



RETHINKING THE ARCHITECTURE AND ENGINEERING DESIGN FIRM IN A POST COVID WORLD

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has closed for good many architectural and engineering design firms and has dramatically challenged the survivors on how they do business. In a post-Covid world, the fight for talent will become even more intense as firms face the challenge of a reduced supply and a resource pool that has become increasingly disengaged. Firms can fight back with a focus on intellectual stimulation to change their own culture and to transform it into an active and engaged workforce. One that attracts both talent and clients. Intellectual stimulation done right challenges all to think, create, and take risks to create solutions. It is through intellectual stimulation that everything about a firm is open for change. From rethinking how a firm handles talent, to client service, and even how it is structured and impacts the greater society around it is on the table, when intellectual stimulation becomes a design firm's focus.

Keywords: design, intellectual stimulation, leadership

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has changed the way many of us work forever. No longer is it acceptable to “muscle through” a head cold and be in the office so that you do not have to burn a day of paid time off. You are instead expected to work from home if you are able and keep your germs to yourself. By now, most architectural and engineering professional service firms are partially “back” in the office after a year of work from “wherever” approach just as long as you remain physically distanced from others and get the work done. However, the lasting effects of a year of reduced interaction in a design studio have yet to be counted. In many firms, new hires from the class of 2020 have yet to meet face to face with their more senior counterparts. This has not been just a minor disruption to the apprentice model of teaching that firms rely on to train up new architects and engineers, but it has caused many to question whether they should continue or leave the industry. In a year consumed with a fear of togetherness, intellectual stimulation has suffered. Many firm cultures have eroded and client service is in jeopardy. The following addresses the ongoing battle faced in all design firms - the fight for talent to be intellectually stimulated and engaged to create a dynamic team of professionals focused on delivering consistently amazing services to clients.

THE CRISIS THAT ALL DESIGN FIRMS FACE

Good design is hard, consumes tremendous hours to achieve, and requires a lot of motivation, inspiration, and stimulation. Great design pushes a team to borderline insanity and an almost cultlike work ethic that few are willing to sustain over long periods of time. Design professionals regularly work long hours often in excess of 50 or even 60 hours per week (1). Whether it is the long hours driving people away or competition for the same talent from other industries, there is a tremendous lack of qualified talent within the architecture and engineering industry. So how do we solve this problem and attract more talent into the industry? Hopefully, with more available talent, design firms will be able to better compete in a post-Covid world by better balancing work hours and workday flexibility. A recent survey conducted by Dr. Chuck Coker of LifeThrive found that the number one motivator for people under the age of 40 was growth and not just any kind of growth, but specifically intellectual stimulation (2). Therefore, the design firm that focuses on

intellectual stimulation as a primary motivator should be able to attract and retain top-tier talent that will give it a competitive edge in the marketplace.

WHAT IS INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION?

Intellectual stimulation involves “rational thinking, creativity, and the freedom to fail” (3). Intellectual stimulation focuses on individuals learning how to think and apply their ideas. The ideas from those with consistent intellectual stimulation will often be both innovative and “challenge conventional wisdom” (3). John Maxwell, in his book, *Thinking for a Change*, discusses the importance of the process of intentional thinking (4). Intentional thinking is a discipline that can be taught. When a senior architect reviews their thought process for designing a building with an intern architect, they reveal how they think and why they implemented certain ideas and rejected others. The intern architect can then choose to emulate that practice or discard it based on how useful they find it to be. Either way, they are engaged in rational thinking that provides intellectual stimulation and motivation to improve. Through sessions of intense, intentional, and focused thinking the brain is stimulated to create. Creativity becomes richer when it is allowed to occasionally fail. And it becomes even richer when an entire design firm is engaged in intentional thinking focused on creative solutions. A designer will take a risk and push harder for the right solution when they know that they will not necessarily lose their job when their ideas fail. Consistent failure may mean a termination, but the occasional failure in a mound of success should be rewarded by leadership.

TWELVE THINGS TO RETHINK

Intellectual stimulation is a major driver in determining success for a design firm. Done right, it challenges everything and motivates design professionals to rethink how they practice in every area of their business. The following are twelve key items for firm leaders to rethink as intellectual stimulation is deployed throughout their organization. If COVID-19 taught us anything, it is that we need to be more flexible and open to how we conduct business, serve clients, and make a profit.

Rethinking How to Earn a Profit

At its core, clients retain an architectural and engineering design firm to create not a design, but a solution to meet their needs. A creative solution deployed correctly can create a tremendous profit for a design firm. A firm should challenge its team members to create a pricing model that will most effectively maximize the profit potential for a firm while still creating a solution that will meet a client's expectations. Instead of reviewing a project's scope of work, generating tasks, and assigning hours to assist in pricing a project, a team may choose to brainstorm what a true value of a particular solution is to a client and then base their project pricing accordingly. This exercise will also intellectually stimulate a whole team and unify them towards delivering effective solutions and earning increasing profits.

Rethinking Talent Acquisition

Not every designer wants to work all day from the office or same location. However, almost every designer wants to be intellectually stimulated and learn to grow as a professional. By reimagining the design studio as a place for thinking and creating, the workplace becomes more desirable for talent looking to join a firm. In addition, building career case studies highlighting intellectual milestones and design accomplishments of team members not just promotions will entice the recruit who wants to learn and develop better solutions.

Rethinking Talent Development and Retainment

Intellectual stimulation can be both formal and informal. Advanced degrees, daily topic seminars possibly over lunch, project site visits for junior staff, and informative performance feedback sessions are all formal tools that will help develop and retain talent. Informal tools include training everyone to learn how to teach and mentor those around them or assigned to their projects as situations occur. Whether formal or informal, intellectual stimulation is a great way to build comradery and to transfer knowledge and skills.

Rethinking Design Leadership

A true design firm leader has not spent a career to arrive at the top just to be rewarded. They are now in a position to make an increased impact on those around them. They should regularly challenge team members and intellectually stimulate them to grow to become stronger and more effective. A leader should look to intellectually stimulate through one-on-one interactions, group settings, and regular correspondence such as email and text messages. A leader should look to collaborate with and wherever their team members reside. Being accessible to engage in meaningful conversations will also serve a design leader well in both intellectually stimulating and building a bond with team members.

Rethinking Design Leadership Development and Retainment

Design leaders need to be developed and retained through intellectual stimulation as well. This requires active engagement with peers in other firms to learn best practices through professional organizations and other networking events. Leaders should seek to challenge each other to learn through book clubs. Passing around best practice materials found through journals and having both formal and informal discussions go a long way in intellectually stimulating firm leaders. Finally, looking to speak at industry conferences will challenge a leader to improve and develop.

Rethinking Client Solicitation

Many design firms are reactive or only engage clients in response to formal requests for proposals. However, the very best meet clients where their needs are regardless of whether they are being commissioned to engage or not. By hosting seminars, discussions, and publishing useful material created to meet client's needs, design firms set themselves up as experts and intellectual heavyweights in their field. They use a client's curiosity and innate drive to be intellectually stimulated to their advantage.

Rethinking Client Engagement and Development

A signed design contract does not mean that further investment in intellectual stimulation with that client is complete. Now is the time for the firm to show a client a true intellectually stimulating design process. This will raise their expectations of what to expect from a design firm. The process itself becomes the intellectual stimulation and as a project develops so does the entire team which includes the clients themselves. Clients then get better at communicating their needs and understanding what is expected of them to help a design firm create amazing solutions.

Rethinking Client Service

Involving a client in the design process is one way to intellectually stimulate a client. Another is to show how a design firm can do so much more for them than designing physical solutions to meet their needs. For example, designing a building to house a manufacturing facility is an opportunity to understand and offer advice on how a client should be organized across an entire supply chain. This challenges a firm's team members to take a risk and to create solutions beyond which they may be classically educated. This then becomes another opportunity to develop and intellectually stimulate everyone involved.

Rethinking the "Typical Workday"

Where and when does design happen? When does a creative solution rise to the top? Traditional firms have set working hours and days of the week. In a post-Covid world, professionals are now used to designing and innovating from a wide variety of locations (office, home, coffee house, etc.) and different times of day. Design firms should look to incorporate some core times when they are in the office to work together and be open to team members working remote for other times. Flexibility is crucial here. Again, intellectual stimulation is the key not a rigid set of rules that mandate fixed times and locations for work.

Rethinking Firm Culture

One of the attributes of an intellectually stimulating firm full of leaders and team members is an active and engaged firm culture. A healthy organization is the result and success is the outcome. A culture where any team member feels free to engage their thoughts and take a risk is attractive for talent. This means that leaders should be open to criticism and be able to accept other ideas as possibly better than their own. Celebrating a junior member's design solution only makes a team's culture stronger.

Rethinking Ownership Structures

Most design firms have a set of a few principals that own the firm. A few firms are publicly traded. However, there is a movement to open the ownership to all employees through ownership structures like employee-owner stock ownership plans (ESOPs). This concept was born out of the idea – “why can we all not be owners?” After all, unlike product generating firms, design firms are valued solely off of the combined intellectual capital of their team members and what they can produce for the future since most do not have any meaningful tangible assets. Visit www.esop.org for more information on how this model may be the best ownership structure for attracting and retaining the best talent.

Rethinking the Role of the Firm in Society

The ideal design firm focused on intellectual stimulation and full of team members attracted to and actively engaged is a powerful force. Besides benefiting itself and its clients, it can also become a resource for improving its entire surrounding community. STEM programs that are led by mentors from within will intellectually stimulate both the youth and the firm talent to grow and develop. Assisting with solving the lack of talent begins in schools. The design firm focused on attracting more individuals to become architects and engineers helps to solve this problem. Plus, even if a student decides to pursue a different type of career, they may end up becoming a firm client in the future. So, either way, the design firm wins.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on how design firms operate over the past year. They may mostly go back to offices to work, but they are never going back to the old days of working. Soliciting, developing, and retaining engaged talent is the focus of successful design firms. Intellectual stimulation that encourages new ways of thinking, creating, and risk-taking is required for design firms to thrive today. It creates an active, engaged, and healthy team that is growing together and focused on client solutions. Intellectual stimulation challenges a firm to rethink everything. This rethinking process makes the firm stronger, more resilient, and ready to sustain itself through the next worldwide challenge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA is an accomplished architect and leader of teams and organizations in the architecture, engineering, construction, and technology industries with over 25 years of experience. He delivers a creative and comprehensive perspective on the issues and challenges impacting organizations today. A noted teacher and consultant in leadership, he knows how to liberate greatness in those around him to achieve success in their organizations. He is currently pursuing his Doctor of Strategic Leadership (DSL) at Regent University after previously earning a Bachelor of Architecture along with a B.S. and M.S. in Civil Engineering from Virginia Tech.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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