

How to Get Hired as a User Experience Designer

A CLEAR/POINT
White Paper

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Are you hoping to begin a career in the user experience field or perhaps find a new one? In this highly competitive field, the best jobs are difficult to obtain. **The way to stand out from the crowd is to understand what potential employers are looking for and know how to demonstrate those skills.** Clear Point Consultants, the UX staffing professionals, offers the information you need to land your dream job.

[hint: keep reading] 



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Gain hands-on experience



and take a class

Education is critical to your success. Our most important recommendation for you is to be aware of the entire spectrum of user experience so that you understand the field and can choose the specialty that is right for you. Courses are available in information architecture, human computer interaction (HCI), and usability. Many colleges and universities across the country offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees in user experience including Carnegie Mellon, Georgia Tech, University of Michigan, Tufts University, Bentley University, and Savannah College of Art and Design, to name a few. Bentley University offers a User Experience Certificate program as well

If formal education is not for you, there are still options.

Consider a mentor. Reach out to organizations in the field and get names of potential mentors. You can also study on your own by reading helpful informational books on the field or by following thought leaders on LinkedIn and Twitter. Learn more by joining as many UX groups as you can on LinkedIn and listening to the conversation.

Once the knowledge is in place, apply it

With only knowledge and theory of UX and little to no experience, you can still participate in the wide selection of freelance and *pro bono* projects that are out there. One way to start is to do freelance work for friends and companies you have established relationships with. Since this is about building your portfolio, it may be worthwhile to donate your time to a non-profit organization. Also, check out area internships.

Or simply create your own project: be your own UX designer and go through the whole process from ideation to design and implementation. Try creating some scenarios that would allow you to demonstrate your skills. For example, take the website of a local business and redo the entire site. Demonstrate your improvements with before and after screen shots as part of your portfolio.

Gain experience in identifying a user experience problem and coming up with an effective design solution using the tools of a UX professional.

Paid work is, of course, better than unpaid work, but the most important thing in the early stages of your career as a UX designer is to complete two or three projects for your portfolio that can be shown to prospective employers.

Your portfolio will be the biggest determinant of whether you get a phone interview or not. If your own portfolio isn't optimized for the user experience, why would a potential employer consider hiring you?

In your portfolio, make sure you not only show the final outcome but also demonstrate your process.

Display the sketches, flows, and wireframes that you created to arrive at that outcome. Use call-outs to tell the story.

Potential employers want to see the thinking that got you from the idea through to the final design. Be sure to explain what kind of design challenges you encountered and how you resolved them. What constraints did you have to work within? For

"You need the people who want to work at a high level but who can go all the way down to the atoms."

→ Ben Fried

instance, if the site had a successful e-commerce component you wouldn't want to estrange the current users. How could you improve the design, interaction with the user, and flow, yet still keep base users happy?

Show your commitment to the field of user experience and begin to pursue the formal education that will improve your competitiveness in the field. If going back to school is impossible, look into certificate programs, webinars, seminars, and conferences. Join a professional organization such as UXPA or Boston CHI and participate, even volunteer. By contributing to the success of the group you'll meet people in the profession as well as learn from them.

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The Résumé

Make a great first impression



How does your résumé look? Is it easy to read and to navigate? Do all the links work? Your résumé should have live links to your portfolio. Test links before sending it out.

As the designer, you want your résumé to be clean and crisp, to express *you* to your own satisfaction.

Viewing your résumé should be a positive user experience for potential employers.

Have a trusted person edit it and get some feedback before sending it out.

Your résumé should have an opening statement about you, the equivalent of an elevator pitch. This professional summary should be consistent and placed on all your materials, including your portfolio and website, to establish the brand by which you want the world to know you.

Make sure to only send out résumés in PDF—never in Word—to prevent reformatting errors.



“Good design, when it’s done well, becomes invisible. It’s only when it’s done poorly that we notice it.”

 **Jared Spool**

Know what to do and what not to do

A UX portfolio is a *hard* thing to put together. Much of the work you'll do is confidential or proprietary. However, the portfolio is crucial to securing a phone interview, so pay attention to some important portfolio do's and don'ts.

Do introduce yourself with a professional summary statement. Employers will want to know who you are. They also want to know what distinguishes you from other applicants.

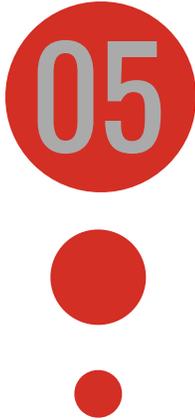
Don't show only the final design. What techniques do you use? What methods? What innovations? Were you responsible for both interaction and the visual design? Make sure you demonstrate your internal thought process. How did your research inform the design? Employers want to know how you tackle a project from brainstorming to pixel-perfect design. Annotate the pages. Tell a story and make it clear. Managers understand that many hands are involved in a project, and they want to know what your part was. Did you work with a visual designer, a UI developer? What exactly did you do?

Don't forget that managers who read your portfolio will be having their own user experience. You want the portfolio to inspire them to want to speak with you. Make sure the pages are large enough to read

and that images are crisp and clear. Make sure navigation is user friendly and the design is appealing.

Do put your most recent and best work first. There is always the issue of NDA's. Know the time limitations of the NDA's you sign. After you finish a project, ask for written permission to use it in your portfolio. If it's too late for that, you can password protect it or only show it in person or redact the proprietary terms and language. Managers want to see your most recent work. They assume that as you grow as a professional the most recent work will be your best.

If you have a large portfolio, point out the pieces that are most relevant to a particular job. Have you distinguished what is a desktop application, a web app, or a mobile app? Build a portfolio that tells your story. Be prepared to talk about how your designs solved a problem. Most employers look for designers who are innovative problem solvers. Show them how you use the latest design practices to create an exceptional experience for the user.



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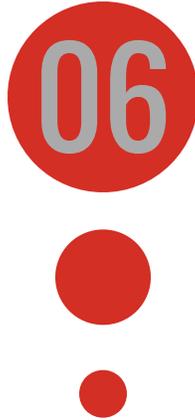
The Personal Website



It is highly recommended for all UX professionals to have an online presence and to keep that presence as current as possible.

Your Web site should reflect who you are as a professional. It should display your portfolio in an organized and engaging fashion.

Password protect any sensitive material so that it is only viewed by those with permission. Have your professional summary statement at the fore. Segment your work into desktop, web, and mobile applications. Show the process as described above and the before and after shots. Include a link to the live site featuring the completed design. Be sure the font size is readable and that the links open to a screen that is large enough to be read and navigated.



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Staying Current



Stay up to the minute by regularly reading the many UX blogs and sites. Our favorite ones are UX Magazine, Boxes and Arrows, UX Matters, UX Booth, and Smashing Magazine. If your budget allows, attend one of the big conferences. We recommend Convey UX, IA Summit, and SXSW Interactive in Austin; Boston UXPA Conference; UXPA International; and UXPA, D.C. Nielsen Norman Group also hold weeklong usability training camps. Conferences and training camps are great because in addition to learning about the latest studies and research you'll get a feel for the industry and be able to network with a lot of great designers.

Follow thought leaders in the field.

Some important UX thought leaders include Jared M. Spool, Luke Wroblewski, Jacob Nielsen, Don Norman, Jeff Gothelf, and Josh Clark. Know who they are, what they say, and why they matter. Follow them on Twitter and read their blogs, websites, and books.

Never stop reading.

→ [especially these]

- Web Anatomy: Interaction Design Frameworks that Work *by Jared Spool*
- Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability *by Steve Krug*
- Mobile First *by Luke Wroblewski*
- Mobile Usability *by Jakob Nielsen and Raluca Budiu*
- The Design of Everyday Things *by Don Norman*
- Lean UX: Applying Lean Principles to Improve User Experience *by Jeff Gothelf and Josh Seiden*
- Tapworthy: Designing Great iPhone Apps *by Josh Clark*
- The UX Book: Process & Guidelines for Ensuring a Quality User Experience *by Rex Hartson & Pardha Pyla*

Join the UX Book Club online and see if you have a local chapter where you can meet others and discuss the latest practices in the field. www.uxbookclub.org

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Do your research



Take time to research companies that you are applying to. Go to LinkedIn and see if you have a connection to the company who you can talk to before your interview. Do a Google search, spend time on the company website, and go to sites like Hoover.com and Glassdoor.com. Find out whether you can do a demo of their product online before your interview, and look at it critically.

How would you improve the user experience based on what you've seen? Research reviews of the product and identify its weak spots so you can speak about them during your interview. Knowing your potential employer can provide a competitive edge.

“I know the price of success: dedication, hard work, and an unremitting devotion to the things you want to see happen.”

 Frank Lloyd Wright

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Show that you can think critically **and** communicate clearly →

If the portfolio is what gets you the phone interview, demonstrating your critical thinking and communication skills is what will get you the job. Be able to articulate your thought process and design decisions. Demonstrate your knowledge of best practices in the user experience field. Being a UX professional means being an advocate for the user while meeting the business goals of your company. You have to be both creative and business savvy to influence top decision makers.

A career in UX also involves facilitating UX processes within a team, communicating with different groups, and selling ideas. It is an important and high-exposure role: be ready for your close up.

“Design is really an act of communication, which means having a deep understanding of the person with whom the designer is communicating.”

→ Don Norman

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