Abstract

Curriculum in Interior Design higher education is specifically developed to prepare students for a successful career in the Interior Design profession. During the final year of design programs, students explore professional practices, research potential firms and specialties, and generally plan for their transition to the work force. Evidence from other disciplines indicates that this transition to the professional environment has the potential to overwhelm students [1].

In addition to this generalized anxiety, millennial generation students have been identified as having very specific characteristics that include their reliance on and mastery of technology [2] [3]. These generational characteristics are influencing the transition-to-work in every field, including the Interior Design profession.

The objective of this project was to conduct a preliminary inquiry of the role of design internships on the transition-to-work process within the framework of the characteristics of the millennial generation. The inquiry included three specific components: 1) Conduct a literature review of the three bodies of knowledge - the transition-to-work phenomena, millennial characteristics, and design internships; 2) Analyze existing survey data detailing employers experience with ID interns as collected for one Southern United States university; and 3) Develop an agenda for further study to include creation of tools to enable quality data collection about the internship as a profound experience shaping the transition-to-work process of a professional Interior Designer.

Findings of this study will broaden Interior Design educators understanding of millennial generation students, and the role of internships as they relate to the student’s ability to successfully transition to the profession of Interior Design. This research builds on previous work on millennial generation design student cohort characteristics and begins to explore them within the framework of the transition-to-work phenomena – the final step in the design education process.

Keywords - Interior Design, Millennial, transition-to-work, internships, professional practice

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant research has been conducted on various parts of the transition-to-work process as well as on characteristics of the millennial generation. Unfortunately this research is not particularly cross disciplinary. The phenomenon of the transition-to-work from university has been studied – primarily for countries other than the United States [1, 4-6]. Much has been written about the millennial generation’s struggle gaining employment and dealing with employers expectations of this new cohort [2, 7]. Recently, there has been an increased focus on Millennials in the working world, including some popular press articles containing tips for employers to help them maximize the productivity of this new generation of workers [8]. In the field of interior design, the transition-to-work research focuses on topics such as determining how students can best present their design skills to future employers and providing information to support the search and securing of a job [9]. Nevertheless, Perrone and Vickers state there has been “little qualitative (or quantitative) investigation of the experience of graduates during the transition through life after university, as they leave one phase of life and enter another” [1]. Provided here is a summary of these research bodies.
1.1 Transition-to-Work Phenomena

The transition-to-work phenomenon has been studied since the early 1960’s. Focus has been on both the transition from high schools [10] to the working world as well as from college to the working world [5, 6, 11-13]. Teicher notes that the “relationship between higher education and the world of work has been at times a major issue and at other times has hardly been addressed at all” [14]. The two main bodies of research include (1) an exploration of theoretical and prescriptive frameworks, and (2) research focussing primarily on large graduate data sets available in countries such as France, England, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. While each of these adds to the body of knowledge about this important transition in a young person’s life, very few studies look at the experience at an individual level. One study exists that explores a phenomenological case study approach to look at the transition to work [1]. There are no specific studies of this experience in the Interior Design world.

A. Theoretical Frameworks

While there are several theoretical frameworks that have been used to study the transition to work, two specific studies stand out for their insight into the theoretical discourse on this subject. In 1998, Ulrich Teichler proposed an “international comparative perspective,” which sought to define and document ‘smooth’ and ‘rough’ transition processes. His research assumed that the goal of the transition-to-work process was to ensure a smooth transition for the graduate.

Teichler’s observation of the cyclical nature of the study of the transition to work is particularly relevant. He noted several reasons that the 1990’s saw an increase in the interest around this topic. His observations included a concern about graduate employment (high unemployment for university graduates), the “massification” of higher education (higher education has become a requirement of employment), a focus on more majors and career options, and the changes in the increasing number of majors has placed on higher education curriculums. As the world economy has entered a recession over the last few years many of the things he noted during the 1990’s are magnified in the current workplace.

In general, Teichler’s study also identifies some of the most important variables to look at in transition to work research. He defines the transition period beginning as the time when students begin to identify and make contacts with prospective employers. The end of the transition period varies by country, but a three year window is typical. He also seeks to define a ‘smooth’ and ‘rough’ transition. Smoothness can be defined by the amount of time it takes to find a job after graduation, or more specifically an appropriate job after graduation. The definition of smoothness is a controversial one.

The 2002 framework presented by Tchibozo proposes a set of meta-functional criteria [12]. These criteria affect the quality of the transition-to-work, but have nothing to do with skills acquired in the educational process. These criteria are related to the applicant’s ‘appearance’ of ability to carry out the work. These include things like attitude and personality traits that are preferred in certain job families. He presents an optimal process framework that includes eight stages that he believes can provide a smooth transition to the working world. His optimal process begins when the subject begins to select an appropriate curriculum and training option for a given job. It continues through the educational process and ends after the subject has acquired his first position.

While both of these approaches for understanding the transition-to-work phenomenon differ in their focus, it seems that a combination of acknowledging the meta-functional criteria (those traits that have little to do with educational training) and a discussion of the relative smoothness of the transition as experienced by each student may hold the future for further research.

B. Large graduate population research studies

A second body of knowledge seeks to analyze data from large graduate population studies to describe the transition-to-work. Teichler uses his framework to analyze data sets from various countries in the 1980’s and 1990’s. While the information basis of his analysis focuses primarily on the motives of students and graduates and the relationship between knowledge and work tasks, the quantitative data he analyzes includes what is available from the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and other industrialized nations. He is relegated to studying the data that is available and making observations and conclusions based on the differing data sets [14].

Canada conducts the ‘National Graduates Survey’ (NGS) to provide feedback on graduates of post-secondary institutions. Finnie employs a human capital perspective to review this data, focusing on the skills developed in college and their use and further development in the post-graduation years.
This survey is conducted at two years and five years post graduation[5]. Finne used the following variables in his study: (1) further studies; (2) job-education skill match; (3) educational prerequisites of the job versus individual qualifications; (4) job satisfaction; (5) an overall evaluation of the educational program and (6) inter-provincial migration. Specific findings for this study include a relative positive trend for all variables. Graduates felt, in general, that they had a positive job-skill match, and would choose their educational route of study again given the chance.

Guy Tchibozo used data from a French survey of 430 graduates in economics and management over a five year period [6]. Based on his meta-functional criteria theory, the graduates were divided into 45 ‘homogenous’ groups based on six criteria of homogeneity: (1) gender; (2) level and (3) specialty of highest education attained; (4) institution, (5) year and (6) age at which highest qualification was obtained. His study sought to look for a convergence or divergence between groups over time in the two variables that were available from the survey: net monthly wage and work week duration. Interesting findings include the observation that over the whole population, regardless of group, the “individuals situation in terms of wage and work week have been globally decreasing all along the (3 year) transitional process”. Graduate wage rates are converging to a similar level, regardless of where they started out on the spectrum. This leads to an interesting possible option for future study.

C. Phenomenological study

A third focus of research on the transition to work is a more qualitative approach. While most existing studies of the transition to work are theoretical or quantitative in nature as alluded to in the previous sections, Perrone and Vickers refer to using “Heideggerian phenomenology” - concerned with the need to capture the subjectively experienced life of informants as interpreted by them [1]. The purpose of the investigation is not only to describe the experience, but also to interpret it. Their 2003 study is based on an exemplar case study of an Australian university graduate, Jason, focusing on the unexpectedly “uncomfortable world” that Jason found upon entering the workforce.

This study identified four specific themes that Jason encountered in his transition to work. These include: (1) feeling unprepared for the significant and life-impacting decisions that must be made; (2) inflated expectations about ease of finding work and the levels of work available; (3) the work experience paradox – to get a job you need experience, but to get experience, you need a job; and (4) feelings of self worth in the face of job rejections. Although this study is small in scope, it expands the other research and adds richness to the quantitative and theoretical studies.

One additional study of specific interest to the discussion of the transition to work for designers is the 2001 study by Luffman. This study focuses on 278,000 ‘culture’ graduates surveyed by the Labour Force Survey (LFS) in Canada. The culture workers include occupations such as fine arts, design, film, languages and literature and architecture. In Canada, studies have shown that culture workers are more likely to have higher levels of education, higher rates of self employment, lower rates of unemployment, lower wages, a greater likelihood of working part time and a tendency to be concentrated in certain regions of the country [4]. This study shows that of the 23,000 culture graduates of the class of 1990, over 70% indicated that they would choose their course of studies again and over 90% reported that their studies gave them an in-depth knowledge of skills needed for their job. Additional findings conclude that culture workers tend to change jobs at higher rates than non-culture workers, and that although they would pursue their chose field of study again many culture workers find jobs in industries other than their chosen field. This study yields some interesting variables not previously mentioned by other graduate studies.

1.2 Millennial Characteristics in the Interior Design Profession

The millennial generation currently numbers over 70 million and makes up 20% of U.S. population [15]. This generation, consisting of those born after 1980, has been entering college since the year 1998 and will continue in the higher education system until 2020. They have been entering the workforce over the past eight years and will continue to do so until the year 2024. As all generations before them, they are marked by set of specific cultural, economic and experiential experiences that have had a profound effect on their ‘generational’ personality. Employers are also finding that the millennial generation of students (born between 1982 and 2000) have a significantly different profile than previous generations. Millennials are profiled as having a hopeful outlook, a relaxed view of authority, a civic perspective, and relationship loyalty [2]. These generational characteristics are influencing the transition to the work in every field including the interior design profession.
Although Claire Raines’ 2003 publication marked one of the first books on the millennial generation at work, the design field was slow to notice (or at least document) experiences with the millennials. Since 2007, there has been an increase in the pace of information that is circulating about this generation of design students. Primarily this information came out of the educational sector as educators had been working with millennials as students and were beginning to send them out into the work world. The popular press provides us with an interview of three Interior Design Educators that share their observations on design students. These educators echo many of the characteristics of previous authors writing about the millennial generation. These characteristics include being over burdened, technologically savvy, optimistic, globally aware, and good multi-taskers [3] [8].

As more millennials hit the working world, additional articles have arisen about ‘making the most of the millennials” and understanding their impact on the design office. Ryan Healy, a millennial generation blogger, notes that the workers of this generation want to do meaningful work and are not afraid to walk away from an unfulfilling job [15]. Millennials also crave feedback, so programs like mentoring and peer feedback are extremely important.

1.3 Interior Design Internships

Interior design education is multi-faceted. The discipline covers wide ranging topics including environmental psychology, aesthetics, business, visual arts, building construction, and communications. It provides students with a broad range of experiences from residential design to many types of commercial design including offices, retail design and healthcare. This broad education background is required to prepare our students for any of several careers in the design field.

While a design curriculum covers this wide range of topics, in the final year the students turn their focus to the requirements of becoming a professional interior designer. Typically, the students participate in a course that discusses professional practices such as contracts, organizational structure, business finance, and dealing with vendors and suppliers. For many programs, at some time during this year or in the summer previous or following, the student secures and participates in an internship experience. This internship experience is required in a majority of accredited programs across the United States. Despite this requirement, there is currently no universal document that defines the optimal internship experience.

2 CURRENT SURVEY DATA

As a part of our internship process, Mississippi State University surveys employers about their satisfaction with MSU interns, after the internship has ended. Although data is collected, it is currently only used to provide employer feedback to the intern at the end of the process. No significant analysis has been done on this data. In an effort to determine whether this data would help define the internship’s role in the transition to work for our students, data from one year (2006) was selected to provide an overview analysis of the richness of the data and its use in the defining of the transition to work process. The current survey is broken down into four major categories. Two sets of questions fall into the meta-functional data that Tchibozo mentioned, the third set deals with technical skills that the student displayed on the job, and the fourth category is an overall assessment of job performance. Each of these questions sets is defined below with preliminary data results.

2.1 Interpersonal skills

The first two sections of the survey are labeled “Personal Qualifications” and “Attitude Toward Job.” The questions in this section deal with variables that are outside of the technical skills the intern brings to the job. They are listed below:

- Personal Qualifications:
  1. Is the student dependable and punctual?
  2. Does the student work well with others?
  3. Is the student’s dress and appearance appropriate?

- Attitude Toward Job
  1. Is the student interested in his/her work?
  2. Does the student perform his/her work willingly?
  3. Does the student accept responsibility?
Each section ends with an “additional comments” section. The employer rates the intern on the following scale: 1-poor, 2-below average, 3-average, 4-above average, and 5-excellent. Data for the selected year show an overall positive rating with an average of 4.6 for “Personal Qualifications” and a 4.45 for “Attitude Toward Job” for the 18 interns in the sample. There were only two instances of a student earning less than a 4.0 in either category. In general, those students also had lower scores in the technical skills and overall job performance categories as well.

These specific categories seem to be closely aligned to characteristics that appear in the millennial generation. At this time we have not been able to compare how the current cohort of students (firmly in the millennial generation) compares to previous generations.

2.2 Technical Skills

The information collected about technical skills is broken down into several different sections including creativity, theory, interior design, technical knowledge, communication, professionalism, history and research skills. In addition to the previous scale, employers are allowed to select “not applicable” (N/A) if they did not observe this skill during the internship. In general, the most commonly observed skills were interior design and communications skills, while the least observed included history and research skills. From a curriculum perspective, it is interesting to understand which skills are used and observed right away in an internship and which ones our employers feel need to be improved. However with the current survey, it is impossible to know if a specific skill set needs to be improved since we have no year to year comparison.

2.3 Overall Job Performance

The final set of questions includes the section entitled overall job performance. This section aimed to get an overall picture of the intern’s performance during the internship experience. It included the following questions:

Overall Job Performance:
1. Does the student learn rapidly when taught a new job or skill?
2. Does the student display initiative and independent thinking?
3. How would you rate the overall quality of his/her work?
4. How would you rate the overall accuracy of his/her work?

Overall the 18 students in the sample were rated at a 4.3, slightly above average. As noted above, those students who scored less than 4 in overall performance also received lower scores in technical skills, personal qualifications and attitude toward job. This finding may indicate that this intern was a ‘C’ student in the program, or that the internship/student match was not a good fit. Additional data need to be collected to determine this situation.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND AGENDA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the fact that one major goal of Interior Design programs is to prepare design students for entry-level practice and future professional success, there is a paucity of research literature on the effect of the transition to work process for designers. The current research in this area would benefit from: 1) more focus on specific design professions, 2) exploration of the role of an internship experience in the transition, and 3) discussion in the context of generational characteristics.

Upon reviewing the data collected by one university, it becomes obvious that it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive program for surveying employers and interns to gauge the success of the internship as promoting a smooth transition to work experience. More focused questions and longer term follow-up are also required to determine how this experience supports the process.

The next phase of this research will redesign the survey tool used for employers, begin to collect information from the interns themselves, and to gather demographic information about the students and internship firm. This new data should provide the ability to create a gap analysis focusing on what the firm would typically expect from an intern and whether those from our university are similar in skill levels and personal qualifications to either our own previous interns with the firm or interns from other universities. Additionally, we will begin a long term study to follow graduates more closely as they embark on the first three years of the design career. As indicated by the literature, this seems to be the accepted period to model the transition to work process.
References


