

# HOW TO GET A UX DESIGN JOB

Create a compelling portfolio, submit a stand-out application,  
and ace the interview to land your user experience dream job



LISA MURNAN

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UX FOR THE PEOPLE

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UX for the People

Pine, Colorado

On the web: [UXforthePeople.com](http://UXforthePeople.com)

Please send errors to: [errata@uxforthepeople.com](mailto:errata@uxforthepeople.com)

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*For my students, who remind me why I love UX.*

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# Introduction

We are in the midst of a “UX Gold Rush,” according to *Forbes*.

The signs are everywhere. “UX Designer” is now included on Glassdoor’s influential “50 Best Jobs in America” list (ranked 27th in 2018). Searching on the keyword “UX” on any of the major job sites will yield thousands of results. And LinkedIn now has over 110,000 members with “UX” in their job title (compared to 159 members in 2008 and 3,500 in 2013).

This all sounds great if you’re looking to transition from your current job into a user experience career, right? The problem is, many companies want UX professionals with at least two to three years of experience. There’s a huge demand for UX designers, but it’s a demand for mid-level and senior designers. Junior positions are harder to find, and the competition is fierce (partially because of the tidal wave of junior-level designers emerging from UI/UX design certificate programs like General Assembly, Springboard, etc.). What’s an aspiring UXer to do?

You need to find a way to fit in (on one hand) and stand out (on the other) so that you can get your foot in the door and start working in the industry. This book will help you do that.

If you’re an experienced UXer, it’s a whole new world out there. A few years ago, nobody was requesting our portfolios or grilling us with behavioral interview questions or asking us to spend 45 minutes on a whiteboard explaining how we’d design an elevator for a 1,000-floor building. Whether you’re actively looking for a new gig or just constantly barraged by recruiters trying to lure you to greener pastures, you need to be prepared. Portfolios (good ones, anyway) aren’t created overnight.

This book will tell you what today's recruiters and hiring managers are looking for in good job candidates (at all experience levels), and what you can expect during the recruiting and interview process.

You'll need to create a resume that will pass the Applicant Tracking System (ATS) test and a UX portfolio that is slick enough to impress recruiters during the initial screening process (and substantial enough to get you in front of the hiring manager).

You'll also need a solid online presence, including social media profiles and a website that shows you in the best light.

Then you'll have to really turn on the charm and walk the walk during the interviews, portfolio presentations, and design exercises.

There are no silver bullets. I'm not going to tell you to create a video resume or to print your resume on pink perfumed paper. No tricks here. You're going to have to take action and bust your ass.

You can do it, though. You're going to treat this whole job hunt process like a UX project and I'll show you how.

I know it can feel overwhelming. I've been doing UX work since before it was called UX, and I still feel like an imposter sometimes. I even wonder if, after 23 years in the industry, I'd make it through some of today's screening processes and interviews and design exercises.

I'll let you in on a little secret. Most of us senior UXers are self-taught and had to learn UX the hard way – stressful project after stressful project. We spent years learning from our mistakes and by talking to users, collaborating with other UXers and stakeholders, and watching usability tests. There aren't many better ways to learn than by seeing your design get torn apart during a usability test!



I was introduced to web design in 1994 when I was working at a newspaper in North Carolina. Management gathered up all the tech-savvy people at the newspaper (I was a news researcher and spent a lot of time on LexisNexis), put us in a group called New Media, and sent us off to another building to create an online version of the newspaper. So I learned to code HTML by sitting next to a guy who knew HTML, and I learned to crop photos and create graphics in Photoshop by sitting next to another guy who knew Photoshop.

A year later I landed a job as a webmaster at a software company. I had no idea what I was doing but nobody else knew what I was doing either, so at least I had that going for me. It took me weeks to figure out I could view HTML files in a browser from a local folder on my computer. Seriously. I used to FTP files up to the server just to look at them in a browser.

Back then the Internet was the Wild West. There was no process. There were no UX classes and hardly any books or mentors. The best sources of knowledge I had were usability guru Jakob Nielsen's articles and reports (which I still read today), and deconstructing other people's websites.

Today there are so many different ways you can learn about UX. Immersive in-person courses, online classes, books, blogs, YouTube videos, Meetups, conferences, and millions of websites for inspiration. There are lots of great tools, too – Axure, Sketch, InVision, Balsamiq, design templates and libraries out the wazoo, online card sorting apps, WordPress and all its plugins, Google Analytics, and Slack.

Maybe this is why some of us old-timers act a little curmudgeonly toward younger designers sometimes.

A little over a year ago I started teaching the UI/UX design certificate program at Boulder Digital Arts. The class is held several times a year in person in Boulder, CO. I love teaching this

class. I think I learn as much from my students as they learn from me.

My students are from all walks of life – they are graphic designers, developers, illustrators, photographers, writers, marketing people, product managers, salespeople, college students. Their ages range from the early 20s to late 50s. One thing they all have in common is that they are strongly drawn to UX. Many of them are already experimenting with UX design in their current jobs. They're putting in a significant amount of free time to explore UX concepts and work on design projects. They are trying to figure out if they want to pursue a full-time UX career.

There is so much to try to pack into a 40-hour class, and we spend a lot of time designing and collaborating on student projects, so all the finer details of UX portfolios, resumes, interviewing, etc. often get pushed out to the very end, and by then everybody is brain-dead.

I wrote this book to bridge that gap. I started out by giving my students access to a Google drive full of cheat sheets, but a book seemed so much more *useful*. Plus a book allows me to share this knowledge with a much bigger audience than the ~30 students I teach every year. It has become a personal mission of mine to help as many people who truly love UX find a user experience design job that makes them happy.

So is it all worth it, trying to get a job in UX? *Yes*. You get to solve problems and make people's lives better. There's a great sense of satisfaction in fixing things or making complicated things easier to use. You get to work with a lot of cool people. Often you can wear what you want (creative people can get away with a lot), work from home, and the pay is good. It's fun being a UX designer. You get to have an "X" in your title and be all edgy and shit. *Yo*.

Disclaimer! The purpose of this book is not to teach you how to be a good UX designer. If you're looking for UX jobs I assume

you've already got this part covered. There are tons of great books out there that cover UX concepts, process, strategy, skills, tools, etc. (I have listed many of them in the Resources section at the end of this book). This book is about helping you get a job.

Ok, ready to get to work? Let's do this.

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# 1.

## What Are Hiring Managers Looking For?

### Background

Your background doesn't seem to matter that much. For the longest time, there was no such thing as a UX degree (now there are schools like Jared Spool's Center Centre and more established colleges offering interaction design and UX design degrees), so we all started out from different backgrounds. You'll see UXers with degrees in liberal arts, psychology, philosophy, English (my degree), computer science, design, business, etc.

### Wait, Do I Need a College Degree?

We're seeing the need for it less and less. As I was researching this section I came across a "Lead UI/UX Designer" posting on Indeed that said: "The only credentials we care about is that you are an expert in doing the things listed above. Graduating summa cum laude from the Rhode Island School of Art is a fantastic data point, but what's more important in our eyes is how well you work with our team, and the caliber of work you consistently deliver. Results speak much louder than words."

Many UX job postings don't mention educational requirements at all, or simply say, "Bachelor's degree or equivalent experience."

According to Glassdoor (in their article "15 More Companies That No Longer Require a Degree – Apply Now"), the following companies do not require a college diploma for some of their "top

jobs”: Google, Ernst and Young, Penguin Random House, Costco Wholesale, Whole Foods, Hilton, Publix, Apple, Starbucks, Nordstrom, Home Depot, IBM, and Bank of America.

## So What Do They Want?

It depends.

Some hiring managers will say that having several years of experience under your belt doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re a good designer. They want to see proof that you are via a portfolio. To them, if you don’t have a portfolio it’s a non-starter.

Others think there is no substitute for experience, especially when it comes to dealing comfortably with product managers, clients, users, stakeholders, etc., and also when it comes to applying what you’ve learned from lots of contextual interviews and usability tests. They’ll say you can wow somebody with a sexy portfolio but that doesn’t prove that you know what you’re doing, it just means you’re good at designing portfolios.

Then you’ve got someone like Laszlo Bock (former SVP of People Operations at Google) telling the *New York Times* that the least important attribute Google looks for is “expertise.” Instead, they focus on learning ability, leadership, humility, and a sense of ownership.

It seems reasonable to assume that senior-level UX designers will be judged more on their experience and portfolios, while junior-level designers will be judged more on their potential and work ethic.

It really depends on which company you’re interviewing with and what they value in a candidate.

## Why Hire a Junior Designer?

I was recently asked by one of my students, “Why would a company hire me instead of someone like you (with your years of experience)?”

There are several reasons I can think of.

1. I require a lot more money than a junior UXer.
2. Some UXers get complacent or burned out and quit growing after a while. They don't keep up with the newest tools, they may not understand how responsive design or mobile apps work because the project they've been on hasn't required that of them, they don't network anymore. Their portfolio is dated or nonexistent. Meanwhile, the aspiring UXers are pushing themselves every day to learn and grow and understand the latest design trends. And their enthusiasm and passion for UX comes through in interviews. (Just don't let it come across too much, because that's annoying.)
3. Hiring junior UXers is a good way to leverage the more experienced senior people. Senior designers can delegate some of their tactical work to juniors so they can focus on the bigger more strategic stuff.

In my experience, the types of places that hire junior UXers are:

- **Startups**, who will be looking for a UX generalist (or a “unicorn” who can do everything – they may have you answer the phones and write their blog while you are also designing and coding their mobile app).
- **Big corporate UX teams**, especially those who require their employees to work on-site versus remote. They have a limited pool of local talent to choose from and are often willing to take on junior designers because

they have a lot of managers and senior designers there to mentor them. When I was at Ally Financial in 2014, they were hiring print designers with no web experience to join the UX team as visual designers. They had to do this because they needed visual designers ASAP, their UX staff was required to come into the office every day, and the Charlotte market was extremely competitive with big companies like Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Home Depot, TIAA, and others all competing for the same people.

- **Consultancies and agencies**, who often need to put warm bodies in seats to work on incoming projects. This isn't necessarily a bad place for junior UXers to land, though. There are usually lots of mentors around and a variety of fast-paced projects to work on, so you can learn a lot in a short period of time.

If you're a graduate of a UX certificate program, you'll need to find ways to differentiate yourself from the other graduates, because they are all saturating the market right now.

The certificate program I teach requires students to come up with their own project idea and collaborate on it with the class (UX team style), so what each student puts in their portfolio is uniquely their own. Many of the other programs have students all working on the same project. If you're doing a group project that every student in every class has worked on, it's going to come up as a red flag in your portfolio – recruiters or hiring managers have probably seen that project before. It's important that you come up with some work of your very own for your portfolio. We will talk more about this in an upcoming chapter.

## From Their Point of View

Although it seems like they're calling all the shots, hiring

managers and other potential team members are anxious during the interview process, too. They don't want to make the wrong recommendation or choice. A poor fit causes all sorts of angst – the poor fit isn't happy, their coworkers aren't happy, their project may be suffering, the company has already put all sorts of time and money into onboarding them and now the hiring manager has to publicly take responsibility for their bad decision and deal with the situation. Then they have to find somebody else, fast.

Other UXers may get caught up in comparing themselves to you when they evaluate you. Do you solve problems the way they do? Do you use the same tools they do? Do you communicate the way they do? Do your deliverables look like theirs? This isn't fair, especially if they're a senior designer and they're interviewing you for a junior position. Ironically, they may hold you to a higher standard than they were held to when they were hired – they might not even pass their own interview process if they were going through it today! (If this happens to you, your best bet is to demonstrate your knowledge of the UX design process. Dropping Jakob Nielsen's name might help, too.)

## **What Do You Want?**

So now that we (sort of) know what hiring managers are looking for, what are *you* looking for?

Do you want to be a generalist (aka a “Swiss Army knife” designer, sometimes confused with a unicorn), who can do lots of different things like user research, information architecture, interaction design, and some usability testing (sometimes with a little visual design or front-end coding thrown in)? Or do you want to be a specialist who focuses on one skill and really masters it, like user research or visual design or interaction design?

Do you want to work on a big team, where there are lots of other designers to collaborate with and learn from, or would you prefer



to work on a small team or even be a UX team of one at a startup or small company?

Do you want to work from home or at an office (or both)?

What kinds of projects do you want to work on – web apps, customer portals, branding sites, analytics dashboards, SaaS, retail, mobile apps, media, gaming, security, eLearning, blockchain...? Is there a particular industry you want to be in, like financial services or healthcare or cryptocurrency?

Do you want to do something socially impactful, or are you okay working for “the man” and selling something? A lot of UXers are so good-hearted and truly do like helping people, and I am not being sarcastic when I say that if you get to know your users and empathize with them, you’ll soon recognize that you’re helping make their jobs easier or their lives better, regardless of what you’re building.

I was on a project once where I designed an iPad app that helped Finance & Insurance (F&I) Managers at car dealerships (you know, the guys that sit across from you and push paper after paper for you to sign when you’re buying a car) sell customers vehicle service contracts. I got to know several F&I Managers over the course of the project and they were cool and they liked the app we designed. Overall it was an interesting project to work on and the app tested well, which is always rewarding for a designer. I just tried not to think too much about the fact that we were selling vehicle service contracts. (When I was doing early user research for the project and googled “vehicle service contracts,” half the results were about what a scam or waste of money they were. Consumer Reports gave them the big thumbs down.)

What do you hate about your current job and hope you never have to do again? What do you like about it? What would you like to be doing in the future?

Make sure that whatever job you take fits into this plan. Don’t

just take a job because you're running *away* from your current situation, run *toward* something instead.

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## 2.

# Your Job Hunt is a UX Project

Think about the whole job hunt process from a UX point of view. Your job hunt is a project, and you already have everything you need in your toolbox to make this project successful.

On this project, you're the business, and your business goal is to get a UX job. Your resume, portfolio, cover letter, website, social media presence, and in-person interactions (interviews, design exercises, emails, conversations) are all products you're creating to make this goal a reality.

The users are all of the people who will be interacting with these products you create and evaluating you. They have their own goals – they need to fill a job opening and find someone who meets their criteria, will make their lives easier, make their products better, work well with their team, etc. These are recruiters, HR people, hiring managers, potential UX teammates, and other stakeholders.

The user-centered design process that UX designers follow is iterative and involves users throughout the design and development of a product. The names of the phases can vary, but they're generally laid out like this:

**Discover > Define > Design > Deploy > Measure**

Here's what to think about in each phase. We'll get into a lot of the how-to details later in the book.

## Discover

This is the phase where you'll nail down the business objectives and do user research.

- Decide what kind of UX job you actually want.
- Get to know your users (starting with the personas below).
- Deconstruct job postings.
- Look at your “competitors” (other designers’ portfolios, LinkedIn profiles, etc.).
- Research the companies you’re interested in.
- Google yourself.

Let’s look at your users a little more in depth.

### PERSONA

Recruiter – “Kate”

*“Being able to play matchmaker and connect a great company with top talent is what truly motivates me as a recruiter!”*

### Overview

- May be in-house (as part of company’s HR department) or part of an external recruiting firm
- Annually reviews thousands of portfolios and interviews hundreds of candidates to find the right match for her clients
- Works for the employer, not you

## **Goal**

- To match talented professionals with opportunities from employers

## **Pain Points**

- Race against time – many recruiters searching at the same time for the right candidate
- Logistical nightmares – phone tag and interview scheduling
- Not hearing back from candidates
- Candidates reacting poorly to interview feedback
- Candidates turning down offers

## **UX Knowledge**

- Low

## **Interaction with You**

- Shepherds you through the interview/hiring process
- Acts as the primary liaison between you and the company
- Often your ally, advising you on how to make the best impression
- Handles administrative details (such as salary, benefits, travel arrangements)

PERSONA

## Hiring Manager – “Andrew”

*“It’s pretty straightforward – do they have the skills and do they have the right personality and cultural fit?”*

### Overview

- Reviews anywhere between 12-50 portfolios for a position
- Sometimes reviews portfolios on his phone
- Often removed from day-to-day design decisions
- Wants you to succeed – if you’re the perfect fit, he can hire you and get back to his “real” work

### Goal

- To hire a UX designer that has the necessary skills to do the job and is a great culture fit

### Pain Points

- Uncertainty over what parts of the portfolio were actually created by you
- Long rambling cover letters or badly formatted resumes or portfolios
- Afraid of making a hiring mistake

### UX Knowledge

- Medium to high (depends on their background...may be more strategic than tactical)

### Interaction with You

- Interviews you and introduces you to the rest of the team
- Makes the final hiring decision
- Wants to see and hear details about your design experience (usually through a portfolio review)
- Wants to see how you interact with the team and how you react to design feedback

## PERSONA

Senior UX Designer (potential team member) – “Melanie”

*“I wouldn’t want to hire a UX designer without seeing them do design work.”*

### Overview

- Usually not involved in high-level screening of candidates
- May or may not have final say over whether somebody is hired, but definitely has influence
- Would prefer to hire someone she’s already worked with or knows personally

### Goals

- To hire a UX designer that will fit well with the rest of the team
- To add somebody to the team that can contribute something valuable, either through knowledge/skills or collaboration

### Pain Points

- Fear that the person they hire won't know what they're doing and the work will fall on her
- Afraid of recommending the wrong person

## **UX Knowledge**

- High

## **Interaction with You**

- Interviews you and provides feedback to recruiter and hiring manager
- May participate in collaborative design exercise with you
- Wants to hear about your process in great detail
- Wants to see examples of your deliverables (like wireframes/prototypes)

## *PERSONA*

Senior Software Engineer (potential team member) – “Eric”

*“If you're an engineer without a background in design, hiring a designer can be challenging, frustrating, or downright scary.”*

## **Overview**

- Usually not involved in high-level screening of candidates
- Probably works with UX peripherally

## **Goal**



- To work with a UX designer that understands technical constraints and the importance of efficiency and quality (the less bugs and changes, the better)

### **Pain Points**

- Prima donna UX designers who over-design things
- Not reusing UI patterns so he constantly has to reinvent the wheel

### **UX Knowledge**

- Low

### **Interaction with You**

- Interviews you and provides feedback to recruiter and hiring manager
- Wants to hear that you're willing to tweak your design (without compromising the user experience) to help meet deadlines or reduce development work

## **Define**

This is where you'll get things organized.

- Gather your content (for your portfolio, resume, website, LinkedIn profile, etc.). This could include existing resumes or portfolios (yours and other designers'), screenshots and images for your portfolio, links to social media profiles, possibly a logo for your website, a professional-looking headshot, and unique background image for LinkedIn, etc.

- Write down your answers to the most common interview questions and practice answering them out loud.
- Set up a spot in your house for online interviews and have someone test it with you (using Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.).

## Design & Deploy

For the sake of this job hunt project we'll combine the Design and Deploy phases, because you're not going to be doing much sketching/prototyping beforehand, you're just going to be cranking things out (and constantly iterating on them).

This will sound obvious, but as a UX designer you're going to be held to a higher standard than most people when it comes to things like your resume, portfolio, cover letter, and website. They should be attractive and easily scannable. They should contain all of the important information a user would want. They should be typo-free. The fonts and colors should be consistent (on the print versions of your resume and portfolio, for example). They should look every bit as good, or better, than something you'd create for a client.

Don't worry if your visual design skills aren't all that great. Just make everything look clean and professional. Use white space and category groupings and good fonts (no Comic Sans!) and color accents to create compelling "products."

What's included in these phases (again, we'll cover the details on all of these in upcoming chapters):

- Create a resume that is Applicant Tracking System (ATS) friendly.
- Create a pretty resume (PDF format) to email to people

that ask for it, and to print out and bring to interviews.

- Create an online portfolio.
- Create a PDF version of your portfolio.
- Complete your LinkedIn profile and turn the recruiter beacon on.
- Go through all your public social media accounts (Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.) and make sure they look professional and are consistent with each other. If your Facebook account has posts that are visible to the public, make sure there's nothing inappropriate on there.
- Create a personal website (optional).
- Create new content or social media profiles (if necessary) to improve Google search results on your name.
- Test everything – read your resume and portfolio out loud to yourself and have friends read through everything for you. You could also join a few UX Meetup groups and share your resume/portfolio with other members.
- Start applying for jobs.

## Measure

- Imagine that every interaction (email, interview, etc.) with one of your “users” is user research or a usability test.
- Use Google Analytics to track visits to your website and online portfolio.
- Use LinkedIn’s “Profile Views” feature to see who’s looking at your profile.

- Check Google to see what comes up when you type in your name (if you've been making changes/additions to your online presence).
- Document all the jobs you apply for – it can be a simple spreadsheet with company name, date applied, and a notes area.
- Document any interview questions you were asked and how you answered them. If there's room for improvement, tweak the wording in your cheat sheet of written questions and answers and practice saying the new answers out loud.

## **Want to Read More?**

The rest of the book is available on Amazon (ebook and paperback versions):

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07B1655WS>

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at [lisamurnan@gmail.com](mailto:lisamurnan@gmail.com).

Thanks!