The coolest job in the world? What it's really like to work at Pixar

Pixar has a reputation as one of the best places to work on earth. The animation studio behind hits like Toy Story and Finding Nemo is famous for its plush premises and relaxed culture. But now the whole process has become a multi-billion-dollar success, can they maintain the spirit that made the company? What is it that sustains the enthusiasm and creativity fizzing throughout the average four years it takes to make a Pixar movie?

Pixar create literally every aspect of a frame from scratch. The studio is a hothouse of inventiveness, where creativity rules. And in a blaze of primary colours, thunderstruck slapstick and aching pathos, they have succeeded in cornering the market in the state-of-the-art children’s entertainment that just so happens to seduce adult audiences alike. After all, it is the Pixar objective to create “unique ideas, compelling stories, visual artistry” according to their website.

Horseback riding, cooking classes, visiting racetracks? All in a day's work as a Pixar animator.

By Francesca Birch.
Time and time again Pixar have surpassed expectations fashioned by the harshest of critics. To those who said a computer-generated film would not work, along came Toy Story grossing over $350 million worldwide. In Wall-E they took a hero who could not speak, placed on a planet without any life form, and it became one of the most successful films of the year winning an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. And in the process, one of the most loved Pixar characters of all time. With Ratatouille, they made the whole world fall in love with a grimy little rodent. Their unique storytelling matched with their technical wizardry invite audiences into an outlandish world where anything seems possible.

What’s the management magic that makes this all possible? Pixar is a cooperative environment. It is a place where there is no iron discipline administered by the authority. Hierarchy is obsolete at Pixar, encouraging employees to express their creativity, producing some of the most aesthetically pleasing and successful products in the world.

It all began with John Lasseter, who is the current creative chief officer for Pixar and The Walt Disney Company. He originally started out as an animator for Disney, but swiftly resigned from his position back in 1979 and began a computer graphics division for George Lucas’s company LucasFilm (now owned by Disney). Lasseter left Disney as an animator as they did not believe in pursuing computer-animated work and favoured the traditional hand-drawn animation which had dominated cinema in previous years. Lasseter believed computer-animation was the new frontier for film, but Disney simply did not agree.

American entrepreneur and founder of Apple Inc. Steve Jobs sensed something in this new technological art form, and later purchased Lasseter’s Lucasfilm computer division in 1986 for $10 million to pioneer computer animation as a separate company. They then eventually established themselves as a little independent company named Pixar with roughly 40 employees to their name.
Shortly after the establishment of Pixar, Disney sought a business deal with them — clearly recognising that they had missed an opportunity with Lasseter. In 1991, Disney and Pixar then announced an agreement to make and distribute at least one computer-generated animated film together. Pixar would control the creative and production processes, whereas Disney would manage the distribution and marketing side.

The success of the first collaborated and world’s first animated feature-film Toy Story, led the two companies to agree to a five-picture deal, releasing more films including A Bug’s Life (1998), Toy Story 2 (1999) and Monsters Inc. (2001) dominating box office charts around the world.

But in 2004, Disney and Pixar hit a problem. Steve Jobs had lost faith in Disney and wanted to find a new distributor to work with. There were reportedly some concerns of mismanagement of the Pixar-Disney relationship by former Disney chief executive Michael Eisner. There was a strong pressure for Eisner to resign because of this, which Steve Jobs pushed further by unexpectedly released a statement to CNN: “It’s a shame Disney won’t be participating in Pixar’s future successes.” By this time, Pixar’s name had outstripped Disney’s in animation, and many companies expressed their interest in Pixar.

Michael Eisner eventually succumbed to the pressure and resigned from his position as Disney CEO. Naturally Disney swooped back in and purchased Pixar in a new deal worth $7.4 billion in 2006. But the money was not the only thing Pixar gained from this new deal. Steve Jobs ensured Pixar would receive 100% of the profits from the films, and only pay Disney a 15% distribution fee; allowing Pixar to remain a separate entity.

It stood and remains to be plainly clear — Disney needs Pixar more than Pixar needs Disney.
Inside, there is freedom. The Pixar offices are open 24 hours a day for those to work the hours they want to. Gone are the days of cubicalised offices, employees are encouraged to design and build their own offices, from Wild West saloons to tropical Tiki rooms. Working at Pixar is a lifestyle, where a freestyling and natural atmosphere means Pixar employees are in it for the long haul. This is a model that Google and Apple would later use, where the job becomes the lifestyle for the employees.

The building is designed with creativity in mind. The main atrium of Pixar named ‘The Steve Jobs Building’ is the central point of Pixar, where you will find a café, fitness centre, cereal and burrito bar and games room. Jobs also insisted during the time of its design in the nineties, that this building is the only place on-site where there are toilets — encouraging conversation and discussion even in the less glamorous quarters of the elaborate Pixar buildings. The building also has an employee wall titled ‘Pixar People’, where it is covered with staff photographs arranged by order of arrival. Pixar care about their employees, and commend any employee that has clocked ten years of service with a golden Buzz Lightyear award at a special event.

**HOW TO GET A JOB AT PIXAR**

Pixar has created a worldwide destination employer — where thousands of talented animators, programmers and lighting experts apply for a job every year.

“How can I become a Pixar animator?” These seven words are some of the most common you will come across at Pixar HQ, or muttered from the lips of inspired children at the cinema, to the bustling hallways of university art and animation departments. While proficient computer skills are important, it is the ability to bring life into a character and setting that differentiates a Pixar
Experience

“Experience is everything. Get as much as you can and anywhere you can. Sometimes you have to do the jobs that aren’t so great to bag the one you do want.”

Ideas, Ideas, Ideas

“It comes down to having good ideas and the acting ideas as well. Sometimes it comes down to a wildcard, but there are the gifted few and the ones who have great potential. There isn’t any specific credentials, but ideas are key.”

Learn How to Draw

“A strong background of traditional hand-drawn art will be very helpful, it helps with staging and character poses, so getting a grip on this is just as important as your computer skills. It’s not all about the technology - but it helps!”

Andrew Bartholomew is a final year animation student at Teesside University. “It is my dream to work at Pixar,” he says. “Although there are so many different areas of animation to work in, it’s sort of the ultimate dream for me and my classmates. We really respect and admire the work that they do.” Students at Teesside are also taught about the Pixar animating ‘style’, “we don’t obviously know exactly how they animate - but we have looked at the evolution of their work in depth. Learning about Pixar has just made me even more hungry for a job there.”

An ultimate dream for the students at Teesside, and for thousands more who have their sights set on a job at Pixar. An estimated 45,000 people apply for each new position at Pixar, where only a few handpicked applicants are chosen. Andrew Gordon has worked at Pixar as an internship supervisor and directing animator for 16 years, and lists the four chief qualities it takes to become a Pixar animator.
Hair animation process for ‘Merida’ from Brave

45000
AVERAGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE APPLYING FOR EACH NEW OPEN PIXAR JOB POSITION

$8BN
CURRENT TOTAL BOX OFFICE TAKINGS WORLDWIDE

4 YEARS
AVERAGE TIME IT TAKES TO CREATE A PIXAR FILM

BE WILLING TO LEARN

“You have to keep learning, don’t get complacent and do your job over and over again. You have to keep pushing and looking for new experiences. Employees are never complacent, even ones like me who have been here for years and years - animation and technology is continuous art.”

Andrew says, “I think people want to work at Pixar because we really allow our employees to push themselves creatively, and it’s a very friendly and open place. Of course there are perks of the job, but we hire people who are really passionate about bringing the best out of themselves – that’s why Pixar is so unique.”
Arik Ehle has worked at Pixar for 13 years, and provides his own perspective on life as a Pixar animation supervisor. “I was hired as the Production Office Assistant on Monsters Inc, doing all the stereotypical duties... photocopies, getting coffee for animators and generally running errands,” he says. But his heart was set on the animation department. Working nights and weekends on his creative animation portfolio, Arik endeavoured to prove he was capable of securing an animation position at Pixar.

“Getting my foot in the door enabled me to get to know almost everyone in the studio, and I was then able to get a heads up when an entry level position opened up in animation. By that point I’d been working on my portfolio for two years, and it was finally ready to go. I was hired as an animator on The Incredibles.” From the release of The Incredibles in 2004, Arik has worked on every Pixar feature-film since.

Art and film appear to be natural passion when working for Pixar. For Arik, they both went together hand in hand, “as a kid, I was obsessed with watching movies and making art and spent most of my time in school doodling rather than studying.” Passion may be one tool. But what are the raw makings of an animator? “I think being a really good observer is key, you have to be aware of how people act, body language and reading emotional cues. When you’re a Pixar animator, you look at the world a bit differently from everyone else.”

Being observational is just part of the extensive research Pixar animators prepare before embarking on their animated endeavours. “We do whatever we can to get inside the head of a character we’re going to animate or get an understanding for the environment. On Cars and Cars 2 this meant going to a racetrack, taking horseback riding classes for Brave all the way out in Scotland, cooking classes for Ratatouille and even touring a car plant to observe the robots which helped us all work towards Wall-E.” Pixar animators completely immerse themselves in the world they are animating.

Then comes the animating process, as soon as all the voice actors have completed their work. In this instance, Pixar are very flexible and allow their animators freedom to work in whichever way they choose.

Pixar animator Austin Madison took a slightly different route into Pixar. He was accepted onto a Pixar animation internship in 2005 and never looked back.
Pixar Filmography
1995 - 2013
Working on every feature since Ratatouille (2007), for Austin, working for Pixar has been “immensely satisfying.” During his time at Pixar, Austin has acquired his own routine of animation, “I usually act out a scene. Sometimes I’ll film myself; other times it’s just to feel the performance and the actions in my body. Then I’ll draw it out as quickly as possible to show the director. Once the director buys off on the performance, I start at the root of the character and work my way out to the fingertips, one layer at a time.”

The animators have a very open relationship with the director. Arik agrees, “Thankfully, animators at Pixar have direct contact with the director, which is vital, on a daily basis.” He continues, “we all review our work together as a group and it’s a very collaborative and fulfilling experience.”

It is the director who assigns specific shots and scenes in each film according to animator strengths, but it
is up to the animator to work on their assigned scenes in any order they choose. Pixar’s flexible working environment accommodates any working preferences. “There are many workflows and ways animators work, luckily at Pixar we are really free to work however we want, as long as our shots are reviewed and approved during the process,” says Arik. Pixar animator of seven years Austin agrees, “some folks are better at acting or comedy, while others might be better at action and drama. I can do it all… of course. So I’m quite happy to receive the more challenging shots of the feature.” It is the free styling atmosphere that is a key component to Pixar’s success. Allowing the animators to become thoroughly engrossed in the quality and refinement of their work.

But do animators ever lose sight of the bigger picture? “There can be times where we get so focused on the shot that we’re working on that we may lose sight of what’s going on, or how the character and actions we’re working on relate to the character’s overall story arc,” says Arik. But Austin believes “it’s your job to lose yourself in a scene, and your director’s job to give you the bigger picture.”

Pixar are so ahead of the game that they have their own in-house tailor made software. But it’s a “continual evolution, as it should be,” says Austin. It takes a lot of training to animate, and is an expanding medium. Acting, staging and composition are the main principles that constantly apply. “Pixar software
has advanced a lot over the years. It’s not easy, but it’s a lot of fun,” says Arik.

These animators are clearly thankful for where they are working. Arik laughs, “sometimes the hours can be long and things can get really, really busy, but when you love what you do, you realise it could be a lot worse.”

Despite working at Pixar for 13 years, Arik still acknowledges, “we are all very well aware that we still have so much room for growth, we’ll continue to learn and push one another indefinitely.” It is clear from the evolution of Pixar films over the years, the quality has improved immeasurably from the very beginning of Toy Story, where computer animation was a new art, until the most recent Pixar release Monsters University where animation has now dominated the mainstream film industry.

It is clear the animators are very appreciative of where they are. As Pixar’s work becomes more advanced with each film, audiences can expect greater things from the upcoming releases, as the animators still find great things in their work. Austin recalls, “I still can’t really get over how lucky I am. One moment that sticks out for me the most is when I animated some rats running by the screen for Ratatouille and there was a tiny little woodwind flourish played by the orchestra to go with my animation — and it hit me, like it always does when I animate - I’m in a movie.”