

Interior designers:



Sprucing up space



by Jill N. Lacey

Do you rearrange furniture as a hobby? Do you know 10 shades of the color orange? Do you idolize the interior designers on TV like other people revere movie stars? If you answered yes to any of those questions, you might have a future as an interior designer. But interior designers' knowledge extends beyond color swatches and furniture placement. Designers draw upon numerous disciplines to enhance the function, safety, and aesthetics of interior spaces. These experts help to make their clients' living and working spaces more appealing by combining colors, textures, furniture, lighting, and space.

And the types of projects that designers work on are more diverse than the living spaces depicted on television or in magazines. Designers are involved in planning the interior spaces of almost every kind of building, including offices, restaurants, and schools. Interior designers help to improve these spaces for specific purposes, such as to boost worker productivity, to attract a wealthy clientele, or to provide an environment conducive to learning.

This article describes the work of interior designers. Keep reading to learn about interior designers' typical job duties, earnings, employment, and outlook. You'll also find out how to train for, enter, and advance in the design field and discover resources for getting more information.

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The designer's work

Interior design work evolved from interior decorating—choosing a style and a color palette and then selecting complementary furniture, floor and window coverings, artwork, and lighting.

Decorating is still an important part of many interior designers' work, but now the work is more technical. Designers increasingly are becoming more involved in designing details, such as built-in bookshelves, or planning the layout of building renovations, including the



Photo courtesy of the National Kitchen and Bath Association

Interior designers apply their technical knowledge to create appealing spaces for clients.

placement of windows, escalators, and walkways. They read blueprints, work with architects and building inspectors, and follow regulations. Interior designers sometimes supervise assistants who carry out the designer's creations and perform administrative tasks, such as reviewing catalogs and ordering samples.

Design process. Nearly all projects, regardless of the type of space that they involve, follow the same design process. The first step in developing a new design is to determine the client's needs. This step is known as programming. An interior designer usually meets face-to-face with the client to find out how the space will be used—when remodeling a kitchen, for example, the designer might inquire about a family's cooking habits. The designer also interviews the client about style and design preferences and about budget size. The designer

also visits the space to inventory existing furniture and equipment and to identify the space's positive attributes and potential design problems.

Next, the designer formulates a design plan and cost estimate based on the client's goals and budget. The designs usually are created using computer-aided design (CAD) software, which provides a detailed layout and allows for easy corrections. The designer presents it to the client for review and then revises the plan after receiving the client's input.

After the plan is approved, the designer begins specifying required items, such as furniture, lighting, flooring, and wall coverings. The designer also might need to prepare and submit drawings for review by an architect and approval by a construction inspector to ensure that the design meets building codes. If a project requires structural work, the designer works with an architect or an engineer to design those elements.

Most designs also require technical work, such as lighting, plumbing, or electrical wiring, that needs to be completed by professionals. When a project requires technical work, the designer chooses qualified contractors and writes work contracts.

In the final steps of the design process, the designer develops a timeline for the project and ensures that it is completed on time. The designer might coordinate work schedules for contractors and oversee installation to make sure that it is done properly. After the project is complete, the designer follows up with the client and corrects problems.

Designer jobs. Many designers run their own businesses; they may devote considerable time to meeting with clients and contractors, developing new business contacts, examining equipment and space needs, and attending to business matters.

Designers who work in furniture or home-and-garden stores have different responsibilities. They offer their design services while selling store merchandise and often help other interior designers by suggesting styles and color schemes or suitable accessories and lighting. However, in-store designers rarely visit clients' spaces, and they are limited to recommending their store's products.

Design specialties. Although most interior designers do many kinds of projects, some specialize in one area of interior design. Some designers specialize in a type of building space—usually residential or commercial—

while others concentrate on a specific design field, such as healthcare or education.

Still others focus on a particular design element. The most common of these are lighting, kitchen and bath, and closet designs. Acoustics and noise abatement, security, electronics and home theaters, home spas, and indoor gardens are also popular specialties.

Three other areas of design that are becoming increasingly popular are ergonomic design, “elder design,” and environmental, or “green,” design. Ergonomic design involves designing workspaces that emphasize good posture and minimize muscle strain. Elder design is the planning of interior space to aid the movement of the elderly and people with disabilities. Green design involves choosing materials that are hypoallergenic, chemical free, energy efficient, or made from renewable resources.

Working environment. Most designers transact business in their own offices or in clients’ homes or offices. They also might need to travel to other locations, such as showrooms, design centers, and manufacturing facilities. Many designers use the Internet to form international design teams, serve a geographically dispersed clientele, and purchase supplies from around the world.

Interior designers who are employed by large corporations or design firms generally work standard 9-to-5, 40-hour workweeks in well-lit, comfortable settings. Designers who work in smaller design consulting firms or who freelance generally are hired on a contract basis. They frequently adjust their workdays to suit their clients’ schedules and deadlines, meeting with clients in the evenings or on weekends when necessary. Consultants and self-employed designers usually work longer hours and, often, in smaller environments.

Interior designers may work under stressful conditions to meet deadlines, stay within budgets, and please clients. To maintain a steady income,

self-employed designers also are under pressure to find new clients.

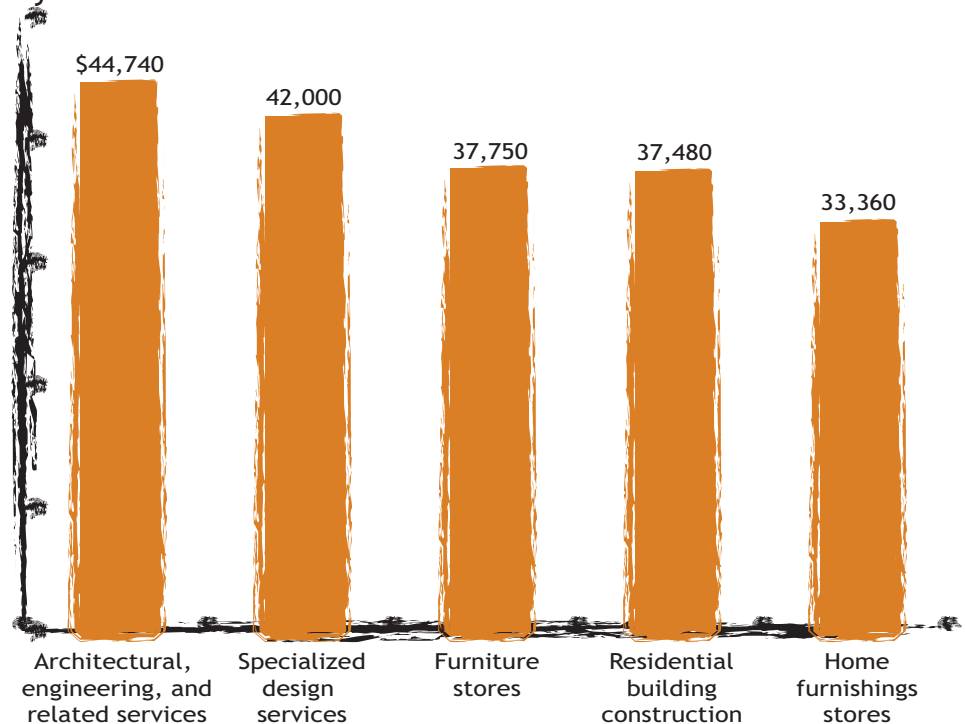
Style by numbers: Interior design jobs and what they pay

Interior designers work for many types of employers; some work for themselves. And whom they work for affects how much they earn.

Employment. Interior designers held 46,360 wage-and-salary jobs in May 2004. About 31 percent of these interior designers worked in specialized design services. Another 19 percent worked in engineering and related services. Other interior designers provided design services in furniture and home furnishing stores, building materials and supplies dealers, and residential building construction companies.

In addition to wage-and-salary workers, there are thousands of self-employed interior designers. Many interior designers also perform freelance work along with holding a salaried job in design or in another occupation.

Median earnings for interior designers in selected industries, May 2004





Although interior designers use computer-aided design programs, they still need basic mathematics skills.

Earnings. In May 2004, median annual earnings for wage-and-salary interior designers were \$40,670. (Median earnings are the point at which half of interior designers earned more than this amount and half earned less.) The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$71,220, and the lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$23,440. Earnings varied by industry. The chart on the previous page shows median earnings of interior designers in the industries in which they most often work.

Interior designers' salaries vary by specialty, type of employer, experience, and other factors. Among salaried interior designers, those in large, specialized design and architectural firms usually have the highest and most stable earnings. Interior designers working in retail stores usually make less, and their earnings can be irregular because they work on commission.

For residential design projects, interior designers who are self-employed or who work in smaller firms usually earn a per-hour consulting fee, plus a percentage of the total cost of furniture, lighting, artwork, and other design elements. For commercial projects, designers might charge a per-hour consulting fee, charge by square foot-

age, or charge a flat fee for an entire project. Designers who use specialty contractors usually earn a percentage of the contractor's earnings on a project in return for hiring the contractor.

Job prospects

Employment of interior designers is projected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. Workers entering the occupation for the first time are expected to fill 20,000 openings between 2002 and 2012.

An expanding economy, growing homeowner wealth, and a rising interest in interior design are expected to increase demand for designers. However, interior designers are expected to face keen competition for available positions. People who have formal training in interior design and who are creative and persistent will be best able to establish and maintain a career in this occupation.

As the economy grows, more private businesses and consumers are expected to seek interior designers' services. But some people consider design services a luxury expense, which may make these services subject to fluctuations in the economy. For example, a slow economy that causes decreases in consumer and business income and spending can negatively affect employment of interior designers.

Nevertheless, demand for interior design services is expected to be strong. This is especially true in the healthcare industry because more facilities are expected to be needed to accommodate the aging population. Designers can make these facilities as comfortable and as much like home as possible for patients. Demand for interior design services in the hospitality industry—including hotels, resorts, and restaurants—also is projected to be high because of an expected increase in tourism.

Recent increases in homeowner wealth and the growing popularity of home-improvement television programs have boosted demand for residential design services. Many homeowners use their home equity to finance expansion and remodeling projects—and associated design services expenses. Many homeowners also have requested design help in adding year-round, outdoor living spaces.

Along with piquing interest in interior design services, however, home-improvement television programs

have spurred a trend in do-it-yourself design. The prevalence of discount furniture stores also contributes to this trend, which could hamper job growth for designers. But people who do their own projects often hire a designer for initial consultations, even if they purchase and install the design elements themselves.

Specialization allows some interior designers to create a niche for themselves in an increasingly competitive market. The demand for kitchen and bath design is growing in response to the increasing demand for home remodeling. Designs using the latest technology, such as home theaters and security systems, are expected to be especially popular. And the increasing demand for home spas, indoor gardens, and outdoor living spaces is expected to continue.

The previously mentioned specialties of ergonomic and green design also are expected to be in demand. Ergonomic design has gained in popularity with the growth in the elderly population and in requirements for workplace safety. Increases in the awareness of environmental quality and in the number of people who have allergies and asthma are expected to boost demand for green design.

Designing a career

Preparing for, entering, and advancing in the field of interior design requires a combination of skills, training, professional affiliation, and relevant experience.

Skills and abilities. Interior designers must be creative, imaginative, and persistent. Because tastes in style can change quickly, designers need to be well read, open to new ideas and influences, and quick to react to changing trends. Problem-solving skills and the ability to work well independently and under stress are important. People in this field need self-discipline to start projects on their own, to budget their time, and to meet deadlines and production schedules.

Communication skills, too, are essential for interior designers. For example, designers frequently collaborate with architects, electricians, and building contractors to ensure that their designs are safe and meet construction requirements. Designers also must be able to communicate their ideas in writing.

In addition, designers need basic skills in business and mathematics. Business skills are important when or-

dering samples and supplies, billing vendors, and writing contracts, proposals, and budgets. Math skills are used when measuring space and calculating the amount—and cost—of materials needed.

Some required skills are specific to the work of interior designers. For example, designers should be familiar with CAD software and be able to read blueprints, understand building and fire codes, and know how to make space accessible for disabled people.

Training and licensure. To acquire the skills that they need, interior designers are encouraged to pursue education after high school. Training programs are available from professional design schools or colleges and universities and usually take 2 to 4 years to complete.

Graduates of 2- and 3-year programs earn certificates or associate degrees in interior design and, upon graduation, normally qualify as assistants to interior designers. Graduates of bachelor's degree programs often enter into a formal design apprenticeship program, or they work on smaller projects or under supervision as they gain experience. Basic coursework includes instruction in CAD software, drawing, perspective, spatial planning, color and fabrics, furniture design, architecture, ergonomics, ethics, and psychology.

The National Association of Schools of Art and Design accredits about 250 postsecondary institutions that have programs in art and design. Most of these schools award a bachelor's or associate degree in interior design. Applicants to these schools may be required to submit sketches and other examples of their artistic ability.

The Foundation for Interior Design Education Research also accredits postsecondary interior design programs. In July 2005, there were 137 foundation-accredited professional programs in interior design, located primarily in schools of art, architecture, and home economics.

A national licensing exam for interior designers is administered by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification. To be eligible to take the exam, applicants must have at least 2 years of postsecondary education in design and a total of 6 years of combined education and experience in interior design. After candidates have passed the qualifying exam, they receive the title of certified, registered, or licensed interior designer, depending on the State. Continuing education is required for maintaining licensure in some States.

Twenty-four States, the District of Columbia, and

Puerto Rico require registration or licensure of interior designers. Prospective designers working in these locations usually enter a 1- to 3-year internship to gain experience after formal training but before taking a national licensing examination or joining a professional association. Designers in States that do not require the exam may opt to take it as proof of their qualifications.

Professional affiliation. Because registration and licensure are not mandatory in all States, many interior designers seek membership in a professional association to indicate their qualifications and professional standing. The American Society of Interior Designers is the largest professional association for interior designers in the United States. Interior designers qualify for membership if they have completed at least a 2-year program and have work experience. Student memberships also are available.

In addition to national licensure and membership in a professional association, optional certifications in kitchen and bath design are available from the National Kitchen and Bath Association. The association provides training seminars, some of which culminate in exams for three different levels of certification.

Gaining experience. In the highly competitive field of interior design, gaining on-the-job experience through a formal internship is critical to securing a permanent position. Most interns work in design or architecture firms under the supervision of an experienced designer. But interns also may gain experience working as in-store designers in furniture or home-improvement stores.

To secure an internship or full-time design position, candidates usually interview with a senior designer at a firm. Most interviews include candidates presenting the best design projects in their portfolio, followed by a question-and-answer session with the interviewer. Successful candidates often present their work as if they were pitching their ideas to a client. With their presentation, candidates should clearly and concisely state what the requirements or goals of the projects are, how the designs meet those goals, and how they solve various design problems. As with most interviews, rehearsing ahead of time improves the chances of getting the job.

The National Council for Interior Design Qualification offers the Interior Design Experience Program to help entry-level interior designers get work experience. Program participation is voluntary, but some employers might require it of applicants for full-time jobs. Successfully completing the program also makes it easier to fulfill experience requirements for some types of licensure.

Participation in the program usually takes 2 to 3 years, depending on the level of education that a designer has completed. Program participants must secure their own job and work with a supervisor and mentor to meet requirements in six competency areas: Programming, schematic design, design development, contract documents, contract administration, and professional practice. Experience in competency areas is gained by working directly on projects, observing others work, and attending lectures and seminars. From time to time, participants also submit completed work logs to the council for review and approval.

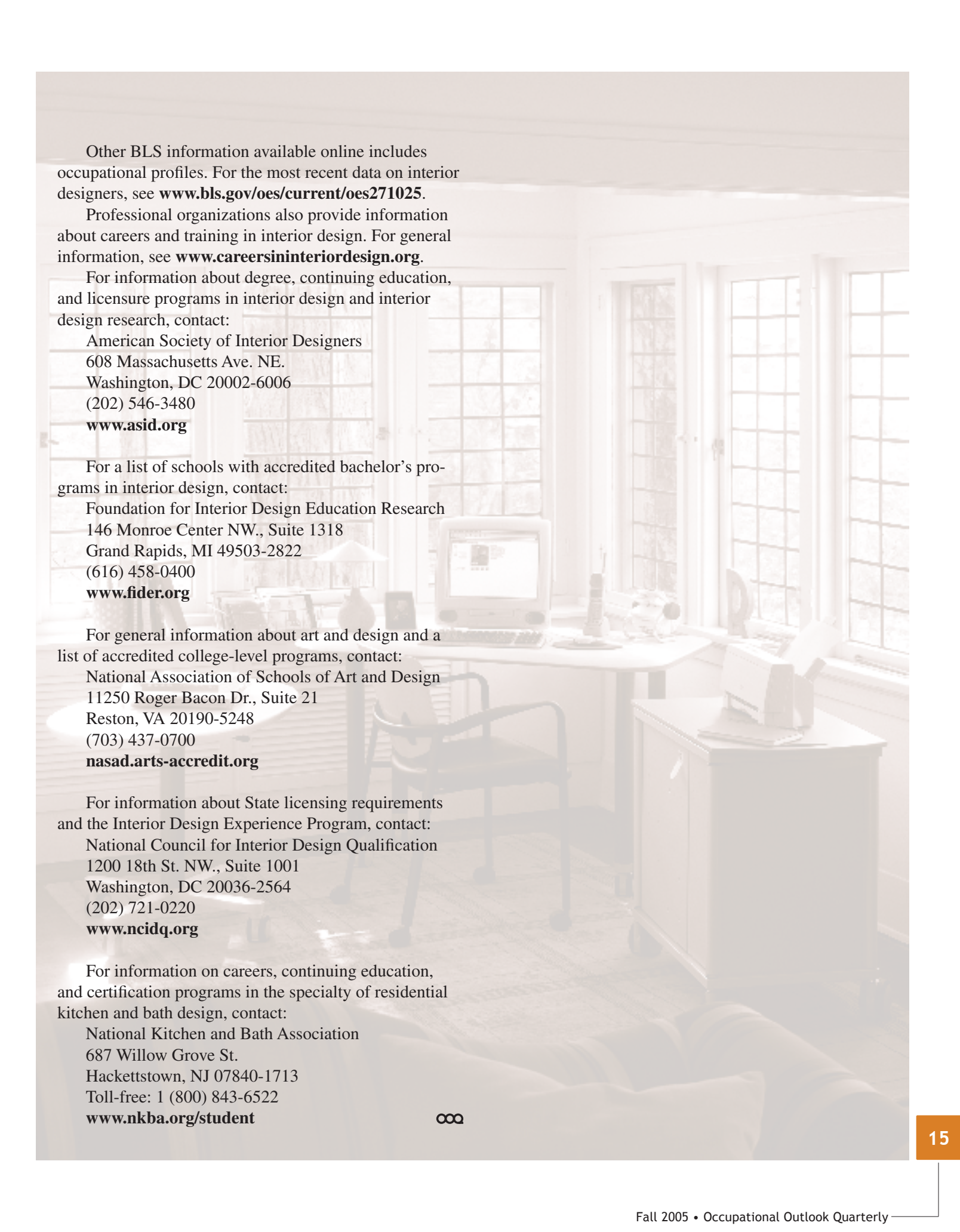
Career advancement. Before they can advance to higher positions, entry-level interior designers receive on-the-job training. Normally, they need 1 to 3 years of training. During this time, these designers usually have to perform small tasks, including administrative ones, while learning the basics of design.

Experienced designers in large firms may advance to chief designer, design department head, or other supervisory positions. Some experienced designers open their own firms or specialize in one aspect of interior design. Other designers leave the occupation to become teachers in design schools or in colleges and universities. Many faculty members continue to consult privately or operate small design studios to complement their classroom activities.

For more information

To learn more about becoming an interior designer, visit your local library or career counselor. Look for books, trade journals, and other resources about interior design and its specialties.

One career resource available in most libraries and counseling offices is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* describes the job duties, working conditions, training requirements, earnings, outlook, and more for hundreds of occupations. Among the occupations covered in the *Handbook* are some that, like interior designers, involve the design or arrangement of objects to enhance their appearance and function. These include architects, artists and related workers, and landscape architects. The *Handbook* also describes other types of designers, such as industrial designers, graphic designers, and fashion designers. You may also access the *Handbook* online at www.bls.gov/oco.



Other BLS information available online includes occupational profiles. For the most recent data on interior designers, see www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes271025.

Professional organizations also provide information about careers and training in interior design. For general information, see www.careersininteriordesign.org.

For information about degree, continuing education, and licensure programs in interior design and interior design research, contact:

American Society of Interior Designers
608 Massachusetts Ave. NE.
Washington, DC 20002-6006
(202) 546-3480
www.asid.org

For a list of schools with accredited bachelor's programs in interior design, contact:

Foundation for Interior Design Education Research
146 Monroe Center NW., Suite 1318
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-2822
(616) 458-0400
www.fider.org

For general information about art and design and a list of accredited college-level programs, contact:

National Association of Schools of Art and Design
11250 Roger Bacon Dr., Suite 21
Reston, VA 20190-5248
(703) 437-0700
nasad.arts-accredit.org

For information about State licensing requirements and the Interior Design Experience Program, contact:

National Council for Interior Design Qualification
1200 18th St. NW., Suite 1001
Washington, DC 20036-2564
(202) 721-0220
www.ncidq.org

For information on careers, continuing education, and certification programs in the specialty of residential kitchen and bath design, contact:

National Kitchen and Bath Association
687 Willow Grove St.
Hackettstown, NJ 07840-1713
Toll-free: 1 (800) 843-6522
www.nkba.org/student

