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Choosing a Focus in Interiors Project Management

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

Passion is what drives most of us to pursue a career in design. That may come from various directions, including innate abilities that cannot be ignored or an intellectual interest that becomes overwhelming and must be pursued. In any case, once we start a serious design education, our major focus often remains on design itself, while the critically important skills of how a project is managed and built can be relegated to second place. This can lead to confusion in our career paths once we are working in the profession.

Early in my career, while in a large firm, I had to make a choice between pursuing a path in design or a production/project management track. Part of my personal decision was based on the knowledge that project managers often are paid more than designers. Considering that I was starting a family and had more expenses, I angled toward the project management (PM) path. As Yogi Berra said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Assuming you come to a similar fork as a young professional, you would not be selling out your design career by taking the PM path. I found that I thoroughly enjoyed project management and learning how to control a project's development. And although I was not the lead designer, I still had many opportunities to influence the design and to ensure that it developed into a great finished space. A PM focus is also excellent preparation for a career trajectory toward firm leadership or starting one's own firm, as you will have to learn how to read financial reports, maintain staffing efficiency, and develop analytic and people management skills to keep projects profitable.

So, what makes a good project manager? A good PM has a combination of innate and learned skills. Their temperament must be logical and organized with good communication skills and, I argue, be empathetic. A PM must also be educated about the best project control techniques. Some are common sense, as noted above, such as good communication and empathy. Technology is also a strong component of project management, including use of Microsoft Project or similar programs for scheduling, BIM, and online drawing distribution and markup software.

Interior design project managers also face unique challenges, compared to managers of larger architectural projects. One of the key differentiators is project speed. For example, a new building takes several years to design and construct, while a 100,000-square-foot interior will typically be finished in no more than a year from start to

finish. Owing to those factors, management of an interior project must be different than an entire new building. Investigation of multiple design and constructability options is compressed, milestones and critical paths are accelerated, and the approval process is truncated. Whereas timesheets for a large architectural project may be appropriate to track on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, interiors time control is weekly—and sometimes seems to be hourly. The PM is responsible for governing the time and effort expended, and must work collaboratively with the project designer to keep the design and production course well-focused, or the fee budget can be exceeded quickly. The PM must also hold sway over the project designer to meet the project's profitability and schedule criteria.

The PM must have a complete understanding of interior design, production, and construction, and specifically know project tasks and what the typical time would be for the team to perform those tasks (it will vary between team members). If the time and effort are in excess of what the fee will allow, the PM needs to develop alternative strategies that marry the fee with tasks—and always in conjunction with the team. It is easy to tell the team that design development must be completed by a given deadline, but if that date is not realistic, the PM must reorganize the schedule to shorten other tasks.

My approach was always to allow for more time at the beginning of the project, where detailed thinking and planning should happen. If the programming, conceptual design, and design development efforts are well thought out—and completed when scheduled—construction documents and construction administration can be completed on a more regular, known timeframe with less need to keep designing during the construction document and construction administration phases.

I will present more specific techniques for exemplary project management in my next column.

Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA, writes a regular column for *Contract* on business practices in design and professional development. Pollack is the CEO of San Francisco-based Pollack Consulting, which supports firm growth and success through improved business development, winning presentation techniques, recruitment of top talent, business coaching, and ownership transition implementation.