

Chief Executive's speech at 2023 DBA Design Effectiveness Awards

Delivered by Deborah Dawton, CEO, DBA

At the DBA Design Effectiveness Awards ceremony on 29 June 2023

“Welcome to the 2023 DBA Design Effectiveness Awards. Thank you for joining us.

We're delighted to bring everyone together to recognise and celebrate the remarkable achievements of the 40 businesses, who have created and delivered the award-winning outcomes you'll hear about today.

From the redesign of an Icelandic town centre, to the bold and impactful exhibition design in Cambridge; from brand transformations to helping save lives – the stories behind the winning case studies inspire emotion and admiration for what design in business and society, can achieve.

If you are joining us here as a winner, you should be incredibly proud. The judging is rigorous, and winning shows that your work has gained independent and peer-reviewed recognition of its value and impact – that you have created opportunities and successes that wouldn't have been there otherwise.

So well done to those of you who have won – your win is testament to the power of design.

And if you are joining us here purely for the inspiration and to hear about what makes a DBA Design Effectiveness Award winner, welcome. Sit back and enjoy. When the show is over, I heartily encourage you to read the full case studies of the winners that pique your interest. There's so much more to these case studies than we can possibly showcase today, so dig in and be inspired by the full story.

The DBA's awards are not like other awards. There really is no barrier to making a case and winning an award, whether you are a small start-up or established design team.

Whether you are addressing some of the societal challenges our world is facing or stewarding the next stage of growth for business big or small, these awards are for you.

It's one of the reasons we have no categories. This is about the unique context your work was happening in and how it delivered results, whatever they were. This isn't about comparing one with another – entries have been judged entirely on their own merits, not in comparison to others.

Design is an increasingly vital area for the economy, society and the planet. It has the capability to be of intrinsic value to the future prosperity of all. It's our job - as an industry - to prove it. So thank you for providing us with the ammunition to prove this value to business and government, and to growing the future influence of design.

Because there is a thread that runs through all of the work that you'll see today. And that is the ability of designers to cause behaviour change. Sometimes it's about tempting people to buy something they've never bought before. Sometimes it's about furnishing people with something that enables them to make life-saving decisions. Sometimes it's about listening to the concerns of a community and building back a sense of belonging that didn't exist before. Sometimes it's about getting people to donate to good causes. And, sometimes it's about making a group of people aware of a great opportunity for them.

These are all examples of designers designing something so well that the desired outcome is achieved, and in some cases far exceeded.

So you can understand why I sometimes find myself banging my head on a brick wall when I read articles like this one in the FT yesterday:

“The UK has lost its global leadership on climate action, according to the government’s independent climate advisers, as a lack of ministerial initiative meant the country was making “worryingly slow” progress on cutting carbon emissions.”

A bit further into the article it talked of the government’s overreliance on yet to be scaled up technologies, and called for the government to instead look at changing consumer behaviour.

So, Rishi, governments across the world, and business, can I please ask you to turn to the superpower you have in design, and your own designers in government, whose job it should be to drive behaviour change at scale, on this issue. I’m about to take you through a set of extraordinary examples that make the case loud and clear, for designers to be brought into these conversations, now, because they know how to get people to *do* stuff.

Design industry. We have a dual responsibility in this. Not only do we need to make our own workplaces sustainable and carbon neutral, but we have to understand the impacts of all our projects, measure their impacts – good and bad – and help our governments and businesses achieve the urgent changes that are needed.

Rishi, I’m back to you. This phenomenal sector is part of the Creative Industries, and the lion’s share of our businesses in the Creative Industries are small. They are the Davids in a world of Goliaths. I need your help to catapult all designers up the learning curve of sustainable practice, because they’ll have the knowledge to strike at the head and heart of the issue. So let me know when you’ve got a slot in your diary for that chat.

To the design-commissioning businesses and charities here today, exercising design to achieve strategic ambitions, well done. Make this a habit. And share your worst fears about people, planet and profit with your agencies and inhouse designers. The legislation that is likely to come at us in relation to sustainable practice, will I think be considerable – there’s a risk that this will be the only option left to ministers. Don’t wait for that to happen. Start now with a conversation with your designers.

Last quote from the FT: *“Apparently, the UK is not alone in failing to make headway.”* Well, let’s stick to our commitments, and just maybe, enough designers across enough challenging areas can make the difference – and even exceed expectations, like they have here today – because it’s a habit designers have been fine tuning for years.”