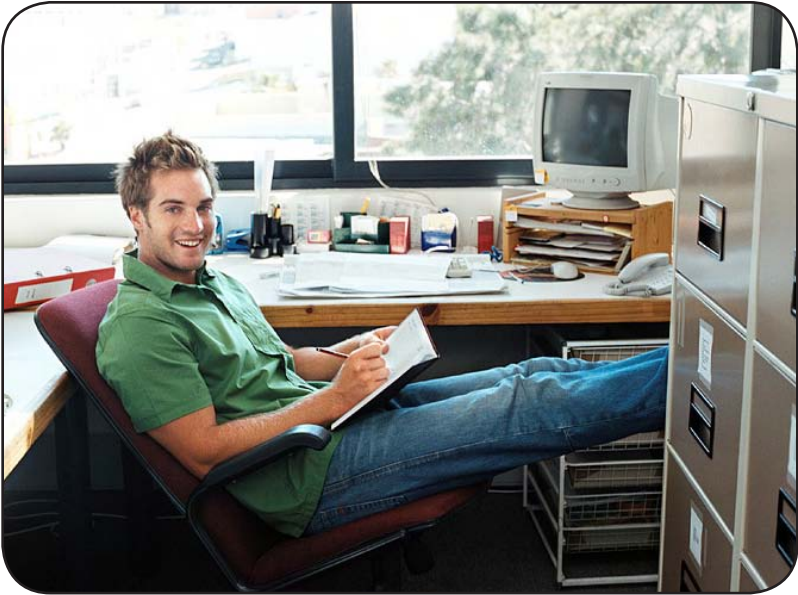


# TIPS FOR GRADUATES ENTERING THE INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSION

## WHAT EMPLOYERS ARE LOOKING FOR





Prepared by the Center for Career Services, Syracuse University,  
International Interior Design Association  
and the American Society of Interior Designers  
May 2008

## Introduction

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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 prepare new 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 nearly 300 practicing interior designers conducted by Syracuse University, the International Interior Design Association and the American Society of Interior Designers in October/November 2007. 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.

## What Matters Most

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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?*

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

**Technical Design Skills** (demonstrated skill in floor plans, elevations/sections, AutoCAD drawings, perspective sketches, reflected ceiling plans, lighting/ electrical plans and hand-drafted plans)

**Sincerity, Honesty, Ethical and Moral Character**

**Eagerness to Grow and Learn**

**Positive, Outgoing Personality**

**Good Work Ethic**

**Professional Etiquette, Good Manners, Polite**

**Good Fit for the Firm**

**Other Skills and Attributes**

- Team player
- Good communication skills
- Professional appearance and manner
- Time management skills
- Personal style, creative talent
- Critical thinking skills (intelligence, knowledge, problem solving, quick thinker)
- Personal style, creative talent
- Office software (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)



*“We want to hire someone  
who wants to work for us.”*

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

- Business management skills: budgets, deadlines, interacting with clients and marketing
- Work experience
- Confidence
- Professional appearance and work ethic
- Good communication and presentation skills
- Good people skills
- Realistic expectations/knowledge of career path
- Drawing (freehand) skills
- Ability to work with others, team player
- Appropriate sense of accomplishment, humility
- Practical (how-to) design knowledge



*“ Be able to talk about the problem,  
your design concept,  
and how it solved the problem.*

***After all, we are problem solvers.”***

## The Portfolio

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The portfolio is your opportunity to demonstrate the skills you have acquired during your formal design training. As you compile your portfolio, think of it not just as a collection of discrete exercises but a way to tell a story about your work and your approach to design.

### 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 for a hard copy portfolio is as follows:

**Size** Two sizes are preferred: 11" x 17" and 8½" x 11"

**Layout** Portrait with removable page inserts

**Projects** Approximately 5 to 7 (More than 7 projects is not encouraged.)

**Boards** May be originals or reproductions (both preferred). About 9 in 10 employers want to see one project that is presented from concept to completion.

## Portfolio Content

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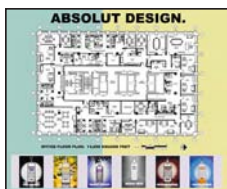
**The portfolio should demonstrate your best work in the following skill areas:**

- Floor plans
- Elevations
- Perspective sketches
- AutoCAD drawings
- Lighting and electrical plans
- 3-D models
- Renderings
- Reflected ceiling plans
- Hand-drafted Plans

**The design specialties most desirable to show (in order of preference)**

- Office/corporate
- Residential/kitchen & bath
- Hospitalityrestaurant
- Health care
- Education/government

***Presentation is everything.***



*Only show your best work.*



## The Resume and Cover Letter

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Your resume and cover letter are your introduction to a prospective employer. They 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 the 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.

### Relevant Information for Resume

The most important information to include in the resume is

- Education/degree type
- List of design skills
- List of technical skills, including technology skills
- Design-related coursework
- Internship experience

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

### 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

The resume is not the place to demonstrate your design skills—save this for the portfolio. 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. (See the sample resumes on pages 12 and 13.)



### **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. E-mail or mail your cover letter with an attached resume.

### **Quality Control**

Be sure to carefully proofread. Many employers report receiving resumes and cover letters that contain multiple spelling and grammatical errors, which they often 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 font
- Choice of paper stock

### **Technical Skills Welcome**

Employers are looking for your computer skills. Remember to note what systems you work on. AutoCAD and Microsoft Word are the most requested skills, along with Excel, Photoshop and PowerPoint.



# MARIA HERNANDEZ

## Contact

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## Local Address

510 Asphalt St., Apt. 131  
Blacksburg, VA 24060

## Permanent Address

1324 Jamba Juice Ave.  
Reston, VA 20194

## Education

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University**  
Bachelor of Science in Interior Design, Industrial Design Minor  
Anticipated Graduation May 2009  
GPA 3.6

## Skills

**Computer** AutoCAD, SketchUp, Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, MS Word and Excel  
**Art** Watercolor, Sketching And Rendering, Perspective Drawing, Drafting  
**Language** 5 years of Spanish (to the AP level)

## Experience

Reston Association  
May 2004 – August 2005 Reston, VA  
Lifeguard for Uplands Pool, substitute guard for all Reston facilities  
Certified in CPR, AED and First Aid

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
June 2007 – August 2007 Blacksburg, VA  
Caretaker of children during church service on Sundays

## Activities and Affiliations

**ASID** student member at Virginia Tech, 2006 – Present  
**IDEAS** (Interior Designers For Education and Sustainability) member, 2006 – Present  
**Relay for Life** Spring 2007 – Present  
**Delta Delta Delta Sorority** Member at Virginia Tech, Spring 2007 – Present  
**Delta Delta Delta Sorority** Historian at Virginia Tech, Fall 2007 – Present  
**Intramural Soccer**, Virginia Tech, 2005 – Present  
**Intramural Basketball**, Virginia Tech, 2008

## Honors

**Dean's List** Fall 2006, Spring 2006, 2007, Fall 2007  
**Honorable Mention** Mark Boone residential design third year studio competition, Fall 2007  
Chosen to enter restaurant design into Hospitality Design Magazine competition (one of six students in class selected), Spring 2007

## The Interview

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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



*Try to relax during your interview.*

## Questions Employers Are Likely to Ask

### *Most Frequently Asked Questions*

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What will you bring to the firm?
- What are your goals?
- What has been your biggest mistake/challenge so far and what did you learn?
- What has been your greatest accomplishment so far?

### *Design Questions*

- Why are you an interior designer?
- What sets you apart from other designers?
- How would you estimate the floor measurements in this room?
- Describe your design process. Where do you begin?
- What were your least favorite projects in school and why?
- Tell me about your marketing and business skills.
- How fast can you work effectively?

### *Interpersonal Questions*

- Tell me about your people skills.
- Describe your work ethic.
- 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?
- Is there work that you prefer not to do or would consider beneath you?
- Where do you expect to be in 5 years?
- What would be your ideal job?

***Be confident and concise.  
Practice your answers.***

## Words of Advice From Employers

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### Advice on How to Show a Portfolio/Project

- Rehearse. Your time is limited, so be sure you know what you're going to say.
- Verbally walk through the portfolio, don't just hand it to the interviewer. Tell the story. Think of the entire portfolio as one story and present individual projects as separate chapters—each project highlights different skills and challenges.
- Be brief in your description of each project: present the concept and solution. Explain how your solution met the needs of the client.
- Communicate clearly. Be enthusiastic and confident.
- Show your best work. Show a progression of growth. Show professional, neat work.
- Never point out mistakes, errors or areas you don't excel in.
- Position page layouts in one direction, whenever possible.

### General Advice

- Interview advice: Rehearse beforehand, smile, have a firm handshake, look people in the eye, remember names, wear professional dress, be prompt. Come prepared with questions for the interviewer.
- Know the firm and connect your remarks back to the firm and its goals, work.
- Be willing to start at the bottom, and always be a learner.
- Be honest and respectful.
- Know what you want from a job.
- Target the companies you want to work for; have patience and don't give up.
- Don't take a job you don't want; you and the firm will both be unhappy.
- Be enthusiastic and show you are willing to work hard to be successful.



***“Show a progression of growth.  
Show professional, neat work.”***

# Starting Salaries for Recent Interior Design Graduates





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