

TALENT IS NOT ENOUGH: BUSINESS SECRETS FOR DESIGNERS

*Revised
and expanded
third
edition*

SHEL PERKINS

"Now that design skills have become a commodity, you need business skills to focus them. Shel Perkins has written a cracker-jack book that will be on the shelf of every ambitious designer."

Marty Neumeier

President, Neutron LLC; author of *Zag* and *The Brand Gap*

"This is the best left-brain business book I've ever read for right-brain designers. And, having two right brains, I know what I'm talking about. I'm recommending Shel's book to every student of mine and buying a copy for each designer on my staff."

Brian Collins

Chief Creative Officer, Brand Integration Group,
Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide

"Damn good advice! This is a fantastic business handbook for designers. It's loaded with the specific, usable, real-world business knowledge that designers need. Shel has done a masterful job of making the information simple, clear, and easy to follow. This is a must-have book for any designer who wants to succeed in business."

Billy Pittard

President, Pittard Inc.

"This is the most concise and brilliantly informative guide I have ever wished I'd read before establishing three studios for ATTIK. Shel has managed to capture a vast array of learning that most of us only gather after many years of trial and error — a guide that every independent designer or agency owner should have within arm's reach."

Will Travis

President, U.S. Operations, ATTIK

"Shel Perkins' book Talent Is Not Enough is a gift to the design community. It is an extraordinary resource jam-packed with wisdom, advice, and sage counsel. It is truly a business bible for professional designers."

Debbie Millman

President, Design Group, Sterling Brands;
host of *Design Matters* on VoiceAmerica Internet Talk Radio;
author of *How to Think Like a Great Graphic Designer*

"The title says it all. You can learn the hard way, or you can read this book."

Brian Singer

Manager, Communication Design, Facebook;
author of *Graphic Content* and *1000 Journals*

"If only I could give a copy of Talent Is Not Enough to every graduating student! It's an invaluable guidebook. I wish it had been around before I went through my own education in the school of hard knocks."

Louise Sandhaus

Program Director, Graphic Design,
California Institute of the Arts

"This is a virtual encyclopedia of essential design business information. I've practiced on both sides of the freelance/in-house fence for more than twenty-five years and it amazes me that there's not a single business question I've encountered that doesn't have an in-depth answer in this book. Just as important as the range of advice is the fact that Shel's conversational writing style makes all the information accessible and easy to understand. This is the go-to resource for all design business topics."

Andy Epstein

Chair, AIGA Task Force on In-House Design;
author of *The Corporate Creative: Tips and Tactics for Thriving as an In-House Designer*

"I have always found the business end of running a design studio to be somewhat daunting. I wish I had this thoughtful, clear, and accessible guide to business development ages ago so that I did not have learn through trial and error."

Mark Randall

Principal, World Studio;
Program Chair, Impact: Design for Social Change,
School of Visual Arts

"Every designer should have this book. If you've met the man or heard him speak, you get a sense of how brilliant he is, but you really have to read this book to appreciate how well he can explain the landscape of the design business."

Doug Cheever

Goodreads.com

"Shel's book is a how-to for everyone in the business — from start-up design firms to established agencies to in-house teams. I'm reading it again and I'm still learning things. It's the next best thing to an in-person consultation."

Stanley Hainsworth

Chairman and Chief Creative Officer, Tether;

author of *Idea-ology: The Designer's Journey*

"I wish I had read this book when we started our business seventeen years ago. Or even ten years ago. Or even last month, come to think of it. There is a ton of incredibly valuable information in here."

Bonnie Siegler

Co-founder, Number Seventeen

"There is no doubt that Gravity Tank owes its success in part to Shel Perkins and the business values he taught me early in my career. Now all that wisdom is captured in Talent Is Not Enough. All creative professionals running their own business should grab a copy immediately and start reaping the benefits."

Chris Conley

Partner and Co-founder, Gravity Tank;

Track Lead, Human-Centered Product Design,

IIT Institute of Design

"An invaluable resource for designers and small creative businesses. I made the mistake of lending this book out once and it never came back — so I bought it again."

Amy Stafford

Your Shining Red Thread

"My students are required to read this book. It makes it crystal clear that landing (and keeping) a design job requires much more than just talent and technical ability."

Mary Scott

Chair, School of Graphic Design,
Academy of Art University

"As a first-time owner of a design studio, I find this book to be an invaluable reference guide. It provides options for challenges I face every day and the security of knowing I can deal with the unexpected. This is a must-have for any design professional."

Brian Jacobs

Founder, Brick Design

"Where was this book when I was first starting out? Today, I keep it close to hand. It's a fabulous resource for everyone in the design industry. Thank you, Shel."

Sylvia Harris

Information Design Strategist, Citizen Research & Design

"It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that just about everything I know about running a design agency I learned from Shel and this book."

Eric Heiman

Principal, Volume Inc.

"Finally — a comprehensive business guide written just for us. No designer should live without this book!"

Lynda Weinman

Co-founder, Lynda.com;

author of *Designing Web Graphics*

"Many design firms and designers have benefited from Shel's sound business perspectives and advice. Now he has written a valuable guide that continues that process. The lucky readers of Talent Is Not Enough: Business Secrets For Designers will absorb many important messages that are essential to success. Shel deserves a 'thank-you' for rendering this service to all designers."

Roz Goldfarb

President, Roz Goldfarb Associates;

author of *Careers by Design*

"Destined to become a dog-eared reference for all those parts of running a design firm that they never taught in college."

Mitchell Mauk

Principal, Mauk Design

"Although designers are highly skilled at applying their creativity toward solving design-related problems, most lack the fundamental business knowledge that would enable them to start or optimally run a firm. Whether you're a student, design contractor, or design firm owner, Shel Perkins' book, Talent Is Not Enough: Business Secrets For Designers, is a comprehensive source of information on the professional practice of design."

Gerard Furbershaw

Co-founder and COO, Lunar Design

"A great overview of all of the issues that designers need to know to be in business."

Nathan Shedroff

Chair, Design MBA Programs, CCA;

author of *Making Meaning* and *Experience Design*

"A confident and perceptive mentor, Perkins creates a painless navigation through a range of strategies and issues."

Communication Arts Magazine

"Shel Perkins has brought together the key insights and techniques every designer needs, whether they work from a spare room or a Madison Avenue cubicle. Use this book religiously: you'll have more energy for what matters most — creativity."

Bill Camarda

Read Only

"Whether you're just getting out of design school, thinking of going out on your own, or having large-firm growing pains, this is the book for you."

Mike Lenhart

GraphicDesignForum.com

"Packed with information on everything from how to get started to how to stay afloat."

STEP Magazine

"This book is simply a must-have for anyone working in the design profession."

Deanna Moore

AIGALosAngeles.org

"Shel Perkins spells out every aspect of business for every type of designer in a language that is easy to understand. From career paths to pricing to legal issues, no stone is left unturned. This book is an invaluable asset."

Troy Finamore

Finamore Design

"It is by far one of the best — if not the best — graphic design business book I have read."

Daniel Schutzsmith

GraphicDefine.org

"This is a fantastic book; everyone should have a (well-worn) copy. In Shel's typical style, the information is delivered in clear, concise language. Required and highly valuable reading for us all."

Rob Bynder

Principal, Robert Bynder Design

"Our favorite design consultant and your future best friend, Shel Perkins, literally wrote the book on this subject. Because he's a designer himself, he can give advice in a way that doesn't make creative types want to hurt themselves."

Alissa Walker

UnBeige

"Perkins' book should be required reading for any designer who would like to turn their design degree into a paycheck."

Robert Blinn

Core 77

Talent Is Not Enough: Business Secrets For Designers

Shel Perkins

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Talent Is Not Enough: Business Secrets For Designers, Third Edition

Shel Perkins

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Production Editor: David Van Ness

Proofreader: Kim Wimpsett

Indexer: Rebecca Plunkett

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Preface to third edition

Let me start by saying how extremely gratified I am at the very warm reception that the first two editions of this book received. They garnered positive reviews in the design press and enthusiastic word-of-mouth within the creative community. The book has been adopted as required reading in many design schools across the country, and it now sits on the reference shelf in many studios.

I've had many phone conversations and e-mail exchanges with readers. I've also had opportunities to give conference presentations based on topics addressed in the book and engage in lively Q&A sessions with audiences. I've enjoyed all of these interactions, and the great feedback I've received has guided me in the preparation of new content. In this expanded third edition, you'll find fresh information on understanding contracts, negotiating motion design projects, and coping with economic downturns. In addition, I've revisited all of the original chapters and added updated information wherever needed.

As everyone knows, a lot has changed in the overall economy since the first edition of this book was published several years ago. The global recession caused many clients to cut back on budgets. Competition for good projects increased. Employment opportunities for creative professionals became harder to find. All of this placed even more emphasis on the vital importance of solid business skills for designers. With that in mind, my goal in preparing this revised and expanded third edition has been to make the book even more useful to you as you move forward in your career. Please let me know whether I have succeeded!

Introduction

The work that we produce as designers has always been well documented. Every museum shop is stocked with glossy magazines and coffee table books that showcase innovative design. All of these show just one side of the profession. They focus on external, client-facing issues — the creative challenges that we take on and the solutions we deliver. In contrast, very little information is available about the internal, operational issues sometimes referred to as “professional practices.”

The design community needs more information on internal business issues, particularly for people who are just starting their careers. The majority of young designers now enter the profession as graduates of design degree programs. Most colleges do a good job of nurturing talent, teaching technical skills, and guiding the development of portfolios. However, many degree programs do not teach professional practices. The unfortunate result is that many graduates hit the streets each year with good portfolios and lots of enthusiasm but absolutely no idea how to determine pricing, negotiate fair contracts, and avoid common tax problems. It takes more than talent to sustain a design career. Long-term success requires both creative ability and business acumen.

In the working world, it has been traditional for designers to acquire business skills the hard way — by making mistakes. Many new design firms go out of business after just a few years, not because anything is wrong with the quality of the creative work being produced but because of inadequate business practices. Sometimes it's hard for design entrepreneurs to know where to turn for reliable advice. Professional practice insights are not often shared directly between competitive firms, and small companies often can't afford the services of outside business advisors. Because of this, creative firms tend to re-invent the wheel when it comes to daily business practices. This can lead to serious problems for innocent designers who inadvertently re-invent some key aspect of labor law or tax accounting. Not only is this trial-and-error approach wasteful and unnecessary for individual companies, but, in a larger sense, it holds the entire profession back.

This book addresses a broad range of vital business issues for designers. It draws upon my own experiences as a working designer and creative manager, and those of the established creative firms with whom I collaborate. I will continue to explore these important issues in my consulting work and teaching, and I'll continue to write about them — in fact, watch for free bonus chapters to be posted from time to time on the site: www.talentisnotenough.com.

The structure of this book

In assembling this book, one of the biggest challenges has been to sort out many topics that are largely interwoven and place them into one logical sequence. In arranging the chapters, I've chosen to cover topics in the order in which they arise over the course of a designer's career. This means that each new chapter builds in some way on the chapters that precede it, and a number of important topics (such as pricing) come up more than once. Each time a topic reappears, a different aspect of it is explored. This iterative structure will be clear to those who read the book from cover to cover. However, the book is also designed to serve as a quick reference for readers who are pressed for time. A detailed index is included to help you find specific information very quickly. In addition, many chapters list Web sites, industry associations, and publications that will be useful to you if you want to do further research.

As the table of contents indicates, the chapters have been grouped into four general sections. Here's a sneak preview of what you'll find in each section:

Career options

If you haven't yet selected your career path, this section will help you understand the many options available to you. It describes different ways to make a living as a creative professional, and it examines the key differences between a career as a designer and one as a fine artist.

Within the field of design, there are a number of different creative disciplines and work environments. If your plan is to become an employee — either in a consultancy (such as a design studio or an advertising agency) or in an in-house design department — you'll find lots of useful job hunting advice here.

On the other hand, you might decide that you don't want to be on anyone's payroll. Many people choose to remain independent and work on projects as freelancers. Most often, this involves assignments received on a subcontract basis from established design firms. To help you understand this type of relationship, a sample independent contractor

agreement is included. It clarifies many issues related to independent contractor status and ownership of the work being produced.

This first section ends with a review of personal income tax requirements for independent contractors and a recommended process for calculating a freelance billing rate.

Small business

Many designers who start their careers as freelancers discover that they really like being their own boss. They start thinking about moving away from subcontracting, going after corporate clients directly, and perhaps hiring a friend or two to help with the increased workload.

If you decide to grow a freelance practice into a small design company, you'll go through a series of growing pains. This section of the book covers the essentials of establishing and sustaining a successful firm. It will help you choose the right legal format for your company, register a business name, become an employer, and stay on the right side of the law when it comes to business licenses and taxes.

To stay afloat, your company will need a constant stream of appropriate new assignments. To accomplish this, time and money must continually be put into new business development. This section includes tips for effective marketing and self-promotional activities. Chances are that most of your client work will be done on a fixed-fee basis, so you'll find detailed instructions here for calculating a fixed fee and preparing a compelling proposal document. You'll also find information about other revenue models for creative services, including such things as licensing fees and royalties.

Each time you land a client assignment, you must strive to keep the work on schedule and on budget. As every design professional knows, this can be difficult. To help you succeed, the essential elements of smart project management are discussed in detail.

To round out this section on small business basics, you'll find guidance on bookkeeping fundamentals, cash flow management, facilities issues, and an introduction to the various types of business insurance that your company will need.

Legal issues

Unfortunately, designers are often naïve or ill-informed when it comes to legal issues. In the working world, no one else is going to look out for our interests — we have to do it for ourselves. This section covers many important legal issues that apply to creative services. It includes an explanation of intellectual property rights (including copyrights, trademarks, and patents) plus a discussion of defamation and the rights of privacy and publicity (which are particularly important if you're working in advertising or publishing).

These and other legal issues come into play when you're negotiating contracts with clients. You can set yourself up for serious problems if you sign a contract without completely understanding the fine print. To help you avoid the most common pitfalls, this section includes the full text of the latest AIGA Standard Form of Agreement for Design Services. AIGA (formerly the American Institute of Graphic Arts) is the leading professional association for designers in the United States. This important reference document consists of recommended contract language, definitions of key terms, and suggestions for successful contract negotiations with clients. It has recently been expanded to address some of the specialized legal issues that come up on motion design projects.

This section closes with a few thoughts about the important ethical challenges and social responsibilities facing the design profession today.

Large firms

Over time, each successful small business will have opportunities to grow into a large business. You don't have to expand your operations if you don't want to. However, if you decide to become a larger firm, be prepared to face an entirely new series of growing pains. You'll be working with larger client organizations. Projects will become

larger and more complex, requiring you to develop a broader range of resources. You'll face the challenge of building and guiding larger and more diverse design teams.

With more people on board and more money at stake, you'll need to develop additional expertise in business planning and financial management. It will become more important to establish long-range targets and benchmark your financial performance against key indicators for your type of firm. All of these issues are discussed here.

As the firm grows, you'll be getting other people involved in new business development, and eventually you'll hire at least one full-time salesperson to represent your company in the broader business community. This will raise many issues about the evolving role of the founder and the need to develop a second generation of management. Effective long-range business planning includes thinking about ownership transition. Eventually, the founder of the company needs to create and implement a smart exit strategy — a way to extract some of the value that has built up in the firm over the years. This will provide cash for retirement or for launching other ventures. You'll find detailed information here about the process of valuing and selling a creative business, along with some tips for making a successful transition to the proud new owner.

This section also discusses the fundamental business differences between design studios and advertising agencies and provides expert advice on successfully navigating your creative firm through an economic downturn.

Last but not least, this section on large firms comes to a close with a discussion of the challenges faced by design managers who are working inside large client organizations as leaders of in-house departments. In many respects, this closing chapter is a summation of all that has preceded it.

A resource for your career

In writing this book, my goal has been to provide an essential resource to the design community on professional practice topics. No matter what stage of your career you're at, I hope you find this book to be one of your most important tools for success.

Chapter 01:

Making a living as a creative professional

Every year, thousands of hopefuls seek to enter the design profession without quite knowing what it's all about and without having a clear understanding of how a design career is different from that of, say, a fine artist or an illustrator. If you're getting ready to write a big tuition check to enter a design degree program or if you've just graduated and are wondering what to expect in the working world, read on!

Creative careers

If you're a creative person, there are many possible outlets for that creativity — ranging from music to fashion, from architecture to filmmaking. More specifically, if you're interested in visual communication, you may be attracted to a career in fine art, photography, illustration, or design. However, it's important to understand that each of these visual career options fits a different personal temperament. All of them involve the creation and use of images, but they are not the same in terms of psychology and work process. It's important to choose the one that's right for you.

Fine art

Fine artists tend to work alone, selecting their own themes and setting their own standards. The work is all about personal exploration and self-expression. If you choose a career in fine art, you'll be able to set your own schedule, and you'll have sole control over your output. Once you are satisfied with a piece, such as a painting or a sculpture, it's finished and will not change after it leaves your hands. To build a successful career, you must enjoy working independently and be good at motivating yourself to get work done. Your income will be generated through the sale of individual items, so you must produce a sufficient quantity of pieces and do a good job of calculating unit prices.

Most sales of fine art are made through galleries on a consignment basis. The gallery takes a large commission on each transaction. Some fine artists also pursue grants to support personal projects. The money, which usually comes from non-profit foundations or government agencies, is a subsidy — it does not have to be repaid. Understandably, there is intense competition for fine art grants.

Photography and illustration

The careers of some photographers and illustrators are centered on fine art as well — particularly those individuals who create personal images to sell through galleries or who generate personal projects like limited-edition books.

However, many more photographers and illustrators accept commercial assignments from business clients. Producing work that meets the needs of a client is very different from producing work just for you. Commercial clients specify the

imagery, size, and media, and you must meet whatever technical specifications are required for the use or reproduction of the work. You must be comfortable in accepting feedback and making any requested revisions. Budgets and schedules must be respected, and, all along the way, you must communicate effectively with the client and keep them happy.

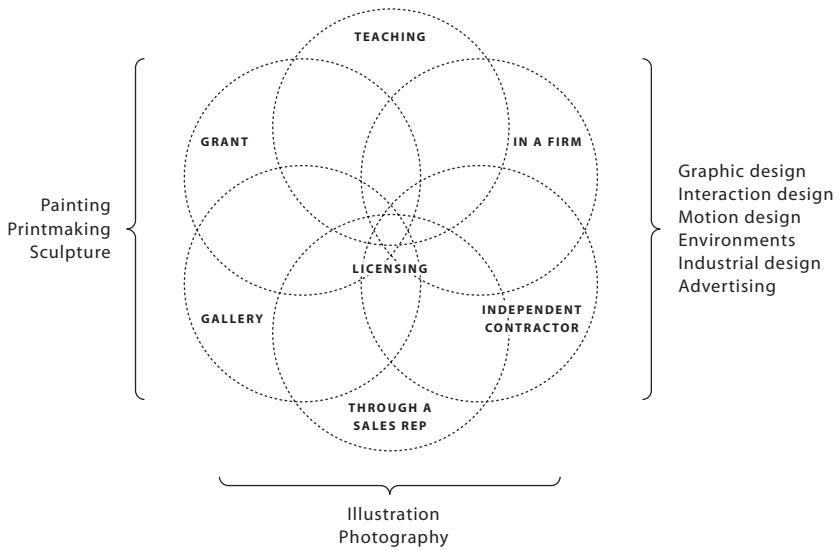
To get assistance in lining up commercial assignments, you may want to establish a relationship with an agent (sometimes called an artist's rep) who will promote your services and then negotiate the price and terms of each project on your behalf. In exchange, he or she will take a commission. You might also have opportunities to generate licensing income if you have retained ownership of your commercial images and they can later be used in additional ways.

Design

Unlike fine art, the focus of design is not on self-expression or the exploration of personal issues. Being a professional designer means solving business and communication problems. You are providing expert advice and strategic services to clients to help them succeed in a competitive environment. The impact and results of your work will be measured by multiple sets of criteria — both yours and the client's. Each project must meet high aesthetic standards, but it must also meet specific business objectives.

Most professional design assignments span several different media such as print, online, or broadcast. This means that most assignments require a multi-disciplinary team. Projects evolve through an iterative process of multiple design directions and refinements, so you need to be very comfortable with the give-and-take of close collaboration.

There are different ways of structuring teams and different ways of charging for design services. If you are a freelancer who is subcontracting with an established creative firm, meaning that you've been brought in on a short-term basis to help with someone else's project, you'll be paid a freelance rate. If you accept a staff position as part of a creative team, you will negotiate a payroll rate. However, when you're selling services directly to a business client, it's common for design projects to be negotiated on a fixed-fee basis.



Some designers are also able to generate income from licensing. Again, this assumes that you have developed and retained ownership of intellectual property, such as product designs or software applications, for which there is additional demand.

Figure 01.01 shows an overview of the possible income sources available to creative professionals, including one more that we need to talk about:

Teaching

For some individuals, teaching might also be a career option, but chances are that it will not be full-time. Most schools of art and design bring in working professionals to teach specialized courses on a part-time basis (either in person or online). This approach has several benefits. It gives students access to the latest information and techniques. It also gives them opportunities to develop their personal networks, perhaps learn about internships or freelance gigs, and maybe even meet a potential employer. For these reasons, it's common for instructors of art or design to teach in addition to their client-related activities.

Teaching also requires supplemental skills. You need to learn how to be effective in an educational setting. You must be able to present your field in such a way that it is

Figure 01.01. There are several ways for creative professionals to generate income. Each source of income tends to relate most closely to certain career paths. However, teaching and licensing opportunities could be available to all.

accessible to newcomers. You need to support students in developing and verbally articulating abstract concepts and connecting them to concrete craft procedures. You must be able to perceive the constructive intent of a student's work and help him or her achieve it. To be excel at this, you should seek out teacher training. You may even want to consider pursuing a degree in education.

Design skill sets

If you're interested in becoming a professional designer, you must possess five essential skill sets:

Talent

The first requisite is talent. You must have an instinctive ability to exercise good judgment in manipulating the formal elements of visual communication such as contrast, scale, color, pacing, and typography. You must be able to use them effectively to develop new and appropriate visual solutions to complex communications problems. If you don't possess this creative ability, or the potential to develop it over the course of your education, then you are not cut out to be a designer.

Methodology

The second requirement is to become familiar with the current methodology in your creative discipline — the steps and processes that support the production of good work.

Technical skills

The third requisite for a successful career is technical expertise — mastery of the current tools that are necessary to produce and implement your solutions.

Technical skills are a moving target because design tools are constantly changing. For example, thirty years ago, the tools of graphic design included T-squares, stat cameras, waxers, and Rapidograph pens. Eventually all of those went out with the trash. Today's basic tools are primarily digital, including such things as Adobe InDesign, Illustrator, Photoshop, and Acrobat, as well as Dreamweaver and HTML5. However, thirty years from now these in turn

will be gone — replaced by even newer tools. This means that each of us must constantly work to expand our technical skills and stay on top of new developments.

People skills

The fourth requisite is a solid set of interpersonal skills. This means being a good listener and a good verbal communicator who is able to build and sustain positive and productive relationships with others. It means being able to establish and maintain mutual respect. It means having a positive outlook and exhibiting grace under pressure.

These positive qualities will motivate others to seek you out. Co-workers will want to have you on their teams, and clients will want you on their accounts. Career opportunities will be severely limited for any designer who is perceived to be a lone wolf — defensive, territorial, uncooperative, or difficult to understand.

Business skills

The final essential skill set for a designer is business savvy. In order to advise our clients, we need to clearly understand their business challenges, trends, and options. On each new account, we have to come up to speed very quickly. We also need to be just as smart when it comes to our own marketing, financial, and management issues. Business savvy is what makes our careers sustainable over the long haul.

Range of design disciplines

The field of design is quite large, spanning many different disciplines. This creates a bit of a paradox. A good designer must be enough of a generalist to see the big picture and develop strategies that are comprehensive, but at the same time he or she must be a specialist in one particular design discipline in order to execute strategy successfully at a tactical level. Each individual component of a system must be delivered in well-crafted detail. Ultimately, of course, it's not possible for one person to know and do everything. You must choose an area of concentration based on your talent and interests and then keep sight of how that piece fits into the larger strategic puzzle.

For freelancers and sole proprietors, this means developing personal expertise in a specific area and developing a network of peers in complementary disciplines with whom you can collaborate on an as-needed basis. Larger design firms are able to hire individuals in a range of creative specialties, putting them together in multi-disciplinary teams. Together, they are able to plan and execute comprehensive systems with components that span as many different environments and media types as necessary.

Depending on the firm and the nature of the client work being done, the following disciplines may be represented:

- Design planning and research
- Corporate identity design
- Communications and collateral design
- Publication and editorial design
- Brand identity and packaging design
- Advertising and promotion design
- Information design
- Interaction design
- Motion design
- Environmental design
- Industrial design

Different team roles

In addition to bringing your specialized design skills to the group, you will also be functioning in a particular team role. Depending upon the project challenges, teams might include individuals in the following roles:

- Strategists
- Designers
- Implementation specialists
- Programmers
- Project managers

There are other possible roles as well, and some people wear more than one hat. In a small firm, it's likely that you will switch back and forth between roles from one project to the next. In a large firm, however, your role may be less flexible.

Potential employers

The next step in planning your design career is to decide whether you want to be part of an in-house creative department, join an outside consultancy, or remain independent. You need to choose the environment where you'll be most comfortable and will be able to do your best work.

In-house department

Many designers accept staff positions within client organizations. If your goal is to become part of an in-house creative team, there are many large businesses that hire design employees on a regular basis, including the following:

- Publishing houses
- Entertainment companies
- Broadcasting companies
- Online businesses
- Major corporations

Staff designers are often responsible for maintaining an existing identity system and making sure that there is creative consistency in all materials produced. In-house teams tend to work on recurring projects. Key assignments often come back on an annual cycle that reflects seasonal promotions and major industry events.

One of the biggest advantages of working inside a large organization is the opportunity for ongoing collaboration with product managers and marketing executives. For designers who are just starting out, this is an incredible chance to participate in long-term strategy development and to see creative challenges from the client's side of the table.

Another advantage that should not be overlooked is that, because of its size, a large company is often able to offer a more extensive benefits package as well as some degree of job security. One negative aspect is that you may have to deal with corporate politics. In a large company, there's always a certain amount of tension between departments over resources, budgets, and decision-making authority.

Outside consultancy

Working in a design firm or an advertising agency is a great option for a designer who is just starting out because it involves a wide variety of creative assignments from clients in different industries. It's also a great way to learn the ropes. You'll have a design mentor plus you'll learn about business practices and pricing.

Corporate clients buy a range of creative services from outside consultancies. Most creative firms position themselves as specialists in a particular discipline, such as corporate and brand identity, marketing and communication systems, public relations, advertising, technology services, interactive design, or industrial design.

Many advertising agencies belong to large holding companies that are publicly traded (we'll talk more about this in Chapter 31). In contrast, most design firms are small and privately owned. In fact, it's estimated that half of the design firms in the U.S. have five employees or less. Even larger design firms rarely have more than fifty employees.

Your own company

Finally, you may decide that you don't want to be on anyone else's payroll. You can choose to remain independent. In the U.S., the Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps track of employment trends in a wide range of occupations. Its information indicates that three out of ten designers are self-employed, compared to one out of ten in the overall workforce.

Anyone who chooses to be self-employed must come up to speed on a range of important small business issues, including financial management and the basics of business law. In addition to producing great design, you're also responsible for all of your own marketing and sales. Your long-term success will be very dependent upon the amount of personal networking and self-promotion that you do.

You must also be consistently self-motivated, disciplined, and productive. These traits may not be easy to achieve if you're accustomed to having someone else give you instructions and nag you to get things done.

Staying flexible

At the start of your career, it's important to get yourself onto the path that is the best match for your interests, talents, and temperament — one that will give you opportunities for personal growth and satisfaction.

Once you're on that path, though, it's also important to stay flexible and remain open to new opportunities. The design profession has changed significantly in recent years, and it is continuing to evolve. Larger economic shifts are taking place as well. The U.S. economy is moving from being manufacturing-based to knowledge-based, and employment is shifting from permanent staffing to short-term projects that use independent contractors or temporary workers. This places a growing emphasis on expertise, peer networking, collaboration, and technology. Designers are at the cutting edge of all this. Success requires brainpower, entrepreneurship, and flexibility. As you advance in your career, always look ahead and keep a broad view.

Chapter 02:

Job hunting

If you're looking for a staff position with a creative firm, the information in this chapter can help you move toward that goal. It includes tips on preparing your job search materials, researching job opportunities, and developing a network of personal contacts in the profession. It also includes real-world advice on interviewing well and making a successful transition from school to professional life.

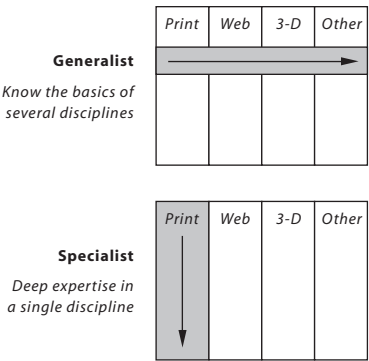
What are you looking for?

To be happy in your career, you need to seek work that closely matches your interests and abilities. Think about the kind of firm that you would like to join. Each firm is focused on specific creative services and will tend to have clients that are clustered in certain industries. These have to be of interest to you. Within that firm, what kind of position do you want to hold? Chances are that you want to be doing hands-on graphic design, interaction design, industrial design, or a similar creative activity. You might be a bit flexible on the exact responsibilities of the positions that you apply for, but they must still be on your chosen career path. Be careful about taking a position that's not related closely enough, because it can easily redirect your career. You also don't want to join a firm under false pretenses. If you jump at the first position that opens up in one of your target firms with the assumption that you can somehow shift your job responsibilities after being hired, you're setting yourself up for failure. Whatever position you're hired for, that is in fact the work that you must perform.

Getting your career off to a successful start requires making an honest assessment of your own strengths and weaknesses. To move forward, you need to possess the necessary qualifications for the type of position that you want. It may be that you're not currently prepared for your dream job. You might need to develop additional skills or learn new tools before you'll be viewed as a strong candidate. If you decide that you need further academic training, be careful to choose an educational program that has a great reputation. When you apply for positions, potential employers will review your portfolio and evaluate your abilities. However, you may find that additional doors will open if you're a graduate of one of the leading degree programs. It will speak well of your abilities, and it will allow you to tap into an alumni network.

You should also be aware that some firms hire generalists while others hire only specialists. A generalist is a jack-of-all-trades who knows the basics of several disciplines (for example, print, interactive, and three-dimensional design)

Figure 02.01. Most designers are educated as generalists and then go on to become specialists over the course of their working careers.



without necessarily having extensive experience in any of them. In contrast, a specialist has much deeper expertise in just one area (see Figure 02.01).

New graduates from design degree programs tend to be generalists — it’s the natural result of completing degree requirements. A wide variety of courses with instructors from different fields will lead to a student portfolio that’s broad but not deep. This broad training can be good preparation for working in small firms that sometimes need to be flexible in what they provide to clients. You might have clients in different industries facing very different business challenges. Occasionally, one of them will request a service that you haven’t provided before (such as motion graphics or a trade show booth). You’ll be expected to pitch in and do what you can.

However, if a large firm hires you, it’s more likely that you’ll be part of a team that is very focused on just one type of work. The creative director of that team will serve as a mentor, helping you to gain deeper expertise in that one area. Within a couple of years, you’ll be a specialist. Keep this in mind when selecting firms that you would like to join.

Preparing for your search

If you don’t already have a complete workstation set up at home (computer, printer/scanner, high-speed Internet access), go ahead and do it now while you still have access to student discounts on equipment and software. Next, start preparing the materials that you need for your job search. Each potential employer will see a number of

different items from you. All of the materials you provide must work together as an integrated system and project the right professional image — what management consultant Tom Peters calls “the brand you.”

Stationery system

You need a personal stationery system. The components must be consistent in terms of design and in terms of paper stock. The complete system should include the following items:

- Business card
You'll be handing out lots of these. Your card should be distinctive, but, at the same time, it's a good idea to stay close to standard sizes and materials. Odd sizes (above 3½ x 2 inches in the U.S.) won't fit well into wallets or Rolodexes. Unusual materials such as plastic or metal can make it very difficult for the recipient to turn the card over to write a note about you on the back. These are important issues for job hunters.
- Letterhead
This will be preprinted with your name and full contact information. When finalizing your design, remember that it must scan and fax clearly, so you'll want to avoid hairline rules and the use of pale ink colors for important text.
- Second sheet
This must be the same paper stock as your letterhead, but usually nothing is preprinted on it. You need these blank sheets for correspondence of two or more pages. In long documents, only the first page will be on letterhead.
- Business envelope
The most common business envelope fits a sheet of letterhead that has been folded into equal thirds. (In the U.S. it measures 9½ x 4⅞ inches and is referred to as a “number ten” commercial envelope.)
- Mailing label
You need an adhesive label that can be applied to large packages or mailing tubes.

Traditionally, stationery systems have been professionally printed in large batches using offset lithography. Now, however, you also have the less expensive option of printing small batches on your own color printer, provided that no part of the image needs to bleed off the edge of the sheet (and that your desktop printer is of sufficient quality).

If you're using paper that has a slight texture on one side, you should feed it through the printer so that your information is applied to the smooth side (otherwise, small type may become hard to read).

As soon as your stationery system is ready, put it to use by drafting a *résumé*, a cover letter, and a thank-you letter.

Résumé

This is a one-page summary of your background and qualifications. It must include your name, full contact information, work experience, skills, and education. If you print it on your letterhead, your name and contact information will already be on the sheet. If you have a Web site, include the URL. You don't have to use the word "*résumé*" at the top, but if you do, it's correct to include both accents (unless you set the word in all caps).

There are several different ways to organize the content of a *résumé*, but many employers prefer a chronological format because it tends to be the easiest to read. List your most recent position first and then work your way back in time. Give employment dates, company names and locations, job titles, key responsibilities, and major accomplishments. Near the bottom, list your software skills and any awards that you've won.

Be completely honest. Don't exaggerate any aspect of your training or experience because these facts will be checked during the hiring process. In describing your background and abilities, be sure to use action verbs (like "planned," "implemented," "developed," "created," and "produced"). They indicate in a subtle way that you're a proactive person with energy, ideas, and initiative. Candidates who are perceived as passive or dependent will be at a definite disadvantage.

Use a clean, easy-to-read layout. For the sake of brevity, it's OK to use lists with bullet points. Good *résumés* are essentially typographic. There's no need to incorporate images. Don't include anything that's not relevant to the job, such as family activities, obscure hobbies, or pets.

And, for legal reasons, do not include your age, gender, race, national origin, religion, a physical description, or a photo of yourself — these might expose you to illegal discrimination in the hiring process. Also, don't add the names of personal references — wait until they're requested later in the hiring process.

If you list work experience outside of the design field (such as a summer job that you had as a student), you need to explain how it's relevant. What did you learn that would carry over to this creative position? For example, was the work team-based or deadline-driven? Did you gain skills in client management? If you're a recent grad with no work experience at all, add more details about your education. Highlight particular courses, well-known instructors, or academic achievements that are relevant in some way to the work that you're seeking.

In addition to the printed version of your résumé, prepare an e-mail version to use when responding to online listings. Put all of your information into the body of the e-mail. There's no way of knowing exactly what e-mail system each recipient might have. For your message to display properly, it should be text only. This poses a creative challenge. You have to make it look good while using only basic type formatting and paragraph breaks. Be sure to include keywords that match the vocabulary used in the online job listing. This is important because many large firms now use software to filter messages received from job applicants. For example, if the job listing mentioned "press checks" or "XML coding," the software will screen out any responses that do not include those keywords.

Don't attach any files to your e-mail unless the company states that attachments are acceptable. To avoid viruses, many corporations have a strict policy against opening files sent to them by strangers. If it's OK to send an attachment, be sure that the title of the file includes your name (for example, `Mary_Brown_résumé.pdf`).

Lastly, before sending out your résumé, whether it's printed or electronic, take time to proofread it very carefully. It helps to have a friend look at it as well.

Cover letter

You should never send out your résumé without a cover letter. If you're sending the e-mail version, add a block of introductory text. Whenever possible, address the letter to one particular individual at the hiring company. This requires identifying who's responsible for the search, learning that person's job title, and verifying the correct spelling of his or her name.

Your cover letter should be no more than one page in length. The purpose is to make clear the connection between the job requirements and your qualifications. State which position you're applying for and then briefly explain why you're right for the job. Customize the text as much as you can by referring to specific elements in the job listing. Let them know how your experience and skills will benefit their company. Refer to any enclosures that you're sending, and state how you'll follow up (for example, with a phone call or an e-mail on a specific day or by dropping off your portfolio). Close your letter by expressing gratitude to the prospective employer in advance for his or her courtesy in reviewing your qualifications.

Thank-you letter

The next use of your stationery will be for sending a thank-you letter. You need to have a basic format prepared in advance so that it's easy to update and send quickly. Do this whenever you've had a personal interaction with someone, such as a telephone conversation or an interview. It's polite and professional to follow up promptly. In the text of this letter, express your appreciation for the time and personal attention given to you by the individual. If the interaction was a job interview, briefly reiterate why you believe you're a good fit for the position, and clearly restate your interest in joining the team. If you met with more than one person, send a letter to each one. The letters should not be identical. Also, if you're sending this as an e-mail message, be sure to include a signature block at the end with your full name and contact information.

Portfolio

To land a hands-on creative job, you must have an outstanding portfolio that demonstrates the quality of your thinking

as well as your form-giving abilities. The specific contents and formats of design portfolios vary quite a bit from one creative discipline to another. Regardless of your field, though, you should tailor the contents to fit the needs of each prospective employer. This means you must carefully research each firm in advance to determine what kind of editing might be necessary.

Keep in mind that most studios and agencies have a drop-off policy. They may require you to leave your portfolio at the reception desk and then return to claim it a day or two later. You won't be there to explain any of the projects, so be sure that everything is self-explanatory. Because of this, there has been a trend away from box-type portfolios filled with loose samples. Most designers now use a case study format. This usually resembles a book, with spreads about each project. The portfolio itself becomes an exercise in publication design, with selected images or tabletop photos of completed projects, along with captions and explanatory text. For each project, you should do the following:

- Identify the client
- Explain the business or communication challenge that they were facing
- Describe the solution you developed
- Explain how well it succeeded — quantify the results of the project by describing the impact that the finished work had on the client's business

Organize your portfolio content in such a way that it's easy for the viewer to navigate back and forth at will. Usually, this involves grouping the work into categories, adding some sort of pagination or tabs, and developing a table of contents. For projects that were produced by a team, identify the key members, and explain your role within that group.

When you drop off your portfolio, be sure to include a cover letter printed on your stationery and an extra copy or two of your résumé. Some job seekers also include a small leave-behind item that can be added to the company's files. It might be a postcard or a small booklet with selected images from the portfolio. However, be cautious about wacky self-promo items. It's best to let the quality of your portfolio

speak for itself. Any correspondence or other items that you drop off with it should be business-like. Novelty items or personal gifts (such as T-shirts or food) are not professional.

Web site

You also need to set up an online version of your portfolio. Creating a Web site will take time, but it doesn't have to be expensive. Many Internet service providers offer package deals for hosting small sites, including the ability to send and receive e-mail using your Web address. When placing files on your site, remember that search engines cannot read text that's integrated into graphic files or Flash animations. To make it easy for people to find you, be sure your contact information is somewhere on your site in a searchable text format.

If you've developed Web sites for clients, don't just list the URLs. Your portfolio should include images of those projects with captions. Again, sort the work into categories, and make it easy for the viewer to navigate back and forth. Your goal is to keep prospective employers on your own site for as long as possible. If they follow a hyperlink to a client site that you designed some time ago, they may encounter something that no longer resembles what you delivered. The quality of the site may have slipped under the direction of other people. If prospective employers see a bad site, they'll assume that you were responsible. They'll quickly move on to another candidate instead of returning to see more of your work.

When developing your online portfolio, be aware of download times. Keep them as short as possible. Before making the site available to the public, test it thoroughly to make sure everything displays exactly the way you want it to and that visitors won't receive any error messages. You should also use META tags on your pages (keywords included in the HTML source code for the header sections — these are indexed by some, but not all, search engines). One final bit of advice: this is a career-related site, so keep it professional. Don't mix in family photos or vacation stories. They're irrelevant to your job search and could easily alienate potential employers.

Conducting your search

Think of your search as a full-time job in and of itself. Establish good daily habits to make sure that you're spending the time and effort necessary for success. You need to pursue more than one lead at a time. You should also be open to the idea of relocation to another city for the right job. Your search may take several weeks or months, so it's important to keep track of all the leads that you've pursued. Set up a simple tracking system for yourself that includes the following:

- How you became aware of the opportunity
- The job title and description
- Anything you know about the compensation and benefits
- The name of the primary contact for the selection process
- Dates and descriptions of each interaction with the company (e-mails, phone calls, and so on)
- A record of any materials that need to be returned to you, such as portfolio items

Your tracking system should include a simple calendar for follow-ups. Be persistent about pursuing each opportunity (but, of course, not to the point of having companies regard you as a pest).

Overview

So, how do you find out about jobs that are currently open? There are a number of different ways, but some are more effective than others are.

In the design community, the best way to learn about opportunities is through personal networking. It's said that more than half of the positions at agencies and design studios are filled in this way. Most designers hear about job opportunities through friends before the position has been advertised anywhere.

Second in effectiveness is to respond to direct recruitment ads on company sites. This is a good way to find out about in-house positions because corporate HR (human resources) policies often dictate that job openings be advertised.

Simultaneously, these notices may be placed as classified ads in industry publications. To stay on top of these job listings, haunt the sites of the companies you're interested in, and watch the newsstand for the latest issues of key publications.

A smaller number of people find positions through head-hunters. Entry-level staff positions are rarely listed with recruiters because design firms have plenty of recent grads approaching them directly. However, companies often seek help in filling senior positions because headhunters maintain extensive professional networks. They are often aware of strong potential candidates who aren't actively looking to make a change but who might be interested in switching jobs if approached discretely.

The least effective way to find a design job is through one of the huge general online job boards. These have lots of listings, but many are not current and very few are for creative positions. Even when an appropriate listing does come along, the competition will be overwhelming — you'll be one of several hundred people responding.

Now that we've done a very quick overview, let's go back to discuss some of these job search strategies in greater detail.

Personal networking

If the most effective way to find a design job is through personal networking, how do you go about developing contacts within the profession? The best way to do this is through professional associations. Do some research to identify the leading organizations in your own creative discipline. Many of them have local chapters, making it very easy for you to get involved. As a reference, here are some of the most prominent membership organizations for creative professionals in the U.S.:

- AIGA, the professional association for design (formerly the American Institute of Graphic Arts)
www.aiga.org
- Industrial Designers Society of America
www.idsa.org

- Graphic Artists Guild
www.graphicartistsguild.org
- Society of Illustrators
www.societyillustrators.org
- Society of Publication Designers
www.spd.org
- Society for News Design
www.snd.org
- Type Directors Club
<http://tdc.org>
- Art Directors Club
www.adcglobal.org
- American Association of Advertising Agencies
www.aaaa.org
- American Advertising Federation
www.aaf.org
- Society for Environmental Graphic Design
www.segd.org
- Broadcast Designers' Association
www.promaxbda.org
- ACM SIGGRAPH
(Association for Computing Machinery,
Special Interest Group on Computer Graphics)
www.siggraph.org
- ACM SIGCHI
(Association for Computing Machinery,
Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction)
www.sigchi.org
- Information Architecture Institute
<http://iainstitute.org>
- User Experience Professionals Association
www.uxpa.org
- National Art Education Association
www.arteducators.org
- College Art Association
www.collegeart.org
- University and College Designers Association
<http://ucda.com>
- American Society of Media Photographers
<http://asmp.org>
- Professional Photographers of America
www.ppa.com

When you find the right organization, become a member. This will get you onto their mailing list for newsletters and events. It's important to attend as many of their events as possible because each one is a great networking opportunity. Don't be shy. Arrive early, and socialize with as many people as possible. Marketing people call this "working the room." As you meet new people, keep the conversations fairly short. Let them know who you are and what you do. Whenever it feels comfortable, present your business card. With luck, they'll make a note on the back about how they met you (and perhaps your creative specialty) and then place it in their Rolodex.

In your conversation, if it turns out that there is some useful news or information that you can send to them afterward (such as a recent article about one of their clients or updated contact information for a mutual friend), follow up promptly by e-mail. When you do, be sure to add a signature block with your full contact information so that it can be easily added to their electronic address book.

Attending events is just the start. You can meet more people by becoming a volunteer and helping the organization to produce their events and publications. This will take you behind the scenes and allow others to see your creative and collaborative skills in action. Show them just how bright, talented, hardworking, and dependable you are.

To build your personal network, you need to have the mind-set that everyone you meet is important. There's no way of knowing what role each new person might play in your career. Make a good first impression. You want to be perceived as smart, friendly, professional, and upbeat. Each time that you meet someone in your field, look for opportunities to stay in touch in a non-obtrusive way. Share news that's relevant to his or her activities. Watch for occasions to send congratulations about awards and major accomplishments. To build genuine relationships, remember that it's not just about you. Help others with their careers whenever you're in a position to do so. If a project or a job opening comes along that's not quite right for you, pass the information along to others who might be a better match. They will appreciate it.

Social media

Expand your social media activity to include LinkedIn. It's free to get started. You'll be setting up a profile that includes the basic information from your résumé and then gradually building a professional network by establishing connections to peers.

Online listings

In addition to personal networking and reading ads in industry publications, you'll be looking for work online. Spending time on job boards can be frustrating because many of them are cluttered with out-of-date listings for positions that have already been filled.

When a new listing appears, you need to respond promptly. Send your information within one week of the posting date. If more time than that has passed, the employer will have moved on in their hiring process. The typical cycle for employers looks like this: a week or two of advertising, then a week or two spent screening applicants and conducting telephone interviews, followed by a couple of weeks of in-person interviews and negotiations, after which the hire is completed.

When you submit applications online, often you won't receive any acknowledgment that your information was received. Many large sites use software to screen candidates, so it's very important for each application to incorporate the keywords used in the job listing itself. Most online job boards are free, but they require candidates to go through a registration process. Instead of allowing you to simply post your résumé, many require you to complete a questionnaire. This allows them to standardize all candidate information in a searchable database.

Be cautious about the personal information that you provide. To protect yourself against hackers and the possibility of identity theft, do not provide your Social Security number, date of birth, or any personal financial data. After registering with job sites, you may begin to receive marketing messages and spam. To minimize this, you may want to give job sites an e-mail address that you can later cancel after you've landed a job.

Also, some sites have a limited posting period for candidate information. If you're still on the job market after several months, you'll need to re-register if your original listing has expired.

Some job sites are general, while others are industry-specific. For creative positions, it's best to start with sites that are specific to design. Here are several that are hosted by industry publications and professional organizations:

- Creative Hotlist
www.creativehotlist.com
(This site is hosted by Communication Arts magazine. You can search design jobs by region, category, and industry. You can also post portfolio files.)
- AIGA Design Jobs
www.aiga.org
(AIGA members can search this national job bank by state and category, and post portfolio files.)
- IDSA Employment
www.idsa.org
(This site features many industrial design job listings.)
- SEGD Job Bank
www.segd.org
(The listings here focus on environmental graphic design.)
- Adweek Classifieds
www.adweek.com
(This is a searchable database of jobs in design, advertising, and public relations.)
- HOW Job Bank
www.howdesign.com
(HOW magazine hosts this searchable database of national listings.)
- Coroflot Jobs
www.coroflot.com
(This is a searchable database of U.S. and international job listings, primarily for industrial designers. You can also post portfolio files.)
- Graphic Artists Guild JobLine
www.graphicartistsguild.org
(Members of the guild can sign up for a weekly e-mail listing of staff positions and freelance opportunities.)

- Ad Age Career Center
<http://adage.com>
(This publication has classified listings, mostly for advertising and public relations jobs.)
- American Advertising Federation
www.aaf.org
(The AAF maintains an online job bank.)
- Talent Zoo
www.talentzoo.com
(This site features advertising jobs and industry news.)

If you're specifically interested in corporate in-house positions, look for job listings directly on individual company sites. Many Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. also have links to this shared employment directory:

- National Labor Exchange
<http://us.jobs>
(This site includes listings from the Direct Employers Association, which is a consortium of large employers. There are links directly to listings on their individual corporate sites.)

At this point in your job search, if you haven't found any listings that interest you, the next step might be to begin visiting large, general job sites. If you do, keep in mind the drawbacks mentioned earlier. General sites include the following:

- Monster Jobs
www.monster.com
(This site promotes itself as having more than one million job postings and tens of thousands of résumés. You can set up automatic notification of new listings that meet criteria you define.)
- CareerBuilder
www.careerbuilder.com
(This site has some listings for advertising and graphics. You can block particular companies from seeing your résumé. This is a great feature if you don't want your current employer to know that you're thinking of leaving.)

- Craigslist
www.craigslist.org
(This is more of an online community, with lots of people looking for apartments and romance. It does include chronological job listings by area and category, but few are design-related.)

You might also want to look at these two sites:

- Simply Hired
www.simplyhired.com
(This specialized search engine indexes help-wanted listings from hundreds of sources. You can filter the results using many different criteria.)
- Indeed
www.indeed.com
(This is another specialized search engine that checks for listings on other sites.)

When you spot a job listing that interests you, your next step should be to research that employer. Visit their Web site for background information including their size, services, and clients. Do a search on Google for recent news stories about them. Many design firms also have profiles in online business directories such as the following:

- Core77 / BusinessWeek Design Firm Directory
www.designdirectory.com
(Profiles can be searched by name, location, or design specialty.)
- The Firm List
www.firmlist.com
(This is an international directory of Web design and development firms.)
- Agency Compile
www.agencycompile.com
(You can search marketing and advertising agencies by type, location, size, or client industries.)
- Adweek Directory
www.adweek.com
(Limited information is available for free. Payment is required for the full directory, which contains detailed profiles of more than 6,000 agencies, PR firms, and media buying services.)

Headhunters

Companies with senior positions to fill often contact creative recruiters. When a recruitment firm is managing a search, the employer pays the fee for their services. Although the amount is usually calculated as a percentage of the first-year base salary for the position being filled, there is no charge to candidates or new hires. There are two different financial models for headhunters: “contingency” recruiters get paid only if they successfully make a placement, whereas “retained” recruiters get part of their fee up front. This retainer compensates them for going through the search process, even if a hire is never made.

For a creative manager with a very heavy workload, it can be a godsend to have a professional recruiter take over the search process. However, when creative firms are not busy, there’s more than enough time for them to conduct searches on their own. For this reason, the use of headhunters tends to decline whenever there’s a downturn in the economy. Less hiring is done overall, and when positions do open up, companies find candidates without assistance.

Recruiters function as matchmakers. They take care of all screening and testing, which can be very labor-intensive. They also maintain their own databases of qualified candidates. If a position needs to be filled quickly, an initial group of qualified individuals can sometimes be produced within a matter of days. In general, headhunters are not looking to add recent grads to their databases. They prefer to represent individuals who are further along in their careers. This is because filling senior positions generates larger fees. If a headhunting firm does take you on as a candidate, they will provide you with expert feedback and guidance regarding your portfolio, résumé, interviewing skills, and career strategy. They will also handle all negotiations for salary and benefits.

Each search is covered by a written agreement between the employer and the recruitment firm. Usually, the contract stipulates that the headhunter’s fee must be paid if the employer hires a referred candidate for any position at all within an extended period of time, usually one year.

It also includes a guarantee that additional candidates will be provided for no additional fee if a new hire is fired or quits within the first few months of employment.

Recruitment firms tend to specialize in filling permanent staff positions. However, some also function as temp agencies or brokers for freelancers. A temp agency sends individuals out on short-term assignments. The individual hands in timesheets and is paid directly by the agency at an agreed-upon hourly rate.

To learn more about recruitment firms, do some research online. You'll find that some headhunter sites provide only a description of services, but others include detailed listings of all positions currently available. To help you with your research, here are several of the best-known recruitment firms in the design community:

- RitaSue Siegel Resources
www.ritasue.com
- Aquent
<http://aquent.us>
- Janou Pakter Inc.
www.pakter.com
- Wert & Company
www.wertco.com
- iCreatives
www.icreatives.com
- Filter
<http://filterdigital.com>
- The Creative Group
www.roberthalf.com/creativegroup
- Syndicate Bleu Creative Talent
<http://syndicatebleu.com>

Next steps

OK, now you've identified an open position that interests you, made initial contact with the company, and given them a chance to review your portfolio. If they're interested in you, they'll contact you for an interview. The next steps in the process look like this:

Telephone interview

Many companies start the screening process by setting up quick telephone interviews to evaluate whether candidates seem like a good fit. The call will probably last about fifteen minutes. The interviewer will be jotting down some notes. You should prepare two or three brief stories to highlight relevant aspects of your work experience and skills. If you're asked to come in for a face-to-face meeting, that's when you can provide more detail.

First interview onsite

You will not be the only candidate coming to the office for an interview. To beat out the competition, you need to practice your interviewing skills. Your portfolio has already shown the quality of your work, and your résumé and cover letter have shown your writing abilities. Interviewers are looking for an open, positive personality; good interpersonal dynamics; and the right kind of chemistry for their company. They will be wondering how well you work under pressure and how well you'll fit into the team.

Chances are you'll be nervous. The best way to overcome nerves is to be well prepared. Do some additional research on the company. Find out more about their history. You want to ask informed questions about their business, not make a bad impression asking about things that you should already be familiar with.

You can also prepare for the standard job interview questions they will have for you. Expect classic questions like "What didn't you like about your last job?" and "What was the biggest mistake you ever made on a job and how did you fix it?" You should also be prepared for the trick question "What do you want to be doing five years from now?" When you explain your career goals, be careful to

focus on objectives that relate in some way to the position you're interviewing for. Employers will be reluctant to hire you if they believe that your real goals lie elsewhere.

Sometimes interviewers will ask you about things that you're not familiar with. If you don't know the answer to a factual question, don't try to bluff. Saying "I don't know" is much better than saying something that is obviously not true.

Think about the clothing that you'll wear to the interview. It's important to dress appropriately for each firm. Styles of dress vary quite a bit from firm to firm. You may want to speak to friends who are familiar with the company or perhaps do some discrete surveillance the day before to determine whether the staff wears blue jeans or Prada.

On the day of the interview, bring extra copies of your résumé. Arrange your schedule so that you will arrive early. Never be late — you don't want them to cancel your appointment and move on to the next candidate. Before you enter the building, turn off your mobile phone (and throw away your chewing gum). Be nice to everyone you encounter — the woman walking through the parking lot might be the founder, or perhaps the guy standing in the lobby is the human resources director. When you check in with the receptionist, you may find that there's a little bit of paperwork for you to do before the meeting. Some creative firms ask candidates to fill out a standardized job application form (it's a requirement of most employment practices insurance policies).

In the interview itself, even though you're nervous, don't let yourself dominate the conversation. Try to spend as much time listening as you do speaking. When answering questions, be concise, honest, and upbeat. Don't rehash any old gripes about past employers or clients. Make it clear that you are a positive and productive person. Emphasize how your skills can benefit the company and contribute to their continued success.

In many instances, your first interview will be with an individual, either a team leader or an HR director. At some point, you will also meet with your potential co-workers. In large firms, this is usually reserved for the second

interview because it's expensive for the company to pull several people away from billable client projects.

Be aware of your body language. Make eye contact, shake hands confidently, and smile. You want to be perceived as comfortable, open, and responsive. Don't send negative signals by physically closing in on yourself. Even though you may be shy, don't cross your arms over your chest, hang your head, or stare at the floor.

It's best to avoid negotiating compensation in the first interview. If asked, share information about your salary history, but don't go on to haggle over starting salary or benefits at this firm. Wait for the second interview to discuss compensation. If you concentrate on money too soon, it can give the wrong impression. The first priority for you and for the firm should be to find a good fit in terms of skills and personality. Money is important, but it's not at the top of the list.

At the end of the interview, close with enthusiasm. State again how excited you are about the position. Immediately after you leave the office, jot down a few notes for yourself to help you remember the names of the people you met with and the things that you discussed.

As soon as you get home, follow up promptly with a thank-you letter or e-mail. It's proper business etiquette, and it's an opportunity to provide any additional information that the employer may have requested.

Basic background check

If a company is interested in you as a candidate, they will verify the information that you gave to them on your résumé and in your interview. This fact checking will include your employment and salary history and your education and degrees. At this point in the process, they will also ask you to provide personal references.

Personal references

The hiring firm will want to speak with professionals who are familiar with your abilities and attitude and who can describe how well you function under pressure. When asked for references, it's acceptable to provide a list of names, but

it's much better to provide letters. If possible, provide three letters that are no more than one year old. A good letter could be from a past supervisor, a co-worker, or an assistant (if you're interviewing for a leadership role). You might also have a letter from a vendor or a client who knows you well. When you provide contact information to the potential employer, give all of the references a quick call to let them know that they might be contacted.

Some employers have moved away from traditional reference letters and phone calls. Instead, they use reference-checking software. You will be asked to provide e-mail addresses for at least five references. They will receive messages asking them to fill out an anonymous questionnaire online. There will be about twenty to twenty-five questions and all responses will be automatically aggregated into a report for the hiring company. The goal in making the process digital and anonymous is to get results that are faster and perhaps more honest.

Second interview

If you're called back for a second interview, be prepared to discuss compensation. The job listing itself may have stated a salary range, but it's helpful to have some outside points of reference. In the course of your job search, you will have collected some classified listings that stated what the starting salary would be. However, this information is a bit random, which means that it may not be representative.

Do some additional research into current salary levels and standard benefits so that your expectations will be realistic. You don't want to ask for a salary so high that it will kill your chances of getting the job. At the same time, if you lowball your request, it may lock you into a salary that will be very difficult to adjust upward in any significant way over the course of your employment.

Salary surveys

The best way to research compensation is to find salary surveys. Start with data that's available for free from the

U.S. government. Annual income for a wide range of occupations can be found on this site:

- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
www.bls.gov/ooh
(The BLS maintains the Occupational Outlook Handbook, which is a searchable database of information about hundreds of careers.)

Government information is not always the most current, however. For the latest data, you'll have to turn to industry sources such as professional associations and trade publications. For example, salary and benefits surveys are conducted by the following groups:

- AIGA/Aquent
www.aiga.org
- HOW magazine/The Creative Group
www.howdesign.com
- Industrial Designers Society of America
www.idsa.org
- Association of Registered Graphic Designers
www.rgd.ca

Salary information for many creative disciplines can also be found online by using search engines. Type in the name of your design discipline plus "salary survey" or "wage survey" or "median earnings." Be careful, though, when you read the results. All salary surveys are not created equal. In general, you should have these concerns:

- How large was the sample?
(The larger the better, so that the results can be broken out by region, job title, and level of experience.)
- How current is the information?
(Data compiled within the last twelve months is best, so that you don't have to guess at how things have changed.)
- How reliable is the source?
(Some Web sites use salary data to attract traffic, but they're very vague about where the information came from. If you can't determine the date or sample size, there's a good chance that the numbers are not representative and cannot be relied upon.)

Mean versus median

Look for surveys that calculate a median instead of a mean. The difference between the two is something that you probably learned in high school but may have forgotten since graduation. Here's a quick description of each to jog your memory.

"Mean" is another word for average. Let's say that you have the following set of numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 500. To calculate the mean, you add them together to get a total of 510 and then divide by 5, which is the number of items in the set. The result is 102. It's important to note that, in a salary survey, the mean can be distorted if an individual response is significantly higher or lower than the rest.

You can avoid this kind of distortion by looking at the median instead. A "median" is the midpoint in a series of values. At the median, half of the values are higher, and half are lower. If we return to our example of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 500, we see that 3 is the midpoint. The median is a much more realistic number to use as a basis for salary negotiations.

Other compensation issues

In the past, most design firms paid their employees base salaries only. More recently, many have added incentive programs. In these firms, base salary levels are high enough to be competitive and attract strong candidates, but no higher. This is to save room for variable pay — extra earnings that will be paid only if specific business targets are hit. Incentive bonuses may be tied to particular projects, specific client accounts, or the overall performance of the firm. A well-thought-out incentive plan can be a powerful motivator for employees. It can also allow the firm to flex payroll expenses in a way that is tied to profitability.

In your discussions with the hiring firm, you might also want to ask about their system for performance reviews and salary adjustments. Many large firms follow a strict annual cycle based on the date of hire. Often, annual adjustments are calculated in two parts — one portion reflects the quality of your job performance, and the other portion is a cost of living adjustment. A cost of living adjustment (often abbreviated as COLA) is necessary for your earnings

to keep pace with the inflation rate in the overall economy. Without it, you'd be losing ground in terms of purchasing power. Cost of living adjustments are usually based on the twelve-month consumer price index (CPI) that is tracked by the federal government. Again, this type of economic data can be found on the BLS site:

- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
www.bls.gov/cpi

A more extensive background check

If a company is negotiating a starting salary, it's clear that they're pretty serious about you as a candidate. At this point in the process, it may be their policy to do a more extensive background check. The results would include your credit history, any bankruptcy filings, and any type of criminal record. This practice is less common in small studios, but it's standard procedure for many large agencies and corporate in-house departments. When companies seek this type of information about accounting candidates and security guards, they often seek it for all positions so that the process is not seen as discriminatory.

However, a company can conduct a more extensive background check only if they have received the candidate's consent. You may already have signed a form authorizing additional information gathering. Many employers include this request for consent in their standard application paperwork. In addition, they may ask you to provide a set of fingerprints.

Legal guidelines have been established for such background checks. For example, the federal limit on retention of consumer credit information is seven years, so any financial information that's reported will not be older than that. Standards for employment screening are included in the Fair Credit Reporting Act, which is administered by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). For more information about this, visit its site:

- Federal Trade Commission
www.ftc.gov

Most employers do not have the time or experience necessary to conduct an extensive search on their own. Instead, they use a paid service to gather the information. One of the largest background-checking companies is

- ChoicePoint/LexisNexis Employment Screening
www.lexisnexis.com/risk

If a decision not to hire you results from negative information found through a background check, the employer is required by law to provide you with the results and give you an opportunity to dispute them. Incorrect information might be due to such things as confusion over similar names, data entry errors like transposed digits in your Social Security number, or outright identity theft. At any rate, you have the right to set the record straight.

Extensive background checks raise a number of important concerns about the intrusion of Big Brother into our private lives. More information about these issues is available from nonprofit consumer rights organizations such as the following:

- Privacy Rights Clearinghouse
www.privacyrights.org

Final hurdles

It's not common in design consultancies, but prior to hiring, some corporate employers may require a urine sample for drug testing. Many design firms and advertising agencies will, however, test your production skills if you're being hired for a position that requires mastery of certain software applications. Finally, don't be surprised if the first offer to you is in the form of a paid freelance assignment. The company may want to collaborate with you on one project as a kind of test-drive.

You're hired

To complete the hiring process, you'll be given a written job description and some form of employment agreement. In small firms, the agreement may be rather short. In larger firms, it will be a more detailed document.

It should include clarification of your employment status (temporary or regular, part-time or full-time, and exempt or non-exempt from overtime). Unless the company is unionized, your agreement will not be for a fixed period of time. Instead, it will include a statement of “employment at will.” This means that you can be fired at any time and for any reason, as long as the reason is not illegal. Similarly, you have the right to resign at any time and for any reason.

You will also be asked to acknowledge that all original work produced within the scope of your employment will be considered “work made for hire” under U.S. copyright law (for more information about intellectual property, see Chapter 17). Your employment agreement will also include a nondisclosure section to protect confidential information that you will learn about your employer’s company and about your clients’ businesses.

Other general employee guidelines and policies may be provided to you in the form of a printed employee handbook or made available on a company intranet site. After hiring, you will have a certain amount of time to come up to speed and become a productive team member. Usually, this initial orientation period lasts three months. If you don’t catch on quickly enough and the employer is unhappy with your performance, you could find yourself job hunting all over again!

The transition from school to the professional world

One of the challenges that recent grads face when entering the working world is the fact that client assignments are very different from academic assignments. In general, professional projects involve many more constraints, including some that are related to the type of design language or visual vocabulary that can be used. Creative activity can be regarded as a continuum, with innovation at one end and convention at the other (see Figure 02.02). Innovation includes wild, crazy, risky stuff that has never been seen before. Convention includes various types of visual communication that have been around for a while. We know how they work and in what situations they are most effective.