

AIA Practice Management Digest – September 2018

 network.aia.org/practicemanagement/blogs/sara-r-boyer-aia/2018/09/10/aia-practice-management-digest-september-2018

Firm Culture

How different firms express and develop their firm's culture, exploring various topics including enjoyment, generations, branding, and risk management.

Letter from the editor

By Sara R. Boyer, AIA, LEED AP B

I am obsessed with firm culture. Obsessed. This obsession came to me in an Oprah-style ah-ha moment a few years ago. My mantra had been, “Ask questions. If you are asking questions, then I know that you are thinking about what you are doing.” (I thank the patience of my mentors with respect to my tenacious question-asking.) Nevertheless, the mantra was useless. The questions were few and far between. The questions that were seldom asked were logistical, not probing. An epiphany came that we had to create a *culture* that is comfortable to ask questions. Peter Drucker said it best, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast....” My firm has spent the past few years cultivating that culture, especially for the emerging professional demographic.



This month's *Digest* takes a different format, one of various industry professionals responding to a series of questions about firm culture, interview style. Peruse the responses from firms across the country: Baltimore, Orlando, Washington D.C., Columbus, and Kansas City. Questions range from cultural drivers to multiple generations in the work place.

If you are seeking information about a conscientious approach to defining, or perhaps redefining, your firm culture, Samantha McCloud, AIA offers thought-provoking strategies to dig deep and understand the what, how, and why of your firm culture via the Practice Management Knowledge Community's continuing partnership with AIA Trust.

I hope you enjoy this quarter's edition of *Practice Management Digest*, particularly the different format approach. And as you read through the edition, consider what comes first in your firm? What is that driving force?

Five firms respond

1. Cultural driver: What drives your firm culture?

2. Enjoyment: Why do you enjoy working at your firm?

3. Generations: How does your firm address multiple generations in the work force?

4. Work-life balance: How does your firm support a work-life balance?

5. Change: Would you change anything about the firm culture? If so, please explain.

6. Brand: What is your firm brand? How does it drive the firm, or does the firm drive the brand?

Meet the contributors

Feature article

Firm culture and risk management

By Samantha McCloud, AIA

In our industry, firm culture takes many forms. There is arguably no one-size-fits-all solution in how to best guide the way people work. However, research shows that firm culture can be a powerful resource for positively engaging team members--or bring significant adverse outcomes. These three steps can help you conscientiously approach your own firm's culture.

Contribute to the Digest

The next issue of the *Practice Management Digest* will talk about sustainability from a practice management perspective, including the 2030 Challenge and updated energy code challenges. Submission deadline is October 10.

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 Sara Boyer, AIA, at sboyer@moodynolan.com.

#1: Cultural driver

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What drives your firm culture?

Ayers Saint Gross

Mission Statement: "We engage people and places to create designs that enrich the world."

Our internal driving force is very much fueled by the people, especially self-starters. If you see a better way of doing something, whether it be design or operations related, there is an unspoken ethos to just jump in and do it. Part of the reason for this is that we became an employee owned company in January of 2013, and thus everyone has a stake in the success of the company. Every employee has the opportunity for input into our Strategic Plan, that we revisit every four years. My first experience with the firm wide listening sessions was in 2013 for our 2014 Strategic Plan. These are small groups representing a cross-section of the firm. We have tried different models of listening, including a firm wide anonymous online survey, to capture all voices.

Also, in the interest of transparency, we do a Business Plan every year identifying strategic objectives for the near term and every employee gets a copy. Our graphic's department puts this booklet together, and does a great job making otherwise mundane information understandable for us visual people.



DLR Group

Design comes first, and the people are the driving force. As an employee-owned design firm, the firm values the talents and skillsets of each employee-owner. Ownership is a fundamental element of our design culture. Because of this business model, each employee-owner has a unique perspective that is seen from a position of leadership and ownership. Each employee-owner is empowered to contribute to the success of the business leading to a high level of client satisfaction and quality of design. We like to say, "every employee has a design voice." And I've found that this is a value that is respected and expected of everyone on staff.

Moody Nolan

The projects we touch have a real impact on the people and communities that experience them. With design, we can help ensure that impact is positive. We push to do what it takes to make our clients' ideas into that positive reality. I have realized that it's not about the buildings. It is about the interconnected network of relationships and needs that those buildings help to support. We emphasize "responsive architecture" and that aphorism reflects the diverse communities and clients that we serve. We have made it a priority that our culture reflects that diversity, so that we can be responsive to the needs of the diverse clients and communities that we serve.

Knu Design

Client joy. We use architecture as a tool for elevating humanity. Of course, architecture has a lasting impact on many people, and that impact may be appropriately anything from a sense of safety, dignity, or revealing the purpose & pith of a place, to a fleeting sense of delight, but we as architects spend less of our time in our built works than other people do...so what drives us

is making the design process a pleasure. We love it when our clients recognize the caliber of our service, both in the designs we produce, and, in the way, we deftly accomplish the many small tasks along the way - making what can be a stressful experience fun for everyone.

Populous

There are really two priorities that are incredibly important to us; the first is our people and the second is our clients. Taking care of both is so interrelated that it's hard to talk about one without the other. We hire the best people in the business, we take good care of them and value what they do in the firm. We are active participants in providing the necessary tools, training and feedback for them, so they can reach their full potential.

Additionally, we have tremendous clients with very large, complex, and important projects. They trust us to deliver on their dreams. We have worked with many of our clients for decades, and that doesn't happen without having tremendous professionals who understand how to serve and how to deliver. Simply stated our great people take care of our great clients.

There are many driving forces here at Populous, but if we strip away all the predictable answers there are two forces at work in this firm which when combined are tremendously valuable to our success and our future. And these two forces have been with us from the start. This firm and the people we employ are "curious and fearless." These characteristics are what allow us to draw people together through new and exciting experiences, driving change, innovation and improvement. Together they are so powerful. We can imagine and accomplish so much because we don't feel limited. When you add fun-loving to curious and fearless you have a culture characterized by high-energy, optimism and limitless potential with a good dose of lightheartedness. There is a palpable buzz in our offices derived from the combination of these three characteristics.



Image: M. Robinson

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#2: Enjoyment

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Why do you enjoy working at your firm?

Ayers Saint Gross

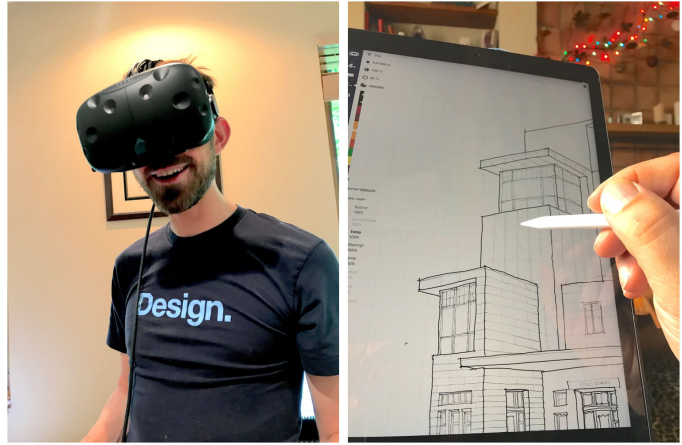
Since joining the firm in 2010, the company has been in constant growth and thus the projects have become larger and more diverse, keeping it interesting. Every project is an opportunity to do something new and exciting. Working in a multi-disciplinary firm you have access to a wealth of knowledge and expertise outside of your own specialty. I regularly lean on our graphics department for completing interior concepts. One big intangible is the culture. I thoroughly enjoy the people I work with, I laugh daily. The work can get intense, but in a good team that trusts each other it doesn't feel like work.

We have Collaboration Week every year. We usually do this via The Square (our intranet) to involve all offices, but in May of 2016 we had every single person from all offices in Baltimore. We had a full day together of team building exercises. It was so valuable to me to meet colleagues that I had only every spoken to over the phone or email.



DLR Group

While being an exceptionally well-managed business, DLR Group is a design-centered firm, which is extremely satisfying to me. All decisions, from opportunities, to research and development, to client engagement, to evolution of practice is seen by gazing through the lens of design.



Knu Design

We are a new, small, and building studio. Before launching, I worked for several firms, most of which had some innate dysfunctionality instigated by the leadership. It is a thrill to see things grow and progress as a company in positive directions. I enjoy the sense of adventure in the start-up, and every project feels like a new world to discover.

Moody Nolan

Before I started at Moody Nolan, my father promised that every day would be different. That promise has held to be true. We get to touch so many different project types, clients, and communities. Each team and each client has a unique personality and set of challenges. The projects begin to have their own unique characteristics that reflect the teams touching them. The biggest challenge is not creating the spirit of a building, but trying to focus its richness. It's exciting to wake up each day and be able to interact in that type of environment.

Populous

I love working at Populous for many reasons, but in short, it is the great projects we have the privilege to do, the opportunity and responsibility to make lasting impacts on society, and the tremendous people who do amazing work. The work, the challenges, and the clients are constantly changing with each project, and that makes working here continually interesting and rewarding.

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#3: Generations

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How does your firm address multiple generations in the work force?

Ayers Saint Gross

I have learned so much from the more experienced people in our office. I have learned not only technical skills, but also patience. My goal is to model that same patience as I mentor the younger generation.

Our teams typically consist of a diversity of specialties and experience. Having that day-to-day exposure in a peer relationship on a team helps to grow younger staff. Creating that open space to ask questions of more experienced staff creates trust, which is the unspoken fuel of every team.

DLR Group

DLR Group is a lateral business, meaning that it recognizes that each employee-owner can contribute to the practice with skillsets and professional/life experiences unique to each generation. Each new hire is seen as filling a leadership position because we are all brand ambassadors with a unified design voice. Age is just a “thing” and we embrace all levels of employees as precious to the organization because our differences contribute to a diverse, well-blended whole. Although expertise and experience are valued, younger staff bring their own value, and those who show initiative and passion can move into leadership positions early in their careers.

Knu Design

Personal flexibility (meaning each of us must stretch our mind to accommodate the others), and institutional flexibility (work hours, communication techniques, duties, etc.).

Moody Nolan

Having multiple generations in our firm presents unique challenges. Generations are reflected within our leadership. It gives us the ability to have meaningful discussions about how we support our staff from multiple perspectives. We have also been fortunate that some of our staff have taken leadership on this topic leading to the creation of various intergenerational support groups, changes in corporate policies around community participation, and meaningful engagement in various mentoring efforts. Interestingly, some of the challenges learned through these efforts help inform the way we help our clients through their similar struggles.

Populous

A multi-generational workforce is a core component of our culture. The diverse perspectives, knowledge and experience levels it comes with promote variety – variety of work, clients and people. It results in high energy and tons of ideas and interaction. Diverse perspectives help

makes us stronger and better problem solvers. We recognize the value of a multigenerational firm. Teams are formed with the intent of integrating the various generations. It provides great mentoring opportunities and breeds a team culture of looking for ways to improve process and product. It helps us to embrace change, but also to acknowledge the value of experience.

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#4: Work-life balance

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How does your firm support a work-life balance?



Ayers Saint Gross

Our leadership made a conscious effort to formalize discussions around work life balance in 2014. A moderator was brought in to help guide these discussions firm wide. It was an eye-opening process and gave me a perspective on all the challenges parents and road warriors face, as well as the burden the younger generation feels to stay late and complete work because they may not have outside family obligations.

The company has long been supportive of working parents and flexible schedules as needed. We have well-being programs and being located in the Under Armour Headquarters, we can take advantage of lunch time workout sessions, if we choose. As an aside, the Baltimore office is directly on the water, so the views aren't too shabby either.

DLR Group

DLR Group understands the complexity of balancing professional and personal responsibilities and supports this through issuance of laptops and well-integrated technology work mobility if required. We also encourage self-care for minds and bodies through participation in varied outside interests including: company-sponsored, family-centered events; company-sponsored travel and volunteer activities; mothering rooms; brown-bag lunch sessions focused on learning and inspirational content; a Health Wellness Program; and a Professional Development Grant program.

Knu Design

Work-life is not a spectrum - they are not two separate things to be compared on a scale. Each individually is like a square dance or a solar system with many centers twirling in a collective balance. We look at two concepts to help us spin at the right cadence:

1. **Flexibility** - Employees set their own schedule within the constraint of pulling their weight and being readily available to interact with coworkers, contractors, consultant, and clients. Working at home is encouraged.
2. **Reinvestment** - We are developing policies that will require engagement in the community, the arts, or the broader profession as a predicate for promotion to certain levels in the firm, and to offer sabbaticals for long-term employees.

Moody Nolan

With ever increasing project and client demands, we endeavor to make sure our staff knows their life outside the office is valued. Flexibility with personal scheduling allows staff to manage the various demands that we all face. Additionally, ways that demonstrate a belief in a work-life balance are encouraging vacation (not allowing an accrual and rollover of time), providing various wellness programs (including financial wellness and a company-wide walking challenge), and supporting numerous community engagement programs (from corporate initiatives via Moody Nolan Cares to staff-motivated initiatives like the annual American Heart Association Columbus Heart Walk).

Populous

We inherently trust our staff to manage the work they need to do in the context of their personal lives. We work hard, we travel a lot, and our firm leadership recognizes the sacrifices our people and their families make for the work we do. So, we are sensitive to that, encouraging employees to put family first, take their vacation time, and actively pursue the balance that they need in their lives. We take care of each other so when someone needs a break, team members step up to help lighten the load or cover for others when needed. Everyone's needs are different and ever-changing. We also intentionally create activities that include employees and their families, which is always fun and helps us put our work in perspective.

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#5: Change

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Would you change anything about the firm culture? If so, please explain.

Ayers Saint Gross

We have grown rapidly in the last few years and are figuring out how to adjust from a small-scale firm model to a larger corporate firm while still maintaining our “ASG-ness.” We are working on making sure that all three of our offices have the same voice in the discussion of our firm’s future. Our internal intranet called “The Square” has really helped in minimizing those distances. Everyone has access to post anything from, technical information, construction photos to cool initiatives or things to do in the community. It’s really helped close the distance and get to know faces in other offices just by their photos and posts.

DLR

Our firm culture is so strong that it is difficult to imagine the roads which will lead to further evolution.

Knu Design

I would like there to be more of us (requiring some more growth) who see each other more often, so the sense of a firm culture becomes stronger.



Moody Nolan

I have the impression people feel cultural change is off limits. People have great ideas on things we could do differently and aren't certain that it's up for discussion. We are willing to discuss anything. We need to make sure that anything that we do fits within an overall structure, but the structure can always change. We tell our clients that all ideas our good ideas and that it's ultimately their building, so we need their ideas. The same thing applies to our firm culture! If you've got a great idea about how we can make our work environment better, I want you to feel comfortable bringing it up. We are working to make that process clearer. Right now, I think people are holding some ideas in and we need to find a way to get them out.

Populous

We are our own worst critics. I think at times we don't take enough time to stop individually and collectively to acknowledge the amazing and impactful work we do and to just for a moment celebrate our successes. That is truly the only thing I would change.

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#6: Brand



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What is your firm brand? How does it drive the firm, or does the firm drive the brand?

Ayers Saint Gross

I am not sure it is exactly a brand, but rather an ethos in how we operate. We pride ourselves on being experts and bringing our years of experience to our clients, serving as trusted advisors. As a firm, we focus on mission-driven clients, with the bulk of our projects in higher education. Our goal is to bring our experience on other campuses to our new clients, but also realizing that every situation has its unique complexities. Our work ranges from space analytics, to campus master plans, graphics and wayfinding, to appropriate classroom, housing, and dining solutions, and more.

DLR Group

DLR Group's brand is our firm promise to "elevate the human experience through design." This is an inspiration brand. The brand message focuses on people. The people, both employee owners and our clients, drive the brand. Our brand tagline is "listen.DESIGN.deliver" which succinctly expresses the process we employee to fulfill our brand promise.

Knu Design

Our clients expect sensible solutions. We help them enjoy their medicine by bringing confidence (rooted in experience) so they are comfortable taking risks and we can all have fun in the process. They come back because the results elevate their experience and move humanity forward.



Moody Nolan

Moody Nolan's brand is "Responsive Architecture", meaning we need to be responsive with clients, people, projects, communities, and engagement. This mantra is the firm's soul.

It is so ubiquitous that it is a perfect balance between brand driving the firm and the firm driving brand. And yet, we always need to question if we were able to be responsive and if we are able to create a culture that enhances responsiveness.

Populous

We design the places where people love to be together. A sense of togetherness and enjoying the place you're in and the people around you are what has driven the firm, the types of projects we pursue and how we've worked together since day one. Populous is the firm that it is today because of the people and has experienced great success by making sure our care for people translates through to the places we create.

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Firm culture and risk management

network.aia.org/blogs/samantha-mccloud-aia/2018/09/10/firm-culture-and-risk-management

By **Samantha McCloud, AIA**

In our industry, firm culture takes many forms, considering the variety of firm sizes, specialties, locations, and numerous other factors. There is arguably no one-size-fits-all solution in how to best guide the way people work. Nevertheless, research shows that firm culture, when designed effectively, can be a powerful resource for positively engaging team members on an emotional level. This means big benefit for the bottom line. Firm culture can energize people to invest more in their projects. It can support social connection and increase loyalty to the company. It can also attract new talent and bring in new business.

However, on the opposite end, firm culture can also bring significant adverse outcomes when not managed with care. A blind firm culture can lead to employee exhaustion, high turnover, decreased productivity, increased team conflicts, and unfavorable notoriety. To avoid these negative consequences and to help boost desired results, below is an outline of how to conscientiously approach what firm culture can do for your company.



Step 1: The What – Definition

Defining or re-defining firm culture requires connected thought and decision-making. It is important to take time to reflect on company goals and values. Some example components of the definition process include branding statements, marketing materials, employee benefits packages, compensation structure, team structure, dress code policies, office layout, work flexibility options, featured portfolio of project types, company membership in professional associations, and involvement in community organizations.

The list above is not exhaustive, but it does demonstrate how defining a cohesive firm culture

will incorporate goals and values into internal messaging, public relations and business development. The definition of company goals and values, expressed in language, images (from company brochures to office art), amenities and benefits, are the foundation for guiding the behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of your team and serve as support for connecting with your clients. Ask yourself:

- What sets your company apart from your competitors?
- What are the core pillars of your company's identity?
- What inspires your company to do its work?
- What type of projects does your company pursue?
- What type of scheduling demands do you expect your team to accommodate?
- What situations do clients come before team or vice versa?
- What values do you want your team members to possess?
- What standards define success at your company?
- What is the hierarchy structure at your company?
- What demographics do you seek to serve?
- What organizations do you engage with to pursue work?
- What imagery do you promote in your marketing materials and in the workplace?

Step 2: The How – Wayfinding

In addition to defining the goals and values of your firm culture, providing structured direction to help your team navigate expectations and better serve clients is critical. Wayfinding centers on effective and timely two-way communication. Examples of wayfinding in firm culture include team member on-boarding, policy implementation, access to performance measures for upward mobility, personal accountability, structure of formal reviews, team training opportunities, mentorship and sponsorship programs for professional development, employee resource groups, company social events, staffing management, project assignment, project approach, client appreciation practices, and leadership representation.

Without clearly identifying resources and opportunities for your team to align themselves with the goals and values of the company, you risk individuals' disillusionment as well as detachment. It is important to demonstrate how professional development at your company is accessible and to create platforms for people to connect and contribute.

- How do you communicate company goals and values to new employees?
- How do you demonstrate your company goals and values in the workplace?
- How do you inspire your people to do their work?
- How do you communicate performance expectations to your workforce?
- How do you develop desired new skills in your workforce?
- How do you build trust among your team members?
- How do you learn about the goals and values of your team members?
- How do you help your team members grow in the direction of their goals?
- How do you learn from your team members?
- How do you recognize significant contributions in the workplace?

- How do you determine who gets to work on career-advancing projects?
- How do you relate to your team and your clients outside of work?



Step 3: The Why - Risk Management

Aside from the ethical motivations for providing a workplace where people find value and belonging, designing an effective firm culture offers compelling risk management benefits. By optimizing your people's performance with collective emotional vitality, you cultivate a workforce that equates personal success as growing the success of the company. This connection can mean the difference between simply operating versus fully thriving. Examples of risk management benefits include increased personnel retention, increased productivity, improved quality of services, strengthened trust with team and with clients, improved communication and innovation, positive outside workplace representation, talent attraction, increased referrals, expanded networks through an engaged team, and repeat business with satisfied clients.

When implementing change in your firm culture, from small adjustments to network-scale programs, it is valuable to plan measures for tracking outcomes. Examples of tracking measures include staff surveys, profit and loss statements, retention rates, recruitment metrics, client metrics, and comparative data analysis. While tracking measures require both time and financial investment, data-based evaluation of your firm culture provides accurate risk management documentation. As part of the defining and wayfinding processes described in earlier sections above, it is wise to weigh the strategic gains and losses of your company's resources and outcomes to understand what may work best for you.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the most important aspect of firm culture is intentionality behind company resources. Understand what, how, and why your company is investing in its business materials, its operations, and its personnel. Firm culture is dynamic. It requires regular examination and flexibility to adapt to the climate of the market.

People tend to mirror their environments or draw towards new environments where they find identity. If an environment supports collaboration, people will feel comfortable working collaboratively. If an environment supports the status quo, people will feel apprehensive to

contribute new ideas or innovate.

As an industry that plans for the future, firm culture is just another aspect to how we as designers can improve upon present standards of the way people work, live, and grow. Financially and fundamentally, investing in our people is investing in our success.

*The AIA Trust is dedicated to assisting AIA members in making decisions about complex matters and offering insurance and benefit programs of the greatest possible value to AIA members and components. It serves as a risk management resource for the practice of architecture in cooperation with the American Institute of Architects. To find out more, visit **TheAIATrust.com**.*

Interested in the work of the AIA Kansas City Equity in Architecture Committee?

Equity in Architecture mission is in its “A.C.E.” goals to Advocate, Connect, and Educate membership to improve industry awareness and success on issues around diversity, inclusion, and equitable practice. Check out the [AIA Kansas City Equity in Architecture 2017 Survey Report](#) for regional key findings on inclusion and goals in firm culture.

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Meet the contributors

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Diverse industry professionals from across the country responded to a series of questions about firm culture in an interview style format ranging from cultural drivers to work-life balance to firm brand.



Ayers Saint Gross

Katarina Carlin, AIA, IIDA, LEED AP BD+C, Senior Associate at Ayers Saint Gross, brings thirteen years of experience practicing interior design and architecture, including focused experience designing specifically for higher education clients with the student experience in mind. She brings an in-depth understanding of interior spaces from her training as both an architect and interior designer. She specializes in designing interior spaces that bring a project's identity and the client's vision to the forefront. In her position she collaborates on many projects coming out of the Baltimore office and leads interior teams in setting the vision and executing interior details on projects. You can reach Katarina at kcarlin@asg-architects.com or (410) 347-8500.



DLR Group

Ronok Nichols, AIA, LEED AP, Principal at DLR Group, has spent her career working across the country with clients on complex Justice and Civic projects. However, her interests within the profession are multi-faceted. She focuses on aspects of the profession that strengthen her thought leadership through design focused endeavors. As a leader within AIA and her firm, she continually implements new technologies and processes to strengthen design culture and communication. As a working mother, she passionately believes that it is possible to significantly contribute to both family and workplace, that there is a way to "have it all". You can reach Mrs. Nichols at rnichols@DLRGROUP.com or (407) 803-4938.



KNU Design

Scott Knudson, AIA, LEED AP BD+C is the principal of Knu Design, LLC, a small practice in the Washington, DC area focused on building stronger relationships and communities through architecture. His work strives to express and elevate the culture and place in which it sits with a balanced approach that addresses the input of all stakeholders and resolves the practical and financial issues pragmatically. Currently, he is involved in several affordable- and market-rate multifamily projects, a winery, a cidery, and a temple, in addition to single-family and commercial projects. You can reach Mr. Knudson at scott@knu.design or (240)372-0185.



Moody Nolan

As the President of Moody Nolan, Jonathan Moody works to create a culture of collaboration, creativity and inclusion. He approaches design with an overall goal of having a major positive impact on communities in need. For Jonathan, architecture is a medium through which people can be connected and inspired by giving tangible being to ideas. Over the last several years, he has passionately devoted himself to community service through mentoring and education programs focused on developing young men. You can reach Jonathan at (614) 461-4664.



Populous

A Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, Todd Voth leads the Populous convention center practice. He has more than 30 years of experience in design and project management for convention centers, hotels and retail facilities. Todd is particularly noted for assembling outstanding teams and leading them to deliver service and solutions beyond expectations. You can reach Todd at todd.voth@populous.com or (816) 221-1500.

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