

# Tips for Graduates Entering the Interior Design Profession



WHAT EMPLOYERS ARE LOOKING FOR



Prepared by the Center for Career Services, Syracuse University  
and the American Society of Interior Designers  
May 2006

# INTRODUCTION

Even the most talented interior design students need assistance in making the transition from the classroom to the workplace. This guide provides practical advice to assist recent graduates in their search for that first interior design job. It covers three major areas: portfolio preparation, resume and cover letter composition, and the interview process.

The information contained in this guide is based on the results of a survey of more than 500 practicing interior designers conducted by Syracuse University and the American Society of Interior Designers in May 2005. The respondents, most of whom were owners or principals in their firms with responsibility for hiring new designers, answered a detailed and lengthy questionnaire concerning their expectations and preferences when considering new graduates for positions in their firms. Some of their comments, along with the most frequently provided responses, are included.

Thanks to contributors Michael Cahill, Lynn Capirsello, Rosemarie Crisalli and Susan Filkins at Syracuse University; and Cindy Burke, ASID, and Michael Berens at ASID.



# WHAT MATTERS MOST

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Interior design firms are in the business of getting work and getting the work out. They want to know how you are going to help them do that if they hire you.

They know you have a degree in interior design and want to work as an interior designer. They want to find out

- » **Will you make a good employee for their firm?**
- » **How do you stand apart from all the other new designers?**

“We sell style in this business.”

Here’s what they say are their top considerations when hiring a new designer (in order of most frequently mentioned).

- » Positive, outgoing personality
- » Communication skills (written, verbal, grammar, spelling, presentation)
- » Technical design skills (knowledge of scale, proportion, color, balance, harmony, rendering, sketching, drafting and computer)

### **Other skills and attributes**

- » Professionalism (knowledge of business practices, promptness, professional dress)
- » Good fit for the firm (team player, flexible, independent and good people skills)
- » Good work ethic (hard-working, motivated, initiative, multitasker and goal oriented)
- » Lifelong learner
- » Personal style, creative talent
- » Passion and enthusiasm for design field
- » Experience (work and internships)
- » Education
- » Portfolio
- » Sincerity, honesty, ethical and moral character
- » Critical thinking skills (intelligence, knowledge, problem solving, quick thinker)

“Personality matters, presentation matters,  
design sense and creativity matter.”

- » Confidence
- » Organizational skills
- » Goals
- » Computer skills (Word, Excel, AutoCAD)
- » Humor
- » Resume

### **What employers would like to see more of in job candidates**

- » Ability to write a clear, concise cover letter
- » Business management skills (budgets, deadlines, interacting with clients and marketing)
- » Experience
- » Confidence
- » Realistic expectations
- » Professional appearance and work ethic
- » Knowledge of code requirements
- » Drawing skills
- » AutoCAD skills
- » Space planning
- » Passion for the industry
- » Ability to sell
- » Realistic salary expectations
- » Respect and loyalty
- » Humility
- » Well-rounded liberal arts education (history, geography, art and social sciences)









“It has to be neat, organized and easy to present as well as understand.”

## PORTFOLIO FORMAT

Different employers have different preferences for how the portfolio is formatted. If you are preparing your portfolio for presentation to a specific firm, you should check in advance with that employer about his or her preferences.

If you are looking to prepare a single portfolio to show to a number of different firms, the most commonly preferred format is as follows:

- » Size—11” x 17”
- » Layout—Portrait with non-removable pages
- » Pages—Approximately 12 to 15
- » Projects—Approximately 5 to 7

## PORTFOLIO CONTENT

The portfolio should demonstrate your best work in the following skill areas:



Floor Plans



AutoCAD Drawings



Elevations



Lighting and Electrical Plans



Sketches



3-D Renderings



Renderings



## PORTFOLIO CONTENT

The design specialties most requested to be represented are (in order of preference):



**Residential**



**Office**



**Hospitality**



**Restaurant**



**Retail**



**Health/Spa**

“I want to see a complete project they have done, with examples from all phases of the design process, from programming to construction documents.”

# THE RESUME AND COVER LETTER

Your resume and cover letter are your introduction to a prospective employer. These components must be clear, to the point, professional and easy to read. Employers say they want to see that an applicant is serious about his or her work and is passionate about the profession of interior design. Both those qualities must come across through the information you provide and appearance of your materials.

Think of these documents as steps toward your goal. The purpose of the cover letter is to make the prospective employer want to review your resume. And the purpose of the resume is to get you an interview. Focus on what the employer needs to know about you to determine if you will meet his or her needs.



“A resume has to be presented well and contain the right stuff.”

## RELEVANT INFORMATION FOR RESUME

The most important information to include in the resume is

- » Education
- » List of design skills
- » List of technical skills
- » Internship experience

Other desirable information includes a brief statement of a career objective, work experience (other than design internships) and membership in professional organization(s). Information about study abroad or volunteer experience is of less importance.

“I look at a resume as a design project.”

## FORMAT OF RESUME

Employers place a high level of importance on the overall graphic layout and appearance of the resume. An effective resume needs to

- » Demonstrate clear organization of thought
- » Present the information in a clean, readable layout
- » Adhere to acceptable business style
- » Include employer, positions held and dates of employment for all work experience

Use a font that is easy to read, and do not use more than one or two typefaces in the document. Avoid or minimize the use of graphics in the resume. The portfolio, rather than the resume, is the place to demonstrate your design skills. (See the sample resumes on the next page.)

## COVER LETTER FORMAT

Your cover letter should consist of a single page and, preferably, one or at most two paragraphs. It should state clearly and succinctly why you want to work for that particular firm and why you believe you are a good fit for the firm.




## QUALITY CONTROL

Be sure to proofread carefully. Many employers report receiving resumes and cover letters with multiple spelling and grammatical errors, which often they simply discard without reading further. Don't rely on spell check and grammar check to catch every error. Ask one or two other people to go over your resume and cover letter for you.

Characteristics employers look for in a resume and cover letter

- » Originality and creativity (but not overdone)
- » Professionalism
- » Communication skills (concise, clear, correct grammar and spelling)
- » Clear visual presentation of the facts / good organization
- » Choice of fonts
- » Choice of paper stock

# SAMPLE RESUMES

EDUCATION	<b>DANIELLE GROMOSAIK</b>	2900 Kensington Ave • Apt # 704 XXXXXXX • XX 55555 555•555•5607 danielle_smeff@yahoo.com
	<p><b>XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX UNIVERSITY, XXXXXXX, XX</b>                  Bachelor of Fine Arts, December 2003 GPA: 3.8/4.0 Major: Interior Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virginia Tech Summer Study Abroad, (Switzerland, Italy &amp; Germany) Architecture Program, June-July 2002</li> </ul> <p><b>XXXXXX COLLEGE, XXXXX, XX</b>                  Bachelor of Arts, May 1998 GPA: 3.6/4.0 Major: French Minor: Elementary Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive French Study, <i>University of Angers, Angers, France</i>, Sept. 1996-Jan. 1997</li> <li>• Teacher Licensure, Elementary Ed. NK-8, Secondary Ed.-French, Dec. 1998</li> </ul>	
WORK EXPERIENCE	<p><b>Baskerville &amp; Son, XXXXXXX, XX, June 2003 – Present</b>  <i>Interior Design Intern</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisted Senior Designers in the Corporate and Hospitality divisions in a firm of over 100 employees</li> <li>• Assisted with spec books by researching all finishes and materials according to floor plans, project guidelines</li> <li>• Red lines of CAD drawings</li> <li>• Assisted with move coordination of our firm</li> <li>• Draw architectural details in CAD</li> <li>• Finish / Furniture Selection</li> <li>• Site measurements</li> <li>• Constructed complete set of CDs including elevations, casework elevations, finish plans, and finish schedules</li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Hummel Associates, XXXXXXX, XX, Sept. 2002 – May 2003</b>  <i>Interior Design Intern</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisted design director in a small firm focusing on healthcare &amp; corporate design</li> <li>• Red lines of CAD drawings</li> <li>• Constructed presentation and contractor's boards</li> <li>• Maintained sample and architectural library</li> <li>• Finish / Furniture Selection</li> <li>• Site measurements taken to input base plans into CAD</li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Gromosaik Design, XXXXXXX, XX, May 2002 – Aug. 2002</b>  <i>Assistant to XXX professor</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted on-site building measurements.</li> <li>• Recreated building floor plans using AutoCAD software.</li> </ul>	
		<p><b>Riggs Ward Design, L.C., XXXXXXX, XX, Aug. 2000 – Aug. 2002</b>  <i>Design Assistant</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assembled all necessary components to respond to Requests for Qualifications (RFQs) Requests for Proposals (RFPs), including identifying qualified subcontractors.</li> <li>• Assisted with on-site installation of exhibit displays</li> <li>• Created comprehensive vendor and graphic samples reference databases</li> <li>• Compiled project spec books and created standard procedures for future jobs</li> <li>• Wrote and distributed press releases to announce project completions</li> <li>• Edited copy and assisted with format and layout for print collaterals</li> </ul>
		<p><b>Franklin County Schools, XXXXX XXXX, XX, August 1999 - June 2000</b>  <i>Second Grade Teacher</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managed a group of 18 individuals with varying personalities and abilities</li> </ul>
	HONORS AND DISTINCTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The XXX IIDA/Chasen's Scholarship, 2002, 2003</li> <li>• The XXX Rozanne Epps Scholarship, 2002</li> <li>• The Pellegrini Scholarship from the Swiss Benevolent Society, 2002, 2003</li> <li>• The XXX Affinity License Plate Scholarship, 2002, 2003</li> <li>• Induction into the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, 2002</li> <li>• Dean's List every semester, 2000-Present</li> <li>• Participated in the Annual XXX Student Design Exhibition, April 2002</li> </ul>
KEY SKILLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong communication skills</li> <li>• Strong problem solving abilities</li> <li>• AutoCAD 2002/ADT 3.3</li> <li>• Manually draft plans, elevations, perspectives, and axon drawings</li> <li>• Adobe Photoshop 7.0</li> <li>• Block and space planning</li> <li>• Graphic computer renderings (StudioViz)</li> <li>• Fluent in French, Conversational German (U.S.-Switzerland dual citizen)</li> </ul>	

Chelsey Knauer  
 INTERIOR DESIGN

118 GORON COURT  
 ORADELL, NJ 07649  
 201.261.4254

EDUCATION

**Syracuse University College of Visual and Performing Arts.** Syracuse, NY. (May 2002) B.S. in Environmental Design Interiors. Dean's List.

**Environmental Design Interiors Program.** Florence, Italy. (Summer 2001)  
 Eight-week course on synthesizing interior designs with natural and built environments. Culmination project proposed temporary structure for Florence's Piazza della Republica.

WORK EXPERIENCE IN INTERIOR DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

**DiGeronimo P.A.** Paramus, NJ. (June 2002-November 2003)

*Architectural Designer*

Schematize, design, and execute interior design and architecture projects in public, corporate, commercial, and private settings in New York and New Jersey.

- Conduct site surveys, select building materials and interior design samples, prepare design presentations and material boards, calculate construction estimates, check building codes.
- Proficient in AutoCad 2002.
- Liaise with clients, architects, mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, furniture and fabric vendors.
- Past projects include the expansions and renovations of a computer company, a childcare facility, a private home, and a major public works facility.

**Michael Interiors.** Tenafly, NJ. (Summer 2000)

*Assistant Designer*

Developed and constructed material and furniture specifications. Conducted client business at Manhattan's D&D Building.

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE IN INTERIOR DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

**College of Visual and Performing Arts Counseling Program.** Syracuse, NY. (2001)

*Peer Advisor*

Counseled first year students in Environmental Design Interiors program. Familiarized students with technical and drafting strategies.

**Habitat for Humanity.** Syracuse, NY. (2001)

*Construction Assistant*

Worked with volunteer team to build one home for low-income residents in Syracuse, NY.

MEMBERSHIPS

**American Society of Interior Designers.** Greater New Jersey Chapter. (1999-Present)

*ASID Affiliate*

Attend meetings, guest lectures, conferences and field trips in New Jersey and New York.

COMPUTER SKILLS

AutoCad, Adobe Photoshop, Architectural Desktop, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Microsoft Publisher.

# THE INTERVIEW

During the interview, you will be expected to discuss and demonstrate what you have learned and the skills you have mastered. You will also be asked questions that will help the prospective employer to determine if you will fit in with the firm, if you have good work habits and use good judgment.

## WHAT EMPLOYERS EXPECT YOU TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR FIRMS

- » **Who We Are**—owner, designers, values/culture, size, longevity
- » **What We Do**—projects, clients, competitors, awards
- » **Why We Do It**—philosophy, vision, goals

## WHAT EMPLOYERS ARE LIKELY TO ASK

### Most Frequently Asked Questions

- » What are your goals?
- » What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- » Why do you want to work here?
- » What do you bring to the firm?
- » Why are you an interior designer?

### Design Questions

- » Can you estimate the floor measurements in this room?
- » Describe a storage solution for children's toys.
- » Describe your design process. Where do you begin?
- » If you were asked to measure a building, how would you go about it?
- » How would you redesign this room?
- » What are your design specialty preferences?
- » What did you learn from your internship experience?
- » What is the most important thing you learned in school?
- » What professional organizations do you belong to?
- » What were your least favorite projects in school and why?
- » Tell me about your marketing and business skills.
- » How would you classify your style?
- » What sets you apart from other designers?



## Interpersonal Questions

- » How long do you plan to stay in your first job?
- » Where do you see yourself in five years?
- » Do you feel comfortable presenting a project to a room full of strangers?
- » How do you handle other designers' egos?
- » How would you handle a difficult client?
- » Who are the three most important people in your life and why?
- » Tell me about your greatest challenge and how did it turn out?
- » What has been your greatest accomplishment?
- » What work is below you?
- » How can you make a difference through the medium of design?
- » Describe your work ethic.
- » What would be your ideal job?
- » Tell me about your people skills.

## Words of Advice from Employers

- » Interview advice: Rehearse beforehand, smile, use a firm handshake, look people in the eye, remember names, dress professionally, be prompt.
- » Be willing to start at the bottom and always be a learner.
- » Be honest and respectful.
- » Target the companies you want to work for; have patience and don't give up.
- » Gain business skills, join professional organizations, master AutoCAD.
- » Use correct spelling and grammar in your resume.
- » Have a sense of humor.





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