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15.990 Practicing Management: Project Proposal

An Argument for a New Paradigm in the Design Services Sector[i]

I am proposing a consulting business built on the foundation of providing out-sourced technologies and contractors, expert in the use of those technologies, to architectural and design firms on an as-needed basis.

Current Problem

Most architectural/design firms cannot realistically afford to own or utilize the large number of available digital design and fabrication technologies for all potential projects that might come their way. This is based on the belief that firms cannot anticipate their technological needs for a project before that project is acquired. Due to the significant up-front cost for new software applications (which quickly become outdated or obsolete as a result of updates or new releases) as well as the large amount of time and expense to re-train existing employees, owning and using more than a few software applications is cost-prohibitive. These issues may handicap otherwise creative firms by limiting them to a particular range or *type* of work imposed by their choice of software.

My experience indicates that designers are facing increasing pressure to be not only design experts but also computer experts requiring both the awareness of, and the expertise to effectively employ, an ever-changing body of state-of-the-art digital design technologies. The result is a functional gap in the role of each employee as 'designer' (creator and producer of a design concept) and 'developer' (creator of the representational material of the design concept). This continually-growing divide presents a unique opportunity for a new paradigm of design consultant - one that can forge a better link between designers and design tools: the *Architectural-Technology Consultancy (ATC)*.

Solution

By assuming the burden of keeping current with ever-changing technology, an ATC would provide architectural firms access to a wide array of technologies that would otherwise be cost and/or man-power prohibitive, while also offering the flexibility to choose the most appropriate technologies on a project-by-project or as-needed basis. Furthermore, by taking on the responsibility of up-to-date technological expertise, the ATC would be able to provide design firms hands-on knowledge about the latest available technologies, including unbiased user-reviews from its pool of expert-users.

The structure of an ATC could itself be incredibly flexible. Rather than an in-house staff of full-time experts for all of the various technologies, an ATC could employ a method of hiring and distributing experts as they are needed, similar to the way a head-hunting or 'temp' agency functions. By utilizing independent contractors the ATC could rely on a distributed network of professionals, to reduce overhead and associated HR problems, while maintaining a dynamic workforce possessing the most up-to-date skills in the available technologies. While the introduction of an ATC contractor has the potential of changing the office dynamic of a firm, this type of relationship is already inherent in many architectural firms in which the lead designer presents design ideas and goals to members of the design team whom are charged with translating and inputting these ideas into digital form on the computer (ie Gehry Partners, Foster & Partners, SOM). By externalizing the 'developer', the creative process could be enhanced by enabling architecture and design firms to focus more resources and energy towards designing.

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