

Make Your Breaks

With competition still tough for creative jobs, graduates who lack experience of the industry need to show they can bring a lot more to the table than just a degree. This **Design Week** extract finds out from employers and recruitment agencies how junior designers can boost their chances of getting work

Today's financial climate is testing the patience, determination and confidence of design graduates trying to find their niche in the design industry. Recent positive signs indicate that consultancies are starting to recruit more juniors (see Design Week Salary Survey, 17 March), which is great news, but competition is still tough and graduates would do well to raise themselves above the crowd. Talking to employers, recruitment agencies and recent graduates themselves, the same message keeps coming through: having a degree is a good start, but for employability and if you are hoping to strike out on your own client appeal, there is no substitute for real-life experience.

Internships

For graduates struggling to find a job because of their lack of experience, the option of offering your services for a few weeks or months as an intern at a consultancy is a perennially popular one. Usually badly remunerated, many cannot sustain doing more than a few weeks as an intern, so make sure that time really counts and is not just being spent making the tea.

Digital design group Clearleft takes on three to five interns a year, paying them a subsistence wage for three months. Recent interns have left Clearleft for jobs at Sapien Nitro and Inuse in Sweden, while one started up her own consultancy in Brighton.

Managing director Andy Budd, who founded Clearleft six years ago, is frustrated by the quality of digital graduates, which he blames on university courses. He believes that for digital design graduates, real-life experience is even more of an imperative than for other disciplines.

'Graduates coming out of more digitally focused degrees and going into Web design or interaction are finding themselves in real difficulty, as they are being taught a very tool-based curriculum, but they are not being taught how to think,' says Budd.

Regarding his internships, Budd says, 'They are hard and we expect a high level of talent. We treat interns like any other staff member, recruiting them in a similar way and with similar criteria as permanent staff, because we don't want to hire people to answer the phones and make the tea we want them to have an impact on internal projects at the very least.'

The intern's view

Product design consultancy Haughton Design appointed recent graduate Lisa Wolseley-Hext last September as design development consultant, following her year-long, mid-degree placement at the group. Wolseley-Hext has a first-class degree in industrial design from Brunel University, but equally key to her success is confidence and determination.

'There were lots of other placements available to us during our degree, but I really hunted Haughton down and put myself on its doorstep. The group wasn't even running placements at the time, but it created a job for me anyway. I was paid £12 000 for the year, which was good as I had friends with placements in London who were paid half that,' says Wolseley-Hext.

'Although I got a first, I was amazed at the small amount of knowledge that I had when it came to designing for the real world. Even though mine was a four-year course, it still cannot give you a proper appreciation of what can and cannot be manufactured,' she adds. 'I'm a big advocate for doing placements. Even if you don't get a job from it, you still get a stepping stone and a reference.'

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- Lisa Wolseley-Hext Brunel University Industrial Design Graduate

Landing your dream job

Employers can offer great insights for graduates seeking to raise themselves above the crowd. Digital group Underwired Amaze has created websites for McCain Foods and Economist-owned Eurofinance. Creative director Jason Holland's advice applies to any design graduate, not just those in the digital field:

- Play with me. Your brief is to make your possible employer not only take notice, but to nudge his colleagues and say 'check this out'. The best job requests I have seen included receiving ten-second segments of a showreel each Friday morning. One came as an augmented reality postcard, while another was a CV (which I usually hate) presented as beautiful infographics, packaged in a picture frame.
- Try humour, if you dare. I once had someone approach me offering their services as a tea-maker and human footstool. It was done with nice, punchy, edgy copy, without a CV, and it got my attention. I made a vacancy specifically for him.
- Thoughtful flattery can get you everywhere. Critique something from the company's portfolio, saying what you love and what you'd change. Done in the right way this shows how you'd add value.
- Triple-check the detail. A spelling error or technical problem sours the experience and leaves a bad taste across everything seen afterwards.
- I employ the person first, their talent second. I need to like you and feel you will fit in and add more than just a skill set. Graduates only have education to rely on, so be friendly, energetic and ooze positivity.

The road less travelled

For free spirits or jaded jobseekers, here are some less conventional ways of gaining experience, exposure or money:

- Get It Made (www.getitmade.com)
- Designers can upload product proposals which are then voted on by other site users. If the products get enough votes, the products are put into manufacture, creating a relatively risk-free way of taking a product idea into production.
- The Lost Generation (www.thelostgen.co.uk)
- This magazine publishes work by unemployed or freelance graphic designers, illustrators and photographers. Created by graphic designer Daniela Di-Benedetto and writer Laura Cude, the magazine also offers moral support to its readers. Its most poignant piece of advice to 'lost and disillusioned' design graduates is: 'Don't wait for someone to "allow" you to do what you've always wanted to do. Just do it, then work out how you can get people to pay you for it.' It's advice that these two clearly followed themselves.
- Shellsuit Zombie (www.shellsuitzombie.co.uk) Another great network and community for new talent, offering exposure, promotion and advice.
- Start your own consultancy or freelance group this can really pay off, but demands a whole lot of business sense, luck and hard work. Take advantage of your college or university's business incubator units, if available.

Advice from recruitment agencies

Recruitment agencies see more graduates pass through their doors than anyone else, so design industry recruitment agencies know what impresses potential employers. Here are some top tips from Jim Hunter, of agency Become (formerly Mac People):

- Self-expression is key. Employers want to see that you can think intelligently, articulate your ideas and have a strong grasp of the commercial purpose.
- Be informed and have opinions about what is going on in the design industry.
- It's been a tough two years for everyone, but steer away from negative experiences and don't be gloomy. Small achievements and overcoming difficulties show how you have been creative in securing work and experience,

from internships to placements or private commissions.

- Don't be afraid to look beyond London. Sydney, Australia, is thriving, for instance.