



## REPUTATION HELPS RECRUIT TALENTED STAFF

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The importance of design reputation hit me during my first design-industry recruiting assignment in 1988. A large architecture and engineering firm was looking for a Senior Designer, and the salary range was proposed to be in the low six figures. At the time, I was fresh out of the Wall Street human resources world, and this number seemed satisfactory, if not a bit low, given my recent frame of reference for senior-level hires. A qualified candidate - a Fulbright scholar with numerous design awards - surfaced out of I.M. Pei's office. He was making a base salary in the high forties. I was taken aback after he listened politely but replied that he was not interested. Initially baffled, my introduction to the world of architecture and the value of design was complete: the quality of the firm and its projects were more important to him than a paycheck. In the years since, I've learned the following relevant points on the importance of design reputation and the hiring of talented staff and I've learned that what is true for architects is just as relevant for engineers.

**Talented staff want to work where they can learn and grow.** This is accomplished in leading firms, and leading firms want talented staff so they too can gain knowledge. After all, the design profession is a life-long journey of learning.

A 60-person A/E firm recently hired a Director of Design whose work will take them in a new direction. The partners rejected another qualified candidate, one of four regional design directors in a much larger firm, whose work the partners described as awesome and inspiring. In spite of the candidate's multiple international design awards, they ultimately felt that his portfolio was too much like their own. The partners wanted to grow the firm in a new and different direction. The successful candidate - in his first role as a Director of Design - will be learning and growing, and additional personal growth will come from being in an entirely new geography and culture.

**Talented staff want to work in an environment that fosters loyalty and professional growth.** Howard C. Birdsall, President of Birdsall Engineering, Inc. attributes a low turnover rate of less than three percent last year to an employee-friendly atmosphere and a structured career-advancement program. A program specially designed for Birdsall Engineering and its affiliated companies - called the management matrix - provides a path of attainable career advancement opportunities and rewards, motivating professionals to grow within their chosen field. "Employees are seeing many of their peers raise themselves through the ranks of the program, and that encourages them to strive to attain the goals and rewards of the program."

**Talented people want an opportunity to explore.** This is slightly different from learning. Talented staff members want to work with systems to develop responsiveness to constructability - from applying computer technology to solving problems in ways not previously used. Many of architect Frank Gehry's projects, for example, have delved well into this arena and will continue to do so. Structural engineers at Skilling Ward Magnusson Barkshire (an ACEC member firm from Seattle with more national Engineering Excellence awards than any other firm), who have worked on several Gehry projects, are challenged and ultimately publicly recognized and published for their innovative solutions. This year the firm was a merit finalist for ASCE's Outstanding Civil Engineering Achievement Award for their structural engineering on Seattle's Experience Music project.

**Talented people want to participate in a work environment for which the quality of the work is known. They want to do quality work.** In the 1960s, CH2M Hill was a relatively small, regional engineering firm with about 300 staff. Today, they are an international engineering firm with thousands of employees. Much of the nucleus for their growth came from the exceptional people they attracted in the mid-1960s. During that time, CH2M Hill was committed to researching and developing new technologies in several fields such as water reclamation - and the firm attracted talented people eager to explore new technical frontiers. Many of these people subsequently became leaders in the firm and are still in leadership roles today.

**Talented people want to work on projects that help build a personal portfolio.** Talented people want to be involved with the types of clients with whom high-profile firms are engaged. Although some engineers and architects prefer to channel their energies in a focused area of expertise, many are increasingly open-minded about expanding their fields of competence. We often used to hear, "I only work on hotels and high-rises"; that is a rarely heard statement these days. At 400-employee Vanderweil Engineers in Boston, employee interest is focused more on the opportunity to work on projects that result in building a portfolio. The more challenging projects that one does now, the more prepared one is to tackle the next. This adds to resume building as well as professional and personal growth. The Power and Utilities Group at Vanderweil is one of many groups whose staff tenure exceeds ten years because of the continuing opportunity to solve their clients' technical challenges while adding to their ever-expanding capabilities as engineers.

**Talented people will seek firms with high-profile clients.** Whether it is Weidlinger Associates working on the American University in Cairo, Rizzo Associates working with HOK Sport on the New England Patriots' new Gillette Stadium, or the plethora of firms who will be involved with whatever is done to Ground Zero, design talent will naturally gravitate towards clients who offer exciting projects.

**Talented people want assurance that there will be work to do.** This is especially true in economic times such as these. The probability of the firm having an extended pipeline of work is often seen as greater in well-known firms, both large and small, with well-established reputations and where the leadership practices and embraces the importance of hiring and supporting excellent talent. Candidates are, however, more than ever assessing whether or not the work for which they were hired will be there in the foreseeable future.

ACEC member firm The Louis Berger Group, with offices throughout the US and in 60 countries, is known worldwide for its engineering expertise. The firm's focus in its early years involved international work to ease the impacts of changing economic cycles and to provide their staff with exciting opportunities.

**Talented people want to work with equally talented people.** They may want to work with just one star individual, or they may want to work with a number of talented individuals who work well together. Many firms have summer internship programs and/or participate in co-operative education programs through which interns can assess the work environment as well as the firm's design quality. ACEC/MA member CDM has had great success in rehiring their co-op talent for subsequent terms and then hiring them full-time after they graduate. Engineers at The Thornton Thomasetti Group - another ACEC member - get to work with those who designed Malaysia's Petronas Twin Towers, the world's tallest buildings.

**Talented people want to work in a professional, civilized work environment.** An environment that openly recognizes individual and group success and provides a democratic and supportive culture will attract more talented professionals. Comfort level and chemistry are important. The impression may be that larger firms offer a greater variety of design work, but opportunities for personal growth may not be as great as at smaller firms. Those engineers at smaller firms start to design from day one, get management responsibilities more quickly, and get to work with and know the firm's senior staff. They receive credit for their work and have opportunities to advance. SchenkelShultz based in Fort Wayne and Orlando does good design work but also has a top-of-the-line project delivery system and strong collaboration among all eight offices.

**Talented individuals seek ethical firms with a reputation for excellence and a concern for the development of their staff.** They are firms where the employees are appreciated, given an opportunity to design and do creative and meaningful work, given credit for their successes and paid equitably. At these firms, project delivery systems are sound, clients are happy and talented people learn and grow because they are surrounded with quality and award-winning results.