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Good Project Management Techniques for Interiors Practices

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

In my last column in the January/February issue, I described how project management (PM) for interiors contrasts with PM for core and shell architecture. This month, I describe several specific techniques for good project management and, therefore, more successful projects.

The process begins no later than the receipt of the request for proposals from the client. The project manager works with others in the design firm to develop the proposal, and is responsible for preparing an initial pass of the project plan—this document includes the anticipated staffing and hours for the project, along with tasks and deliverables. It also includes projected hours over the course of the project and contingencies for some changes. The best way to establish the project plan is to work with the in-house team to get everyone's input so that the tasks and hours are appropriately allocated.

Many project managers use Microsoft Project to develop schedules, but few use the resource allocation available within the program. The project manager can input all staff or functional levels and associated hourly billing rates, and the resulting schedule will show the fee and timing required for the project. Of course, this is before any fee adjustments owing to market conditions and competition are taken into account, but it dramatically reduces the time for the project manager to prepare a proposal's scope of services and compensation.

Building in time buffers

Once your firm has won the project, the project manager updates the team on the project plan at the in-house kickoff meeting. In that meeting, all team members literally sign the plan, creating a contract between the project manager and the rest of the team for the hours and timeline. But, for contingency planning, an effective project manager will also reserve a time buffer—a percentage of hours and milestones that are not shared with the team.

For example, if the project plan includes 40 hours for a design task with a Friday due date, the project manager's real hour allocation is 48, not 40, and the deliverable is planned to be due the following Monday, not Friday. Therefore, if the design effort slips a day, there is no problem. But if it does get accomplished in 40 hours, there is now some provision for offset against future delays, or possibly increased project profit with corollary bonuses to the team.

I am sure that some readers might feel that this time buffer tactic is inappropriate. However, I know it to be a huge positive. Anything that one can do as a project manager to minimize team members from being critiqued for not getting work done on time is a boon to morale and project success.

As the project proceeds, the project manager must have accurate—at least weekly—fee analytics from the firm to properly adjust remaining hours and schedule to changing conditions. One often-overlooked key component is dealing with additional services. My experience is that architects and designers try almost too hard to avoid telling clients that they are asking for work beyond what is included in the agreement. Designers will often say to their colleagues, "it's a small revision and we can absorb it within our fee," or "we were just hired and I don't want to upset the client." But that is the wrong approach. The interiors profession is not intended to be non-profit! We provide extremely valuable services to our clients and deserve to be compensated accordingly. It is critical that each member of the design team—including junior staff—understands the contracted scope and which services are included and which are not, and alerts the project manager before tacitly agreeing with the client.

The most effective approach regarding additional services is to be up-front about them: identify them to the client at the very first instance they are requested. The project manager should speak directly with the client, explain the additional service, and promise to immediately send an email with the details of fee and potential schedule impact. The client may be annoyed by this, and a good project manager has to be ready for that reaction, recognizing that there is almost nothing one can do to ameliorate the emotion. But the real outcome will be that the client has now been trained to know that the design firm will not be ignoring additional services, will give the client advance warning, and will provide information to enable the client to make an informed decision. And the client's initial upset reaction will not be repeated.

The sampling of project management techniques described here, along with other effective tactics, can be used to deliver great solutions to clients and to ensure that your firm makes a good profit—all with the goal of having the client ask you to do another project.

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