

## Hire The People Your Clients Value

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It's been said that architecture is an old-man's profession. A complex combination of knowledge and experience, expertise in any facet of architecture takes decades. Add liability concerns, and it is easy to understand why firms recruit for the most technically competent people they can find ... whether they're hiring a designer, project manager, project architect or construction administrator. It's encouraging to see that most firms also recognize the importance and influence of their own culture and also seek people who will fit with the firm's values, style and personality.

Hiring for experienced -based competence and cultural fit are necessary, but not enough. Clients care deeply about the individuals who are assigned to work with them, but they are often disappointed. The truth is, many design firms miss the boat in their hiring practices by not focusing on the qualities their clients value.

### What clients think about your people

To test whether the idea that firms hire primarily for competence and fit, and, as a result, populate their practices with individuals who may not necessarily be valued by clients, we examined over two dozen past perception surveys. We use two questions to identify how clients feel about the people inside design firms. What we read in the answers suggests that extraordinary experiences with architectural firm employees are not common.

### What was it like to work with XZ Architects?

Sorry to report, clients were not very articulate or even very enthusiastic on this point. Of course there were some glowing work experiences, but the top four responses were:

1. It was fine/they performed well (unspecific)
2. No hassles
3. They did what we asked them to do
4. They made my job easier

### Does anyone stand out in your mind?

The worst answer you can have is "no": you can fix problems, but when no one stands out, you're just not memorable. Here are some trends:

- Most clients cite the principals, say "no", or have to think hard about their answer.
- Few employees are singled out
- Those employees who are named get enthusiastic responses from multiple clients
- Clients remember people better than firms

We'd call these responses equally luke warm. Can it be that there just aren't very many architects that clients like to work with? Art Gensler, as quoted in *The Executive Architect* has a theory: "I believe the profession has put itself in a position where it attracts people who are almost introverts." His point: architecture is a self-selecting profession and most practicing architects reject those who are, in his words, "outgoing and effervescent". The problem is, the rest of the world embraces these people!

### Valued traits

In addition to reviewing perceptions of specific firms, we wanted to know what traits were generally valued. So we did an "armchair survey" of purchasers of design services on the subject of hiring people they value to extract some themes. This group included the former Western Regional Director for GSA, the recently retired head of construction for the San Francisco Airport, three Fortune

500 Corporate Real Estate executives, a Senior Vice President for a developer and two heads of design and construction for large real estate services firms.

We hit a nerve. They were energetic in voicing their opinions. Their thoughts were helpful, if discouraging: we heard the same things we've been hearing for many years about not listening, being prima donnas, blaming others. In no particular order, here is some advice provided by multiple respondents:

### **Embrace who we are**

- "They must be business-savvy. They can listen to business issues and help build solutions to business problems." (D&C)
- "The just have to care about us." (corporate)
- "They've got to understand our culture: what's important to us, what we value, what design means to us." (public/private organization)

### **Don't make us teach you**

- "It drives me crazy when I have to step in and manage the project for them". (corporate)
- "We hire the same firms over and over again so that we don't have to spend time while they learn about us." (corporate)

### **It's all about behavior and attitude**

- "They have to act like empowered individuals" (D&C)
- "It's trite, but they must be team players. They can have their say, but they don't have to win all the time." (D&C)
- "Drive behind what's obvious. Ask insightful questions. The one's who don't work start presuming too early that they know what you're going to say" (corporate)
- "Confidence. It makes all the difference. We have not hired great firms because of the apparent lack of confidence of the project manager they put forward." (corporate)
- "They must be cooperative. Architects are not effective when they push "traditional" when "modern" is effective or the reverse due to personal preferences. (developer)
- "They have to have a responsive attitude. I don't value people who don't understand the difference

between getting meeting minutes out 24 hours after the meeting as opposed to 24 hours before the next meeting." (developer)

- "I respond particularly well to people who get us back on track ... who lead us." (corporate)

### **Make our organization more important than theirs**

- "The good people don't let their own internal discord surface on our job." (D&C)
- "I select for people depending on the degree to which their firms support them. I need to know who I need to talk to in your firm to reinforce how important you are to me." (corporate)
- "The organizational structure of the firm

### **Take responsibility**

- "They can't be defensive. They have to be willing to own up." (Public/private organization)
- "People who don't own up to a problem really bug me." (corporate)

Perhaps the most succinct statement on the subject of working with good people was from Brian Ferguson, who, until recently, was Director of Real Estate for PriceWaterhouseCoopers: "I select people, period. I don't care what firms they work for."

### **Five fundamental traits**

From the loose collection of comments and observations about what clients value and perceive, we have tried to distill the fundamental traits of client-valued employees in a way that would be useful to you in recruiting and hiring mode. We hope this gives you an idea of what to look for in the people you recruit that will make your clients happy.

#### **#1: Organizational competence**

Organizations are complex, unpredictable, and full of surprises. People who know how to use organizations will achieve results for their clients. Being able to "read" an organization is a huge leg up. Cynics look at this as "being political". But all organizations have politics. Those who can recognize the cues and behave accordingly are organizationally competent. To use the words of a prominent Corporate Real Estate strategist, Joe Ouye of Gensler, "the soft stuff turns out to be the most important."

## #2: Bias for co-creation

Co-creating – fully involving a client in the process of developing solutions – is the unconscious M.O. of people who are natural collaborators. Most clients want to be involved in the solution, and the result is almost always better if they are. Most architects absorb information and go away to solve the problem. People with a bias for co-creation absorb information and engage their client as they invent a solution.

## #3: Situational Specialization

Valued professionals offer specialized expertise to fit various situations. They may provide great value, say, managing the renovation of a laboratory but then they redeploy themselves to lead an analysis of the expansion requirements of the faculty of Arts and Sciences ... all for the same client. As Jason Uyeda, a Principal at EDAW, the nation's largest landscape architecture and planning firm says: "You fight fires. My entire career has been about following the fire." You can't know how to do everything, but you certainly can supply people who do. Just be helpful!

## #4: Relationship antennae

Managing a relationship doesn't just happen. Many architects are thrilled when they are awarded the job: then they relax. Theodore Leavitt, the marketing sage, believes that that's when the work begins. He writes very convincingly (and entertainingly) on the subject. Much of what he has to say is couched in terms of a marriage. This is from his venerable and ever-relevant work, *The Marketing Imagination*:

"The sale merely consummates the courtship. Then the marriage begins. How good the marriage is depends on how well the relationship is managed by the seller. That determines whether there will be continued or expanded business or troubles and divorce, and whether costs or profits increase."

Figure X shows some behaviors that Leavitt believes should characterize all good relationships between business partners.

## #5: Confidence

Clients can perceive a personal conviction that an individual has about his/her ability to bring value to the project and to the relationship. For reasons too complex to go into here, the design professions have

tended to become insecure and somewhat timid. Art Gensler ... again in *The Executive Architect*: "People in the profession don't value what they provide. They're so eager to provide something, that they don't place an economic value on it" Jim Cramer argues for the importance of conviction in his book *Design Plus Enterprise*: "Clients are not looking for architects who pressure the design process with a peacock display of ego or, more troublesome, jerk around the design team. Instead, they're in the market for professionals who know their own strengths and deliver the goods with full confidence."

**The big question:  
Can you hire for these traits?**

The short answer is: absolutely. To understand exactly how to orient your recruiting to include client-thinking, look at typical hiring process to identify opportunities in the process itself. There are places all along this continuum to inject client-thinking into the process.

## Figure X: Typical hiring process

### Description of the job

Let's face it: most position descriptions are boring. In our view, that is because they focus on competencies, not markets or clients. For starters, ask your own clients what kinds of traits they value in the markets in which this candidate will be working. If you don't want to be direct about it, conduct a client perception survey, but be sure to include a section on people. Make the position description engaging: obviously, you'll have to talk about your firm and its culture, but you want candidates to understand that you measure your own success by the quality of the client experience. Here are some ideas for supplementing a position description or posting with client-centric qualities:

- Talk about results your clients expect to see
- Create an expectation that learning the objectives of clients' organizations is the first step and the best way to produce solutions that matter to clients
- Outline your expectations for client interaction
- Identify achievements which your clients would value and which will be rewarded

Figure X illustrates some comments from a position description and a posting for a Director of a Planning Group in New York City that attempts to address these points.

### Specification of candidate attributes

It is excruciatingly common for our clients to provide us with what they think is a useful set of requirements for a position they want us to fill that goes something like this:

- BArch; MArch preferred
- 15+ years of (project management/design/marketing) experience
- Self-starter
- Team player
- Can work well without supervision

This kind of description helps no one. The people interviewing candidates for this position have limited information on which to base their evaluation of potential candidates. As their search consultants, if we only used this information, most of the people in our database would qualify. And any candidate who reads this thinks that he/she qualified.

To illustrate a list of requirements that we believe are client-oriented, Figure X shows the desired attributes of a Senior Designer for a practice that specializes in the high-end hospitality, resort community planning and exclusive residential sectors to see how we begin to paint almost a physical picture of the kind of individual our client seeks. These kinds of requirements provide an interview committee with specific traits to look for, and a candidate with enough information to know if or how to respond.

### Sourcing

Every search has a strategy ... the paths you follow simultaneously to identify candidates.

In addition to the usual techniques of tapping your own staff for whom they know or mining Professional Association meetings to encounter impressive candidates, ask your clients and potential clients about the professionals with whom they have had positive experiences in the past. There is a high probability that the kind of individual you seek is employed and hard at work, not thinking about making a move. They will not make themselves visible to you. So your own clients – past, present and potential -- can be your single most

important source of potential candidates. Infiltrate the organizations your clients value and see who attends conferences, and even better, takes an active role in presenting or organizing client events. (Not all people who attend conferences are Marketing Directors, and those who do are there to learn about new thinking in their market sectors and meet potential clients. These are the people you need.)

### Selling

Even in challenging economic times, to create a pool of qualified candidates you'll need to cast a wide net.

But at the same time you are broadening your candidate pool, your "pitch" must be very specific, proactive and engaging. We provide potential candidates with what we call an Opportunity Profile. This document portrays a firm in a candid and objective light. One of the key pieces of this document is a section on client relationships, as Figure X illustrates.

### Interviewing candidates

For the candidates you want, simply engaging them in discussion about your clients, the market sectors you serve, and how you address their issues during the interview process will be a breath of fresh air.

You'll see an animated response and be able to detect a real interest in trends and factors affecting your clients. For others, such discussion will reveal their difficulty in thinking about clients and their issues. You may detect uneasiness and a desire to bring the conversation back to a discussion of the position or their own background.

Some clients require the firms they hire to present potential candidates to them for review before the individual is hired. We see this practice becoming more and more common in outsourcing situations (for example: the people who provide on-going moves-adds-changes assistance to your clients on-site) or for the individual who will be the Construction Administration lead for a complex new building like a replacement hospital. Even if you're dealing with the majority of clients who don't request involvement in the hiring process, it could be quite beneficial in many ways to have those valued clients who have become friends of the firm meet finalist candidates both to get their perspective, but also to demonstrate that their input counts.

## Reference checking

If you are able, ask for references from at least two clients. Focus on the qualities we have touched on in this article. Ask about the experience of working with this person. Was it easy? Were there any surprises? Was it fun?

## Our overall recommendations for recruiting and hiring

- **Cultivate “FOF’s”:** Friends of the firm. These will be professionals from other disciplines, past clients, even valued past employees who have been recruited by your clients. These are people whose opinions you value. Seek their advice as “third-party opinions” on your people ... existing and potential.
- **Be unusual.** Articulate what you want carefully and with an edge. Remember that words matter: use them creatively. Our experience is that the words you use about the traits that matter in the position are critical to attracting a strong group of potential candidates. Here are the kind of words you can use to attract the people your clients value:

Courageous  
Grace under fire  
Even-tempered  
Resourceful  
Diplomatic  
Get-to-the-point-ability  
Persuasive  
Personable  
Leaderly  
Confidently modest  
Empathetic

You won't see these words in most ads. People with these qualities respond to things that are out-of-the-ordinary. Introverts don't.

- **Hunt where the ducks are.** Look for people who always seem to be surrounded by clients. Attend conferences, lectures, civic events. Watch your competitors in action. In our view, every gathering is a recruiting event.
- **Entrust hiring to the “right” people in your firm.** Learn who your clients value in your firm and make them a critical part of your hiring process. Establish hiring team protocol:
  - Review the position before the interview
  - Review the resume before the interview
  - Include people who are client-valued on the team
  - Same people interview all candidates for a position
- **Make an example of the people clients value.** Be specific about why clients value which individuals. Encourage the behaviors that clients value, and let employees know when they are successful with clients. Be proactive about retaining the people clients value.
- **Teach by example.** Create a marketing culture of “experience” rather than “sales”. Debrief your staff on interactions you observe – both positive and negative. Underscore your own behavior before and after the fact. This is a hard one, since much successful client interaction is second nature. But think about what you do and why it evokes a positive response. Don't just assume everyone thinks the way you do.