



Paving the Road to Licensure

When it comes to pursuing licensure, firms need a plan to get their emerging professionals over the hump

By Steve Cimino

The burden on an emerging architectural professional is ample. Getting your first job in the profession is only the tip of the iceberg; you then have to navigate the road to licensure, a long and potentially lonely one that some never even complete.

So it's beyond important for firms to have a plan for helping young hires find their feet in an uncertain world. There's no one right way to do it, but there are tried and true methods that've worked for organizations of varying shapes and sizes.

One firm with a strategy is Boston-based Payette, home of the Young Designers Core (YDC). The YDC was created 15 years ago as a volunteer initiative to help develop the firm's newest staffers. Recently, it played a huge role in Payette winning the AIA's IDP Outstanding Firm of the Year Award in 2014; its co-chairs, Hilary Barlow, Assoc. AIA, and Jenny Ratner, Assoc. AIA, consider it one of the reasons they came to work at Payette.

"It started as educational opportunities," Ratner says, "but it's changed to become a cultural community-building endeavor."

Firm leadership is not involved; the co-chairs are always chosen by their predecessors. And there is a degree of importance afforded to attendees of YDC events; not limited to emerging professionals alone, they've become gatherings aimed at increasing communication from both ends of the age spectrum.

"It speaks volumes that the firm allows young designers to have such a huge say," Barlow says, "to listen to our needs and allow us to share knowledge and learn from each other."

At Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture (ASGG) the goal is to create a more casual series of collisions. The Chicago-based firm focuses on career advancement as much as NCARB's Intern Development Program (IDP), trying to balance exam preparation with long-term self-assurance and informal accessibility.

"We want to equip the office with all of the tools available—from the ARE Prep video tutorials from Black Spectacles to quarterly discussions and online forums—to increase that feeling of being prepared," says Matthew Dumich, AIA, senior architect at ASGG. "I truly believe that the exams are all about confidence; no matter their learning style, we want our young architects to get to that good level of comfortability."

ASGG offers a formal mentoring program as well, but Dumich is quick to note that it can be a very hit-or-miss operation.

"If you assign mentor responsibilities to someone," Dumich says, "it can be a bit like an arranged marriage. The more you can create organic overlaps between emerging professionals and mentors, the better. We try to pair people that aren't on project teams, so you have an additional advocate in the office; but ultimately we let the mentee pick who their mentor is."

Amanda Snelson, AIA, of Ehrlich Architects shares similar concerns. The California-based firm does not offer a mentoring program of that sort, in part because of apprehensions about forcing a match.

"There's a wariness around it," she says, "because we're not sure of the benefits in saying, 'Go work with this person.'"

At the same time, she sees the value in starting a carefully planned program similar to what's been built at Ehrlich, one that could become a key cog in the firm's operations and attract burgeoning architects who value community building and collaboration from top to bottom.

"In terms of the minutiae of prepping for tests, how to do IDP, it would be nice to have someone in a leadership role to guide you through that process," she says, "one person who you're going to for questions, who is cheering you on, making sure that you are scheduling tests, and staying on top of it."

The hoops that fresh-faced graduates must leap through to achieve licensure are abundant. It's an important step in the process, one that everyone should explore and complete to the best of their abilities. But the costs of testing and the time needed for studying can sap the will of even the most committed neophyte.

So whether its mobile-friendly video tutorials, long-lasting initiatives like the YDC, or a handful of experienced architects who make it their business to monitor and assist newcomers, it's paramount to remind emerging professionals that they're not alone in their journey. In that regard, Dumich feels the implicit can top the explicit.

"What it really boils down to," he says, "is creating a culture of mentoring."

Check out more of the AIA's licensure resources and sign up to attend our free Dec. 7 webinar on the path to licensure.

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