

Using the psychological contract to help retain young staff members

Practice Matters

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Architectural firms spend a significant amount of time and money recruiting talented younger staff. We attend on-campus job fairs, participate in university architectural and interior design boards, interview countless potential employees, and hire interns in the hope that they will continue to work for the firm in the long term. But firms often drop the ball when it comes to retaining the younger staff members after their initial excitement wears off.

This is a relatively new problem. When we first started our firm, we knew that we wanted to build a solid team of highly talented people, and we knew that this would not be easy. In order to attract talented employees, we had to entice them with a good financial and benefits package, as well as interesting projects. The job market in the past was much tighter, and younger employees felt lucky to have work and stayed at jobs longer.

Recent architectural graduates have much more job mobility, thanks to the economy and the fact that many alternative careers in fields such as real estate, construction, and industrial design have opened up. Our culture has changed, too. Young people may forego job security for the opportunity to work at a start-up, where

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their stock options might even make them rich. Today, it is not enough to hire smart graduates and offer them good salary and benefits packages. In order to retain these employees, the people who already work at the firm must interact with new hires in a supportive manner. By implementing the following four-step proactive process on an ongoing basis, you can greatly reduce your firm's turnover rate.

Create the psychological contract

People who hire new employees must understand that during the interview and hiring process, a verbal, psychological contract is forged between employer and employee. During the interview, what message are you giving potential employees? Interviewers must be clear about what they want in a new hire, what the job responsibilities are, and what the firm is committed to offering its young employees. Start by talking about the work environment. Explain the firm's organizational structure, the amount of client contact there will be, the kind of projects younger staff will work on, and the challenges and rewards of the work.

In the interview, it's equally important to learn what the applicant wants. Often, recent architectural graduates do not know what they really want, and it is up to your firm to decipher the applicants' goals based on their interview responses and portfolio.

Look beyond professional training and skills to an applicant's drive and ambition, his expectations from a job, and his areas of interest and enthusiasm. Then, hire the best match for the firm.

Firms are organized in different ways. A good match for one firm may be a terrible match for another. Does the potential employee want to be involved in every stage of the design process from start to finish within the first year? If so, then he could be a great candidate for a small to mid-sized firm looking for young talent for small projects. However, he would not be a good match for a firm that only works on extremely large projects or for a firm that is looking to staff a 1 million-square-foot project that is just beginning and is projected to last for years.

Be sure that your goals and those of the potential employee are similar. One of the worst mistakes a company can make is to make promises that will not be kept.

Mentor the new employee

At many architectural firms, a partner or principal will conduct the interview, yet often he or she does not actively supervise new employees. This is where problems often start. It is crucial to remember that new hires believe that the person who discussed what the firm was offering during the interview—the psychological contract—will be the person who sees to it that these promises are kept. But new employees often find themselves supervised by associates who are

not aware of what the partner may have said about the work environment or what opportunities were promised. When the job does not meet an employee's expectations, he may feel that the verbal contract was broken and may decide to leave the firm.

To prevent this, the firm must assign a mid-level staff member to act as a mentor toward new employees. That person should be part of the interview team and should make the psychological contract with applicants, because he or she will be supporting and interacting with them in the coming months and years. Mentors should be chosen carefully. Not everyone has the interpersonal skills or the interest necessary to support new employees in an advisory or mentoring role. It may take extra effort on the mentor's part to maintain the connection with the new employee, especially if they are working on different projects.

In addition, contact with the firm partners or principals should be continued after these initial interviews. Even if the new employee is not working directly with the partners, there should be other times for this interaction to occur. At Lehman-Smith+McLeish, we often have firm events, such as in-house project critiques and presentations, trips to art exhibits and architectural lectures, as well as an annual tour of prominent architectural spaces. This gives our staff more opportunities to interact with one another than they have during a normal workday. And, given the

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nature of each event, the interaction is often a chance for the more experienced people in the firm to share their knowledge with younger members. We consider interaction between employees in architectural settings outside of the office to be essential in creating lasting relationships.

Manage the morale curve

When a young person comes to a new job, he is excited and idealistic. However, in a few months he may well go from feeling euphoric to feeling mired in the workaday world, not because of anything the architectural firm has or has not done. This can often just be reality setting in after weeks of routine work and late nights.

The mentor must be aware that this will happen and manage the situation appropriately. If new employees lose some of their initial

enthusiasm, let them express their frustration and disappointment and be careful not to become defensive if some of the feedback is negative. To bring the morale curve back up, the mentor first should help young employees get a handle on the reality of the situation by helping them understand what they should expect at this stage of their career—and what they can achieve in the future. And, as trivial as it may sound, it helps just to say that almost all of us have had times when we thought we would never get past doing stair details or picking up redlines, but eventually we did.

Finally, the adviser should also take the time to really think about the relationship between a hire's professional growth and her satisfaction, to find the tasks that are best suited to her, thus allowing her to have some authorship of

her own career. In addition, it is helpful if, during the first months of new employees' tenure, principals check in with them regularly, ask how things are going, and encourage them to discuss any problems honestly.

Communicate openly

Occasionally, an architectural firm will undergo a significant change, perhaps in its organization or in the nature of its work: A partner may be added to the firm, a principal may leave, or a high-end retail design may shift to corporate work. The change can be like a big rock thrown into a quiet pond: The ripples may start the gossip mill and raise questions, uncertainty, perhaps fear or anger. It can also alter the psychological contract between younger staff and the firm.

How can a firm help its employees weather and even welcome the change? The key is communication, starting at the top. A senior partner should tell associates exactly what is going on

and explain the change fully. Don't wait until the last minute. Do it up front. Otherwise, employees will imagine the worst. The associates should give younger employees a chance to ask questions. This two-pronged approach is both reassuring and informative, and it will help allay fears that might otherwise lead to turnover.

It is inevitable that architectural firms will lose some of their younger staff. But they can minimize attrition by creating an organizational structure that supports the psychological contract, by establishing a mentoring structure, by proactively managing the morale curve, and by communicating early and clearly any significant company change to all employees. In today's market, we must be more creative in our initial search for new employees, and we must forge strong relationships with them so that the firm can make it to the next level. Remember: You recruit younger employees once. But you retain them one day at a time. ■