

As Dawn Phillips moved from academia to the professional world, she learned the importance of a focused and a well-documented job search.

From Student to Intern

By Dawn Phillips, Assoc. AIA, LEED® AP

TIP #1: CUSTOMIZE YOUR PORTFOLIO + RESUME

In the world of architecture, the portfolio is invaluable! It is the first item a potential employer will inquire about during your initial contact and often the first thing they will reach for during your interview. It is important to take the time to develop a portfolio that clearly exhibits your talents, strengths, and interests. The sooner you begin developing your portfolio the better.

Portfolios can be (and should be) as diverse as the people developing them. They can range from having simply composed sheets of your work to the actual full-sized drawings. The most successful portfolios are the ones that re-tell the story of your design projects through the careful selection of your most convincing images (drawings, diagrams, models, photographs, etc.).

Before you begin to assemble your portfolio, think of what you want to communicate. Do you render exceptionally well? Build beautifully crafted models? Or is there a design philosophy you have previously researched that could set the tone for your portfolio? Whatever your approach, your portfolio should have a focused direction that is easily understood by potential employers.

Your resume should work in conjunction with your portfolio. As designers, we are usually anxious to show our design skills, but it's wise to exercise a little restraint with your resume. Allow the portfolio to be the *visual* element of your overall presentation and allow the resume to be the *written* one. Both docu-

ments should highlight your strengths, describe your academic and professional work experiences, and be strong enough to stand on their own.

TIP #2: PREPARE FOR YOUR JOB SEARCH

One of the great skills design schools teach is the ability to research effectively and to think critically. The process of looking for a job should be no less rigorous than research done for a term paper or a thesis project. Start this research by making a wish list of what you are looking for within a firm. *What types of projects would you like to work on? What do you want to learn from a firm? Do you want to find a firm that supports the Intern Development Program (IDP)? What type of environment will give you the most opportunities for growth?*

Once you have compiled your list, you are ready to begin researching firms. The Internet makes it very easy to browse the web sites of potential firms you wish to contact. Once you are ready to compose your cover letters, take the time and construct each cover letter based on the research done, the needs of the firm, and your personal career goals. Give this portion of your research a concerted effort because the employer will know the difference!

I took this approach and found the process to be a good one for focusing in on what was important to me in my job search. For example, my husband and I often walk around the neighborhoods of Washington, DC. During one of our walks, we came upon a housing project that I liked. After some



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research, I found the architects of the project and I'm now working for that firm – Hickok Cole Architects.

TIP #3: HAVE A RECIPROCAL INTERVIEW

The interview is when you know your hard work has paid off—so far. Oftentimes, job seekers are so excited to get “the call” for an interview that they only focus on making the firm like them. Remember, just as they are interviewing you, you too are interviewing them. When you go in for the interview, tune into what is going on around you. *How does the office feel? Does it seem like an environment where you would want to work? Are your interviewers giving you their undivided attention?*

Look for cues around the office. If you are really excited about a beautifully hand drawn sketch in your portfolio, but see only computer printouts of black and white plans on the office wall, that firm may not be a good fit for you. If you are really interested in sustainability and aspire to work on a “green project,” but the interviewer thinks the green movement is a fad, this may not be the firm for you. Remember your list! You created it as a means of assessing the firms. The goal of the interview is to find a place that values your work just as you value theirs.

Another tip that I found to be invaluable was taking notes following an interview. Keeping an “interview journal” was great because it allowed me to document my impressions of the firm, staff members I had met, projects discussed, and the “feel” of the office. I would also include things that seemed out of the

ordinary, such as a lot of people looking stressed and unhappy. It can be a month or more between an initial interview and an official job offer, so taking notes is a great way to refresh your mind about the firm before you make a decision.

TIP #4: ON THE JOB...

You have found a job that is a good fit and a step in the right direction on your career path. If you haven't done so already, you should start an NCARB Record and enroll in IDP. Documenting your experiences through IDP allows you to track your growth through a system that establishes core competencies. Enrolling in IDP also shows you have personal career goals and starts you on your path towards licensure.

During the first few weeks on the job you will be getting acquainted with your new firm's culture, operating systems, projects and team members. Use any downtime time you have wisely. *Be nosy!* Carefully browse through the project folder and learn as much as you can. There may be some previous drawing sets around—look and learn from what has been done. The better acquainted you are with a project, the better able you are to make helpful suggestions and contribute to the team.

Recent graduates are used to receiving regular feedback in the design studio environment. It is important to know that on the job feedback may come less often and in some cases, not at all. This shouldn't stop you from soliciting feedback. Your career is now in your hands! Managers and team members are

usually willing to help you do your job better. This also shows that you care about the work you are doing.

Take the initiative and schedule regular meetings every few months to review your IDP training units and get your IDP Training Report signed. If you are having trouble getting hours in some areas, work with your supervisor to create a plan for fulfilling those requirements. Many firms include IDP codes in their timesheets because it makes it easier for interns to categorize—and supervisors to verify—their training hours. If your firm's timesheets don't include IDP codes, talk to the principals about adding them.

TIP #5: OWN YOUR FUTURE!

The most exciting part about working for an architectural firm is being a part of a project team and seeing a project realized. As a team member, you will be engaged in the day-to-day dealings of that project. You'll be amazed at how much you will grow on each project. In addition to learning on the job, always look for other opportunities to expand your knowledge base. Take advantage of the extra-curricular events within your firm, such as the lunch and learns, as well as technical and professional seminars outside of the office. Developing your own “continuing education” program will keep you current within the industry, make you more valuable to the firm you're working for now, and more attractive to firms or clients you may work for in the future. **DC**

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