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Making Recruiting a Continual Firm Project

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

Recruiting for employees is something that a firm typically does only when there is a need for new staff. I would argue it is too late then, and that is not the best approach.

The value of a firm is not simply established by your great designs. Nor is it the sum of your rent and equipment. The value is completely about the people. The only way to increase a firm's value is by having the best staff that adds to the quality of the organization, its ability to provide clients with exceptional service, and to produce the best design. Firm leaders should always be looking to strengthen staff by recruiting the best and brightest—not waiting until there is a specific need to hire.

Of course, you may not feel the need to be looking for new employees at all times if you do not have the income to support them. But when you do need new people, how can you find them quickly if you are not always seeking them out? If you find an absolutely fantastic person who will be a great asset to the firm, do you just let them go to a competitor? The best approach is to make recruiting an unceasing effort, mirroring what should be the firm's relentless focus on developing new business—even when the firm is busy.

Ongoing recruiting serves additional purposes:

- Word will circulate through the design community and the buzz on the street will be that the firm is busy and doing well.
- Existing staff will appreciate that the firm is continually working to improve and grow, contributing to the feeling that they are in the right organization.

So how do you get into a constant recruiting mindset? The first step is to build a strategic consensus among the firm's leadership. Once there is leadership buy-in, a plan must be established to make recruiting efforts as consistent as timesheets, along with accountability and appropriate time allocations for staff. The person responsible for the program should report on recruiting to the full leadership team on a regular, at least monthly, basis.

Sources for recruiting candidates include AIA and IIDA job boards, Monster and other general online job boards, LinkedIn, and business publications, to name a few. Where it is possible to place an ad, very clear, creative copy should be developed incorporating the

personality of the firm. Think about some of the best ads you have seen. They stand out, are usually funny, and depart from the norm. An example of the copy might be: "Are you fully satisfied at your job, have great possibilities for advancement, and can't imagine having new design opportunities? If so, don't bother submitting your CV to us."

For the advertisement, do not use a position description—that comes later. The sole initial purpose is to entice great candidates to respond to a specific recruiting email address. Internally within a firm, I also recommend offering a bonus to employees if they assist in recruiting a new hire.

Other sources for potential employees can include allied professionals, such as furniture, contracting, and engineering colleagues, and even your larger clients. The latter can also be a superb combined business development tactic: Ask a client for the names of people they love to work with in competing design firms. If you later hire them, you might get more of the client's work. A side benefit is that you may get interesting information when interviewing a person from a competing firm.

One of my key techniques when interviewing a candidate would be to spend several minutes of general conversation to help them feel comfortable, then tell them that I would not be reviewing their design work or drawings. Other people in the firm had already looked at their work and vetted their professional qualifications, and I did not want the candidate to use the visual aids as a crutch. My only objective in my meeting a prospective employee was to determine if they had an exceptional brain and would be a cultural match in the firm.

In overview, a recruiting mindset gives the firm a pipeline of great professionals to increase the firm's growth and success. Happy recruiting!

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