

Staffing the Profession

Paul Nulty of Paul Nulty Lighting Design looks at the vexed issue of how we build a body of skilled, experienced lighting design staff in today's pressured climate

Good staff are hard to come by... or so the cliché goes. Having started my own practice last year I'm starting to agree. We've recently been interviewing for a number of design positions ranging from interns to senior designers and I'm really quite surprised at the diversity of talent.

Now I'm not about to launch into a tirade about a dearth of talent in the industry – in fact, on the whole, most people we've seen have been pretty good. However, there does seem to be a lack of clarity in terms of expectations or understanding of the role of the lighting designer – for example candidates who have never worked in the lighting industry applying for senior design roles.

Perhaps this is a product of postgraduate courses turning out technically knowledgeable students with no real-life experience. I suspect that it's a wider issue than this, because we work in an ever-expanding industry with new consultancies popping up all the time. A straw poll of my contemporaries suggests this expansion is creating a vacuum at the top of the industry. Senior designers are hard to find and with practices seemingly very busy, I wonder whether we, as an industry, are pushing our young staff harder and promoting them more quickly than real-time experience necessarily should allow, in order to fill that vacuum. Such a vacuum may well account for the unrealistic expectations from those new to the industry.

Prior Education

I personally would always expect a person with no previous working experience in the industry to start as a junior designer. If they happen to have a prior lighting education then inevitably they should (capabilities notwithstanding) develop much quicker than one without. But it's the prior education bit that interests me. As an industry no formal qualifications are required to practice as a lighting designer and I certainly agree with the school of thought that says we need to formalise this to better promote and professionalise our industry.

Postgraduate courses such as the MSc in Light & Lighting certainly go a long way in terms of providing graduates with expertise and technical knowledge, but appear to be limited in encouraging creative thought... and they certainly aren't able to provide the kind of real-time pragmatic experience the lighting designer requires, such as dealing with a tricky contractor or balancing tight budgets. To an extent, too, the PLDA professional membership status informs a client that their chosen designer is at least experienced. All of which is fine if you've been in the industry a while, but what if you're new?

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I also worry about the possible muting effects of the mooted undergraduate architectural lighting design course. One of the key strengths of the lighting design industry is the sheer diversity of backgrounds we come from. A straw poll of three practices threw up the following backgrounds: theatre, architecture, engineering, product design, exhibition design, fine art, surveying, interior design, textile design and industrial design. It's this melting pot that makes lighting design so exciting. Would an architectural lighting degree homogenise that talent?

So what is the answer? Well the Hochschule in Wismar is certainly onto something when it actively encourages students to undertake lengthy work placements. These internships provide an excellent environment for students to obtain practical experience. I even wonder whether we could take this further and return to something akin to a good old fashioned apprenticeship, whereby a student studies and works at the same time, thus applying learned knowledge



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in the working environment. The closest thing we currently have to this is the MSc in Light & Lighting two-year course, in which students study part-time, usually while in work. It turns out truly excellent students who are experienced and knowledgeable, but I'm sure we can do more as an industry to encourage the development of new talent, such as offering internships and formally mentoring new designers.

Exciting Times

This is a truly exciting time for the lighting industry, as a combination of legislation and client awareness is putting lighting design at the heart of the building design team. So I'm genuinely keen to ensure we actively encourage the future of our profession, in order that we can fill the ever-growing vacuum at the top end of the industry. This year's graduates will soon be entering the market and with that in mind (and assuming you've actually read this far) I'd like to sign-off by offering a few words of wisdom for those about to start job seeking:

- Your CV and portfolio say everything about you! Your CV needs to demonstrate creative thought and an eye for detail – Word templates will not suffice! Your portfolio doesn't need to include lots of finished projects (in fact I'd be worried if it did). Use it to demonstrate what it is about light that captures your imagination, show us how you think, and demonstrate those all-important CAD, sketching and calculating skills!
- Do your research on the company you're interviewing for and tailor your CV/ portfolio to suit. Above all, enthusiasm and willingness to learn is key. One of the best covering letters I've ever seen was honest and simple – the candidate wrote 'I may not have a great deal of experience but I'm willing to learn and I'm passionate about light'.

Compared to other professions lighting doesn't yet pay that well, so if you are coming into the industry you need to be in love with it, live it and breath it... which probably explains why I'm writing this at 2.00am in the morning...