

Working in design recruitment, I get a lot of enquiries from people in their late twenties/early thirties who've decided that they genuinely want to work in the design industry. What is the reality and viability of retraining and launching a new career at that age? I asked two designers to share their experiences: Paul Shadbolt, who the company I work for, Portfolio Recruitment, placed at Switch. And Julia Vodanovich, who is currently freelancing for Portfolio, while she continues to seek that perfect, permanent role.

#### PAUL'S STORY

**Paul, what were you doing before you decided to take the leap into design?**

I was a women's hairdresser for 16 years. During that time I threw myself into many aspects of the craft including educational work, giving seminars and co-owning a salon on Ponsonby Road. Although I enjoyed hairdressing, I felt that I had arrived at a point where I did not love the work and needed new challenges.

**Why did you choose the design industry and what design course did you choose?**

A year prior to leaving hairdressing I had bought a Mac from a friend and was fascinated by Photoshop. Digital manipulation of images was starting to appear in hairdressing magazines and I wanted to experiment with the computer. It was around this time that I met and was inspired by my partner who is a creative in advertising and had just completed a design degree at Unitec. I also had friends in design and received a lot of encouragement from them to get into the industry. So there was a converging of movement towards design. I applied for both the Unitec design degree and Advertising AAA course and was accepted by both, which was very encouraging.

**Was it difficult going back to school?**

One of the most difficult adjustments was the drop in income. I would suggest to anyone thinking about doing full-time study that they spend time working out a budget and have part-time employment organised. I was also apprehensive about how I would

handle tertiary education as I had only been an average student at college. One of the best things that I did was to attend a 'New Start' course at Auckland University – it's an excellent bridge for people who haven't studied for a while. In the first year of my design degree I was very disappointed with my results but was determined not to be an average student again. In my second year I managed an A-, which encouraged me to try harder and the ultimate result was that I graduated with honours.



**How did you feel studying with mainly 20 year olds?**

For me [my age] was an advantage. I had a clear vision of what I wanted to achieve and knew that I wasn't going to waste a minute of my four-year degree. My friends in the real world were charging ahead in their lives, careers and salaries. It felt that I had taken a step back by becoming a student and that I would have to take a couple of bloody great leaps forward to get back on track again, so there was always a feeling that I had to be very efficient and effective while studying.

**Was your age factor detrimental to you finding a design job?**

Yes and no. I think that employers will look to an older graduate as having life skills and more focus which is great, but they may forget that you only have the skill set of a new graduate.

**Do you have any hints or tips for design students on how they can think ahead about finding employment after graduation?**

I believe that students should be

proactive and actively seek out mentors and design heroes. For my third-year 'end of year presentation' I created a job interview portfolio and after school had finished for the year I set up appointments with whoever would see me in the hope of finding mentors and getting feedback. This was invaluable, allowing me to meet many people and gain some great insight into the industry. It was through this that I secured an internship at Seven Visual Communications for my last year of

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school. Because of this relationship I completed my final year with excellent marks, some live commercial work in my final presentation, and the greatest reward which was full time employment as a junior designer at Seven.

**How did you feel actually starting your first job in the design industry?**

I had achieved my goal of getting into a new career, but this was where the real work would start... School is great for learning skills but it can't prepare you for the practical realities of deadlines, client needs and working in a busy studio. Again I recommend that students reach out and make contact with the industry as soon as possible.

**Last Word?**

Don't do it alone. People are happy and willing to help, but show you're keen. Be the first one at work and the last to leave. Design is a competitive but highly rewarding industry. Plus it's pretty cool standing in a CD store and seeing someone buying an album that you designed the cover for!

#### JULIA'S STORY

I was 27 when I began studying computer graphic design at Wanganui Polytechnic School of Design. It was a big step in a new direction and became my first experience in tertiary education. My journey started in 1983 as a keen art student at Sacred Heart College in Wanganui. Jane Maxi was everything you'd imagine a great art teacher could be. She drove a quirky old car, wore long, flowing, patterned skirts, her glasses had small round metal frames and her dark hair was styled in a bob. Jane observed that I displayed a natural ability to simplify things. In 1985 I sat and passed School Certificate Art. This would be the last time I would pursue something creative until years later.

At age 16 I was eager to leave school and decided to apply for a job with the Bank of New Zealand. After 12 months I changed jobs and began working for the Wanganui City Council collecting rate payments, parking fines and assisting with dog registration. Working with the public had its drawbacks, there would always be someone wanting to vent their frustration towards council staff.

Eighteen months later I began work at the Pharmaceutical Pricing Office, now known as Good Health Wanganui. Glide time hours and a 37.5 hour working week were the main attraction. I worked there for five years, during which time I became pregnant with my son, Matt.

After two years at home as a full-time parent I decided it was time to re-establish my career. I was ready for a change and realised I would need to retrain for this to happen.

While doing a water-colour painting course at summer school in Hamilton in 1995, I met fellow student Chris Gibson, who turned out to be a tutor at the Wanganui Polytechnic School of Design. I shared with Chris that I'd been considering applying for the degree course and he suggested I come in for a chat. A few months later I had completed my application for the course, using my water-colour paintings as part of my portfolio. After a face-to-face interview with Professor Hazel Gamec I was accepted into the course. While my class-mates were predominantly school leavers, other adult students were dotted amongst the classes. We'd socialise together over dinner and drinks each of us preparing some part of the meal. The