



Illustration by Brian Danaher

Development

10 AD100 Designers Share Their Best Early Career Advice

Francis Sultana, Sheila Bridges, Ilse Crawford, and others share their words of wisdom

By Elizabeth Fazzare

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There's no better place to pick up early career advice than from the pros who have come before you. Whether you're just graduating or are making a professional shift, there's a good chance you've got the tools and the talent to become an interior designer—but getting a foot into the industry can be a challenge. Willing to lend a helping hand to the next generation, 10 design veterans share their hard-won early career advice. Prepare to take notes!

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Speak up

“Don’t be afraid of your own voice. I think we all suffer from a lack of confidence when we start our careers and tend to focus on what we don’t know rather than [on] what we do—and often what we do know is pretty good! I would certainly say follow your gut on things. With time and experience, that feeling becomes more and more informed, but I think you either know how to design or you don’t. Also don’t be afraid to ask questions. I was not trained formally as a designer; I taught myself through places like the V&A Museum in London as well as with books and magazines about the history of design. Understanding and respecting history is the best school that I could have had. I also sought out people that could inform me—people that I respected—and I worked alongside them and let them educate me.” —Francis Sultana, [Francis Sultana](#)

Keep a strong mindset

“My firm has been around for almost five years now and I’ve learned a lot and continue to learn every day. It’s very important that you feel passionate about what we do, or don’t do it. People can think it’s a glamorous job, but it’s a lot of problem solving, fixing issues, and so on. A strong mindset is key! Even in its toughest moments, I wouldn’t trade what we do. Maybe a sofa didn’t fit in the elevator, the pieces don’t arrive when they’re supposed to or come broken.... These things don’t happen all the time, but if something should go wrong on a job, step up and find a way to deal and fix it. If you feel overwhelmed and stressed by these sorts of things, really decide if this is the right industry for you. I’m not trying to dissuade you at all! The opposite—I want to prepare you. You got this.” —Brigette Romanek, [Romanek Design Studio](#)

Take credit

“Take ownership in everything you do. The job title isn’t what gets you there; your ability to problem-solve based on real, firsthand knowledge is.” —Charles de Lisle, [The Office of Charles de Lisle](#)

Accept the role

“Don’t be afraid to take any position in the industry, even if it’s not your dream job. Getting into the room is the first step, and you will figure it out from there. Internships, showroom positions, and administrative roles can all provide invaluable insight into who’s who and how the business works.” —Rayman Boozer, [Apartment48](#)

Promote your work

“Designing a room in a showhouse is a great way to meet other designers and showcase your work. When I designed a room at Kips Bay [Decorators Show House] in 1990, it put us on the map. You can show the public how you think and how you like to solve problems.” —Victoria Hagan, [Victoria Hagan](#)

Hone your business skills

“I love the business side of being a designer. Creativity is of course what most of us are drawn to, but it is a business, and being able to understand that aspect of the industry is essential.” —Christine Gachot, [Gachot](#)

Stay flexible

“Successful designers tend to be quite flexible in terms of the kinds of projects they work on. Be open to different types of design briefs. Having different strings to your bow is crucial.” —Ilse Crawford, [Studioilse](#)

Think long-term

“Something to understand is that it’s not always about the money. Yes, of course we all need to make a living, but occasionally (and especially when starting out) it’s important to take a job that speaks to you, that you know will lead to others and could be the perfect springboard to get published or exposed to the right people who you want to work with—even if that’s a job where you barely make the ends meet or the budget is very tight. In the past, I have done things for free knowing it would lead to something I wanted or would get the right eyes on me when I needed them to move forward in my career. I have found that people can be their most creative when challenged with a small budget. It’s a great learning curve and much like dressing: You can buy your outfit from H&M, but with one or two good accessories, you can turn that outfit into something that looks like it just fell off a

Paris runway. It's all in the confidence and styling.” —Martyn Lawrence Bullard, [Martyn Lawrence Bullard](#)

Prepare for many hats

“Our jobs involve so much more than just ‘design’ and the profession is way more grit than glamour, despite how it looks on social media. In addition to designing/decorating, we are part-time therapists, psychics, sociologists, bookkeepers, carpenters, plumbers, lifestyle concierges. We do whatever is necessary to get the job done right!” —Sheila Bridges, [Sheila Bridges Design](#)

Get connected

“Follow a project through to the very end until the last vase is placed. Photograph your work and embrace the interior design community. They are very special colleagues that will help you along the way in your career.” —Amy Lau, [Amy Lau Design](#)

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