



Nurture staff as if they were your own... Training will dramatically boost the quality - and retention rate - of your staff.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in *Modern Steel Construction*

I was overcome with pride when an engineering client recently stated: 'We want to significantly grow the **quality** - not necessarily the **quantity** - of our people.' It's true; scrambling to recruit new hires is not always the best way to accommodate an increase in workload.

Quality is the operative word. Consider this similar evaluation: is success measured in terms of growth? Often, yes. And is growth defined through an increase in revenue, an increase in profit, or a combination of the two? Think about this: a firm can reasonably double its revenue in about five years, but potentially remain (yikes!) stagnant in - or (double yikes!) decrease - its level of profitability.

A firm is more profitable when it has quality clients that value the services offered, pay on time, and partake in a communicative client-engineer partnership. Profitability is also realized when the engineering firm itself is producing quality work through a quality process with quality professionals. Which brings us back to my core message in this article: proper, multi-faceted training of existing staff is well worth the investment.

This is great news for engineering firms that are racing to hire warm bodies. In today's ever-present talent war, the best and brightest are enjoying kudos, attention, and job offers from many an employer. Engineering leaders need to examine their existing resources with a fresh perspective. What can you do to secure staff loyalty and retention; tap into undiscovered talent; enhance existing value; and strengthen teams so that the 'whole is more than the sum of its parts'? The answer is clear. Quality training programs will go a long way to fulfill intense staffing requirements.

So, you know What you need to offer (solid training program within a learning culture) and Why you need it (to grow your business by strengthening your existing talent base). As for the rest:

Who needs it?

When a department head submits a new staff requisition to human resources, does it occur to him or her that perhaps dwelling amidst their studio is a professional with the intellectual bandwidth, ambition, and enthusiasm to expand into a new role? Through purposeful, multi-faceted training, these performers can elevate to star quality, where mutual employer-employee benefits will ultimately be realized.

Let's also review folks on the flip side. Consider the non-performers in your firm - those folks that have become too comfortable, even lackadaisical, in their existing positions. At this stage, expectations from themselves and others have dramatically reduced. What impact do they have on your firm's overwhelming workload? Are they still a part of the solution, or a part of the problem? Can they still be motivated, even reinvented, with a rigorous training program?

Where are the best areas to focus upon?

A. Marketing/business development:

Surprise! My training recommendations are strongly biased towards marketing. (It's my life's work...what do you expect?) In support of this bias, marketing training is a:

- Learnable endeavor! Where there is intellect and sincere interest, there is someone predisposed to learn and practice marketing. Broken down, marketing is logical; straightforward; process-driven – an appropriate fit for the engineering mind.
- Valuable asset to every staff member. Demand for A/E/C services will ebb and flow. During down times, those who excel at marketing contributions are better positioned for job security.
- Opportunity for technical staff to grow personally - becoming more multi-dimensional.
- Means to build vested interest and long-term firm commitment from the technical staff member.
- Vehicle for refining communication skills – valuable every day for a lifetime.
- Way to stretch above-and-beyond primary responsibilities; get promoted; shape the firm's future; and be a business leader.

B. Professional skills, management, and leadership:

Very few architecture/engineering curriculums contain business and management courses. Therefore, the majority of our exposure to management occurs on-the-job. To further exacerbate this deficiency, many A/E industry firms are failing to capture – and transfer - the critical workforce knowledge of senior staff. By providing learning mechanisms for internal staff, the benefits go beyond just an education to also build mutual respect; stronger teams; and an unbeatable esprit de corps. These mechanisms range in complexity - from brown-bag seminars, internal finite courses, and intranet-posted programs to comprehensive curriculum provided by a firm's corporate university.

To assemble a well-rounded training program, variety is essential. It is most sensible to seek expertise from diverse sources – not just internally. External training for professional enhancement - time management, writing, negotiating skills, leadership – can be delivered via webinars, offsite open-enrollment training, or as a professional program with on-site, customized delivery.

C. Technical:

Keeping technically current is easy; opportunities are abundant! Make software training mandatory for appropriate roles; propose offsite and/or online opportunities to earn PDH or CEU credits; and facilitate cross-discipline training (ie. receiving site safety training from a reputable construction firm).

D. Work-life balance:

One A/E firm I work with offers enhanced value through an array of non-industry related topics: coaching on financial investing; personal health for the long-term; family planning; elderly care for our aging parents. The firm serves as a well-rounded resource – one that gains employee loyalty and longevity from the staff.

When is the best time to train?

How about all of the time, every week of the year? One way to make training prevalent throughout 'everyday' work is through staff-created and staff-led programs. One of my east coast engineering clients has sustained a book club that started at the associates' level, and then evolved into a multi-generational membership. Their reading list includes: The Tipping Point; First Break All the Rules; Managing Up; Five Dysfunctions of a Team; and other business books. It was enlightening to discover that these folks are not just referencing what they read in conversation; rather, they are also experimenting and applying the concepts in their work.

Firms most resistant to formalized training are those that are ultra-concerned with productivity. Split the difference! For your formalized training program, hold the sessions partially during lunch or after hours – and offer food as an immediate

incentive. (Naturally, the real incentives come later when attendees realize they are enhancing their own careers).

How do we measure results?

Establish key metrics and then measure your return-on-training-investment. Once your new (and/or improved) program has been in place for one full year, then conduct before and after comparisons on:

- Project performance (schedule/budget)
- Hit rates on proposals and interviews
- Results from client perception surveys
- Percentage of attrition (and feedback comments from those that depart)
- Recruiting success (a robust training program is a value-add for recruits)
- Revenue growth
- Productivity
- Profitability

As well, hold bi-annual reviews with employees in order to directly discuss their career, contributions, and assessment of the training program as it relates to their professional and personal growth.

The best training programs are those that truly align with the corporate strategy. They are championed by an enthusiastic, visible leadership team. Every step of the way, be sure to monitor the program's results, to evolve the content, and to emphatically commit to its success. It may sound crazy, but there are firms that allocate as much as \$6000 annual training budget per individual. Now that's commitment!