



Episode 39

Hiring Tips for Design Professionals



**Jason: [00:00]**

Hello and welcome to Designer Discussions with Jason, Mirjam and Maria. Today we're going to be talking about hiring practices for design businesses.

Intro: [00:05]

Welcome to the Designer Discussions podcast. Tune in each week where we discuss marketing, branding, PR and business advice for design professionals.

Jason: (00:27)

So, Maria, as our resident interior designer, which you haven't worked at interior design terms, what has been the hiring practices that you've seen that have been good and not so on the good side?

Maria: (00:41)

So I've always been more in the new home construction industry. I have worked in hospitality for a little bit, but one of the things that I learned was a really excellent interior designer with some business savvy is the best person that you can have add into your business. I had the luxury of having a very smart person who worked with me for a while, and we would build our business around what supporting people we needed. And we found areas that had nice replicable behaviors and habits in each one of the roles and then found people to fill them. So, for example, we had one person who did plumbing and lighting almost exclusively. We had one person who is tile selections and tile drawings. And then we had someone who was scheduling and operations and all of that stuff as support. And then we just had two lead designers who would go out, sell the projects, get more work, turn it over to the team and get stuff done. And then what happened was we became so efficient having people who were so specialized at doing things. Then the builders would sometimes lean into us for the things that they needed that they wish they could have had in house and knew that we were kind of the strongest asset for them.

**Maria: (02:11)**

And another thing I learned with hiring practices was that there was a point at which having an office space started to make me money when the real estate agents and brokers wanted to have their presentations in our office. And then they would give us the work because they were using our showroom. And I had a few friends that were like, when did you know you needed an office space? And I said, what was when the office space started to generate its own revenue. So I even looked at what I had as an office as one of my employees in this space, so that I had some type of value coming in from that. So that's my experience. It's not a perfect experience. When I was building a business, we did not have VAS at the time. We didn't have the technology that's available today. And I know a lot of designers look at how can I grow my business? And there are business coaching practices out there that teach you how to do it. But I just like for people to see in a little bit behind someone who has been doing this for a while and understand that being really good at doing small things really well, actually make you stand out and have a really nice, strong business model.

Jason: (03:26)

Mirjam, having worked at the behemoth called Kohler, what are some hiring secrets that you have seen that have been helpful and not so helpful?

Mirjam: (03:37)

Well, that's a very loaded question. And I have experience in hiring in different types of businesses. So I hired people when I was at Kohler, I hired actual employees of the company, which is very different from hiring people on a contract or consulting basis. Right. I've also been involved in a couple of brick and mortar businesses. So I've hired people for more like in the restaurant business and in the salon business. So I would go about it very differently in that space as well. And now I'm a solopreneur and I don't have employees, but I have contractors that I partner with when I need help.



Mirjam: (04:37)

So I think that the critical difference in hiring for different businesses is that if you're hiring employees that actually are on your payroll, the most important thing is for me personally, and that's how I handle too. But it's like that you have a personal connection. You know, that it's not necessarily the skill set and the experience of the person because you can teach them. Like if the foundations are there, you can teach them everything they need to know. And the more important thing is that they're motivated, that they have a good work ethic, that they're a nice person, frankly, because you don't want to work with somebody you don't like in the long run. So when I hire employees, I really base it more on personality and character than on the skill set that they already have, because everything else you can teach them. It's very different, though, when you're thinking about bringing in help into your business on a contract basis, because you're hiring experts that will help you with something specific. Right. So when I worked at Kohler, I would hire PR agencies and consultants to help because we didn't have enough people inhouse my team was not big enough. There was too much to do. And so I obviously want somebody who's highly qualified in what they do, who has a proven success, and that I know they can come in and be up and running. There's a little bit of an onboarding learning curve, but they come in and they contribute right away. And in my business right now, it's similar. It's like when I hire somebody to help with graphic design or I hire somebody to help with finances or with tech or marketing or whatever it would be I'm like, they have to come in and they're the experts, and that's what I hire and pay them for. I still care about them being a nice person. You know, I just generally think it's important that you work with people that you like and that you have a certain trust in the working relationship that's essential, but they have to come in and know what they're doing. I don't want them coming in and then I have to train them and get them up to speed on everything because I'm paying them from the get. It's obviously also different if the money comes out of your own pocket as opposed to when it comes out of your employer's pocket. I've noticed this many times over, but I think those are the main differences. It's like, are you hiring employees? I'm like if they're there for the long term, or are you just bringing in help for whatever your need of the moment is? I would treat each that very differently.

**Jason: (07:37)**

I agree 100%. Having been on the hiring side as well, I like to, as you said, hire for attitude and not for scale in terms of a team. If you're trying to build up a team because how they interact with each other is vital. And from the business owner's standpoint, what I find is lacking that you have to do to start, you must have a job description. If you do not have a job description and some type of policies and procedures, you need to work on that first. I don't know how many designers I've actually talked to that do not have a job description or do not have the policies and procedures that once they're hired, this is what they have to do, and these are the processes that they have to follow. If you do not have that, you're setting yourself up for failure. So what are some horror stories that you all have heard in terms of hiring or hiring the wrong person for the position?

Maria: (08:31)

I think the hardest thing when you're an interior designer and you have someone come into your office is that they think they're going to be doing design, and they don't understand that. A lot of days were like moving around heavy objects that have been in shipping trucks and insides of airplanes, and they're just filthy. And we have to clean it up and get it ready to go to a client house in a way that we don't damage or make their home dirty. And when people start to see that we do a lot of this very small hand holding care of objects, assembling things, checking stuff in, they don't realize that all of the cool stuff we do requires a huge amount of messy. And all of that messy is part of our job too. And I think this all originates from our hidden behaviors of not showing the ugly stuff in social media and not talking about it. A lot of people really do think we have these ultra glamorous lives. And so we do have people who come in or want to apply for a job because they think it would be a great career because they did their own home, which we all know doing your own home means you were the client and client management is the biggest part of our job. And so that's the biggest obstacle is just them being delusional about what it is that we do in the office.



Mirjam: (09:31)

That sounds interesting. It made me think of something else that obviously I'm not an interior designer, but I think that there are experiences that are very similar in a lot of different industries. And it makes me think of an experience I had when I worked at Kohler and I had to work with a PR agency that I didn't choose, but that was chosen by the executive management for political reasons. And they wanted to streamline processes. And they completely disregarded the fact that in public relations, everything is relationship based. Right. So they forced this agency on me. That is a great agency, one of the very big names in the PR industry, and they have a lot of excellent people on staff. They do great work, but they had zero experience in our industry. And part of what they did is they did reach out to media for us and they started doing that. And in a PR agency, typically the people who do the media relations are the very junior people. So this is like your 22 year old who comes straight from College, who has never been to a trade show, has never met any of these Editors that we work with. And so I would get complaints from media friends of mine. Who is this person? Who is this person who reached out to me. I don't know who they are. Obviously, they don't know what they're doing. And the moral of the story is that if you hire people in whatever capacity and they go out in the world and they represent you, the way they represent you has to be up to par to what you want to represent, what your brand wants to represent in the marketplace. And it can be really detrimental for your reputation if somebody who basically doesn't have the necessary experience or I don't even know how to say they don't represent you and your brand. And it was a very humbling experience for me. And I had to apologize over and over and over, and we had to have serious conversations with the agency. Part of it is and I agree with you, Jason. It's like you have to have job descriptions, you have to have procedures so they know exactly how to go out and do it. And you can teach them to a degree, but only to a degree. I'm like they have to come in. So if you're hiring somebody, they're going to go through a training period, right? So they understand what your business is all about and how you represent yourself outside of the company. If you're hiring a contractor, that's not always possible. So you just have to make sure that whoever goes out and represents you does not do any damage to your reputation because it's painful.

**Jason: (13:31)**

That is the exact example I was going to use too. So we had worked with a design company that hired a new employee that did not know policies and procedures of the company. So when they went to talk to a client and the clients started to talk about the pricing and what they were, the actual employee looked like, really, we're charging you that much? And she had caught herself, but she was like, I had already said it. So now the client went back to the owner and said, okay, now what are you charging me? And they had to relook at all everything that went over it. So that was just a small example of really having your policies and procedures in place and training your new hires before they interact with your clients. So that was very interesting. So I had that exact example to use as well. So knowing what you know now, what is one tip? If you were to hire either a new employee or a contractor, you would tell yourself.

Maria: (14:20)

Now, people you have to pay more for typically do a better job, require less management, and will produce what you need them too. You can always go with a less expensive person, but then your time is being used to deal with it and manage them. And you really have to start looking at are you wanting to hire someone because you have enough time to manage them? Or are you wanting to hire someone that can get something completed for you in a way that's timely and efficient? And honestly, in this day and age, you can have a rendering outsourced. You can have a website outsourced. You can have your social media outsourced. As long as you are willing to put the time into coming up with your own word bank of words you would use in a caption things that you would say to describe your business. As long as you're willing to put the time in to do those things, you can bring in people. But you can also use contractors. Always start with contractors first and then move on to bringing in a full time person. Maybe that contractor can move into someone who is fulltime.

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Maria: (15:20)

And like I said, with technology today, I would record yourself training, like doing the tasks that you're wanting someone to do even before they come into the office and give them a YouTube channel of exclusive videos that when they get stuff that they can watch. The younger generation is not going to ask you questions. They don't feel comfortable raising their hand and asking questions because they've grown up with Google their whole entire lives. And they also been using YouTube as their training source for almost everything. So if you can record what you do for work, a lot of the things that you know, they have issues with questions that they're going to ask like what does 2040 window on a plan? What does that really mean? Because if you ask someone to lay out a closet, the first thing they say is, how do I know where the windows are? And you're like it's in the plan? And they don't even know what the ceiling height is. So what you want to do is have any of that kind of information. If you can prerecorded and have a YouTube channel for someone who's going to come work for you, they are smart. These kids are with it. They will watch those before they come into the office. And then what you're teaching them and pushing them through, they have a bank of answers and responses and things to help them understand what they need to do next. Since what I do for work right now is very diverse and I have to do some technical things that I only do once every six months. I even record those steps and keep them in place for me so that I can look back at it and make sure I'm doing it correctly in the future. So just feel free to start recording some of your processes and get those things documented and have them on hand so that if you were to hire someone, the transition from hiring and onboarding will be easier for you.



Mirjam: (17:20)

I think that's so smart. I may have to listen to you and implement some of that because it's so true. I think that the critical point is that you have to really think through the job description and what the person is going to do, and you have to lay it all out in detail. And I've been terrible at that in the past. And I've tried to bring on people, and in my mind, it's all perfectly clear because I live this every day. I think about it every day I have for years. And to me, there's no question about it. But I had to understand that even bringing in qualified people who have similar level of experience that I do and they did not deliver the quality of work that I was expecting because it was all my fault, because my briefing was horrible. It's basically nonexistent. And I'm like, wow. I'm like, people are not in your head. I'm like, you have to really get good at explaining what it is that you want and anticipate people's questions ahead of time. Right. Because they may be embarrassed or they may not ask. So really getting your and managing your expectations. I think that's the other thing for me. If I'm thinking of hiring somebody to take off something off of my plate, I sort of want them to do it as well as I think I do it. And that's probably not realistic. So you have to manage your own expectations in what type of services you can outsource and what level is acceptable to you and what you're willing to pay for it, because you do definitely get what you pay for.

Jason: (19:18)

In many instances, I would have to agree whole heartedly. If you already have policies and procedures in place, go back and review them. Make sure they're up to date on what's happening now with virtual remote hybrid all of these new terms that are now happening because of the coronavirus. Make sure all your policies and procedures are up to date and in place and have someone else review them that can have an objective view to make sure that it's clear what you're hiring for and it's clear once they hire what they have to do that'll help you in the long term. Review episode 18 on how to establish policies and procedures for your firm and that'll help you out there but if I had to advise me that's what I would say. Go back and review your policies and procedures to make sure you're hiring for the right person and they are up to date on what's happening right now.

**Mirjam & Maria : (20:20)**

That sounds terribly boring but that advice I hate it. I had like a very long book I put together for my last business and we had it and I was like if you need anything you can use this book and I saw some people look at it but yeah it was a bearer to take on and do it's not really glamorous information for designers.

Jason: (20:44)

This is not what they want to do honestly and I'm a designer so I understand but if you want to have success in your hiring practices you have to do in my old life we used to call it SOPs yes.

Mirjam: (20:55)

Standard operating standard operating practice. Every time somebody asked me to put together an SOP I wanted to cry.

Jason: (21:02)

There are very few people that love it but it's necessary and it's just something that you have to do 100% true. So we hope you all have enjoyed this episode and we hope to see you all next week on designer discussions.

Outro: (21:17)

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Designer discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and tag Jason, Maria and Mirjam on social media. You can find them on all platforms@designerdiscussions.com. Don't forget to like subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode from wherever you are listening.



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