How are agencies approaching hiring creatives of colour?

We recently covered the issue of diversity in illustration, a field mainly made up of independent freelancers or freelancers signed to agencies and creative studios (which, in case you need reminding, can translate to more opportunities but not full-time work.)

Working for a design or branding studio is the salaried option of choice for many a creative, but these opportunities come few and far between. Those chances may be lower if you come from an ethnic minority background within the UK or US, something we've been reminded of by recent news in both countries.

In response to such events, we've reached out to agencies at home and abroad to see how they're responding to the discussions generated in the name of Black Lives Matters, and what advice they would give to graduates of diverse backgrounds stepping out into a COVID-ravaged, pre-recession marketplace.

Personal pride and a polished portfolio

"We have open hiring at Grey, so I'm not looking for a particular college (or even a creative education at all) when I look at books for internships and placements," says Laura Jordan Bambach, CCO . "And we're big believers that you hire the right person for the team, not for the job, so making sure diversity in all its forms is included in our search is key.

"As with all creative jobs though, ideas and portfolio are a big part of what we look at, so to anyone that may be

unfamiliar I’d work with UK organisations like , or who specialise in training underrepresented talent, to get yourself portfolio-ready. The rarer you are the more interesting your ideas are going to be, so coming from a different background or having a different point of view is a plus, not a negative.”

This is a sentiment shared by Maggie Rogers, creative director at Fred & Eric, whose advice is “be direct and highlight how you, your background and perspective can be a huge asset to a studio or agency, now more than ever.”

Image:
Jiri Bures, , also agrees that there are unique businesses which can grant you access to a variety of agencies all searching for talent from different backgrounds.

“Imagination is committed to being a diverse and inclusive employer across its global business. Whilst applying directly is always encouraged, (you could consider) , which runs a mentor programme to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds fulfill their potential by working together with industry agency partners, including ourselves.

“Another entry point is to work with , which focuses specifically on helping under-represented candidates to enter the creative industry.”

Meanwhile, grads should know that some agencies have been giving free portfolio reviews to help new talent.

“What we’ve been doing at Vault49 is giving personal portfolio feedback to those we feel have great potential but are currently jobless,” says . “It’s not even about preparing them for a position at our company, but more about setting them for success in an increasingly competitive market.”

Get Real Paid

“Never accept an unpaid internship if you absolutely can avoid it,” stresses Adam Weiss, founder and creative director of . “We’re a small company at Landscape, we’ve always been able to afford it – and felt it was the right thing to do. ‘Cool’ companies, museums, institutions that don’t should be assessing their values / planning processes.

“Your work is valuable, and your employer will benefit financially from your presence in some form.”

Image:

Hold to Account

“I’d start by saying that onus should not be on grads to make sure they have a fair shot,” says Angela Roche, . “It’s the role of agency owners, HR and culture at large. That said, it’s important to be vocal too. Grads SHOULD hold employers accountable if they feel that the recruitment process has been discriminatory and unfair.

“I can say without hesitation that we want to ensure a fair playing field for all grads, interns and future employees. But I KNOW that Design By Day can do more, should do more and will do more.”

What the future holds

Possibly reassuring would be to know that agencies are actually striving to ensure diversity. Let’s first turn to Chris Page, and director of Three Blind Mice (TBM).

“Ironically, in a world that seems to have made many significant runs for the worse over the last couple of years, I would really hope that now is the best time to get a fairer shot at an agency or creative job if you are of an ethnic background,” says Chris.

“Here at Jelly/TBM, like everyone else, we were deeply affected by recent terrible events. We have always been a relatively diverse company but rosters and employees are always turning over in the creative industries, and we had to take a long hard look at ourselves and admit that we were nowhere where we need to be in terms of racial diversity.

“The high profile of all these events will have pulled up all right-thinking agencies in their tracks and I would be very surprised, not to say terribly disappointed, if all of them aren’t instigating positive changes in their hiring policies in order to get a higher percentage of candidates of colour on their books. It’s a shame we had to get his point to see a positive change of course, – but there we are. Society sometimes needs shocks to change.

“I would have thought that recruiters too will be feeling that they need to have a higher percentage of BAME candidates on their books,” Chris continues. “I know that we would insist that they do if we were to use them.”

“There are four areas where we can directly affect change: Our roster, our staff, mentorship and student outreach. We are putting solid plans in place to adjust our approach in all of these places and we are mobilising ourselves to make positive changes.

“We don’t want this to be a knee-jerk and short-term reaction but to be an over-arching policy change, so watch this space. However if you are an ethnic (or other) graduate looking for ; we may not be able to give you instant solutions but we are

always happy to share our time and experience.”

“Our leadership just underwent some initial, unconscious-bias training. This was eye opening,” reveals Adam at Landscape. “While we 100% judge initial applications by their work, we were unaware how our bodies/brains naturally interfere with being totally objective.

“We plan to offer this training to our whole team. We also have some outreach programs currently being planned which we’re excited to share more about soon.”

“Thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement, we are starting to see companies take the matter of diversity more seriously, and hopefully this will follow through with the hiring of more hugely talented BAME staff,” adds Heather Delaney,

“Gallium Ventures naturally has an incredibly diverse team whether that be BAME, LGBTQ+ or even those who hail from other countries as we believe teams should have a cross-pollination of skill sets and backgrounds. It is only with a diverse team that agencies and studios can provide truly creative campaigns which reach consumers across markets.”

Encouraging diversity then might benefit creativity as it benefits the talented creatives of colour who deserve a chance to contribute to it.

Related: The creative sector has a diversity problem – are talent schemes the answer?

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/creative-business/how-are-agencies-approaching-hiring-creatives-of-colour/