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**STRUCTURE OF DESIGN FIRMS WITHIN NAIROBI:
CASE STUDY OF A+ PLUS INTERIORS, AVOCADO
CREATIVE STUDIOS AND DALBERG DESIGN**

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Abstract

Background: Design is evolving and today there is as much emphasis on the processes as there is on the product. **Problem:** A great deal of research on design projects has been looked at, but very little has been conducted on how “design firms” actually function in Kenya. Every design firm has a unique company structure and the way they operate. This varies from company to company. For instance, the company structure of an interior design firm is different from graphic design firm while some components like having designers in similar in both companies.

Objective: This paper looked at design practice in Nairobi's design firms.

Design: It used a case study method through observations, desktop research, literature review and interviews.

Setting/Scope: Three Design firms which included A+ plus Interiors, Avocado Creative Studio and Dalberg Design in Nairobi.

Subjects/Respondents: Creative directors, managers, designers, accountants and managers.

Results: This study sought to understand and highlight the company structure of three design firms stated. The results points to a generic structure with minimal divergence of systems. **Conclusion:** Every design firm has its own special company structure. However, regardless of what type of company structure is used in a firm, the structure should be clearly defined. The goal should be to build the fewest management level and have the shortest chain of command, the unit staff needs to be able to see where their tasks fit into common tasks of the organization, and the organization structure should enhance and not impede communication

Key Words: *Interior Design, Company Structure, Design Practice, Graphic Design, Participatory design, multidisciplinary*

Introduction

A design practice is a firm; small or big that brings together designers with diverse capabilities to provide creative solutions to common social and industrial needs.

A+ plus interiors is a private interior design company located along Mombasa road at vision plaza, Nairobi. According to the director and founder, Mr. Charles Kyeti, the company was started back in 2011 when the director was still in third year at the University of Nairobi. It was called Skiza interiors and it had two partners. Although the company was at its beginning stage, they had several jobs including painting Christmas deco's, graphic design and landscaping jobs. The

founders at that time did not have much knowledge about the industry and where they could begin when they were given a project. Between 2012 and 2013, Mr. Kyeti joined Design forty an interior design company within Nairobi. This is where he had experience on how to market, meeting new clients and negotiating with clients. A+ plus company was officially launched in 2015 where Kyeti was a sole proprietor acting as the director as well as the marketer or the company.

Avocado Creative Studio is a design studio, located in Karengata Business Park, Karen, Kenya. It is a creative firm that comprises of a permanent staff of five: two directors, one account manager and two graphic designers. Avocado was started in 2013, by two partners; Katya Kuzi (Managing Director and Co-founder) and Mikhail Kuzi (Creative Director) out of Mikhail's bedroom. Started as a freelance firm, there initial work was events, and printing. The firm grew from its humble beginnings to a studio that boasts the international clientele as their major source of revenue.

Dalberg design is a multidisciplinary design firm that works with underserved communities all over the world to come up with solutions aligned to their needs. They work in a wide range of different fields including but not limited to; health, agriculture and food security, humanitarian assistance, education and employment and cities and urban development. They have a multidisciplinary team that has designers, behavioral scientists, product designers and illustrators among others. They also offer a variety of solutions; design labs, product and business prototypes, service and program design and innovation strategy and capacity building.

THEORY

CASE STUDY 1: A+ PLUS INTERIORS

A+ Company structure

The company is a registered company under the Laws of Kenya under the Act of businesses and companies. The company is comprised of the following company structure-:

The director

Mr. Kyeti is the CEO of A+ interiors. He also holds the position of the main marketer of the company. As chief executive officer (CEO), he has numerous roles to play including being the highest-ranking executive in the company. His primary responsibilities include making major corporate decisions, managing the overall operations and resources of a company. Furthermore, he acts as the main point of communication between all the other members of the company. He is also the public face of the company. Other responsibilities held by the CEO in A+ interiors is such to hire and to fire the staff, He also comes up with strategies to grow the company.

Accountant

The company has one permanently hired accountant. The accountant has the following primary roles including performing financial functions related to the collection, accuracy, recording, analysis and presentation of the company's financial operations, financial data collection and entry as well as report generation. The accountant also pays the salary of the staff and also filing the company tax returns. Furthermore he also deal with third parties, such as vendors, customers and financial institutions.

Auditor

The auditor is not a permanent employee at A+ plus interiors. They come three times annually for the auditing purposes. They work closely with the accountant and they report to the director. The main objectives of the audit of financial statements by the independent auditor is the expression of an opinion on the fairness with which they present, in all material respects, financial position, results of operations, and the company's cash flow in conformity with generally accepted accounting principles. The auditor's report is the medium through which he expresses his opinion or, if circumstances require, disclaims an opinion. In either case, he states whether his audit has been made in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards. These standards require him to state whether, in his opinion, the financial statements are presented in conformity with generally accepted accounting principles and to identify those circumstances in which such principles have not been consistently observed in the preparation of the financial statements of the current period in relation to those of the preceding period.

Project manager

A+ plus interiors has one project manager. The Project manager coordinates and oversees the interior design construction part. He manages projects from conception through construction to completion. These project manager develop construction plans, assist in evaluating and selecting the craftsmen (carpenters, plumber, electricians etc.) and also coordinate the work of the project and designs teams, as well as the numerous contractors who contribute to facilities projects.

Interior designers

A+ interiors has three permanent interior designers. They have the following roles as members of the company: Interior designers typically do the following:

- 1. Determine the client's goals and requirements for the project***
- 2. Consider how the space will be used and how people will move through the space***
- 3. Sketch preliminary design plans, including electrical and partition layouts***
- 4. Specify materials and furnishings, such as lighting, furniture, wall finishes, flooring, and plumbing fixtures***
- 5. Create a timeline for the interior design project and estimate project costs***
- 6. Place orders for materials and oversee the installation of the design elements(at times)***
- 7. Visit the site after the project is complete, to ensure that the client is satisfied***

The Interior designers work closely with project managers and construction laborers to determine how interior spaces will function, look, and be furnished. They read blueprints and must be aware of building codes and inspection regulations. Although the preliminary sketches are freehand, the final projects and presentation use computer-aided design (CAD) software for the majority of their drawings. Throughout the design process, interior designers often use building information modeling (BIM) software to create three-dimensional visualizations that include construction elements such as walls or roofs. Some of the drawings they produce include interior designers produce 3D design renders, plans, and drawings for construction and installation. These may include construction and

demolition plans, electrical layouts, and plans needed for building permits. They also work closely with the interns.

Social media marketers

The social media marketer plays a vital role of marketing. He is one of the permanent employees of A+ plus interiors. He works closely with the director in the marketing of the company. The social media marketer combines marketing and social media management skills to enhance company social media presences, including interacting with customers, promoting brand-focused interactive and engaging content, and expanding opportunities for revenue.

Social Media Marketer Duties include:

- 1. Creates marketing and social media campaigns and strategies, including budget planning, content ideation, and implementation schedules*
- 2. Collects customer data and analyses interactions and visits, plus uses this information to create comprehensive reports and improve future marketing strategies and campaigns*
- 3. Reports progress to the director who also works as the senior marketing personnel*
- 4. Grows and expands company social media presence into new social media platforms, plus increases presence on existing platforms including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram*
- 5. Researches and monitors activity of company competitors*
- 6. Creates and distributes engaging written or graphic content in the form of e-newsletters, web page and blog content, or social media messages*

Interns

The interns at A+ plus interiors are not permanent. They stay for a period of 3 to 6 months. They work closely with the interior designers in order to learn the roles of interior designers. In an interior design internship job responsibilities may include: assisting in client presentations, resource updating, assisting designers, and participating in brainstorming of the design teams. They report to the Director.

Craftsmen / Artisans

The craftsmen at A+ plus interiors are normally employed on contract basis. They include the team of carpenters, plumbers, electricians etc. They work almost entirely by hand to create beautifully unique pieces. From artwork and ceramics to doors and coffee tables, craftsmanship is displayed in any piece of work that is passionate and diverse. The key to choosing the right furnishings is selecting items which have been loved from conception all the way to execution and delivery. The care and attention are only half the story – it's also about creativity and individuality. They work closely with the project manager in the built part of interior design.

Client

At A+ interiors the client is the heart of the company. Without the client the company would not be existing. All the members of the company from the director to the craftsmen work hand in hand in order to meet the clients need. The clients work closely with the director and the project manager. The director report to the client.

Company structure of A+ plus Interiors

Summary A+ plus interior design company, in its quest to fulfill the

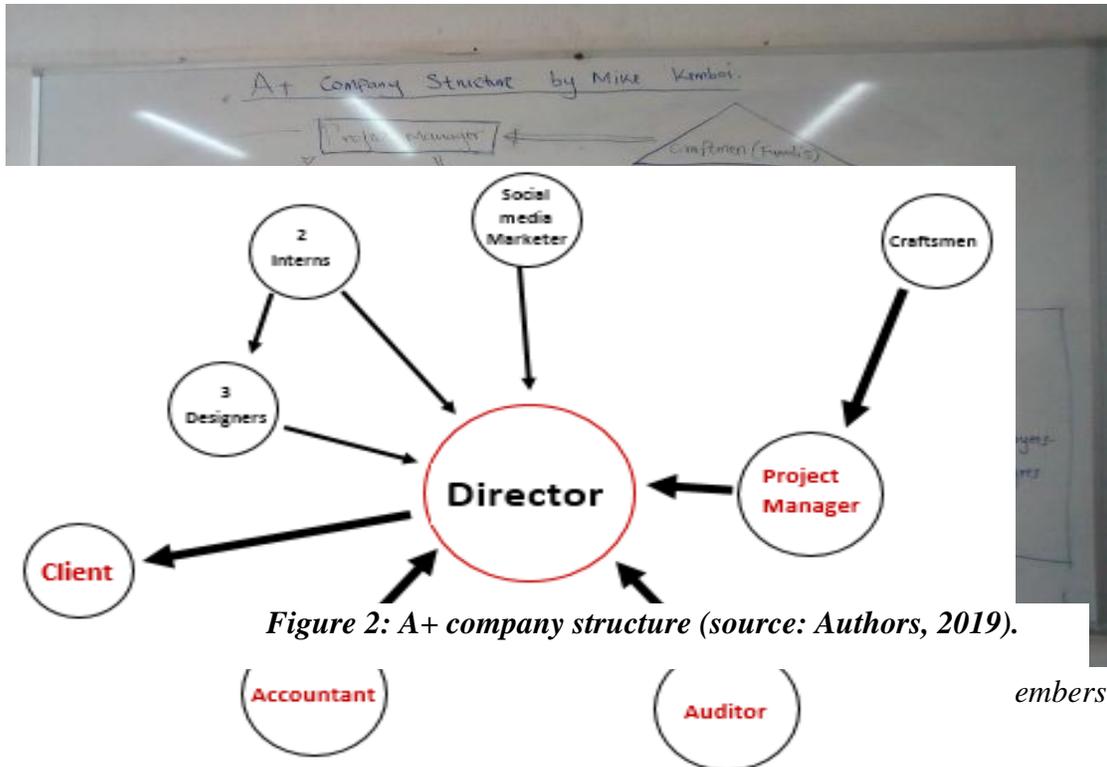


Figure 2: A+ company structure (source: Authors, 2019).

embers

companies vision of becoming a global interior design brand, combine the effort of the director, accountant, auditor, project manager, interior designers, interns, social media marketer and craftsmen to meet their client’s needs. The client is the heart of this company as without them they cannot be existing. The author has successful brought an illustration of A+ interiors company structure by showing the relationship between every member of the company.

KEY TO THE DIAGRAM	
	Weak Relationship
	Strong relationship / Arrow points the person reported to

CASE STUDY 2: AVOCADO CREATIVE STUDIO

General Layout of a Graphic Design Firm: Case Study of Avocado Creative Studio

Start Up Financing and Sustainability

Avocado is a partnership that was fully financed by the business partners. The initial capital was obtained from savings of the partners. They opted to start small and plough back the company's capital for growth. After three years in business, the partners acquired a commercial loan to finance the company's expansion. They brought in additional staff starting with an account manager and a couple of graphic designers.

Business Structure

The Business Director also doubles as the managing director of the company. She runs the business side of the firm while the creative director handles the creative side of the business.

Managing Director

The managing director (MD) manages revenue, expenses and external financing to maintain the consistent growth of the business. She monitors the cash flow to keep the firm in business.

It is the responsibility of the MD to regularly refine the company's product vision and often has frequent interactions with the clients. She calls for monthly meetings with the team to review and reinforce Avocado's vision. As a creative firm team building is at the core of the practice. From time to time she organises company trips and teambuilding activities

Avocado's managing director also doubles as the marketing and sales lead, and will be often tasked to bring in new business to the firm.

She also handles the salaries and promotions of the team. At Avocado, it's the role of the MD to prepare the payroll and submit the taxes and remittances on behalf of the employees. However, there are plans to bring in an HR manager as the company grows.

The managing director, in consultation with creative manager is also in charge of the recruitment and firing of the employees.

Creative Director

At Avocado, the creative director conceives and implements concepts, guidelines and strategies in various creative projects and oversees them to completion.

He also collaborates with account executives to obtain knowledge of the clients' requirements and leads the brainstorming/creative sessions to generate ideas.

The creative director doubles as the copywriter, writing and designing unique and well-crafted copy that meet clients' needs as well as the firm's own. He revises content and presentations, approve/reject ideas, provide feedback to the team.

He is in charge of internal skills growth: trains and guides the subordinates into accomplished professionals. It's his role to monitor results of team efforts and propose actions for the future.

Account Manager

The account Manager at Avocado, handles communication between the client and the agency. She organizes and attends client meetings, creates a creative brief from the client that is then passed over to the creative.

The account manager fills out job requests and organizes meetings with the creative, production and media team depending on the scope of the project. She also prepares weekly client status reports.

The AM is tasked to build and maintain strong, long-lasting client relationships, overseeing client account management. That includes negotiating contracts and agreements to maximize profit.

She also collaborates with sales team to identify and grow opportunities with new and existing clients. She works with the marketing manager to bring in new business.

Graphic Designers

Avocado has two graphic designers, one senior designer and a junior designer. The senior graphic designer also doubles as the agency's web and UX/UI designer.

The designers develop design briefs that suit the client's purpose, thinking creatively to produce new ideas and concepts and developing interactive design using innovation.

Outsourcing

Avocado outsources different professionals, from time to time when need arises. Large projects often require additional personnel; Copywriters, Bloggers, User experience & Interface (UX/UI) designers, Web designers, Media buyers, Brand and Digital strategists, illustrators, Project managers and Front and backend programmers.

The firm also outsources consultants from different fields, Business development, Design strategy, Psychologists and even Anthropologists as per project demands

AVOCADO DESIGN PROCESS Design Process



Brief (Discovery)



Figure 3: Avocado design process (Source: Author, 2019)

The agency receives a client brief from a potential client. The agency analyses if the job is right for them. This is done through a thorough background check. The brief is discussed to gauge the strengths, weakness, Opportunities and Risks for the project. If the project deliverables are achievable in the stipulated deadlines the Account manager accepts the job and organizes for a client meeting to discuss the project in detail. If the project or the client does not meet the threshold or is outside Avocado's competencies, the agency

declines the project and recommends another firm that can handle the project.

A typical client brief spells out the challenges and limitations to the project, the brand strategy, the deadlines and the budget for the project. This will often guide the design process.

Research (Analysis)

After locking down the client brief, the designers at avocado conduct an in-depth research on the particular project, the target audience, the competition, the demographics to gain knowledge on the particular field and the general network.

Brainstorming & Ideation (Creative Brand Refresh)

The creative then come up with random ideas that can solve the client problem. They then brainstorm and sieve out those that are the least applicable and pick the best three that are sketched and proceed to development stage.

Development (Brand Application)

The designer will actualize the designs, through the use of Adobe software (Adobe illustrator, InDesign, Photoshop or any appropriate software). The designer generates finished designs that are then sent to the client for selection and approval.

Market Plan & Evaluation (Feedback)

The proposed designs are then sent to the client. Client feedback is then incorporated to come up with the final designs for publishing (Digital or printing). In some cases, the product is taken to the market for initial testing before the final product is created. For instance, the Cancer booklet was tested at KNH and the results were incorporated into the final booklet and charts.

Hiring Process

The agency rarely places adverts on social networks, instead they leverage on their networks to get reliable employees and consultants for different projects. They make use of agencies like Yusudi to get new personnel.

The firm will often require the potential employee to send their portfolio as proof of work. This helps them gauge the candidate's level of competence. On the interview day, the interviewee is often subjected with a practical brief to gauge their ability.

New employees will undergo three months of probation before they get absorbed on permanent basis. They also offer annual and temporary contracts depending with the firm's needs. The employees are entitled to different allowances and the company often covers their remittances and submits government taxes alongside NHIF and NSSF dispatches.

Services

Avocado offers a variety of services. Some of this include; Brand Development, Graphic Design, Strategy, Social Media Management, Photography, Illustration, Copywriting, and Consultancy.

Target Market

Avocado's primary market is Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Multinationals. They however also do a lot work of small and medium sized companies. They from time to time work with promising start-ups and companies that require a refresh or a change of corporate strategy.

Flexi-Design

Avocado creative studio applies a concept of design that new in Kenya and globally as well. This way of working involves working remotely without being in the office at all times. It allows the staff to work from different areas only meeting when need be.

Flexi-design in this case is a system that allows employees to vary the time that they start or finish work, and work remotely provided that they deliver the work on time adhering to deadlines.

Company structure

At Avocado creative studio, the employees, consultants and outsourced personnel work from home following the freelance model, with meetings with client taking place at restaurants or at the clients. They however meet as a company monthly to share notes, and plan for the following months projects. In projects that require group participation, plans are done prior for the meeting areas or use of video conferencing tools like Skype and What Sapp.

Flexi design not only saves the company on overhead cost but also allow the employees to work in environments they are comfortable working in. This in turn enhances their creativity and innovation with relatively little or no supervision and facilitation.

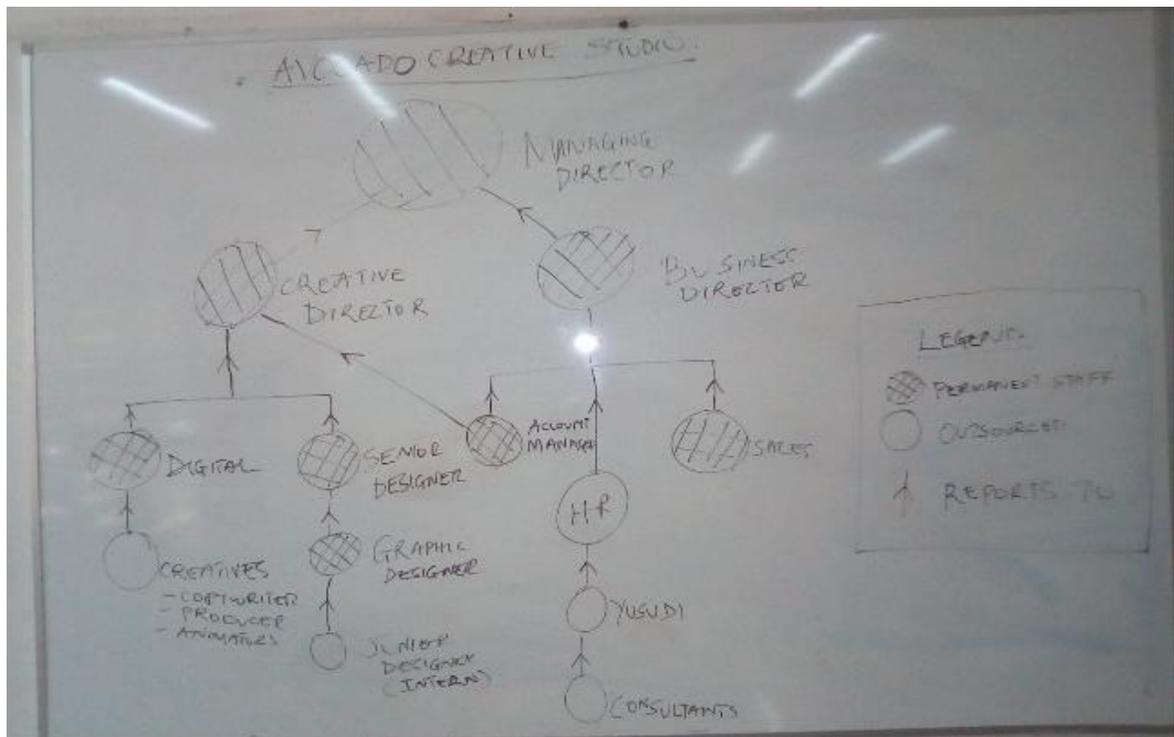


Figure 5: Avocado company structure (Source: Author, 2019)

Method

Data used to write this paper were collected through desk research. The paper seeks to document aesthetics as a philosophy of art and design. The thematic scope of the study is Kenya.

CASE STUDY3: DALBERG DESIGN

Research Design

The research was qualitative researcher conducted interviews with a designer at Dalberg Design, the research was supplemented by desktop research and literature review.

Design approach

They use a human centered design approach called participatory design.

They strive to engage the ultimate users of the product in the design

process. For example in the case where the solution could be a mobile application, the designer will engage the users live as he sketches the user interface of the application getting real time feedback and iterating the design without the need of going back and forth from the studio to the field. To collaborate with the ultimate users, they engage the community in co creation activities and workshops especially in the ideation stage which involves a lot of brain storming. At times collaboration means going to where people are; in their homes and farms.

Participatory Design

According to Fisher (2003) participatory design supports diverse ways of thinking, planning and acting and the results of the product resonate with human needs. Designers and the ultimate users of the product work together and collaborate to have a greater insight on the usability of a product. This approach is more focused on a design process that involves different stakeholders at different stages of the design process. This approach is democratic whereby the users and other stakeholders have a right on the design process and product. Schuler & Namioka (Eds.) (1993) also agrees with this idea of democracy. He says that the people affected by the product should have a right to influence and this right is exercised by participating in the design process.

The overall quality of the design is likely to be better especially when there is effective participation as compared to leaving out the participation of affected stakeholders. When people participate they also build relationships and it easier for the ultimate users to buy in the product, Schuler & Namioka (Eds.) (1993).

According to Schuler & Namioka (Eds.) (1993) the intended users of a product play a critical role in the design process. Traditionally the

intended user had no say on the process and would be seated idly waiting for a solution from the designer, however in this case the user is considered an expert in his own sense; he knows what he needs and wants. Designers act as consultant and the success is celebrated by both. Leaving out the user in the design process is undemocratic and also dangerous and could have serious consequences on the user.

Design process

When a client comes with a problem, the first step is to broaden the challenges of the client and look at the problem holistically and from different perspectives. This involves going to the users and doing a research to better understand the behaviors, challenges and the need of the client's users. This step is crucial as it helps in understanding the problem and identifying opportunity areas. Sometimes the problem stated by the clients is not the root problem and the research helps clarify the root problem to avoid solving the symptoms instead of the real problem.

When going to the field, the team goes with an open mind so that they are not swayed by their assumptions. They go to the field not as experts but as learners so that their solutions are based on the understanding of the specific problem and not solely on their expert knowledge of things. The main idea is to observe and capture insights. At the end of the day there are sessions where the team comes together for the team to align their findings and start classifying their findings into themes.

After aligning their findings into themes they start identifying possible solutions and then they start designing concepts and solutions. After coming up with the possible solution they partner with an external firm that would make the actual product or service.

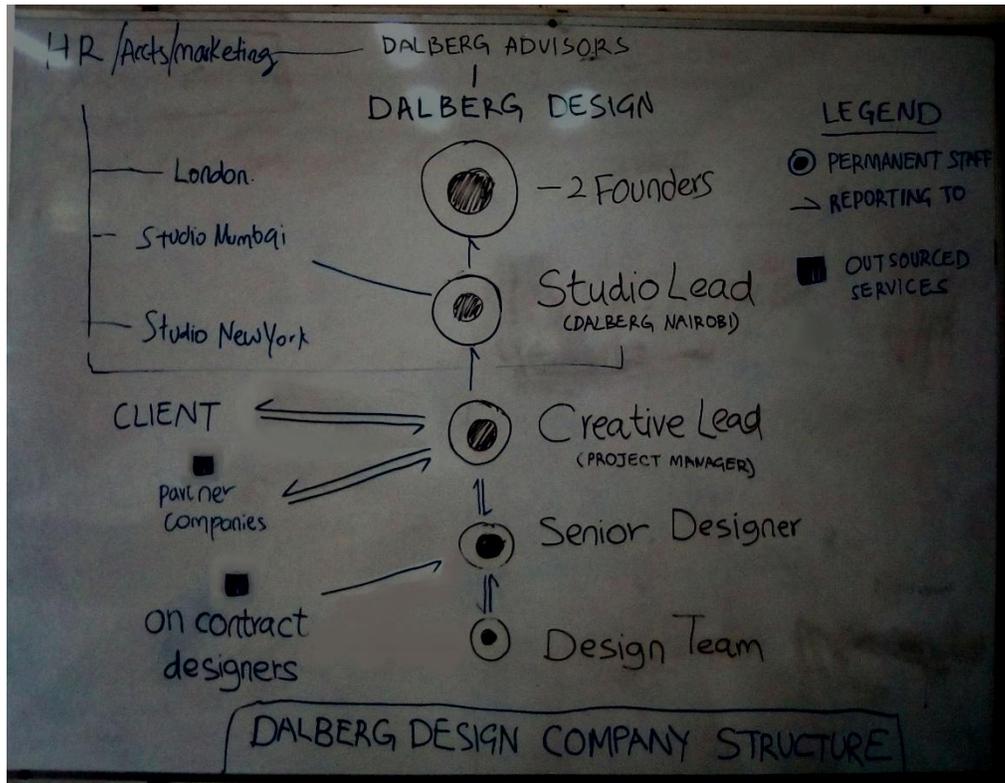


Illustration 1: Dalberg Design company structure

Company structure

Dalberg Design is a sister company of Dalberg Advisers. Dalberg advisers handle the human resources part of Dalberg Design. Dalberg Design is headed by two founders and it has four design studios; in Nairobi, Mumbai, New York and London. Each design studio in the four countries is led by a studio lead. The studio lead is responsible for heading the business and engaging clients and the general welfare of the studio. Then there is the creative lead who leads the research of the project. The creative lead is the design

manager and acts as the project manager (See Ill. 1).

After the creative lead there is a senior designer who engages the clients and leads the research. He also directs the development of deliverables of each project. This position is held by different people depending on projects from project to project. The senior designer is also responsible for internal initiatives and creating an environment where designers can interact so that they can learn, improve and create resolutions. The senior designer heads a design team whose work is to support research efforts by creating research materials and tools, mapping and conducting out the actual research. Sometimes when the project demands more resources they hire contractors on a project basis.

Summary

Participatory design approach requires a mind shift from traditional design where the voice of the end users was hardly heard by the designers and their ideas barely seen on the final product. In participatory design all the involved stakeholders are engaged in the process and the result is easily owned by the users since it was a collaborative effort. The company structure is an important ingredient for a successful design firm. It is necessary to have a multidisciplinary team since problems have a wide range of solutions; cultural, technical and behavioral. It is important to also have a team that is hireable on contract basis. It is also important to have third party companies so that the designers can focus on immersing themselves in the research and recommend appropriate solutions.

ANALYSIS

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THREE COMPANIES

Similarities

1. Directors

In the instance of A+ Plus interiors, the director is the owner and manager of the company. The company is registered under sole proprietorship. Avocado Design Studio has three directors at different levels. They include managing director, Creative director and Business director. Managing director is the overall and the head of the firm. Dalberg Design has two founders who are the owner as well as the general directors of the company. The directors are elected or appointed to manage a company's business and affairs.

Their obligations include:

- *determining and implementing policies and making decisions*
- *preparing and filing statutory documents with the Companies Office or other agencies*
- *calling meetings, including an annual meeting of shareholders*
- *maintaining and keeping records*
- *Binding the company to contracts with suppliers, lenders and others dealing with the company amongst other roles*

2. Designers

Designers play a complex role in any design firm. Designers not only create useful products and images, but they also produce and reproduce cultural meanings through those products and images. Many misinterpret the designer's work to be simply deciding upon

some sort of representation based on an artistic rendering. In fact, that is only one small part of a designer's final work product. The real work of a designer involves a process that brings forth the greatest possible outcome despite imposed limitations (Hill, 2019).

3. Accountants

The major role of accountants is to provide financial information to management by researching and analyzing accounting data, preparing reports. (<https://hiring.monster.com/employer-resources/job-description-templates/accountant-job-description-sample/>)

Other roles played by the accountant include:

- *Prepares asset, liability, and capital account entries by compiling and analyzing account information.*
- *Documents financial transactions by entering account information.*
- *Recommends financial actions by analyzing accounting options.*
- *Summarizes current financial status by collecting information, preparing balance sheet, profit and loss statement, and other reports.*
- *Substantiates financial transactions by auditing documents.*
- *Maintains accounting controls by preparing and recommending policies and procedures. Among other roles.*

4. Human resource management

Human resource management office engages in employing people, training them, compensating them, developing policies relating to them, and developing strategies to retain them (Frasch, Shadovitz, &

Shelly, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Every design firm has its own special company structure. However, regardless of what type of company structure is used in a firm, the structure should be clearly defined. The goal should be to build the fewest management level and have the shortest chain of command, the unit staff need to be able to see where their tasks fit into common tasks of the organization, the organization structure should enhance and not impede communication, the organization structure should facilitate decision making that results in the greatest work performance and most importantly, the staff should be organized in a manner that encourage informal group to develop a sense of community and belonging.

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