

How the Talent Strain Affects Architecture Firms

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources Staff

September 2007

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SUMMARY

Many architecture firms have noticed a drop in the pool of talented new hires. The talent strain is not unique to the architecture profession, of course, and no single cut-and-dry reason explains the shortage. One factor, however, is that the Baby Boomers will soon retire, making many skilled senior positions hard to fill. As firms prepare to pull employees up the line to fill retirees' positions, they are strapped for experienced designers to fill the much-needed positions between intern and project architect.

Many firms have been responding to these employment changes for a few years and have already created ways to adapt to the industry employment shifts. The AIA Knowledge Resources staff spoke to members to see how they have reacted and how other firms can mitigate the effects of hiring difficulties.

JACOBS' INITIATIVES TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN STAFF

Barbara Price, FAIA, of Jacobs Engineering Group says the company is the pinch and has begun a proactive campaign to keep quality staff. Jacobs' focus is not only on recruiting but also retaining their current staff with a multi-faceted approach of mentoring interns, continual training, and peer hiring initiatives. Jacobs has a formal and well-developed internship program to introduce new staff to the company as well as an in-house training program that includes "Jacobs College"; with training programs in leadership, safety, project management, and project delivery tools, coupled with continual discipline specific professional training. Jacobs also offers a tuition reimbursement program.

An exciting new program being created is an international exchange with overseas offices. To encourage peer hiring Jacobs created a program titled 'Recruit a Winner'. In addition, Jacobs has also been successful in reengaging staff with a formal process called "rebound hiring", which encourages staff that have "off-ramped" or left the company to return.

Jacobs also recognizes that the different generations currently in the work force have different needs. The Jacobs human resources department offers a one-page information sheet about the four generations active in today's work force to better educate supervisors about generational differences. For example, Generation X members want to work on constructive projects by themselves, while Generation Y-ers are interested in personal professional growth, Baby Boomers enjoy public recognition for a job well done, and the Matures appreciate symbolic records of achievement.

A CONSULTANT'S VIEW

Michael Strogoff, AIA, of Strogoff Consulting, who advises architectural firms across the nation, reports that the majority of firms are clamoring for adequate help. Many firms have taken a multipronged approach to this issue by

- Insourcing: sharing staff between office locations within a larger firm
- Outsourcing: typically, farming out production documents to firms in India, China, and the Philippines
- Leveraging current staff: investing in technology, ongoing staff training and mentoring, delegating tasks to project administrators that don't require architectural training
- Ongoing recruiting: at colleges and universities, at industry events, through consultants and vendors, and bonus incentives to current staff for their recruitment efforts
- Retention planning: providing active career and professional development guidance, offering involvement in a variety of project types, creating a collaborative office environment, and providing competitive salaries and benefits

PPKS' GROWTH STRATEGY

Craig Pryde, AIA, principal at PPKS Architects, says his firm's strategy for employee satisfaction and

growth includes, seeking higher quality clients, diversity of project types, offering great benefits, and leveraging current staff capabilities through a three-year professional development process.

The firm has concentrated on building a tiered staff with abilities to grow into a management/project architect position. PPKS has shifted its focus to hiring graduate architects with less than five years' experience and training them to work within the practice style of the firm. PPKS has noticed that the information technology (IT) talent coming out of school today is fantastic and can be very beneficial to a firm's projects presentation.

PPKS feels the quality of projects it contracts for and its design work is directly related to its staff retention. On top of quality projects the firm provides equal opportunity to employees to work on multiple projects within a year's time. Developing crossover staff for various project types is essential to the firm's operation.

PPKS recognizes that benefits are critical to employee happiness and has structured benefits as a key component to employment. They have been going on firm-wide summer excursions for one or two days to experience architecture in other areas of the country and socialize as a firm outside the work environment.

PPKS, like many other firms, has recognized that leveraging current staff is critical in both office success and retention. It has developed an in-house strategy to introduce staff to all aspects of project management so that each person can effectively run a project within approximately three years. Younger staff trained in project management can help lead small projects, are more effective team players on principal-led large-scale projects, add another set of eyes to find errors, and learn first hand all the aspects of project management.

PPKS has not yet ventured in to outsourcing but sees it as a possibility in the future.

RECRUITING STRATEGIES

Justin Roy of SullivanKreiss, an executive recruiter for A/E firms, suggests nine strategies to help firms maintain their competitive edge:

1. **Offer employee incentives** for finding new hires or even recruits to interview.
2. **Talk to clients, vendors, or business partners** about the positions you want to fill. Best bet is they know people in the industry who might be looking for a new job.
3. **Use the media.** Communicate your firm's positive stories and HR practices to local newspapers and trade publications. Talk about your firm's community service, special benefits, charity, and fundraisers. This free exposure can pique the interest of people who are (and who are not) browsing job boards.
4. **Host an open house.** Invite targeted candidates. Show off your firm, but remember to provide value for those attending.
5. **Open that dusty folder containing the rejected applicants.** Call them all. Applicants might have been wrong for one position but perfect for another. These people already know your firm, showed an interest, and (provided they were let down easily and professionally) they are probably still open to talking with you.
6. **Implement a firmwide initiative** (not just HR) to set up, grow, and manage a database of detailed information on potential candidates or recruits. Many of these entries may come from project managers and employees out on the front line. PMs interact a lot with counterparts in competing firms; if they think someone is qualified and could be an asset to the firm, they can enter this information into the database.
7. **Always be in touch.** Always be in recruiting mode. Reach out to candidates regularly, just like you do with clients. Invite these people to join your mailing list, invite them to an open house, invite them to be on your press-release list, and share your exciting projects with them. However, send these communications to personal addresses.
8. **Use IT to gather competitive intelligence.** You do not have to be a large firm to do this, even though it is considered an advanced-level application. Note announcements of your competitors' new hires and backgrounds. The data helps you answer questions such as these: Where are your competitors finding new employees? What levels of experience do these new hires have? You'll be able to keep tabs on the job market and possibly find new avenues for recruiting by keeping a watch on the competition.
9. **Be benefit-sensitive.** Understand what motivates the candidate in a benefits package (typically, you can separate these into generations or age groups) and sell it to them. Firms that are aware of these differences will be more effective during the recruiting process.

RESOURCES

For More Information on This Topic

See also “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. *The Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending an e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



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More Best Practices

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

- 09.01.11 Develop a Talent Retention Program
- 09.03.27 Continuing Education at Francis Cauffman Architects
- 09.02.01 Definition of Architect Positions

Key Terms

- Practice
- Personnel management
- Employment