



NICHOLE A. MCCOLLUM, CID, NCIDQ, ASID, COR
Interior Designer at Social Security Administration & The Polished Room

Nichole McCollum is a Certified Interior Designer and entrepreneur in the state of Maryland. She currently works for the Social Security Administration (SSA) as an interior designer. Formerly a federal contracting officer, Nichole has experience developing and administering facilities contracts. After a career change in 2015, she now serves as a Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) and Interior Design Subject Matter Expert (SME) for interior design related projects at SSA. Recently, Nichole was sworn in as an interior design member of the Maryland Board of Certified Interior Designers. She is also a member of the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) and an Ambassador for the Council for Interior Design Qualification (CIDQ).

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

A: I work for the SSA in the Division of Architectural and Engineering Services (DAES) where I serve as an Interior Design Subject Matter Expert. I am responsible for design development and review for large site renovation projects at our headquarters campus, as well as for our hearings offices across the country. I am also responsible for design standard development and implementation for our headquarters campus and hearings offices nationwide. These design standards ensure that our buildings meet all necessary building codes and accessibility requirements for the safety and welfare of our employees and customers. Recently, I started my own business, The Polished Room, where I provide interior design consulting and e-design services for residential and small commercial renovations.

Q: When did you decide to take the NCIDQ Exam? How did you decide what order to take them in?

A: I decided to take the NCIDQ Exam when first researching how to become an interior designer. Since this was a second career path for me, I wanted to ensure that I was armed with all of the knowledge and qualifications necessary to adequately perform the job.

I began taking the exams based on my eligibility. I took the IDFX immediately after I finished school. I took the IDPX and PRAC as soon as I had acquired all of my required work experience hours.

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

A: The first time I sat for the IDPX and PRAC I failed both exams. I passed the IDPX on my next attempt, but it took me three times to pass the PRAC. Going through the process was humbling. I thought I would pass the IDPX fairly easily because of my business background. I have a degree in Business Management. By failing both exams, I realized I needed to vary my work experience and refer back to the exam blueprints often.

I stayed motivated by incorporating the study material into my daily life. For example, I would observe how bathrooms were configured in public places while I was out running errands or I would see what types of materials new businesses were using. I also engaged more with friends and colleagues in the industry who had been through the process of sitting for professional exams and asked for assistance, when needed.

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

A: I began studying about 3 months prior to the exam date. I would use various study methods to try to incorporate studying into my day rather than studying for large chunks of time. I reserved those times for practice exams.

To study, I used flashcards; some I made and some I purchased. I also prerecorded myself reading the study material so I could listen to it on my commute to and from work. Prior to the pandemic, I began to attend various local events to help with preparing for the exam. I

also attended a workshop for the PRAC, took practice tests, and used various online forums.

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

A: Absolutely! I love what I do. I enjoy the aesthetic side of interior design, but more importantly I love that what we do improves the health, safety, and welfare of the people occupying the spaces we design.

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

A: Be open to every opportunity and explore as many facets of the industry as you can. Don't wait until graduation to develop relationships with people in the industry. Take opportunities to job shadow designers at all levels and in various industries to see what type of interior design you may be interested in.

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

A: I became NCIDQ Certified to indicate to anyone I am working with that I am qualified to perform at a high level. This was important to me because it also gave me the added confidence I needed to move forward with pursuing my passion for interior design.

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

A: Having my NCIDQ Certificate has opened doors to becoming a member of the Maryland Board of Certified Interior Designers. It has also allowed me to take on more complex interior design projects. It demonstrates to customers and my employer that I am qualified to work on their project.

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

A: The first step is acknowledging that these obstacles exist. From there, I think we can work together to develop programs and create opportunities that not only level the playing field but allow every person in the industry to thrive.

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

A: Many people don't realize the extent of the scope of services and level of knowledge provided by NCIDQ Certified interior designers. Interior design is more than just a hobby, it's a profession and should be treated as such. As an industry, we need to educate our customers on what we as professionals bring to the table when being considered for a project. Knowledge is power. If everyone knows their roles and the roles of their respective colleagues, then we can work together. When our customers better understand who they are getting into business with, it helps them to feel better about the value of services offered. This benefits the industry as a whole.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

A: Thanks for the opportunity.