

Case Study: Exhibition Designer - Katherine

What do you do?

I'm a creative director at an exhibits company. As well as being a senior exhibition designer, my responsibilities include managing the design department, setting department goals and scheduling projects.

I'm also in charge of recruiting and training staff, and I'm responsible for the overall quality of the designs and presentations.



What is your background?

I've always loved to draw. At school, I liked both art and maths and wanted to combine them both. I decided design work would provide better financial opportunities than fine arts.

At university, I studied for a degree in architectural design technology. I've also completed some college courses in computer-aided design (CAD).

When I left university, I couldn't find work in an architectural firm, so applied for a job with an exhibit company. I was interviewed, but only got the job after the first person they employed didn't do very well.

I worked my way up from junior designer, developing a respected reputation and portfolio.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

You need to be a creative and lateral thinker. Designers must constantly come up with new ideas or ways to present things.

You should also love to learn. Design is always changing, preparing the way for new trends, and exhibition designers are on the cutting edge of these changes.

Design is also subjective, so you should be flexible and able to accept changes (for example, from clients) that you may not always agree with.

An open-minded, positive attitude is useful for listening to, and dealing with, clients. You have to explain how your design will affect their company image and product sales. Therefore, it's also necessary to be a good communicator.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

Exhibition designers can work in a number of areas such as museum exhibit design and science design. They could also use their design skills in interior, retail and theatre stage design.

Because designers come into contact with sales people and project managers, they could work in either of these areas, too.

What changes will there be in the future?

I think the demand for exhibition designers will increase slightly. Companies need to demonstrate their products three-dimensionally or have live demonstrations.

As for the way we do our jobs, computer-aided design is changing the way presentations and details are produced. Email and the internet allow designs to be transferred electronically.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

Trying to be as creative as possible, within time and budget constraints, is a constant challenge. Another is convincing clients to try something new or different, which you feel will succeed, but they think is a little risky.

Finally, keeping up to date with changes in technology can be challenging. Computer design programs are always changing and being updated.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

It can be difficult to enter this industry. You need a portfolio of design work, and the ability to do detailed projects. You also need a positive, ambitious and hard-working attitude. Then try to set up interviews at design companies, or get some freelance work as a junior designer.

What do you like about your job?

Working as an exhibition designer is an exciting career because I'm always learning something new. I have designed exhibitions for industrial products, health care and computer companies. Each of these projects presents new and unique design opportunities that require you to learn about the products and services, as well as their company philosophy and image.

Another thing I like about designing exhibitions is the close interaction I have with colleagues and clients. When taking on a project, I need to meet with the client to discuss their vision for the exhibition. I then generate ideas with other designers and discuss their costs and timescales with the project manager. I then meet with the cabinet makers and welders in our shop to see how my ideas can be built.

Finally, I enjoy working on a project that goes from concept to completion in less than two to six months.

What do you dislike about your job?

Because some clients don't understand how long it takes to design and build and display your exhibition, most projects have tight deadlines. This can be frustrating because there is little time that can be spent researching ideas or finding unique materials to develop creative design solutions.

Although computer technology is allowing for consistency in design and making transfer of information easier and faster, computer-aided design has a longer learning curve to become proficient. Some software programs take a good while to learn.

Another dislike is the fact that many clients lack understanding about the cost involved in designing exhibitions. This can create difficulties in designing what they need, or want it to look like.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

The exhibition design industry is exciting and fast-paced. You must learn to work on more than one project at a time and work to a deadline. You must love learning and change, since there are always new materials, new trends, new methods of construction and new technology.

Design ability and creativity is based on experience, both personal and work related. So, you must also expect a longer learning curve.

A day in the life

8:30 am - 9:30 am

I arrive at work and answer my emails and voice mail. I then go through the details for meetings and new design requests.

9:30 am - 11:00 am

Design meeting to discuss strategy of projects and who is working on what. We discuss problems or issues, workload and what information is required for specific projects.

11:00 am - 12:00 pm

Revising drawings for a project as a result of client input. Time for a quick meeting with a salesperson.

12:00 pm - 1:00 pm

Lunch.

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Dealing with a new design request. Meeting a client or salesperson to discuss the direction of concepts.

3:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Developing concepts through sketches. Reviewing design magazines or books. Thinking of pencil sketch ideas.

4:00 pm - 5:00 pm

Discussing concepts with salesperson for approval. Discussing new construction details with a colleague. Reviewing budgets with the project manager.