



AIA Best Practices: Mentoring interns: A firm commitment

Contributed by Jonathan Kanda, AIA; Jeffrey DeGregorio, AIA; George Takoudes, AIA

Summary

Three employees of Payette Associates in Boston spearheaded the development of an in-house training program designed to meet the needs of the firm's young designers. The firm and its designers have benefited from the program's success. Payette Associates was the recipient of the 2002 Intern Development Program Outstanding Firm Award.

When firms mentor interns, the whole profession wins

Jonathan Kanda, AIA, newly licensed, and Jeffrey DeGregorio, AIA, brought forth an idea at Payette Associates two years ago, when DeGregorio was an intern. They asked the leadership of the 150-person firm to institute regular educational programs for the firm's interns in a format tied closely to the National Council of Architectural Registration Board's Intern Development Program (IDP).

Making the case

With advice from firm associate George Takoudes, AIA, on how to make a convincing case within the company, DeGregorio and Kanda made a formal presentation for a new educational program, to be called the Young Designers Core, or YDC. The presentation included a clear mission statement and a defined structure and organization. YDC would have a strong link to IDP and would benefit both interns and the firm as a whole. DeGregorio and Kanda proposed to link all levels of the firm through YDC, which proved to be among its strongest selling points.

As with any design problem, the authors began with a problem statement. In this case, the principals and associates already had their respective groups with regular meetings and current activities. Yet a large portion of the firm—the young designers—lacked an organizational structure and represented a variety of experience and training levels. At any one time, 30% to 40% of the firm's staff had zero to five years of experience. This group needed focus, attention, and a voice in the firm; organized intern education and training to provide a solid foundation to the firm's work; freer knowledge-transfer among people in the office; and a way to archive the information being shared.

Getting started

The "schematic design" solution was simply to activate the group. Payette Associates had always had a culture of learning and mentoring; YDC was a way to channel and organize it. The underlying goal would be to help this group of interns get through IDP and the Architect Registration Examination. At the same time, the firm would benefit in terms of enhanced project performance.

The original plan called for twice-a-month learning events. Jim Collins, AIA, the firm's president, challenged the group to meet weekly, and the challenge was accepted. With the variety of daily activity in the office, weekly learning and training opportunities were not difficult to identify. To measure and record the learning experience, DeGregorio and Kanda developed a simple matrix showing the scheduled events on the y-axis and IDP competency categories on the x-axis.

Early benefits

Several benefits became apparent early on:

- Interns are introduced earlier to the range of topics related to IDP, including project management and contract negotiation, which are among the most difficult IDP categories to fulfill.
- Cross-team and cross-functional communication improved. YDC has fostered relationships among young designers in different studios and between young designers and principals and associates. Cross-communication is much easier because of a wider appreciation of what others in the firm know and are interested in knowing.
- The new program created an opportunity for cross-cultural communication with other Boston architecture firms. YDC sponsored a co-tour of a building completed by another firm, meeting with the other firm's young designers at the site. This fostered awareness and appreciation of learning opportunities beyond the firm's own work.

Success requires diligence

Maintaining a high-quality program requires constant attention, energy, and commitment on the part of the program coordinators. Some events are easily planned—when someone has a presentation already prepared, for instance. Bringing in outside speakers requires more homework. It is important to meet with the prospective speaker in advance and sometimes to have the speaker deliver the presentation to a review group to ensure that it focuses on the intended audience. Design reviews for interns—a Socratic method familiar from architecture school but not typically part of the work environment for junior staff members—are also part of the program.

Building the program

As YDC got under way, DeGregorio and Kanda identified as top priorities those IDP categories for which it is most difficult for interns to earn credit. They invited the firm's chief financial officer to talk to the group. They recruited people in the field, including subcontractors and manufacturer, people with whom interns have little direct daily contact.

In addition to running the program, DeGregorio and Kanda maintain a YDC website on the firm's office intranet. The site includes documentation of all seminars, photographs of site visits, PowerPoint presentations or handouts of past programs, contact information for speakers and experts, a schedule of upcoming YDC events, and links to other resources on the firm's extensive intranet knowledge base.

The process of assembling material for the IDP Award submission was itself a learning experience. It fostered an awareness of the breadth and depth of experience and knowledge within the firm and the importance of capturing that knowledge for use by others in the future. The YDC website augments the knowledge disseminated through mentorship and seminars. As new employees join the firm, they can access the archive, view presentations, read the collected information, and identify people with whom to speak directly about a particular subject.

The supporting framework

YDC is the cornerstone of Payette's intern development program, enhancing the firm's reputation as a terrific place for interns to learn about providing broad-based services and excellence.

But YDC is only one part of a comprehensive staff-development strategy that includes reimbursement for the cost of the Architect Registration Examination. Fulfillment of IDP requirements is also an integral part of annual employee performance reviews. The IDP requirements give supervisors a framework for evaluating an employee's competencies and identifying areas for further development.

Firm-wide benefits

The value of archiving and sharing the collective knowledge of the firm cannot be overstated. Payette is organized in three different design studios—architecture, landscape, and interiors—and until recently each studio provided its own training. The knowledge of the office was not being leveraged for all. One studio might have a terrific lunch presentation, from which only one-third of the office would benefit.

From the principals' perspective, another major benefit comes from training all junior staff at once. It can be inefficient to explain bathroom layout individually to every intern assigned to draw one. One of the first presentations offered, therefore, was about bathroom layout. Other presenters may talk about hospital and lab planning, a core competency of the firm.

Professional responsibility

YDC is great for a 150-person firm with the initiative and resources to fulfill its professional responsibility of training interns. But what about interns in firms that cannot or will not provide adequate training? It is important for the profession to develop such programs through the AIA and its chapters.

As Payette developed its in-house program, Takoudes worked with the Boston Society of Architects/AIA on the Young Designers Professional Development Institute, now in its fourth year. The institute offers an annual 12-part lunchtime seminar series to provide intern development education and training, helping to bridge that gap from zero to five years of experience.

The Young Designers Professional Development Institute works from the premise that people should be able to work in any firm they choose and still get help during the internship period that is so filled with angst. It only makes sense that our professional organization would fill that role.

Lessons learned

Payette's Young Designers Core program benefits employees with limited experience and, more important, the firm as a whole. This program streamlined an inefficient training program previously in place. By training all employees at once and keeping the program current, available to all, and organized, every employee has equal opportunity to gain knowledge.

About the contributor

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