



AIA Best Practices:

How to leave a firm without making enemies

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Summary

It is rare for architects to spend their entire careers at one firm, yet even the best job transitions can be a stressful event. When preparing to leave, these tips can help you optimize your timing, avoid burning bridges, and maintain professionalism throughout your departure.

“The only constant in life is change.” – Heraclitus

This article discusses how to leave a firm on good terms by optimizing your timing, avoiding bridge burning, and practicing professionalism throughout the logistics of your departure. If you’ve chosen to leave your firm, then keep reading for some tips on how to exit on good terms. However, if you’re uncertain about changing careers or employers, then make sure to take the time to fully consider the emotional stress and potential alternatives.

It is rare for architects to spend their entire careers at one firm. Whether their departures have been voluntary or not, most architects have experienced an exit. The reasons for resignations are many: Some are pragmatic, such as changing professions, pursuing a degree, or moving to a different city, state, or country. For some architects, the grass always appears greener elsewhere after they’ve been with a firm for a couple of years. But the most common reasons for changing firms are better salaries or benefits, new career opportunities, more appealing interpersonal relationships or culture, more enlightened office management, and better recognition of staff. It’s important to note that employers want to know why you’re leaving and what it would take to change your mind. Think about what you want and if a change is the best next step.

Timing is everything. Being considerate about how your departure impacts the bigger picture is key to leaving on good terms. Are you leaving during a critical phase of a project and the firm will be unable to meet an important deadline? Have you recently received a substantial incentive, such as licensure reimbursement or an annual bonus? Departing immediately after receiving such an incentive might tarnish your reputation with the firm or make them less likely to give a good reference. Note that a performance-based bonus would not fall in this category since the time for the reward has already passed.

Are you the most recent in a string of resignations? Looking at your planned departure through the lens of those you work with can help you determine how much notice to give. The standard two weeks’ notice may leave the firm short-handed, without enough time to find and onboard your replacement or transition your responsibilities to others. More seasoned staff may want to give as much as four weeks’ notice to ease the transition. On the other hand, your firm may dismiss you on the spot when you resign, with the mindset that

you've already shed your commitment (and with the advice to not let the door hit you on the way out!). Be prepared for that!

Sweet sorrow. An exit can bring out many emotions. Excitement, relief, and apprehension are natural responses for the person leaving. Coworkers may have bittersweet emotions as well, while employers may just be bitter, especially if you're moving to a competitor. Recognize that not everyone will be pleased with your decision.

Give credit where credit is due. The "instruments of service" are property of the firm, even if you created them. Assuming that you are leaving on reasonably cordial terms, request permission to copy files and photographs for use in your portfolio. Your resume and portfolio must acknowledge the firm that owns the work, and professional photography must be credited to the photographer. Don't take credit for work that's not yours. Even innocent misrepresentation is in violation of AIA's Code of Ethics .

"It's not you, it's me." How and to whom you resign are important. Be professional. Make the effort to tell your direct supervisor in person first, then follow up with a written notice to human resources or whoever handles those tasks. An email confirmation of your resignation is acceptable only as a follow-up to the initial conversation. Be prepared to respond to a counteroffer. Next, tell your internal project teams and contacts. Ask your employer how, when, and if you are to inform clients and consultants; they may prefer to deliver the message themselves.

Don't burn bridges. Regardless of the reasons for your departure, take care to not leave in a wake of bad feelings. The architecture profession is a tight community, and you never know who you will run across again (or who may become a future client). Avoid bad-mouthing the firm to former and future colleagues. You may have disagreed with the firm's policies, but you probably didn't know all the reasons for those policies. You may not be privy to all of the behind-the-scenes decisions related to managing a firm that influence your job satisfaction. Chances are that you don't know all the details. Rather than criticizing your co-workers and employer(s), focus on your strengths.

Communication is a two-way street. Here is a short to-do list as you prepare for your last day:

- Connect with co-workers on LinkedIn, personal email, etc.
- Complete unfinished tasks.
- Prepare a status report of your tasks to ensure a smooth transition.
- Be courteous and clean out your desk.
- Request an exit interview. If you won't discuss what irks you during an exit interview, then think twice before posting it on a platform like Glassdoor.
- Confirm your benefits end dates and whom to contact for rolling over a 401(k), continuing insurance, etc.
- Tell the firm if your address changes so that they can send you the applicable tax documents.
- Get a reference letter.

- Send out a departing thank-you email to the firm and key coworkers.

Most firms strive to retain good employees. Employee retention has many benefits for the employer, such as the institutional knowledge of experienced employees, increased productivity, and a better-quality culture. Having longevity and a depth of experience with a firm will make your resume look better. Only you know what is right for your situation.

A final word of caution. According to The American Institute of Stress, changing jobs, retiring, and even receiving a promotion are listed on the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory. This means that even if work is going well, it may be stressful to leave. It can take from 12 to 24 months for you to acclimate to a new firm (and for them to acclimate to you). Be mindful and practice the Golden Rule.

Resources

1. American Institute of Architects. (2020). *AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. [PDF]. <https://www.aia.org/about-aia/professional-standards/aia-code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct>
2. Ask a Manager. (n.d.). *Resigning*. <https://www.askamanager.org/category/resigning>
3. Minutes. (n.d.). *The Right Way to Quit: How to Leave Your Job Without Burning Bridges*. <https://minutes.co/the-right-way-to-quit-how-to-leave-your-job-without-burning-bridges/>

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About AIA Best Practices

AIA Best Practices is a collection of relevant, experience-based knowledge and expert advice on firm management, project delivery, contracts and more, aligned with the *Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition*. See the full AIA Best Practices collection at aia.org/aia-best-practices.

This article corresponds to:

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