

AIA Practice Management Digest - September 2017

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Tips for training employees

Implement a continuing education program, create an effective AXP mentoring program and develop a robust firm procedure training program.

Letter from the editor

By Seth Anderson, AIA

One of my favorite things about the profession of architecture is the ability to engage in lifelong learning. The sheer amount of knowledge an architect must possess cannot be learned in school alone, so learning on the job is a necessity. As leaders, managers, mentors and colleagues, it's incumbent upon us to help others continue the education of others in our profession.

For this edition of the *PMKC Digest*, we've compiled six perspectives on the methods and benefits of employee training. New graduates, employees new to the firm, keeping skills current, ensuring consistency, and reducing risk—these are all reasons for having a robust training and continuing education program in your firm, and the authors of these articles have provided some concrete ways in which any firm can implement a culture of learning and growth.

Does your firm formalized a training program? How do you approach on-the-job training for new graduates? What resources do you make available to your employees to assist them with their growth and development? We'd love to hear about it on the [PMKC Discussion Group](#).



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[Professional development resources can benefit your bottom line, increase staff retention](#)

By Marc Teer, AIA

Firms are realizing that training their emerging professionals and providing the best resources for efficiency and education will enhance their bottom line, while showing that the firm cares about their professional development.

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By Nick Caravella, AIA

We've forgotten to train our staff to experience the joys that attracted us to the profession in the first place. However, creating a culture of learning addresses these issues while combatting employee turnover.

[How effective risk management training can address potential indicators of risk](#)

By Kevin J. Collins, RPLU, Associate AIA

A recent study found that firms in the acceptable/outstanding category of loss ratios demonstrated a commitment to continuing education, making sure that key principals and a large proportion of their staff attended training sessions.

Employee onboarding: Best practices

By Ann Casso, Honorary AIA

Leadership can be defined as the ability to influence, empower, and inspire others so that they in turn maximize their efforts. The process of onboarding employees, from their recruitment and orientation through to their achieving peak performance is ultimately the result of leadership. Are you that leader?

Setting up emerging professionals for licensure and success

By Korey White, AIA

There are drastically different ways architectural associates and supervisors view their contributions to career advancement and licensure. However, by bringing together various approaches of practitioners, we can move towards a more unified profession that can support itself for generations to come.

What do emerging professionals need from firms?

By Steve Cimino

Supervisors and firm principals have an opportunity to influence the career arcs of the next generation of architects by creating environments in which their emerging designers can shine. Four designers weigh in on how firms can help their employees at a critical career stage.

Contribute to the Digest

The next issue of the *Practice Management Digest* will investigate “Presentation strategies: Improving skills related to public presentations and client interviews.” Join the conversation and let us know if your firm has any tips or tricks for creating and delivering a successful presentation. Submission deadline is November 3rd.

We are always looking for topics that you would like to see addressed in an edition of the *Digest*. If you have topics related to practice management that you'd like explored or articles you would like us to consider, please contact Seth Anderson, AIA, at sanderson@ascentarch.com.

Professional development resources can benefit your bottom line, increase staff retention

network.aia.org/practicemanagement/blogs/marc-teer/2017/09/27/professional-development-resources-can-benefit-your-bottom-line-increase-staff-retention

By Marc Teer, AIA

All too often aspiring architects graduate with a notable degree, but their schooling focused heavily on design, and not so much the important technical aspects of the job. They also have the burden of completing the ARE. This has created a huge demand for on-the-job learning and training for staff. There is a need for this kind of training because firms are competing for talent and the firms with the most highly trained staff tend to be the most successful.



Competition for Talent

In order to retain this talent, 82% of firms are choosing to invest in more professional development opportunities, according to the latest Design Intelligence research. Research from Deltek even found that firms reported external education programs as one of the top three tools used to develop talent, and 70% of those same firms reported that their win rates increased or stayed the same over the past year.

I think there is something to be said here that when you equip your staff with the tools they need to further their skills and education, you are creating an environment where they feel valued and confident. At the same time, you are increasing their ability to perform independently and accelerate the speed at which they can achieve licensure. The more licensed and experienced architects you have, the higher your win rate and the more you can enhance your firm's bottom line.

Mentoring

I think increasing employee skill proficiency starts with offering a mentor program. A learning plan should first be developed with the mentor with set end goals. These mentor programs should teach employees both the skills necessary to achieve licensure, if they are pursuing this, and the technical aspects of their jobs. By offering these options at your firm, you're showing an investment in the progress of your staff and their path towards licensure.

The Deltek research cited 63% of firms out there are offering mentor programs, and one of the more successful examples I know of is AIA Chicago's Bridge program. The program pairs up EPs with FAIA members. They meet regularly to discuss the mentee's goals and aspirations, and provide direction and ideas for how to achieve their goals. A firm could take a similar approach by pairing up their staff with the principals in their firms.

Group Learning

While one on one mentoring can be successful, learning in groups can be an efficient way to disseminate knowledge in your firm. Building groups with knowledge leaders in, for example, sustainability or exterior wall assemblies can focus the expertise in your office. This approach can satisfy both the technical learning needs of your staff and the skill set necessary to achieve licensure.

Additional Resources

Providing additional resources for learning, instead of just manpower, can significantly cut down on training time and upfront costs. In fact, Mark Kim, a principal at MVE Architects, used our Black Spectacles exam prep videos both as exam prep, and as a baseline for technical training for young and mid-level staff. Whenever they had to work on something they hadn't before, like designing with an escalator, they assigned the escalator videos to bring them up to a baseline level of understanding, which would in turn cut down on the time that the manager or mentor needed to spend with an employee showing him or her a very technical skill.

Licensure

To increase the number of licensed architects at your firm, I think it's important to offer a variety of incentives to achieve licensure. According to Design Intelligence research, almost 90% of firms are covering expenses associated with the ARE (including online, textbook, or other learning). They are also providing additional income at licensure, and a number of firms even track progress towards licensure on a chart in the office, or cover workshop or conference expenses.

Firms are clearly finding it increasingly important to offer more than just a promotion to encourage employees to pursue licensure, and when they do, I think they'll also find that their staff are more motivated and engaged at work. They'll feel more valued and supported on their path. But don't make advancement in the company their only incentive to work there.

In the end, I think firms are realizing that training their EPs and providing the best resources to be more efficient and more educated on-the-job will enhance their bottom line as a company, all the while showing them that the firm truly cares about their professional development. This will make your staff more likely to invest time into technical training and pursuing licensure, increasing retention rates and the skillset of your employees.

[Marc Teer, AIA](#), is the founder and CEO of Black Spectacles, a former award winning architect at Gensler, and Assistant Adjunct Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Black Spectacles is an online learning platform for architects and designers, that offers a software curriculum and an ARE® exam prep curriculum. All of the courses are available on demand, on any device with an internet connection, and are taught by practicing architects working at firms like SOM, Gensler & Krueck + Sexton- some of the most celebrated firms in the world.

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Practice, process, passion

network.aia.org/practicemanagement/blogs/nicholas-caravella/2017/09/27/practice-process-passion

By Nick Caravella, AIA

When looking at the problem of training in the industry, the problem is not that we are not training well. Our struggle is that we've forgotten the very reasons many of us chose this profession we love and are not training our staff to experience this. For many of us, we did not pursue a career in architecture to become solely production staff. We chose this profession to be exposed to the countless design problems, ability to use self-expression and come up with unique ideas, and to leave a plot of land or existing structure a little better than when we first found it.

Ernst & Young published the [Global Generations study](#) in 2016 that suggests some of the key reasons employees stay with their companies are opportunity for growth, meaningful work, supervisors who respect their employees, and pride in the company. Creating a culture of learning responds to some of the key issues and the largest enemy of training: employee turnover.



Given the freedom to take on new challenges, employees can feel a level of ownership and pride in their work. Both emerging professionals and architects can feel like they have the support and guidance they need for success when they work through issues as a team and with strong mentors. Allowing those challenges, you're not only creating a natural growth path, but also increasing your employee's value.

Productivity through passion

We all work our best when we are exploring our passions. We'll all have to carry out tasks we may not enjoy at times, it's the nature of the business. But it's important that we identify opportunities for employees to explore their passions in the profession. Listen to your employees and ask them what their interests are and how you can help them grow. They will return your interest with some of their own and before you know it you'll be learning something new too.

Architecture is a craft

There is a reason we call our work in architecture 'practice'. Each project brings a new challenge or lesson for us to learn. We often forget variety in project work creates a variety of expertise. To this end, we must think deeper about the purpose of training and the objectives behind it.

Practice, Practice, Process

Since no two projects are alike, it is necessary that we understand training in architecture is not task oriented. An emerging professional must learn how to practice. This comes through understanding how to approach a problem

and identify a solution. In order to capture this process we need to structure our firms around teaching the practice of architecture.

The Architectural Experience Program, AXP formally known as IDP, outlines some of the principles of broad exposure to the many facets of the industry. A focus on these items help build a better architect. Yes, great technical drafting is essential to a productive draftsman. Yet, if we're training the next architect in a firm, it is essential to look at the Experience Program and find ways to expose the full practice of the architectural profession. This means encouraging our emerging professionals. Encourage licensure. Celebrate it. Provide the mentorship that will expose them to the practice and process of architecture.

Mentorship

With any practice comes failure and with failure comes opportunities to learn. Another key element of the AXP is that practice must be completed under the direct supervision of an architect. To establish a good mentorship program, it is important to understand the importance of practice in training.

At Davis Wince Architecture, we have project kickoff meeting and weekly team meetings. Here we discuss the practice and the process of each project. We identify *pain points* in the process and how we can refine them, and discuss our progress. These conversations create a culture of mentorship. No question is a dumb question. Throughout the process of designing a building, the lead architect can help teach the approaches to the problem and the questions young professionals need to be asking. It is in these discussions we are not only training, but also learning about how we can improve the process ourselves.

Innovation is where wisdom and new ideas meet

As the process becomes celebrated and asking questions becomes encouraged, our firm often finds ourselves hearing questions that haven't been asked before. These questions often lead to new ideas, innovative solutions and practice methods, and ways we can refine our process to be more productive and meaningful about the way we work.

My passion for exploration is what fueled my pursuit of the architectural profession. I recall spending days in studio chasing down various ideas. Throughout my studies, I found myself on a path of self-expression and discovery. Being exposed to different areas of practice by my own mentor and being encouraged to challenging the norm of practice and process, I found my true passion in architecture. As a result, that passion has drawn me to push the practice further and empower my peers to do the same. Together, we can make a difference. Isn't that why we've become architects in the first place?

Nick Caravella, AIA is the Denver Technology Leader for Davis Wince Architecture and serves on the National Associates Committee (NAC) as an At-Large Director. He is passionate about the "craft of architecture" and creating opportunities for the new workforce to chase their passions and push the industry further.

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How effective risk management training can address potential indicators of risk

network.aia.org/practicemanagement/blogs/kevin-collins/2017/09/27/how-effective-risk-management-training-can-address-potential-indicators-of-risk

By Kevin J. Collins, RPLU, Associate AIA

When weighing the risks of design and construction professionals, professional liability underwriters typically look at indicators such as a firm's size, billings, geographic location, clients, professional services provided, and project types. Actuaries collect data on these claims indicators that help predict a firm's risk exposure. Victor O. Schinnerer & Company conducted a study to determine what additional factors—besides those supported by actuarial data—underwriters should look at when assessing a firm's risk.

In this study, Schinnerer explored the broad categories of internal continuing education, business practices, and financial parameters. Though these are difficult to track from an actuarial standpoint, it was thought that these factors could be potential indicators of risk. Our study consisted of looking at firms that were classified as having acceptable or outstanding loss ratios, as well as firms with problematic loss ratios. Data was collected from in-house seminars and webinars, and in-depth interviews with the firms' senior management.



The study sheds light on the relationship between the additional underwriting factors and the loss ratios of the firms. The study found that firms in the acceptable/outstanding category demonstrated a commitment to continuing education, making sure that key principals and a large proportion of their staff attended training sessions. In addition to extensive internal training programs, firms with acceptable/outstanding loss ratios facilitated external training. The same level of commitment to training was not shown by firms with problematic loss ratios.

Methodology

The study began by developing a consensus of what additional factors beyond those that underwriters typically use may be considered in assessing a firm's potential risk exposure. After consultation with risk managers and underwriters as to what factors may influence a firm's overall performance and risk exposure, the following broad categories were agreed upon:

- internal continuing education
- business practices
- financial parameters

The next step was verifying if any of these factors could be an indicator of a firm's potential risk. Over a two-year period, Schinnerer's risk managers collected data on the firms that requested and were provided in-house presentations or webinars. Underwriters also identified several firms with "acceptable" to "outstanding" ten-year loss ratios, as well as several firms that had "problematic" loss ratios. Schinnerer risk management staff conducted personal interviews with the leadership from these firms on the topics listed above to get more information than the

data collected from in-house seminars and webinars.

It is very important to note that data was collected from an extremely limited number of firms, and the firms were not diverse in terms of size, services provided, or geographical location. Also, despite our best efforts, most of the information was collected from firms that fit the acceptable/outstanding category, and only a few from the problematic category. So, it is important that whatever is stated in be taken in this context. These are not actuarial conclusions, but rather suggestions of what other factors may be indicators of a firm's risk.

Internal Continuing Education

Over the two years of this study, Schinnerer's risk managers collected data on participants in in-house seminars and webinars (principals, CFOs, general counsel, project managers, staff professionals, administration staff, etc.). Risk managers also looked at the percentage of the overall staff that attended the presentation. The interviews focused on the process, commitment, and philosophy regarding a firm's approach—if any—regarding continuing education. Once all the information was collected, a comparison was done between the firms with acceptable/ outstanding loss ratios and firms with problematic loss ratios.

Firms in the Acceptable/Outstanding Category

The majority of firms in the acceptable/outstanding category demonstrated a real commitment to continuing education. Most of the firms had some sort of formal continuing education plan that incorporated not only internal training, but facilitated external training as well. Some firms also had plans to help new employees get acclimated to the firm's culture and procedures. Many of the firms identified, planned, and scheduled appropriate continuing education opportunities for the year.

For example, one firm that was transitioning to building information modeling (BIM) had a product representative present on the technical aspects of BIM. The following month they had an attorney and an insurance representative discuss the professional liability exposures of BIM. The third month, the firm's principals presented a plan to the staff on how the firm was going to transition to BIM. Most of the firms in this group also had principals that actively participated in the planning and in-house presentations. As one risk manager noted, "Of the firm's five principals, four were in attendance, and the one that was not was out of the office on business. The four that attended not only asked questions and provided feedback, but also shared with the staff how the topic being presented applied to the firm either in a negative or positive fashion."

For those firms that had multiple offices, there was a conscious effort to have the other offices participate in the live presentation either via a video or audio connection, or later via a recording of the presentation.

Finally, many of the firms in this category had a higher percentage of their overall staff attend the presentations. Most had 30% of their staff attend, and a few had above 50% of their staff attend. The majority of firms in the "acceptable/outstanding" category demonstrated a real commitment to continuing education.

Firms in the Problematic Category

Conversely, firms in the problematic category gave no indication of a commitment to continuing education. Although only a few were in the study, those that we were able to collect data from did not have a formal continuing education plan, and there seemed to be no commitment to continuing education from firms' leadership (principals, CFOs, general counsels). Also, most of these firms had a very low percentage of their overall staff attend the

presentations, often with the percentage of attendance being 10% – 20%.

Conclusions

While the limited scope of this study does not allow definitive conclusions to be drawn based on the information gathered, some conclusions can be inferred from the data collected.

A commitment to a system for internal continuing education appears to be a vital component in managing risk. Firms that foster an environment of continuing education on a range of technical, business, management, and professional liability subjects generally had lower loss ratios than firms that did not demonstrate the same level of commitment to continuing education.

For architecture firms, self-evaluation is important, and this information may help you benchmark yourself against other firms. In particular, for firms that have had some costly loss experience, it may suggest changes that could be implemented to help minimize risks in the future. Implementation and a commitment to continuing education, as well as to business practices that include proper contract negotiation, review, and implementation, succession planning, and financial management, will help firms minimize their risk and provide a foundation for present and future business challenges.

Coverage and resources

Victor O. Schinnerer & Company, Inc. and CNA work with the AIA Trust to offer AIA members quality risk management coverage through the [AIA Trust Professional Liability Insurance Program](#), [Business Owners Program](#), and [Cyber Liability Insurance](#) to address the challenges that architects face today and in the future. In addition, they offer [various educational opportunities, free to AIA Members, available on the AIA Trust website](#) .

Kevin J. Collins, RPLU, Associate AIA, is a Senior Vice President with Victor O. Schinnerer & Company, Inc. and is a senior leader of the firm's Construction Industry Group. He has been with the firm for over 26 years in many capacities including: claims management, underwriting and risk management. Mr. Collins has more than 25 years of experience working with design firms and other construction-related professional service firms on issues of professional liability exposure and business risks. He has spoken extensively on challenges to the design profession and a wide array of practice management issues.

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Employee onboarding: Best practices

network.aia.org/practicemanagement/blogs/ann-casso/2017/09/27/employee-onboarding-best-practices

By Ann Casso, Honorary AIA

Employee onboarding is the process of acclimating new hires to company culture, job functions and standards so they can be productive and begin to contribute successfully to your organization's goals. Your firm wants to quickly and smoothly integrate new employees into your organization so they can make successful contributions to its mission and goals.

Onboarding Impact

In the typical organization, new employees get 90 days to prove their worth. This form of "sink or swim" onboarding, a common practice, forces employees to fend for themselves, promotes a very competitive work environment, and fails to immerse the employee in the company culture. Typically, companies that neglect onboarding practices face severe consequences such as:

- Higher turnover rates
- Slower rate for employees to become productive
- Failing to team-build between new employees and their co-workers
- Promoting a competitive environment that negatively impacts collaboration
- Possible bad publicity on social media sites, like GlassDoor.com

To avoid the pitfalls of an ineffective onboarding strategy, companies are developing comprehensive strategies that help new hires transition into the workplace. By setting the tone of the employee's time at the company, companies are benefiting from employee engagement, collaboration, increased productivity, and more.

Recruitment

Onboarding should start during the recruitment process, well before an employee's first day. Job advertisements and descriptions should align with the actual position so that new hires are not met with unanticipated responsibilities or expectations. Expectations should be clear, not vague or ambiguous. You want employees to feel confident in their jobs, and you want to feel secure in the employee you hire for the job.

Without someone fluent in small business HR, creating accurate job descriptions, screening candidates, conducting interviews, and selecting, onboarding and training new hires is a daunting task. Often, this leads to hasty hiring which makes employers vulnerable to error. It's understandable as hiring takes a tremendous amount of time and effort.

Hiring a new employee requires a critical examination of how and why you hire. Take time to audit your hiring methods, and look for and eliminate any discriminatory practices. Ensure open job positions are easily accessible to



all potential candidates. Clearly and firmly explain employee expectations in the hiring process so there is no confusion in the future. Making a mistake could lead to a costly discrimination lawsuit down the road which is why it needs to be done right every time.

Best practice tips: Be very clear on objectives, roles, and responsibilities. Make sure the position is described accurately and consistently throughout the hiring process.

Company Culture

A company's culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and personality of a company. When an employee fits the company culture they tend to work better and stay longer, as their values align with the firm's mission and approach.

If a new hire fits into the company culture, or even the team's culture, they're going to be more productive while bringing their own unique skills. If they share the same business goals as the team or firm, they will aspire to be a part of the mission. Conversely, if they do not fit into the culture, a new employee may not complete work appropriately, possibly leading to termination.

A good culture fit is important for both the employer and the candidate. When potential hires are made aware of a company's culture, they can make a more informed decision of whether it's a place they would want to work. And when their values align with the firm's, they may become more passionate and hard-working.

Best practice tips: Figuring out if an applicant is a culture fit for the company can be completed in a variety of ways:

- *Ask questions to spark descriptive answers about the culture at their previous company.*
- *Alert applicants what characteristics the company looks for in an employee, in addition to the skills needed for the job so they can be sure the company is a fit for them as well.*
- *When contacting their references, see what their thoughts are on the cultural fit at places they currently or used to work at, as well as what the culture is like there.*
- *When interviewing a candidate, expose them to the culture and let them experience first-hand what it might be like to work there and if it is somewhere they would want to be. This can be some exposure to co-workers at the office, a shadow experience, or even a trial hire period.*
- *Determining a culture fit doesn't fall solely on the shoulders of the hiring manager. The applicant's potential manager and work team need to meet the candidate and consider whether or not s/he fits with co-workers and the environment and would work well with them.*

Onboarding Technology

Onboarding technology and software can automate processes such as benefits enrollment and assist with new hire documentation. This ensures forms are completed, compliance requirements are met, and quality onboarding systems can electronically store required documents. This relieves employees and managers of the pressure to complete all forms on the first day, and the headache of manually inputting the information into a database.

Best practice tips: New hires retain limited information on the first day; don't overwhelm them with long lectures or lots of paperwork. Information overload can lead to confusion and disengagement. Direct new employees towards technology that eases first day paperwork that also provides employees with a positive introduction to the company.

Employee Retention

Employers have a short window to sell new employees on their company. In fact, as many as one in three employees voluntarily, or involuntarily, leave before their one-year anniversary. To avoid high turnover and benefit from the productivity of a tenured employee, companies are starting to have longer term onboarding policies.

With a formal onboarding strategy, employers can begin to track their employee retention rates and can evaluate the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of their strategy. Measuring retention can set employers on the path towards higher retention rates, lower turnover costs, and increased employee performance and engagement.

Best practice tips: Provide useful feedback to facilitate employee's progress at hiring and at the three-month, six month and one year marks. Get feedback from current employees to discover weaknesses, assess challenges and build on strengths of the onboarding process. Don't treat onboarding with a one-size-fits-all approach. Employees should be onboarded/trained according to their position, department, and/or skill set.

Creating an Onboarding Plan

Creating a personal onboarding plan with your new employee is an important step to begin a beneficial working relationship together. Work with the new employee to discuss the job and its requirements, various stakeholders, immediate and long-term needs and scope out what the employee will be doing. Develop a 100-day action plan that spells out who will do what by when so that both you and the employee are clear. Developing the plan together enables both of you to raise questions and discuss matters that might otherwise not be appropriately addressed.

Some sample benchmarks for such a plan might include:

- First 10 days - An orientation process to meet team members and other stakeholders, in both formal and informal environments.
- By day 30 - Identify priorities and what needs to be accomplished by when.
- By day 45 - Review what's being accomplished, by when and by whom, answer questions and determine any course changes.
- By day 60 - Identify specific accomplishments and acknowledge them and identify longer term goals to be delivered by month six.
- By day 75 - Assess whether there is appropriate staffing and support & any needed changes.

Firms without – or with limited – HR staff may find managing the hiring process burdensome. A Professional Employer Organization (PEO) is a company that manages the many responsibilities associated with employee management including staffing, recruiting, and hiring management. Sometimes known as HR-outsourcing, a PEO shares responsibility and liability for the firm's employees with the architecture firm, called co-employment or employee leasing.

The PEO arrangement may be customized to take on other various firm responsibilities, such as: payroll, benefits administration, human resources, workers' compensation, regulatory compliance, and 401k administration. [The AIA Trust recently partnered with XcelHR, a PEO or HR-outsourcing option](#) to provide administrative relief to AIA members, with special pricing and benefits, so they can focus on the business of architecture.

development and administration of member benefit and insurance programs and online risk management resources for the members and components of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Ann currently serves on the Board of Directors for Assurance Services, Inc. (ASI) that provides insurance products to support the members of the National Association of Social Workers. She holds a Master of Science degree in Organization Development from the American University in Washington, DC and a Bachelor of Arts degree from their School of International Service.

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Setting up emerging professionals for licensure and success

 [aia.org/articles/137346-setting-up-emerging-professionals-for-licen](https://www.aia.org/articles/137346-setting-up-emerging-professionals-for-licen)

By Korey White, AIA, June 30, 2017



There is a clear divide on whether or not architectural associates are getting the support they need in their firms to pursue licensure

Is getting an architecture license worth it? Are emerging professionals even encouraged to pursue licensure? Chances are you're going to get a very different opinion depending on whom you ask. According to AIA and NCARB's [2017 joint survey](#), there are drastically different ways architectural associates and supervisors view their contributions to career advancement and licensure.

But where does the gap come from, and how can we overcome it? By bringing together various approaches of practitioners, including firm leaders and [emerging professionals](#), we can move towards a more unified profession that can support itself for generations to come.

Perception versus reality

As detailed in the survey findings, only 27 percent of emerging professionals believe it is "very important" to their supervisors for them to obtain a license, while 88 percent of supervisors indicated that it was "very important" for the emerging professionals they supervised to get licensed. Essentially, those on the path towards licensure don't feel like their supervisors care whether they get licensed or not, and that's a problem.

This discrepancy seems to come down to a communication issue between firm leadership and emerging

professionals. Jason Takeuchi, Assoc. AIA, of [Ferraro Choi](#) in Hawaii believes that the current generation of leaders has “viewed licensure as valued and necessary,” whereas the newer generation of emerging professionals doesn’t always see it as a critical step in their careers. Like many, Choi’s firm has encouraged licensure as a means to get to work on desirable projects, and as a tool to become exposed to the business of architecture.

Those on the path towards licensure don’t feel like their supervisors care whether they get licensed or not, and that’s a problem.

Peter Kuttner, FAIA, of [Cambridge Seven Associates](#) believes the discrepancy is a product of supervisors not understanding that it is also incumbent upon them to serve as a mentor. Previously, NCARB’s [Architectural Experience Program](#), or AXP (formerly the Intern Development Program, or IDP) called for a “supervisor” and a “mentor,” with the mentor serving a more discretionary role to the emerging professional.

Now that architectural associates are required only to have a supervisor, the concept of mentoring may have gotten lost in the process. Supervisors may be able to mitigate potential problems with the perceived value of licensure by stepping back into that dual role. Kuttner, who supervises two young designers, goes beyond encouraging licensure.

“I have been able to get emerging professionals involved with local and regional AIA activities and positions,” he says. “I believe being a part of the bigger professional community early is an important factor in getting excited about licensure and the profession.”

Realizing the benefits of licensure

While there are many benefits to licensure, some of the most notable are those which directly affect the individual and the firm. Obvious benefits include increased salary and responsibilities, and respect within the industry. Janice Suchan, AIA, principal and managing leader at [Stantec](#) in their Berkley, Michigan office, stressed the benefit of a license not only for the firm but for the individual employee. “For the employee, it provides the validation necessary for them to take complete accountability and control of their work in the future,” Suchan says.

Licensure is often seen as a very personal endeavor. Studying for the ARE is left to the discretion of the individual practitioner. Some firms support this through providing resources, such as time off for exams—in addition to PTO and sick leave—and reimbursement for exams passed.

Tania Salgado, AIA, principal at [Handprint Architecture](#), identifies incentives to get licensed as one of the reasons why there is a discrepancy between emerging professionals’ perspective and their supervisors. As a small firm owner, she provides paid time off for exams and a study day prior to the exam. Her firm also supports licensed professionals by paying for their licensing dues and their AIA memberships.

“For the employee, [a license] provides the validation necessary for them to take complete accountability and control of their work in the future.” - Janice Suchan, AIA

Annual and semi-annual reviews are one of the greatest tools to encourage and support employees on the path to licensure. Suchan describes the process at Stantec: Each employee has a semiannual formal review where future goals are discussed and detailed plans are established collaboratively, which are monitored and developed over time.

While automatic raises and promotion are not associated with licensure at Cambridge Seven, it is a factor in overall evaluation and there is still support throughout the licensure process. Exams which are successfully passed are paid for, as well as the increase in AIA membership dues when [changing from an Associate to an Architect](#)

membership level.

In practice, reducing liability is at the forefront of running a successful business. Ken Anderson, AIA, managing principal of [RNL Design](#) in Arlington, Virginia, believes that when more employees are licensed, they are less of a liability to firms and to projects. Because architects are required to meet certain continuing education requirements per state licensing laws, they are staying informed of the best practices and newest technologies throughout their career. Inherently, this reduces the risk of mistakes on the job, decreasing liability.

As any firm owner, leader or architect knows, winning business is paramount to the success and livelihood of a firm. More and more, business development has become a key factor in encouraging licensure. Suchan identifies business development as a key benefit to licensure. RFPs and RFQs are requiring certain licensure requirements for key roles on projects. This can be prohibitive to a person's professional development if they cannot be a project manager on a new project because of licensure requirements by the client.

Increasing success on the path towards licensure

Architectural professionals are always looking to enhance the perceived value of the architect in society. The value and importance of licensure should be stressed both in architecture school and in the professional environment, Suchan explains.

Supervisors can ensure a clear path and increase transparency, but individuals need to take licensure seriously by fulfilling AXP and establishing an ARE test schedule. Communicating the value that a firm places on a license will increase the value of the license to the individual and the community in which the architect is working.

"Within the firm, we can do a better job of integrating test schedules and AXP experience needs into our project management concerns," Kuttner states. "It is too easy now to put off an exam or two to accommodate a project schedule or last minute charrette." If test schedules and AXP are discussed regularly, emerging professionals will feel like they truly have a partner in their path to licensure.

Salgado notes that increasing the value of architecture starts early on in one's career: "Professional advancement includes improving individual worth. In addition to integrity, this consists of developing determined skills sets, building strong client relationships, championing good design, and validating with licensure."

Korey D. White, AIA is a registered architect and passionate advocate of the built environment. She currently serves as the AIA National Associates Committee Chair and is a project architect with RNL Design in Washington D.C.

This article reflects the perspective and opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent a policy or position of the AIA.

About the Emerging Professional and Supervisor Survey

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For more information about the survey and its methodology, or to provide any thoughts on your own experience,

email us at emergingprofessionals@aia.org.

What do emerging professionals need from firms?

 [aia.org/articles/142661-what-do-emerging-professionals-need-from-fi](https://www.aia.org/articles/142661-what-do-emerging-professionals-need-from-fi)

By Steve Cimino , August 8, 2017



Four designers weigh in on how firms can help their employees at a critical career stage

The path to licensure can be challenging for many. Even with the streamlined [ARE 5.0](#), emerging professionals are pressed to connect what they learned in school, what they're learning on the job, and what their exams require them to know. As such, supervisors and firm principals have an opportunity to influence the career arcs of the next generation of architects by creating environments in which their emerging designers can shine.

Yet there's still much debate as to [how much support EPs receive](#) from their firms; a recent [survey commissioned by AIA and NCARB](#) displayed significant gaps between emerging professionals and their supervisors when it came to pursuing licensure. This sort of support is not the firm's responsibility alone: EPs need to carve out time for independent study and build a collaborative community during this critical career stage. But to receive the financial and professional encouragement that is so beneficial to becoming licensed, EPs must continue to state their needs loud and clear.

Experience matters

LaShaun Key, Assoc. AIA, is a design professional working at [Novus Architects](#) in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. The road he's taken to get here is, as he puts it, "a squiggly one," but it's brought him unique insight into what emerging professionals need from the world around them.

After serving in the United States Army for 10 years, Key decided to follow his dream and pursue a career in architecture. He moved from Hawaii to Georgia, and enrolled at the Savannah College of Art and Design, but graduating during the recession left him with very few prospects. He took part-time jobs estimating flooring and working in telecommunications for a software company with interest in the construction and design market; that opportunity finally led him through a back door into the profession.

As he moved from firm to firm as a designer, with a wealth of experience in other aspects of life, he started to better grasp—and lament—some of the cavities that principals have been unable to fill.

“I’ve noticed this empty space in architecture,” he says, “where all the people who left during the recession used to be. They all got other jobs, they’re not coming back, so as EPs we’re stepping into this gap of sorts. And not having an experienced architect there to teach you, to allow you to make mistakes and spend what extra time he or she has guiding you, is hard.”

“I think all firms have a desire for their EPs to get licensed, but producing well-rounded architects is even more difficult.” - Claire Gillis, Assoc. AIA

“If a firm really wants to be great,” he adds, “mentorship is key. You are mentoring what should be your future principals. No firm leader should come into the mentoring process with any fear, or think, ‘What if I teach him or her everything I know, and then they leave?’ That’s great! You did a heck of a job, and you produced an architect who is out there making an impact.”

Novus has given Key the freedom to pursue both licensure and his career; he has the option to take time off, both to study and to take the exams, and he’s even opened his own design studio. Yet he’s very aware, from conversations with other future architects, that not every firm is as understanding.

“In talking to my peers,” he says, “there seem to be a split down the middle: firms that are flexible and take care of their employees, and firms that love to produce work, regardless of their employees. I’m a military man; I was taught that if you take care of your soldiers, they will charge that hill and be willing to take a bullet for you. If you take care of your people and then ask, ‘Can you stay late?’ you know what response you’ll get.”

Finding your place

“Clients want to work with a firm that specializes in something,” says Claire Gillis, Assoc. AIA, a designer at [StudioGC](#) in Chicago. “And who wouldn’t? Who wouldn’t want to hire the best architect in his or her field?” However, as an emerging professional she sees how firms that subscribe to this mindset can stunt the growth of newly licensed and future architects, especially anyone who wants to experience the whole spectrum of architectural opportunities.

After four years working in marketing and design visualization at a firm in Minneapolis, she’s finally learning how projects actually get built. And she’s appreciated every chance to visit a construction site, even when she wasn’t on that particular project, just to soak in the experience. But her steps forward with [AXP](#) and the ARE have reinforced what she doesn’t yet know, and how difficult it can be to absorb the as-yet-unknown.

“It’s a challenge for firms to meet the needs of clients, as well as the needs of someone going through the licensure process,” Gillis says. “Some firms do it well, but specialization is good business and you end up leaning on architects and designers who draw on their past experiences.”

“I think all firms have a desire for their EPs to get licensed,” she adds. “But producing well-rounded architects is even more difficult.”

The need for a community

“Architecture is in the weeds right now,” says Nick Caravella, AIA, project manager at [Davis Wince, Ltd.](#) in Denver. “Schedules are faster, deadlines are tighter, and production is how we pay the bills. But sometimes, when you want to run, run, run, the best thing can actually be to stop, take a minute, observe the situation, and create a plan of attack.”

Caravella is recently licensed and an at-large director of the National Associates Committee, meaning he spends a copious amount of time thinking about what firms can do to develop and produce licensed architects. His general consensus? Start talking.

“When I would ask the question, ‘What’s valuable to EPs?’ I would get different answers from everyone,” he says. “But architecture is an explorative process; all of us are in different places, and we have so much to teach each other. It’s a craft, at the end of the day, and understanding the different methods and approaches is the best way to hone our craft.”

This means firm leaders need to get involved with their EPs—specifically, taking ownership of AXP and understanding what it really entails—and EPs need to feel comfortable interacting with their firm leaders. But just as much, Caravella recognizes how important it is to build a community outside of your firm’s walls.

“It’s not about giving anyone a hard time; it’s about reminding them that we care, and making sure they’re progressing not only with exams but in their professional development as well.” - Chris Bohigian

“I don’t think I would’ve gotten licensed as quickly as I did if I didn’t have friends who were also getting licensed,” he says. “And sometimes, we’d even wonder if this road was really right for us. But through that back and forth, I learned that studying for these exams made me a better practitioner. And I talk to the friends I studied with nearly every day; if I ever have a question, I’m not afraid to ask. That network I built will pay dividends throughout my career.”

How firms are getting involved

At the end of the day, though, it often comes back to your firm. There’s no more accessible concentration of experienced design thinkers, and there’s no other force with that kind of ability to shape your future. Many firms take pride in that opportunity to mold the next generation of architects, including [DLR Group](#). This international firm has identified the need not only for study resources but a mix of professional and personal guidance as their licensure candidates traverse this bumpy path.

“When we meet with our EPs as a group,” says Chris Bohigian, senior associate at DLR Group and one of the firm’s AXP coordinators, “it’s not about specifics, or to review particular areas of study. We ask where they are in the process and what they need from us.”

“It’s about being accountable for your own progress,” he adds. “If you said you were going to take an exam last month and you haven’t, what happened? Do you need help? Are you overloaded with work? It’s not about giving anyone a hard time; it’s about reminding them that we care, and making sure they’re progressing not only with exams but in their professional development as well.”

One of the tools they’re using is a firm-wide license for [AIAARE Prep by Black Spectacles](#), which offers 200 licenses for the firm’s emerging professionals to use at their leisure.

“It allows for a valuable level of continuity,” Bohigian says, “to track the pace of all our EPs and to know that everyone

in our offices is consuming the same materials. Plus, the Black Spectacles system is all about accessibility: there's no limit on where you can watch their videos, or how many times. If you're a working professional with a family, it makes it easy to study at home."

When asked what resources would've made the difference on his own journey to licensure, Bohigian doesn't hesitate: "Access to digital information." "At the bare minimum, offer study materials for the ARE," Gillis insists. And Key feels a real need for person-to-person mentorship: "As you send great people out, great people will come in to you."

Regardless of each person's specific needs, firm leaders need to listen and EPs need to ask. "Speak up," Caravella says. "Don't be afraid. Have faith in yourself, and figure out what you want, what you need, and how to get it."

Steve Cimino is a digital content consultant with AIA.

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