

The Basics of a Professional Development Program

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SUMMARY

Jean Valence, Hon. AIA, wrote *Architect's Essentials of Professional Development*, which discusses the process of forming and implementing an effective professional development plan. Core concepts from this book are highlighted below, including the importance of creating a professional development plan, elements of a successful plan, and program design, implementation and evaluation.

A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

For a business to stay current and strong, it is important to offer in-house learning. An organic, constantly changing firm that continues to grow has a competitive advantage over a complacent firm. Professional development is an avenue to share staff knowledge and increase the firm's overall competitiveness.

Designing such a plan by and for the firm will

- Feed the firm's accumulation for knowledge
- Stimulate business excellence
- Inspire innovation and fresh ideas among staff
- Reinforce the firm's culture

FORM A STRATEGY

A successful professional development program must include a strategic plan that outlines the firm's mission and means to achieve its goals. The level of information allotted to the strategic plan depends on firm size and culture. The strategic plan can be a formally written plan with course outlines as addendums, or it can be as simple as a few goals bulleted on trace paper. How the plan is written doesn't matter; what matters is that the firm's leaders thought critically about the subject of professional development for junior staff.

Valence identified five components necessary for a successful development program:

1. An educational strategy

2. An assessment process
3. A program designed for learning
4. An implementation period
5. An evaluation method for constant improvement

A successful program must include each of these steps as an individual element of the cycle. However, a successful program does not have to follow this exact order. Few firms implement a professional development program immediately; more often a firm informally implements the program after a period of planning, assessment, and program development has taken place. The program can start simply with an informal vendor visit at lunch. The creation of a development program does not happen overnight and can take 18 to 24 months to become integrated.

THE PROGRAM'S DESIGN

The strategy and guidelines should focus on the firm's vision and values. A firm that wants to become a leader in client relationships should focus on teaching strong client-relations and project management skills. Similarly, a firm that wants to be a leader in architectural technologies should focus its program on new software applications and innovative building materials.

It is important that professional development focus on knowledge building, not just information accumulation. Professional development should be a format for creativity and a stimulus for experience and questioning. Valence writes that a firm's professional development program should

- Incorporate best educational practices
- Facilitate internal knowledge sharing
- Provide various learning methods
- Organize around firm priorities

Each aspect of professional development should be used as a method to increase awareness of a firm's vision and goals. A professional development long-

range plan should further explain the goals of the development platform and the means to get there.

DEFINE THE CURRICULUM

A successful curriculum reinforces a firm's culture, adapts easily, honors in-house expertise, and promotes communication. The program must allow participants to apply what they learn at work. The curriculum should relate specifically to project roles and address information pertinent to project goals.

Typically, architects appreciate independent critical thinking and can feel stifled in a lecture environment. A professional development program should vary teaching formats to incorporate person-to-person learning and, when necessary, lectures.

Class-style learning is often necessary to introduce a new product or computer application. Class subjects should be fresh and current, and presenters should be knowledgeable and well-spoken. To locate a large talent pool of presenters

- Identify qualified subject matter experts
- Give the expert a course outline
- Brief the expert on effective learning techniques
- Provide individual coaching and/or the opportunity for observation and practice
- Provide feedback and opportunity for improvement
- Tap outside providers

When creating a development program, these questions help to focus the curriculum:

- Why does the firm think there is a need or opportunity for learning in this area?
- What specific subject deserves to be addressed?
- Who should build this knowledge or skill?
- How should learning occur in this area?
- How will new knowledge or ability be manifested?

MENTOR JUNIOR STAFF

Mentoring is a rewarding knowledge-sharing method that architecture firms readily use. The mentor-protégé relationship has different levels of involvement depending on who initiates the knowledge building. Training, coaching, and mentoring are identifiable stages between junior and senior staff, novice, and expert, respectively. At the training stage, the expert presents a skill or idea to

the novice. In coaching, the expert works with the novice to incorporate the skill into practice and, in mentoring the novice, integrates the expert's knowledge into the novice's own repertoire to eventually add their own personal touch. The level of involvement changes for each stage. Training is 75 percent expert and 25 percent novice; coaching is 50/50 expert and novice; and mentoring is 25 percent expert and 75 percent novice.

Many offices use a *lessons learned* platform at project closeout. Lessons learned provides an opportunity for open group discussions about project methodology. Whether the lessons are about what went wrong or what went right, they give the novice an opportunity to see the project through to the end.

IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

Implementation of a successful professional development program, regardless of firm size, tends to take two years to fully develop. Valence suggests this implementation timeline: form an educational committee, create a strategy, assess, implement an administrative system, form a budget, inspire, define the first topic initiatives, train experts, evaluate, redesign, and recognize. Some of these steps are inherent to the program, such as providing inspiration, defining initiatives, and training experts. Formation of an educational committee, budgeting, and a formal administrative system might not be as defined in a small firm, but the thought process remains intact.

EVALUATE THE PLAN

The evaluation stage is the easiest and most satisfying because it responds to all the work that has already been accomplished. One method to evaluate employee reaction to seminars and events is through evaluation forms, pre- and post-event. Evaluation should address two factors: the various pieces of the learning system itself and the learning that participants actually accomplish. The evaluation process should try to answer these main questions: How did the participants like the event or relationship? How has the firm's practice improved as a result of the program?

CONCLUSION

An in-house professional development program can strengthen a firm's culture and spread knowledge throughout staff. Sharing knowledge learned from experience is a hallmark of professional development, and firms of all sizes should incorporate it at some level.

More Best Practices

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

- 03.02.04 Mentoring as a Team Sport
- 07.05.09 The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice as a Training Guide
- 07.05.04 Types of Training Programs

For More Information on this Topic



See also *Architect's Essentials of Professional Development*, by Jean R. Valence, FAIA.

See "Staff Development," by Laurie Dreyer-Hadley and Kathleen C. Maurel, Assoc. AIA, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 9, page 242.



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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