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SHARPENING THE SKILL SET

BY EDWARD BARTHOLOMEW

During this current recession, many of our colleagues have either been laid off or had their work hours reduced. As a result, a number of lighting professionals have considered going back to school to improve, add to or change their skills sets to become more attractive in the job market. Paradoxically, schools are graduating design students who are unprepared for the shifting priorities of the workplace. All of which begs the following questions: 1) Is it possible for lighting education to provide students the skills they need to take advantage of current trends and opportunities in the marketplace? 2) How do lighting students and professionals navigate through the many learning options in order to find a fulfilling career?

Because the lighting industry is a subset of the construction industry, its fortunes are inextricably tied to and parallel that of architects. The "2009 Environmental Scan" prepared by McGraw-Hill Construction for The American Institute of Architects outlines the risks and opportunities facing architects. Below are highlights from this report:

- Firms hiring are most often looking for senior-level "catch-all" employees who have multiple strengths.
- Sustainability is moving into the classroom and the firm, as owners demand credentials for projects.
- Interdisciplinary programs that teach both engineering and architecture will grow.
- Enhanced specialization may emerge and require lifelong learning to adapt to specializations as they come and go.
- Sustainability and green design/construction are here to stay.
 - a. Education and training at top design and architectural schools are incorporating sustainability into their curricula.
 - b. Energy efficiency will outlast the economic downturn and remain a fixture in design in the future.

These trends bode well for lighting professionals who are well-positioned in the marketplace, especially in support of building efficiency and sustainability goals. But it's not business as usual for many lighting professionals.

In researching this article, I corresponded with lighting students, executive recruiters, lighting educators and lighting designers, and asked them variations of the same question: How would you improve lighting education to address, through college courses or even an additional degree, what you feel is lacking in your skill set or knowledge base? Phrased another way, if you had a chance to go back to school today what would you want to study? The flip side of this question becomes, how can lighting education help map a successful path for the individual, the practice and the industry?

TRACK RECORD

Paul Pompeo, president of the recruiting firm The Pompeo Group (and fellow LD+A columnist), offered perspectives on what employers are looking for. "For lighting designer positions, while a degree is a plus, we find that employers put less importance on education and more on specific job experience. A lighting designer with a solid track record working for a well-known and/or well-respected firm carries more clout than a specific degree."

This points out a generational divide that exists in our industry. The "2006 IALD Compensation and Workforce Report" on the lighting design profession revealed that "Professional Members have twice as much professional experience (median of 25 years versus 12.5 for Associate Members), are slightly older and are less likely to have a master's degree." This gap in education can be explained by the lack of lighting-focused master's programs until about 20 years ago. Many designers with 20 or more years' experience have backgrounds rooted in manufacturing or sales. Even today, there are still only a handful of schools which offer a master's degree in lighting design, so employers looking for mid- to senior-level designers may not appreciate the value that a degreed candidate brings to the workplace.

SOFT VS. HARD SKILLS

There is also debate on whether continuing education should emphasize technical expertise or some of the softer skills needed to run a practice. "Most designers have the technical and cognitive design skills; they are the easiest to learn," says David Rodstein of Rodstein Design. "Most design and architecture programs offer little training in the soft skills such as (the) give-and-take in a team, client empathy, human resource management and leadership training." His recommendation is "an MBA with a concentration in human resources, operations management

or organizational dynamics to complete the education bandwidth. Too many good designers are impotent since they cannot fully leverage a team, manage finances or speak the business language of their clients."

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However, other independent lighting professionals emphasized technical and cognitive skills, such as increased knowledge of daylighting analysis, architectural history, sustainable design, and production tools such as REVIT, BIM and 3D CAD. Some even wanted a deeper understanding of the perception and psychology of light.

Rosemarie L. Allaire, principal of RALD, took a holistic approach, advocating a "master's in lighting or an architecture degree, in addition to presentation skills, communication skills, rendering, . . . and being familiar with energy codes and LEED." Eric Brooks, one of my current lighting students who is already a practicing architect, adds that he chose to go back to school to get a master's in architecture with an emphasis in lighting. "My undergraduate degree in architectural engineering did not give me much exposure to lighting. By going through the M.Arch. program, I will get exposure to the theoretic and poetic side of architecture while adding lighting to my technical understanding."

Not surprisingly, working lighting designers are looking to shore up personal skill sets. For example, those already familiar with the business of running a design firm are seeking greater technical and creative knowledge, while those who are either managing principals or interested in advancing in medium- to large-scale firms are interested in business skills. Maureen Moran of MCLA notes that, "staff members who have more business sense can contribute to the firm better than those that do not. One aspect for a business course would be improving awareness of the client expectations and point of view."

In addressing the client's point of view, language skills can also be valuable. "Mandarin is now the world's most widely spoken language (mother-tongue)," says Mark Lien, director of Hubbell's Lighting Solutions Center. "Teaching in and doing business with China while only glimpsing the meaning of most conversations around and about you is a disadvantage. Conversely, engaging with people in their land, in their native language, is respectful and significantly more effective. This language skill would be an advantage to most in the lighting industry since the Chinese economy is still growing, buildings are still being built and their need for green upgrades to existing structures seems likely to provide long-term employment."

KNOW THYSELF

Finally, even the best lighting education program—one that combines both technical and business training—cannot be fully leveraged unless students first perform a personal inventory to identify their goals, talents and passions, before trying to find a position in the industry. Finding the right balance between academic and professional goals can be challenging, but without this agility, a promising opportunity can easily lead to a dead end. Over the years, I've seen struggling professionals fall into this trap as they try to shoe-horn themselves into a career that does not fit. To quote Bob Marley, "Don't gain the world and lose your soul. . . ."

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