

Navigating the Job Search Process and Beyond

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SUMMARY

Dawn Phillips, Assoc. AIA, LEED AP, learned a lesson when she accepted a job after interviewing at only one firm. The position turned out to be a poor fit, and she knew this within the first month. When Ms. Phillips started the job search process again, she knew she had to do it differently. The next time, she employed a systematic give-and-take approach to her job search process, interviewing at eight firms during a two-month period and ultimately accepting a position at a firm that better suits her needs. Following are some of her notes from along the way.

STEP 1: PREPARATION

The first step in the job search process for intern architects is the development of a portfolio. Take your time and develop a portfolio that clearly exhibits your talents, strengths, and interests. It can take anywhere from a month to an entire semester to develop and finalize a portfolio. It is beneficial to work on it while you are in school, where you can use the school's computer equipment to save print fees and software costs.

Begin by considering what message you want to communicate, and plan your portfolio accordingly. If you render beautifully or build well-crafted models, provide enough examples of this type of work to show your abilities. If you appreciate sustainable design communicate that by showing green projects and/or research and using recycled materials in the development of your portfolio.

If at all possible, prepare your résumé while you are working on your portfolio. This will make it easier to relate the projects in your portfolio to the text in your résumé. If you have worked professionally, coordinate the firms listed on your résumé with the projects shown in your portfolio. As designers, we are usually anxious to show our design skills, but exercise restraint with your résumé; keep it clean and to the point. Upon completion, both documents should be strong enough to stand on their own visually and verbally.

STEP 2: PREPARE FOR YOUR JOB SEARCH

To further prepare for the job search, make a list of criteria that articulate what is important to you in a firm. Ask yourself questions like these: What types of projects do you want to work on? What do you want to learn from a firm? Do you want a firm that supports the Intern Development Program (IDP)?

Next, research firms based on the criteria you developed. A firm's website is one way it presents itself to the public, and it can be a good place to learn about a firm's values. Look for articles about the firm in the news and professional media, and check the local AIA component Web site for information. The goal of your research is to identify a short list of firms that stack up well against your chosen criteria.

The next step is to compose the cover letters that will accompany your résumé. Write a basic letter first, then take the time to tailor it to each firm, basing your efforts on your research, the needs of the firm, and your personal career goals.

If the job market is hot and firms are looking for people with your level of experience, you may be able to wait for people to call you. However, if this is your first job out of college or the job market is slow, you may need to employ a little more ingenuity and follow-up. For example, I sent my résumé in a chartreuse green envelope when I was applying for my first job to help it stand out. It can be helpful to place a follow-up call to see if the firm received your résumé and if they sound interested.

STEP THREE: PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Often, job seekers are so excited to get "the call" for an interview that they focus only on making the firm like them. Remember, an interview is a two-way street; you should also be assessing the firm. During any interview tune in to what is going on around you, think about the office environment. Does it seem like a place where you would want to work? Are the interviewers giving you their undivided attention? If you are really excited about a beautifully hand-drawn sketch in your portfolio, but see only

computer printouts of black-and-white plans on the office wall, that firm may not be a good fit for you. Or if you are a new graduate who is interested in sustainable design and aspire to work on a green project, but the firm that just offered you a job does not emphasize sustainability; it may not be the firm for you. The goal of the interview is not only to land a job but to find a place that values your work just as you value theirs. Remember the criteria you identified in your list, and use it to assess the firms where you interview.

If you plan to go on multiple interviews, keep an “interview journal.” An interview journal is a way to document first impressions of a firm, its staff members, projects, and office environment. The time between an initial interview and an official job offer is about a month, so taking notes is a great way to remind yourself about the firm you interviewed with when it comes time to make a decision.

STEP 4: GOT THE JOB...NOW SET GOALS

Once you start a job, if you haven’t done so already, you should start an NCARB record and enroll in its Intern Development Program. Enrolling in IDP helps clarify your career goals and starts you on your path toward licensure.

If your new job is slow at first, find ways to learn more about the firm and the project(s) you are working on: Browse through project folders, review marketing materials, look at drawing sets, and learn from what has been done in the past; be nosy!

STEP 5: ACCLIMATE TO THE PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Recent graduates are accustomed to regular feedback in design studio. Feedback may come less often or not at all in the profession. If you want feedback, solicit it; your career is in your hands. Take the initiative and schedule regular meetings with your supervisor every few months to review your IDP training units and have your IDP training report signed.

When it is time for your 6-month or 12-month review, prepare accordingly. Use this as an opportunity to highlight your strengths and to show how you plan to improve your weaknesses. Overall, the review process should be an encouraging though accurate account of your performance during your first few months or year.

As you gain experience on the job, assess your career goals from time to time to make sure you are doing things that parallel your own goals and support your own future. Always keep a current

résumé and copies of your design work on hand; you never know when you’re going to need them.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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RESOURCES

More Best Practices

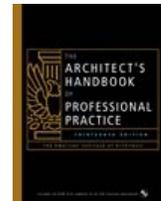
The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 03.01.01 Tips for a Successful Job Interview
- 07.02.01 Sample Interview Questions
- 07.02.03 How the Talent Strain Affects Architecture Firms

For More Information on This Topic

See “Recruiting and Hiring,” by Laurie Dreyer-Hadley and Kathleen C. Maurel, Assoc. AIA, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 9, page 229.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Practice
- Personnel Management
- Hiring
- Professional development
- Associate AIA members