



UK iProfessionals

Education, Training and Development Audit

Elaine England—ATSF

Executive Summary

Interactive media is a strong contributing factor in the digital economy, but little research has been done to understand the nature of its workforce—the digital interactive media professional (iProfessional). For the first time, this qualitative research takes a long hard look at their education, training and development by listening to the people themselves.

Almost all of the sample were graduates but very few people interviewed had actually studied for Interactive Media (iMedia) degrees despite over 500 such courses being available in the UK. In fact, the largest group took their degrees in Media/IT related courses while the second largest group had degrees in subjects unconnected with media. Just over three quarters of the sample came into the interactive sector without any specialist preparation.

The main criticism levelled against traditional Media/IT courses was the absence of any interactive options in the subject matter. On iMedia courses, many found that the application packages, the facilities or the lecturer's knowledge was dated.

Very little training is done in the interactive sector. Just under a third of the sample had had no formal training of any type. Informal on-the-job training from colleagues was the most widely attributed source of training followed by self-tuition. However, there was lack of recognition of the value of the informal coaching role taken by colleagues even though it accounts for the largest transfer of expertise within the sector.

Twice as many people had taken training on design related packages than any other type of training. But as the research progressed, a clear need for hybrid skills that spanned technical and design areas emerged. Business and communication skills training is neglected within interactive media with very few taking courses even at middle management levels. The strong need for these skills was evident from the information the sample provided.

The top three skill-sets acquired during the first three years interactive employment were: platform and media techniques, management insights and business acumen.

Communication with clients and teams took up a substantial amount of project time but this was not considered a skill that might be improved through formal training. The skills of analysing client needs and putting forward suitable interactive solutions are the pivotal processes for winning a project yet only two people had received training in them. Similarly, over half the sample had project management responsibilities but only four people (from large companies) had had formal training in this area.

Online sources were the most common way the professionals kept up-to-date, followed by talking to colleagues. Few companies structured ways and means for employees to top up current information except for providing access to the trade press. On average three trade magazines were read by each person.

The hardest aspects of work the interviewees reported having to deal with were:

- ◆ Work practices—especially the time pressures inherent in the project process
- ◆ Clients—the changes that they asked for and the consequences of these
- ◆ Internal people issues
- ◆ Adjusting to work from higher education

The size of our sample was 50 (34 male and 16 female). The average age was 26, and each person was interviewed for an average of 40 minutes. Between them the interviewees used 43 role titles and came from the full range of large, medium, small and micro companies. Their jobs spanned middle management, design, production, specialist and support staff.

Throughout the report, a point of comparison case study covering the education, training and development of lawyers specialising in interactive media law is used as a benchmark. Discussion points are used at the end of every section to highlight issues raised by the interviewees and to outline possible solutions.

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Reviews

As the Course Leader for the MA in Interactive Multimedia at Staffordshire University I found the iProfessionals Report to be invaluable as I conducted a review of our MA's focus. I was pleased to find that the areas I'd seen a need to be addressed in postgraduate work had also been identified in the Report. I also used the data collected in the Report to make a case to the university to offer the MA online to part-time students currently working in the multimedia industry. Without this data I think I would have had a more difficult time making the case.

Melissa Lee Price, Ph.D.

I am involved in new media education and training, most notably in the management and delivery of the University of Brighton's Multimedia HND at our partner campus, Sussex Downs College, Lewes. In that capacity, I found the iProfessionals audit an essential source of information that will help me develop a vocationally relevant course to give students the range of skills needed for success in the new media industry. Before this research report, I haven't found a paper so directly relevant to my field. If you're a new media educator or trainer, you should consider the findings of this study in your planning.

A particularly useful aspect of this research to me is in new media workers' attitudes towards the skills they acquired at university. Clearly, we would want to be delivering the type of qualification that graduates see as being a solid and valuable foundation to their career, and this report reinforces the importance of currency of skills, technology and knowledge within the faculty. The fostering in students of communication skills, both written and oral, business awareness, team-working and time management are ultimately as important as software and design skills, and graduates should go into the profession with an ability to keep their skills up to date in a self directed way.

The iProfessionals report paints a picture of an industry that is at the moment not well served by education and training, where most skills are self or peer taught. Hopefully, by highlighting the issues to the industry and the educators, this will help create the training and courses that are needed to fill the gaps.

Kate Williams

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