

Working for yourself as a Graphic Design graduate

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Abstract

This dissertation is an investigation of the contemporary Graphic Communication industry, and people who have entered it both with and without a degree in Graphic Design. The decisions made whilst finding work in the industry and the complications as well as the rewarding aspects of working for yourself as a freelance Graphic Designer.

This research examines the success of today's Graphic Design graduates and their career opportunities along with taking the leap into working for yourself as a Graphic Designer, the questions asked about whether graduates know what to do with their degrees and finally, whether a degree is even needed to be successful in the ever-changing Design industry.

Introduction

Due to the vast, increasing number of people taking it up as a profession every year, the Graphic Design industry is arguably one of the biggest, most competitive and highly anticipated industries out there, and knowing how to get going in this industry straight out of University can be a huge, daunting challenge that most people don't have the relevant help to be able to do so.

Graphic Design is rapidly changing with technology and colleges and universities must keep that in consideration when running a Graphic Design course for students to learn and prosper from. The development of digital design has arguably taken over the industry. This could well be due to the increase of social media use over the years.

Anjana Varsani conducted an online article explaining the pros and cons of digital media compared to print, and she states that a positive about the increase of digital media means that it's 'very easy to share your favourite articles to spark discussions on social networks', another reason being the ability to track which media is successful. Varsani suggests that 'analytics can show you what kind of articles and features are most popular' so that time can be dedicated to giving their audiences exactly what they want. On the other hand, this perhaps means that people who have been Graphic Designers for many years now do not have the relevant knowledge to be able to keep up with the modern-day Design that clients are after. This aspect will be explored in this dissertation and concluded through various research and opinion.

This dissertation explores whether today's students really know what they want to do straight after graduating from University. It considers the impact of University on students and whether there really is a better chance of graduates getting a respectable job in the Design industry than people who don't go into Higher Education at all. Some research will be directed towards the role of the University degree in helping people

work towards becoming a Graphic Designer and whether it is possible to be just as successful going at it totally independently and without a degree. This is to explore the benefits that University has to offer in depth.

To become a successful freelance Graphic Designer is a highly desirable outcome that Design graduates aspire to do full time, others like working within an agency. Working as a freelance Designer does come with its fair share of stressful responsibilities and obstacles, which will be covered through thorough research and interviews with people living as freelance Designers. Other aspects that this research will cover are establishing target audiences and client relationships that suit exactly what the Designer wants to be working with, as well as dealing with ever growing competition from other Graphic Designers. Following on from this, another decision that some Designers appear to make, is to begin by starting up their own Design agencies following graduation and then gathering up relevant experience in business. Using the author's own experience of developing a business as a freelance Designer and through supporting case studies as well as primary research, this dissertation will compare the experiences of both starting up an agency, and going freelance following graduation.

This investigation will cover a range of research developed from both people who have been to University as well as people who have gone straight into working for themselves as a Graphic Designer. This will include first hand experiences from the author as someone who is currently living and developing as a freelancer whilst studying at Birmingham City University, as well as a University graphics graduate who has successfully started up and is running their own agency. Research includes first hand interviews with Design graduates as well as interviews with experienced and successful people in business.

This research will be heavily supported by facts and primary research informed from the authors work as a developing Freelance Graphic Designer, and established Designers in the industry. This concludes on how easy it is to work for yourself as a Graphic Design graduate, whether University helps Designers to get where they want to be in Design, and the final conclusion about whether the majority prefer to work for themselves as freelancers, or whether agency work is more attractive.

Studies will be made from various books and articles from well known, respected people in business and in the Design industry such as Kevin Roberts, Wally Olins and Adrian Shaughnessy. Personal opinions from graduated and current students at universities such as Birmingham City University working through the investigation towards the conclusion. Finally, this dissertation will include images of work produced by the designers mentioned throughout the chapters to support specific points and gather an insight into the comparisons made between various agencies and Freelance Designers.

Chapter 1: Career Opportunities

There appears to be a lot of cases where students pick a subject and move away to University for perhaps the wrong reasons. From personal experience of the author, reasons such as drinking and partying, getting a money loan to buy what they want when they want, having the freedom to do what they want without their parents being around and even choosing a subject they hate purely because they were maybe good at it in school or felt pressured in to doing it by family members or friends. The reason this has been mentioned is because it then falls down to the final year of University, when graduation is just around the corner, there is a lot of pressure to get every piece of work submitted on time and to the best standard possible. Arguably, the pressures of the final year of University can be heavily influenced by whether or not the student genuinely wants to be there, actually enjoys the course and sees a future with this subject. This reiterates the question stated previously, do students really know what they want to do after graduating?

According to Online Education Editor Josie Gurney-Read, in October 2015, only 62.5% of Design graduates went straight into employment following graduation. This could possibly suggest that a large percentage of students weren't serious about their degree or did not enjoy it. This could also suggest that students are very serious about their degree, but may have not had the relevant help or guidance to be able to get to the stage of being employable right out of University, or maybe they purely did not want to go straight into employment. After discussing this subject with Lyndon Thruston from the BCU Careers Plus team, it was suggested that a 'relatively small amount of graduates' finish Uni 'and they need a break, they need a reset', and it can be argued that this break makes them less employable, as they are then 'competing for employment against next year's graduates, who are fresh out of University'. From this,

Lyndon suggested that 'the window of employment of trying to get into the industry, is generally relatively small', and so it is encouraged to find work as soon after graduating as possible to ensure all skills and knowledge is as up to date as it can be.

There are millions of people working in some aspect of Graphic Design, both people who have been and studied a degree in a University or College, as well as those who jumped straight into business from school, and some may question whether graduates really have a better chance at getting a job in the industry than people who don't go into Higher Education. Adrian Shaughnessy conducted an interview with Stephen Doyle which was produced in his book 'How to be a graphic designer without losing your soul'. This interview covers many aspects of Doyle's journey into his career. One point given by Doyle is that 'enthusiasm, appropriateness, curiosity, good footwear, humour, personality, literacy, spell check, manners, and a little sparkle in the eye' are some of his checklist of qualities he looks for when employing a new Designer. Nowhere in this interview does Doyle mention anything about needing a degree to work for his company Doyle Partners. This could be seen as evidence that not all Agencies require a University degree to give someone a job with them, but it could be argued that these general skills and the knowledge of how to behave within a professional environment may not be as prominent without going to University.

An industry lead opinion states that when looking for a job, it is more important to show drive and passion for the job than to show a University degree. Adrian Shaughnessy suggests that to be able to know how to identify a good employee, the best thing to do is to 'always hire people who ultimately want to start their own studios.' This is supported by the question of 'why would anyone hire someone who wants to be an 'employee'?' mentioned by Doyle. This suggests that anyone looking to start a career as a Graphic Designer will be successful when driven by, and passionate about the subject, and the level of commitment will show when applying for work in the industry.

It is incredibly difficult to be successful in an interview if you do not actually want the job, simply due to how much enthusiasm you portray when applying.

It can be said that in order to be able to start up a business as a Designer and work for yourself, a degree is not needed as you are not being employed by anyone, and so only have yourself to answer to and succeed for. On the other hand, the experience and skills will possibly not be completely there if someone is deciding to go into this area of work with little to no education on the subject. From the point of view of someone who is in their third and final year at University, it is believed that a great amount of experience, skills and confidence have grown from being at University. On the other hand, when going into a work placement as a Graphic Designer in a print company [See Fig.1], many more new skills were learnt from the workplace that University had not taught me. Furthermore, it must be considered that University is not a vocational training course, but it is 'superb training ground', as mentioned by Thruston, and so should not be expected to deliver skills and work to students who may not make the most of it. During a job interview with Nigel Clarke, he said that he is a strong believer that 'in order to gain relevant experience that will impress future employers or even yourself as a freelancer, completing internships and work placements in different agencies is a much more practical use of time than completing a degree.' The argument to this is that a lot of agencies may be looking for a relevant degree to be able to give someone a job within their business, and that people get taken more seriously when they have shown enough commitment to get a degree as well as experience.



Fig. 1 Waveprint Prospectuses. Available from: <https://www.waveprint.co.uk/primary-school-prospectuses/>

Working for yourself may not specifically mean going at it alone and being a contractor or freelancer. Working for yourself means being responsible for gaining your own knowledge and experience and building yourself up as a Designer, whether that is on your own or in an agency with a load of other professionals working with you. Both roles are perhaps as important and highly regarded as each other, it goes down to what the Designer wants from their career. The focus in particular in this case, is working in an agency and the opportunities available to those wanting to be employed into one.

There are hundreds of job roles within Design agencies that graduates may not be aware of. When studying at University, students arguably have their eyes on the goal of taking up the standard role of a Graphic or Digital Designer in a big, well-known agency. As amazing as that may sound, there are so many different aspects to consider and the main one being, what exactly is required from the employer of the specific role.

During an interview with Lyndon Thruston, we discussed the intentions of students when looking for work after graduating and Thruston mentioned that what students tend to underestimate, is that 'when you come out and go into the workplace, you are essentially in a competition' and although not everyone will be applying for the same job role with the same skill sets, they will mostly be competing to get work within the industry. An example Thruston gave was that you 'look at Birmingham and you initially take in your cohort, and you look at the whole course in Graphics and then you think you may be competing with Illustration, and then you may be competing with the same students at the University of Birmingham, University College Birmingham, South and City College...' which puts into perspective the magnitude of the competition for work faced after graduating. Thruston also advises that work experience is the single most important aspect when looking for work, he states that 'the way of standing out is employers will look for what experience you have within the workplace', mainly to gain an understanding of the graduate's ability to work with clients and build relationships, and although having the skill to produce the work is highly important, Thruston states that 'it doesn't necessarily translate into understanding someone's brief and ability to engage with them,' Graphic Design is 'often about the relationship with the person, not just the design of the work.'

Every student has the same career opportunities. The deciding factor is purely down to how much effort the student is willing to put in to get the career they want following University. Thruston says 'It's all about what you're showcasing, because the employer only knows what you share with them', and so building up a vast body of work to showcase your skills, having relevant work experience in the industry and being able to engage with clients and produce work to reflect their needs are evidently the most important factors in the careers process after graduating. Thruston advised that students carefully consider where they would like to work, and build their portfolios up

to match what their ideal employers are looking for. In other words, 'identify where you're aiming at, if you're aiming at a creative agency, that might be different to the brand you would show to a corporate organisation.'

Chapter 2: Freelance Design Work

One of the most exciting aspects of building up a Business in Freelancing as a Graphic Designer, is the ability to design your brand as your own. This involves having a brand strategy and a set of brand values, building a company logo, colour scheme, a specific typographic family and a set of customised brand guidelines. The ability to make something so specific to who you are as a person and be able to share it with the world and use it to help people is such an amazing and exciting experience.

The decision to become a Freelance Graphic Designer is the decision to become a Business person. This requires at least a small amount of knowledge about how businesses work, and what needs to be taken into account in order for the business to work successfully. Looking at the previous chapter about career opportunities, as opposed to going through the process of applying for employed job roles, starting up a business in Freelancing requires one person with a little to a lot of knowledge on business and a lot of passion for their creative direction. Freelancing does, however, require the same ability to create relationships with clients and to provide a service that clients will wish to continually use, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

When becoming a Freelancer, there are many things to consider, such as how to keep track of accounts, skill, and possibly the most important thing is how to get clients and furthermore, how to keep them happy. As mentioned by Kevin Roberts in his book 'The Lovemarks Effect: 'Everyone in business is experiencing the impact of the consumer revolution', meaning everyone in business is needing to know how to cater to the consumer's requirements, no matter how big or small. Roberts also states that 'the new consumer is no longer willing to passively accept whatever comes their way from producers.' This suggests that in order to deliver the best quality work for clients, the producer needs to do as much research as possible on the client before beginning the

work. 'Feeling encouraged to grow, to ask questions, and to experiment by clients and peers who share similar interests helps.' Sara De Bondt also suggests that 'it adds structure to your practice and gives you a sense of where you want to take it.' Meaning that having a good relationship with your client and taking the time to get to know them results in not only them being happy, but you as a Designer having a sense of direction and structure.

Becoming a Freelancer is a huge commitment and arguably a huge risk in anyone's career, whether or not this is a good thing or not results down to the person choosing this pathway. There is always that worrying thought of whether or not you are skilled and experienced enough to take on the challenges set by the clients on your own. There is also the fear of not getting any business at all and therefore not making any money.

It is easy to see that a lot of today's Graphic Design students tend to try and start up their own freelance business whilst still completing their degree, which is arguably a great way to gain experience, build up a good, professional portfolio of work and even generate income. Doing this could result in a range of situations, one example being clients making the most of your assumedly low prices as you're still developing, resulting in lots of business yet not a lot of profit. Another example could possibly be clients not taking you seriously as you have not yet fully found your feet and as a result of this, missing out on potential business opportunities.

It can be argued that in order to build up a solid, successful foundation of clients as a Freelancer, it is most beneficial to start out whilst at University and get as much networking done as physically possible whilst having the opportunity to be constantly surrounded by like-minded, successful creative people in the industry. Another aspect of this could be based around location. For example, it could be argued that someone living in London could be more successful than someone living in Somerset, meaning

they may have more clients, more work and are more well-known. On the other hand, 'the risk of working in a capital city like London is that you begin to believe yourself at the centre of the world, to lose that excitement of being on the periphery and feeling that you are not there yet, that you still have to learn.' As said by Sara De Bondt in another interview conducted by Adrian Shaughnessy. It is exciting to anticipate where you may be in the future and where work will take you. Sara De Bondt studied in Belgium, Spain and Holland and is now working in London. In her interview with Shaughnessy, she touches on the reasons why and how she went about studying in so many places to land her in London, the main one being an exchange programme run by the Universities allowing her to travel and experience the Design industry in different cultures, this supports the idea that going to University can be very helpful in having the opportunities to network around the world without needing a lot of money.

An example of someone local who is now running a successful Design business is Eilish Fitzpatrick, who graduated from Birmingham City University in 2016. She began work as a Freelancer in her first year of University, has never worked in an agency and instead works alongside other agencies. An interview was set up with Fitzpatrick and conducted to find out the ins and outs of her journey from University through to successfully running her own business. When asked which advice should be given to current students approaching graduation and wanting to work for themselves, Fitzpatrick stated that 'you need to figure out what you want in your personal life so that your work life can complement it.' She spoke about her personal preferences about feeling claustrophobic in the city and not liking the idea of working 9–5 in an agency, she followed on by concluding that 'freelance was great because I can mix and match my time'. This suggests that there is no set pathway for every Graphic Design Graduate and that no one should be pressured into following the trend that is working in an agency if they feel that it isn't for them.

Another huge benefit of working for yourself as a Graphic Designer is the opportunity to outsource any commission work that you either do not feel confident in doing, or have not got the skills, facilities or even interest in that field of work. An example of this could be a Graphic Designer who is experienced in and passionate about branding, who gets approached by a client wanting a website developed. The Designer may not be interested in taking on this commission to do personally, however they may know a Web Developer who would happily take the project on for a reduced price. Therefore, the designer will be able to say yes to the client, outsource the design work to the Web Developer and also make a profit out of it. During her interview, Fitzpatrick stated that she has only ever worked for herself and 'hiring people as and when I need them is better'. She also explained: 'as I like to do every stage of a project because I'm quite a neat freak like that, I like to have control.' However, no one is good at everything, and so outsourcing arguably 'fills in the gaps' and 'brings the projects right up', as mentioned by Fitzpatrick. An example of Fitzpatrick showing full control over a brief is the website mockup she created for Jackson Studios [See Fig. 2].

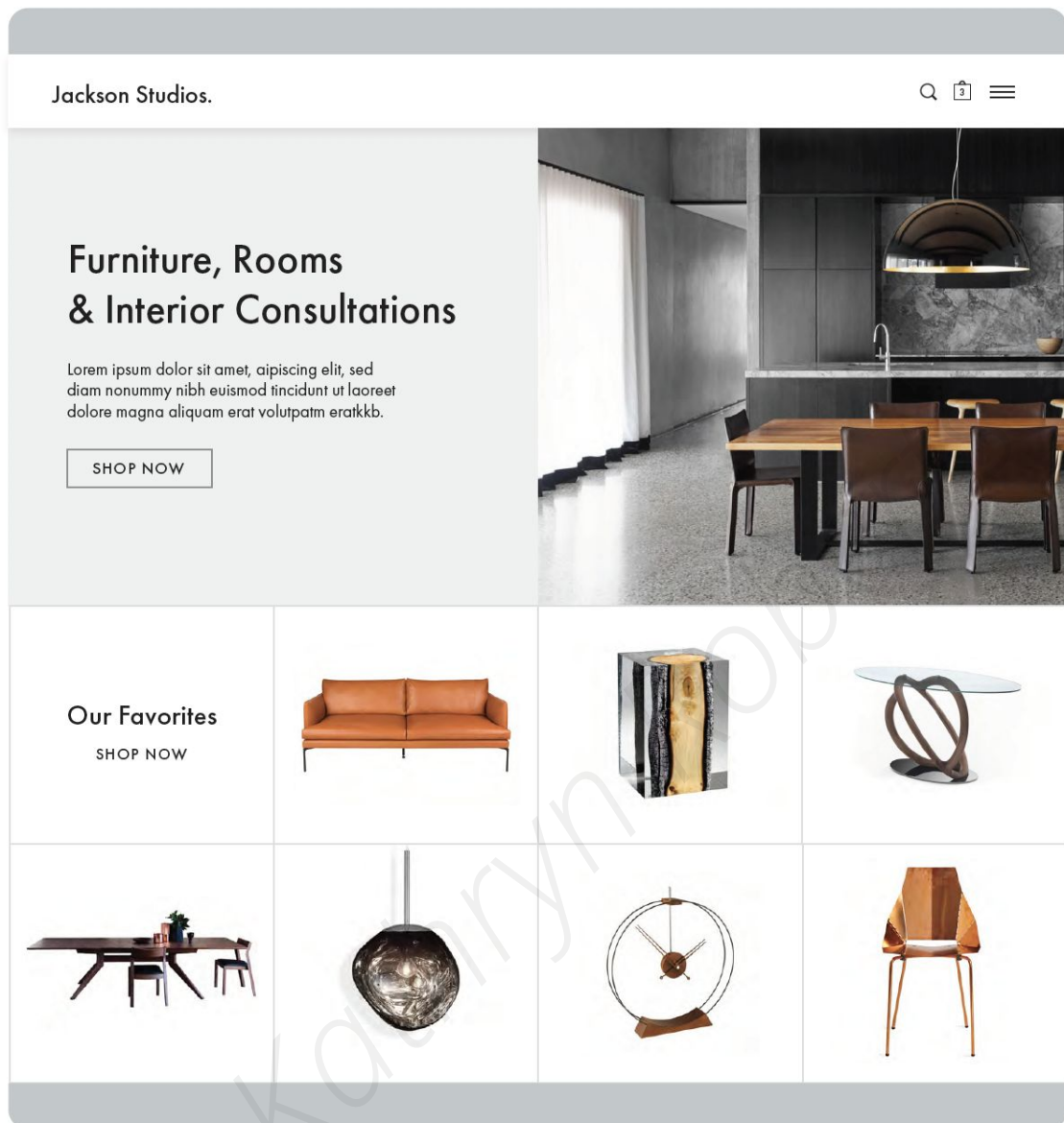


Fig. 2 Website mock-up for Jackson Studios. Eilish Fitzpatrick (2018)

Competition is a perhaps one of the biggest challenges faced by any Designer. Wally Olins made the point that 'It is becoming increasingly evident that the nature of competition is changing.' This point arguably suggests that several aspects in competition are changing, such as the number of competing businesses that are developing every day and the ways in which these businesses are winning or losing in comparison to your business, which all goes down to the number of clients and the

success rate of your work. However, it has also been said by Olins, that 'being as good as the best of the competition is now sufficient only to enable an organisation to stay in the race', which concludes that in order to be successful, Designers should perhaps stop paying so much attention to competitors, as trying to be better than them will not make a difference. What Designers should do, is purely focus on their own passion for what they are doing and let the relevant business naturally come to them, which leads on to the topic of target audience.

As a developing Freelance Designer, building up an idea and a profile of the ideal target audience is extremely important in terms of getting the right business, especially for someone who is working entirely for themselves and wants to create work that they are specifically interested in creating for clients. There are often cases where clients fail to respond to the Designer or fail to pay them after a significant amount of work has been done. This happens for multiple reasons and almost always, the answer is 'if you haven't heard, you've heard', according to Bonnie Siegler on Design Observer, and it can be argued that this problem happens less often within Agencies, urging people to want to work within an Agency for 'fear of rejection' as a Freelancer. 'The solution to the bloating of the design business is not for design "agencies" to grow even bigger, but for marketing to shrink.' This statement implies that the amount of people working within a business does not determine the success of the business, however the skill of the people involved, suggesting that there is always going to be competition between Freelancers and Agencies. However, the success of the Creative is purely down to how each Creative markets themselves and builds relationships with their clients.

To become a Freelancer straight out of University, and having the ability and funds to sustain this is unrealistic, but whilst speaking with Lyndon Thruston, he pointed out that 'it's realistic for everybody, if they want to put in the effort', and 'if someone wants to really be freelance, they will be freelance.' Everyone has the ability to set up as

a Freelancer, and it can be agreed that effort is the main factor when starting up. It can also be believed that not everyone will have the required funds to be able to put everything into going Freelance straight away, and so from this interview, it was concluded that building up a Freelance business on top of other ventures and jobs is the best way to get the most experience and the highest income possible.

Chapter 3: Start Up Agencies

'Agency' is a service-orientated, marketing-friendly word. It makes designers sound more biddable.' A lot of graduates may read this statement by Rick Poynor and rush to get work in an agency to become 'more biddable' and build up their network. Working for a Design Agency is a highly desired job role to have which many Design graduates aspire to have after finishing University. Having the opportunity to start up an Agency as a graduate is perhaps an even more aspiring role to have.

Starting up and running a Design agency from scratch is man be one of the biggest achievements any Design student dreams of having after graduating from University. It's a sign of success and passion for the industry.

A valuable point can be recognised that when starting up an agency, it is highly unlikely that the person starting up the agency will be immediately set with a broad range of loyal and well-known clients. This is also something that may scare Graduates when coming into the industry, as they may not have had the experience of possibly having their ideas rejected, or even the opposite of being overwhelmed with work being requested from lots of different clients. For example, Fitzpatrick, as mentioned previously, has ran her business for four years and has established herself mainly within local businesses in her surrounding area such as Gill's Heritage, Terry's Removals and Signature Retreat [See Fig.3 and 4].



Fig. 3 Signature Retreat Leaflet Mock-Up. Eilish Fitzpatrick (2018)



Fig. 4 A4 Flyer Presentation Mock-Up. Eilish Fitzpatrick (2018)

During an interview with Fitzpatrick, it was discovered that she works mainly with 'local projects, like beauty salons, IT companies' and 'interior designers' as well as work 'for a disability charity, I did all their monthly management and things like that, and then I've got a few projects for animal charities because I love dogs.' Fitzpatrick also mentioned that she began her business by Freelancing during her first year at Birmingham City University, however she mentioned 'only little bits and bobs, it wasn't a full-blown thing, I only had a couple of clients.' This was interesting to find out whilst learning about her journey into the Design industry, it was also interesting to find out that she learnt a lot about 'the creative, the ideas, and getting a good flow of work together' through her tutors at University. This perhaps suggests that going to University gives students a big boost into knowing what they need to know when starting up an agency, which they may not have access to if they didn't go to University.

Although Fitzpatrick is clearly doing very well for herself due to her solid foundation of clients and regular income, it can be argued that as she has only been running her business for four years, her client basis has remained relatively low key and local at this point in time, compared to bigger, longer standing agencies such as Big Fish, a branding and packaging agency, who have worked with huge clients such as BBC, Coca Cola, Waitrose, Harrods, Mothercare and Yeo Valley [See Fig. 5, 6 and 7].



Fig. 5 Kallø. Available from: <https://www.bigfish.co.uk/blog/portfolio/kallo/>



Fig. 6 Fantasy Gardens at Harrods. Available from: <https://www.bigfish.co.uk/blog/portfolio/harrods/>



Fig. 7 Yeo Valley. Available from: <https://www.bigfish.co.uk/blog/portfolio/yeovalley/>

Big Fish Agency was founded in 1994, is based in Chelsea, London, and consists of around 32 members working within it. In light of this information there is arguably no doubt about why they have had the opportunity to work with so many well-known clients over the years. However, it is easy to assume that just because an agency has been around and established for so many years, that they will be working with so many famous brands. On the other hand, an example of another design agency who have been established for many years yet have not had so many big clients is Simply Design, who are based in Wolverhampton and together have around 20 years' experience in the design industry. Their clients include more local businesses such as 24/7 Plumbers and Regal Motors [See Fig. 8]. It is hard to know whether these agencies intend to reach the clients that they do, however most would assume that the bigger the clients, the better the agency, which is not always the case. Big Fish is arguably one of the most well-known and successful branding and packaging agencies in the UK, however they

will not appeal to all audiences. They may not produce the same style or quality required by a client that Simply Design may be able to produce. This shows that it is possible for any agency to get clients and build a good reputation, largely including small, local start up agencies and agencies that have not yet been established.



Fig. 8 PC Midlands. Available from: <http://simply-design.co.uk/portfolios/website-for-it-company/>

Conclusion

There is no doubt that this industry is constantly developing and changing with the times and improvements of technology. Therefore, it should be easy to understand that the role of the Graphic Design graduate heavily changes each year as well as the content that the graduate would have learnt throughout their time at University. This point arguably supports the idea that in order to get the best, most up to date knowledge of what is needed to be successful in the industry, a degree is recommended. On the other hand, it has been mentioned previously that having solid, relevant work experience is the most important factor in successfully getting work in the industry, which students have to get for themselves.

It is clear to see that the amount of young people joining the industry to work for themselves as Graphic Designers is rapidly growing and Graphic Design is becoming increasingly more stylish as a career choice. From this, it can be believed that working for yourself as a Designer is incredibly challenging due to the pure amount of competition from like-minded Creatives.

Graphic Design is a heavily rewarding career path when done successfully, as proved by case studies mentioned earlier on in this investigation. When the work ethic, determination and business acumen is there, there is a very high success rate from both Freelance Designers and Agency Workers.

In order to be successful in the graphic Design industry, it has been suggested that students follow all guidance and take advantage of any necessary workshops, tutorials or any other facilities that are offered by the University to give them a jump start in knowing what to do when they graduate. As mentioned by the author to Lyndon Thruston, 'being at Uni, I've had a lot of advice. The tutors are really helpful', however in terms of 'know how to be in the industry, the work experience has definitely taught me

that.' Therefore, it is important to build up career opportunities, skills and contacts from as early as possible to ensure success in the future.

As both a current third year student and freelance Graphic Designer, it must be said that University helps to gain the confidence to start up a Freelance business and take that leap into the industry. It is recommended that anyone who has the opportunity to work for themselves either independently or within a company, should take up any chances to learn as much as possible about business and Graphic Design, so that they are in the best position possible to make their dream of working as a Graphic Designer a reality.

As to whether Agency work is more glamorous and desired by graduates, from the authors perspective, neither one is more 'desirable' than the other. It is known that more Graphic Design students go to University with the intention of graduating and getting a job in an Agency than those who wish to work as a Freelancer, according to Thruston, the Careers Plus team get around '65% looking for employment, 35% looking for self-employment.' There are multiple reasons for this but it arguably falls down to either lack of confidence or lack of knowledge. It is even possible that both confidence and knowledge can hinder one another, in the sense that one may have the knowledge, but may not have the confidence to express that knowledge. On the other hand, one may be confident, however may not feel that they have the knowledge to support that confidence, and so requests a job within an agency as a means of support as well as further education. In conclusion to this, Agency work is more popular within Graphic Design Graduates, however many may develop into their own businesses when they feel that they have received everything they can from the Agency they have worked in.

Finally, both working Freelance and within an Agency come with issues such as clients not co-operating and most of the time there is no way around it and it should not be a reason not to do one or the other, it should be a reason to motivate the Creative to

do an unforgettable job to please the clients they do have. 'The future of graphic design, if it is to have one, can only lie in focusing on graphic design.' Rick Poynor's statement is one that is brutally honest, and supports the final conclusion that both working Freelance and in an Agency, are highly respectable job roles that both carry their own negatives and positives as mentioned throughout this essay. Whichever job role the graduate decides to go into, the focus must solely be on producing work that they can be proud of and creating solid relationships with their clients.

Image List

Figure. 1 *Waveprint Prospectuses*. Available from:

<https://www.waveprint.co.uk/primary-school-prospectuses/>

Figure. 2 *Website mock-up for Jackson Studios*. Eilish Fitzpatrick (2018)

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Figure. 5 *Kallo*. Available from: <https://www.bigfish.co.uk/blog/portfolio/kallo/>

Figure. 6 *Fantasy Gardens at Harrods*. Available from:

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Figure. 8 *PC Midlands*. Available from:

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Appendices

Interview with Eilish Fitzpatrick

K: Alright so basically, what year did you graduate in?

E: It was 2 years ago, so 2016.

K: When you were at uni, did you know exactly what field you wanted to go into?

E: No not at all

K: Did you have any idea?

E: Well, I knew I wanted to work for myself, but part of that was like, everyone around you would be doing different things, and a lot of people would want to go to a high fly agency and you can feel quite easily pressured to go and do that, and if you don't do that and if you went freelance it was a bad thing almost. So, there was definitely that kind of stigma around. So, I knew I wanted to work for myself but in what capacity, not really. It was just kind of like jobs were coming my way and it was like "oh great, I'll do that then".

K: So, you kind of started freelancing whilst you were at uni?

E: Yeah yeah, in first year. Only little bits and bobs, it wasn't a full-blown thing, I only had a couple of clients.

K: Did the uni actually help you with that?

E: Yeah, James. James is the one.

K: So, did he help you to know how to start your own business? Did he help you with that or did you learn that yourself?

E: Yeah, a lot of it you learn from yourself, I think you don't need to know how to run a business, that will just come with you doing it and being like "oh ok I should probably do that and trial and error" but where your tutors will help you is the creative, the ideas and getting a good flow of work together if you know what I mean.

K: Do you think going to uni expanded your chances of getting a job in the industry or creating your own business or do you reckon you'd still be where you are now without a degree?

E: No, I don't think it's impossible to do it without a degree, but it's more just the things you get pushed your way. Like, if I didn't have James for example, he was a massive influence on me, and the other tutors. You'll build relationships, you're only as good as the people around you. Like, outside of uni for first and second year for sure, I wasn't really the one that was doing design in their spare time because I loved it so much. Like you get some people and they're like "I lust after this and I do this every day for my hobby" and I'm like "that's not me and maybe this isn't for me".

K: Yeah, I've had that quite a bit, especially this summer I've just been like "maybe this isn't what I should do".

E: You don't have to be totally engrossed in it every minute of the day to be a designer. I don't think so anyway because that's not what I'm like.

K: And you're doing fine

E: Yeah

K: So, what's your advice for students approaching the end of their degree in terms of like, getting into the industry as soon as possible after graduating?

E: Well, I suppose it depends. You'll go on your own little journey, like for me, even though it sounds so cheesy, travelling was the best thing that I ever did.

K: Oh did you travel?

E: Yeah so, my boyfriend and I went away for a year. You need to figure out what you want in your personal life so that your work life can complement it. Like I feel quite claustrophobic in a city, I really like being outdoorsy and in nature, so the idea of working in an agency 9-5 to work for a wage, I didn't really want because I don't spend a lot of money, it was pointless for me. So, freelance was great because I can mix and match my time.

K: I agree with that

E: So, you've got to figure out what you want in your personal life and build it around that, and that's easier said than done. It's taken me quite a while to get to a nice balance now.

K: So, did you go straight into your own freelance stuff?

E: Yeah, I've never worked for an agency.

K: How did you get into that so easily because obviously you're doing alright from it?

E: Well, the first project I had was just a friend of a friend. Literally everything I started with came from my mum's network, so you'll be fine because your mum's got an amazing network, and everything was just word of mouth and it was just small projects. It started with a logo and I'd never made a logo before, I didn't have a logo and I was like "yeah of course I can make you a logo", made a logo and they happened to like it and it just spiralled and spiralled from that and it was really small stuff you know it was business cards here and there, it was leaflets, it wasn't work that I wanted to do, it wasn't work that I was so, so proud of. It got the ball rolling, and you can make mistakes with those kinds of clients and it doesn't really matter that much, you know? It snowballs.

K: So, are you the only one in your business? Obviously, you've got your company name and stuff, you don't employ anyone? It's just you?

E: No, no, it's just me, but I subcontract when I need to, so I got James in to consult on your mum's project. We've got developers in if we need them, illustrators coming in. Like, employing staff, that's pretty stressful and you know, it's not only getting the best out of them but also developing them as an individual and as your employee, and I'm not really ready to make that sort of jump, but hiring people as and when I need them is better, and also, as I like to do every stage of a project because I'm quite a neat freak like that, I like to have control. But I'm not a good illustrator, I'm good at design, I'm good at thinking, I can do photography but I'm not good at everything, so if I just kept it completely with me then I'm limited to the skills that I have. So, outsourcing fills in the gaps where I need them, and actually it brings the projects right up.

K: I think that's what I need to start doing because I get asked about websites and stuff and that's one thing I just...hate.

E: Yeah, websites aren't that exciting but they are a good way to earn an income.

K: It's good money and like you said if you can't do it just subcontract and get someone else to do it.

E: Yeah you can make very good money from it, depending on the price range you've got to play with as well, you can get a project in and then say they want to spend a grand on their website or £500 or £600 on their website, you can find someone like on fiver to do it for £200, and you just Y frame it, you tell them "I want you to build this, this and this, this is the theme, build it" and it's fairly easy.

K: How do you go about pricing stuff? Because that's the one thing I'm struggling with.

E: Pricing is the hardest.

K: Do you have set prices? Do you charge per hour?

E: When I started, I charged per hour. Purely because that's what I felt comfortable with. But really, if you're going to get a business head on you then you should be pricing on value, because a hairdresser down the road might have quite a tight budget, and IT company in the centre of Birmingham is going to have a bit of a bigger budget, and with a larger company, the risk is more. So yeah, you might be making a logo for two identical sort of company but if that logo is going to be printed on more things, seen in more places, it's going to hit more of a larger audience, so there's more risk there.

K: I guess it's based on what they're going to use it for and how much business they're going to get from it.

E: It's hard to charge by value though because you've got to be confident about it and be like "I am worth this" and "I am going to charge it" and that's a bit hard to dip your toe into because you're like "I've only just graduated" or "I haven't even graduated" or whatever, but no one's asked me what I got in my degree or what experience I have. I don't even have a website up at the moment it's ridiculous, no one should hire me!

K: But you don't really need it I suppose, if you're getting the clients.

E: You don't, it's about the trust that you have with them.

K: So, what kind of clients have you had?

E: So, I've done some local projects, so like beauty salons, IT companies, I did some charity work for Lloyd's Bank locally in the Midlands. What else have I done? I worked for a disability charity, I did all their monthly management and things like that, and then I've got a few projects for animal charities because I love dogs and I can't help but do stuff for them. Interior designers, it's a really mixed bunch.

K: Is that people approaching you?

E: Yeah, so what you'll start to find is that you'll get your first round of projects in and that will obviously become your portfolio, and what happens is you'll get more of that work. So, whether you like it or not, if you don't want to be doing that kind of work, if that's what you're putting out there and showing people that's what you can do, that's what you'll keep getting back. So, it's hard to break the chain. The recent projects that I've been having since maybe last March, have all come from a totally different network, and now I'm getting completely different projects, projects that I actually like, but it's because it's out of the network that I've been in, the bubble for the last 3 years.

K: Yeah great, well that's all the questions I had to ask, so thank you for your time.

E: Of course.

Interview with Lyndon Thruston

K: So, the title of my dissertation is 'Working for yourself as a graphic design graduate', so I'm trying to find out...it's basically about how to be successful. I want to be a freelancer when I graduate, well eventually, so my main focus is being a successful freelancer, so what do you think is the most successful thing a student can do to get a job in the industry as soon as possible?

L: As soon as possible after graduating and potentially go freelance afterwards? Or employment overall?

K: Relevant employment

L: I think the thing that students underestimate when they're going through their degree, whilst they may be doing some superb work, in terms of their assignments, dissertations and projects, is actually getting some solid work experience. So when you come out and go into the work place you are essentially in a competition, and you're in a competition with all the other students and graduates that are looking for the same sort of employment as you. So, if you look at Birmingham and you initially take in your cohort and you look at the whole course in graphics and then you think you may be competing with illustration and then you may be competing with the same students at the University of Birmingham, University College Birmingham, South and City College, so this is a massive competition basically, and this is what I think students underestimate, it's a massive competition and you have got to stand out. The way of standing out is employers will look for what experience you have within the workplace, because whilst you might have amazing design skills, it doesn't necessarily translate into understanding

how to work with clients. It doesn't necessarily translate into understanding someone's brief and ability to engage with them, to interact with them and to engage with them and to build a relationship with them, because something like graphics is often about the relationship with the person, not just the design of the work. I'll give you an example, I wanted something designed for a logo, it was a personal thing it wasn't in the uni, and I asked someone who I knew was working in graphics 'could you look at this logo with me, I've got a couple of concept ideas', and they said to me 'if I'm going to be designing it, I'm going to do it my way. I don't want to openly engage in the concept you have.' So automatically for me, that relationship then didn't work. So, employers are looking for what experience you have in the work place, so they can see that engagement, and this is through things like live project briefs, and then being able to showcase that, and graduates don't always recognise all of the skills they've got. So, when you're writing a CV or portfolio or whatever it may be, the students often have lots of things they've done, but they're not necessarily showcasing it. It's all about what you're showcasing, because the employer only knows what you share with them, if you don't share it they don't know it. It's somehow being able to share that, and recognising that when you're sharing that, for example in a typical application process, you're doing it via a CV, you are then a brand. You're a brand in terms of the quality of your work, the type of work and the style of work you want to represent, and that brand follows all the way through from your email interaction, your phone interaction, your CV, your portfolio, your LinkedIn, your Instagram, your website, it's all part of the brand 'you'. What a lot of students don't recognise is that they are perceived as a brand, it's no different for an employer closing an employee, it's almost no different to you going to Sainsbury's and choosing a packet of pasta, do you go with the value? Do you go with the mid-range? Do you go with the luxury? You're looking at the outside and assessing what that offers you, and employers are assessing you in the same way. What does this

person offer me? What is their brand? What is their style? This might come down to language, it might come down to having a consistent colour scheme, so your CV and your letter for example, use the same template. Follow the same colour scheme on to your website. Follow the same colour scheme on to your email signature. Design yourself a logo. You're a graphics student, if you were a graphics student, or a graphics student without a logo or without an identity, how are you going to brand other companies?

K: Yeah

L: Because part of the role within graphics is a lot of the time, this overlaps massively into marketing. I think that's the other area which is really interesting. That overlaps into marketing which means, if you can't advertise yourself as a brand, how are you going to recommend a company to advertise themselves as a brand? Because essentially, when you're doing graphics, it often is branding of a product, of a logo, sign writing on a van, sign writing on a stall, a logo on a website...it's all branding and marketing. I think that sometimes, working in graphics, students recognise that you could be super skilled, but they may not recognise the link between their skill and the fact that they're promoting the company's product or service ultimately...and therefore reflecting their brand. Therefore, when you're designing something, it has to reflect the quality and ethics of that company...and that goes through everything you're presenting to somebody else. How do you break that down? I think you can probably break it down into really simple steps: identify where you're aiming at, so if you're aiming at a creative agency, that might be different to the brand you would show to a corporate organisation. So for example, if you went and did graphics for a financial company in the business district, it's going to be quite constrained, quite contemporary, quite simple. It's going to be very

non-offensive, very professional use of colours...dark blues, blacks, whites. If you're going to do graphics for a company...I don't know, Nandos, aiming at students. The stuff you're presenting is entirely different. So, when you're a graphics student applying for work, you have to look at the style of the work that you're presenting to the employer, and work out if that relates to the image of their organisation.

K: To what they do, yeah.

L: And how that correlates...and I think people don't recognise that, and they just sort of say 'hey, this is me...' that's it. But they're not recognising that when they work for that organisation, if you've got a very fixed style, that company's going to look at your work and think 'well, I'm over here...you're over there... in terms of the concepts you're coming up with...so I don't think that looking at all of your portfolio, the concepts you're coming up with are going to match what I'm trying to create as an image for my business.'

K: Yeah, so they may have the skill, but if it's not what the company is looking for...

L: Massively, so I see a lot of really skilled graphics students, graduates, and it's clear that they're super good at what they do. A lot of them, without realising it have fallen down a certain path of graphics. One might be logos, purely logo design, one might be branding and packaging, so I'm talking about the packaging on a packet of crisps...and translating that into other aspects within that product...but another person might have gone down the music scene, and all of their graphics is based on poster design in the music industry. Someone else, again might have done something really corporate, they might have done things relating around business cards and website design. Somebody

else might have gone down the theme of sports...or, I get certain aspects of students and graduates will go down an aspect of their own culture, so they might have gone down elements of what they consider Asian culture, in terms of certain designs that feature prominently for them in the world which they socialise in, if you like...and they've not realised that when they've done that they've created a portfolio, that portfolio is created of their brand, of them as an individual, and that brand might not replicate the brand for the job you're applying for...and those two not linking up, causes an issue for the employer in the recruitment process.

K: So, what about the other end? So, say someone is wanting to be Freelance. You're building a brand and you're trying to advertise yourself and market yourself, how would you go about that? So, getting clients basically?

L: That's a good question. So massively, the industry is obviously about networking.

K: Yeah.

L: It's about actual students and graduates. The typical situation is we get some fantastic graduates who look at their career proactively and half way through their last year, or even before that, they're really building up contacts and networking, and developing themselves and their content and the direction they want to go in. But we might get 70% at a guess, I don't know exact numbers, that don't look at it until they graduate. They're working part time just to support themselves financially through university, and they're doing their degree and they're struggling to do the two things. It's not until they graduate, and they sort of stop and look up and go 'oh, I've not got a job...not at graduate level anyway...what am I going to do? I want to go self-employed.' This is often

the situation we get in Careers, 'I want to go self-employed, how do I set up?' The practicalities of setting up and registering self-employment are really, really easy. They're dead straight forwards. You log on to HMRC website, you register as a self-employed person or limited business, which is really simple...it's like you literally fill out a couple of forms, and you are registered as a business, which you can trade, or you're registered as a limited, individual company. That's easy, the bit you've got now is how do you get your work?

K: Yeah

L: This is the biggest challenge, facing anyone that's self-employed. 'How do I get my work?' A fundamental constraint with a lot of students and graduates is, they might know how to do it but they haven't necessarily got the funds to do it, and there isn't a lot of organisations that will give you funds to do it. Now you can apply to go through the bseen Scheme at the University, which is run by Richard Leighton, and they run a competitive application process for people, graduates, students that want to set up a business, and you can win some support and I think there's some element of funding to it, to establish your business. If you've not gone down that route and you are now on your own and you want to set up as a sole trader, where do you start getting your clients? Ultimately, actually you should have started twelve months ago...

K: Yeah

L: Using all of the links and contacts you've come across through the university. Because your hardest thing is 'where do I find these people?' Whilst you're at university, there's lots of people coming into lectures, offering things like mentorship programmes,

offering internships and placements, or just coming in, alumni coming back to the university that have graduated, and they're all links for you as an individual, and finding work is about links, its about you getting know by as many other people as you can, and in graphics, in some degree it doesn't even matter what field they're associated with, because anyone can use a graphics service. It doesn't matter what organisation you are, you will ave a brand, and that's going to be created by graphics by somebody. So, you've got to network, and that network you know, you've got basic things like going on to LinkedIn. LinkedIn is often really good for keeping that network or that contact, once you've made it. The harder bit is making the contact, and how you're going to do that. You could go to...you could try and get work via a commission basis, so you could try and contact a big organisation, or big and small organisations, that might contract out to somebody. They can't afford, or don't have the requirement for a full time graphic designer. So, they will contract out to a graphic designer, exclusively to them for their work. The graphic designer will be self-employed, and they will get these organisations that will regularly go to them, maybe once every month or couple of months with a task...or it might be small, individual companies where it's very sporadic, they want to build a trusting relationship with you, and that relationship comes from them liking your brand, it comes from them trusting you, and self-employment is a lot about trust. It's about believing in you as an individual. It's about seeing you and thinking 'I can work with this person. I understand them. I think that when I ask them to do something, it's going to be done on time.' - that's a massive issue for businesses, it's finding someone when they commission a piece of work, that I believe that when I ask you to do this piece of work, it's going to come to the standard that I want, that's going to come within the timescale that I want, and if it doesn't, that falls out the window. Unfortunately, in the creative world, a lot of people start getting this, building these links by working unpaid...and that's unfortunate because it's not really something at BCU that we want to

promote, because we believe that as graphics graduates, you've got a skill, and you've got a profession...

K: You should be paid...

L: ...and the same as everybody else, you should be paid for your time and your efforts as an expert in your field. Your challenge is, when you're meeting new contacts, is making them trust you enough to pay you for the design, for the work you're going to produce.

K: It's getting taken seriously as well.

L: ...and getting taken seriously, and there's no shortcut for that. It is simply hard work, if there was a magic formula for self-employed people finding work...well, we'd be millionaires, wouldn't we? If we had that. There isn't, it's knowing what your brand is, knowing who your audience is, so like we said earlier, are you advertising to large businesses? Small business? Individuals? Are you advertising at SME's? Are you going down the corporate route and you want to do work for accountants, solicitors, regulated industry...thing is it's quite professional. Do you want to be going down the events and music industry and designing work for them? Are you looking to do graphics within fashion? Are you looking to do something within the motor industry? Are you looking to do it exclusively around website design? What are are you looking at? You've got to establish yourself. Because once you establish yourself...the market's a busy place, if we go onto the internet now and we Google 'graphic designer', there's going to be a lot of graphic designers come up, and when someone's looking for a graphic designer, they will look for one meeting their needs. So often, it's not necessarily a great

idea, in my personal view, to be a generalist... 'I will do anything and everything...' There will be some that use a generalist, but there will be lots where they will feel that they can relate to somebody in tune with their industry. In tune with their field, in tune with their sector, because if you're passionate about that sector, the work you produce, you will have an understanding of it. Having an understanding of it, you'll produce work at a better quality, and links better to what they're trying to show.

K: Ok, so do you tend to get more people wanting to start up on their own? Or more edging towards wanting to be employed by someone?

L: I think we get 65% looking for employment, 35% looking for self-employment.

K: So, it's quite close then.

L: As a guess. Now, the interesting thing is, when we send out... often what I find happens is, I don't get loads and loads and loads of engagement from students until I have a vacancy that's of interest, and then if there's a particular vacancy or company that's of interest for somebody, it might sway their decision from being self-employed to being employed. If that one opportunity comes up and they think 'wow, that's me.' The other thing with self-employment is we get a lot of quiet enquiries about it, but when I think about the number of enquiries, the number of enquires doesn't translate to meaning those people are really seriously interested. So, we get people that are looking for employment, get really frustrated and then go 'I want to go self-employed, can you help me?' Yes, I can help you, but fundamentally, I can give you the guidelines, but you're actually going to have to do a lot of the work. You're going to have to establish who your target audience is, you're going to have to establish your website, you're going

to have to make sure you appear in the yellow pages, you're going to have to make sure you come in google results, you're going to have to make sure you've got a pricing model, you're going to have to go to networking events, you're going to have to pick up the phone to businesses and explain what you do, and try and get some work. I'm not doing that, it's your business. I can tell you that's what you need to do, you're going to have to do it. It's hard work, and when people start understanding the actual volume, energy and time they need to commit to get some work, they tend to start looking for employed vacancies again, and there's a small selection that pursue this, who have got their absolute heart set on it, and they will go for it. But self-employment, I often find that when people realise that it is tricky...we get lots of people doing odd commissions, you know, and those commissions might have come from links through academic staff or friends and family and things like this, and they get sporadic commissions, maybe one thing a week or three things a week...whatever, it's not huge volumes....and when they start to equate that and thing 'what have I earned from this commission? How many more jobs would I have needed this week to earn a salary?' then you work from that and say 'I need ten jobs this week to earn a salary, how much marketing, promotion, engagement, phone calls, emails, shows, networking events do I need to go to, to get those ten pieces of work this week? I also need to do it next week and the week after...' and they start equating that, the dream fizzles a little bit where the reality strikes.

K: So how...because obviously with people wanting to go freelance, they have to most of the work because as you said, it's their business. With that, I take it you just give them the advice they need to be able to do it?

L: Yeah, so our role is obviously an advice service, and we're supported with things like the bseen programme, where they're very good with self-employment, so yes, we can set people up with registering self-employed. We haven't got the specialisms to provide advice on, for example, tax and legislation around hiring staff. We might be able to help you seek out events you can go to, to learn more about these things, but we don't have those specialisms, because they are very specialist areas that really you need to be qualified in some of these areas, and we're not experts at running our own businesses, but we will support you in putting an idea together, and our role is to sort of sense check the direction, and in doing that, challenge it, because it's part of challenging it that will allow the individual to grow. I think there's a section where 'I'll go self-employed, I'll register self-employed, I'll get this website, and all the work's just going to pour in...' and that just doesn't happen. You know, it's...there's a lot more involvement than that. I mean, for example, if you design a website, is there any guarantee anyone's viewing it? No. How are you going to make people view it? You're going to have to possibly pay someone to optimise your website. So actually, when someone searches graphic design, you're competing with national agencies, that you are somewhere decent in the results. You know you want to be in the first couple of pages, so how are you going to get yourself in the first couple of pages? So therefore, you need someone now who's an expert in IT marketing, so there are things we can encourage people to go to such as Google Digital Garage is very, very good at supporting people with digital marketing ideas, but there's a cost involved.... ok, how are you going to get the money? You might go through things like the bseen programme, outside of that, there's not a vast amount of people support business start-up, because what's in it for anybody to support that? It's a lot of financial risk giving somebody money. So essentially, often, to start a business, people need to look at their own sources of funding...overdraft, banknote, you've got to convince someone to give you the cash. If not, you've got to look at your

own resources... 'can I save some cash? Or am I going to have to work part time, alongside setting myself up as self-employed?' Which is the realistic way to go, have a part time job generating your income, so you can pay your rent, your food bill, pay to drive your car, whatever it might be, and then do the freelance alongside. So, you might find people are doing four days a week in a paid employment capacity portfolio career if you like, and a day a week they're trying to build this brand and this image, but you know you've got your website, you're on to Yellow Pages, does that guarantee people are going to call you?

K: No.

L: It doesn't, you've got to have a targeted approach through social media. If you're going to start a new social media page, which is a really fast way to grow if you can get it out there... Facebook, Twitter, whatever... you've got to start that... how are you going to get the followers? If you haven't got any now, you're going to start with friends and family, that might get you 50, 60, 70 followers, but how many of those people need your services? How are you going to get that to 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000? How are you going to price your work? People will come to me and say: 'what shall I charge?' Well, the ultimate thing to what you can charge, depends on what the rest of the industry charges. People will charge per hour, or per design, or per complexity of what they're coming up with. If you've got a hand drawn design and you're just saying to someone 'can you put this in CAD and send it back?' It's quite a straightforward piece of work, but if you're saying to somebody: 'I want to establish the complete brand for my organisation, for my website, for my car, for my business cards, my letterheads...' and think about the concept that the brand reflects, that's a massive job. How are you going to price it? You've got to price it essentially by other competitors, and that means you need to do some research. You

need do some research by going to some of these competitors and saying: 'I've got this concept; how do you work to charge me?' Actually, doing some proper live costings from somebody else, getting all of these costings together and then thinking 'where do I fit into this market? Do I want to be at the high end? Charging more than everyone else, because I'm really good and I'm going to deliver an exceptional service, turn it round really quickly and I want to be at the top of the market' or are you going to say 'I'm going to be at the bottom of the market, I'm going to charge as low as I can afford to make sure I get all of the jobs initially. Once I've got jobs and established a client base, I'm going to increase my price, because I now don't need to work for such a low rate.' As a student, graduate and as a freelancer, you've got to set those prices, and you've got to work out enough that it gives you enough to live off, but not too much that you're higher than the competition. You might also gage that by the relationship you have with the person. You might think based on conversations, interactions, and meetings...if you had a couple of meetings with somebody, and they really engaged into your work, you might think 'well I can charge a bit more here, because this person has invested a lot of time in me, so I think there's a good probability they're going to use me.' You might think to charge them more, or you might think 'I don't want this piece of work, it's a horrible piece of work, therefore I'm also going to charge more, because either I won't get it, and I don't mind because I don't want it, or if I do get it, I'm going to get paid really well.' On the flip side of that, if you're over charging somebody, they might tell their friends, family, colleagues, business contacts, who may have otherwise used you, but now won't. Pricing in a service and a brand you have represents everything that you do, and news travels quickly as to whether the service and the price and product you delivered was great, average or not good...and that will reflect whether that person: 1. Comes back to you, 2. Encourages someone else to use you.

K: So ultimately, the success you get from your own business is completely down to you.

L: 100%, it's entirely down to you. You're doing the work, you're doing the pricing, you've set up your brand, you've chosen your target market, you're doing the interaction with the customers, you're coming up with the product. You're also resolving issues when the product isn't quite what you want, you're also managing those situations to make sure you don't get any negative feedback. If your design turns out to be not quite what someone wants, you might manage that process to minimise the impact, to make sure you turn that negative situation into a positive situation. That might not necessarily be by price, it may be by the effort you put in to other options. The other thing you might think about, branding... is the brand after you as a person? Your name...is that your brand? Or are you going to create a brand based on a brand name that you create? What element you want to trade under?

K: Yeah. It's literally all down to the decisions you make as the designer.

L: Absolutely, and how you react to the changing environment. So, example, if you quote for lots of work, and no one comes to you, you have to work out why that is. Is it they're not sure on your design? Or is it they don't like the price? It's managing situations like this. People might not always give you the answer. It's you having the ability to work out the answer, and willing to take the risk to try another approach, which might give you a different result. It's recognising when the market is changing as well. If, in three years' time, there's so many people doing graphic design in Birmingham, it might bring the prices down. Or, it might be, for some reason, that the opposite happens, and the prices go up...and how well your business does will reflect on how well you understand the industry as a business, and how they operate. How you keep in touch with other

people and what they're doing. As we said, how you market yourself. We've seen lots of...this is an extreme example, but did you see the recent Iceland campaign with the palm oil?

K: Yeah.

L: The banned advert?

K: Yeah, yeah.

L: Now, that might have been genuinely banned, or it might have been an incredibly clever marketing strategy. Often things that are banned, get more publicity than things that aren't banned.

K: People want to see it.

L: So, for them, yes, they're a national company, and they've got more means and financial means and a lot of expertise in their business to promote themselves...agencies etc. but they're trying to do the same as you trying to run a small business, just on a national scale. You'll be doing the same on a local scale. How do you get people to recognise you? If you've got loads of followers on Facebook, Twitter, whatever...how are you getting them to see you as the place to go to? The basics are, simply sharing customer work that you've been commissioned and that you've completed, and getting customers to tag you in posts of their work and their branding. For example, if you've got a really big piece of work, or a piece of work for an organisation with a large footfall of staff. Might you say to them: 'I do want paying, but I

will do it for a reduced rate, if my name is on the piece of work, or if my name is associated with the piece of work...' Do you see what I mean?

K: Yeah

L: Then, you might find that a high volume of people see your work with your name on and think 'I'll contact her.' It depends what sort of work you're doing. If you've designed something and that thing is being seen by hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people, in the area which you're working, your name being on it might be more important than what you get paid...because your name being on it might generate you another twenty pieces the same.

K: Yeah, that's what I tend to focus on at the moment, just getting my name out there and actually signing stuff with my name.

L: Anywhere you can, anywhere you can. If you have a business card, does it have a piece of work on it, on the back? How easy are you to find if I want to find you on social media or through the internet? You could have a website that no one sees, because you're on back ten. You could be on page four and not many people see it, because most people, when they're looking for a service, will go to the top one or two pages. They're not going to get to page three unless none of the results on page one and two are any good...and the chances are one of them are. So how are you going to be there? It's having a strategy, and I think that's the massive challenge that people face going freelance. Being good and having a super skill in graphics doesn't make you any good at business.

K: Yeah, it's two different things

L: It doesn't mean you have a strategy, and I'm yet to see anybody who's come to me and says they want to be self-employed that have come to me with an actual proper strategy of who they're going to be, because they haven't processed that they need to work that out first. You can't just go 'I'm going to be self-employed tomorrow, let's go.' Chances are, that won't work. 'Who am I? What am I aiming at? What image do I want? How am I going to get the work? What am I going to charge?'

K: So, is this what you tell people that come to you? You need to sort this and this and this out.

L: Yeah, to raise these questions with people, and to ask them to ask themselves. Then I'll see if they come back with some answers, or do they look at that and just go 'no thanks.' Some will look at it and go 'I hadn't considered all of that...' If you want to pay yourself a salary of £20,000 a year, how many pieces of work is that?

K: A lot.

L: That's a lot of work. People don't do that process. So, what are your thoughts on it? You must have faced some challenges already.

K: Yeah, I mean, I'm kind of in that position where I'd love to go freelance in the future, I know it's not realistic to purely do that now because of all the work involved and all the money you need to earn. So, I'm in the mind set of wanting to go into an agency.

L: It's realistic for everybody. If they want to put in the effort. I don't mean that disrespectfully to anybody, but freelance is realistic for anybody who has got the skill to deliver the work. It's ultimately a conscious decision of how they want to be freelance. If someone wants to really be freelance, they will be freelance. It's the commitment and whether you want to put in and sustain that. It might take you two years to get enough work before you can be paying yourself an actual income.

K: That's what I want to do. I want to do it, I'm going to do it, but I'm going to probably do it on the side for a bit and dedicate most of my time to earning a wage.

L: So, if you're doing it on the side, who for?

K: That's still what I'm trying to work out, because at the moment I'm doing a bit here and there, it's not anything big.

L: In any degree, any qualification, a university tries to expose you to a broad cross section of different design to try and open your opportunities as much as possible, but your role is to identify the one that you're either most skilled at...but you do have to be careful, because it might be the that the thing you're most skilled at doesn't have that much work. You might be really skilled at something that doesn't pay that well...or pays well but isn't much volume...and that's part of what you're doing, to work that out and which way you would prefer to work as a freelance designer.

K: Yeah, I'm still trying to figure that out. I'm still at the beginning stages where I'm trying to work out what it is I want to do exactly, who I want to do it for. At the moment, I'm just enjoying it and seeing what comes my way.

L: Going into an agency is a good idea because university is superb training ground, but when you go into the work place, you will see people who have been expert in it for ten, fifteen, whatever number of years, and is very concentrated in producing high volumes of work, and because they're probably charging you a reasonable sum of money, they're really putting in a lot of effort to make sure their work is really quite good. So, you'll develop very quickly as an individual, anybody will in that environment. When you go freelance, you won't necessarily develop in the same way, because you're not working with anybody other than the customer. You might learn through feedback from the customer, but they're not graphic designers. Work with other graphic designers, you might find for twelve months, you really learn a large amount in a short amount of time and that may aid you to make your freelance business a lot stronger.

K: That's what I've noticed actually. Being at uni, I've had a lot of advice, the tutors are really helpful with stuff like that, but in terms of actual physical learning to do stuff and training, and knowing how to be in the industry...the work experience has definitely taught me that.

L: Agency, you'll see a broad variety of clients, and you'll see a high volume, and that will give you a massively wide exposure. If you go and work for an organisation as their in-house graphic designer...say you worked for West Midlands Travel for arguments sake, as a graphic designer...you're going to be generally focusing on one style of design, which then means that instead of broadening your skill set, you're specialising in a very narrow band. In an agency, you will come across lots of different aspects, and that will make you more durable as a freelancer, because you've potentially got other options you can fall back on. If your main route of work doesn't give you the volume you need,

or you have quiet periods, you've got other things that you can try and do for a different variety of customers, and that's the advantage that agency work might give you.

K: That's definitely where I'm going to go. Where I'm going to aim for straight away.

L: The other thing you have to do is really...people get caught up...if you've got an aim of where you're going, you really ought to set yourself some objectives and targets of when you're going to achieve this, because what a relatively small amount of graduates do is they finish uni, and they need a break, they need a reset, and that's usual in any discipline....for people to feel like 'I just need a break to reset, to work out where I'm at, what I'm doing.' It might be that their living arrangements have changed, and they need to work out the income they need, all sorts of different things, but if you make that break too long, you will then be competing for employment for next years' graduates, who are fresh out of university. If you're a graduate graphic designer, and in a year's time, you haven't been into the workplace, there is a chance that you will lose out to the fresh graduates that are current that year, that September...because for an employer, their skills are bang up to date, because they were designing yesterday. You've now not designed for a year...is your software a little bit rusty? Are you out of routine of doing it? Whereas the person that is doing it now...they're on it, they've just come from it, the creative degree, the creative background, working with creative people, working with people challenging their thoughts. So, the window of employment of trying to get into the industry, I think, is generally relatively small. After the first six months after you graduate, it becomes tougher. Often the people need additional support, and it can become tougher because an employer would look at you and think 'why has no one hired you yet? When you left university, why didn't anyone hire you?' Was it A. Because you applied for loads of jobs and someone wasn't willing to give you the chance? Or

they may think your heart wasn't in it and that's why you didn't go into it straight away...not necessarily, people will look at broader ideas than that and look at the quality of your work and how you present yourself and your brand and all that...but sometimes with an employer, they may ask themselves those questions, if you've left a qualification for a period of time and not used it.

K: Ok, that's great, I think that's everything.



Kathryn Roberts <kathrynrobertsdesign@outlook.com>

Monday, 10 September 2018 at 17:26

To: jonny@adultartclub.co.uk

Hi Jonny, hope you're well.

I'm currently in my third year of studying graphic design at Birmingham City University and am carrying out research for my dissertation on working as a Freelance Design graduate.

I was wondering if you would mind answering a few questions as a reference that could help me move forward with writing my dissertation. I understand you're probably very busy but it would be great to either meet you and chat, or ask my questions over email, whatever works for you!

I look forward to hearing from you!

Thanks for your time,

Kathryn Roberts

Graphic Designer



Kathryn Roberts <kathrynrobertsdesign@outlook.com>

Monday, 10 September 2018 at 18:08

To: Jonny Costello

Brilliant, my questions are as follows...feel free to answer in as much or as little detail as you like.

- Did you go to university?
- How early on did you decide that the graphics industry was for you? What made you realise this?
- How did you go about getting into the field that you're in?
- Do you think going to uni expands your chances of getting a job in the industry, or do you think you'd still be where you are now with or without a degree?
- In your experience, do you prefer working for yourself as a freelancer or working in an agency? Why?

Could I also confirm that you're happy for me to use your name and answers as a reference in my dissertation?

Thanks a lot,

Kathryn Roberts

Graphic Designer



Kathryn Roberts <kathrynrobertsdesign@outlook.com>

Wednesday, 19 September 2018 at 14:52

To: hbartonwong@gmail.com

Hi Henry,

I'm going into my third year at BCU and am starting to write my dissertation. I'm in the process of gaining primary research so am contacting graduates to see if they'd be interested in helping me gain some reference material for my dissertation.

The title is "Working for yourself as a graphic design graduate" and it's basically all about the industry after uni, whether uni is relevant to getting into the industry, going freelance vs going into an agency etc. Would you mind answering a few questions for me if I send them over to you?

Thanks in advance,

Kathryn Roberts

Graphic Designer

Good Morning,

I am currently a final year university student in England and am in the midst of writing my dissertation titled 'Working for yourself as a graphic design graduate'.

The reason I am emailing you is because I read your interview with Adrian Shaughnessy in his book 'How to be a graphic designer without losing your soul' and was really inspired reading about life in your agency. I love your take on how it's best to employ people with the intention of running their own business one day and I love your approach to life in the agency and basically how the sky is the limit in terms of working with you. It seems like you treat all designers (regardless of their time there) with the same respect and give them the same opportunities to grow and produce as little or as much work as they can, I truly aspire to work for someone like you soon after I graduate.

I'm currently establishing myself as a freelance graphic designer and have been slowly growing as a business since the end of my first year at Birmingham City University and so my goal for the future is to successfully work for myself and run a design business. However at this point I am eagerly looking for an agency to grow in and develop my skills a lot further than what I have gained so far from Uni.

I hope you don't mind me emailing you, I just wanted to let you know that I really admire your work ethic and I hope to soon have the chance to work in that sort of environment.

Many thanks,

Kathryn Roberts

Graphic Designer

On 11 Sep 2018, 14:19 +0100, Katie Roberts <Katie.roberts97@aol.co.uk>, wrote:

Hi Eilish, nice to meet you!

Mum's been telling me a lot about you and I'd love to meet up and have a chat at some point, I'm writing my dissertation about going at it as a freelance design graduate and would love to use you as a reference if you'd like?

I look forward to hearing for you!

Katie

Sent from my iPad

Hey Katie,

Happy to help in anyway I can! My dissertation was on a similar topic, there may be some references/books that might be useful for you too. I'll hunt it down and send to you as I can't seem to find it :) Let me know when you're ready and we can get a date in the diary!

Many Thanks,

Eilish Fitzpatrick

Founder & Creative Director

Yeah I could do next week, hows about Thursday, 11ish?

Where would you like to meet? I can come to Uni or you're welcome to come to office, just let me know :)

Many Thanks,

Eilish Fitzpatrick

Founder & Creative Director

Yeah Thursday at 11 is fine, would you be able to come to uni? There's a cafe area in the parkside building I can meet you if you like?

Katie