

## Demographics and professional concerns of high achieving floral designers

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### Abstract

Data was collected from florists who passed a rigorous examination in floral design ability and maintained certification through educational updates. The purpose was to identify the current profile and challenges of leading floral designers, members of the American Institute of Floral Designers (AIFD). Survey responses indicated more than one-fourth of the participants identified as traditional retail florists, operating brick and mortar shops. Remaining respondents were either specialized, studio designers, freelance designers, teachers or other. A slight income increase was observed in those with years of experience. AIFD membership was not statistically significant in relation to income level, but those with more years of membership earned more income. Educational level was not significant for any of the variables. Age, years of membership and work experience were highly correlated.

**Key words:** Florist, floristry, American Institute of Floral Designers, studio, freelance

### Introduction

Floral design is the artistic use of plant materials with a decorative purpose (Butler *et al.*, 2005). It ranges from the planning and execution of individual designs to entire settings created with floriculture products and accessories. Floral designers adapt loose stems into designs, creating added value to floral crops through the use of decorative accessory items, mechanics and creativity; updated knowledge of current trends and skill updates are important to their business survival (Scace and DelPrince, 2015).

Floral designs are conventionally retailed through brick and mortar shops, termed traditional retail florists (Royer, 1998; Hunter, 2013; Scace and DelPrince, 2015) and/or mass market outlets. Internet-based entities offer flowers in bulk, loose stems in bunches, or connections to full-service shops that fill orders locally. Changes in market and consumer buying habits have caused florists to diversify retail efforts, affecting some to shift outputs to event and wedding services only (Huang and Yeh, 2009, Scace and DelPrince, 2015).

In order to navigate changes in consumer tastes, floral designers must distinguish themselves in the marketplace. The economic recession beginning in 2008 caused a downward shift in number of floral retailers. While overall floriculture consumption increased (USDA, 2014), the number of retail florists decreased (IBISWorld, 2015). Inexpensive, imported fresh flowers by the stem or sleeved bouquets are commonplace in supermarkets (Jerardo, 2004), making them convenient for consumer purchase.

U.S. retail floristry does not require special degrees, training or certification, except Louisiana, which requires retail florist licensing. Florists must successfully pass an examination to design and sell floral arrangements, cut flowers and ornamental plants (Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 2015).

The typical entry level education of floral designers is a high school diploma or equivalent and mean annual pay in 2016 was \$25, 850 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Educational programs in floristry are offered by industry associations and for-credit programs. Twenty state and regional floral industry organizations offer voluntary certification training programs (National Alliance of Floral Associations, 2016). Secondary horticulture programs may have floral design components that can help prepare students for entry-level jobs upon graduation (Ohio Board of Regents, 1998). In higher education, floral design courses are taught for credit at numerous two-year and four-year institutions. Several offer more than one floral design course and have curricula tailored toward design. Current examples include Mississippi State University, Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute, and Texas A&M University. Within these institutions, students are required to successfully complete courses that emphasize business practices of accounting, economics, management, and retail floristry management. Core competencies in mathematics, science, and language are also required. Several institutions have operational floral shops/studios which act as teaching/learning facilities (Mississippi State University, University of Missouri, and Western Kentucky University). Anderson (1990) reports floral design creativity is best fostered in a series of progressive courses and other prerequisites, including those where learners are exposed to the talents of creative professionals. Communication skills are considered most important when professionals select job candidates (Pearson and Moore, 2017). The learning environment for floristry must continuously be modified and updated to prepare students for shifts in the profession, as well as the market they serve. The purpose of this study was to explore the current profile, challenges, and needs of leading members of the American Institute of Floral Designers (AIFD). This population was selected

because they play a critical role in advancing the profession. Membership in AIFD is selective, involving the successful completion of the two-part Professional Floral Design Evaluation (PFDE). The first part is an exam based upon floral design and technical theory, and the second is successful completion of five floral designs in assigned categories. Applicants must score 80 percent or higher on a 55-item examination (part 1) with a time limit of 45 minutes. In the second part, floral designs are evaluated using a rubric developed by the membership committee, based upon floral design principles. A variety of floral design themes are assigned within each category. Although general categories remain the same (sympathy, arrangement, wedding, flowers to wear, duplicated design), specific category examples change. Applicants could be assigned a bridal/attendant bouquet or a flowers to wear design within the wedding category (AIFD, 2015). The AIFD North American membership is 850, which includes members at the Certified Floral Designer (CFD) and AIFD levels, the difference between the two involving evaluative score levels.

## Materials and methods

In 2013, an electronic survey was administered to the North American membership of AIFD in consultation with the Executive Committee of AIFD. The purpose of this survey was to gather information from highly skilled floral designers who successfully completed the membership process to earn peer reviewed certification. Questions covered demographics and challenges associated with being a professional florist. Participants were also asked to select challenges from a list. The electronic survey was administered through Qualtrics survey software (Qualtrics, LLC) and consisted of 20 closed- and open-ended questions. The survey was pilot tested with members of the Alabama State Florists Association and edited to reflect the national-level AIFD membership. All research procedures were approved by the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board (approval number 12-286).

The survey was emailed by AIFD Association Headquarters on 13 Sep, 2013 to North American membership only, and a reminder email with survey link was sent 27 Sep, 2013. The response was 354, or 42 percent of North American membership. Frequency and percentage data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23 (IBM). Income and education levels were treated as discrete variables, whereas hours worked, years of experience, years of AIFD membership, and age were continuous variables. Data were analyzed by analysis of variance ( $P < 0.05$ ) using JMP 9.0 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA) with the Fit Model procedure. Means were compared by Student's *t*-test ( $P < 0.05$ ). Correlations were estimated by restricted maximum likelihood (REML) using the Multivariate procedure and pairwise correlation were tested by Pearson's correlation coefficient.

## Results

Nearly 27 % of the respondents are primarily traditional retail florists, defined as offering a variety of floral products and services normally associated with traditional shops. These include, but are not limited to, loose or arranged cut flowers, potted plants, gifts and decorative accessories for occasions such as birthdays, memorials, anniversaries, holidays, weddings and offer product delivery service. Following traditional retail florists, approximately 12 % of respondents identified within one of three categories. Some designers are primarily specialized (12.4 %) and

produce designs for weddings or sympathy orders. This category works within a brick and mortar store that offers flowers, plants and accessories that support floral sales and displays these items in merchandise vignettes. Studio designers (12.1 %) primarily work where sales are mostly or exclusively conducted by appointment, and walk-in trade is not attracted. The third group, freelance floral designers (12.7 %), work primarily for various retailers and/or contract companies throughout the year. Some AIFD members chiefly identified as educators (9.9 %), and a similar amount identified as "other" (8.8 %). Few respondents identified as floral designers in a wholesale floral enterprise, with a manufacturing entity, or chiefly as a consultant. Sixteen percent are able to temporarily depart the business to work as freelance floral designers for various retailers and/or wholesalers.

The largest group reported an annual income between \$20, 000-39, 000 (22 %), followed by \$40, 000-59, 999 (18 %). Those in the \$19, 999 or less category were third (12 %), \$60, 000-79, 000 fourth (8 %), \$100, 000 or more fifth (5 %) and \$80, 000-99, 000 last (3 %). About a third reported no increase in pay from the previous year. About a third work more than 40 hours per week. Active membership in AIFD tends to peak among designers with two to four decades of professional floral design work. AIFD certified florists have been involved in the industry from 30 to 44 years, with half of the respondents being industry members for over 25 years.

The most frequently chosen challenge associated with being a professional floral designer involves managing social media marketing (40 %) followed closely by balancing professional and private life (39 %). Next, designers are concerned about working for low salaries (37 %) and paying for health and life insurance (36 %). Concern about matching employment to their skill level was selected by 27 % of respondents. Maintaining good consumer relations only worried about a fifth of respondents as did staying abreast of floral design trends (21 %, 19 %). Time management (17 %) and the management of people, products and services (15 %) were on the lower part of the list, finished by maintaining co-worker relations (10 %), completing necessary tasks (5 %) and getting along with management (3 %).

The hours worked per week for florist industry workers was not consistent; although those who tended to make the most money also worked the most hours, except the category of those who made the least income (Table 1). Those who had the most years of experience in the industry also tended to have the highest income. Interestingly, those who were members of the American Institute of Floral Designer the longest trended toward having a higher income. Although this was not statistically significant at  $P < 0.05$ , we believe it may be with more responses. Age was not a significant factor in income level.

Three variables (hours worked per week, years of AIFD membership, and age of respondent) were not significant factors in relation to education attainment. Years of professional experience was significant, but not consistent among education levels (Table 2).

Pairwise correlations of continuous variables showed that years of experience was significantly correlated with years of AIFD membership and age. Years of AIFD membership was also significantly correlated with age (Table 3). Hours worked per week was not correlated with any of the other factors.

Table 1. Income level of florist industry workers in relation to hours per week worked, number of years' experience, years of AIFD membership, and age

| Income Level (\$) | Hours worked per week <sup>y</sup> | Years of experience <sup>z</sup> | Years of AIFD membership | Age of respondent |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| <19, 999          | 62.9 a                             | 5.9 b                            | 10.5                     | 53.0              |
| 20, 000-39, 999   | 52.5 c                             | 6.4 ab                           | 13.2                     | 54.0              |
| 40, 000-59, 999   | 54.0 bc                            | 6.9 a                            | 15.5                     | 54.7              |
| 60, 000-79, 999   | 59.6 ab                            | 6.9 a                            | 14.7                     | 55.6              |
| 80, 000-99, 999   | 60.0 ab                            | 7.6 a                            | 17.5                     | 55.7              |
| >100, 000         | 63.8 a                             | 7.4 a                            | 18.6                     | 56.6              |
| <i>P</i> value    | 0.0198                             | 0.0452                           | 0.0554                   | 0.8122            |

<sup>y, z</sup>Means followed by the same letter are not significantly different as determined by Student's t-test ( $P < 0.05$ ).

Table 2. Achieved education level of florist industry workers and its effect on hours worked per week, years of experience, years of AIFD membership, and age

| Education level      | Hours worked per week | Years of experience <sup>z</sup> | Years of AIFD membership | Age of respondent |
|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| High School Graduate | 55.5                  | 7.0 ab                           | 13.8                     | 55.9              |
| Some College         | 55.6                  | 6.9 ab                           | 14.1                     | 55.3              |
| College Graduate     | 58.6                  | 6.1 b                            | 14.1                     | 53.4              |
| Graduate School      | 59.3                  | 7.3 a                            | 16.0                     | 57.9              |
| <i>P</i> value       | 0.62                  | 0.04                             | 0.81                     | 0.22              |

<sup>z</sup>Means followed by the same letter are not significantly different as determined by Student's t-test ( $P < 0.05$ ).

Table 3. Pairwise correlations of work and demographic variables related to workers in the florist industry

| Parameter                | Hours worked per week | Years of Experience  | Years of AIFD membership | Age of respondent   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Hours worked per week    | 1.00                  | 0.0673 <sup>z</sup>  | 0.1585 <sup>z</sup>      | 0.0304 <sup>z</sup> |
| Years of Experience      | 0.5745 <sup>y</sup>   | 1.00                 | 0.6459 <sup>z</sup>      | 0.6867 <sup>z</sup> |
| Years of AIFD membership | 0.2036 <sup>y</sup>   | <0.0001 <sup>y</sup> | 1.00                     | 0.5854              |
| Age of respondent        | 0.8055 <sup>y</sup>   | <0.0001 <sup>y</sup> | <0.0001 <sup>y</sup>     | 1.00                |

<sup>z</sup>Correlation coefficient. <sup>y</sup>*P* value

## Discussion

High achieving floral designers find a variety of ways to make a career, including, but not limited to traditional retail operations. It is apparent that those who work the most hours have a higher income level, yet some at the lowest income level work over 60 hours per week as well. This could be due to factors such as the market in which they operate dictates lower returns. Experience did lead to higher income levels, but only slightly. Six years of experience appeared to be the point at which income levels started to rise. Membership in AIFD was not statistically significant in relation to income level; however, there was a definite trend upward in income with the more years of membership. This could indicate that membership in a professional society is beneficial. Professional societies perform the function of education and networking that may further translate to higher income levels (Table 1).

Attained education level was not a major factor for any of the variables. Years of experience was statistically significant (Table 2), but not very informative as there was no clear delineation among education levels. Overall, the effect of education level was not clear on this group of respondents. Three variables were highly correlated, but this could be foreseen as years of work experience, years of AIFD membership, and age of the respondent are somewhat related. Those with more years of experience had more years of membership in AIFD and were also older. Although the correlations are significant, the fact that older, more experienced members are longer term members of AIFD is not a revelation (Table 3).

Many of the leading challenges identified by participants do not relate to a need for more technical or content expertise but to marketing and work-life balance, with some indication that business management could be an issue. Given these challenges, professional societies could provide education on proper and effective use of social media. The challenges identified by survey participants may be of interest to professional societies and could inform future educational efforts offered by these societies as well as other continuing education resources.

Despite income levels, many designers are attracted to membership to be amongst likeminded individuals who desire to continue their education, promote and elevate high quality floral design, and philanthropy. Membership may help to foster networking relationships that over time can increase knowledge and income. Further studies may gain additional insight on perceived versus actual educational needs.

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