AIGA After School Special

Advice for Emerging Designers

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Building a career is not something that happens overnight. It requires patience and tenacity, and it involves more than raw talent. A career demands an overarching curiosity about the world and how things work, topped off with well-honed people skills. To rise to the top in your profession, you have to have the guts to be self-aware, to know your own strengths while trying to improve upon your weaknesses. And, come to think of it, raw talent doesn't hurt.

The great thing about a career in design is that you can define success in a number of ways. You can strive to be a renowned creative director at a big firm, to create a small boutique studio, or to savor both your profession and parenthood by working out of your home while raising children. This industry isn't just about savvy insight and fresh aesthetic perspectives; it's also largely built from flexibility and potential.

In the beginning of a career, the transition from school to work is difficult, to put it mildly. The first thing you learn is that there is more to learn. A lot more.

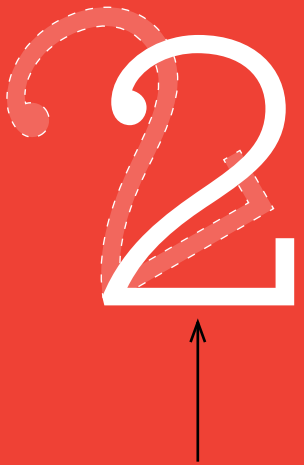
Respect the difference between theory and practice.

Don't get me wrong, school is great, and by all means revel in your trek through academia, because nothing will ever be the same. Appreciate the time you have been given to learn about yourself, and get an education that you can apply to your whole life, not only your job.

In school, your instructors push you to express yourself, they insist on your developing the essence of your design perspective. They want you to be able to articulate why you believe in your work. Every day you try to find a unique way to express your ideas, so, in that way, school is creative nirvana. A teacher's objective is to develop students' skills and to nurture creativity before you set out on your own upon graduation.

Once you're out in the real world, however, it's a whole new game; in a professional environment everything changes, and there's no room for being an isolationist, or demonstrating that you alone are terminally unique. You are now expected to understand your clients and their objectives. In order to do so, you may work in a team, and the emphasis is on how you—collectively, not singularly—are going to meet the aims of the client and the client's business. Suddenly you are one of many, and no one might even care what you think.

Design firms are businesses. They are not created to teach and nurture, although both sometimes happen along the way if you find a great mentor. A design firm's objective is to be a successful company. You walk into a firm and acquire the processes, culture and the various stylistic methods of the firm. You are a part of a group, and you begin to realize that you thought you knew a lot six months ago, but now you only know a fraction of what everyone else seems to know. The learning curve changes.



Develop really great habits.

A great deal of success is about fostering good habits early. This is the time to start; it's harder to break a habit than it is to practice a new one. Also, as you get older, your daily obligations are greater, and you will have less time and energy to make new actions routine. Get those mental muscles toned now and it will become easy to maintain them.

Be positive.

Having a can-do attitude makes people want to work with you. There's an old adage that says, "People work with people they like to work with." Believe me, it's true. Who wants to be around someone who is negative or complains about everything?

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Learn to write.

Writing is hard. Really hard. Personally, I struggle with constructing and perfecting sentence after sentence, even though I can write a nice headline. Among my daily duties, I have to write proposals, letters and all sorts of text related to press and correspondence. I don't feel particularly good at it, I simply slog through. In retrospect, I wish I had focused on honing the technical elements of my writing earlier because I think it would make things easier now.

The ability to write gives you power. A designer who can structure content can communicate visual ideas more effectively. Clients tend to be word oriented, and when designers can communicate on their level, they gain trust. That trust is what leads to getting more work approved.

Work harder than anyone else.

I hate to say this, but if you really want to be successful, you have to rethink the concept of the so-called work/life balance. The most successful creative people I know do not segregate their "work" and their "play"—it's all the same. They love what they do, and do it all the time. If you look at design as a job that you do between 9 and 5 every day, you will earn a paycheck... and that's all.

Talent will take you far, but determination will take you further. I can't tell you how many people I've heard moan about how they could have started a business, gotten the great assignment, scored a better position or whatever. The truth is, most people aren't willing to put the time and effort into accomplishing their goals. It's easier to just live their dreams inside of their heads instead of putting in the sweat equity.

I look at successful people and I see the same patterns. I know a photographer who, when starting his career, worked literally around the clock, and even spent his own money to make shots memorable. He never looked at an assignment as a job, but as an opportunity to do something outstanding. He is still pushing himself today and branching out into new areas. His renowned career is nothing if not enviable.

When I started my business, I had no clients and very little money. The first year I worked until midnight most nights, almost seven days a week. Not only did I work past the point of endurance on my design, I learned how to do basic billing. I wired my own network. I wrote copy. I steeled myself and made cold calls. All of the long nights paid off, I built a client base, and now, years later, I have a thriving practice. You can achieve great things, if you're willing to put in the effort.

Ignore the naysayers.

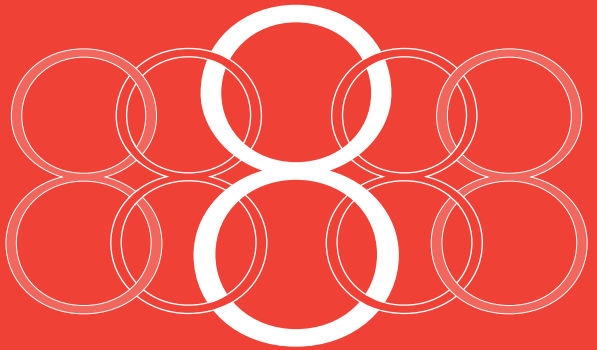
If you craft a good game plan, stay focused and work incredibly hard, you can accomplish just about anything. As a friend of mine says, "It's all about the follow through." Remember that the most important person to believe in your work is you—then you'll prove any who doubt you wrong.

Try to make every assignment better, than the last.

When you finish a project, look at it, hard. Scrutinize. Nitpick. Be critical. Do more. Do better. Don't become complacent.

Ever.

Complacency is death.



Get involved.

This is a great way to continue your education at the beginning of your career. Reach out. Cultivate relationships with your peers and contacts in the field. Learn from what you see and what you're told. As you mature, you will have the opportunity to give back to the profession. If you're lucky enough and work hard enough to make it to the highest levels, you may even be given the ability to affect policy. There is strength in numbers. Every accomplished professional that you encounter has an immeasurably large volume of knowledge that you can learn from, free of tuition.

Be kind.

Non-designers often feel that designers are arrogant, that they don't listen, and that they are intent on loudly bullying them on issues of taste and intellect. A wise man once told me to observe people that I thought were really smart. He then said, "The ones who don't feel a need to put anyone down are the ones who are most secure in their own ability. They don't feel they have to prove anything." It's true.

Your clients, your colleagues and your vendors will all have their separate points of view. And, hey, that's great, because you are so hardworking, smart and talented, you will use all of your finesse to convert them to your way of thinking. In the end, if they still disagree, you might realize a) the other guy might actually have a point or b) that you can find a happy middle ground.

Have passion.

It seems like the inscription on a greeting card, but it's true, everything is meaningless unless you love what you do, both in the sanctuary of school and out in the real world. Life is too short to spend years acquiring skills for a career you aren't completely passionate about. So if you woke up this morning and didn't feel excited about what you are striving towards, then change something. Change your attitude, change your environment, change your profession, or change your direction. You deserve to wake up every day with enthusiasm.

That's it. Oh, wait. One more thing...

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Don't lie.

Tell the truth if you make a mistake. Don't lie to clients, vendors or bosses, and, most importantly, don't lie to yourself. Taking credit for someone else's work—that's called stealing. And misrepresenting your qualifications is called cheating. The funny thing about dishonesty is that people always find out, and you will lose something invaluable: trust. If you mess up, 'fess up.

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