

Exhibition/display designer

Job Description

Exhibition or display designers produce designs for one-off exhibition/display stands, basing designs on their client's ideas and requirements and using their own interpretation. Designers also provide their own ideas in relation to product concept and likely customer appeal. These activities may sometimes be part of the remit of a Graphic designer.

Designers must create a stand that works on several fronts. It must:

- have aesthetic appeal;
- be practical;
- communicate positive messages about the brand;
- meet the limitations imposed by space and budget.

Designers also have responsibility for overseeing the implementation and building of the exhibition or display stand.

Typical Work Activities

The work involved varies according to specific roles and employers, and larger firms may specialise and have account managers handling initial negotiations with the client, but tasks typically include:

- liaising with clients to discuss concepts;
- discussing concepts with the design team, finalising proposals and presenting these to clients;
- developing a genuine understanding of the organisation's brand, products, needs and objectives, as well as the motivations behind customers' buying decisions;
- working on quotes - once the design brief and concept are established, the costs need to be calculated to make sure the project is financially viable;
- gathering product information from the client;
- creating initial design sketches and computer-generated three-dimensional visuals, sometimes building models and prototypes;
- working on a variety of design work (graphic design and artwork) for different displays and exhibitions;
- taking financial responsibility for a project in terms of meeting budget constraints;
- deciding if a proposed budget is realistic against the client's brief, and negotiating this as necessary;
- attending meetings to discuss the status of current projects and to be briefed on new projects;
- responding to emails and telephone calls from clients, and answering technical questions;
- liaising with the workshop manager to ensure the project is within the assigned budget, running to schedule, and meeting the client's requirements, and that it complies with health and safety regulations;
- handling production orders for materials and site services, e.g. electronics;
- meeting with and briefing suppliers;
- transporting displays to exhibition sites, and installing and dismantling exhibition displays.

There are likely to be several different one-off projects in progress at any one time.

The role may also include project management, which is likely to involve responsibility for aspects such as furniture, stock-panel, lighting and rig rental or hire, pre-event marketing, packaging, delivery and storage.

Work Conditions

- Range of typical starting salaries £18,000 - £20,000 (salary data collected Aug 2007).
- At senior level, a creative director or design manager working in a large company in London could typically expect to earn in excess of £100,000 (salary data collected Aug 2007).
- Salaries depend on the size of the company or, in the case of freelance designers, the type of job. Earning potential is essentially limitless, depending on how hard you are willing to work and who you work for.
- Working hours vary according to the size of the company you work for. Larger companies tend to employ people to fulfil specific roles and ensure work deadlines are met, so hours are more likely to be between nine and five. In smaller companies, although working hours are generally governed by the EU working time directive, it is usual for employees to sign disclaimers to work overtime. Hours may be from seven in the morning to seven in the evening. In smaller companies, your role is unlikely to be solely design-specific. You will probably be involved in, or oversee, other aspects of the project, including installation at the exhibition site, which may require weekend working.
- Self-employment is common, but is more likely to be successful after gaining experience within a firm and establishing a network of personal contacts.
- The gender balance in this area of work is fairly even.
- The work may be stressful as lead times and deadlines are often tight.
- In the tendering process, designers put their hearts and souls into their designs, but they need to develop the ability not to take criticism and adverse comment personally.
- Travel within a working day and absence from home overnight are common. Occasional international travel may be required to visit clients in other parts of Europe.

Entry Requirements

Although this area of work is open to all graduates, a degree in one of the following areas is likely to improve your chances:

- graphic design;
- architecture;
- interior design;
- fine art;
- theatre design;
- multimedia.

First degree courses specifically in exhibition design are available at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (www.bcuc.ac.uk/), the University of Teesside (www.tees.ac.uk/) and the University of Lincoln (www.lincoln.ac.uk/), the last including museum design. An MA/postgraduate diploma is offered in museum and heritage exhibition design at the University of Salford (www.pg.salford.ac.uk/funding/). Such courses focus on areas such as communication through spaces, involving 2-D, 3-D and time-based design in many combinations, and usually involve undertaking creative work through projects, written essays and proposals, hands-on production of models and artwork, and training in specific computer design programs.

Some courses offer placement and live project opportunities, which are a good way to build contacts and your design portfolio. University or college design departments, schools and faculties typically have strong links with the design industry and it is a good idea to take advantage of these networking opportunities during your course - if your name, face or even your work are already known to an employer, it will help when it comes to getting a job. The Chartered Society of Designers (CSD) (www.csd.org.uk) runs a placement programme for student and graduate members and D&AD (www.dandad.org) run a graduate placement scheme.

Entry into the career without a degree is possible, but attitudes will vary between employers. Some employers may favour a mix of the right skills and personality rather than academic qualifications. Others, however, may request specific degree qualifications and grades. Check with individual employers before applying. Irrespective of the views of employers on qualifications and training, it is essential to have a design portfolio and desirable to have some relevant work experience.

Candidates will need to show evidence of the following:

- good design, drawing and artistic skills, including the ability to do perspective sketches;
- creative, imaginative and lateral thinking;
- good communication skills for dealing and liaising with colleagues and clients through presentations, written bids and reports, and also through their designs;
- outgoing and positive personality;
- excellent organisational skills;
- the ability to work well as part of a team in achieving a good design solution, sometimes accepting that their own ideas are not to be adopted by the whole team;
- reasonable understanding of relevant design technologies and printing processes;
- good commercial understanding;
- ability to accept criticism of one's own ideas and designs;
- ability to work with other specialists and awareness of other people's particular knowledge;
- good computer skills with Quark Express, In Design and Freehand.

Make speculative applications by calling employers, sending them your CV or even going in person to meet with them.

It is illegal for employers to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation or religious faith. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market see Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination).

Training

Opportunities for further training will vary depending on your employer and the size of the company.

Smaller companies have more limited resources, so you may find you are expected to learn on the job and pick things up as you go along. This can be a steep learning curve, but some find it is the best way to learn. You may also have the opportunity to shadow a colleague for a set period of time or enrol for design-related day-release training days and courses at nearby educational institutions.

In a large company, the training is likely to be more specific. You might spend a significant amount of time on areas related to design, such as purchasing and project management, or regulations, such as health and safety.

As well as offering specific training, larger companies are likely to offer more formal training opportunities, such as graduate training programmes, work-based qualifications, work shadowing and internal and external courses. The British Display Society (BDS) (www.britishdisplaysociety.co.uk) offers a range of courses through a number of approved colleges, including certificates and diplomas in areas such as:

- exhibition design;
- promotional/point of sale design;
- visitor attraction display;
- display background design.

Career Development

Career progression will depend on whether or not you are self-employed and on the nature and size of your employer:

- if you are freelance or working for a particularly large company you are more likely to work purely on exhibition design;
- if you are employed in a medium-sized company, you might start as a junior or a design assistant and work your way up through the company's career ladder to a position such as creative director or design manager;
- in a larger company you may take increased responsibility for tendering for new work and finding new clients;

Your career path will also depend on your background and training. There are likely to be more opportunities open to you, and you will have greater freedom to move into other areas and fields of work, if, for example, you have:

- architectural training;
- a technical bias;
- specialist knowledge and experience in areas beyond pure design.

It is a good idea to get as much experience as possible, particularly in project management, in order to maximise your desirability as an employee, particularly for work in smaller companies, where roles involving purely exhibition design are few and far between.

Typical Employers

There are relatively few exhibition/display designers, but the number of design companies, including exhibition design, is increasing across the UK. Whilst some companies do concentrate solely on exhibition design, you are more likely to find broader design and marketing companies that encompass this particular area of design. There are also a few companies which offer a full design and build service. You can find further details about exhibition design consultants on the Directory of Design Consultants (www.designdirectory.co.uk) and New Design Partners (www.newdesignpartners.com/) websites. There are generally more openings and opportunities in the larger companies.

There is a reasonable market for freelance exhibition designers, but it is essential to gain experience and build your portfolio and network of contacts first.

Employment prospects are good, particularly for graduates qualified in exhibition design, since courses generally have close and long-established links with the commercial exhibitions industry.

Sources of Vacancies

- The majority of exhibition design companies advertise online, either via recruitment agencies or on their own websites. Use employer directories such as Directory of Design Consultants (www.designdirectory.co.uk) and New Design Partners (www.newdesignpartners.com/) to identify possible design consultancies.
- You may find the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) (www.rec.uk.com) helpful in identifying specialist agencies that handle exhibition design vacancies.
- Speculative applications can be effective.

Related Occupations

- Architect
- Architectural technologist
- Furniture designer
- Graphic designer
- Industrial/product designer
- Interior and spatial designer
- Multimedia specialist
- Museum/gallery exhibitions officer
- Production designer, theatre/television/film

Information Sources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS Publications

[Advertising, Marketing and PR Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing
[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet
[Options with Art and Design](#), AGCAS Options Series
[Options with Fine Art](#), AGCAS Options Series
[Options with Graphic Design](#), AGCAS Options Series
[Options with Media Design/Production](#), AGCAS Options Series

Other Publications

[Design Week](#), Centaur Media plc, Weekly
[Exhibiting](#), Mash Media, 10 issues pa
[Exhibition Bulletin](#), [Mash Media](#), Monthly
[Exhibition News](#), [Mash Media](#), Monthly
[The Guardian](#), Guardian Newspapers Ltd, Daily

Websites

[Design Talkboard](#), www.designtalkboard.com/
[Directory of Design Consultants](#), www.designdirectory.co.uk
[New Design Partners](#), www.newdesignpartners.com/
[Recruitment and Employment Confederation \(REC\)](#), www.rec.uk.com
[Your Creative Future](#), www.yourcreativefuture.org

Addresses

[Association of Event Organisers \(AEO\)](#), 119 High Street, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire HP4 2DJ Tel: 01442 285810 URL: www.aeo.org.uk

[British Design Innovation \(BDI\)](#), 9 Pavilion Parade, Brighton BN2 1RA Tel: 01273 621378 URL: www.britishdesigninnovation.org/

[The British Display Society \(BDS\)](#), 12 Cliff Avenue, Chalkwell, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex SS9 1HF Tel: 020 8856 2030 URL: www.britishdisplaysociety.co.uk

[Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College](#), High Wycombe Campus, Queen Alexandra Road, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP11 2JZ Tel: 01494 522141 URL: www.bcuc.ac.uk/

[The Chartered Society of Designers \(CSD\)](#), 1 Cedar Court, Royal Oak Yard, Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3GA Tel: 020 7357 8088 URL: www.csd.org.uk

[Creative and Cultural Skills: the Sector Skills Council for Advertising, Crafts, Cultural Heritage, Design, Music, Performing, Literary & Visual Arts](#), 4th Floor Lafone House, The Leathermarket, Weston Street, London SE1 3HN Tel: 020 7015 1800 URL: www.ccskills.org.uk

[D&AD](#), 9 Graphite Square, Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5EE Tel: 020 7840 1111 URL: www.dandad.org

[Design Business Association \(DBA\)](#), 35-39 Old Street, London EC1V 9HX Tel: 020 7251 9229 URL: www.dba.org.uk

[The Design Council](#), 34 Bow Street, London WC2E 7DL Tel: 020 7420 5200 URL: www.designcouncil.org.uk

[University of Lincoln](#), Brayford Pool, Lincoln LN6 7TS Tel: 01522 882000 URL: www.lincoln.ac.uk/

[University of Salford](#), Course Enquiries Service, Salford, Greater Manchester M5 4WT Tel: 0161 295 4545 URL: www.pg.salford.ac.uk/funding/

[University of Teesside](#), Middlesbrough, Tees Valley TS1 3BA Tel: 01642 218121 URL: www.tees.ac.uk/