



This Month:

Viewpoint: Human Resourcing

Welcome to **INFOCUS**, C3 Consulting Solution's Monthly Newsletter. This month, we wander away from the technical a little and examine some Human Resourcing (HR) issues and what we can do about them. As a viewpoint, this paper is intended as 'food for thought' rather than being anything particularly scientific.

In my dealings with multiple clients, I sometimes observe patterns which I believe to be representative of elsewhere in the industry. It's no secret right now that in Australia at least, good personnel are increasingly in short supply across the AEC sector. Moreover, of those that are available, some of us believe that they are becoming increasingly less skilled at what they do.

Like choosing favourite characters in a computer game, we can select those with strengths in one area, but always counterbalanced by weaknesses in another. What everyone wants is someone (or a team of these beings) in whom we find satisfaction of more than one criterion.

Within, but not limited to architecture, I like to term this type of person as the 'ultimate hybrid' – in whom both technical industry knowledge (e.g. how to put a building together) and technical operational knowledge (how to use the tools of the trade well – particularly software) coexist. This is not to ignore other capacities such as communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving ability, strategic thinking etc. but rather to highlight an issue that I hope many will recognise.

Over the last decade or so, Australia has enjoyed tremendous prosperity, particularly in the resources and building sectors, with a significant proportion of this being generated by the economies and resultant demand from other growth regions like China, India and the Middle East.

In addition, and perhaps as a consequence, domestic investment by our Federal and State Governments has seen even more construction work take place, each project demanding design and construction teams to help procure it.

So how does this affect staff?

Firstly, the basic rule of supply and demand applies. The supply of skilled labour decreases as demand increases. With added demand, we observe other consequences:

- Increases in earnings to skilled staff
- Greater difficulty in keeping staff
- Pressure of many projects means we don't have time to devote to staff development
- Skills stagnate or dissipate
- Industry ultimately starved of well-trained, highly skilled valuable people

So, while we complain that we can't find good staff any more, we should ask the question: Have we (and if so, how) contributed to this decline?

The causal factors might help to illuminate the solution.

Where have the office mentoring schemes gone? Where are the technical gurus that used to teach us when we were still wet behind the ears? How are we adapting our practices to new industry developments? Are we justified in complaining when we might be contributing to the problem?

How much (or as the case may be, how little) are we investing in our present work force – i.e. those that we already employ?

The danger of my selecting this topic is that I may inevitably fall into my passionate cries for Architects (among others) to become better able at selling value to clients, and recognising value as more than a number of drawings or a number of hours worked. This is a key opportunity that I believe is waiting to be seized through the effective use of Building Information Modelling (BIM) and even more via Integrated Project Delivery (IPD). If we can alleviate some of the economic pressures (e.g. decline in fees), perhaps as an industry we might feel more prone to reinvesting in our long term future. However, I shall leave that point for another edition!

Growing a business is not easy, but a key part is finding good people and putting them to work in appropriate positions and working within good systems. As the pool of skilled workers (and I mean to use this term very loosely, to encapsulate anyone you need for your business) grows smaller, how do we both *attract* good staff, and *retain* those we already have?

I know that there will always be a portion of the industry which believes that the primary way to find and employ good people will be to pay them more money. If a high level of remuneration is the *primary* basis on which someone works for you, how do you prevent them from leaving for yet more money from another employer? While it's reasonable for remuneration level to be a *factor* in a relationship with an employee, it doesn't seem wise to me for it to be the *foundation* of the relationship.

Surely, there must be more to finding and employing good staff.

One of the suggested consequences of operating in a tight labour market was the increased pressure on projects and the impact this has on the time we devote to staff development. While this is directed specifically at professional development, it follows also that the time we are prepared to spend on being creative with our staff and employment structure suffers.

Being creative (perhaps even clever) with your recruitment strategy can yield some great results. The opportunities might be different from one organisation to another, based on size, location etc.

So, let us consider some of these items which may assist us in our staffing issues.

What do job hunters look for in a job? I've listed some ideas here, and you may wish to add your own ideas to this list.

- Career opportunities
- Responsibility/Challenge
- Variety/Specialisation
- Teaching/Learning/Mentoring
- Opportunity to contribute
- Remuneration
- Employer brand/being part of success
- Atmosphere (casual/friendly)
- Working hours (flexible/RDOs/work from home)
- Industry reputation (for any of the above)
- Good equipment (e.g. Hardware)
- Location (and ability to commute)
- Regular performance appraisals (of substance)
- Good internal systems (clear parameters)

In summary, job hunters will look for a place where they believe their value items will be met. The key question, therefore, to ask of prospective staff is "What are your value items?"

If their answers are things that you feel you can provide, and that they fit with your company's own value items, you're off to a good start.

Closely related to the list above (with some duplication) are ways to attract or entice new staff. The best way to find good staff is to get them to come to you, so invest in your 'market gravity' and ensure that your reputation precedes you. Whether one or all, consider the following ideas:

- Ensure staff already employed are enthusiastic about your organisation
- Offer good levels of remuneration
- Be creative and flexible with your salary packages (e.g. laptop, phone, car etc.)
- Offer discounts on product lines (if any)
- Social interaction (community/family atmosphere, activities)
- Offering business ownership/profit share
- Mentoring programs
- Child care programs
- Listening
- Seeking a win/win scenario
- Demonstrating to existing staff that they are valued (fulfilling promises to them)
- Present work and firm at social/industry events
- Present work and firm at tertiary institutions
- Exploit your staff's strengths (get them to do what they're best at – but don't let them stagnate)

Conversely, there are items that will achieve the opposite of what you might like. These are things that may cause your staff to seek employment elsewhere:

- Boredom/lack of challenge (compared with the promise of challenge elsewhere)
- Invitation
- Higher remuneration
- Less stress
- Political or personnel issues (e.g. personality clashes)
- Personal issues (e.g. family, moving home, health)
- Perceived failure to deliver on promises/Unmet expectations
- Lack of career development
- Atmosphere (unfriendly, cold, disinterested)

In summary, they'll leave because they believe they'll get a positive change in their new place of employ. It's not whether they will or won't get it – it's that they *believe* they'll get it.

A list of items to consider when your staff attrition is painfully high is also nominated here. If you can match any of these up with staff you've lost, it's time for action.

- Demonstrate that they are not valued
- Don't support them
- Don't listen to them
- Don't inform them
- Don't equip them
- Don't care about their careers
- Never reward success/provide credit
- Don't address problems (e.g. political/social)
- Backstab them
- Don't pay them (at all, or on time)
- Ignore them
- *Spy* on them (as opposed to 'appropriate' monitoring)
- Micro/Macro manage inappropriately
- Foster or allow an adversarial 'us and them' culture
- Require them to do things they're not trained to do without equipping them adequately

Remember that for better or worse, your existing staff will share their experiences with others. Use this fact to your *advantage* rather than to your detriment.

They also have a good memory for how colleagues are treated, both during their tenure and upon their exit. I once decided on the spot that I was going to leave an employer after witnessing the way a friend of mine was treated upon his resignation.

Now, you might find that despite your best efforts at all of the above, you still lose staff. Sadly, there are no guarantees. Reasons they leave may simply be out of your control. However, if you play your cards right, you may find some of them wish to return if they:

- Find unfulfilled promises or expectations elsewhere
- Are invited back
- Leave on good terms (i.e. avoiding 'burnt bridges'. Be aware that you won't always hear of their real reasons for leaving if they are trying to protect their bridges.)
- Are assured that particular issues will be addressed

Getting previous staff to return can be like a repeat client. The energy expended in getting them on board can be miniscule compared with one you haven't already worked with. Consider the reverse of this too – how much does it really cost you to find someone new?

Who you employ is just one of a number of key factors to your business success. Look to build on what you have rather than let it dissipate (or disappear!). Do so by attracting good people and then determining who will provide the most value to your organisation.

A final point to dwell upon – people feel valued when they belong to something they value. People, by their nature, like to be a part of success. If you allow your staff to feel part of the success which (hopefully) is your business, they will likely be more willing to participate and contribute toward that success.

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C3 Consulting Solutions
PO Box 2127, Spotswood VIC 3015 Australia
info@c3consulting.com.au
www.c3consulting.com.au