MANAGING DESIGN GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

The design profession currently has an ad hoc approach to management, education and training methods, which results in a mixed experience for the graduate designer, depending on the particular company where he or she is employed, and the management and training styles adopted within that company. A bad experience could result in a loss of interest for the graduate designer, and stunted personal development, and for the company this could result in a discontented design team that could reflect in the work outcome. To seek to reduce and overcome these risks, this research analyses the wide ranging management and training styles currently being practised within UK in-house design teams within companies, and consultancies. The results identify a range of management and training methods in operation, some proving to be more successful than others. Finally, this paper identifies the best practice extrapolated from the results, and suggests more effective methods of management and training within different contexts.

Keywords: Design Education, Design Graduates, Training Methods,

1 INTRODUCTION

The UK design industry has gained the reputation for being the best in the world. This is currently being threatened by foreign counterparts such as China, Korea and India who have a number of advantages over the UK, such as being based close to the manufacturers in one of the world fastest growing markets, and much lower labour costs. The UK design profession must take stock and decide its future direction or it may diminish in the same way as UK manufacturing. The focus needs to be competing on quality rather than cost. One way that this can be achieved is by reshaping design current education, training and management methods use by companies and consultancies.. One particular aspect of this broad issue is management and training methods for newly employed graduate designers, as they are the design sector of the future. By establishing methods to effectively train and manage design graduates, post their University design education, passing on relevant knowledge and skills, this could be a major factor in competing with countries such as China, Korea and India.

When graduate designers leave university, they are entering a very competitive field with far more graduates than vacancies. In 2003–04 there were 56,785 students on design courses in the UK [1]. 8,072 design consultancies and in-house teams recruited 17,297 designers, of which 39% of new appointments were made directly from colleges and universities in 2004. The Design Council report that it is very difficult for graduates

to gain employment, although it does show that the main source of recruitment within design is directly from universities and colleges. However 25% of businesses with design vacancies found these positions hard to fill. The main reasons given for this anomaly were the low number of applicants with the required skills (61%) and applicants' lack of work experience (29%). The main skills that were reported as difficult to obtain were technical and practical skills (45%) and communication skills (42%) [2]. This result shows that there is an issue concerning the standard of graduates who have studied a design discipline, as they are not meeting the required expectations of employers.

So how can design graduates effectively be managed in their first design position post-graduation within a company? The establishment of effective management and training techniques for design graduates remains a relatively unexplored and emerging issue. Structured management and training methods for designers can be seen in practice in some companies and consultancies using various methods that have evolved specifically within that particular organisation, but adopted or used in the same manner in other organisations. The majority of corporate companies value the need for design to a certain extent, however the understanding and acceptance of a design facility operating in a corporate environment is sometimes a constraint, as senior management often have overall control of the design department, but little understanding on how this can be effectively managed. Design departments working within a company on the whole are expected to conform to the corporate lifestyle that follows business practices; however this may not always be the best approach, as design specific issues to the management practices and training for designers are often lacking.

Management practices within the design profession remain underdeveloped. In one respect this may be regarded as a positive point, as it fits in with the creative nature of design, and the perceived lack of management control may result in the development of some extremely innovative and successful work. On the other hand it may result in a lack of general progression for all parties – businesses, consultancies, clients and designers, as it is difficult to build a significant role for design on unsteady ground. The design remains non-conformist and ad hoc, sometimes quite belligerently and thus encounters difficulty in being accepted by other sectors and there continues to be a lack of understanding.

This research aimed to gain insights into the training and management of design graduates, and show possible new directions in practice to increase performance quality and productivity of design graduates. The guidelines produced for design managers could contribute to the acceptance and understanding of the design profession amongst other sectors, helping design to be seen as 'conforming' through the integration of a more structured approach to management and training methods.

2   DESIGN EDUCATION AND DESIGN GRADUATES

The effectiveness of design education has recently come under scrutiny recently. But still the design education system in the UK is highly regarded throughout the world. Cox stated that there is no doubt that the UK's higher education, with its variety of institutions and courses, is in many ways a great strength. The fact that so many overseas students - notably from the fast developing economies – seek places within UK higher education system underlines the international regard in which it is held [2]. However, the principal issue is that graduates are leaving higher education without the skills that the UK industry requires, thus design graduates are finding it hard to gain

employment and the design industry is finding it hard to fill vacancies. A research study conducted by the Design Council showed a wide range of reasons for this dichotomy and an above 80% level agreement, pointing strongly to view that the design profession are keen to suggest positive changes and see them implemented [1].

The Cox review identified four main types of design education; art influenced or skills based (the dominant type), design and technology, humanistic context and management and social sciences, the latter two emerging relatively recently [3]. Design taught in a university environment is inherently controversial, with assessment criteria principally based on knowledge acquisition at the centre of the debate, as this can be more readily measured and compared for assessment purposes. However, this approach to design education has reduced the amount of time used to teach practical skills, and graduates are now seen to be lacking these skills in the eyes of employers. This can result in a misunderstanding by design students concerning practices within the design profession and students may leave education without any knowledge of commercial awareness.

In the Design Council survey, 85% of designers think that design lecturers should spend time working within in industry in order to be able to teach a current view at all stages. 88% of designers think that students should complete compulsory and extensive work experience, in order to fully understand the design industry and be able to put into practice the skills and knowledge that they have learnt throughout their education [1]. The current system has recognised drawbacks, therefore all the stakeholders must work together in order to reduce the proven deficiencies. Industry needs to be aware of what is being taught in design education and to complement this through carefully planned training. Design graduates should be made aware of these issues and prepared to do all they can to bring themselves up to speed in order to increase their chances of employment.

Within the design profession, training is an area that often seems to get overlooked, particularly in smaller consultancies: it can be seen as being non-productive, time consuming and costly. The 88% agreement in the Design Council Research to the introduction of more employer-based vocational design training shows that industry sees the need for a higher emphasis on practical skills and experience. Therefore the design profession needs methods that have proven to be successful whilst remaining sympathetic to the constraints.

3   PRIMARY RESEARCH RESULTS

In order to gain a broad perspective from graduate designers who have progressed to their first design position within industry, a questionnaire survey was conducted.. Also, the research has focused on the training practices of three large companies and three leading consultancies. In the selection of the research sample, it was noted that companies and consultancies expressed a high level of interest in the contemporary relevance of the research

3.1 QUESTIONNAIRE REVIEW

The questionnaire aimed at graduate designers focused on their views on the undergraduate course they completed, and their path to employment related to the training or personal development within the design profession.

57% of those questioned thought that the design related course they completed gave them the skills employees are looking for, but 57% also agreed that the design course they completed did not teach them enough skills to work within the design profession, with 50% of those questioned going on to complete further design related courses. This

re-iterates the message that the content of undergraduate design courses needs to be reviewed in order to bring the contents closer to the expectations of industry. Design students report "a raw deal", as they are paying significant amounts to study these courses to enter the design profession, then discovering the reality that the course may not have prepared them properly.

90% of those questioned succeeded in finding work within design with the majority of those staying in their first design position for between 1-3 years. Of those that stayed in their first employment for less than one year, 60% agreed that if they had been offered incentives to stay longer they would not have stayed, suggesting they were keen to look for new challenges elsewhere.

Those that stayed for more than 1 year in their first employment were often offered incentives to stay, such as being offered a higher level of responsibility or more interesting work. The findings- Table 1 - demonstrate that creative people value new challenges and working relationships, and are not always motivated by other incentives such as the offer of pay rises or bonuses.

Table 1. Incentive to stay

Section	The reason to stay in the first position for more than 1 year	the reason to stay in the same position
Training	15%	0%
Personal Development / Mentoring	10%	20%
Pay rise	10%	20%
Bonuses	10%	0%
More responsibility / more interesting work	20%	20%
Enjoying the position	10%	10%
The people I work with	10%	20%
Manager I work with	10%	10%
Customer Satisfaction	5%	0%

3.2 OBSERVATIONAL AND INTERVIEW STUDIES

The research stems from an observational study, which formed part of a 6-week placement carried out at Xerox Technical Development Centre, UK. The experiences at Xerox benchmarked against the practices of two companies, British Airways and Royal Mail, and three design consultancies Alloy, Design Bridge and Conran Design Group from information/insights gained through interviews. The choice of 6 very different businesses with the common theme of design led to the discovery of 6 individual approaches to training and management techniques for graduate designers. A summary of each follows and methods are shown in Table 2:

- Alloy - The recognition shared by senior partners that training should be and does add value to the consultancy which can be seen in the product outcome, resulting in training being a high priority and heavily invested in.
- Design Bridge – Training and management techniques that are implemented include mentoring and on the job training. An individual approach is used for specific training packages allocated to those who would really benefit.
- British Airways – Recognised that a graduate training scheme for other disciplines was not suitable for designers, therefore alternative training and management methods were implemented, including mentoring, and training on the job.

- Royal Mail – Being funded as a separate entity within Royal Mail with little senior management intervention allowed the design manager to initiate training in his own personal style creating a 'finishing school' for designers.
- Conran Design Group – In contrast to Alloy, training is not seen as value-add, so therefore no investment. On the job training and mentoring techniques are used in an unstructured and ad hoc approach to training and management.
- Xerox – A corporate American company with a structured and standardised graduate training scheme aimed at all disciplines, not just design, resulting in little specific training for designers.

Table 2. The training status and situations

Section	Contents	Alloy	British Airways	Design Bridge	Royal Mail	The Conran Design Group	Xerox
effective managing skill for design graduates	Manage in an open team environment			■		■	
	Recognise their limited experience		■				
	Introduce to industry jargon		■				■
	Assess previous experience		■				■
	Encourage to build professional relationships		■			■	
	Give creative freedom				■		
	Teach them about time management	■					■
	Teach them about business practices	■					
	Look for characteristics and build on them			■			
Training skill for graduates working	Carry out a 'training audit'		■				
	Learn by doing - involvement in projects	■				■	
	Assign a mentor			■			
	Project selected to increase skills / experience	■				■	
Used training skill for design graduates	Given a general company introduction		■				
	On the job training		■	■			
	Mentoring		■	■			
	Personal Development Program		■	■			
	Individual Approach		■				
	Finishing School for designers				■		
	Graduate training scheme	■					■
	Training on system processes	■					
	Skill development training	■					
	CAD training	■					
	Presentation skills training			■			
Main training effect of design graduates	Time reducing	■	■			■	
	Resources reducing	■	■				
	Budget reducing			■			
	Senior Management Control						■
Design educator's roles for design graduates	Live projects		■	■			
	Have a too polished/professional approach to work			■			
	Emphasis on vocational courses					■	
	Compulsory work experience					■	
	An external training package for design graduates					■	
	Lecturers should gain commercial experience					■	
	Understanding of practices within industry		■				
	Formal Placement Scheme		■				
	Knowledge of how design can be used within business	■					
	Designers should train to be managers	■					
	Knowledge of business language	■					

4 EFFECTIVE TRAINING METHODS FOR DESIGN GRADUATES

The primary research has highlighted a number of management and training techniques that are being used in the three companies, and three consultancies that took part in this study, with varying levels of effectiveness within each individual context. Some similarities in training techniques emerged, for example training on-the-job and mentoring were both popular techniques used at British Airways, Design Bridge,

Conran Design Group and Xerox; on the other hand there were some visible differences – at Royal Mail a unique 'finishing school' approach had been adopted. The methods highlighted in these six examples are shown in table 3 below.

Table 3. Design graduates training methods

Methods	Features	Examples
An individual approach to training	Encouraging junior designers to give each piece of work their best shot Treating the creative people differently	British Airways / Design Bridge / Royal Mail
Graduate development schemes	Pursuing a career in general management Teaching specific topic areas for business knowledge	Xerox / Alloy
No formal training methods	All training is initiated on the job and through a mentor, holds a contradictory opinion	The Conran Design Group
Training on-the-job	Developing a graduates skills and knowledge through projects Standard training method	The Conran Design Group / Design Bridge / British Airways / Royal Mail / Xerox / Alloy
Personal development programme	Giving the employee a timescale in which to prove themselves Remain working within a company for longer	British Airways / Design Bridge / Xerox
Mentoring	Giving guidance throughout the process Asking questions and gain advice on company specific items	Xerox / The Conran Design Group

5   CONCLUSION

This initial research of the topic area identified a number of issues that contribute to a lack of unification in training techniques for graduate designers. It showed that training specifically for graduate designers was scarce with constraints such as time and cost, and a general lack of understanding of best practice in training and management methods for graduate designers emerged. This study has implications for future training methods for graduate designers and the way they are managed. The outcome provides a range of general methods and gives a platform for planning and development of more effective methods. The findings from current training practice for designers in industry can form part of the greater challenge of re-aligning design education and identifying new directions for the design profession, to prepare future generations of creative specialists and new business leaders [4].

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