

EDITORIAL

Not-so-great management practices that won't die

Some management policies just don't work anymore, Mark Zweig writes, offering eight examples.

We have come a long way in the A/E/P business over the last 30 years. Not only is it OK to market to clients, we even have computers on every desk and auto attendants to answer the phone when the receptionist isn't there.

While these things may sound "normal" to our younger readers, they were subjects of great debate in A/E/P and environmental firms at one time. But there are still some other archaic management practices in our business that refuse to die—but need to. Here are a few of them:

1) No open book. With all the research out there on this subject, it's hard for me to understand why every firm does not share its numbers with employees. The more familiar people are with the gauges that reflect the firm's performance, the better. Open book firms grow faster and are more profitable. Trust your people



Mark Zweig

have the capacity to understand the numbers and share them.

2) Annual bonus. The majority of firms (over 90%) pay bonuses (or potentially pay bonuses) once a year. Why not more often? This is too long to wait if you really want firm performance linked to pay. Monthly or quarterly bonuses

are so much better.

3) Salary tied to performance appraisal. Tying pay to job performance as indicated by the formal performance appraisal seems to make sense on the surface. But in practice it's quite a different story. Doing this pretty much ruins any discussion about performance with the employee. All they care about is whether or not they are getting a decent raise, not what your criticisms are of their performance. Also, there are many factors that go into pay. Scarcity of talent, how critical a specific individual is to the firm, longevity with the firm, ownership status, subjective factors, etc., all can impact pay and cannot be ignored.

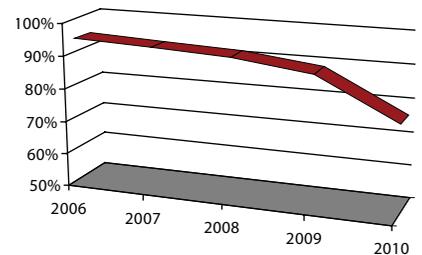
4) Book value stock sales. Why firms still use book value for internal valuation is beyond me. I don't see how it makes any sense to value a firm on its assets minus liabilities when its real value lies in its future earnings stream, its brand and name recognition, and its people. Not to mention the fact that book value for internal stock sales encourages your owners to strip profits every year. Who wants to leave a dollar in the till today just so you can get a dollar back in 20 years? Makes no sense at all.

5) Mass brochure mailing. Why do firms send out brochures with no call to action? I have heard more than once from

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TRENDLINES

Worth down



According to the 2011 *Principals, Partners, & Owners Survey*, the percentage of principals who say that their investment in their firm is worth more than what they paid for it has seen a gradual decline over the past few years.

After reaching a 10-year high of 94% in 2006, the number dropped slightly to 93% in 2007, and then to 92% in 2008. In 2009, this number fell again to 89%.

The biggest decline, however, is in 2010, with only 77% of principals reporting that their investment in their firm is worth more than they what paid for it.— *Margot Suydam, Survey Manager*

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a firm when I suggested a postcard series or design bulletin series that they would rather do “one good piece” and send that out instead of having a multi-pronged, direct-mail campaign. This just does not work! It would be like Coca-Cola saying that they won’t waste their time with all those little commercials and instead buy all ads on the Superbowl once a year. Won’t work too well. Learn from other industries that know how to market!

6) Timesheet sign-off. Huge waste of time. Do you really think your managers know how much accumulated vacation their people have? Or do department heads really understand what Sue did on PM Joe’s project for four hours that week? Nothing happens with this process other than time wasted. Send the timesheets directly to accounting and review reports later to make changes if needed.

7) All internal BOD. Not having any outsiders on the BOD is normal for firms in the A/E/P and environmental business. But it makes no sense! How can the BOD hold the CEO accountable for firm performance when that very CEO is most likely their boss on a daily basis? It’s impossible. Outside directors are one of the ways you can bring in the expertise and marketplace connections you need and could not attract or afford on a full-time basis at a super-low price.

8) No smartphones for ALL employees. It is hard to believe that in 2011, there is still resistance to this idea. The IT people tell you it’s too much trouble. The bean counters tell you it’s too expensive. But they are both wrong. If giving a smartphone with e-mail on it to everyone costs you \$150/month per employee and your average billing rate is \$85/hour, you will make the cost back in less than two hours a month.

I could go on and easily come up with a list three times this size but I am out of space. The bottom line is that we have come a long way in this business but still have a long way to go. More movement into our business from others outside this industry is needed. We’re too inbred.



MARK ZWEIG is the founder and CEO of ZweigWhite. Contact him with questions or comments at mzweig@zweigwhite.com.

A/E BUSINESS NEWS

SBA PROPOSES CHANGING SIZE

STANDARDS: A proposed rule published March 16 for comment in The Federal Register by the U.S. Small Business Administration would adjust the size definition of small businesses in professional, scientific and technical services, and other services sectors such as A/E/P and environmental consulting businesses.

The proposed revisions would increase the revenue-based size definition businesses need to meet to qualify as small businesses.

As part of its ongoing comprehensive review of all size standards, the SBA evaluated 46 industries and three sub-industries in these sectors.

Of these, the SBA proposes to increase size standards for 36 industries and one sub-industry and retain current standards for the remaining 10 industries and two sub-industries. SBA’s size standards vary from industry to industry to account for differences among them.

In 2007, the SBA began the process of reviewing and updating size standards based on industry-specific data.

Before this, the last overall review of size standards occurred more than 25 years ago. Under provisions in the Small Business Jobs Act of 2010, SBA will continue its comprehensive review of all size standards for the next several years.

The proposed changes take into account the structural characteristics within individual industries, including average firm size, the degree of competition, and federal government contracting trends to ensure that size definitions reflect current economic conditions within those industries.

The changes would allow some small businesses that are close to exceeding their current size standards to retain small business eligibility under higher size standards, giving federal agencies a larger selection of small businesses to choose from for small business procurement opportunities. SBA estimates as many as 9,450 additional firms will become eligible for SBA programs as a result of the proposed revisions, if they are adopted.

For more information about SBA’s revisions to its small business size standards, click on “What’s New” on SBA’s web site at www.sba.gov/size. Comments can be submitted on this proposed rule on or before May 16, 2011, online at www.regulations.gov.

CALENDAR

PRINCIPALS ACADEMY COMING TO PHILLY:

The Principals Academy, a crash course in all aspects of managing a professional service firm, is coming to Philadelphia on June 23 and 24. The program is presented by a team of speakers—including ZweigWhite founder and CEO Mark Zweig—with extensive experience working with and for A/E firms. They have a clear understanding of what it takes to survive, and even thrive, in any economy. The two-day agenda covers six critical areas of business management from the unique perspective of architecture, engineering, and environmental consulting firms, and is presented in tutorial and case study workshop sessions.

- Business planning
- Financial management
- Project management
- Ownership transition planning
- Human resources management
- Marketing/business development

The Principals Academy program also includes a case study workshop session that will provide an opportunity to practice implementing these management strategies in a supervised test case scenario.

For more information or to register, call 800-466-6275 or log on to www.zweigwhite.com/seminars/pmo/index.asp.



The voice of reason for A/E/P, and environmental consulting firms.

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LEADERSHIP

Never too early to start ownership transition

Most in industry don't have a plan, and that works against them.

By JOÃO FERREIRA
Managing Editor

A staggering 63% of A/E/P and environmental consulting firms don't have an internal ownership transition plan, according to ZweigWhite's 2011 *Merger & Acquisition Survey*.

No wonder ownership transition drives the M&A market. Selling as an exit strategy ranked as the main goal among potential sellers responding to the ZweigWhite survey. Other goals include managing growth and improving management.

"I am looking to retire shortly and current employees (some of them here for more than 20 years) are not interested in buying me out," says Stuart Jacobson, president of **Stuart K. Jacobson & Associates, Ltd.** (Northbrook, IL), a consulting structural and forensic engineering firm that fits the statistic above squarely.

The firm is also among the majority by not having an internal ownership transition plan. But, in Stuart K. Jacobson & Associates' case at least, there's an explanation.

"Because we are a structural engineering firm, it is my understanding that an Illinois Licensed Structural Engineer would need to be a primary shareholder," Jacobson says.

"Our Director of Engineering is the only Illinois Licensed Structural Engineer in our firm and he is just not interested in the responsibilities associated with ownership. He is in his early 50s and feels that it is too late to get involved in ownership. Each year, at his annual review, I bring up the subject again; and for the last five years or so, his answer has not changed."

VULNERABLE POSITION. ZweigWhite consultants say that owners in Jacobson's position may end up forced into a fire sale.

"If you don't have an internal ownership transition plan in place, your second tier management could be seen as

a red flag, and the perceived value of your firm may very well be diminished in the eyes of sophisticated third-party buyers," says Jeff Clark, managing director and principal of the M&A team for ZweigWhite.

Nevertheless, Jacobson is hardly in a unique position. Just like him, many firm leaders are baby boomers nearing retirement age—and without a transition plan.

Time is running out. ZweigWhite principal Hobson Hogan says the choice between beginning an internal transition of selling to a third party will likely have to be made in the next five years for this group.

"From an economic standpoint, holding on to your ownership rather than selling is typically in your best economic interests, as you are not likely to be paid an amount that will make you want to walk away," he said in a recent TZL report.

SHOCKED INTO ACTION. For Blair Enman, president of **Enman Engineering, PC** (Rutland, VT), a four-person civil engineering, sanitary engineering and environmental permitting, consulting, and engineering firm, it took attending a ZweigWhite seminar twice to get a leadership succession plan going.

"I took your Mergers & Acquisitions seminar several years ago in Florida," he says. "I have said to my staff if anyone ever wants ownership, 'Please talk to me. One of three things will happen to the firm, I close the doors, I will sell to someone else or I will sell internally. So, if you are interested in ownership and internal transition, please talk with me.'"

"I took a prospect to the same M&A seminar in Boston two years ago, and while the seminar was more geared toward how to sell an A/E business, my prospective partner heard the entire story," Enman says. "We signed an agreement last year, I have a partner, and the firm and our staff have a future. And, I will have a way to retire when the time comes."

For Enman, the whole affair proved to be time and money well spent.

"The seminar was excellent, and tak-

ing my prospective future partner to the seminar was absolutely the right thing to do," he says. "She heard the whole story as to why it was a good deal for me, and how she could benefit from my making her a partner."

ECONOMIC DELAYS. James Boyer, vice president and CFO with **David Miller/Associates, Inc.** (Lancaster, PA), a 20-person multi-discipline firm providing civil engineering, landscape architecture, planning, and surveying services, says the economy has put a kink in many ownership transition plans.



James Boyer,
VP and CFO,
David Miller/
Associates, Inc.

"Our firm is currently in the middle of an ownership transition, which has stalled due to the economic downturn," he says, adding that the biggest challenges have been:

1) Calculating a realistic stock value, since the numbers (revenue, profit, etc.) have been far different than the historical numbers and

there isn't a consensus as to what they will look like over the next few years;

2) Creating value for the buyers, since the most recent stock purchases have not provided a financial return.

"I still think now is a good opportunity for buyers who are confident that their firm is moving in the right direction, but the outgoing shareholders need to be flexible and realistic regarding the stock value," Boyer says.

Meanwhile, Hogan is urging baby boomers who have not acted yet to do so soon.

"An average ownership transition plan takes five to seven years to complete," he says.

"It becomes difficult to implement a plan with people in their late- or mid-50s because by the time they complete the purchase, they have to turn around and sell. You need five to seven years to buy, and five to seven years to own shares before you begin your sell down." ■■■

NEWS

Japan disaster poses logistics challenges

Transportation slowly improving but other infrastructure, such as power system, will face increased challenges.

By JULIE KYLE
Editor

The devastating tsunami and earthquake in Japan will likely have a long-lasting effect.

A week after the disaster, the Tohoku Expressway, one of the country's main thoroughfares, was still closed to civilian traffic, says Kit Miyamoto, the CEO of **Miyamoto International**, a West Coast-based global earthquake and structural engineering firm.

Miyamoto was in Japan at the time of the earthquake and resulting tsunami on March 11 for an earthquake engineering conference at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. He stayed to conduct damage assessments, and to present a technical report of findings from his investigation in Sendai and neighboring eastern coastal Japan communities most affected by the disaster to the University of Tokyo.

"I did exactly same thing for PEER (Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Center) at Berkeley yesterday. Essentially, I cut out trails for them to do a more in-depth study by observing the big picture rapidly, quickly," he says in an e-mail. "I know very few engineers visited the sites so far besides myself, due to concerns about radiation."

Tohoku Expressway, the main thoroughfare between Tokyo and the region devastated, reopened at 6 a.m., 13 days after the event, according to the Japan Road Traffic Information web site. The opening of the expressway "will save lives and speed up recovery," Miyamoto said in a published journal.

"After seven days, I still have not seen a single nonprofit organization here, not even the Red Cross," Miyamoto said. "Huge issues in the disaster zone and the surrounding area have arisen from a lack of gasoline, food, medicine, and basic necessities. Almost all the stores, from Sendai and the surround-

ing unaffected cities, were still closed after one week."

That's because the freeway was designated by the government for use by emergency vehicles only; no private-sector vehicles were allowed access, including nonprofit relief organizations, without a proper permit, Miyamoto said.

Bullet train lines within the area of northeastern Japan resumed partial service, according to the web sites of Iwate Prefecture and East Japan Railway Co.

The big uncertainty about this disaster (and what sets it apart from other such disasters) is that roughly 10% of electricity generation capacity (both nuclear and coal) may be offline for a few months, until oil- and gas-fired plants can ramp up, according to IHS Global Insight, a company that provides research and investing information to international clients.

In an attempt to forestall financial panic, the Bank of Japan has already pumped about \$250 billion dollars worth of liquidity into the Japanese economy, IHS Chief Economist Nariman Behravesch said in a report in *EngineerLive* digital magazine.

Meanwhile, the Associated Press reports that Japan's government said the cost of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated the northeast could reach \$309 billion, making it the world's most expensive natural disaster on record.

Despite concerns about Japan's already high debt levels, financial markets are likely to take a benign view of the Japanese government's reconstruction spending, Behravesch said.

The primary community and public health concerns are providing survivors with clean drinking water, safe food, shelter, and medical/public health attention for any injuries, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Survivors may be at risk of dying from diseases unless they get access to clean water, the CDC says.

"Huge issues in the disaster zone and the surrounding area have arisen from a lack of gasoline, food, medicine, and basic necessities."

While officials are grappling with short-term needs, the National Institutes of Health reports that natural disasters such as a tsunami can have a devastating impact on the psychological and social well-being of anyone exposed to them.

"Many Japanese are experiencing severe psychological stress due to the devastation, and that will have a long-term effect," says John Traphagan, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Traphagan is an anthropologist who conducts research on culture and society in Japan, with an emphasis on religion, family, and health. He has spent a total of four years in Iwate Prefecture conducting ethnographic research on the culture and life of that region. Iwate is one of the prefectures most severely affected by the earthquake and tsunami.

"I think that most Japanese are experiencing a very deep sense of uncertainty right now. Lots of people have lost most or all of their family. It's hard to calculate what's happening," Traphagan says.

Dade Moeller (Richmond, VA), a 253-person firm that provides consulting services for assessing, preventing, and controlling harmful exposures from radiation and hazardous agents, is providing pro-bono advice to companies that have employees, infrastructure, or other interests in Japan and are concerned about the situation.

As a public service, the company announced in a release it has made several educational resources available free on its web site, including three "Radiation 101" courses that normally would cost more than \$300 per student.

Dade Moeller will make additional online resources available as needed, or upon request.

"We will keep these free resources available to the public for as long as they are needed," said CEO Matthew Moeller. "It's the right thing to do."



ON THE RECORD

What keeps you up at night?

The economy? Rising costs? Lack of talent? It's all that and more.

It's a fairly innocuous question, but there is plenty that keeps the leaders of A/E/P and environmental consulting firms up at night. For this "On The Record" feature, several firms leaders shared their most pressing concerns, offering candid and sobering assessments on topics that keep them up at night.

Ramesh Gunda, president, **Gunda Corporation** (Houston, TX), a 29-person planning, engineering and management services firm:



Ramesh Gunda,
President, Gunda
Corporation.

Surviving current economic challenges, ensuring we consistently meet client expectations, having the assurance that we are producing the quality expected from our clients, and preparing for the impact of political decisions on businesses keep me awake at night. Having contingency plans is so important because they prepare us to meet challenges as they come.

When the economy is down, I want to be sure that we can maintain a sufficient level of workflow for staff. During these slower times, we use this as an opportunity to update our design tools and resources, further develop company and project guidelines, and conduct additional training to improve staff skills. We have also established a rainy day fund to withdraw from if needed.

To ensure that we consistently meet client expectations, we train all staff in client service and each project is led by a principal-in-charge to make sure client needs are met. In order to maintain the highest level of quality that is expected from our clients, we have implemented a comprehensive quality management plan and we regularly conduct internal project audits for QMP adherence.

What we don't have is a defined contingency plan for the impact of state and federal government infrastructure funding decisions on businesses. However, we are closely monitoring the situation and will stand ready to implement strategies that will reduce the impact of any proposed infrastructure spending cuts on our business.

Randall Bagwell, president and CEO, **NOVA Engineering and Environmental LLC** (Atlanta, GA), a 200-person environmental consulting, geotechnical engineering, construction materials testing/inspection services firm:



Randall Bagwell,
President and
CEO, NOVA
Engineering and
Environmental
LLC.

The things that keep me up at night and are concerning from a business standpoint include three issues. The concerns stated are mostly beyond my or any firm's direct control, but we still have to develop contingency plans if we want to maintain viable, profitable businesses.

The first issue is the rising cost of fuel/gas. This has a direct bearing on our company's profits, as we operate a fleet of over 100 trucks. Fuel costs are almost 3.5% of our gross revenue and with price increases of over 30% predicted, this will increase our costs tens of thousands of dollars on a monthly basis. Also, with the majority of our business being tied to construction, an economic recovery is needed if our industry is to achieve real growth anytime soon. Experts note that higher fuel prices generally lead to higher unemployment and inflation, and decreased GDP; none of which bodes well for the construction industry.

"Surviving current economic challenges, ensuring we consistently meet client expectations, having the assurance that we are producing the quality expected from our clients, and preparing for the impact of political decisions on businesses keep me awake at night."

My second concern is the rising cost of health care. For our firm the employer-paid portion of this insurance benefit is almost 5.5% of our gross revenue. We renew our employee benefit policies each May and the initial proposals from health care insurance providers include a 32% increase over 2010's premiums. Such an increase will result in an added cost of over \$300,000 to the firm. Worse yet, many employees may be forced to discontinue coverage if premiums continue to escalate at such a rapid pace. It is very difficult to provide competitive benefit packages to employees at an affordable level and still remain competitive or profitable as a company.

The third and final issue that concerns me is that our industry is not attracting the brightest and most motivated young adults into our profession. Our schools are not adequately preparing today's children for careers involving science and math, and for those who are prepared, they often are not taught in college the business and people skills required to succeed as consulting engineers. With these challenges and a potentially prolonged recession in the construction industry, we may be missing a whole generation of potential engineers and scientists in our business.

William Browne, president and founding principal, **RATIO Architects, Inc.** (Indianapolis, IN) a 90-person architecture, historic preservation, interior design, landscape architecture, urban design and planning, and graphic design firm:

With the current economic cycle, having seen the devastation it has wrought on the design profession(s), my greatest concern is where the demand for design services will come in the domes-

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ON THE RECORD, from page 5



William Browne, President and Founding Principal, RATIO Architects, Inc.

tic market. Clearly, several market sectors are overbuilt (commercial office, condominiums), while others may not need to be updated/expanded for many years (cultural institutions, sporting/entertainment venues). This has resulted in a smaller pool of opportunities with significantly increased competition to secure them. Although

the quantity of design professionals has reduced by 25 to 30% nationally, and consolidation of firms through merger/acquisition activity continues, the profession, in my opinion, has not yet reached the equilibrium point with the sustainable domestic market sectors.

In an attempt to overcome this and be one of the firms that remains and thrives in this “new normal,” our firm has decided to consider three specific strategies.

First we are identifying the markets where we have presence that we anticipate will be sustainable and in some cases will provide growth (higher education/health care). With the increased competition, we are attempting to expand our firm/staff’s capabilities and know how to provide greater value to the clients in these markets.

Clients have become increasingly demanding— appropriately so— of their designers to provide broader knowledge and insight into their design services, such that it is helping them improve their business competitiveness. No longer is it sufficient to provide a client with a well-designed, functional facility. They are looking for thought leaders who can help them with their financial model, design/construction delivery methods, improving their operational efficiencies, and creatively enhancing their product/service in their market, all the while designing first-class facilities.

Through strategic hiring, training, and an increased focus on broadening our awareness of our client’s goals and business strategies in our specific target markets, we are attempting to position ourselves as creative thought providers.

Secondly, we can no longer be limited to our current geographic regional mar-

ket (Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky), as we have achieved maximum market penetration with two office locations (Indianapolis, IN, and Champaign, IL). We need to expand into locations of population growth, where there is a larger quantity of potential opportunities that suit our skill sets, as well as where client market stability exists.

To that end, we recently completed merging/acquiring a firm in a specific growth market. We selected the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill market as the jumping off point for expansion into the Southeast domestic market. It is a higher education center, has significant health care providers, and is growing steadily in population. Rather than growing organically, we felt that expanding from an established firm will allow quicker success in achieving growth. We found a firm with great personnel assets and market presence and look forward to achieving further market penetration.

Lastly, many firms are now relying on an increased share in the international markets, where there is great demand currently, and for the foreseeable future. Accomplishing this from a first tier city is more easily done than from second tier communities, but regardless of location, there are different chal-

lenges to overcome with a move into this market. As a design firm, this market appears to have great allure, as the American architect’s creativity appears to be valued and appreciated.

Subsequently, we are beginning to understand what is required to enter into this market. Again, we do not believe that an organic approach can be followed. Identifying a firm that has experience with this market and its workings will be important to achieving success. For us, this may be several years away, but as the global world flattens it seems as though this is inevitable for us and many design firms.

It is our hope, through aggressively embracing change we can provide the stability needed for a good night’s sleep.

Randall Holste, president, **Holste & Associates, Inc.** (Houston, TX), a mechanical, electrical, plumbing and fire protection engineering firm:

The most challenging part of my business is trying to understand why architects think that engineers should work for free. Why is it OK for architects to be paid by institutional clients (school districts) and not pay subcontractors? We are totally unprotected! ▀▀

“The profession, in my opinion, has not yet reached the equilibrium point with the sustainable domestic market sectors.”

In our current economy,
uncertainty is a constant reality.

But you shouldn't be uncertain about how
your firm stacks up against your competitors
— and the industry at large.



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FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Referrals: What are people saying about you?

It is far less expensive to recapture an unhappy client than it is to capture a new one.

In a fascinating recent book, Fred Reichheld asks *The Ultimate Question* (also the title of the book), “On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to refer _____ (fill in your firm’s name)?” His rating scale sets a high standard, indeed. If the person questioned answers 9 or 10, he or she is a loyalist, very likely to give you a positive recommendation. A 7 or 8 means you’re vulnerable. Your firm might receive a positive nod, but so might another firm. 1 through 6, take a deep breath—the answer will probably be, “Anyone but you.”

Have you checked your references lately? Do you know what people are saying about you? A piece of advice: It’s far less expensive to recapture a bad reference than it is to create a new positive one. And that bad reference will keep haunting you no matter how many wonderful, positive ones you’ve nurtured. So, it’s in your best interest to be asking *The Ultimate Question* on a frequent basis.

But it’s not just client referrals you need to worry about in the building professions. We have a large number of stakeholders in the work we do and many of them are out there talking to your prospective clients—sometimes before you’ve even identified them. So, it’s very much in your best interest to cultivate a strong referral preference among every one of the people who can be influencers on the decision to hire you. Your goal is that anyone who is asked about architects mentions your name first because they know

you care about their issues. Make a list of anyone who might be one of these influencers and take him or her to lunch, for a cup of coffee or for a beer after work. Get to know them personally. Understand what irritates them about other architects or engineers (or about you and your firm). Share what you learn with others in your office and adjust your work practices and attitudes accordingly. Doing this on an ongoing basis will make you a better professional. Here are some ideas about who these people might be:



Ed
Friedrichs

■ **Contractor:** Meet with a project manager and find out what you can do to make their life better. Is it to be more responsive? To meet with them personally when you’re issuing a new set of drawings or a change? How about a field superintendent? This is where the rubber meets the road. They know what information needs to be on drawings and what is extraneous. The person who negotiates with subcontractors and buys out your project is a key influencer about your firm within the contractor’s office. Are your intentions clear in your documents? Are there formats that help them package your work better for subcontractor bidding? You see, your reputation is built a piece at a time. The owner of the construction firm may be the one a client asks about you, but he gets his information from his people, no matter how many rounds of golf you’ve shared.

■ **Subcontractors:** The person who prices your project for the general contractor, the person who details your work in shop drawings, and the person who installs it in the field are all influencers on your reputation. And remember, these folks are out in the market looking for their next assignment. They may have called on your prospective client before you even knew about the job.

■ **Manufacturers and suppliers:** Treat the sales people who visit your office with the greatest respect. Deal with them as “partners” in the work you do. When your project is being built, they can make it go well ... or not, based on the way you’ve dealt with them. Always return their phone calls, even if you’re too busy. If you

set a meeting with them, give them your full attention—don’t take phone calls or scan your e-mail while they’re giving you their “pitch,” and don’t blow them off if you’ve set a meeting and something else comes up. Don’t make unreasonable demands for samples or mock-ups; anticipate your needs and give them as much lead-time as possible. Remember, they probably have more “feet on the streets” than you do and often sniff out new prospective work before you. If the client they call on asks about architects, whose name do you want them to pass along? I’ve gotten some wonderful referrals over the years from manufacturers and suppliers because I truly did work with them as partners.

■ **Engineering consultants:** As an architect, work with them as partners. Meet with each engineer you know and find out how they would like to work with you in a way that will give you the best and most creative value. That’s what makes their work fun. They may also know about upcoming work before you hear about it.

■ **Government officials:** Wouldn’t have thought of this one, would you? But I got one of the most important referrals in my career from a city manager asked by a client about a firm that would work well with the city and the community on a particularly sensitive project. He quizzed his staff and our name came up at the top of their list. Meet with the plan checker long before you submit your documents. Get their advice on issues you have questions about. Treat them as partners with a mutual interest in public safety. It’ll also speed your plans through plan check.

■ **Lenders:** Your new prospective client will need money and may have the same lender that funded your previous project. Trust me, they will ask about your firm. Throughout every project you do, take the time to understand the priorities and concerns of the financially responsible party. Make sure you’ve addressed them. Whenever you have a project presentation, touch base with this person and review with them how your solution has addressed their issues.

Are you getting the idea? ■■

EDWARD FRIEDRICHS, FAIA, FIIDA, is ZweigWhite Group’s chairman and the former CEO and president of Gensler. Contact him at efriedrichs@zweigwhite.com

GUEST SPEAKER

Who's responsible?

Improve project management practices by increasing personal responsibility.

We've invested heavily to improve our project management capabilities over the last few years. We updated accounting systems and project management software. We developed standards for project tracking and team resource loading. We've held project management discussions and organized training.

All worthwhile activities. All poor substitutes for solid *personal responsibility*.

I don't mean to be overly critical of our team. We've continually improved project management and client satisfaction. There is also no question that new project management tools help our employees manage projects better.

However, when we fail, the reason is usually that team members forget their personal responsibility to meet project budgets, schedules, and scopes. These failures happen at all levels—from draftsman to principal.

A couple years ago, one of my partners took an interesting approach to alleviate this problem. One evening, he drafted an "Employee Pledge." This 11-part statement outlined the rules by which we would work together to meet client needs. The primary message: Each individual must take *personal responsibility* to ensure project success.

Example employee pledge statements included:

"As an M&S Employee, I commit to know the schedule, budget, and scope for all tasks I'm assigned."

"It is my responsibility to request this project information."

Cheesy? Perhaps. Necessary? Most certainly.

When originally drafted, the



Derrick Smith

employee pledge encouraged plenty of discussion. It was posted on bookshelves, computer monitors, and doorways. It was discussed at employee and manager evaluations. It was also presented

at new employee orientations. Like many initiatives, over time the pledge gathered some dust. It remains, however, our proclamation for *personal project responsibility*. Recently, I've refocused on the pledge with those employees I manage directly.

Project success is not the sole responsibility of project managers. Everyone must recognize the role they play in *profitably* delivering exceptional client service. New tools and processes are only a part of the solution.

This is a company culture issue. You can change your firm's culture to one of personal project responsibility by:

■ Hiring (and retaining) for

it. Internal behavior can change dramatically when new and aggressive blood is added to the mix. Sometimes complacency is the biggest culprit. New energy kills complacency. A written employee pledge (or similar document) may be an indispensable tool for evaluating new hires. How does that new employee respond to such a statement?

■ Providing solid leadership.

Personal responsibility doesn't stop at the top of the ladder. Are your firm's principals focused on project budgets, scope, and schedules? An effective employee pledge would hold leadership equally responsible for project success.

■ **Being transparent.** Certainly, a written commitment is one way to clarify and bring transparency to the issue of personal responsibility. Good project management tools and processes are another. However, the most effective way to clarify and bring transparency to personal responsibility is committing to regular and frequent discussions about project performance and success. This is a simple commitment, executed on a weekly basis through simple team discussion. Again, this starts at the top, with strong leadership.

If you hire and retain employees who

take personal responsibility, provide leadership, and seek transparency in expectations and regular project communications, your firm can increase project team members' personal responsibility.

These are my thoughts. I'm interested in hearing yours. What efforts have you made to increase personal responsibility in your firm? Please send them to my e-mail below. ▀▀

DERRICK SMITH is a senior vice president at **MacKay & Sposito, Inc. (M&S)** (Vancouver, WA). Contact him at dsmith@mackaysposito.com.

CALENDAR

LEGAL ISSUES FACING ENGINEERS: Get a solid framework of information from experts to help you address legal and contracting issues, and recognize and mitigate the potential risk to your firm during the "Ten Top Legal Issues Facing Engineers" seminar hosted by the American Council of Engineering Companies on May 12 and 13 in Philadelphia.

Among the key questions answered in the course during the focused one-and-a-half-day program include:

- What are the non-standard contract terms to watch for? How can you negotiate them out—or alternative terms in?
- How do you legally handle social networking media, aging employees, hiring, and discrimination, and other challenging human resources issues?
- Required and voluntary disclosure in pending litigation—how much do you have to disclose?
- Licensure issues: What is your liability if one of your engineers sealed a document after his or her license lapsed?
- Green project liability: How far does the engineer's responsibility extend if the structure does not meet expectations?

The fast-paced agenda covers a range of critical legal issues you should recognize and understand in order to protect your business, including contract provisions and all types of insurance: general liability, auto, professional liability, employment procedures, officers and directors, special risks, how to keep good electronic records, and more.

For more information or to register, log in to www.acec.org/calendar/eventDetails.cfm?eventID=1242.

BEYOND BENEFITS

Firm stays true to its name

From car sharing to banana trees in the office and cooking in the kitchen, company lives its motto—and employees rejoice.

By JENNIFER KOVALICH
Correspondent

Jason Lederer, an engineer at **Bioengineering** in Salem, Massachusetts, frequently rides the commuter rail the 20-some miles from his home in Cambridge to his office. He doesn't have to worry about leaving his car behind because if he needs one, he can use one of two hybrid Toyota Prius vehicles the company owns.

Lederer took one of the cars, which are decorated with the company's logo of a giant green leaf and a water droplet, to conduct a field visit with a client the first Friday in March. If he rides the commuter rail to work more than half the time, he also receives a \$50 bonus per month from his employer to sweeten the pot.

"It also helps offset the cost of train fare, which is nice," Lederer says. "It's a great benefit."

Bioengineering is a women-owned firm that has 50 employees and operates with the mission statement "Building sustainable communities on an ecological foundation." The company's devotion to "going green" is apparent in all of its projects—they conduct site planning and work in the realms of development, transportation and wastewater management—and its working environment.

ATTRACTING THE RIGHT TALENT.

The company operates from an old warehouse, has open work spaces and a loft-style area, uses low-fume emitting paint to decorate its walls and has also installed carpeting made from recycled fibers. There are also banana trees and other green plants around the office. It



Dogs and Priuses welcome at Bioengineering.

is also a dog-friendly working environment.

"When you walk into this building, within seconds, people say, 'Oh, I'd really like to work here,'" says Kathy Santoro, director of human resources. "I find that because we're in a sustainability focused business, we attract a lot of people who are green in their personal lives and they come to work here and people are practicing what we preach."

One of those people is office manager Nathalie Veillette-Pareene, who has worked at Bioengineering for four years. One of the benefits she enjoys the most is the use of the company kitchen to prepare lunches at work she often shares with coworkers.

"We all get very creative with meal cooking," says Veillette-Pareene. "I usually will bring a few basic ingredients that I have at home, such as carrots, onions, chicken, apples and cheese and end up making a gourmet meal out of it thanks to my coworkers, who will usually share some of their ingredients with me to make the meal more complete."

Usually Veillette-Pareene cooks with three to four of her coworkers and they dine family style.

"We are all from different backgrounds and ethnicities, so it gets very diverse in what we cook every day," she says.

A traditional Thai dish might wind up with a French twist, for example.

"I believe that there is something

primitive about 'breaking a loaf of bread and sharing it,'" Veillette-Pareene says. "It brings camaraderie at work. It helps with team-building, too."

The cooking is also within the company's philosophy of being a green company, because employees use a compost bin to reduce waste. On a daily basis, coffee grounds, vegetable and fruit peels go into the compost bin, Veillette-Pareene says.

"Composting offers the obvious benefits of resource efficiency by creating a use for organic waste byproduct that would otherwise have been landfilled," she says. The employees reuse the composted materials for soil in the summer.

Veillette-Pareene also orders coffee and tea that is Fair Trade and ensures that the coffee is locally roasted and distributed. She also cooks for all of Bioengineering's staff meetings, favoring "healthy alternatives," including fresh fruits, yogurt, pita chips and hummus.

"By being green, our company shows its employees that they care about not only the environment but about their health too," she says.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH. Bioengineering's green reach also extends into the communities where it has offices, including Salem and in Baton Rouge, LA. Each year on Earth Day employees participate in an Earth Day event in their local community. In the past they have pitched in to help clean up parks.

"We usually try to provide manpower to other groups that are trying to organize for that day," Santoro says.

Along with educational Brown Bag luncheons, Bioengineering holds monthly after work "Eating and Thinking" sessions where topics are a little more highbrow, such as "how New York City can lead the world in becoming a green city," Santoro says. The intellectual exercises are employee-organized.

"It's rewarding work," Lederer says of working at Bioengineering with its focus on sustainability. "You feel like you're making a difference." ■▲

RETENTION

Recession makes engagement challenging

Communicate, celebrate, train and reward are some of the ways HR professionals are reengaging employees in post-recession economy.

By SUSANNAH SWEARINGEN
Correspondent

Following a tumultuous period of layoffs, hiring freezes, and budget cuts, human resource professionals may find themselves faced with the challenge of reengaging employees who may be overwhelmed with increased workloads and responsibilities.

The economy has taken its toll on staff, and with a recovery on the horizon, employees may be considering greener pastures.

According to the Job Seeker Nation 2010 *Jobvite Survey* released last November, roughly two-thirds, or about 77.5 million, of American workers are either actively seeking a new job or open to a new opportunity.

COMMUNICATE AND CELEBRATE.

Debbie Kenderdine, human resources officer for the **Spiezele Group, Inc.** (Trenton, NJ), a 40-person architecture, planning, and design firm, says her firm makes concerted efforts to mitigate the effects of the post-recession economy.

The first step in reengaging employees is to communicate, she says.

“We are an ‘employee-owned’ firm and as such we have shared financial, marketing, and strategic pursuit information with our employee owners,” Kenderdine says. “We do this no less than twice a year and field Q&A sessions. Our communications and education link what is going on in the external, economic climate to what we are experiencing as an industry and a firm.”

The firm educates team members on key economic indicators, such as revenue per employee, profit margins, project profitability, interest rates, inflation, and unemployment.

Kenderdine says it’s also important to

take time to celebrate.

“While times are tough, we maintain a budget to bring team members together to have fun— we did not eliminate our special events budget, leaving dollars to have our recent Big Game ‘wing bowl’ and we plan to gather during the summer months for group barbecues, etc.,” she says. “We’ve scaled back a little bit on the budget. However, being together as a group is much appreciated by our team members.”

The firm was also able to award employees with bonuses.

“With the profit we realized in 2010, we paid bonuses to employees, taking into account their allocated ESOP (employee stock ownership plan) shares as a partial basis for payouts— linking ownership to rewards,” Kenderdine says.

GIVE THEM LUNCH... AND TRAINING.

Erin Gebo, director of human resources at **MVE & Partners** (Irvine, CA), a 90-person architecture, planning, and interiors firm, says her firm is investing in its current staff in a number of ways to “encourage them to continue to develop in their careers.”

“One way we have been successful at developing our employees is through our internal training program,” she says. “We started a new internal training program back in July 2010 with the idea that our firm would provide lunch for attendees during the lunch hour, while one or two of our employees host a training session.”

Gebo says the program has been a huge success.

“The attendance is evidence of their interest in the subject matter being presented and anonymous surveys have concluded that they are able to apply the information they received on the job immediately,” she says.

The firm also engages employees through a weekly internal newsletter.

“While times are tough, we maintain a budget to bring team members together to have fun— we did not eliminate our special events budget, leaving dollars to have our recent Big Game ‘wing bowl’ and we plan to gather during the summer months for group barbecues.”



Erin Gebo,
HR Director,
MVE & Partners.

“Each Friday, we send out a customized internal newsletter that not only shares the good news of business development activities, but it also allows our employees to recognize each other for a job well done,” Gebo says. “We allow our employees to e-mail suggestions to be included in

the newsletter to describe where they have witnessed a team member who has exemplified our company values. This honors many employees with recognition in the workplace in front of all of their coworkers and encourages the behavior that we value the most.”

HR professionals say recognition is key in motivating employees, particularly when salary increases and bonuses are not an option.

Gebo says her firm is about to deliver promotions to several key staff members.

“Although the title does not come with a salary adjustment, we are celebrating the individual’s contributions to the firm and promoting them for their continued efforts in making MVE a great place to work and creating more satisfied repeat customers by delivering a quality project,” she says.

Creating an environment that engages employees and helps them develop their talent is crucial in both acquiring and retaining employees, Gebo says.

“We are fortunate to be in a field where the employees are passionate about what they do to create environments where people can live, learn, work, and play,” she says. “This passion comes from the heart and we simply have to nurture that passion and allow opportunities to grow. This is something we are achieving at MVE even in a down economy.”

Finances: How much should you share?

The benefits of having it all in the open outweigh the negatives, but some are still holding back.

By JULIE KYLE
Editor

If you're like most executive-level leaders, you have a pretty clear picture of the state of your industry, the context in which you operate, and the financial health of your company. And you've likely wondered: How much should I tell employees about what's really going on behind the scenes?

The more the better, says Bill Siegel, the president and CEO of **Kleinfelder** (San Diego, CA), a 2,000-person science, architecture, and engineering firm. Kleinfelder shares all financial information, except individual salaries, with employees, Siegel says, and that open company culture helps employees connect to the *why*.

"We want all our employees to be good business people," he says. "They need to know how we work as a business and what drives our profits. They need to know how their individual efforts impact the overall company financial health and long-term value."

"Second, as an employee owned company, I feel that our employee owners have a right to know how the company is doing. Besides, if they know what is going on, they will likely be better stewards of the company's assets," Siegel says.

THEY'RE SHARING NOW. Leaders of **Sam Schwartz Engineering** (New York), a 75-person engineering firm, began sharing financial information with employees about three years ago. Employees have told the firm's president and CEO, Samuel Schwartz, that before that, they were under the assumption the firm was making far more profit than it actually was.

"Sharing the real numbers seemed to lower a barrier between us (management and staff). The more the employees knew, the more they understood the decisions we made of late including

delaying raises, forgoing bonuses and even layoffs.

"I now know sharing the information was the right decision," Schwartz says.

Transparency can also help provide team members with a sense of accountability, says Xochitl Medina, controller for **Bain Medina Bain** (San Antonio, TX), a 62-person engineering firm.



Xochitl Medina,
Controller, Bain
Medina Bain.

"Our reputation strives on innovation, education, punctuality, and 'within budget.' The more the staff is aware of budgets and cost, the quicker and more efficiently they work to reach the 'under budget' goal. As the staff becomes knowledgeable of the budgets and expectations, they

hold each other accountable, which becomes a motivator as well as a self-confidence booster," Medina says.

Douglas McKeown, CEO of **Woodard & Curran** (Portland, ME), a 600-person integrated engineering, science, and operations firm, believes transparency regarding finances engages and empowers the firm's workforce.

"I don't see any risk in this, unless a firm only followed through partially," he says. "You must be consistent and completely open or you run the risk of folks questioning leadership and not trusting. If they have a feeling that you are metering out information, then you've lost the value of real transparency."

"Our employees feel we are very accessible, open and honest. I think we have the advantage of explaining to people why we are doing what we are doing so they can remain focused on their jobs without wondering what the state of the firm is," McKeown says.

NOT SHARING MUCH... YET. **Architects Mosher Drew Watson Ferguson** (San Diego, CA), a 23-person architecture firm, does not share financial information with employees, and

Kelly Michajlenko, marketing manager, feels that hinders her ability to help the firm discern how to spend valuable marketing dollars.

"Although I do not know the details, it is my understanding the various market sectors do have different rates of return for each project," she says. "Secondly, it would also be worthwhile to know the differences during the go/no-go decision process as we try to determine if the individual projects are worth the marketing pursuit. Sometimes we need to choose between two RFPs that are due at the same time. If our chances of winning both are equal, it would be a better business decision to go for the one that will bring in more cash flow. Of course this would have to be evaluated against the need to build a portfolio or opportunities for future projects with the clients."

Additionally, understanding the numbers "would make me a better, well-rounded business person and an asset to any firm for making business decisions," Michajlenko says.

Aria Group Architects (Oak Park, IL), a 60-person architecture firm, shares just enough financial information to keep employees apprised on projected financial goals for the near future. James Lencioni, Aria Group's president, feels that the benefits of transparency do not outweigh the risks. "Discussion with employees is based on general information and not specific numbers," he says.

"During the very slow period in 2008 and part of 2009 we did share some additional information with employees to help them understand cuts, and also to allow them to feel more comfortable that the firm was healthy," Lencioni says. "As far as full disclosure of financials, I believe that many of our staff would not understand the full impact of the numbers and either be improperly concerned or the opposite. Also, there is always the possibility that an employee may get hired away by a competitor who could then have access to our confidential financial info." ■▲

"Sharing the real numbers seemed to lower a barrier between us (management and staff)."

TRANSACTIONS

POND ACQUIRES: Pond & Company (Norcross, GA), a 175-person architecture, engineering, planning, and construction management company, has acquired **CEGG Associates, LC**, (Virginia Beach, VA), a 28-person architecture and engineering firm.

The addition of CEGG to POND brings a strong résumé of full-service A/E experience with similar clients and project types, key client relationships in the region and new commissioning capabilities that are important to POND's continued growth.

CEGG will become POND's Norfolk office. In addition, POND has three existing offices in Norcross, Georgia, Atlanta, and Jacksonville.

"At CEGG, we're excited to add further strategic capabilities and resources. Pooling our talents with those of Pond & Company will allow our customers to experience an unmatched level of quality, service and value," said James Chapman, president of CEGG Associates.

"At Pond, the strategic fit between the two organizations will enhance our regional presence and current client base. Both CEGG and Pond share a common history of serving similar customers and delivering similar project types, further ensuring a seamless integration through the transition," said Al Pond, president of Pond & Company.

"Both CEGG and POND share a common culture—one with total focus on technical quality and service to our customer—making this an exceptional fit for the firms as well as their clients," according to a release.

RATIO MERGES: Indianapolis-based **RATIO Architects**, 90-person architecture, historic preservation, interior design, landscape architecture, and urban design and planning, and graphic design firm, announced the finalization of its merger with **Cherry Huffman Architects (CHA)**, a 17-person architectural and interior design firm in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The transaction, first announced in January, is Ratio's second merger. In 2004, it joined with a Champaign, Illinois-based architecture firm.

Principals of both firms are calling the business transaction a merger of equals given the team expertise and the similarity in design philosophies of both firms.

Louis Cherry, principal of Cherry Huffman, has been named the sixth RATIO principal.

"We know the time is right for this merger and continued national expansion," says RATIO's Founding Principal and President Bill Browne.

"As the economy shows signs of rebounding, we are anticipating the client's needs at the

national level. Providing geographic reach and breadth of talented work teams is a win for our clients as we eye larger and more complex projects."

RATIO principals became aware of Cherry Huffman about two years ago.

"We've worked in the North Carolina market and completed various projects for Duke University, observing many of the architectural teams in the area along the way. Simply stated, we are impressed with Louis Cherry's leadership and his creative and innovative team. Our design philosophies, work cultures and styles are very similar," Browne said in a statement.

RATIO and Cherry Huffman are privately held firms, and terms of the transaction will not be publicly disclosed.

GIELISSEN INTERIORS AND EXHIBITIONS ACQUIRES: Dutch firm **Gielissen Interiors & Exhibitions** announced the acquisition of **Nuance International** (Atlanta, GA), a global exhibit and interiors design and project management firm.

Gielissen, based in Amsterdam, is one of the largest interiors, events, exhibitions, and exhibit fabrication companies in the world. With this most recent acquisition, Gielissen now has 11 locations worldwide.

Now part of Gielissen Worldwide, Nuance International customers will have the convenience of the U.S.-based team, and a direct connection to the over 350 employees and nearly one million square feet of production space for the design, fabrication, and installation of exhibits, displays, interiors, and events throughout Europe and in the Middle East.

A/E BUSINESS NEWS

ABI FLAT: During the first two months of 2011 the Architecture Billings Index is not exhibiting the strength of business conditions that were seen in the final quarter of 2010.

The American Institute of Architects reported the February ABI score was 50.6, up slightly from a reading of 50.0 in January. This score reflects a modest increase in demand for design services (any score above 50 indicates an increase in billings). The new projects inquiry index was 56.4, compared to a mark of 56.5 in January.

As a leading economic indicator of construction activity, the ABI reflects the approximate nine to twelve month lag time between architecture billings and construction spending.

"Overall demand for design services seems to be treading water over the last two months," Kermit Baker, AIA Chief Economist, said in a press release. "We've been preaching patience and cautious optimism for a full recovery because there continues to be a wide range of business conditions for architecture firms that are also influenced by firm size, practice specialties, and regional location. We still expect the road to recovery to move at a slow, but steady pace."

The regional averages in February were: Midwest (55.3), South (50.1), West (49.1), Northeast (46.4).

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