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Project Manager at Ramsey County (Minnesota)

Cole is an architect and interior designer with 13 years' experience leading interior design projects. Though workplace design has been a primary focus, his project work also includes high-end residential, hospitality, and healthcare. Cole taught interior design studio at Dunwoody College in Minneapolis, MN, and has been a guest lecturer at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. Cole currently leads workplace projects as a Project Manager for Ramsey County. He is a proud alumni of Iowa State University College of Design.

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

A: I'm an interior designer and architect; my primary focus has been corporate office projects, but I've worked on a wide variety of projects including high-end residential, hospitality, and healthcare. I worked at architecture and interior design firms for 12 years, and recently took a position as a project manager for my county, helping lead and coordinate architecture and interior design projects.

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

A: Fortunately, I didn't have to retake any exams. I took the IDFX exam first to get a feel for the exam format. Passing the first exam gave me the motivation to keep going.

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

A: I took the IDFX first to get a feel for the exam format, then sat for the IDPX and Practicum six months later. I remember studying for about four months before each exam administration. I used the NCIDQ Interior Design Reference Manual by David Kent Ballast. I used David Kent Ballast's practice questions and mock exams as well. There was a lot of overlap between the study materials for the NCIDQ and the architectural registration exam (ARE), which I took a few years later.

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

A: The relationships in interior design are really rewarding — whether students, interns, product reps, clients, contractors, or teammates. I was surprised to find the relationships more rewarding — for me at least — than the design work itself, especially once I'd worked for a few years and had completed a few projects.

Work-life balance, especially when juggling quick turnaround projects and multiple deadlines, is a struggle at many architecture and interior design firms, and a challenge that needs continued focus to solve, otherwise we risk burning out talented designers and losing them to other career paths.

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

A: I love talking with students about their next steps. There's so much to share! One thing I heard in school from a practitioner that I carried with me is that it's OK if you're not a star designer. Studio culture focuses so much on design and design representation skills, but there's a lot of room in professional practice for people with other skill sets — so it's OK if you're more technical and want to focus on construction drawings and construction administration, or a great communicator and connector who might one day be a great principal, or if you're organized and detailed and want to move toward project management. Also — your first job very likely isn't your forever job. It's OK if you don't get an offer at one of your dream firms right out

of school. Get a foot in the door somewhere, contribute as much as you can, and pick up as many skills as possible. With those additional skills, you'll land your dream job soon.

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

A: I had an internship at a design firm in Boston after my junior year in college, and ever since then I've looked up to NCIDQ Certificate holders for their professionalism and expertise. Becoming NCIDQ Certified was my first career goal as I worked to establish myself as an interior designer.

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

A: Having an NCIDQ Certificate certainly helped advance my career. It showed firms I was committed to the profession and had a solid background of professional knowledge. At many firms, getting your certification leads to better project opportunities, higher pay, and increased leadership responsibilities.

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

A: It's critical for the industry to nurture talent of all types, and actively support BIPOC and LGBTQIA participation in the profession. Many young people haven't had exposure to design professionals, so reach out to your community and host an open house as a firm, or talk directly to students at a high school career day. Expand and diversify the list of colleges and universities where your firm recruits. Participate in, and/or connect design students and emerging professionals with BIPOC mentorship programs. Consciously think about diversifying the backgrounds and perspectives at your firm when making hiring decisions. Do anything and everything you can to commit to the education and professional growth of diverse talent.

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

A: I think the most common misconception is that we're 'color pickers' or 'finish pickers.' People know interior designers work with colors and finishes, but don't know our education focuses on programming, space planning, technical material knowledge, life safety, accessibility, human factors, acoustics, and lighting. Interior designers synthesize a lot of information — we're leading clients through hundreds of design decisions while balancing considerations like budget, timeline, constructability, sustainability, code compliance, and accessible design. I was once the interior design lead on a new office building for a multinational client, and the project manager at my firm said, "Isn't it nice all you have to worry about is carpet?" I was dumbfounded — I was responsible for understanding and implementing the client's global workplace standards, which included planning and documenting 100,000 square feet of interior office space. How could they have missed that?