



Looking for a Fashion Mentor? Here's Where to Begin

By Cathaleen Chen

July 2, 2019

Today's fashion aspirants must create a lasting career trajectory amid a rapidly changing industry landscape. Finding a mentor early can help.

NEW YORK, United States — Grant Lacy was still in college when he became a business consultant for Eckhaus Latta. He had started as an intern at the buzzy bi-coastal label the summer before, and made such an impression that co-founder Zoe Latta hired him to help out part-time.

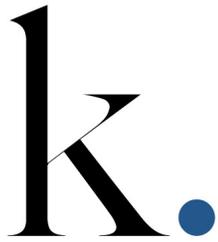
And thanks in part to Latta, Lacy runs his own retail startup today — a wholesale management software called Inline Digital. It was Latta, he said, who encouraged and advised him to start his own company right out of school.

“She said, ‘If you don’t jump in now, you’re going to get too comfortable,’” Lacy told BoF. He counts Latta as not only his mentor but also one of his first clients.

But Lacy is an anomaly: while the tech industry naturally cultivate mentorship — where senior employees routinely take junior staff under their wings, even to the point of acting as angel investors when they strike out on their own — developing such intimate professional connections is more fraught in the highly competitive world of fashion. Brands contend with one another for the same store space and media attention, sometimes pitting veteran designers against their former protégés. Where mentor-mentee relationships do develop can come down to luck.

“In general fashion keeps a tight hand to the chest,” Latta said. “It’s not like tech where you can be like, ‘oh, could you introduce me to this person or that person.’”

Nonetheless, having a mentor to navigate the industry can be crucial for those just starting out. Today’s fashion aspirants must carve out their role and create a lasting career trajectory even as traditional companies give way to digital newcomers. The stakes are even higher for



women and minorities, who still lack representation in management positions. That's why it's more important than ever to find guidance and forge relationships with experienced veterans.

Here, BoF lays out tips for finding mentorship in this largely disconnected industry.

Seek jobs at companies that prioritise mentorship

For some companies, mentorship and support are simply built into their identity — a qualification that job seekers can prioritise in the interviewing process.

That may mean choosing between a small but supportive workplace and the prestige of a global label. But the meaningful relationships formed in a nurturing first job could have a greater impact on long-term career prospects, said Keanan Duffy, programme director of fashion business management at Parsons School of Design.

“What I say to students is, go to an organisation that you're passionate about, working for someone you respect and admire,” he said. “That will advance your career way faster.”

Ask a hiring manager about mentorship opportunities: does this company have mentor-mentee programmes? What kind of relationship do employees typically have with their supervisors? Candidates can also speak to employees to get a sense of the company culture.

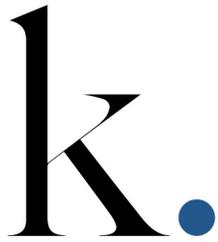
Lacy said he didn't consider Eckhaus Latta's workplace environment when he applied for his internship, but was lucky to find a company with such a collaborative nature.

“Everyone wears small hats and no one is above taking out the trash or doing the dishes — but everyone also works on P&L [profit and loss statements] and meeting buyers and putting together line sheets or organising swatches,” Latta said. “Every part of our business is exposed and we kind of bear it all with them.”

Some companies may have formal mentorship programmes that pair newcomers with senior executives, or offer career training.

At Tamara Mellon, managers host biweekly sessions about professional development, financial literacy, mental health and other topics meant for enriching the professional and personal lives of their employees. Chief Executive Jill Layfield calls this “cultural mentorship” — an attitude of support that the company wants to embed in its DNA.

“Culturally, there are things that we want to build into the organisation,” she said. “With the financial intelligence class in two weeks, Tamara [Mellon] and I were like, ‘We wish when we



were 25 our bosses had sat down with us and said here are some things to think about in terms of being financially independent.”

Layfield pointed to another class the company recently held called How to Tame Your Inner Critic.

“People quit when they don’t like their managers, so we want to invest in our employees outside of the monetary [incentive] of working with us,” she said.

Women and minority candidates can tailor their job search to find companies that prioritise inclusivity. A growing number of HR departments among both startups and global companies host mentorship programmes to better cultivate inclusivity in senior management positions.

Montreal-based shoe brand Aldo Group sponsors the Two Ten Women in Footwear Industry programme, which hones female leadership in the space, as part of its commitment to promote gender diversity on leadership teams.

Last year, 68 percent of Aldo’s management level associates were women, while women comprised 50 percent of directors and 40 percent of vice presidents, according to Senior Vice President of Design, Daianara Grullon Amalfitano.

“The most powerful leadership moments for me actually have to do with mentoring,” she said.

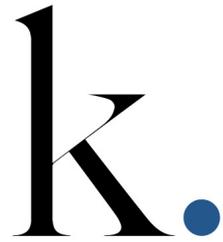
Find institutional support

Traditional networking through industry organisations is another channel for mentorship. In the US, designers can apply to join the Council of Fashion Designers of America while their European counterparts have the British Fashion Council and Camera della Moda Italiana.

Once approved to be part of the CFDA, for instance, emerging designers have access to the entire roster of senior members. The CFDA created programmes for specialised mentorship, such as Network, which requires mentee members to reach a revenue of \$1 million annually and have a certain number of employees. Members can request guidance on a specific topic and be paired with one of 75 mentors on call.

“Someone might say I need help with digital marketing and warehousing, and then we’d look at what they’re interested in achieving and who we have on board and pick a mentor,” said CFDA Executive Vice President Lisa Smilor.

If the \$1 million barrier to entry is too high, fashion-school graduates can always reach out to former professors for guidance and tap into their alumni network.



“I have a lifelong mentor, a teacher at Central Saint Martins,” said Parsons’ Duffy. “Even when she’s not ‘mentoring’ as a physical act, she always has something new to talk about. The learning curve never ends.”

Ask for help

The first step toward finding a mentor is to ask for help. But equally important is knowing what sort of assistance you need.

“Everybody loves to give advice and be admired,” said Caroline Pill, vice president of global executive search at Kirk Palmer Associates, a corporate talent search agency. “It’s as simple as having the guts to ask someone for their advice.”

Pill said she receives cold emails on a regular basis and tries to reply every time.

A CEO or creative director may be impressed by an ambitious fashion aspirant who sends a cold email. But keep in mind that the best way to build a relationship from scratch is to ask for advice rather than seek a specific job opening.

For Lacy, college was a time to reach out to professionals for advice without the pressure to turn those relationships into job hunting opportunities.

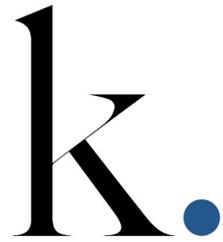
“Whether you’re trying to get hired in the long term or not, build the relationship first,” he said. “Don’t reach out with the suggestion of trying to get hired, reach out trying to build the relationship.”

“If you have the advantage of learning constantly, my advice is don’t be shy,” he added. “Make a list of people you think have the career trajectory that you identify with and just reach out. LinkedIn, Instagram DMs. I’ve seen people do that and get great advice.”

Duffy, who also receives enquiries for career guidance, suggests sending specific questions when sending a cold email.

“What’s most effective is if you’re contacting me out of the blue, I’d want you to ask me something specific that I can respond to,” he said. “If it’s, ‘Can you give me general advice?’, that’s very hard to answer. My general advice is, ‘Don’t go into the fashion industry.’”

Still, discretion is advised. While some professionals are happy to answer to solicitations of advice, others aren’t, or simply don’t have the time to respond. Be polite, and when you don’t hear back, a follow-up is okay but don’t be a pest.



Look to friends and peers

Mentorship doesn't have to come from someone more senior.

"People forget that a mentor is anyone who provides guidance," said Pill. "It could be a first boss but it could also be a friend. In general, I think the more natural the relationship, the better."

Latta, for instance, found mentorship as well as friendship in her peers, like designer and shop-owner Maryam Nassir Zadeh, whom she had met through mutual friends.

"Maryam was the first to see our collection and she wrote an order. At one point she ran my showroom and was my landlord," Latta told BoF. "I would consider her a mentor, but she's not so much older than me."

For Latta, professional support comes in the form of commiseration from fellow designers. As a finalist of the LVMH Prize for young designers last year, she and co-founder Mike Eckhaus had access to professional mentorship as part of the programme. But the best component of that experience, according to Latta, was "being with the people that were my age, making clothes in 2018 and we all deal with the same stuff, like 'Oh, this store cancels orders' and 'this factory is pulling this bullshit.'"

Beyond shared sympathies, Latta has also been able to swap resources like facilities and suppliers within these relationships.

"It was nice to have peers and that's what was lacking more so than mentorship," she said. "I've learned so much more with my peers than in the traditional structures of mentorship."