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The Female Design Student and the Art of Negotiating & Overestimating Professional Worth

Today's difficult economic climate requires design graduates to be both resourceful and unrelenting in their quest for employment. Throughout my professional life I have observed an interesting pattern of behavior among students and professionals: men are more likely to overestimate their abilities and therefore make greater strides in their careers, while women are more likely to accept a position for which they may be over-qualified. Female students will underestimate their skills and are less likely to apply for a position where they do not quite meet the requirements; they are less likely to negotiate for higher salaries or posit themselves as the best designer for the job. While educators can train students in best practices of design and portfolio building, it is more difficult to train students, specifically female students, in the art of establishing and advancing their careers.

Why are women more likely than men to underestimate themselves? The issue of female self-deprecation is deeply rooted in early learning and societal norms. In early childhood development and education, most cultures cultivate the art of competition in boys while stressing the art of cooperation and community building in girls. Both these behaviors are rooted in the hunter and gatherer archetypes. Cooperation requires individuals to function in the interest of the group and does not particularly favor self-promotion. Competition, on the other hand, requires individuals to enhance their abilities in order to win.

Elementary schools, staffed primarily by female teachers, "feminize" the learning experience. All students are encouraged by role models to be deferential, obedient and to work collaboratively. Current classroom pedagogy discourages competition in order to create an inclusive environment.

Most female students are quite naturally at home in this setting while young male students have to be encouraged to adopt these qualities. While an admirable process, one could argue it reinforces certain innate feminine traits while ignoring lessons in more masculine behavior. Young girls are guided to structured play while boys are more likely to participate in unstructured play that fosters independent thinking and leadership skills.¹ Girls are more likely to recognize and honor a system while boys will find ways to circumvent the system. Women are socialized to become other-oriented while men become self-oriented. Women define themselves in terms of their relationships while men define themselves in terms of their abilities and accomplishments.² In adulthood many of these qualities need to be called upon as students make the transition from college to the workplace. Women's inability to overestimate, self-promote or negotiate on their own behalf becomes a detriment to their future careers and financial stability. The glass ceiling does still exist and there are still gender-based gaps in earnings. The trend is not specific to Graphic Design, but if women in the field hope to advance their careers and close the salary gap then they must learn the successful techniques of men without sacrificing their uniquely feminine skills.

I've observed in my teaching that female students tend to be much more grade oriented than male students. The women want affirmation that they are working successfully in the system. The men are open to input but ultimately are more concerned with their own satisfaction with the work than the grade assigned to them. Classroom critiques reveal a similar imbalance: men are more confident at stating their opinions while many women choose their words more carefully and are less confident about offering critical advice. Linguist, Deborah Tannen, observes that there are significant gender differences in conversational styles in the classroom. She notes, "...speaking in a classroom is more congenial to boys' language experience than to girls', since it entails putting oneself forward in front of a large group of people, many of whom are strangers and at least one of

¹ Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 35.

² *Ibid*, 177.

whom is sure to judge speakers' knowledge and intelligence by their verbal display."³ Men are also less concerned that I agree with their statements. Overall, the women appreciate a structure with set guidelines that outline a path to achievement. Men are able to envision success outside of a structure of guidelines. A parallel can be drawn to childhood where girls participate in structured activities while boys seek independent play.

Women have faith in a system of "meritocracy" believing that their good work will be recognized and rewarded.⁴ Asking rather than waiting for recognition is a process that causes great anxiety for women. A study by Lisa A. Barron, Assistant Professor of Organization and Strategy at the University of California-Irvine, supports the thesis that women feel the need to prove their worth on the job, while men believe the interview itself proves their worth.⁵ If men are asking for and expecting more, then it stands to reason that men will advance their cause much more quickly than women. In many cases this alone accounts for the salary gap.

For their book, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever researched men and women's attitudes about negotiating. They found that negotiating on their own behalf is very difficult for most women. Negotiating is perceived to threaten their relationships. In surveys conducted by organizational psychologist Michele Gelfand, men equated negotiation with "winning a ballgame" or a "wrestling match," while women compared it to "going to the dentist."⁶ The game analogies hold strong implications for career advancement.

³ Deborah Tannen, "Teacher's Classroom Strategies Should Recognize that Men and Women Use Language Differently" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 19 1991,

⁴ *Ibid*, 33.

⁵ Lisa A. Barron, "Why Do Women Negotiate Lower Salaries Than Men?" *Human Relations Magazine*, June 2003. WWW, *Excerpted from* http://www.imakenews.com/ucigsm/e_article000201529.cfm (visited May 15, 2003).

⁶ Michele Gelfand quoted by Babcock and Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, 114.

Women settle for less and are less likely to negotiate for more. Babcock and Laschever note that some internal factors contributing to this simple truth include: a woman's sense of personal entitlement is much lower than a man's; women are pessimistic about how much is available so they get less when they do negotiate—30 percent less than men on average;⁷ women don't have the same expectations as men; and they lack knowledge of their worth in the marketplace.

External factors include society's devaluation of "women's work." At home "female chores" for children such as washing the dishes or setting the table are not likely to be financially rewarded while "male chores" such as shoveling snow, washing the car or mowing the lawn are more likely to be paid work.⁸ Labor Bureau statistics support that almost all major fields dominated by men, such as engineering and architecture, have above-average salaries, while those areas dominated by women, such as nursing and teaching, are characterized by below-average salaries.⁹ Women are also expected to prove themselves by performing at a higher level than equal male counterparts. There is deeply entrenched belief on behalf of both genders that men are entitled to more reward for equal work. Neither is likely to profess this and in the cases cited women were only made aware of this belief when they undervalued their own work in comparison studies.

At first glance graphic design does not seem to harbor gender bias. After all, the majority of FAU's graphic design undergraduates are women. However, in the ninety-year history of the American Institute of Graphic Arts less than one percent of our elected presidents have been women¹⁰ and only thirteen percent of national medalists have been women¹¹. Almost a quarter of the female medalists were paired with well-known male partners such as Laurie Haycock Makela, Zuzana

⁷ Babcock and Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, 20.

⁸ Jacqueline Goodnow quoted by Babcock and Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, 47.

⁹ Stephanie Boraas and William M. Rodgers III, "How Does Gender Play a Role In the Earnings Gap? An Update" *Monthly Labor Review*, v126 n3, Mar 2003, 9-15.

¹⁰ Nathan Gluck and Steven Heller, "A Brief History of the AIGA" WWW, *Excerpted from* <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm?contentalias=brieffhistory> (visited July 20, 2004).

Licko, Lella Vignelli, and Ray Eames. Women are not equally represented in power positions in most U.S. organizations. In 2001 women held only 2.5 percent of the top jobs at American companies and only 10.9 percent of the board of directors' seats at Fortune 1000 companies. Women own about 40 percent of all businesses in the US but receive only 2.3 percent of the available equity capital needed for growth.¹² It is very likely that they do not ask for the equity capital.

The fact that women on average make seventy-three percent of a man's salary is partly attributable to the fact that men consistently ask for advancement opportunities and salary increases. Men initiate negotiations four times as often as women.¹³ Statistics from a National Science Foundation survey indicate that early career (25-34 years of age) female workers with a bachelor degree in the visual arts make 96% of the salary of their male counterparts. The salary drops to 90% in the mid-career (35-44) and finally to 82% in late career (45-64).¹⁴ This drop in salary equity between men and women can be attributed to a number of influences including women's failure to self-promote or negotiate on their own behalf throughout their careers.

Women are complicit in their acceptance of the system. Some of the internal factors affecting women's lacking sense of entitlement can be identified and addressed. Women don't know the market value of their work but instead base their salary expectations on what they are willing to settle for. This expectation can be up to one-third lower than those of men for the same jobs. By not negotiating their starting salary, an individual stands to lose more than \$500,000 by age sixty. On the other hand, women who consistently negotiate their salary increases earn at least \$1

¹¹ "AIGA Medalists" WWW, *Excerpted from* <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/aigamedalists> (visited July 28, 2004).

¹² Babcock and Leschever, 24.

¹³ Babcock and Laschever, "Interesting Statistics" WWW, *Excerpted from* <http://www.womendontask.com/stats.html> (visited July 16, 2004).

¹⁴ Daniel E. Hecker, "Earnings of College Graduates: Women Compared with Men." *Monthly Labor Review*, v121 n3 Mar 1998, 62-71.

million more during their careers than women who don't.¹⁵ Market value is easily obtained by conducting peer group research independent of gender. Studies indicate that when women are knowledgeable about fair salaries they are more likely to obtain them.¹⁶

One reason women may lessen their professional worth could be their traditional status as the second salary earner. However social change points more and more to women as "primary bread winners" even if they have planned otherwise. Current divorce rates hover at fifty percent; earnings relative to men's have stagnated at seventy-three percent; thirty-three percent of births in 2000 were to single mothers.¹⁷ Women often outlive their spouses but will receive half the pension benefits that men do.¹⁸ In other words women often end up as the primary salary earner although few will have the same financial power as men.

Preparing graduates for a job interview elicits the typical laundry list of advice on the importance of portfolio presentation, personal appearance, punctuality, preparation, poise and follow-up. Many new designers, both male and female, doubt their readiness to enter the job market. In a slow job market the pressure of a job interview can be even more stressful. Many students are intimidated by the skills employers are asking for in a job description. The more difficult dilemma is trying to de-program self-deprecating women. Their interest in playing by the rules often means that they will not apply for jobs unless they meet each criterion listed. Male students don't doubt their ability to meet those criteria even if they do not presently possess the skills. The amount of experience required for a position is another grey area for men that women are too quick to abide by. It is helpful at times to step outside the rules. It is difficult to convince them of the value of

¹⁵ Babcock and Laschever, "Interesting Statistics" WWW, *Excerpted from* <http://www.womendontask.com/stats.html> (visited July 16, 2004).

¹⁶ Bylsma and Major quoted by Babcock and Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, 59.

¹⁷ Babcock and Laschever, "Interesting Statistics" WWW, *Excerpted from* <http://www.womendontask.com/stats.html> (visited July 16, 2004).

¹⁸ Teresa Heinz, Cindy Hounsell, and Jeffrey Lewis, "Women & Pensions: An Overview" Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement. WWW, *Excerpted from* http://www.wiser.heinz.org/pensions_overview.html (visited July 29, 2004).

pursuing a position that is not listed or is not exactly met. The ideal position for most women is one where they safely exceed the criteria—essentially over qualifying for the job.

I know of two recent graduates who were interested in working for the same design firm. As students, the woman was a much stronger designer while the man's talent was more difficult to recognize because he took his coursework out-of-order. After graduation, he became a tireless self-promoter. He stopped by my office often to show me work he was doing for a South Beach magazine. The work was not strong but apparently the publisher had been sold on his confidence and enthusiasm for the job. Interestingly, as he consistently took on more than he was qualified for, his skills began to improve dramatically and he built an impressive portfolio.

The female student did well taking an extremely well paying job after graduation. However, rather than expressing confidence she had feelings of being under-qualified for the job. When the company went under in the wake of the dot.com bust, she lacked the confidence to pursue a position with any of the leading design firms. Her belief that she was an outsider constantly hindered her career. She didn't think her portfolio was good enough.

Meanwhile the male student eventually landed a job with previously mentioned the design firm. Ironically, the firm had called her for a freelance job but she declined. When informed that he had the job she was angry with herself for not pursuing a position with the firm. Despite her lack of faith in her own abilities she knew she was at least as good as him.

The Bureau of Labor reports that nearly one-third of designers are self-employed—almost five times the proportion for all professional and related occupations.¹⁹ Most of these are small studios or freelancers. Flexible hours and the ability to work from home attract women to freelance work, allowing them to work and raise families. Still, issues of undervaluation and self-deprecation persist. Women designers often don't feel able to justify a significant hourly rate. Their tendency is to feel grateful for the work, guilty for charging what they are worth and fearful of running off the

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2004-05 Edition, Designers" WWW, *Excerpted from* <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos090.htm> (visited July 20, 2004).

client. Estimating a job is a difficult process but one needs to be conscious of their true cost including overhead incurred in the form of education, rent, insurance, transportation, equipment, software etc.. Most in the profession understand that lower prices undervalue the profession and attract troublesome clients. Women who fail to charge adequately hurt the entire profession.

In the early nineties a friend of mine was dating a self-taught artist. He was not especially talented yet his work was everywhere. He was a tireless self-promoter who carried images of his artwork on his person at all times. We called him the “art-whore” because he was shameless about promoting his work. It was hard not to be derisive of his techniques all the while envying his climb up the gallery ladder. Self-promotion has been shown to enhance people’s perception of competence but it is not an attractive quality for a woman.²⁰ Women have been subconsciously taught that to blend in is to be a good citizen. Ms Manners would be proud.

The solution is not as simple as adapting male traits. Society is not accepting of women who violate gender norms by behaving too assertively. Likeability is an important factor for women who are trying to negotiate or take on leadership responsibilities.²¹ The trick for women is to learn to integrate male traits like self-promotion and competition with more feminine traits such as consensus building. Women’s style of interaction can be quite useful in the workplace. Rather than a competition where the winner takes all and the loser gains nothing, women are more likely to seek compromises that are agreeable to all parties. Women are skilled at listening and seeking solutions that are superior to ones compromised by competitive tactics.

Lisa Barron, author of “Why Do Women Negotiate Lower Salaries Than Men?” offers six tips for women negotiating salaries:

1. Get accurate information about salaries for comparable jobs by talking to colleagues, professional associations and other sources.

²⁰ Babcock and Leschever, 90.

²¹ Ibid, 88.

2. Assess your worth in terms of the value of the skills and experience you bring to the job (rather than your salary history). Keep a running record of your accomplishments.
3. During the negotiation, indicate...that salary is important to you.
4. Negotiate other things that will position you well for your future such as job title, level within the organization's structure, responsibilities, visibility with higher management and who you report to.
5. To see how you are perceived by others, role-play salary negotiations with a trusted and experienced male and female colleague.
6. Research suggests that establishing likeability is very important for women when persuasion is involved, so use inclusive language, such as "we" instead of "you."

In addition to Barron's advice, I would add that students should thoroughly research competitive salaries by visiting the following websites: www.salary.com, www.careerjournal.com, www.jobstar.com, and content.monster.com.²² The annual AIGA | Aquent Salary Survey is also a good resource for information about regional design salaries. It is especially important that women conduct peer research of salaries that is not gender specific.

The balance of power in an interview is not as one-sided as students may think. The interview is also a chance to "interview" the potential employer. The student should be asking "is this job appropriate for me?" The interviewees should be prepared to enter a negotiation in which they envision themselves as the ideal candidate. During the interview ask for evaluation criteria for promotion and raises. Hard criteria are better than vague criteria that may be open to subjectivity. Women fare better in advancement when the criteria are structured and not open to interpretation or discrimination.

²² Ibid, 60.

Set obtainable, significant goals and be willing to take some risks. Research indicates that raising expectations can raise confidence and performance.²³ Enhancing one's abilities or overestimating is an important "skill" in the classroom and professional workplace. By overestimating and rising to the occasion the designer sets the bar higher and takes bigger professional leaps. Many women designers operate on the belief that their work will speak for itself. And it will, only quietly to itself when no one else is listening. It behooves women to understand the politics of the workplace. Treating it like any other structure, women should be able to integrate their feminine skills with negotiation and self-promotional skills to close the gender gap.

²³ Rosenthal and Jacobson, "Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition," Quoted by Babcock and Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, 73.

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