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7.5 Staff Development and Retention

Laurie Dreyer-Hadley, Kathleen C. Maurel, and Debra Fiori

Developing a staff of architects requires special attention to, and recognition of, the creative work of the profession. Training can be formal or informal, but it must be ongoing.

Retaining talented staff should be one of the highest management priorities of any architecture firm. This is because it is generally understood that employees are the most important resource in a firm.

Keeping your best people starts with paying close attention to a firm’s human resources. This includes maintaining a supportive culture, careful supervision, thorough communication, appropriate use of praise and criticism, a system for formal appraisals, reasonable benefits, and consistent salary administration. Where appropriate, it is also helpful to provide paths to leadership and possibly to ownership in the firm. The important thing is to find a way to manage the firm and the people within it with sensitivity to the aspirations of the firm and its projects, on one hand, and those of its people, on the other.

Managers often assume their job expectations and desires are different from those of the individuals they supervise. However, managers and their employees usually have many shared expectations that affect retention. Among them are the desire for

- Recognition of work done
- Open communication about the firm’s goals and values
- Job stability and security
- Competitive wages

Many in management assume that high wages are the key to staff retention, but in reality, wage discussions are often an opportunity for an employee to bring up other

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factors of concern, including opportunities to grow in the profession. Recent evidence indicates that access to learning is of prime importance to the younger members of the workforce, and that continuing education benefit programs are valuable aids to retaining employees only if they are properly communicated to the staff.

EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION

The secret of good human resources management is to manage each staff person as an individual. A great deal of guidance exists on how to do this, but most research on motivating professionals centers on two factors: challenge and recognition. Professionals seek challenging work and recognition for doing a good job. It is significant that mid-career professionals who leave their firms after years of service cite such reasons as, “I wasn’t appreciated,” “I didn’t know where I stood,” and “I couldn’t see where I was going in the firm.”

Inspiring Staff Members

Architecture work is inherently challenging. Opening that challenge to every staff member, though, can be difficult for firm management. As in all professional work, some tasks in the architect’s office are repetitive and mundane. Nonetheless, managers can vary assignments and provide opportunities for employees to develop new skills. Most researchers suggest involving all staff in the “big picture” so they can see where their efforts, however mundane, are headed.

Managers can also show each employee the tangible steps that he or she can take to grow in the firm. With clearly defined goals, the employee is more likely to follow the plan—and less likely to leave.

A career path should be created through a two-way dialogue. It is just as important for an employee to weigh in on his or her interests or specialty as it is for the manager to identify strengths and areas needing development. Steps on a career path could include such behavior-based activities as learning to manage people and projects, improving listening skills, or dealing with conflict. Other activities could include specific on-the-job training in technical skills related to architecture, such as beginning to work on different phases of a project, increasing client contact, or coordinating with contractors.

Providing Frequent Feedback

Feedback should be frequent, specific, immediate, and sincere. Praise tends to have more desirable results than negative comments. Criticism, when due, is equally important, however; even excellent performers need to hear it. As in design itself, feedback is integral to growth and improvement.

Regular performance appraisals and professional development discussions offer both the firm and the employee opportunities to take stock, assess the relationship, and make plans for continued improvement. Properly approached and carried out, performance appraisals also provide opportunities for both challenge and recognition.

Communicating Effectively

Employees who are knowledgeable about firm goals, client objectives, and project problems consistently make better decisions, resulting in improved performance by the firm. Employee performance is even better when employees have participated in setting goals and solving problems in the first place. It follows that communication within an architecture firm ought to be structured to provide staff members with the information they need to perform their jobs effectively.

Many people are thrust into ownership or management positions in architecture firms without training or a clear understanding of the best ways to communicate with employees. For example, management may not spend much time communicating the guiding values of the firm because they believe such values are self-evident. Or, man-

► Communicating with Clients (6.2) provides guidance on achieving better verbal and written communication with clients.

agement may view project budgets as confidential and keep them from the project managers responsible for project performance.

This is not to suggest that every firm should become a democracy, with every staff member privy to the agonizing decisions of the firm's leaders. Instead, thoughtful decisions should be made about what types of information will be shared with the staff, bearing in mind that it is unfair to hold staff members responsible for situations when they may not have the knowledge to assess them properly.

Most people become anxious in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Thus, management decisions that affect an entire firm are best received when they are quickly and clearly communicated to everyone at the same time.

Generally, though, communication should be taking place consistently on several levels, including these:

- *Informal, everyday contact.* This involves staying in touch and providing—via a short note or e-mail message or in person—a point of guidance, a bit of praise, or a word of criticism or just asking, “How’s it going?”
- *More formal, regular forums for communication.* Smaller offices might hold biweekly officewide meetings; large offices might meet regularly by studio, department, or project. Project teams, or the whole office or studio, might meet to review projects in progress.
- *Off-site meetings for the owners or the management team.* These provide an uninterrupted occasion to step back and examine the progress of the firm as a whole. If held regularly, such sessions can be invaluable planning tools for the future. As well, they can be highly motivating for the people involved.
- *Social events.* When sponsored by the firm, social events encourage informal communication and can help staff members build relationships with one another.

Because so many architecture firms are small, many architects learn to supervise in the crucible of everyday activity.

► Developing Leadership Skills (7.6) covers basic leadership concepts and describes practical tools for leadership training.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Performance appraisal and professional development are two different processes. However, they are often conducted together, much to the confusion of staff members. It is important to be clear with staff about which process you are attempting, or if you are attempting both processes simultaneously.

A *performance appraisal* or review looks backward at how an employee performed his or her work over the past year. Usually the process includes measurements against job descriptions or responsibilities and attempts to show how an employee's performance affected the work produced by the firm. Not surprisingly, most employees see it as a grading system.

Professional development looks forward at an employee's future goals and opportunities to grow along a career path. It can be used to correct minor deficiencies, set new sights, define new learning programs, and show staff where they can hope to advance within a firm.

Confusion comes into play when employees want to discuss their future careers and management wants to discuss past performance.

Performance appraisal begins with everyday praise and criticism. It can continue with formal performance appraisals, but it is important to provide feedback to staff members, both positive and negative, on a regular basis. Unfortunately, feedback of any kind is often neglected. It is very difficult to tell an employee that performance on a given task has been unsatisfactory. Rather than using such situations as a learning experience, a supervisor will often fret about an employee's performance until an accumulation of incidents results in dismissal.

W. Edwards Deming, the father of total quality management (TQM), believed that formal appraisals should be abolished entirely because in an ideal workplace employees would understand at all times where they stand. He asserted that performance

WHY DO PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS?

Performance appraisals are done for a variety of reasons, but particularly to

- Encourage and support communication between managers and employees.
- Communicate firm goals and priorities.
- Clarify an employee's role, responsibilities, and expectations.
- Recognize (praise) accomplishments and discuss improvements required.
- Share input or feedback from others.
- Enhance employee performance through feedback.
- Set job goals and objectives.
- Identify training and development needs and develop plans to address them.
- Establish short- and long-term professional goals and plans for reaching them.
- Determine personnel actions—promotions, terminations, etc.
- Serve as a basis for pay decisions.
- Enable an employee to provide feedback to the manager.

DEFINING THE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

The purpose of a performance appraisal is to improve performance. Performance appraisal can be defined as

- An ongoing process, *not* an annual "event"
- A dialogue between the manager and the employee, *not* just a communication from manager to employee
- An opportunity to reinforce the firm's mission, values, and culture, *not* to focus on irrelevant factors
- An opportunity to acknowledge success and discuss positive outcomes, *not* solely an enumeration of mistakes or deficiencies
- A process based on job performance and behavior, objective facts, specific examples, and results, *not* on subjective opinions, "hunches," the employee's "attitude," or generalizations
- A process in which the reviewer serves as coach and counselor, *not* merely as judge
- An opportunity to summarize and reinforce what has been discussed in the past, *not* an opportunity to surprise the employee with new information

appraisals can create unhealthy competition among staff members and destroy team spirit. Recent studies suggest that employees do not like them and that they are regarded as instruments of dismissal. Still, an appraisal process gives employees a chance to communicate their questions and aspirations in the absence of other means to do so. In a litigious environment, a written appraisal can also help protect the firm.

Purposes of the Appraisal

The primary purpose of a formal appraisal is to improve performance by recording the strengths and weaknesses of a member of the firm. This information is then used to establish a plan for improvement. Appraisals are an opportunity for both parties to communicate goals, expectations, opportunities for improvement, and progress. They help the firm identify and determine ways to develop management potential. They help in firm planning, and they can become part of the process of determining promotions and, when necessary, layoffs.

Many firms are beginning to focus their appraisal process on shared future goals and professional development rather than concentrating strictly on past behavior. In this way, the process becomes a career planning tool for the employee and part of the firm's strategic plan. Some firms also include an opportunity for employees to evaluate their managers and the firm in general, which can provide healthy and innovative input for the firm's management.

Timing

To be effective, appraisals and professional development planning should be done at regular intervals. Research shows most firms conduct reviews once a year, although some management consultants recommend semiannual or even quarterly reviews. Everyone in the firm may be reviewed during the same time period, or reviews may be related to the anniversary date of employment.

Some firms have recently shifted toward team reviews and assessments. These peer reviews can be more effective, since they are seen as more constructive and less judgmental than a traditional discussion with management.

A firm needs to determine whether formal performance appraisals will occur at the same time as compensation evaluations. Some argue that separating the two events allows for more concentrated discussion of performance. Others insist that doing both at the same time emphasizes the directness of the relationship between performance and compensation.

Evaluation Factors

Each firm should develop its own evaluation factors that directly express its values, goals, objectives, and priorities. Factors should always relate to work requirements and not to an employee's personality traits.

The firm should also consider broad-based objectives when evaluating an employee's performance. How does the employee's advancement relate to the stated values and goals of the firm? Along these lines, additional evaluation factors might include the following:

- Increase in knowledge
- Organizational ability
- Quantity and quality of work
- Creativity
- Analytical ability
- Communication skills
- Degree of initiative
- Staff relations
- Adaptability to change
- Client relations
- Progress toward goals
- Mentoring of others

It is common to determine a rating system for such factors, usually a three- to five-part scale ranging from “unsatisfactory” to “outstanding.” Most approaches encourage additional comments; many require them for ratings at either end of the scale. In addition to—or in place of—rating scales, performance appraisals may include essays (open-ended questions about performance), forced-choice evaluations (the reviewer selects between pairs of positive and negative performance assessments), discussion of critical incidents (specific examples of commendable or poor performance), results-oriented evaluations (comparing results with goals established earlier), and other approaches to framing the dialogue and doing the evaluation.

The key to a meaningful process is communication. Whatever system you choose, the essential intent is to have meaningful communication with staff about performance and future goals and learning opportunities.

The Face-to-Face Review

Performance appraisal forms are merely vehicles to aid the actual discussion. The face-to-face session is the most important part of the process.

Like employment interviews, good performance reviews are a two-way street. It may be helpful to provide a format in which each employee can, in advance of the meeting, develop a written synopsis of work and educational experience during the review period, an evaluation of the position and the firm, and a list of specific topics to discuss. This allows the reviewer to prepare ahead of time to deal with difficult issues or unexpected questions. It also allows the firm to learn from its employees.

If performance goals and objectives were mutually defined at the start of the appraisal period, it may be a good idea to have both reviewer and employee fill out an appraisal form before the interview as well. Comparison of the two appraisals can help break the ice in a situation that is sometimes awkward for both parties. The comparison may reveal differing perceptions or even misunderstandings about the employee's performance goals; it can also provide an informed basis for discussion and goal setting for the next appraisal period.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL CHECKLIST

Following is a rough outline of steps to be executed in the performance appraisal process:

- At the beginning of the review period, confirm job duties, performance criteria, expectations, and goals and objectives.
- Meet with the employee initially and periodically throughout the year to discuss both good and poor performance issues, coach the employee, and problem-solve together. Be sure to document the discussions you have.
- Hold midyear reviews, either formally or informally.
- Remember to leave time to solicit input from others for the annual review process, if applicable.
- Prepare for the review discussion by completing the performance review form as a draft.
- Schedule the review discussion, and keep the appointment.
- After the meeting, finalize the review summary and send a copy to the employee for comments.
- Review the form when it has been returned, and then refer to it periodically throughout the year.

Documentation

Discussions of unsatisfactory performance should be clearly documented in an employee's human resources file. A chronological record of unsatisfactory work is a useful defense against unjustified claims of discrimination or wrongful discharge following an employee's demotion or termination. Be careful not to use the performance appraisal only as a documentation opportunity for poor performance. If this process becomes known as a dismissal tool, an environment of distrust can develop. Use the review documentation to reflect achievements and successes as well as poor performance.

ADDRESSING PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Except in cases of gross misconduct, terminating an employee should be a last-step solution. Employees do not develop performance problems overnight, and there are usually opportunities to take corrective or disciplinary steps before termination becomes necessary.

SAMPLE PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN MEMO

Date:

To: Employee

From: Manager

Re: Poor Performance

Over the past [period of time], your performance has been below expectations. [If there have been past discussions with the employee regarding his or her poor performance, indicate this and the dates of the prior discussions. If the firm has tried to assist the employee in improving performance, indicate this.]

[Describe specifics of poor performance.]

Based on this information, you are being placed on a [indicate time frame] performance improvement plan. It is imperative that you improve your performance as outlined below. Failure to show immediate improvement may result in further disciplinary action up to and including termination of your employment.

In order to assist you in improving your performance, we have outlined an improvement plan. [List specific action items that the employee must accomplish to improve his or her performance.]

[Insert employee name], it is our goal to assist you in improving your performance. We fully expect that you can make these adjustments.

Company Name

Company Address

Project: _____

Date: _____

Please sign below indicating you have read and received this memo.

Employee Name

Date

Everyone has a natural tendency to avoid conflict, but it is the responsibility of firm managers to manage all performance—the good and the bad. Failing to address an obvious performance problem can send a message that substandard performance is tolerated and acceptable. Also, an employee may not even know there is a problem, and if it is brought to his or her attention, the issue may be easily corrected. In the long run, this will save the firm the cost of turnover.

Communicating the Problem

Ideally, the process of responding to performance problems should look like this:

The first time a performance issue arises, the manager should have a fact-finding or coaching discussion with the employee. The manager can explain the issue, get the employee's view, and make sure the employment expectations are clear. The manager should retain some type of documentation of the discussion.

If the problem remains or recurs, another discussion should take place, followed by a confirming memorandum to the employee (with a copy to his or her human resources file) reiterating the problem and the expected change. This document should cover all of the following:

- What performance standards are not being met
- What has been done to assist the employee to date
- Dates of any previous performance discussions
- What expectations must be met to turn around the employee's performance
- A reasonable time frame within which change must occur
- The consequences of failure to meet the performance standard

Managers should be reminded to follow any coaching or disciplinary procedures outlined in the human resources manual. It is best to have the employee sign the written document to acknowledge it has been received, rather than to indicate agreement.

Coaching for Performance Improvement

When something goes wrong, the goal is to solve the problem and focus on doing better next time. Allocating blame is not a priority. The purpose of coaching is to improve performance and results, improve working relationships, and support professional development—not to punish. When coaching an individual to help improve his or her job performance, these five steps should be followed:

1. Explain the performance issue clearly.
2. Ask for the employee's view of the situation.
3. Ask the employee for suggestions.
4. Agree on an action plan to resolve the problem.
5. Set up a time to follow up.

Coaching tips. Be courteous and respectful when you assume the coaching role. Use active listening techniques, communicate effectively, and attend to the nonverbal cues being used—both the employee's and your own. Avoid jumping to conclusions, and instead focus on helping the employee solve the problem rather than solving it for him or her. Be open to new information, but negotiate when possible and be firm when necessary. It is always desirable to reach a consensus, although you may have to agree to disagree. Follow up on your commitments, set up a review for later time, and make sure it gets done. Document the exchange in notes or a memo to the employee. Finally, it is up to you to acknowledge success or decisively address a continuing problem.

TRAINING AND LEARNING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lifelong learning is a critically important part in the development of an architecture career. This is reflected in the AIA's historic 1992 decision to make continuing education

Typically, design professionals advance in their careers by taking on a new job role or assignment. Whether that new assignment will be with the same firm or require a move to another organization often depends on how much attention the firm gives to its employees and their individual professional goals.

a required condition for membership. In addition, more and more states are mandating continuing education for maintaining an architecture license.

Most firms recognize that providing training and development opportunities is an advantage in recruiting and retaining staff. Ensuring that staff members have current skills and expertise also enables them to react to the fast-changing architecture environment, enhancing the firm's competitiveness in the marketplace.

Firms can support continuing professional development in a variety of ways. Firms can offer in-house programs, provide paid time off for employees to attend external programs, pay for conference fees, offer tuition reimbursement programs, support time that employees devote to professional association activities, or subsidize dues.

Types of Training

Many firms have formal, organized learning events, but there is no evidence that formal education (classroom-type lectures) is any more effective than informal education (integration into a project team where one overhears a great deal and thereby learns). A recent study of architects' learning styles found that 85 percent of the time architects ask the people around them when they have a question rather than going to the library or picking up reference materials.

Some people learn best by doing a job and experimenting with solutions. Others learn by reading and reflecting before applying what they have learned to a practical situation. Fully integrated learning incorporates all aspects of a learning cycle. A best practices approach may appeal to the broadest spectrum of learners.

Training Opportunities

Different topics may lend themselves to different learning activities. For example, the resources and approaches used for technical, skill-building training programs may differ from those used for "soft skills" training programs on topics such as communication, supervision, or presentation skills. Among the many ways to support professional development and encourage retention of valued employees are these:

- *Mentoring.* Employees can gain job knowledge, management skills, career development guidance, and general firm knowledge, or simply establish a trusting relationship with another employee, through a mentoring relationship. Mentoring can provide a forum in which to pass along the accumulated management wisdom of years of practice, and recognition of the special potential of the mentee may encourage an employee to stay with the firm.
- *In-house programs.* Firms may offer programs on an as-needed basis or establish a regular schedule of continuing education courses.
- *Outside seminars.* If a firm wishes to encourage attendance at outside seminars but maintain control of costs, it may allot a certain number of hours or dollars per staff member per year. Those attending can report back to the entire firm through an informal brown-bag seminar or a written synopsis.
- *Tuition reimbursement.* A tuition reimbursement plan is an excellent way to encourage continuing education. The firm should set guidelines for the kinds of courses and the percentage of the cost or annual dollar limit that will be covered. This kind of benefit can commence at the end of the initial (probationary) period or upon attaining a certain level within the firm.
- *Intern development program.* A firm's commitment to an intern development program (IDP) can be a prime motivator for interns to stay with the firm. The IDP provides an opportunity for graduates to gain a range of experience, as it formalizes a mentor-like relationship with a more senior architect that is reminiscent of the early days of the profession. The corollary of this relationship also is important: Established professionals can learn from interns.

► Mentoring (3.2) describes mentoring principles and how to establish and conduct a mentoring program.

- *Licensing support.* Many firms pay for some or all portions of mock exams and other preparations for taking the Architect Registration Examination. Some pay for the exam, some pay for exam time, and some pay for both fees and time. Firms providing these benefits must consider the following issues: whether to offer a pay increase after an employee takes the exam, whether to establish a minimum time at the firm before eligibility for this benefit, and any payback clauses requiring the employee to pay back the firm part or all of the benefit received if he or she leaves the firm within a certain period.
- *Professional association dues and activities.* Many firms choose to pay part or all of the dues for employees to belong to professional organizations such as the AIA or the Construction Specifications Institute. Some firms may also provide paid time for employees to participate in selected professional organization activities.
- *AIA and civic participation.* Firms may encourage staff members to participate in programs sponsored by local and state AIA components. In addition to their educational benefits, AIA meetings and related programs provide a forum for informal exchange of ideas with other professionals. Partial or complete reimbursement of dues and meeting expenses is a strong motivator, particularly for young people.
- *Participation in pro bono professional activities.* Efforts on behalf of local nonprofit groups or community planning and design boards and advocacy on behalf of the profession offer real educational benefits to firm members, as well as heightened visibility for them and the firm.

A firm invests in its staff members by promoting their continued professional development. On-the-job training remains a primary means of professional development, but many additional possibilities exist. Professional development should become a routine and natural aspect of a firm's management philosophy. Providing opportunities to gain new skills and increase knowledge is a very effective staff retention technique, second only to staff recognition.

7.6 Developing Leadership Skills

William C. Ronco, Ph.D., and Mark Jussaume, PE

Leadership is an essential component of successful architecture practice. Through professional development efforts, firms can help staff members attain the skills they need to become effective leaders.

Many architects are deeply interested in leadership and committed to becoming better leaders. Because there are different and conflicting views about the nature of effective leadership, numerous methods are available to architects who want to improve their leadership skills and performance. This article clarifies the different views on leadership and offers guidelines to help architects hone their leadership effectiveness.

WHY ARCHITECTS MUST CARE ABOUT LEADERSHIP

The profession places architects in a wide range of leadership positions. Beyond managing projects, architects also lead firms, studios, and committees within firms;

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