

# These Designers Leveraged Digital Design Work to Start Their Own Firms

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By Megy Karyde s



In recent years, emerging designers have turned to digital design brands for a leg up, seeking guidance on everything from effective billing to building a client base. Designers' reasons for working with companies like [Homepolish](#) and [Decorist](#) are as diverse as the services the companies offer. Often, digital platforms provide designers with exactly what they need in order to launch their own businesses.

For many, giving administrative tasks over to a digital employer translates directly into more time to build a portfolio. This has been especially important to designers like Ariel Okin and Desiree Burns, neither of whom attended design school. Okin, of [Ariel Okin Interiors](#), worked with Homepolish because unlike other online services, it allows designers to meet with clients in person. This was key and helped catapult her career. "Homepolish allowed me to build a portfolio that I could call my own off the bat," she says, something you can't always do as a designer working at a big firm so early in your career. As a new designer, Okin was also attracted to the way Homepolish handled everything, from providing her with business to managing the billing. "In exchange for those leads, they took a percentage of your business and you didn't make commission," she adds.

Okin knew it was time to move on when she realized she wanted more control over all aspects of the role—plus, she was selling a decent amount annually in furniture but not taking any commission. Today, her projects range from the New York offices for [Goop](#) and

Maisonette to gut renovations of prewar Upper East Side apartments in a landmarked building.

Like Okin, Burns of [Desiree Burns Interiors](#) didn't attend school for interior design. Working with both [Decorist](#) and [Laurel & Wolf](#), which [appears to have since folded](#), was her segue into interior design. "It was a good way for me to start and really learn the industry," Burns admits. "I learned how to work with clients, learned how to navigate through client feedback and to adjust the design concept based on that." It provided Burns with a starting point from which to build her own interior design business. A craving for more one-on-one client relationships and a desire to see a project from start to finish were the reasons she decided to leave those platforms in favor of building her own brand and business.

Other designers found these platforms provided opportunities to secure additional work or allowed them to work while raising their family. Take Annilee Waterman, of [Annilee Waterman Design Studio](#), who started on her own in 2007, when it was still common for designers to be cutting and pasting out of catalogues. As companies printed fewer catalogues, she starting using digital boards. In 2012, a Craigslist ad posted by a new company looking for designers specializing in digital work piqued her interest. As a single mother with two kids at home, the prospect sounded great to Waterman. "Having exposure to do stuff online was exactly what I wanted," Waterman says. The company was Laurel & Wolf, and she was among its earliest designers.

Working for [Havenly](#) provided a similar experience for Cris Williams, owner and principal interior designer of Cris Williams Interiors. Williams left her full-time design job last May to care for her daughter, and Havenly allowed her to still earn an income doing design work. She has designed a variety of projects, from midcentury to boho for spaces including bedrooms, nurseries, living rooms, and loft studios.

Williams appreciated the organized nature of the platform but the service—which she describes was created "for people who may not otherwise be able to afford an interior designer or who don't want to pay a more standard design fee"—made it a challenge to be fairly compensated for her skills, knowledge, and the amount of time she was putting into the projects. She has since shifted her energy into building her own business instead.

"Clients don't just drop into my inbox anymore," she admits. But, she adds, "I just felt it was worth the risk of losing guaranteed clients to bet on myself and my talent."