



AIA Best Practices: Fostering multiple talents in architecture firms

Adapted from an AIArchitect article by Jack Train, FAIA

Summary

In an architecture firm, as in any professional services business, the talent, teamwork, intelligence, and intensity of the personnel are fundamental to overall success. Just as planning is required to create and develop a building, so is planning required to develop staff.

Fostering growth

Too often, however, firms hire graduates and applicants only when they need more people, without planning for the development and future contributions of their new hires. As a contrast, look at sports teams, which easily and constantly measure performance. They do not sit around waiting for talent to come knocking on the door. They invest heavily in developing potential talent. Likewise, the best architecture firms are forever on the lookout for individuals who have demonstrated abilities and potential for further development. We learned to start with a vision, hire the right people, manage their activities, and reward them for their performance.

Roles within the team

Talent, incidentally, is not limited to design abilities. It is invariably true that design is the primary focus in school. Nonetheless, probably fewer than 5 % of graduates will function as the “designer” in top firms.

“Design” requires about 15 % of the person-hours in an architecture practice. That is why, in my practice, we classify senior personnel with prefixes:

- **Conceptual architect**, who conceives of design solutions that may be outside his or her previous experience
- **Development architect**, a job captain who can take a concept and make it buildable
- **Structural architect and HVAC architect**, people with the technical know how to guide concept and development
- **Administrative architect**, the project manager with experience in one of the other roles but a higher ability to communicate among the various architect roles and with the client.

These designations are for senior employees. Recent graduates—“pre-architects,” as we call them—receive as much opportunity as possible to work under the guidance of senior staff. Almost every fresh graduate wants to work in design, even though not all are qualified to do so. It is good for every recent graduate employee to work with senior designers, often for two reasons: 1) It nurtures the skills of the less advanced staff and helps them grow fundamentals; 2) It gives the firm a chance to evaluate their abilities.

Equally important is to give each recent graduate employee a chance to work with a development architect—and project engineers—because the learning flows both ways. This training and evaluation loop typically takes about three years. Executing this policy is not easy and requires an unselfish director with authority and commitment to make the policy work.

Of course, other roles must also be addressed, whether that talent is in the firm or contracted as a consultant or partner. Those key roles include drafters, specifications writers, cost estimators, engineers, accountants, and office managers.

Find talent to whom you can delegate

Properly evaluating emerging staff is one of the most difficult yet critical functions of firm leadership because staff ultimately determine the character and success of a firm. The growth of a firm is related to the individual development of each employee.

Senior staff who work directly with less experienced employees should have the opportunity to evaluate their potential, but final decisions should be made by one or two people with greater firm responsibility. It is not uncommon for a senior staff person to try to keep a talented new employee for his or her own work team.

Because successful firms need a variety of talents, no one evaluation formula fits all, but intelligence and dedication are important in every evaluation. These principles, incidentally, apply to firms of all sizes. It has been said that the size of a firm is ultimately determined by the amount of responsibility the principals are willing to delegate. The one exception is when the building market dries up. No task is more difficult and painful than dismissing loyal and able employees. It is much more rewarding to guide promising architects toward fulfilling careers.

Some parting thoughts

To be a manager requires some understanding of what management is all about. Although some members of architecture firms have specific management roles, remember that all members have management responsibilities. Effective management is the combination of leadership, decision-making, and vision.

Management is responsible for communication within the organization, making decisions under conditions of uncertainty, and strategic planning. It is a practice, not a science. It recognizes that performance is based on both knowledge and responsibility. Directing resources from less productive to more productive activities, management creates wealth and maintains an organizational performance. Managers must lead people rather than contain them, direct rather than control. People are resources and opportunities, not problems, costs, and threats. Above all else, remember that there is no one way to do knowledge work.

About the contributor

Jack Train, FAIA, was the 1974 Edward Kemper recipient for service to the Institute. His work with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, which began in the 1940s, includes serving as project manager of the Inland Steel Building in Chicago and the initial Air Force Academy development in Colorado Springs, Colo. An emeritus principal of Valerio Dewalt Train, he died in 2014.

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