MODERN RECRUITING 101: How to Recruit Architects and Engineers

As recruiters for architectural and engineering firms, our clients tell us, “We are only as good as our people. So we want the best.” This is the basic truism of an industry that relies on the talent and creativity of its staff as its fundamental service.

Because of this, one might assume that design professionals are highly adept at recruiting. It would only make sense that they strategically and systematically identify, romance and acquire the best talent they can find, much like a sports team finds players. However, if you are a design professional you are quite aware that this is not at all how it is done.

Most firms use recruiting methods that are about as sophisticated as a horse and buggy. Their approach to recruiting is limited to the old stand-by formula:

- Advertising in newspapers
- Offering positions to people they have met through professional associations
- Reviewing unsolicited resumes

We recruit architects, engineers and environmental consultants for a living and through our experience, we have refined our recruiting methods based on what works. The methods we use to recruit design professionals can be summarized as follows:

- We effectively advertise in trade journals, professional association newsletters and occasionally newspapers
- We conduct executive searches
- We solicit resumes and maintain them in a relational database
- We use the Internet in our recruiting
- We sell job openings to candidates with the same enthusiasm that A/E firms use to sell services

We don’t rely on any one of these methods. Instead, we use them all concurrently to find and obtain the best possible talent for our clients.

**Advertise vs Effectively Advertise.** The key to effective advertising is to get an ad read by qualified professionals, especially those who are happily employed and not actively looking for a job. The best talent is seldom unemployed and is always viewed as a valuable asset by their current employers. Happily employed professionals do not typically read the want ads in newspapers. But they do read trade journals and professional association newsletters.
Many firms rely on newspapers as their only source of advertising. Newspaper ads are expensive and limited to a very specific time and location. How many old newspapers do you keep in your office? In contrast, how many association newsletters and trade journals do your keep on your desk?

In our recruiting we try to attract happily employed professionals. To do this, our ads must sell the position. We tell the reader about your firm, the position that is available and the benefits that are associated with it. We emphasize the things that make your opportunity stand out and set your firm apart from others. The ad must make your position sound better than their current one and better than any other opportunity available to them.

Look at the following ads for similar positions. The first ad was placed alongside 97 other A/E employment ads in a Sunday edition of the Seattle Times at a cost of $79. The other we placed in the San Francisco ASCE Newsletter as one of only four employment ads. This lengthy ad cost $230. Although it is three time more expensive, it is seven times longer! Further, the San Francisco ASCE Newsletter is the most expensive regional newsletter we have ever used. What is most exciting is that we were able to run this same ad for free in five other trade association newsletters, and the position was filled with a candidate who responded to the ad.

Review these ads. Which one would you respond to?

**Engineer, Civil** - PE for potential mgmnt position, min 5 yrs exp. SE desirable. Fax resume and references to (206) 555-1234 Attn Bruce.

**Senior Geotech Engineer**

One of Portland’s top 5 small businesses is offering an exciting opportunity to an entrepreneurial senior geotech engineer. This firm has been in business for over 10 years, offers a good mix of project types and sizes and takes pride in the quality of their work.

Responsibilities of heading the geotechnical engineering efforts include: designing multi-disciplined projects, building client relationships with architects and structural engineers, mentoring staff and participating in business development and planning.

Qualified candidates will have a P.E. in Oregon and/or Washington, a MSCE in geotechnical engineering, at least 10 years of experience and a history of successfully managing others.

The firm offers an excellent benefit package and the opportunity for ownership.

Please fax your resume to Hall & Company 360/697-3744, mail to 19578 10th Ave., Poulsbo, WA 98370, call 800/583-0379 or apply on-line at http://www.aejob.com.
**Offer positions to acquaintances vs Executive Search.** Offering a position to someone you have met is not the same as actively and aggressively searching for a qualified candidate. Executive search is a rigorous and time-consuming process, but when properly implemented, it identifies the most qualified candidates in the marketplace.

We launch an executive search by calling an A/E firm's clients, potential clients and competitors. We describe the available position and ask them to recommend qualified candidates for the position. We contact only people who work in the A/E industry or who purchase A/E services. This method yields us the names of highly respected professionals. People don't recommend mediocre candidates.

If a contact can't help, we ask them to give us the names of people who should be able to identify qualified candidates for the position. For example, a university professor we recently contacted regarding a geomorphologist position we were trying to fill referred us to four other professors throughout the nation teaching this specialty.

We then contact the referrals. If a referred candidate is not interested in our position, chances are they can recommend at least one other candidate who is qualified. In this way, every potential candidate becomes either a real candidate or an additional contact to help us find a successful candidate. With each call we make, we get a little bit closer to the right candidate. This process can easily take several weeks and involve well over a 100 phone calls before the right candidate surfaces.

It is surprising how often a referred candidate is interested in investigating a new opportunity, even though they weren't looking for a new position. You don't know how content someone is in his or her current position until you ask.

**Keep Resumes on File vs A Resume Database.** Most firms gather resumes from two sources: responses to advertisements and unsolicited resumes. Normally, these resumes are considered for any current openings, kept on file for about six months and later discarded if no match is made.

We receive resumes from each and every ad we place for positions throughout the country and from each and every executive search we conduct. We also get unsolicited resumes.

We are in the business of matching a variety of candidates to a wide range of needs. There is no way to predict what type of person our next client will need. As such, every resume we receive is potentially valuable because it may fit a future need.

Our resumes are filed electronically into a database. This database gives us the capability to search for candidates by specified criteria such as discipline, years of experience, project type or any other of the 60 or so items of information kept in each candidate's file.
The resumes we have on file are not only potential candidates but are potential contacts for an executive search process. For example, a senior geotechnical engineer tends to know several other senior geotechnical engineers that they can recommend.

Our resume database currently contains several thousand contacts and has grown into a powerful tool for our recruiting services.

**Relying on Standard Techniques vs Developing new Tools.** The newest tool we use to assist us in our recruiting efforts is the Internet. As a basic component of our service, all of our clients’ open positions are posted on our Internet website, ajob.com. This website is visited more than 100,000 times monthly.

The greatest advantage to advertising on the Internet is freedom. Ad length is unrestricted and can readily be updated and linked to additional pages of information about your job, your company and the type of person you want to hire.

Our well-established website offers clients an easy way to establish or enhance their own presence on the internet. It is highly exposed through the numerous print ads that we publish nationally and it is linked to other websites that are key to the A/E industry, such as trade associations, universities and national job banks. In addition to linking to these sites, we use them to promote our clients’ job opportunities by posting ads for open positions.

Candidates who are interested in any of the positions posted on our website can submit resumes electronically by completing an on-line application form. We get about a dozen resumes a day on-line. These are downloaded into our resume database where they can be sorted based on specific criteria.

When a resume is submitted on-line, we automatically get the candidates’ e-mail address. Candidates who come up as qualified prospects in one of our database searches, are sent e-mail messages to announce the job opening and solicit their interest and/or ask for referrals. E-mail is our most cost effective and discreet way of contacting prospects.

The Internet is quickly becoming our most powerful recruiting tool.

**Assuming the Job Speaks for Itself vs Selling the Opportunity.** Many firms don’t realize that in order to win an outstanding candidate away from their present situation they have to sell their firm and their opportunity with all the enthusiasm they would put into winning a new client.

Our role is to ensure that candidates understand what is being offered. We present our clients with a set of prescreened resumes that meet the job requirements. They interview and select the best candidate. It is difficult enough for our clients to assess a candidate’s fit with their firm without the distraction of having to sell the opportunity to the candidate simultaneously. We concentrate on selling the opportunity while our clients focus on evaluating the candidates.
We make sure candidates understand why the job is the one they should take and why your firm is where they should work. We are explicit about all of the following:

- The level of responsibility they will have
- The types of projects they will be working on
- The amount of travel that will be involved
- The opportunity for obtaining firm ownership
- The amount of influence they will have in directing the efforts of the group
- The role they will play in directing the firm's future
- The opportunities that are available to share in the rewards of success
- The quality of life your area can provide for their entire family
- The superior working environment you enjoy
- The prestige inherent in being associated with your firm

All of these factors influence a candidate's decision to accept a position.

**Making an Offer vs Closing the Deal.** How many times have you gone through the exhaustive process of finding the right candidate just to have them turn down the opportunity once you make them an offer? Our job is to make sure that the final candidates are all excited about the opportunity so that your final selection will accept the position.

We work hard to ensure that the offer that is presented is one they will accept. Because we are not the employer we are able to talk to the candidate in hypothetical terms with respect to compensation options. Candidates also will talk to us about issues they would not normally discuss with a prospective employer, such as the concerns of their spouse and financial constraints. We are in a unique position to help them address these issues before they get in the way of accepting an employment offer.

Compensation is often where recruiting efforts go awry, usually because it occurs too early in the process. We save discussions with the candidate about money in anything but very general terms for the very last. When an opportunity is relayed accurately and the candidate's attributes are clear, the expected salary usually falls very close to the firm's offer.

**Conclusion**
There is a big difference between what we do as professional recruiters and what most design firms do to find new employees. Our approach to recruiting compared to the approach used by most firms in the A/E industry is like comparing a racecar to a horse and buggy.

A/E firms may be able to get by using the same old methods of hiring, but it is imperative in the long run to consider what really works. The truth is, modern recruiting in the A/E industry is not just a good idea. It is a requirement for lasting success.