



**SARAH WOOLDRIDGE, NCIDQ, RID, STATE OF TX, MEMBER OF TAID**  
Retail Program Lead & Sr. PM at NELSON

With a degree in interior design and over a decade in the industry, I am a seasoned project manager and team lead. Starting out in A&D sales, I maintained a substantial clientele of designers, architects, and purchasing firms from the hospitality and commercial design industry in the TX, OK, NM and LA markets. I received the 2009 Wilson Foundation Award of Excellence for client dedication and customer service. I have collaborated with top design firms in Dallas, TX on several major projects in the U.S. and abroad, including the Venetian Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas, Neiman Marcus stores, the Atlantis in Dubai, and the Mandarin Oriental and Venetian Hotels in Macau. I provided oversight and management of design selections, new construction and installation of six proprietary showrooms, 13 representative showrooms, two studios, two manufacturing facilities and one corporate office for a high-end fabric and furniture manufacturer. My construction and project completion experience spans all major U.S. markets, and internationally in U.A.E, England, France, Germany, Mexico and Singapore. Currently, I lead a team of over 65 teammates nationally for a Fortune 500 account with annual project revenue of over 10M for client architectural and design standards implementation with NELSON.

**Q: Brief intro/What type of work do you do/ where do you work?**

A: Under my tenure with NELSON, I am a Retail Program Lead for a national Fortune 500 confidential account; the Team Lead for the Dallas office, as well as an active senior project manager. I work on a specific account under the Retail and Workplace practice areas, coaching, education, training and leading a team of up to 65 teammates nationally on specific client design and construction standards as well as program and deliverable standards by specific project types, which range from new builds/ground-ups, interior fit-outs, renovations and specific equipment installations.

**Q: When did you decide to take the NCIDQ Exam? How did you decide what order to take them in?**

A: I initially took a position in the design industry straight out of college to start accruing the necessary hours in order to start the NCIDQ Exam process. I took the first exam back in 2015 and failed, which I am not ashamed to say. I realized that I did not do myself justice by trying to manage the exam process by myself while working full-time, as well as being a new mom. Failing the exam, even by a few points, made

me realize that I was not ready and I wanted more time “in the field” to learn and experience more for myself before trying the exam process again. I joined NELSON in 2017, and under the leadership of senior interior designers and architects, I felt more confident to try the exam process again with the support of my teammates and leadership. I decided to take all three exams the fall of 2018 and this time I chose to participate in the IIDA study course in Dallas with a fellow friend. I participated in study groups, used a variety of sources, including CIDQ, for study materials and scheduled the three exams two weeks apart from each other. I chose to take the exams spread apart in order to take the tests in manageable parts as well as still provide myself with the opportunity to fine tune my areas of study between tests based on the results.

**Q: Did you fail any exams/retake any? How did you stay motivated through that process?**

A: Yes, I failed the Fundamentals exam in 2015 which helped me realize that I was not personally ready, even though I had many years in the industry, I did not have enough exposure/experience in all areas of study and decided to wait to try again.

**Q: How long did you study for the exams? What did you use to study?**

A: I took the recommended six months from start to finish for the exam process. As a mother of two young children with a full-time job, this was a manageable expectation for me to study by sub-chapters each week. Joining the IIDA study group gave me a focused outline for the NCIDQ material as well as provided insight into the exams and process. I joined a study group on weekends and used practice exams, pre-printed study card decks and made digital study cards for myself. Referencing the online Building and ADA codes helped as well.

**Q: Has the practice of interior design lived up to your expectations that you had as a student? Any surprises or disappointments?**

A: I would have to say, as much with life, you should really experience “the field” and not just rely solely on textbook reading, which is how I prefer to learn and retain knowledge. It helps me tremendously to “live demo” a task or process to truly understand and retain it versus only reading about it. Surprisingly, once working in the field, you realize that there are a variety of ways one can run an interior design business, that building codes are left up to interpretation to some extent, and there is so much value and knowledge to be gained from partnering with architects and engineers.

**Q: What advice would you give to current students that you wished you had received?**

A: I may have been a little naïve in college to think that what I learned encompassed the totality of the industry. There are so many ways to experience and contribute to the built environment; you just need to figure out your areas of interest, your comfort level with technology, and if you want to specialize in a certain practice area, field of specialty, or phase of the design process to guide your career path.

**Q: Why did you become NCIDQ Certified/why was it important to you?**

A: Personally, I pride myself in an accredited education under a school of Architecture for Interior Design. I want to say to the world that

I did not spend four years in college learning how to decorate; I learned how to design environments and build them. Providing a thoughtful and intentionally designed space for the built environment that can influence, inspire, and even transform one’s experience can have a profound effect on one’s life. Even back in 2008 when I graduated, there was still a stigma within and outside the field that interior designers only decorated the space and are second rate to our architectural counterparts. I wanted to prove that there is much more that goes into that process and it takes knowledge and experience to translate an initial design into the built environment. What we do as designers has a profound effect on the health, safety and wellbeing of its occupants. Taking the NCIDQ Exam and being a registered interior designer was important to me as a milestone in my career path, as taking the ARE for Architects or the PE exam for Engineering. Having the knowledge as required with the NCIDQ Exam empowers me as a designer. Don’t get me wrong, I still love to design and decorate spaces just for fun though!

**Q: How has having an NCIDQ Certificate benefited you and your career?**

A: Having the NCIDQ Certificate tells my employer that I am serious about my level of knowledge and has afforded me the opportunity for advancement with certification and registration at the state level. Also, having the certificate allows me to attract talent to the company as a mentor for other designers with aspirations for the NCIDQ and I have earned the respect of my fellow architectural and engineering peers.

**Q: Have you/are you interested in pursuing any other credentials/certifications or licensure/registration/certification in a jurisdiction? If so, please provide those details.**

A: I have two current aspirations in the works, which are the PMP exam for Project Management Certification as well as the WELL exam, both of which will provide an additional level of knowledge to my career bank. COVID-19 really helped solidify the next step in certification as it compelled me to do something

with my preference for green design and holistic living and translate that directly into the built environment for others to benefit, not just for my use in my own home.

**Q: What could the industry do to overcome obstacles from diverse individuals being represented and having equal opportunity?**

A: Personally, I have felt the industry has had a wide array of diverse individuals represented and it just depends on where you are employed, under certain practice areas, and with whom you keep company to experience them. I did not start out in the industry at a design firm and had the pleasure of meeting all walks of life in residential and commercial design, some amazing world renown designers, through my background in furniture and fabric product development, showroom merchandising and A&D sales, however most were not NCIDQ Certified interior designers. In terms of equity of diverse individuals as NCIDQ Certified, I do believe that firms should encourage and even financially contribute to the success of their teammates as an investment in the industry and the future of interior designer. Proactively promoting interior design and its benefits to society to a variety of ethnicities and cultures nationally, starting at the high school level, regardless of proximity to a design school will help broaden the recruitment for future designers to keep the industry fresh and progressing forward through the generations. The field has progressed so much beyond FF&E selections and hand sketches and there are many more opportunities for young designers to contribute to the industry through technology than there was when I graduated college.

**Q: What are common misconceptions people have? How can we combat these misconceptions and communicate more effectively?**

A: I am not shy to correct anyone who states I am a decorator. I have worked too hard through education and my career to be labeled a decorator. Decorating is what I do at my house and help my family and friends with for fun. Interior design is my career and a service I provide where I contribute to the built

environment for others to experience. Interior design is learning the history of interiors through past cultures and understanding how world conflicts and events have shaped and transformed how we perceive and provide the built environment. Interior design is providing a barrier-free built environment for all people to experience and enjoy, regardless of physical or mental capacity. Education is key for others to understand and support the important contributions interior design provides society.