about our last 18 months where that's ever

present, but I was working on that type of work 15 years ago. Yeah.

That starts to lay the groundwork. Um, in that space, I also started to come in and this is what kind of ties me into thinking about AIGA as a design professional organization. I spent a lot of times coming into legacy organizations and helping us rethink how to move forward. So this kind of idea of entrepreneurship, but within an existing space. And so for the last decade or so, I've had a chance to work at professional associations from privacy to HR, to business practice, with helping those organizations kind of re-engage with their members, with their profession and kind of build a new, and that's what kind of drew me to this AIGA moment. Um, so you have someone who's a brand strategist by training, a marketer and entrepreneur, someone who understands business and community, and who has been both, um, design adjacent, as we often say in our conversations. I've been working with in, through and connected to designers my entire career. So that's kind of how we, we move here and this, this was the job that, um, on paper brought all of those things together for me. Was entrepreneurial moment, a moment to lead and grow a profession, a moment to engage with strategy and design, all the things that I love and to your point that I'm passionate about.

And I guess, you bring to the table, all of these different characteristics, this point of view, this entrepreneurial approach, the problem solving approach, what you just described very eloquently. And then every time you deep dive in a specific territory to better understand the world, what did you discover in this journey within AIGA about the design world, that either you didn't know, you didn't expect before you arrived here?

You know, I, it was really interesting that you know, how committed of a community that, that we have in various spaces and it's not, and it's really not community plural it's it's communities, right? It's not a singular space. Um, what was really kind of empowering and it's exciting is that people had a deep love for the design profession. Now what became a challenge and became our rally cry was that in that deep love, we could see as an organization where we've had opportunities over the years to be better and do better. So that naturally fits into what I think about what can we do to kind of elevate and evolving and a dynamic community. So not long for passion, right? Not long for commitment, really exciting things in our community, not long for innovation, but what we were looking for is a way to kind of continue to bring us

together, to support, inspire, and struck elevate, as we move forward.

And that's when I took a deep dive, that's where I saw that there were these opportunities that, you know, some notes we could take from other professions who've been there before us, right? That sometimes we have challenges and opportunities. They're not unique to us. They may feel like they're unique to us in the moment, but these are things that maybe the privacy profession dealt with.

Yeah.

How do you create a new space? These are things that maybe the HR profession dealt with 10 years ago, or in many of our spaces we're following in the footprints of what technology did as a profession to be a part of leadership. So for me, it's been important to take and harness our passion and our excitement, our commitment, and expanded with these are the opportunities that we have to have a larger impact, you know, on our teams, our profession, the world around us kind of idea And that that's, that's, what's been exciting with me. And, and as I like deep dive, I'm always amazed. I'm always humbled with all the dynamic work that people are doing across the globe. But you bring to the table and very interesting background with the diverse experiences. And also you are right now, at the crossroad between the business world on one side and the design world on the other. This is the challenge, that we as designers, we face every day. If I think about my job in PepsiCo,.

Right.

We are building a design culture capability organization within an established company. As you say, where you are mentioning your experience. And then we need to interact every day with the business world, with the RnD world, with different kinds of functions, bring them with us. So many people listening to us right now belong to these non-design wrolds.

Right.

The business of RnD and many belong to the design world. So what would be your advice to the non-designers? Business people, RnD people and how... What they should change, how they should think or behave to better interact with designers? And what would be your advice to designers? What should they change and be, what they should do to better connect and work with the business world and the RnD world.

You know, the power is in that nexus that we talk about, right? This is the classic two plus two is not four, right? It's greater than, than that space. And I think in today's world, when we look at how can we take our modes together and create a strategic advantage for the work in which we do, right? The

strategic advantage is how we deliver against our mission, our goal, our aim, and that language works. Whether you're talking about a for-profit entity or a nonprofit entity, it's about how do we take our parts and pieces, the best of us together, to create that goal, you know, coming in, you know I spend a lot of my time, we mentioned before, as being kind of design adjacent, and it's this notion of leading with and through design, as our businesses mature, there's an opportunity for our business leaders to mature in the way we connect with those around us, right?

How do we get the most of our teams and get rid of the artificial barriers, right? When, when you're at Pepsi, Pepsi wins, Pepsi supply chain doesn't win and Pepsi marketing doesn't win, and Pepsi design doesn't win, Pepsi wins. Yeah.

And as we evolve, there's things that we can take in that journey. What I love about design, you know, and in our space is that is we naturally have those skillsets that we reinforce, we refine, and we develop that allow us to have the empathy to see other parts of the organization and put ourselves in that for creative solution. I think we can help our colleagues to the left and right of us by implying some of that by also being able to understand their roles and showing the value and impact that we can have through their roles. Right. So if sometimes we have a space it's not valuable for us to just place our discipline on someone else's discipline.

Yeah.

Right? You know, the reality is when we have all the seats at the table, you need all those parts and pieces. Um, design is powerful, but you still need legal, you know, design is powerful, but HR and talent has a role in that in space. And you think about how all of that can also integrate into our world. When you think about leading teams of the future, that's a talent conversation, right? It's that nexus of design and HR, we think about intellectual property. How do we create a brand? How do we create images? That's the nexus of design and legal, right. How we implement and how we promote is that nexus as well. So I often think of in our modern approach that both for design leaders and those design leaders in a think of it as not an either or, but a yes and. Kind of in that same, yeah. I, I love the approach. I, and, and that's why when I talk about designers and then in general innovators, entrepreneurs, because I really believe that in the heart of the designer there is the heart of the innovator and entrepreneur by definition. Or the should be, there should be. Curiosity is one of the

key, key characteristic of a good designer. And that ability to be curious about different worlds, diverse worlds, starting with professional, professional diversity. So I'm intrigued by what legal does. I need to understand what is the impact of legal in my, uh, world. I need to understand the impact of HR. And, and, and if any designer listening to us want to be in the future, this Chief Design Officer of a corporation, or a Senior Leader in any organization, big or small, needs to understand the design, the core of design is the starting point, but you need to understand all the different worlds and understand how to build that nexus. I love the word that you use in the most powerful way.

It, it, it, it really is right. And you're thinking about it with design. You're looking at all the tools that you have, right? You think about it as I often describe our spaces like a conceptual artist. As a conceptual artist, there's not the concern, whether you're a painter or a photographer or a sculptor, right? The actual means in which you work are not as important as what you're trying to achieve. When you think about, as a design space in there, you know, the power comes in when designers like yourself are working with the Chief Marketing Officer, and you're seeing the ways in which you get to riff off of each other as a great jazz band would work together. Right?

Yeah.

You're gonna just come in there when you're seeing these unexpected spaces that come in, like some of the ways that you're solving problems, that you may find that another division has a really kind of credible way of approaching that problem solving. How do we apply that to this space? I think, you know, for the teams that I've led pre AIGA, and even here, those are the moments that should get most exciting, when you take the mashup that no one would expect. And when you step away, yeah.

You have a very important, renowned, visible, powerful platform in AIGA, to scream this message you just shared with us, but what can organizations like AIGA do to help designers, not just being aware of the need of learning all their territories and understanding how to connect with other backgrounds, but is there anything you're thinking of that you could practically do to help them getting a better understanding of other disciplines?

Yeah, definitely. I mean, one of the things that we started, um, in the last 18 months and coming on, it's important for me that we are a learning organization, right? All innovation starts with this understanding of learning and insights. So we've

taken the last 18 months to build that into our new DNA. That we're a learning organization. From that, it enables us to see where the needs and gaps are. You know, one of the things that came up, we saw that recently in our research that one in six designers admitted that they needed help with understanding the core language of business. Right? So this is a space in which as a professional organization, we have a very unique responsibility, right? And it's about filling in those gaps, in the connected tissues that make us better as professionals, as designers and leaders. So we're starting to use this research to help build out program offerings, whether it's small business engagement certificates, because we see that 80 plus percent of designers eventually will have their own business. So we want to make sure that we provide that whether it's the mentorship and coaching, right. There's something about leading, working back and giving forward. There's also something about connecting with peers that's important and then moving forward, right? A professional association gives you that sense of that 360 engagement. We also see that some of the other soft skills that are really important to navigating businesses, whether it's a large enterprise like Pepsi or a small, you know, boutique consulting firm, that's focused on design. That these things are important. And so we're providing those operations, those operational spaces. So in pragmatic courses and training, these are all the new offerings that we're introducing and they're coming directly from what we're hearing from our community, but also what we can see, you know, the difference between the designer who leaves with a BFA today and then moving through their career to your position, like all of those spaces that happen in between. Um, that's, like I said, that's the unique responsibility and empowerment that, that a professional association has. And that's the charge that we're taking on to kind of fill in those gaps. Yeah. And now in this nexus between worlds, on one side, there is the design world. And, and so we need to try to understand to better understand the other worlds, but then there is an opportunity for the other worlds to better understand design as well. Are you talking at all to the business world? Are you trying to increase awareness about what design really is? VR and 3d packaging and nice products? Absolutely. Absolutely. It is what we're pushing beyond that. When you think about our core mission of AIGA and it's, it's a beautiful mission in that the core components are advancing design as a professional craft, right? This is beyond just a pretty picture. This is the, there's disciplines, science and

art and commitment that goes to the work, right? So providing the spaces in which we do that. The next is looking at us as strategic advantage. That's really where it's beyond yourself. It's how are you impacting your organization, the business, the enterprise. One of the things that's really important that we see is it's an, it's incredibly encouraging to have the conversations among ourselves, but it doesn't lead us to the end goal of advancing and empowering design, if the conversation is limited to just our community. So we're spending a lot of time engaging with other business leaders who are in spaces that are designed adjacent, but also other business leaders to say, design plays a critical part in the business's success, right?

Whether it's known or understood or articulated, where we're coming in is to advance that, to be able to help, not only tell the, as I like to refer to it, the case story, right? So it's the case study. What gives you the beginning, the middle of the end, the reason, the context, the metrics, how this affect in the business, but then wrapped in the designer's voice of this is how we went from point A to point B and beyond. So this is what we're working to. And what we're finding is that our colleagues on the other sides of the table are really open to hear this design case story, right? In some cases, things have happened around them and they weren't aware that design was the ample part of it. In other places, you know, they hadn't even thought about the design could be an ally, you know, a tool, a resource. And so this is opening up those doors. I think, as, as companies and organizations look for advantage, having design always kind of anchored with strategic thinking and strategic advantage really kind of gives us that in, to go in. And the last part of our mission is the positive catalyst and bigger impact, right? On the world around us. Yeah.

And that's, that's telling that story back, like we've made this big gain and this is how this all tied in together. This is a design story.

Imagine to have some business people in front of you, many of them are listening to us. How would you describe to them what design can do for them? The value that design can bring to the table. In an accessible way, in a way that is easy to understand like, oh yes, I did. I didn't think about these, but actually, yeah, you're right.

You know, I think for most success when we look at business, we always go to talking about the customer or the end spaces as the heart. Design is really a strategic mechanism to put you in the heart of the customer, through



strategy, engagement, and empathy. It puts you there. And if the customer is the heart of business, success and design is the heart of the customer, design is a part of this business success. And I think that when we look at how we plan, how we think about strategy, these are all things and skills that we refine and design. We know that we have a marketplace that is becoming more and more, um, hungry is not the word, but expecting of great and powerful design. You know, as a part of the experience, you think about organizations that are able to engage their customer and their employees through design do better in the marketplace.

So the results are there. It's not just a aesthetic. I feel cool about it. There's actually a move into the bottom line. There's actually a move into the impact that you have, right? The social responsibility that you're able to drive the way in which you think about the world around you. And this is not just for large companies. This is for small concerns, this is for a mom and pop shop, this is for solopreneurs, right? Those companies, we see those companies that put design at the forefront, they're the ones that lead in terms of the most valuable companies to brand. The most accessible and admired companies. They lead with the most profitable companies, right? Design is the throughput in each of those.

Now you start your, this role in AIGA just before the pandemic, if I'm not wrong. So, so did the pandemic change, uh, AIGA if it did in any formal way, for sure. AIGA is based on awesome personal content. We all remember, we love the AIGA conferences with thousands of designers we can part and interact with. So what happened during the pandemic and, and now what are going to be the impact after the pandemic as well? So It completely changed our world as it should. And that's not the big insight there, right? Everyone has been changed in the last, last 18 months. But prior to that, we had a change that was coming on as well. You know, I've often said in our conversations that with my background, no one hires me to do the same thing they were doing before. So I came into AIGA knowing that we were going to have an aggressive change agenda, you know, I didn't know how aggressive it would pull in and in thinking about this, the things that I thought about doing across three and a half years, we've done in 18 months, right? One of the powerful moments that we had is that we didn't have the choice to stop and have long conversations about what was needed. We immediately had to jump in, pivot, build and create, in ways it hadn't before.

And so the first thing we did when the pandemic struck in, we were all at a loss and what we said was, let's reach out. So I

did some of our first social research and listening, let's reach out and hear what's needed. And we learned a lot of things about our community and the impact. We also started looking beyond just ourselves and the world around us to figure out what we needed. The first pivot was a, not a passive or a toe tip into digital content, but we need to go digital. We need to go big. We need to embrace the fact that we are a robust community. So one piece of content does not work for everyone where they're on their career arc in space. And so the idea that we should be doing this, and this was our responsibility, that was a mindset shift.

And we did more digital content in 2020 than the organization had done the last four or five years prior. Um, going forward, we start to realize that there's content that we can always tie back to where there's a need or we're filling in the gap, right? What can I do to hit the greatest needs? And what can I do to go after the biggest opportunity, right? And it's that, that nexus of those two, which I think is where you find relevance, where are we helping out in the best way that we can, where are we exciting and moving to both spaces? Cause we don't want that false trade-off, that you need to be thinking about both now and the future. And so that was a change for us as well. Um, some of the things that grew out of it, our portfolio festival, which we've gone into our second year, it's one of the largest that you can imagine we do a whole week and it's built like a music festival, right?

That's a different type of way of thinking about it. We took the energy from our live events, all virtual, some of our sessions are one to many, one to the masses. Others are one to few, and then we have parts that are one-to-one. What we saw with this is we had people coming in who were not only a few months out of their degree, but we were hearing from designers who were twenty-five years into their career, who hadn't thought about a portfolio in 20 years, but needed this to make pivots. Um, that's grown as part of our content. We did a business conference recently, specifically for designers in our community who wanted to know more about that nexus of business and design. And so we're going to continue to do this going into 2022. We're going to start to bring back some IRL events. So we'll have some things that are in real life, but they'll always be hybrid. There'll always be a chance. Um, what we saw was an expansion of our global design community. Um, it was amazing. We started getting shout outs from people all around the globe to participate in AIGA. We've always had about 70 domestic US chapters and we've had members outside of the US, what this past year has done is it's

really celebrated and championed for us how rich and diverse a global design community is.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Well, you mentioned the key word in general, but especially in the past few years, diverse, diversity. Um, our community is a community where there is not much diversity in design, especially in specific categories. Uh, I remember from the previous AIGA census, uh, the number, the percentage of, um, uh, black designers in the United States was 3%. If I'm not wrong. I mean, the number that is difficult to understand until you start to think about this, then you understand why. Uh, so first of all, can you share with us why you think the number is so low and then is there anything the AIGA is doing? And I know you do, you are doing something that is doing to help growing that number.

Yeah. So the number, and they're, they're probably lots of theories while the number are low. I'll tell the personal story, you know, it's, it's not just design in our space that we have in there. It's those numbers reflect at a lot of creative practices. The numbers are low in interior design and architecture and other spaces in there. I started off, we talk about going to school. I started off as an architecture major, and at the time I was in the space, I was the only student of color, you know, not for one year, not for two years, it was a space in which we went in and, and we see that there are a couple of touch points along the way, you know, in being able to see those ahead of, I talked about the space and how giving and connecting to the, to the future, to the past, to your peers and within are all important.

You know, we have a space in which you see, we see people coming through design, we see young, talented creatives coming through and becoming disenchanted along the way of the career path. So from that first class to becoming your role are you see the drop points in there in which they're all these incredible reasons that have limited the space, whether this is accessible, whether this is viable, you look at it, a design education is not cheap. So you have a financial barrier in there, but looking to see if you have peers who, who are connected. I remember being in my architecture program and the majority of the students, there were second to third generation architects.

Yeah.

Right. So when I was coming through the program, I didn't know anyone to the left or right of me who was an architect. I knew very much about the history in there. I knew that I liked

the idea of building and creating. I knew that I liked this connection point of art and science, of art and engineering and architecture seemed like something was drawn into it, but there was no support mechanism and structure that sometimes we can take for granted that that infrastructure exists. And so you see that, um, where there's been lots of research and conversation, and there are stories many that are horrific in the past and others that are just tragically, sad of missed opportunities in the present. What we're doing now from an AIGA standpoint is we're doing the deep dive that you said before. We're pulling these things apart and digging into it. And we know that it's not one solution, right? It's lots of changes, both intentional in terms of culture and programming resources. It's lots of people working together, right? If you think about it, if you have an intractable problem, and this is an intractable challenge, when you looked at the numbers, the numbers are almost exactly the same as they were 30 years ago, right.

That shows me a challenge. That's not moving left or right up or down, back or forth, it's locked in. And so in order to do that, I think we have to explore a variety of solutions, different solutions with greater intention and energy. And so we've been looking to that where it's an education point where it's an aspiration point where it's a pragmatic space in there. Where are ways that we can look at hiring practices, where we can look at standards. We can look at creating a desirable career path, right? That you want to be in a space that's inner because the last thing you want is no one wants to move into a career path in which you're just considered for a number. You want a space in which you can provide the incredible contribution. As one of the leaders in our field says, you know, that they're looking not for cultural fit before the contribution. And you want to feel like your contribution can be a part of it. And we see people abandoning and dropping out of the process as well and showing up in other spaces. Um, we also know that I think the future is going to be brighter. I look at the programs that are going in. I look at leaders like yourself and leaders in other companies who are making these changes and you see those seeds being planted. Right. And you see the roadblocks being publicly and directly pulled out of the way.

Yeah. Well, one of the things, as you know, we put together a team right away, focusing on, on, uh, this specific opportunity. And one of the things we found out was also the lack of awareness of the African-American community, uh, about design itself as a profession. And then the fact

that it could be a real profession. I remember talking with some of my friends, designers in the community, and they were telling me, "well, one of the problem is that when you have the chance to have the fun in the morning to study, you don't want to let down the people that gave you the money, your family, or anybody that sponsor you. So you want to do a professional if for sure, we'll give you, you know, you would make money way." Then many people think that the creative field, you know, they all is the artistic field is a field where you don't make money. So you're going to waste the opportunity that your family or the people around you gave you. So what we're trying to do is to, to go to high schools and even before to schools in general, to build that awareness and try to make sure that people understand it's there,

They're so true world, words, right? And that's that tension point that you have. Yeah. And other professions have seen that as well, right? Where we have folks around us who have our support system and they want us to be successful and do those things. And you carry that double pressure of, am I doing something that's going to be economically viable, right. So early on many students, especially students of color go through this risk reward analysis. Now, the challenge we may have is if, as you said before, if you're not exposed to other spaces, if you don't know what's behind door number 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5, then you're making these trade-offs and decisions with a limited set of information. Right? So if we are not able to highlight the wonderful career journeys, the beneficial careers, the ways in which you're able to provide for your family, your community, the wonderfulness that it is to be a designer and design professional.

If that's behind door number six and no one ever gets there, then you don't see what's possible. Right. And then you're actually fighting against those tides, that on the surface are, I'm trying to do the right thing. You know, you think about it when you're, when you're a young student. And I remember being, being at high school, just, you know, as we make this a personal In Your Shoes conversation, no one ever paused and said, do you want to be a designer? They're like, "You're really smart. Do you want to be a lawyer or a doctor?".

Yeah.

That was the social construct, right? If you're smart, this is what you do. Now, as time has gone on, we've added engineering to the list, right? But those are the conversations. And these are those real spaces in which it makes sense to be engaged both in high school but also when you're in college. You know, we've had some in, I look at my Board of Directors and

over the last year and a half, we've been expanding people who've come in from this design nexus design adjacent. We have people on our board who started off with designers and then went into finance. So they have a designer's heart with the finance connection. We have people on our board who started off in civil rights law, but then move into accessibility in design, right? The idea, which is a dated one, that you have to make a false choice at 16 and 17, to be one thing in life. That's part of that challenge as well. That how, how do we grow into that space? And then, so since you know, the nice thing is professionals like you and I and ourselves and our teams, we know some of the barriers and obstacles that those behind us are going to face. We may not know all of them, but we know some of them. So how can we build programs and interventions and, you know, connection points to help them along those spaces. Right? Cause it's, you want to look at your mom and make your mom proud with what you're doing, right?

Yeah.

That's, that's what we all want to do. And if your family and community don't understand the power of design, then you have a challenge in that choice.

Yeah. But, but, by the way, these apply to so many different kinds of communities of people, right. We started talking about a specific community, but you are talking and you. I remember, uh, you made me remember a specific episode in my life. Uh, in high school, I was going very, very well. I was doing very, very well. And I remember, but I had this passion for art on one side and literature and writing on the other side. And my parents were like, okay, literature and writing. You're not gonna, I didn't. I come from a very humble family, not very wealthy. So I needed to work after university. In Italy, university is public so you don't pay anything. And the grant also, so I could access university because of that. But if I was in the United States, I would probably wouldn't have been able to study university, imagine. I wouldn't be where I am today if I was born in this country. And this is something that makes you think, even if I am, you know, people see me as a white male, you know, privilege. And I am, I am for sure. But the reality is that if I was born in this country, not in a country where it's through, um, you can go to college for free essentially, I wouldn't be where I am today. Now the story was another one and I just diverged as I often do. But the story was.

That I decided to, I couldn't do art either because we were thinking, there's no way you're going to earn, you know, so I decided to do architecture and it was, you know, the best

compromise in the mind of my parents. And then that year they created the first faculty of design within architecture that then became, uh, uh, degree by itself.

But at the beginning was really within architecture so by coincidence. I started design in the first ever faculty of design of the country, in Italy back then. I remember one after the other, my teachers, the teacher of literature, the one of mathematics, the one of philosophy, in high school, going to my parents and say, you're crazy. You're wasting a talent like this by having this kid doing essentially an art creative school, because they were like, no, this is smart kid, business, engineering. You know? So there was very, you know, you made me remember of this specific episode in my life. And if it was not for my parents, probably I would have ended up somewhere else. Eventually. I don't know. Maybe I will push back, but I was, you know, my parents are people of culture. I trusted them. And so probably they would have influenced me to go eventually somewhere else.

The second point I think is important. And it's a message that I always want to give to any, especially young designer. I did study design at that point, but I brought in my passion for literature, for philosophy, my curiosity to learn other fields. And as a, you know, I just publish a book for now, just in Italian. But at the beginning of this book, I talk about this idea of suspensions amongst different worlds. And so I always find, found myself very comfortable in areas where the most of the people, most of the times, are uncomfortable, in the gray areas.

Right?

So design was defining a certain way in Italy when I was studying it, there was, you know, the design starts in furniture and lighting. Then there was graphic design, art, architecture interior design. I, I saw instead an opportunity of trying to push an approach to design that nobody ever did before. And I think one of the most important thing that happened back then is that they had the courage mixed with the naiveté. If you want, of trying something that nobody ever really tried before, especially I was 24 at the beginning when I tried 27, when I entered 3m. So what I'm trying to say is any designer out there or business person, no matter your background, don't be afraid to try new fields, new path that nobody ever explored before and be comfortable in the nexus. I love the word that you've been using multiple times today, amongst different disciplines, different cultures, different people also. I mean, it applies to anything. Cross pollinate, everything, mix it together, blend it and build your unique or regional point of

view. That's to me I think one of the secrets to success. It really is. You know, it really is. And we think about that. And I like to go back to those stories about where we start. Our origin stories and thinking about, you know, you as the high school student or the college student and these decisions that seem, or conversations or expectations that seem small, but become either amplifying or limiting in our world in which we're in. And I think when we look at kind of expanding and what I love about design is we're not a profession that's closing in. We're a profession that's expanding.

Yeah.

Like the galaxy in the universe, right. It's expanding, it's dynamic, it's growing, we're doing all of those things. And therefore the career paths, the entry points need to be as dynamic and space in there. Like there's no one entry point, right? There's no, if you don't get on the design profession, entry point as a 17 year old, you'll never be a part of it. Right? That's the rewarding and dynamic piece in there. As we look for expanded diversity, because you may not come to design until you're 32. And you then, as you said, you bring this other wealth of experience that may have been in other things you're doing, I may have been in customer service. Think about how that ties into experience design. I may have been in engineering. I may have been in the legal profession, but whatever design allows you to bring the best of all these things that come into you. And what I love is like you said, you get the opportunity to, I can take these experiences and then reapply them, apply them again, and then reapply them to various challenges, you know? So it becomes a solution in a way to work for challenges that are small, you know, kind of the intimate challenge of how do I navigate a kitchen, right. It can be something that's more meaningful and larger. How do I navigate a community, but it can also be dynamic. How do I build a product that never existed before?

Yeah.

Right. How do I build, how do I solve an intractable social challenge? Um, and so those are the things that, that I get excited about. Cause I think that in each of those examples, there's design and the designer involved in that solution.

Yeah. At PepsiCo we are one of the proud sponsor of AIGA design point of view, the research, the survey that you did. And you mentioned earlier, you know, this process of learning, what was the highlights? What are the highlights of the research? Something that you learned through the research? That was very interesting?

It's been incredible, what we've uncovered, what we've learned



and how much more we have to learn. So, and I think you and PepsiCo, especially for when I came in and said, I have an idea that I want to do something bigger and bolder than that's ever been done before. And I just love the fact that you just said yes,

And we see what it is,.

But didn't flinch but said, yes, we're going to go through this.

And we started to say, first, we need to understand better who we are and where we are. So this got into how we've gotten to the point we are now, what is the demographics? What is the range?

What is the background? What experience then let's look at what impact we're having, what skills we need, where we're having success, where there's opportunities. We then start to look at how we interface with the marketplace around us. You know, how we have, uh, an interface with the world, right?

You can't be an industry by yourself, right? You have to have an internet much like you can't lead a company by yourself. And so the research enabled us to do that. Things that highlighted to come in, we saw that designers were more entrepreneurial by the numbers than you could ever imagine.

Like we, the, the notion that almost every designer at one point in time is going to be their own enterprise. Whether it's the side practice, that's just for passion projects or it's full on going from in-house to external. That was an incredible point. The richness of designers in terms of helping one of the things that was very keen, one of the first insights that came in at the beginning of the pandemic was that we could see that one and two designers were impacted negatively by the start of the pandemic. But in the same breath we saw a lion share. I think something like 60 to 70% of designers were using their skills to give back in the communities they were in.

Designers were using their skills in that moment of need to deploy. So it talked about the generosity of heart, right of the profession. We also saw, you know, the spaces where we need to grow.

And we look at representation. We look at geographic diversity, we look at background in space. We were able to get insight into things like age-ism, we're able to look into space and where accessibility comes in, just opens us up to also then look at how talent management and career journeys are happening in design, right? The career journeys of twenty-five years ago and not the career journeys of today. And so this research helped us for, you know, in a very recent, in real space. And what this also did is we've turned ourselves into a learning organization in which our research is not one time of the year. It's an evergreen approach. So we did the surveys,

we've done in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, kind of journey mapping, uh, the story conversations in space, and what's been dynamic is we're looking at the profession from all of these vantage points.

And that was why we kind of thought of this as the design point of view. It really is these rich and robust vantage points of design today and looking into how do we make an intention tomorrow? As I mentioned before, we're starting to build programming and resources based on what we learned in the research. We're also getting a chance to share with outside people outside of our profession designs impact through this research as well, to your point earlier, like we now have the data, we now have the anchored stories to show the impact that's having. And we've been able to establish an this year a baseline to look at how we're progressing and how we're working against these goals and aims in the future. That is, I said is what we wanted to do. We set up, it's a big goal. And that's what this research has enabled us to do. Um, we've also had lots of other people reach out to say, "Hey, I'm working on some research too. I've learned this. How can we add that to the mix?" You know, how can we ask other questions?

One final short question for a short answer, just to close.

What do you see the design profession in 10 years?

Wow. In 10 years, I see the design profession as one that's come into its own that understands the power that it has inherent in its skills and training and standards and that power to change the world. That's what I see in 10 years, But Benny, thanks for everything you're doing for our design community, for your vision, for your empathy, for your passion and for your leading AIGA and thanks also for being with us today on In Your Shoes, It's really a pleasure.

Thank you, so delighted.