

Reality Check

What skills do you actually need for a digital role in 2010/2011?

The digital and design world is well and truly changing. Roles are merging into one another, and as a student emerging from tertiary education, you need to ask yourself what, out of the proliferation of rapidly developing tools and applications, do you really need to learn?

Traditional mac ops will, in the future, be expected to have good Flash skills. There is more demand for intermediate web designers to have motion graphics ability, for senior web designers to know code, as well as user ability, information architecture, wireframing... The list goes on.

So where do you start as a student? Are your courses offering you the right skill set and mix to deliver you to the creative world as a commercially sound graduate?

To help you understand what's key this year and next, Portfolio Recruitment's Louise Lawton asked some of New Zealand's digital creatives for their opinion on what's hot – and what's not.

Louise Lawton is a consultant at Portfolio Recruitment, an Auckland-based recruitment agency that specialises in the advertising, design and digital industry. See portfoliorecruit.co.nz or email louise@portfoliorecruit.co.nz

Aaron Goldring

CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
TRIBAL DDB

What programmes / skills should a new web student be focusing on?

I think it's important for students to develop a wide range of skills so they have options when they graduate. Obviously having some sense of the direction they would like their career to develop is important, but what I'm really looking for is passion, self motivation and the ability to communicate, rather than mastery of a list of applications. Having said that, of course there is a minimum set of skills that we are looking for: with designers it's the ability to use the core Adobe applications and for developers a good feel for a range of languages, html, JavaScript and flash.

But when hiring graduates we're not looking for the finished product, we're looking for raw talent that we can work with and develop.

Jonathan Tillick

DIGITAL DIRECTOR, DAVE
CLARK DESIGN ASSOCIATES

How can a student of web design ensure their skills are relevant when they graduate?

Blindly finding good sources of web design information online can be tough at times. Start by finding design work you like and find out more about the people that created it, and the tools they used. By following them and their extended networks on Tumblr, Flickr and Twitter you'll start to discover the sort of work that inspires

them and how they produce it. Twitter (yeah I know – enough about Twitter, old dudes) can be a great casual way to connect with these people. Someone's more likely to flick you 140 characters of insight than reply to yet another email.

Expose yourself to a range of work and look outside of pure visual design to include disciplines related to usability and user experience, writing, architecture and science. A book like *The Design of Everyday Things* by Donald A. Norman may not discuss the latest technology, but his thinking will help you learn new ways of looking at the objects around you. That approach to thinking is more timeless than how to create the perfect glass shadow.

Take any opportunity you can to talk to, or just listen to, people who are passionate and are the best at what they do. It might be designing websites, or maybe it's someone who's perfecting the perfect pizza oven. Learn from their experience and attitude to new challenges.

Worry less about knowing every last feature of the Adobe suite, and more about forming opinions about how you'd want a website to behave if you were its end user. Make yourself your own client. Try selling something online or building an authentic following in your favourite online network. Experiment with different approaches and technologies and refine it as you go. See which visual and functional

ideas work and which don't – and try to guess why.

Then when you've got some work to show off, make yourself a portfolio that is beautiful and functional to demonstrate what you've learned. Your potential employer is busy – a usable design shows you appreciate that. Make it beautiful too of course. Show some crazy experimental work if you believe it's demonstrating your unique skills – but make that an element of your portfolio rather than the portfolio structure itself. Unless you're looking for a career building sites for architects – in which case, you know, just go nuts.

Jerry Beale

GROUP ACCOUNT DIRECTOR,
MARKET UNITED

When looking to hire a graduate digital student, what would be the main stand out feature for you?

For a nation that prides itself on being innovative, NZ is falling significantly behind in how our businesses utilise and apply digital media and digital communications, particularly social media. This probably explains why we are so desperately short of anything approaching seasoned digital talent.

That being said, because uptake of digital media from web browsing to social media, increasingly via mobile/hand-held devices, is high among consumers, there are a lot more graduates coming into the workforce with good digital understanding.

The sort of qualities we'd look for would vary slightly depending on the role we were looking to fill. Clearly an account executive or digital producer will need a different set of skills to a digital designer, usability expert or developer. However assuming basic requisite skills are present, I look for a genuine passion and fascination for all things digital – covering web-based to mobile and other 'transportable' platforms. As evidence of this, I'd expect to see active participation through Twitter/Facebook, a blog or some other relevant forum. I'd also like them to be able to have some perspective on what's coming... the latest technical innovations and ground breaking new applications, and the impact these may or may not have.

Kevin Kelly said in his seminal book *New Rules for the New Economy*, that the versatile magic of digitisation makes almost anything possible. That's what makes it so exciting and that's exactly the energy we look for!

Steve Martin

CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
TERABYTE

CSS is the hot new package to work on here – do you think this will remove the need for Mac ops?

Ah, will CSS be the 'bee's knees'? Will it let me put my feet up on my desk, enjoy my flat white as it designs a website with a touch of a button? Well, possibly not... but with the new improvements and

tools it will allow me to spend more time on being creative than doing those painful, time consuming and repetitive tasks.

Focusing primarily on Photoshop CS5, we'll certainly be upgrading to this version (from CS3) as it has lashings of delightful enhancements, the new realness of the brushes, content aware fill (oh, yeah!) and more powerful photo correction tools to name a few.

There could also be a real hidden gem with the 'CS Live online services' providing a range of tools including collaborative environments between clients and designers, browser testing, reviewing workflow and online statistics.

Removing the need for Mac ops, I think not, the tools are good but not perfect. There is still the need for the human touch, that little bit of detail and purposeful imperfection that only a real eye and hand can deliver.

I am always of the mind that these are just tools. Improvements to them are welcome, as they will undoubtedly allow us to focus more on the idea, and give us more time to push and challenge ourselves... maybe the real benefit will be for our clients, as simple tasks won't cost an arm and a leg, just a few fingers.

Pep Zuijderwijk

CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
SALTED HERRING

What can a (interactive design) student show you – that will blow you away?

I would be blown away by a student who can think beyond the tricks and effects that are usually associated with digital media. A lot of students in this area touch on the different aspects and disciplines of digital media, but get stuck in just mastering the different types of tools. Great students are able to focus on an idea they want to communicate and pick the right tools to express this. And understand and cleverly hide their shortcomings. You need to understand the tools eventually but I don't expect them to master them all right away. It's all about ideas.

Jonathan Bardsley

ART DIRECTOR, TANGO
COMMUNICATIONS

Does personality really come into play for you when recruiting for web?

At the end of the day the value of a product is realised in the final result. The proof of the pudding is still in the eating – to paraphrase the old cliché, and that stands true for web designers. Their websites and their portfolio tell their story.

It doesn't matter what kind of person you are, if you deliver great looking websites that function well you are doing a great job. Sure, getting on with a team, not being a pretentious tortured creative is always an upsell for your career but at the end of the day your sites define how well you do your job.

Personality is a bonus. Well, that's my opinion anyway.