

## Make yourself employable

So you're well on the way to getting your qualification – either a FDA or Degree in a creative subjects. So is that all you need to know to able to step into suitable employment? Is turning up for an interview clutching your portfolio all you need to do now, and the red carpet will be rolled out and the door to a career opened? Umm....well no.

Self-awareness is the first key step towards making a successful career choice. Also, how do your skills fit with an employer's job specifications?

You may feel that you need more experience or additional skills in order to apply for a particular job. As an arts graduate, you will need to develop and manage your career path, continually gaining further appropriate qualifications, skills and experience in order to enhance your CV and your success in job applications.

So it is time to take stock and examine how to make yourself employable in the eyes of your prospective employer. That means some honest self-analysis and looking objectively at your strengths and weakness - your talents and skills, and what your are hopeless at.

So here it is time to look at self-assessment, preparing for interviews and writing good CVs.

### SWOT Analysis

Examine yourself and ask 'what are my **strengths**?'

What are you good at? Not just the technical things such as drawing, layout, typography or use of colour, but the personal things such as verbal dexterity, eye contact, social interaction. Are you a 'people person'? Are you a team player or a loner? (both can be strengths in different circumstances).

Make a list of all the strengths you have.

Not too difficult really.

Now the harder bit – make a list of all your **weaknesses**. Not always so easy to admit to these. Are you a bit lazy? Lack motivation? Can't speak clearly in public or lousy with money? Unkempt and lacking social gifts? Severely dyslexic?

Looked at from an employer's point of view it soon becomes obvious that your failings can let you down badly in interviews or written applications however good your creative work maybe.

If you're disorganized and always arrive late, sound hesitant on the phone, fumble and mumble at interviews you're at a disadvantage compared with someone who has all the social gifts you may lack.

What to do about it? You can ask tutors, fellow students, family and friends for input at this stage.

But if you're unable to change your habits of a lifetime then you may need to have a reality check and seek employment where these failings don't matter. But just identifying them may help you on the road to dealing with them and there are courses and self-help books to inspire you with new confidence and deal with some of those bad habits. Everything you do from now on should lessen the weaknesses while enhancing your strengths.

It won't happen overnight, but catching yourself falling back into the bad old ways is half the battle. Try to be objective – you may think you are friendly and verbally competent but others may see you as just plain bossy! See yourself as others see you.

Strengths and weaknesses relate to the state you are in now but what of the future?

Ahead of you lie **opportunities** which you should be able to identify to make use of your particular strengths. So it pays to be on the ball and well informed about your chosen career path. If that involves using image manipulation on a computer, then it will be important to be up to speed in all the latest software developments. If you are an artist blacksmith then new techniques may save time and money and help you create entirely new work never seen before.

Opportunities come in the form of jobs, commissions, new materials, specific events (like a Royal wedding or World Cup). They come in the form of changes in the law and tax breaks, in the form of events unfolding on the other side of the globe, and what an employer is looking for right now.

Meanwhile there are **threats** to look out for. Clinging to old technology, changes in world economies, the weather, changes in fashion or employment law will all threaten your position. Somewhere someone is developing a new way to do what you do for half the price in half the time and twice as well..... Again being alert to the world around you will help deal with these difficulties and demonstrate to employers that you know what the current trends are.

These opportunities and threats lie outside your direct control but are going to be best dealt with by a creative person who knows their own strengths and how to make the best of them.

Your turn....do your own honest SWOT analysis, and see what you come up with.

If you really want to be on top of things then carry out a **PEST** analysis. No nothing to do with vermin but rather a way of understanding your place in the world around you, in which you examine the **P**olitical, **E**conomic, **S**ocial and **T**echnological contexts in which you and your potential employers operate. It is a sophisticated process that looks at how, for instance, economic factors might affect a particular area of business such as film production – what is the level of recruitment and investment in the industry? Is it increasing or declining? What are the changes in technology that lie ahead in your field of expertise, and how soon will the knowledge you possess be outmoded? What effects on teen culture have social network sites and youtube had in the way people communicate, and how does this empower would-be designers and film makers to challenge the norms? Once again it is all about demonstrating that you are on the ball.

### What do employers look for?

Research by Plymouth College of Art found that creative industries employers expected 3 to 4 weeks of relevant work experience, and some even 5-6 weeks. In other words employers find that practical, hands on experience is one of the most important factors in deciding to engage a graduate, as it enables you to develop your skills and demonstrate a practical application of your knowledge in a work environment.

Your final grades count of course but personality and experience will make all the difference. So it is rewarding to pay attention to your social attributes – body language, dress, verbal usage and eye contact – polish them and hone them to a fine pitch. See yourself as others see you.

### The Perfect Portfolio

In the visual arts the portfolio still counts as the most important promotional item you possess, but it is not the same as the end of course educational portfolio. It has another job to do, so it is worth spending time considering what to put in it and how to give it structure. In media and graphic design it may be important to have a digital portfolio on CD.

Select no more than 12 - 15 pieces of work and put the best first. Mount them carefully against a neutral background or place within a display box for loose-leaf handling. It may be original artwork but more likely to be final printed versions for graphics, illustration and photography. Give work a context only if it enhances the appreciation of the work. If you feel you have to apologise for a piece, take it out. Update it regularly. Perhaps finish on an experimental note suggesting there is

more development to come. Plenty advice to be had about this, but basically let the work speak for itself, and put a skills based CV at the back.

## **Numeracy**

Many administrative, teaching and management jobs demand calculations and the interpretation of numerical data (ie accounts, costing, budgets, statistical tables and producing percentages). A lack of GCSE mathematics or evidence of ability to work with figures may hold you back, especially as many employers test numerical reasoning as part of their recruitment process.

There are a number of websites with sample tests, which are well worth a try as you can improve your scores with practice. You can also boost your competence with an evening class in mathematics, statistics or finance. There are very few graduates who are incapable of acquiring numerical skills, although some people establish a mental block about them.

## **Driving licence**

A driving licence widens your scope for employment, both in jobs where driving is essential as part of the work and by opening up opportunities that are not accessible by public transport. If you are offered a job where it is necessary to be able to drive, there are fast-track courses available to enable you to obtain a licence in a short space of time.

## **Applications and Interviews**

See the section 'Searching for a job'.