Part III

Making It Work For You

“I long to accomplish a great and noble task but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble.”

HELEN KELLER
Chapter 7

Being (the Right Kind of) Smart

“Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN

You've had an average of 5 hours of sleep each night for the past two and a half years, you have breathed in five pounds of plaster dust, and you're $80,000 in debt. You have been exposed to as many design skills as humanly possible and now you're looking to launch your career. Whether you are a novice or a seasoned designer, looking for a design job can be an unnerving experience. How much are you expected to know and just how good do you have to be? Twenty years ago, one might see an ad for a designer that looked like this:

Wanted: Industrial designer. Must be creative, good at idea generation, sketching, model making, mechanical drawing, and have an understanding of various manufacturing processes. Marketing and business experience a plus.

Today's ads are a little different. As computers tighten their grip on more phases of the design process, ads for designers are getting longer and more specialized. “Must have AutoCad 2000 experience (release 14 need not apply), plus advanced knowledge of Pro-E, Freehand, PhotoShop, Illustrator, Alias, Vellum, Microsoft Project, Macromedia
Maybe the ads aren't *that* bad, but I think you get my point. That list of programs was compiled from a week’s worth of ads I saw on one Internet website, and I did not look very hard. There was a time when you had to know how to sketch with markers. It didn’t have to be a certain kind of marker; *any* marker was fine. But as computer technology became more affordable, software companies took full advantage of this enormously wide-open, untapped and quite lucrative market. Software developers began developing programs for every home and office application you can imagine, and convinced us all that we needed them. Many of them got rich. Many of them got even richer by coming out with newer versions each year, making older versions obsolete.

Would you ever think of using a marker that was only compatible with a certain size paper, or could only be used by left handed people? Or one that was so technologically advanced that schooling was required before you could draw with it? Drawing with markers takes a lot of practice, but once you learn the skill, it’s possible to use any marker from any manufacturer without having to take a refresher course each time they come out with a new set of colors. I think markers are overpriced, but it’s nothing compared to what we spend on computer programs and the hardware it takes to run them. I realize computers do much more than markers ever could. We need them. They are here to stay. But I get the feeling we’re all being manipulated here—hypnotized and brainwashed by the screen savers that come with those things.
I had the pleasure of working with an incredibly talented designer. He could draw circles around me. He had great ideas, sketched them quickly and with little effort. He had worked for a number of well-known companies before I met him. He had all the skills, except he didn’t know any CAD programs. I tried to teach him the basics of one I was using at the time, but his mind worked a different way. Computers were not intuitive to him the way drawing was. He later went on to work for other well-known companies, but like many designers recently, was laid off and is having trouble finding employment. Over twenty years of experience, enormously talented, an award winning designer—and he can’t get his foot in the door. Everyone wants computer skills.

I don’t mean to suggest it was easier to get a job twenty years ago. It required a lot of talent and a keen sense of how design fits in with the big picture, as it does today. However, the focus used to be on ideas and communication skills—not computer skills. As one designer wisely told me, “Skills get you the job; good ideas keep you there.”

RitaSue Siegel’s book entitled, “Getting an Industrial Design Job,” is currently available as a free download from the IDSA website. I recommend reading it. It is full of tips on how to get an interview, evaluating your skills, portfolio advice and other important information that can help land that job. I have to admit though; it was a bit overwhelming for me to see all the skills and traits we must possess in order to be successful. One could go to school forever and still not keep up with it all. I decided to go ask her about this dilemma.
CONVERSATION WITH RITASUE

“You don’t have to be good at everything.”

These were comforting words coming from one of the most successful design recruiters in the world. What a relief! Apparently, I was putting needless pressure on myself, trying to be an expert at everything they teach in design school, and I could relax a bit. Sitting across the table from RitaSue was like getting personal advice from Dear Abby. I had seen her picture in the back of ID magazine for years. As founder and president of RitaSue Siegel Resources, she is a pioneer in the field. She has helped place hundreds of designers and design managers for over 30 years, working with some of the biggest names in the field, and the largest corporations in the world. In preparation for the interview, I spent days in the Pratt library reading her 300-page thesis.

Okay, I’m a slow reader. But I was surprised to find that her thesis dealt with many of the same aspects of the design field as my thesis does, such as design education, job satisfaction, and career success. But hers was done over thirty years ago. What has changed since then? What were her thoughts about the design field today? Could she tell me what is required to be successful? I was excited, and more than a little nervous to meet her.

Then she smiled and said, “You have to be smart.”

I did my best to smile back, but I began to wonder if perhaps I WAS better off learning all those skills. At least skills can be learned—through long hours of hard work,
determination and plenty of coaching. **But how can you learn to be smart?** It’s like learning to be a supermodel; you’re either born with it or you aren’t. Does this mean that your success in the design profession was determined by your genetic makeup, long before you ever noticed what’s wrong with the world, took pen in hand and set out to make it all better through design?

The truth is, she had a very good point. No one can be good at everything, and I am sure there are designers who can’t draw like a master, aren’t good with color, or don’t know how to draw a straight line on the computer—and are still successful. Her unanticipated response to my question took me down yet another path of discovery. After the interview, I headed straight to the library, in search of “Smart.”

**LEARNING TO BE SMART**

The library revealed many books on intelligence, which was encouraging; they wouldn’t write about this stuff if there was nothing you could do about it. I briefly skimmed a number of books. None of them had pictures—not a good sign. One book entitled “7 Kinds of Smart,” by Thomas Armstrong, is based on the work of psychologist Howard Gardner. Gardner developed a theory of multiple intelligence, which challenges the old beliefs about what it means to be smart. According to Gardner, there are seven types of intelligences and that each of these can be further developed using various exercises. There is hope after all.
The seven intelligences are:

1. **Linguistic intelligence**: The intelligence of words.
2. **Logical-mathematical intelligence**: The intelligence of numbers and logic.
3. **Spatial intelligence**: Involves thinking in pictures and images.
4. **Musical intelligence**: Capacity to perceive, appreciate and produce rhythms and melodies.
5. **Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence**: Intelligence of the physical self. Includes talent in controlling one’s body movements and in handling objects skillfully.
6. **Interpersonal intelligence**: The ability to understand and work with other people.
7. **Intrapersonal intelligence**: The intelligence of the inner self. The ability to “discriminate between many different kinds of inner emotional states and use self-understanding to enrich and guide one’s life.”

Humans use a combination of all these intelligences while taking part in any activity. Rarely does one achieve high levels of competence in all of the intelligences, and conversely, few people develop only one or two and let the others lag. Studies also show that each intelligence has its own developmental history. For instance, musical intelligence arises early in life and remains strong until old age. However, mathematical thinking arises later in childhood, peaks in adolescence or early adulthood, and declines in later life. Armstrong writes, “A look at the history of mathematical thought reveals that few major discoveries were made by people after the age of forty.” Albert Einstein received the initial insights of his theory of relativity at age 16.
What kind of smart does it take to be a successful industrial designer? Of course, there are obvious ones such as spatial intelligence, logical intelligence, and bodily intelligence. These intelligences are further developed in school, and are required for learning skills such as drawing, model building, idea generation, spatial analysis and mechanical competency. But is that enough? Gardner writes about interpersonal intelligence, or **people skills**:

“It’s one thing to understand interpersonal processes and another to be able to use this information in one’s life to relate effectively to other people...to negotiate with others, persuade others to follow a specific path of action, resolve conflict among individuals, obtain important information from colleagues, and influence co-workers, peers, and colleagues in many other ways.”

“Your intelligence can be in other people if you know how to get them to help you,” notes Gardner. **“In life, that’s the best strategy: mobilize other people.”** He also says that intelligence is **“the ability to respond successfully to new situations and the capacity to learn from one’s past experiences.”** This is the kind of “smart” to which RitaSue was referring: how to assess a situation and use your intelligences effectively to produce the desired effect.

However, I feel there is another intelligence that is required to be successful. I spoke earlier of Alina, the design student who knew where she struggled in her thought process and knew enough about herself to get through the tough times. Hers is an example of **intrapersonal intelligence**. This is also where the “goal setting that coincides
with your life’s values” I mentioned earlier comes into play. You have to know what you want and what makes you happy. In short, you have to be in touch with you.

In his book, Armstrong identifies ways in which you can strengthen each of your intelligences through a variety of exercises. He cites techniques that help one to listen and respond empathetically, and to recognize other’s wants and desires. These skills are essential for achieving most goals in life, since we don’t live in a vacuum, and need other people’s assistance.
Character Traits of the Successful Designer

“The best way to succeed in the world is to find a crowd that is going somewhere and get in front of them.”

OSHO RAJNEESH

I went to see Judy Nylen, director of Career Services, to see if she could assist me in my job search after graduation. Ms. Nylen sat me down in a chair. “So what kind of job are you looking for—or better yet, what’s your thesis?” she asked rather abruptly. I had no idea this would be a topic of discussion. I smiled, almost embarrassed to say it, “How to be a successful designer.” To my astonishment, she immediately shouted, “I know what it is!”

My first reaction was, “Don’t tell me. I’ll figure it out myself,” but I was curious to know what she thought. Could she possibly have the answer? Is it that simple after all? Before I had a chance to respond, she riffled off five character traits that are required to be a successful designer: talent, people skills, entrepreneurial skills, perseverance and a sense of value in your talents and abilities. The traits made sense to me, and we discussed each of them at length. I left thinking that I had finally found the answer—until something occurred to me: we both assumed our definition of success was to be rich and famous, by getting our products (and our names) out on the market. Indeed, this is
hardly everyone’s definition of success, but even if your definition doesn’t include fame and fortune, developing these traits can help achieve other definitions of success as well. After talking with other designers, I added two more traits I felt were important—curiosity and confidence.

**TALENT**

I dislike using the word “talent.” It’s like being ‘smart.” It seems either you have it or you don’t. What is talent and where does it come from? Can you just work hard enough at something and pretend to have talent? Applying what I learned about intelligence, I am inclined to think that there is no such thing as talent. Rather, it is simply a case of being born with a particular intelligence that allows one to quickly and easily understand, learn and perform certain skills. Yet there are those who think talent is this magical ability some people are born with that pushes them beyond what anyone could ever accomplish just by learning skills alone. One thing I can definitely say is: I don’t know.

I took a rendering class at the Cleveland Institute of Art a few years ago. I happened to sit by a young undergraduate student named Ryan. After our first assignment, it was apparent that Ryan had a lot of talent, especially for someone in his second year of design school. It was a difficult course, and Ryan’s work stood out from the rest of the class. As the course continued, I learned that he had been immersed in art and design his entire life. His father was a designer, working for a major toy company. His father also went to CIA and had numerous friends and associates in
the design field, including Viktor Schreckengost, renowned and influential industrial designer and ceramic artist who started the industrial design department at the institute in the 1930’s. Ryan and his father would spend Saturday afternoons painting watercolors. He drew constantly as a child. His father would take Ryan to work with him, and give him projects to do. He started freelancing when he was fifteen years old.

I spoke to a friend of mine recently who works for a design firm in Cleveland Ohio. He mentioned that they had hired Ryan as an intern. My friend went on and on about his amazing talents, and how modest and likeable he was. We compared stories. I asked, “What do you think he’s going to do when he gets out of school?” My friend shook his head and said, “Whatever…he…wants.”

Having an upbringing that immerses you in a design culture at an early age can have a tremendous impact on your success. However, the opposite may also be true. A respondent of RitaSue Siegel’s survey said,

“My upbringing was frugal- second hand things (old, ugly) all around me…Parents with poor taste, no matter how well meaning, hamper a young designer.”

Nurture or nature: a debate worthy of a thesis or two.
PEOPLE SKILLS

Unlike talent, this is a skill and can therefore be learned. Be nice, smile a lot, think of the other person, be courteous, kind, brave, thrifty, reverent—all those things you learned as a scout. People will love you and then give you lots of money. Wouldn’t that be nice?

As mentioned earlier, interpersonal intelligence is important for gaining acceptance of one’s ideas and reaching one’s goals. Sweet-talking never hurt anyone, and good salesmanship can make the difference between cashing an unemployment check and cashing a royalty check. The importance of knowing how to deal with people and selling one’s self cannot be overlooked. In Dennis Prader's book, “Happiness is a Serious Problem,” he makes the observation that in presidential elections, the happy candidate always wins. Don’t just sell yourself; BE a happy, optimistic person, and people will follow you anywhere.

People skills also include knowing how to promote yourself. The following is a Graphis magazine article (May-June 1998) about Philippe Starck, entitled “Whatever Happened to French Design?”

Starck, at age 19 became art director of Pierre Cardin. His early work was undistinguished until 1982, when he was commissioned to design furniture for Francois Mitterand. In 1984, he designed Café Coste. He then took the opportunity to create the image he has today—a paradigm of press manipulation hype that should be the envy of every designer in the world. His renown has been founded not only by his design abilities and amazing abundance of work, but on his clever creation of a distinctive persona that was appealing to the press- wacky, irreverent, outrageous, while remaining
worthy but still very French. In the late 1970’s he went to Spain and Italy where firms were willing to produce his furniture and lighting for very little money. Only after achieving some semblance of fame, were French manufacturers willing to hire him and pay generous fees.

**ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS**

The importance of this skill depends on your definition of success. If you work as a staff designer where everything you do belongs to the company, your chances of being rich and famous are slim. If fame and fortune are included in your definition of success, then perhaps entrepreneurial skills are important. If your goal is to have your own design firm, these skills are essential. According to the United States Department of Labor, “three out of ten designers are self-employed—almost five times the proportion for all professional and related occupations.” Can entrepreneurial skills be learned? I did some research on this subject, and it seems as though some people have what it takes—and some do not. In his book entitled, “The Student Entrepreneur’s Guide: How to Start and Run your Own Business,” Brett Kingstone advises:

> “Every successful entrepreneur I’ve interviewed has been ambitious, enthusiastic, creative, energetic, and a little bit daring. If you don’t have these qualities in some measure, your chances of success are not great. One cannot teach how to be enthusiastic or ambitious.”
He stresses the importance of asking some fundamental questions before hanging that proverbial shingle:

1. Are you **ambitious**?
2. Do you enjoy a **challenge**?
3. Do you set **high goals** for yourself?
4. Are you competitive and **success oriented**?
5. Are you willing to **take risks** to make a profit?
6. Are you **creative**?
7. Do you get **enthusiastic** about your ideas?
8. Would you rather **lead than follow**?
9. Do you feel **confident** in your ability to work on your own?
10. Do you expect **more out of life than just a good salary** and a steady job?

Don’t get too excited just yet. Even if you answered yes to most of those, he asks more questions of your past experiences—something we cannot change:

1. Were your parents, close relatives or close friends entrepreneurs?
2. Did any of that business carry over into your home when you were growing up?
3. Did you have a lemonade stand or paper route as a kid?
4. Was your academic record in school less than outstanding?
5. Did you feel like an outsider among peers at school?
6. Were you often reprimanded for your school behavior?
7. Do you have difficulty attaining satisfaction from any job with a large firm?
8. Do you often feel that you could do a better job than your boss could?
9. Would you rather play sports than watch them on television?
10. Do you prefer nonfiction to fiction?
11. Have you ever been fired from a job or left one under pressure?
12. Do you never lose sleep at night over your work or personal business?
13. Would you rather jump into a project than plan one?
14. Would you consider yourself decisive, a good thinker on your feet?
15. Are you active in community affairs?
What if you just want to do an occasional freelance job on the side? A book available in the Pratt library entitled, “How to Set Your Fees and Get Them,” gives some practical advice to designers. Written in 1986 by Kate Kelly, it is a little old (although newer than most books in the library), but still gives good advice as to what to charge for services when freelancing. Here is an excerpt:

“Setting fees is a skill too, so it can be learned. You don’t need a gigantic ego to feel comfortable charging several hundred dollars a day for your services. You can attain a feeling of mastery, confidence and a much greater degree of comfort when faced with setting your fees.”

Ms. Kelly explains in simple terms how to set fees and ask for them, and how to gain confidence in charging what you deserve for your talents and skills, whatever they may be. For a current look at what designers are charging, IDSA publishes a report on fee schedules each year.

**VALUE YOUR ABILITIES**

A successful designer knows that what he or she does is valuable. They know that not everyone can do what they do, and that someone will gladly pay for their services. It is easy to feel as though we should not charge for something if we enjoy doing it. We would feel more strongly about charging if it was a great deal of work, and would rather be doing something else. Judy Nylen remarked that although he loves making movies, Harrison Ford does not work for free. See the value in what you do and don’t be afraid to charge for it. In a way, this trait is a combination of two other personality traits: confidence and entrepreneurial ability.
PERSEVERANCE

It is a fact of life that you will fail more than you will succeed, no matter how qualified you are. Believing in yourself and your abilities to succeed can make the difference between seeing something as a roadblock and seeing it merely as a temporary setback. Peter Valois had this to say about his success so far:

“We haven't been at it long enough to say that perseverance is a factor. I do believe, however, that perseverance is the best way to become successful. There are plenty of very successful designers that are not particularly talented, but they had either the desire or the money to keep at it long enough. Anyone can be successful if they stick with it, which is kind of reassuring.”

Being proactive is the best way to respond to any rejection. It is not what happens, but how you respond to it that determines your success. The following is an excerpt from an article titled, “The Rejection Letter” by Carole Martin:

Instead of wallowing in self-pity, you can regain power by staying proactive. Write a letter stating how disappointed you are the position went to another candidate. Remind them of all the positive traits you could bring to the organization. Let them know you are still interested in working for the company if something should change or open up.

Or you could call and talk to your interviewer if you felt a positive connection. Sometimes you will get an individual who is willing to talk to you about your interview and where you may have fallen short. Taking action will make you feel you at least gave it one more shot.
CURIOUSITY

Successful designers never stop asking questions—and never seem to be satisfied with the answers. Why? What if? How does it work? Can we do better? Why can't we? Who says so? When I asked designers what skill or trait they felt was responsible for their success, many said it was their curious nature. Mario Turchi of Ion Design said, “I keep asking questions of the client.” Fred Blumlein of Blumlein Associates Inc., had this to say:

“Hopefully, one develops a passion about something, and my passion is the discovery of what this world is about. Design is a method of getting to the core of that passion.”

CONFIDENCE

Confidence is defined as “a belief in one’s abilities.” An entire book can be written about confidence and its importance in achieving your goals. It is the most important personality trait because it influences all of the above character traits. You cannot come up with a good idea if you think the problem is unsolvable. You cannot relate well to other people if you do not speak to them with certainty. You cannot be your own boss if you always look to others to tell you what to do. You cannot ask the question if you are afraid of the answer. You cannot value yourself if you do not give yourself the credit you deserve. You cannot succeed if you think your goals are unattainable.
I cannot talk about confidence without sharing a lesson I learned recently. In Bruce Hannah’s thesis class, he uses the expression, “If you’re not doing it, then you’re not DOING it,” stressing the importance of “taking action” instead of just thinking about it. I began to question the worthiness of my thesis, feeling as though I am thinking too much about design, and not DOING any designing. I nearly convinced myself that my thesis was a ridiculous waste of time. I thought many times in the past year that it would be much easier if I bagged my “success” idea and designed a product instead. I felt as though I was doing my thesis on my own, at odds with those to whom I looked for guidance and encouragement. Yet herein lies an important, if not essential component of success. One will never find success unless one has the confidence and certitude to say and do what they believe is true, in the face of those whose opinions may appear to differ dramatically from their own.

During the course of the semester, I continued to have periods of self-doubt, but it became clear to me that those doubts were a result of my own thoughts, not what others were saying. At one point I came to class convinced that all I had done this past year was write a self-help book for neurotic designers. Bruce Hannah asked, “What designer isn’t neurotic? Your thesis is worthy simply by asking the question in the first place, whether you find an answer or not.” Although I knew that in my heart, I still needed reassurance from him to see the value in my own work.
“The doctor can bury his mistakes but an architect can only advise his client to plant vines.”

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses pitfalls of an industrial designer—things to watch out for in your thought process or career that might derail, slow down or sabotage any progress you have made. These are based on my own experience as well as those of other designers. The second part contains a number of helpful hints obtained from designers used to circumvent a problem or a lack of skill. It includes stories from designers as they share their own “tricks of the trade.”

PITFALLS OF THE INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER

I have much to offer when discussing pitfalls, as I have stepped in more than a few pits in my career—mostly because I was not watching where I was going. Although I mention quite a few pitfalls in this chapter, only the first few are explained in detail. I could write an entire book on pitfalls alone if I included a story about each one.
FAILING TO ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE

Professor Harvey Bernstein tells students to, “Know your audience” when making a presentation. You may have a great idea, but if you fail to engage your audience, what you have to say may be ignored. You must first know your audience; what do they already know about your topic? What do they want to get out of your presentation? Why are they here? If no one is listening, then what you have to say is pointless. You might as well be quiet and sit down.

TOO MUCH RESEARCH TOO SOON

When given a problem to solve, it is tempting to go out and see what has already been done by other designers. One learns a great deal from other’s solutions and proven failures, but according to Allen Chochinov, too much research early on can limit you and take the wind out of your sails. You can end up with an attitude such as, “Why bother? Everything has been done already. What can I possibly bring to the table that has not already been thought of before?” Naivete can be a blessing and a great problem-solving tool if used appropriately. Be a child. Ask questions even if you think you already know the answers. You might find something no one else has thought of before. Then go do some research.

THINKING TOO MUCH

It is important to understand any problem thoroughly before attempting to solve it. Failure to see the big picture often results in solutions that are later proven ineffective. But there are instances where it is best to deal with the smaller, more manageable aspects of a problem, rather than to try to solve the whole thing. Solving everything can be too great a task for any designer to handle. I have a tendency to think too much about the root cause when analyzing a problem. In the process, I invariably discover
some ultimate, undeniable truth that convinces me there is no solution. Consequently, I lose all hope in trying to find one. An example of this occurred in my directed research class when we were asked to find solutions to the ever-increasing traffic problems in New York City—a daunting task for any group of students with four other classes. After thinking really, really hard about this matter in an intensely introspective way for which I am notorious, I came up with the following insightful, but utterly useless observation: **The public transportation system in NYC seeks its own level.** A profound statement that unfortunately leaves no solution in its path, and no good reason to continue any farther down it, for that matter.

**PRIMA DONNA SYNDROME**

Being talented is a requirement for success, but knowing where your talent fits into the big picture, and knowing when to compromise is also part of the package. I asked Davin Stowell of Smart Design what he looks for when hiring a designer. He had this to say (paraphrased):

"**We look for designers who have an awareness and sensitivity of how their role fits in with others on a team needed to bring a product to market. We look for someone who has one skill in which they excel, and knows how that skill fits into the whole picture. What we don’t want is a prima donna who refuses to see how the whole process works together, no matter how good they happen to be at their specialized talent.**"
MORE PITFALLS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

1. **Being a doer, not a thinker.** You end up being someone else’s hands, drawing their ideas, making their models, working out the details and they take all the credit—because it was their idea in the first place.

2. **Being a thinker, not a doer.** Action is required to accomplish anything. Too much thought and analysis can ruin any motivation to go out and do it.

3. Staying in a job where **nothing comes to fruition** even if the pay is good. If you are not producing, they will let you go eventually.

4. **Being a pleaser.** Pleasing everyone turns you into a doer. Lead. Don’t follow.

5. **Failing to see the big picture** and obsessing over small details.

6. **Seeing only the big picture** and not the details that inevitably make it or break it.

7. Giving too much importance to **flashy rendering** and computer skills and not enough to ideas. You can fool some of the people, but not for long.

8. Making design your **only obsession in life.** Designers are interesting people, especially when they have other interests besides their work.

9. **Digging the wrong hole deeper.** A bad idea—even with a 600 grit finish—is still a bad idea. Learn to recognize the right hole.

10. **Forgetting to acknowledge** those who helped you become successful.

11. Being afraid to ask questions. **Being afraid** to say what you think is right even if those around you don’t agree. Being afraid to take risks, and being afraid of failure.

12. **Mental distortions** such as “all or nothing” thinking, overgeneralization, disqualifying the positive, and jumping to conclusions. All really bad for you.

13. **Perfectionism.**

14. **Failure to see humor** in any situation. Humor is a great design tool, and it heightens creativity. Learn to laugh as much as possible.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL DESIGNER

YOU BE THE BOSS

I interviewed a designer named Tim, who started a design firm with a fellow classmate a number of years ago. Pleased with the results from the beginning, he and his partner
have not looked back. Tim has a calm, relaxed outlook on life and on the profession. He says he has always been a happy person, and doesn’t become stressed over anything if he can help it. He works only on projects and phases of those projects he enjoys doing. When I asked how he is able to do this, he is daringly honest, saying, “When you own your own company, you can always give the jobs you don’t like to someone else.” He is extremely confident. When asked about his skills, he says he rarely spends time doing flashy renderings, although he is quite capable of doing them. He has a casual relationship with his clients, and they know that flashy renderings take time—and cost them more money. He can get his point across more efficiently by using sketches and a fax machine.

**THE POWER OF TEAMWORK**

We like to think of ourselves as a jack of all trades. We can generate ideas, sketch, build models, do mechanical drawings and computer renderings, and take full advantage of our understanding of most manufacturing processes. But it is rare when someone can do all of those things equally well—not to mention at the same time. Even if one could do all of these things, it would be an inefficient way of bringing products to market. Bill Moggridge had this to say in a recent ID magazine article:

“The public image of a designer is still of a single individual who has the breadth and talent to solve the whole problem. This is still possible with simple traditional design problems like a chair or a lamp, but doesn’t work for the complexities of interconnected modern electronic products and services.”
**Never underestimate the power of teamwork.** Even a multi-talented baseball player is only expected to play one position for his team, yet everyone on the team has a chance to step up to the plate and hit a home run. In the design field, no one says you have to do everything yourself. You may find that there are one or two aspects of designing that you are not very good at, or do not enjoy doing. The sooner you realize what makes you happy (or what makes you unhappy), the better off you are. Chances are, you can find someone who compliments your strengths, and covers for your weaknesses. Form a partnership with them. By doing this you can both step up to the plate, hit some homerruns, and be successful—while having a lot more fun.

**VISUALIZE YOUR SUCCESS**

We are trained in school to be visual thinkers. We create beautiful shapes that are interesting and pleasing to the eye. But we seldom use this skill to visualize our lives or our careers as we would like to see them. It is important to visualize a desired outcome before attempting to do anything. Athletes visualize themselves winning a race, scoring a touchdown or hitting a homerun. They also visualize the exact steps needed to complete a series of moves, such as a lay-up in basketball. Dr. Denis Waitley is recognized as a world authority on high-level achievement and personal excellence:

“The reason most people never reach their goals is that they don’t define them, learn about them, or ever seriously consider them as believable or achievable. **Winners can tell you where they are going, what they plan to do along the way, and who will be sharing the adventure with them.”**
To do this requires visualization, and fortunately for us, we have this skill. We simply need to take advantage of it.

**CONCENTRATE ON YOUR STRENGTHS**

In many of my interviews with designers, I asked them about their skills. I wanted to know if there was a skill that they are *not* good at, and how they were able to overcome it and be successful. I was hoping to hear a confession such as, “Well, my drawing skills were never all that great.” Or, “I don’t know anything about 3D computer modeling.” Perhaps I was naïve to think that anyone would openly admit to a lack of expertise, especially when there is a good chance I will write about it and put it in my thesis presentation. But I think there is another reason for the responses I received. Designers are well aware of their weaknesses, even if they do not acknowledge them in front of the camera. However, concentrating on one’s weaknesses can have a negative impact on one’s confidence. I realized that successful designers concentrate only on their strengths. I then began asking designers if they concentrate on their weaknesses and try to improve them, or if they concentrate on their strengths and take full advantage of them. Peter Valois response was particularly enlightening, as it revealed something else I had not thought of before:

“I think that I concentrate on my strengths, not because I think it is the better of the two options, but because it is my natural tendency to do so.”

The following story shows a different way of looking at one’s weaknesses. While taking a class in Copenhagen last summer, our class visited the design studios of Komplot Design. Boris Berlin, a partner of the firm, showed us slides of his work and included
projects that were not very successful. The products were either never produced, had problems in production, or were not profitable for the client—but they were still successful to him for various reasons, such as a solid idea or concept that failed for cost reasons. He was not arrogant in his presentation, nor apologetic for his misfires in the field. He was simply being open and honest about his mistakes. Not only was it refreshing to hear someone talk about their failures in the field, but also that they perceived them in a positive way.

**ASK FOR SOMEONE’S OPINION**

Frequently in the design process, designers are so involved in their work that they are not capable of judging it. Many judge their work too harshly or become blind to its weaknesses. It often takes a trusted friend or coworker to give unbiased criticism. You may not agree with their opinion, but it will help you to see your work more objectively. In academia, students may resist asking others for their opinion, fearing that someone will give them “the answer” and subsequently cannot claim it as their own idea. Personally, every time I hear a suggestion, I think, “There’s another good idea I can’t use.” But in the professional world, design is usually a team effort and ideas are shared freely, although politics and egos sometimes get in the way. **Anything to make the product more successful is fair game**, and all will reap the rewards.
SO WHICH IS THE GOOD IDEA?

Bill Fogler stressed knowing the difference between “a job well done and a job worth doing well.” Harvey Bernstein says the same thing when he advises students, “Don’t dig the wrong hole deeper.” How does one know the difference between the right hole and the wrong hole? I believe it is a combination of using what you have learned from your past experiences (and the way you see life because of them), and making a decision based on what you think will happen. It takes experience, observational powers and an understanding of the world to guide you to the right answer. But how do those without experience know which is the right hole? I am amazed at young designers who have the knack for knowing which idea to pursue. They may be more observant than others are, or they may have a limited understanding of the world, and therefore see it in terms that are easier to understand. “The truth” is sometimes more obvious to someone who does not have a long history that can cloud one’s vision. Nevertheless, the true test of an idea is in the actual use of that idea. As Christopher Alexander writes in his book, “Notes on the Synthesis of Form,”

“...given a new design, there is often no mechanical way of telling, purely from the drawings which describe it, whether or not it meets its requirements. Either we must put the real thing in the actual world, and see whether it works or not, or we must use our imagination and experience of the world to predict from the drawings whether it will work or not.”