How to Ace Your Design Interview

Prepare yourself to impress with do's and don'ts from leaders at InVision, General Assembly, Nelson Cash, and more.

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So you've created a polished design portfolio that tells your story and shows you're passionate about what you do. As you'd hoped, a prospective employer saw your great work and wants to know more about you — now what?

You'll likely be invited to meet with the organization's head of design, and during your interview, they'll throw challenging questions your way to get a better idea of the depth of your skill and professional mindset. How you respond could make or break your chances of landing that dream gig.

Don't be left tongue-tied and poorly prepared for the big day. Here's how design leaders from InVision, General Assembly, Nelson Cash, and more recommend you ace your next design interview.

BRENDAN KEARNS,
PRODUCT DESIGNER AT INVISION

Be the best version of yourself.

"Do your best to be yourself — the nicest, most articulate, and impressive version of yourself."

You're at the interview because they liked your work. Now, use your face time to get them to know and like you — and how you think as a designer. "Avoid duplicating in person what has already been said in your portfolio," suggests Brendan Kearns, product designer at InVision, a design prototyping, collaboration, and workflow platform.

"The best way to do this is to tell me a story," he says. "Who was involved? What was your role? Who was the client or stakeholder? If you take me on a linear journey from the initial challenge to an end result, while explaining your learnings and failures along the way, then I'm going to get a lot of insight into how you approach problems and work with other people."

Brendan continues, "As for the people who'll be interviewing you; find out as much about them as you can. Try to understand who they've worked with and a few projects they've shipped recently. It will help you to walk in with a little context about the kind of people you'll be talking to."

Since you'll be working with these people for most of your waking hours, you can't just pretend to be the model designer for their team. You've got to make sure they truly get a sense of you who are, and how you'll fit into the office culture. "Do your best to be yourself — the nicest, most articulate, and impressive version of yourself," Brendan stresses.

How does someone make it to the next round of the hiring process? Brendan holds candidates up to three simple criteria:

1. Are they a nice person?

2. Have they impressed me with their craft, i.e., could the team learn something from their approach or attitude?

3. Have they been honest in admitting faults and failures when speaking about their work?

"I've seen a lot of designers focus only on No. 2, and while it's impressive, it won't count if they're a jerk or egotistical," Brendan says.

If you're asked a question you don't know the answer to, ask the interviewer to clarify it. And if you don't have a work sample to demonstrate a certain capability? "Grab a whiteboard marker and unpack my question in front of me," Brendan says. "Show us how you'd tackle the question I'm asking and I'll have proof that you can do almost anything, even if you haven't done it before now."

BRYAN BERGER,
PRODUCT DESIGN LEAD AT GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Explain your design process.

"Does the candidate have a strong sense about managing their and others' creative process? Have they facilitated effective brainstorming? Can they project how potential ideas may play out in a release schedule?"

"You want to give off the right vibe by being prepared," suggests Bryan Berger, product design lead at the tech education company General Assembly. "Be confident in your ability and approach it like a design challenge."

Bryan stresses the importance of researching the company and team as thoroughly as possible. Use their product or service, prepare questions of your own, and get an understanding of the design culture.

Bryan says he generally looks for alignment on two core competency traits:

1. **Innovation management,** which is the ability to assess the value of creative ideas and suggestions by planning and operationalizing them. "I usually see this by digging into the design process," he explains. "Does the candidate have a strong sense about managing their and others' creative process? Have they facilitated effective brainstorming? Can they project how potential ideas may play out in a release schedule?"

2. **Organizational agility,** which happens when a person doesn't shy away from conflict and knows how to get things done through formal and informal channels within an organization. This can typically be gleaned from the candidate's demeanor and their stories of past organizational success and failures.

If you've done your research and you're genuinely interested in the organization and the position, you'll have at least a couple of questions for the interviewer(s). "A majority of candidates don't come prepared with thoughtful questions at all," Bryan says. "That doesn't show a level of commitment to design as a career or way of life. Joining a design team you have little knowledge about should spark a thoughtful chat that reveals your ambitions as a designer."

What happens if you crushed the interview but didn't get the job?

It's crucial to understand that there are a lot of factors you can't control. "Companies are dynamic and things change, especially around hiring budgets," Bryan explains. "But you can reflect on your own performance and use each interview as an opportunity to get better. What went well? What didn't go well? Did you notice any specific tone of voice or body language in the interviewer in response to your behavior?"

SARAH GLESS,
DESIGNER AT NELSON CASH

Don't let technical difficulties trip you up.

"**Plan for the worst-case scenario. Let's say your computer crashes or you can't access the company's WiFi to share your online portfolio. Prepare for this by bringing two devices, both of which contain a PDF of your portfolio so you can easily overcome obstacles.**"

Even if you've got the most impressive portfolio in the world, you can't rely on that alone to get you the job.

"Prepare to discuss your process, from kickoff to final deliverable, including successes and failures," says Sarah Gless, designer at Nelson Cash creative studio. "It's always fascinating to peel back the layers of a project and see how a designer approaches challenges, solves problems, and learns from mistakes."

Something else to take into account: the size of the team you'd be joining.

If it's small, the addition of a new designer is going to make a huge impact on the company culture. "That's why we always strive to find people who exemplify our company values," Sarah says. "These are people who are driven to do great work, easily adapt to change, collaborate well with coworkers and clients, lead with integrity, and approach problems in creative ways."

Sarah notes that the most common mistakes she sees during interviews are due to technical difficulties — which means they're also the most avoidable. "Plan for the worst-case scenario. Let's say your computer crashes or you can't access the company's WiFi to share your online portfolio," she says. "Prepare for this by bringing two devices, both of which contain a PDF of your portfolio so you can easily overcome obstacles."

TRISH GLEI,
EXPERIENCE DESIGNER AND
HEAD OF AUX AT FRESH TILLED SOIL

Let your personality shine.

"What makes someone stand out is not necessarily what they can do, but who they are. Tell me your story!"

"Exhibiting a lack of enthusiasm and interest is a killer," says Trish Glei, experience designer and head of AUX at the design and strategy firm Fresh Tilled Soil. You've got to be excited about the work at hand and show them that you have a positive attitude and a friendly, considerate personality.

"One of the biggest mistakes I see candidates make during an interview is failing to show their personality," she explains. "What makes someone stand out is not necessarily what they can do, but who they are. Tell me your story! Why are you here? What obstacles have you overcome? Make sure your interviewee knows what separates you from all the other applicants."

What gets candidates a top rating in Trish's book is their ability to talk through their decisions and process clearly. "If someone manages to show me they're going to hit the ground running and help us as soon as they walk in the door, they get an A+," she says.

KYLE FIEDLER,
CHIEF DESIGN OFFICER AT THOUGHTBOT

Ask smart questions.

"Have questions about the company culture and process. The harder, more thoughtful questions you pose, the better conversation we'll have and the higher opinion I'll have of you."

"Read up on the company and the role they're looking to fill. Think about how you might fit in and make it better," says Kyle Fiedler, chief design officer at the software development and design agency thoughtbot. "Have questions about the company culture and process. The harder, more thoughtful questions you pose, the better conversation we'll have and the higher opinion I'll have of you. I'll use those questions to understand what's important to you about the job and the company you want to work for."

And if you can easily find the answer to one of your questions online? Don't ask it.

While you're researching the position and the company, know that they're doing the same thing — looking at your website, social media, and anything else they can find that reflects your work and personality. "I'll use what I find to pick on what I think are your weak points. Be prepared to answer questions honestly where you believe that you might be a weak candidate," Kyle says.

He notes that a big part of his interview process involves double-checking that candidates actually have the skills they say they do: "I want to hear them talk concretely about their design work and design process."

Be able to answer these questions:

1. What are some of your most recent successes?
2. Why did you consider them successes?
3. What are some of your most recent failures?

"I can learn a lot about someone from how they talk about their successful design and how they recover from making mistakes," Kyle says. As for the most common and aggravating mistake he sees: candidates who aren't engaged. That means a lack of eye contact, low energy, short responses — things that make you seem bored to be there. "Let your energy and passion for design show through," he says. "I want to see that this is something that excites you."

AYANA CAMPBELL SMITH
DESIGNER AT MADE WITH ENVY

Express your willingness to learn.

"If a candidate doesn't fit the job requirements to the letter, they could still be a great employee if they're excited and willing to learn."

"Familiarize yourself not only with the work the company does, but also find out exactly where you would fit in," says Ayana Campbell Smith, designer at the web consultancy Made With Envy. "Do they have clients who align directly with your interests? Are they working on projects in which you have relevant experience? These are the kind of things you can bring up in interviews that could potentially set you apart from the crowd."

Candidates who note that they're seeking a new challenge stand out to Ayana because it means they're serious about making a move in their career rather than staying complacent. It also means they're willing to learn new skills. "If a candidate doesn't fit the job requirements to the letter, they could still be a great employee if they're excited and willing to learn," she says.

Lastly, Ayana suggests dressing professionally, speaking intelligently about the work in your portfolio, and asking questions. "Just as interviewers are trying to determine if you will be a good fit for their company, you should be doing the same," she explains. "Use interviews as an opportunity to learn as much about the work you'd be doing and day-to-day operations as you can."

AUSTIN KNIGHT,
SENIOR UX DESIGNER AT HUBSPOT

Know your interviewers.

"Read up on the problems the team is solving, look up company news, and try to get your hands on the product(s) they create."

The best job candidates show that they care and are well informed, says Austin Knight, senior UX designer at the marketing platform HubSpot. "Read up on the problems the team is solving, look up company news, and try to get your hands on the product(s) they create," he says. "If you have the names of your interviewers, Google them, visit their personal websites, and take a look at their profiles on places like LinkedIn, Github, or Dribbble. Use this information to understand what the company and your interviewers are focused on right now and going forward. Then, go to the interview and speak within that context; make your conversation relevant and helpful."

During an interview, Austin looks for a healthy mix of soft qualities and hard skills, including:

1. **Humility:** Averse to ego and entitlement. Able to collaborate and build the team up. Respects stakeholders and the points of view of others.

2. **Effectiveness:** A desire to get things done. A strong eye for detail, coupled with a sense of urgency.

3. **Objectivity:** Values data, research, and objective reasoning over opinion or subjective decision-making.

4. **Ability:** Demonstrated technical understanding of design, including coding skills and the ability to execute and analyze qualitative research and quantitative data.

5. **Autonomy:** Can work and learn independently, and wants to set the vision for their role rather than just respond to orders. Comfortable working remotely and collaborating with a team based all around the globe.

6. **Curiosity:** Asks big questions and turns them into action. Attempts big challenges. Listens and responds to answers.

7. **Passion:** Has a genuine passion for design and creativity that extends outside of work.

As for mistakes candidates make, the biggest is not asking questions — that's how you can not only show your interest, but determine if this is actually a job you want. "Candidates should use the opportunity to learn more about the company, challenge the interviewer, and see if there is actually a mutual fit," Austin explains. "Consider how the experience made you feel and whether there's a good fit. Interviews aren't meant to be one-sided."

CARIS HURD,
DIRECTOR OF UX AT FOUR KITCHENS

Tell a compelling story.

"Be able to tell good stories about how you worked with stakeholders, clients, and teammates to solve a problem."

Great designers tell stories. Caris Hurd, director of user experience at the digital strategy firm Four Kitchens, thinks of these as "war stories" — and you should make sure you have yours ready for every interview you go on.

"Be able to tell good stories about how you worked with stakeholders, clients, and teammates to solve a problem," Caris says. The more details you can provide about how you interact across collaborators, the better an interviewer will understand how you can fit into their team and workflow.

Don't stop once you've gotten those war stories together — spend quality time on the company's website and look up the people you'll be working with. All this should make you even more interested in the job. (If it doesn't, maybe it won't be a great fit.)

"Someone who has researched the company and is excited about potentially working with us gets bonus points every time," Caris says. "If a candidate has been reading our blog and listening to our podcast and can bring that information to the table, it lets us know that they're excited."

What makes someone stick out as a no-go?

"Rambling, off-topic responses to questions," she says. "If you don't know the answer to a question about skills, it's OK to say so!"

REBEKAH CANCINO,
PARTNER, CONTENT STRATEGY AND
UX DESIGN AT ONWARD

Let yourself be bold and vulnerable.

"Don't be afraid to ask 'Why?' or challenge the premise of my question entirely. Dig deeper, go beyond the surface, and show me how you think on your feet."

Great designers distinguish themselves from good designers by showing interviewers they have empathy, openness, and grit. "I'm always trying to figure out: Is this person open and flexible? Do they have a real passion for human-centered design that'll give them the perseverance to do the (sometimes) unglamorous work in service of the greater good?" explains Rebekah Cancino, partner at the content strategy and design consultancy Onward. "Are they humble and collaborative? Do they acknowledge others in the work stories and examples they share, or do they paint themselves as the hero every time?"

The kind of questions a candidate asks during an interview can make all the difference, too, Rebekah says. "Interviews can be so nerve-wracking; it's easy to slip into a mode where we're only listening for an opportunity to be heard," she says. "This only strips us of our greatest superpower: listening to understand. It's really cool when you're interviewing a candidate and they just intently listen and then respond in a way that reveals their real-time problem solving abilities and capacity for empathy."

Rebekah recommends candidates be vulnerable during interviews.

Instead of hiding your flaws or weaknesses, talk about what you've learned from mistakes and how you're intentionally building your strengths. And be bold:

"Don't be afraid to ask 'Why?' or challenge the premise of my question entirely," she says. "Dig deeper, go beyond the surface, and show me how you think on your feet."

SARAH DOODY,
FOUNDER AT THE UX NOTEBOOK AND
USER EXPERIENCE DESIGNER

Be authentic.

"I want to know that the person I'm interviewing is the person I would be working day to day with."

Designers should approach interviews like they would a design project. That means knowing your audience — the company — and researching the product and people.

It also means knowing yourself.

"Know what matters to you. Know your strengths, weaknesses, interests, and goals," says Sarah Doody, user experience designer and founder of the UX Notebook newsletter. "As for your experience, don't just show screenshots and images. Tell me the story of that project. That shows me how you think, how you problem solve, and how you communicate. That's what matters."

Authenticity is everything for Sarah. "I'm drawn to people who seem authentic. I want to know that the person I'm interviewing is the person I would be working day to day with," she says. "I also value humility. I want to know the person is OK with being wrong. I don't want to just hear the successes, I want to hear the failures and the lessons along the way."

DARRYL GRANT,
LEAD PRODUCT DESIGNER AT HART

Lose your ego and admit your weaknesses.

"Don't feel like you need to present yourself as the best of the best — nobody's perfect."

For Darryl Grant, lead product designer at the health and fitness platform Hart, honesty is one of the biggest ways for a candidate to stand out. "It's easy to tell if someone's embellishing a story or stretching their skill set beyond their capacity," he explains.

Don't feel like you need to present yourself as the best of the best — nobody's perfect.

Plus, it's rare for a team to actually want to work with someone who has an inflated ego. Part of being honest in an interview means admitting your weaknesses. "Admittance of your shortcomings is priceless," Darryl says.

Post-Interview Checklist

After every interview, make sure you take the following five actions:

☐ Consider how the experience made you feel and be honest with yourself about whether there's a good fit.

☐ Mail a handwritten thank-you note to everyone you interviewed with.

☐ Send a follow-up email — it's your chance to not only demonstrate excitement, but convey an understanding of how you'd help the business.

☐ Iterate on your personal brand and perception. Fine-tune how you portray yourself to the industry.

☐ Celebrate! Be proud that you landed an interview.