

Seven AI Tools Per Designer Is Six Too Many

The stack doubled. The blocker moved from quality to bandwidth.

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Tool sprawl = running more software than you can hold in your head.

The average designer now uses seven off-the-shelf AI tools. Last year it was three. That comes from AI in Design 2026, a survey of more than 900 designers across 60 countries.

Doubling the stack was supposed to buy capability. Ask designers what is actually slowing them down and you get a different answer. In the UX Tools State of Prototyping survey of 1,478 designers, the top blocker is time to learn tools, at 55.7%. Second is having too many tools, at 53.0%. Output quality comes third, at 52.2%.

You do not have an AI problem. You have seven learning curves and no time to climb any of them.

Here is what it costs, and what to cut.



Seven tools open. Ask which one finished something today.

1. The stack grew. The confidence did not.

What teams ship: Four more tools than last year, on the theory that coverage is capability.

Why it fails: Nearly half of designers say they are still hunting for their go-to tools. Only 37% have settled on a clear set. More options did not buy more certainty. They bought more searching.

Ship instead: Name your two tools out loud. If you cannot say which one you would keep, you have a shelf, not a stack.

2. Learning time is real work and nobody budgets it

What teams ship: A new tool posted in the team channel on Friday, expected to be in the workflow by Monday.

Why it fails: Harvard Business Review research from February found AI does not reduce work, it intensifies it. People work faster, take on more, and stretch the day. Evaluation time is not spare time. It comes out of the work or the evening.

Ship instead: Put a number on it. One new tool a quarter, with an hour a week to learn it, taken off the roadmap in the open.

3. You are paying for last year's winner

What teams ship: Subscriptions that renew because cancelling is a chore nobody does.

Why it fails: Perplexity went from 34% of designers to 13% in a year. Claude passed ChatGPT, 78% to 65%. The stack turns over faster than the billing cycle. Half of it is habit now, not choice.

Ship instead: The ninety-day test. If a tool has not survived ninety days of real work, it is a demo you are renting.

4. Almost nobody is planning to cut

What teams ship: More.

Why it fails: This is the number that stopped me. 53% of designers say too many tools is slowing them down. Only 3.8% have consolidated their stack in the last six months. Only 17.5% put simplifying it in their top three priorities for the next year.

Ship instead: Book the deletion. Put a stack review on the calendar this quarter and take two things off it.

5. A sixth tool does not fix a quality problem

What teams ship: Another tool, because the last one gave inconsistent output.

Why it fails: 62% name unreliable output as their biggest challenge, and 80% say reliable output is the one thing that makes a tool stick. Adding a tool to fix that gives you two tools with the same problem.

Ship instead: Run one real task through both candidates with identical inputs. Compare where each breaks, not where each dazzles.

What to swap

STOP	START
Seven tools you half know	Two you know cold
Keeping it because it demoed well	Keeping it because it lasted ninety days
Learning on your own evening	An hour a week, on the roadmap
Subscriptions that auto-renew	A stack review every quarter
Adding a tool to fix output	One task, same inputs, two tools

None of this is an argument against AI in design. 91% of the designers surveyed use it weekly, up from 54%, and I am one of them. It is an argument against confusing a bigger stack with a better one.

Run one audit this week. List every AI tool you opened this month. Next to each, write the last piece of real work it finished. The ones with a blank line beside them are not tools. They are tabs.

Checked against

Read on 2 September 2026.

- AI in Design 2026, Tools chapter (Designer Fund and Foundation Capital): designers use an average of 7 off-the-shelf AI tools, up from 3 in 2025; 91% use AI weekly, up from 54%; 49% are still searching for their go-to tools and 37% have settled; 62% cite unreliable output as their biggest challenge and 80% say reliable output is what makes a tool stick; Claude 78% against ChatGPT 65%, Perplexity down from 34% to 13%
- Designer Fund, AI in Design 2026: The inflection point is here: the survey covers more than 900 designers across 60+ countries, and the average designer now uses 7 off-the-shelf AI tools regularly, more than double last year's average of 3
- UX Tools, State of Prototyping Spring 2026 (1,478 designers, surveyed 14 March to 6 April 2026): top workflow blockers are time to learn tools 55.7%, too many tools 53.0% and AI output quality 52.2%; only 3.8% consolidated their tools in the last six months and only 17.5% list simplifying their stack in their top three investments for the next year
- Harvard Business Review, AI Doesn't Reduce Work, It Intensifies It (9 February 2026), Aruna Ranganathan and Xingqi Maggie Ye: AI tools consistently intensify work, with employees working faster, taking on a broader scope and extending work into more hours, risking workload creep and fatigue