Roles of a Project Manager

A project manager wears many hats in orchestrating the firm/client partnership.

ABOVE: A project manager acts as diplomat, detective, leader, and team captain and puts out fires that arise during various phases of construction.

To achieve a successful design and construction project, architects, consultants, contractors, and clients must develop a positive working relationship. This partnership is orchestrated by project managers (PMs); they are the primary point of contact in the design firm for every member of the building team. They have responsibility and authority for staying within the project budget, meeting the schedule, and fulfilling the client’s contractual scope of services. Regardless of practice size, there is a need to fill the project manager role. Often the overburdened principal undertakes this task.

Few architects have both the skills to fulfill the role effectively and an interest in the business side of architecture. Few university curriculums provide even basic management training. Those who seek the necessary skills typically learn them either on the job or through seminars or self-initiative.

Project manager skills

In some firms, the best technicians are appointed to be project managers on the basis of their proven ability in a chosen area of technical expertise. But often, the best technicians make the poorest project managers. Most individuals with a proven technical ability tend to focus on one detailed aspect of a project, to the detriment of the broader needs that must be addressed. The best all-around architect makes the ideal project manager, whose capabilities can be categorized according to a number of skills.

- Strong organizational ability: The successful project manager must be able to organize a project and the team and address the many details that arise. The PM must excel at organizing personnel schedules and be able to handle multiple projects if necessary.
- Broad scope: While managers may be interested in a particular area of architecture, they must be familiar with all aspects of a project. However, project managers do not need to know all of the technical details. Successful project managers must have broad experience in a variety of building types. They must possess strong skills and experience in project budgeting, negotiating, marketing, and estimating. They should also have their own database of previous project experiences.
- Communication: A project manager must be able to monitor project status and display a willingness to ask for assistance as needed. Effective communications among all members of the project team is vital. Project managers must have good verbal and written communication skills—and be good listeners. As marketers and managers, they must establish a rapport with both individuals and groups.
- Professionalism: Professional appearance must be maintained, since the project manager is the firm’s primary representative to the client. Furthermore, the manager must demonstrate a high regard for the firm’s image.
- Leadership and decision making: The project manager must be a leader who can direct and motivate the team. The PM should have previous leadership responsibilities.
A project manager is a decision maker. The ability to make decisions and carry them through is vital. In addition, the manager must be able to admit a mistake and to say no to a client or staff member when necessary.

In general, most of the characteristics of a successful project manager entail the ability to work well with people, rather than technical skills. Certainly, a project manager must have basic technical abilities, but overemphasis on these by senior management will not necessarily result in a good manager. All project managers require regular training to improve skills and learn new ones; this training must become part of a firm’s culture.

**Finding capable project managers**

Many architectural firms find it difficult to recruit capable project managers. As Houston architect Steve Wintner noted at the First Annual Symposium of the Association for Project Managers held recently in Chicago: "A project manager is a businessman, a psychologist, an accountant, a technician; part designer, part nuts-and-bolts. A truly rare combination of skills." As more architectural firms recognize the value of these skills, the shortage of qualified project managers becomes clearer. Competition for available talent is nearing crisis proportions.

In large cities, high job mobility creates the opportunity to recruit project managers from other firms. In many smaller cities, however, experienced managers may be unavailable or cannot be recruited. To obtain project management talent, firms should keep the following criteria in mind.

- **Recruit from outside your firm:** This method is often the fastest way to build your management staff. However, recruiting from other local firms (particularly in smaller communities) may create anomy among your peers, and it may also encourage other firms to raid your staff. In addition, the local design community may simply be exchanging each other’s weaknesses.

If the local pool of talent is thin, recruiting from other, often larger, cities, may be the solution. A variation of this process may occur when an architectural firm establishes a branch office. For example, in 1990, Holabird & Root relocated project manager Greg Cook from Chicago to lead their new Rochester, Minnesota, office. Cook’s understanding of existing firm operations and his project management ability far outweighed the local knowledge and contacts the firm might have gained by hiring or acquiring a local architect. Unfortunately, for many firms, transferring staff to smaller communities may be difficult when highly paid, experienced project managers are sought. Offering competitive salaries, fringe benefits, and firm ownership has been tried with varying success.

- **Train your own project manager:** In some communities, the only significant source of project managers lies within a firm’s own staff. Many firms are reluctant to invest in staff training, however, for fear of losing the newly trained managers to competing firms. Clearly, a certain percentage of your staff will leave the firm for various reasons. With sufficient incentive—for instance, salary, bonus, ownership, or profit-sharing—many capable staff members will remain to help the firm prosper, justifying the cost of training.

Many architects believe that designers are born, not made. They should also recognize that project managers can be cultivated. Effective management is as important as creative design, and it makes sense to focus a limited training budget on staff management and communications skills.

This training process requires constant monitoring of time and resources for seminars, courses, and publications. Some firms recruit prospects directly from colleges and universities to obtain the most capable talent. Then they educate these individuals to become project managers whose beliefs are compatible with their firm’s philosophy.

In large cities, successful firms with experienced teams of project managers also should nurture younger talent and bring them along, as it is not unusual to find a large percentage of architects who—at one time or another—have worked for one or two of the local firms. Many of these firms are noted for their training programs.

- **Recruit an experienced PM:** For many architectural practices inexperienced in effective project management, it is often wise to recruit one knowledgeable manager as the center of your system. This individual should help to establish the project management division of authority between project manager and department.
program, recruit and train younger staff, and serve as a technical and managerial resource. In many architectural firms, it is not necessary to recruit an experienced project manager, since a principal of the firm may wish to begin an intensive self-education program to acquire the necessary skills.

**Training project managers**

In many architectural firms, the project manager learns on the job. However, the benefits of a formal training program to the individual and to the firm are great. A project manager training program includes the following:

- **Communication skills**: As stated earlier, project managers need to possess a wide range of communication skills. Their importance to the marketing effort is well documented. Well-managed firms seek to involve project managers at an early stage in contacting a potential client. As a result, their experience and skill at marketing and selling are essential. Some firms encourage their project managers to take courses in these topics at local colleges and even cover the cost of the classes and materials.

Other communication skills are also important to project managers. In particular, negotiating, effective writing, and public speaking are vital. Negotiating contracts and communicating with other members of the project team such as consultants makes this an obvious focus of training. Firms should encourage staff to attend a number of commercially available courses on negotiating.

- **Interpersonal skills**: Project managers are people managers. They must know how to direct, motivate, and manage their project team, contractors, clients, suppliers, and many other individuals with whom they interact. For some, it requires extensive training in human psychology.

A skill that is very difficult to teach is leadership. Some individuals exhibit natural leadership skills; others can learn techniques to improve their leadership ability.

Perhaps the most difficult skill to learn is that of delegation. Many architects tend to be poor delegators; ego-driven, they often lack trust in their subordinates’ skills. As a result, these individuals feel the need to be involved in all aspects of the project at all times. Not only does this overburden them, but it hinders the performance of project team members. Learning how to delegate is a painstaking process that must be reinforced by top management in setting an example and providing the tools and systems to permit adequate supervision of subordinates.

- **Technical management skills**: Project managers must have a complete understanding of technical management skills, including budgeting, scope determination, personnel planning, and quality assurance/control.

A number of outside sources can assist in developing or enhancing these abilities. The AIA offers a self-assessment program in project administration (for information, contact 202-626-7348). An annual, week-long course is offered by the University of Wisconsin Department of Engineering Professional Development (608-263-4705), and programs are held periodically by the Association for Project Managers (312-672-1777).

**Successful project management**

Ensuring the success of a project management system requires continual effort. In many architectural firms, a principal’s meddling in the process is the biggest obstacle to successful project management. A project manager’s responsibilities must be on a level with his or her authority to do the job.

An effective project management system is not only for large firms. Small architectural practices may not have dedicated project managers, but they can use the management, budgeting, monitoring, and other skills required of effective project management. Capable project designers, for example, understand that adherence to budgets and schedules is an integral part of their responsibility. Every member of the project team—designers, consultants, contractors, suppliers—must become a partner in the process that is led by the project manager.

Architecture must be a collaborative effort. A design is successful by effective management of the creative process. Achieving a balance among all of the parties to this process is essential. It is the project manager who guides and molds this partnership.—Howard Birnberg

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