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Team Building for Architects: Myths, Strategies, Tips

Team building is an essential competence for architects, yet many architects struggle to build teams effectively. Read about the components of effective team building and how teamwork fits into the practice of architecture.

Value Analysis and the Design Process
The analysis of value is intrinsic to the design process. Generating the best alternatives for the client, however, often takes skill sets beyond those of design professionals. Used properly, value analysis can increase the return on investment and create greater overall project value for the client.

Revamp Your Client Newsletter
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Consultants' Corner
This month, Charles Nelson, AIA, FRAIA, recommends resources for project managers. To have one of our contributing management consultants address your burning practice management question, send an e-mail to practicemanagement@aia.org.

Book Review

Communication and Design with the Internet
Jonathan Cohen, FAIA (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000)
Please take 20 seconds to read this excerpt from our featured quarterly book review. If it doesn't stir your practice delivery imagination, nothing ever will—and, in this reviewer's humble opinion, you might as well take down your shingle now.

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Team Building for Architects: Myths, Strategies, and Tips
By William C. Ronco, PhD

Team building is an essential competence for architects, yet many architects struggle to build teams effectively. In fact, some architects see an inherent conflict between teamwork and architecture. Evoking the nightmares of design by committee, some architects resist any attempts to understand or work effectively with teams and team building. Even the more team-oriented architects often fall short in their ability to participate in and lead teams.

This article clarifies how teamwork fits into the practice of architecture and explores the nature of effective team building: what team building is and is not and what architects can do to build teams that perform at optimum levels.

Teamwork and Architectural Practice
Whatever one's philosophy about the role of teams in architecture, it is useful to begin by recognizing four different areas in which architects frequently work with teams:

Project teams. Most projects consist of a team including engineers, contractors, owners, and users. Effective teamwork on projects contributes to project profitability and quality as well as to the connection between the completed project and the original design intent.

Ownership teams. Teams of principals and partners provide the governance and leadership of most professional firms. Effective teamwork on ownership teams contributes to effective leadership of the firm, positive organization culture, interdepartmental information sharing, productivity, and financial performance.
Studio and department teams. Many firms organize their work by studio or department teams that specialize in a building type or client group. Effective teamwork in studios and departments contributes to optimal personnel assignments to projects, staff professional development and mentoring, and employee job satisfaction.
Special project teams. Many firms regularly form teams to tackle special projects, market initiatives, internal issues, and opportunities. Effective teamwork on special projects contributes to the quality and value of the project's outcomes.
Teamwork Potential and Problems: Group Dynamics 101
Many architects do not know that effective teamwork and group dynamics is a well-established academic field with a strong foundation of empirical research, data, and predictable problems and potentials. Most groups and teams of all kinds possess these important potentials:

Synergy. Most teams have the potential to produce at a greater level than the sum of their individual parts. In sports, the team with synergy has a strong winning record in spite of average individual player statistics. In architecture, project teams with synergy produce projects beyond the abilities of the sum of the individual project team members.
Brainstorming or idea generation. Most teams can generate ideas more effectively than individuals simply because they draw upon more minds; they tap into more individual resources.
Motivation. Most groups can energize and motivate individual members. When the group's work is creative, as it is in architecture, this potential is especially strong.
Organizational link. Most groups and teams provide an important link to the larger organization they belong to. Even though architecture firms may be relatively small, it is still easier for individuals to identify and bond with their immediate project team than with the firm overall.
Along with these important potentials, groups and teams of all kinds face these predictable problems:

Performance slippage. Despite strong individual resources and the potential for synergy, most groups suffer from a kind of performance slippage. The sum of their individual efforts falls short of what it could be. Following the sports analogy, they are like all-star teams that showcase strong individuals but fail to deliver a strong team product.

Individual negativity and passivity. People change their behavior when they participate in a group, and the changes can be discouraging. Most people tend to be more critical, negative, and passive in a group setting than when they communicate one-on-one.

Individual focus. Even when the leader of a team is advocating teamwork, most members are actually thinking, "How does this affect me?"

Groupthink. Many groups suffer from conflict avoidance, premature agreement, short-term thinking, and far-from-optimal thinking.

Questionable ethics. Groups and teams of all kinds possess a frightening ability to coerce individuals, even individuals with strong characters, to "go along" with the group sentiment.

The challenge for architects and for team building is to tap into the strong potential that teams offer while also managing and reducing or eliminating the predictable problems

Five Myths and Facts about Team Building
Although the field of group dynamics and the practice of team building has existed for several decades, a number of myths about the nature of team building prevail:

Myth 1: Team building should never be needed. Select good people, and teamwork will follow.
Fact: Team building is necessary because, especially in the practice of architecture, strong individual performers are often ineffective when working in teams. Conflict and miscommunication are inevitable; team building helps groups understand and manage conflict and miscommunication effectively.

Myth 2: Team building is a one-time event like bowling or paintball.
Fact: One-time events can help build a team, but effective team building is usually more of an ongoing process.

Myth 3: Team building depends upon chemistry. People either get along or they don't.
Fact: For professional teams, team building is a form of practice. Like sports teams, professional teams perform at higher levels when they practice.

Myth 4: The goal of most team building is to get team members to like each other.
Fact: In effective teams, members may or may not like each other. Team building can (and often should) be more focused on bottom-line team performance and productivity.

Myth 5: Most team building aims to eliminate conflict and disagreement from groups.
Fact: Conflict and disagreement can help make groups more effective at problem solving. Team building usually aims to help groups manage conflict more effectively, not to eliminate it.

Team-Building Content and Process
The Five Team-Building Myths help explain what team building is not. What team building is comprises four different types of tasks. Our work with architecture teams of all kinds leads us to believe that the four tasks reinforce each other and that teams must address all four to achieve meaningful progress.

Taking stock or self-assessment. These tasks measure team performance and productivity?for example, through surveys on the team's performance completed by its customers or stakeholders, team profiles of individual members' Myers-Briggs personality types, and other types of assessment.

Clarifying goals. Many teams suffer from team performance that is less than optimal because they never fully articulated their shared goals. We often find that interpersonal conflicts in architecture teams are really the symptoms of insufficient work done to clarify the team's vision, mission, and goals.

Improving group communication skills. The team's ability to solve problems, brainstorm, reach consensus, and make decisions is the aspect of architecture team performance that most resembles sports teams in that practice can improve performance in these areas.

Implementing appropriate processes. How often does the team meet? Who attends? Who takes notes? How do group members share information?

Improving teamwork often requires the team to adopt more effective processes for everyday communications.

Team-Building Best Practices and Tips for Architects
The inherent potentials and problems of groups, the Five Team-Building Myths, and the four tasks described above yield the following best practices and tips for architects:

Anticipate the need for team building with all teams involved in architecture practice. Whether you are working on a project team, an owner's team, an internal department, or a special project, the team will benefit from a conscious effort of team building.
Make sure your work with team building encompasses all four of the team-building tasks. Each task is interesting and will produce some results. However, team building that is limited to work in just one of the tasks will produce limited outcomes.
Beware of "retreats." Team-building retreats can generate valuable insights. Too often, however, the notion of a retreat makes it seem that generating the insight is the end of team building.
Most important: Make team building an ongoing process. The best sports teams continue to practice all season and often all year. Architecture teams also benefit most from team building when they make it an integral part of their ongoing work.
Resources
These essential resources will further your understanding of teamwork and team building:

Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L.J. Bourgeois. "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight." Harvard Business Review (July-August 1997). This benchmark article addresses issues that many architecture teams confront.

Jon R. Katzeenback and Douglas K. Smith. The Wisdom of Teams. New York: Harper Collins, 1999. An excellent summary of the current wisdom about the wisdom of teams.

William C. Ronco and Jean S. Ronco. Partnering Manual for Design and Construction. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996. Our own book on partnering contains many useful team-building strategies and tips for project management and communications.

Elaine Biech, ed. The Annual, Volume 1 & Volume 2, Training and Consulting. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999. Pfeiffer Associates (formerly University Associates) has been publishing annual collections of team-building and training activities for 30 years. Clearly outlined to enable novices to run their own team-building activities and indexed to make it possible to locate appropriate exercises for specific team issues and opportunities, these are a valuable resource for architecture firms.

In addition, the "Plan Your Program" link on our www.gatheringpace.com Web site provides specific steps to help organizations design team-building programs to achieve lasting results.

William C. Ronco, PhD, is president of Gathering Pace Consulting in Bedford, Mass. He teaches and consults extensively on team building, strategic planning, business survey research, partnering, and leadership development. Ronco works with architecture and engineering firms, construction companies, corporate real estate, and facility departments. Ronco can be reached at 781-275-2424 or by e-mail at wronco@gatheringpace.com.

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Value Analysis and the Design Process

The analysis of value is intrinsic to the design process. Design professionals evaluate materials and systems as part of the process of responding to the client's needs. The resultant design is really a series of recommendations to the client that address constructability, program requirements, and life-cycle costs including operational and maintenance expenses.

Generating alternatives to produce the greatest worth for the client often takes skill sets beyond those of design professionals. A team approach can best incorporate the expertise of value and constructability consultants into any analysis that the designers of record provide. Used properly, value analysis can increase the return on investment and create greater overall project value for the client.

Assessing Functional Alternatives
The basis of value analysis is an organized effort focused on achieving the lowest life-cycle costs consistent with required performance, reliability, quality, and aesthetics. This organized effort should acknowledge that the design team's participation will result in additional time and liability exposures, and the professional service fee should be increased accordingly. Usually, the best results are achieved when value analysis begins early in the design process. Beginning at the schematic design development phase, initial and long-term expenses as well as construction costs can decrease through use of more cost-efficient materials and reduction in construction time, increasing the client's profitable use of the facility.

Avoiding the Cost-Cutting Mentality
Mere cost cutting is not true value analysis. Cost cutting that results in a loss of quality and functionality does not qualify as the systematic identification of a component's true function. And this does not provide a component's essential function at the lowest overall cost. Most value analysis ideas involve some compromise on quality, but performance, quality, and cost must be weighed against each other before agreeing on changes. If the solution is developed early enough in the design process, the overall benefit to the client will be greater.

CNA/Schinnerer studies have shown that changes made after the design phase?whether to ease the construction process or to reduce the cost of materials or systems?are more likely to generate professional liability claims. While such changes may save immediate costs, later problems can lead to client dissatisfaction and construction inadequacies, both of which lead to claims.

Achieving True Benefits
Reducing project construction costs, improving project schedules, and decreasing operational and maintenance costs can be a significant challenge. The first step in meeting that challenge is to make sure the client has a well-prepared budget and a clear program. Then the value analysis process, conducted early in the design phase, can have positive results. Gaps in the client's program or insufficient funding can lead to significant problems during construction if not addressed up front.

Value analysis should not be a one-time effort, however. The design team must review and evaluate each proposal on the basis of project goals, technical considerations, implementation consequences, and both initial operations and life-cycle cost savings. The design team also is responsible for defending quality to the client and explaining the downside of any value analysis ideas. A client must be able to express informed consent when deciding on design team recommendations.

All stakeholders in a construction project must understand the procedures and timing of value analysis if the process is to achieve a true benefit rather than

illusory savings to the client.

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Revamp Your Client Newsletter

Newsletters can be a cost-effective way to spread market awareness of your knowledge and expertise. Unfortunately, most A/E/C firms provide information that centers around their own firms instead of their clients' firms. These firms continually limit their newsletter content to such topics as past projects or recent employee promotions.

While these topics may be interesting, they offer no value to your clients. Only when you focus content on your client's business—not your own—will your newsletter become an effective marketing tool.

If your client had to pay for your marketing materials, would they keep taking them? If the answer is "No," then you are not providing useful information to your clients.

Adding Value
For a truly effective client newsletter, take the following steps:

Listen to your clients. Find out the immediate issues and concerns that plague them. Document these issues, and make them the subject of your newsletter.

Don't waste your money on appearances. Newsletters do not need to be fancy, high-gloss productions with giant photos of past projects. Again, it is the useful information that matters.

Send a useful article to your top 25 clients with a handwritten note attached. This ensures that the article will get through the administrator who screens the mail. It also lets the client know that you care.

Write a minimum of six issues a year. The client will not only become familiar with your firm but will also look forward to receiving your advice.

Successful Newsletters
One newsletter that provides useful news and advice for clients is Ai Trends, a client newsletter published by Ai, a Washington, D.C.-based design firm. The November 2003 issue focused on security and design, sharing advice on risk assessment, and budgeting for security issues. You can find past issues of Ai Trends at www.aiarchitecture.com.

Seattle's Callison Architecture publishes a similarly styled newsletter, and each issue focuses completely on one of the firm's markets: health care, retail, residential, hospitality, and corporate.

Client-focused marketing materials have a longer shelf life, so your firm name stays visible to your clients and prospects for a longer time. When it comes time for design, your clients will think of you first—not just because they remember your name, but because you have already given them something of value.

Learn about the PSMJ Newsletter at www.psmj.com or call 617-965-0055.

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Consultants' Corner

This month's contributing management consultant: Charles E. Nelson, AIA, FRAIA

What tools can help project managers handle their day-to-day tasks more effectively?

I currently work for an architecture firm in Denver and I work daily with the project managers on administrative tasks and help them with various other tasks that are a part of managing a project. Do you have any project management tools that I could use to help the PMs become more productive and make my job easier (e.g., examples of management reports and checklists), and is a project manager's handbook available through the AIA?

—Laura Muniz, project assistant, AndersonMasonDale Architects, Denver

Response from the Practice Management Advisory Group:

Your best, most comprehensive resource is *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th ed., and the Update 2004, published by the AIA and John Wiley & Sons Inc. Both are available through the AIA Store and can be ordered online.

The Practice Management Knowledge Community also publishes the online *Practice Management Digest*, featuring articles on practice management topics. Cureent and archived issues are available at www.aia.org/pm.

In 1996 the AIA California Council, with sponsorship from Design Professional Insurance Companies (DPIC) Inc., published the excellent Handbook on Project Delivery, aimed at contract administration. For more information or to order, see www.aiacc.org/publications/adapt.html or contact the AIA California Council, 1303 J Street, Suite 200, Sacramento, CA 95814-2935. Phone: 916-448-9082; fax: 916-442-5346; e-mail: mail@aiacc.org.

Also, be sure to check out the AIA's Best Practices Web site at www.aia.org/bestpractices. Start with the articles under Sections 10 (Delivery Methods and Compensation), 11 (Contracts and Agreements), and 12 (Risk Management).

Out of print, but still relevant, is a very good set of manuals published in 1981 by the AIA, edited by Prof. David Haviland, Assoc. AIA, titled Managing Architectural Projects. The set comprises four thin paperback titles: The Project Management Manual, Case Studies, The Process, and The Effective Project Manager. They are still valuable guides—practice management doesn't change all that fast—and are recommended. Although not listed in the current AIA Bookstore list, I've seen copies at AIA convention book fairs in recent years, so you may be able to find them.

The Victor O. Schinnerer Co. publishes an excellent bimonthly newsletter, Guidelines for Improving Practice, that includes articles on project management. Send an e-mail to VOS.Guidelines@Schinnerer.com for more information

Other excellent project management sources are Staying Small Successfully: A Guide for Architects, Engineers, and Design Professionals (John Wiley & Sons, 1991) by Frank Stasiowski, FAIA, and some of the articles in the Design Office Management Handbook, Fred Stitt, ed. (Arts + Architecture Press, 1992).

Charles E. Nelson, AIA, FRAIA, is managing director of Building Technology Party Ltd., Melbourne, Australia, an architect-owned company that provides practice management consulting services to architects, project managers, and

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other design professionals. He also is immediate past chair of the AIA Practice Management Knowledge Community Advisory Group.

Have a Practice Management Question?

The Advisory Group welcomes questions from members on practice topics such as the one that initiated the notes above. Please send your question to practicemanagement@aia.org, and we will ask one of our contributors to answer you. The best question and answer will be published in each Digest issue

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Communication and Design with the Internet
Jonathan Cohen, FAIA (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000)
Reviewed by Charles Nelson, AIA

Book Review

Please take 20 seconds to read this excerpt from our featured quarterly book review:

On-line Project Manuals

Lessons can be learned from the technology industries that may have application for AEC professionals as well. For example, the computer industry has fully embraced the internet for product support. Almost all hardware and software products come with little or no printed documentation; all the information is on-line, saving the cost of publication and enabling manuals to be frequently updated. Similarly, building project manuals could easily be produced in on-line form, using PDF or HTML format. Such project manuals would always be available to facilities managers, maintenance personnel, and repair crews. Currently, a facilities manager must hunt for information from among a variety of disconnected sources, including as-built drawings, product manuals, catalog cuts, maintenance records, and shop drawings.

A well-designed on-line project manual would have hyperlinks to manufacturers' Web sites, specifications, maintenance information, e-mail addresses, and relevant drawing details. A basic manual could be produced as a CD-ROM but be navigable with a Web browser, so that links to on-line resources would be just a click away.

Now, if that doesn't stir your practice delivery imagination, nothing ever will— and in this reviewer's humble opinion, you might as well take down your shingle now.

That sidebar, from page 120 of Jonathan Cohen's groundbreaking work, is just one of hundreds of quiet gems that grace this valuable contribution to 21st-century practice. Cohen, last year's chair of the AIA Technology in Architectural Practice Knowledge Community, is an authority on the rapidly evolving role of the Internet in design practice.

It's all there—or as close to "all there" as one can get to a topic that has the characteristics of a rampaging comet. What's more, it is eminently readable and filled with excellent four-color screen dumps and other helpful illustrations. By an architect, for architects.

For more reviews and current information, visit the book's special Web site: http://communication-design.net.

Order it now! You can get it from Amazon.com at http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0393730433/jonathancohena05/102-8141108-7458558.

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
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