

Winning the talent war:

Designing a game plan for attracting top architects

By Joan Walters President J.R. Walters Resources

Thanks to the tight labor market and red-hot economy, professionals from all walks of life have found themselves sitting squarely in the catbird seat, and architects are no exception. With demand for designers far outstripping supply, hunting for top talent can be a daunting task for architectural firms.

Having worked for years in the architect employment trenches, I've compiled insights to aid employers searching for good people. Here are a few of the lessons I've gleaned from experience (many of them the hard way):

Leverage your selling points Many employers make the mistake of focusing solely on what the potential employee brings to the table. But in an employee's market, the sales job is a two-way process.

Touting the amenities offered by your firm is common sense, but how often do you promote the community in which your firm is located to your job candidates?

Architects as a lot are attracted to locations providing cultural and artistic stimulus. Firms that are located in areas with thriving artistic and cultural communities have a leg up on their competitors. Communities with historically significant architecture are also a big draw.

Consider immersing your firm in the local cultural community. Not only does this lend itself to good corporate citizenship and positive community relations, but a show of support for the artistic community will go a long way towards endearing your firm to your employees.

Dig deep during your interviews with job candidates, and take the time to learn about their specific interests. Then present your community in a light reflecting the aspects that would be of interest to the candidates.

Another point to keep in mind: The geographic makeup of your firm's community may significantly alter the talent pond from which you can fish. Firms located in large metropolitan areas have an advantage when targeting young, energetic architects. And firms located in smaller, family oriented communities are often better suited at attracting experienced architects with families, who have a need for more stability.

Realty 101 If a candidate interested in your firm requires relocation assistance, be sure your deal isn't blown by an ignorant, overzealous realtor. Architects appreciate unique, well-designed homes. A pushy salesperson who insists on showing your candidate homes located in "cookie cutter" developments can be construed as very offensive.

I've seen more than one firm lose top talent – including engineering candidates – due to the aggressive overtures of gung-ho realtors with no understanding of architects' appreciation for unique living space.

Compensation Of course, money is a crucial part of the hiring equation. While historically not at the top of pay rung, salaries have increased drastically for architects over the past few years due to the classic economic law of supply and demand.

Do some benchmarking of your competition. No need to dish out exorbitant salaries; simply being competitive with the other firms doing similar projects, of similar size and in similar communities is enough to attract talented people.

Beyond salary, a liberal benefit package is important – especially for those with families. Bonus plans with a history of paying out, and nice vacation packages, can be the difference in having your offer accepted.

The next generation Developing and encouraging talented youth to explore careers in architecture should be a priority of the architectural profession. Encouraging high school student to enter your profession won't show immediate results, but packing the pipeline to feed your firm in the future will have a great payoff.

Consider using high school interns as gophers – this provides excellent exposure to your firm, and can prove to be a great PR tool. Internships, field trips and speeches to students are all great opportunities to promote your profession to the next generation of architects.

Some points to consider pitching to kids: The ability to visually see and physically touch the completed project can be very rewarding, unlike many design professions which generate non-tangible end products.

I've also found in my years of working with architects that most never experience "burnout" or become disenchanting with the profession, as is so common with many professions. Most architects I've encountered – whether they're 25 or 75 – are not talking about retirement; they're talking about the next project. They continually thrive on the thrill of creating.

The golden rule Hiring top talent is only the first step. Now you have to actually retain these people. Recruiting begins, rather than ends, at the hire. It's a continual process of offering growth, self-satisfaction and creative challenges to your entire firm.

About the author: Holding a Masters in personnel and counseling, Walters has spent two decades in the human resources and professional recruiting professions, specializing in the non-residential architectural sector during the last 12 years.

