

WHAT YOU WANT AND WHAT THEY NEED.

A design school departmental head once asked me this question: “What should professional designers understand about the realities (limits) of design education, and what responsibilities should they take in the bigger picture of on-the-job training?”

I guess only a design educator with his passion for helping students could ask such a student-centric question. The reality is, however, that this is a business-centric world. I would like to suggest that current students and the newly graduated work force are the ones who should take responsibility for readying themselves for the real world. The best and the brightest should thirst ceaselessly for self improvement, and it is up to them to bridge the gap where their formal design education left off.

I believe most professionals realize that newly graduated students are diamonds in the rough, and most are willing to devote the time and patience necessary to help them develop strong professional careers. It’s a long process where focus is put on craft and learning how to think more client-centric. There are three areas, however, where I feel students should invest their own time and effort, because without such effort they would be too rough to consider employing.

1. Polish their interviewing skills.

Many students lack this understanding – that a portfolio review with a potential employer is a thirty minute microcosm of what a full-time working relationship might be like. Here are two examples to illustrate this:

Scenario A: Potential employee shows up a little late. There is a typo on his resume, and a few on his comps. His boards are cut in different sizes, some stuff is mounted, some not. A few things are scuffed or dirty. He is argumentative when told some pieces in his book are not conceptually on target. He has to explain his work in order for the potential employer to understand it. His overall attitude is “what’s in this job for me?”

Scenario B: When potential employee calls ahead to make appointment, he asks about the position available and what the employer is looking for and tailors his book to suit those needs. He researches the website and other materials (regarding the company he is interested in) and comes to the meeting (early) with several questions for the interviewer. The presentation is spotless, consistent, and understandable. His response to negative feedback is “thank you for your perspective.” His overall attitude is “what can I do to help make your company even more successful?”

Both of these scenarios were based on real-life interviews. Guess which one I wanted to hire? Driven, self-education makes a difference!

2. Gain experience with real world deadlines, client expectations, etc.

This might seem like a catch-22. How can you get experience without having a job? Easy – get an internship. Heck, get two. My studio has actually had two interns that worked while they were still in high school! (How is that for focus and drive?) This is excellent experience not only for your resume, but will help you figure out what kind of people you want to work with, and what kind of projects best fit your talents. You don't even have to be a student. I was already a college graduate when I did my internship, and it cemented my desire to be in this business.

Internships may not be news to anybody, I realize. But think about how you maximize your internship. I have had people show up and help, and that is great. But the four interns that have really stood out in my mind were "in my face" – demanding projects, earning my respect and constantly asking questions. Of those four, two were hired at my firm, one works for a prominent local design firm and one works for The Richards Group. In other words, a hard working internship can land you a great job. It is just another example of how an investment in self-education can really pay off. I say "investment" because there has been a disheartening trend lately where students have chosen internships at places because they pay the most per hour. This is the wrong attitude to take. Internships are about education, not making money. The experience you get will actually earn you the ability to make a larger salary in the future. So don't think just for the short-term.

3. Hone their technical/computer skills

I say this with a big disclaimer – the concepting and design abilities need to already exist. What I am talking about is beyond idea generation, it is the ability to work smart and fast while penciling up layouts and building super comps.

Here's an analogy: think of the relationship between a musician and his instrument. Do you know anybody who woke up one morning and said "Hey, I am going to be a rock star," then picked up an instrument and instantly played beautiful music? Get real. Becoming a musician takes more than talent. It takes lots and lots of practice and hard work. So, if a pencil layout doesn't look right, do it over and over and over until it does. Look at layouts done by folks with more experience. Talk to them about the shortcuts they have learned and ask them to share their insights. Give yourself fake assignments for practice.

The same goes for knowledge of different software packages and overall computer savviness. Read the manuals, take the tutorials and if necessary take some evening courses. Subscribe to magazines with tips and tricks

(or ask your firm to do this. Most firms have a book/magazine budget for spending on things like this). I once mentioned offhand to an interviewee that I needed some freelance help for a web project. One week later that person called me back, having just finished a crash course in Macromedia Flash and asked if they could work on it. Gumption is good.

You have probably gotten the spirit of my essay. A formal design education can only take one so far. It is up to each individual to find out what it will take to develop the skills necessary to land their first job, or leave an old position in search of one that will fulfill them on a higher level. In a highly competitive market, you need every edge you can get...think like a business owner and clients. **What do they need? Do they need you?**

Meta Newhouse is a principal at Newhouse Design and has over eighteen years of professional design experience. She graduated with honors from Vanderbilt University with a B.A. in Fine Art. She has also taught 11 semesters of the Senior Portfolio Class at the University of North Texas and believes she has seen roughly just over 1,200 student portfolios to date.