**Computerworld**

**Tech hotshots: The rise of the UX expert**

**As the digital world shrinks down to a screen the size of your hand, demand for user experience designers explodes.**

By Howard Baldwin

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Computerworld - Roberto Masiero vividly remembers the moment in 2011 when it became clear to him that designing a mobile application was a considerably different effort than designing a desktop application.

As head of the innovation labs for [ADP](http://www.adp.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new), the $10 billion payroll services firm, he managed the engineering team tasked with creating [ADP Mobile](http://www.adp.com/mobilesolutions/mobileshowcase.aspx%22%20%5Ct%20%22new), the company's version of its human capital management application for mobile devices.

"We started out with a list of 100 features that we thought were awesome," Masiero remembers, but his team's enthusiasm ran smack into the collective disdain of the user experience designers they'd brought in from an outside agency, who deemed feature after feature irrelevant for mobile users, arguing that so many options would just confuse them.

By the time the designers were done, they had whittled the list of features down by 80%. "Their message was simple," says Masiero. "Less is more." In a mobile application, it is better to cleanly provide the 20 most important pieces of information than force people to navigate through 100 that they might never use. "We learned that you have to drop completeness in the name of usefulness."

**UX Salary Range**

 **2011 2012 2011**Low $67,500 $71,750 $73,750

High $98,000 $104,000 $110,500

What's more, Masiero, like a lot of other tech leaders, realized that in this age of mobility and user-driven technology, IT shops that don't have a user experience expert onboard need to get serious about begging, borrowing or stealing one -- an increasingly difficult proposition.

Developers with user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) expertise are hot these days, according to Shane Bernstein, managing director of [QConnects](http://qconnects.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new), a Culver City, Calif.-based digital recruitment firm. And it's a fairly recent phenomenon, he says. Between 2010 and 2011, QConnects saw a 25% increase in the number of requests for UX designers; between 2011 and 2012, the increase was 70%.

Salaries are going up as well. Recruiters cite starting salaries ranging from $70,000 to $110,000, with the upper end hitting $150,000 and up. [The Creative Group](http://www.creativegroup.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new), a division of Robert Half Technology that specializes in design, marketing and interactive talent, began tracking UX designers separately in its annual salary survey in 2011. Salaries went up 6.2% in 2012 and it expects another 4.8% increase in 2013.

"And be prepared for a local variance factor," says Donna Farrugia, executive director of The Creative Group. "If you live between San Francisco and San Jose, add 30%."

**Thanks to Apple, users expect perfection**

In design parlance, the user interface (UI) is what the user sees; the user experience (UX) is how the application behaves. Both recruiters and practitioners stress that designers need to know the latter as much as the former. That is, they need to concentrate not only on how a design looks, but on the whole "wireframe" of the application, and where their requests are going into the back-end of the system.

What's driving the demand for such skills? Many people in the industry lay the credit -- or perhaps blame -- on [Apple](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9137163/Apple_Update), with its near-fetishistic attention to how design, hardware and interface intersect. "Now people expect everything they interface with to have the ease of use of the [iPhone](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9108338/Continuing_coverage_Apple_s_iPhone)," says Matt Miller, CTO of Irvine, Calif.-based technical recruiting firm [CyberCoders](http://www.cybercoders.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new).

"Apple forces everybody to match their aesthetic," agrees Masiero. "The image of your brand is at stake in your mobile application now. Companies that have great design, whether they're a restaurant chain or a car manufacturer, have a more valuable brand," and the same standards apply internally, he says.

Moreover, as mobile computing explodes, a company's client base becomes both broader and more demanding of a consumer-like product experience. As Masiero notes, 10 years ago his company's sole target audience was the human resources department. That's no longer true.

"With mobile devices becoming ubiquitous, we have to serve 30 million users, from somebody on a construction site to an airline pilot to a hotel manager. And you have to create a design so that the experience is accessible to everyone, while still providing them with a sense of uniqueness," he says.

### High tech, high touch

With design at the forefront of everyone's mind, UX experts are suddenly in high demand and short supply. One reason they're hard to find is that the position spans multiple disciplines: design, programming and human behavior. "When you find that person, let me know," jokes Masiero.

"We do a little bit of market research, a little bit of psychology. We're synthesizers, pulling bits and pieces of different methodologies together," says UX designer [Whitney Quesenberry](http://wqusability.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new), who runs her own agency in High Bridge, N.J. and has done work for Novartis, Siemens, Dow Jones and Eli Lilly among other companies. "UX is like programming -- there's not just one job involved."

#### Why UX designers love their jobs

The job description is amorphous and challenging -- to understand a given app's interface requirements, user experience context and back-end machinations. But the pay is mighty attractive -- between $70,000 and $110,000 to start, recruiters say -- and the perks associated with a UX (user experience) position sound like the halcyon days of the Internet boom: stock options, signing bonuses, flexible work hours.

One recruiter reported seeing one company offering liquor in its vending machines, and one employer offered designers unlimited time off (in return for results, of course).

And UX designers themselves say there are other, intangible benefits to the position. "Money only takes you so far," says Michael Beasley, a designer for Internet marketing agency [Pure Visibility](http://purevisibility.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new) in Ann Arbor, Mich. "The work has to be interesting, not the same things over and over again. I like having fresh problems to tackle and the feeling that I'm making a difference for our clients."

[Whitney Quesenberry](http://wqusability.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new), a UX designer who runs her own agency in High Bridge, N.J., says, "The real perk is meaningful work. Why would anybody want to work on something where you spend the first six months writing about requirements and the next six arguing about them?"

Quesenberry's advice for becoming a highly prized designer with both technical depth and design breadth? Check out one of the multiple masters' programs, such as the one at the University of Michigan, aimed at people already in the workforce, or talk your way onto one of the hybrid design teams that are becoming more prevalent within IT departments and learn all you can.

The Creative Group's Farrugia insists that the more cross-disciplined a designer is, the better, with the ability to combine good design and layout background with technology skills encompassing HTML coding and JavaScript. "The ideal is this hybrid person who's both right-brained and left-brained, high tech and high touch."

That pretty closely describes Michael Beasley, a designer for Internet marketing agency [Pure Visibility](http://purevisibility.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22new) in Ann Arbor, Mich. He got a BA in both English and music from the University of Michigan, and then stayed to get his masters' degree in [Human-Computer Interaction](http://www.si.umich.edu/academics/msi/human-computer-interaction-hci%22%20%5Ct%20%22new) from its School of Information in 2005.

"That's where I got my approach to interface design," Beasley says. "The multidisciplinary approach taught me design, human cognition and usability principles and methods. I also got a good understanding of how organizations work and information flows. That made me a pretty well-rounded person."

That kind of background sits well with IT managers like Masiero, for whom good design goes deeper than rounded corners on icons. "I want you to be a wizard of understanding the mental model of the user and translating that into the behavior of the application. You have to always think about making the user comfortable, about not creating any friction between what the user expects to happen and what the application expects from the user."

"Designers who understand human interaction are one step ahead of everyone else," agrees Farrugia. "They are rare and precious commodities."

### Grow your own UX team?

With so much in the business world dependent on the success of mobile applications these days, most companies feel they can't forego development until colleges or vocational schools churn out more graduates with the ideal mix of design and coding sensibilities.

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Donna Farrugia, The Creative Group

In the meantime, they cope by forming multidisciplinary teams to stand in for one perfect UX expert. "A designer might not be able to program, but they should be able to have a reasonable conversation with a programmer so they understand the impact of a design decision," says Quesenberry.

Farrugia has seen these hybrid design teams form more frequently over the past few years. "We've been coaching people in the design world to learn interaction and Web and digital skills, so they've been adding to their portfolio. Vice versa, people on the technical side are interacting more frequently with the front-end team to understand usability, [personas](http://www.linkedin.com/skills/skill/Persona_Creation%22%20%5Ct%20%22new) and usage scenarios."

Beasley concurs that it frequently takes at least two to tango. "A really creative designer may help [the organization] make big leaps to a whole new level of quality. But the quantitative side is just as important. Designers would do well to get more comfortable with the technical side, to build up those skills and knowledge."

*Frequent contributor* ***Howard Baldwin*** *last wrote for* Computerworld *about [HTML5](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9234585/Making_HTML5_work_now_for_mobile_app_development%22%20%5Ct%20%22new).*