

A Job or A Career

How architects and interior designers can

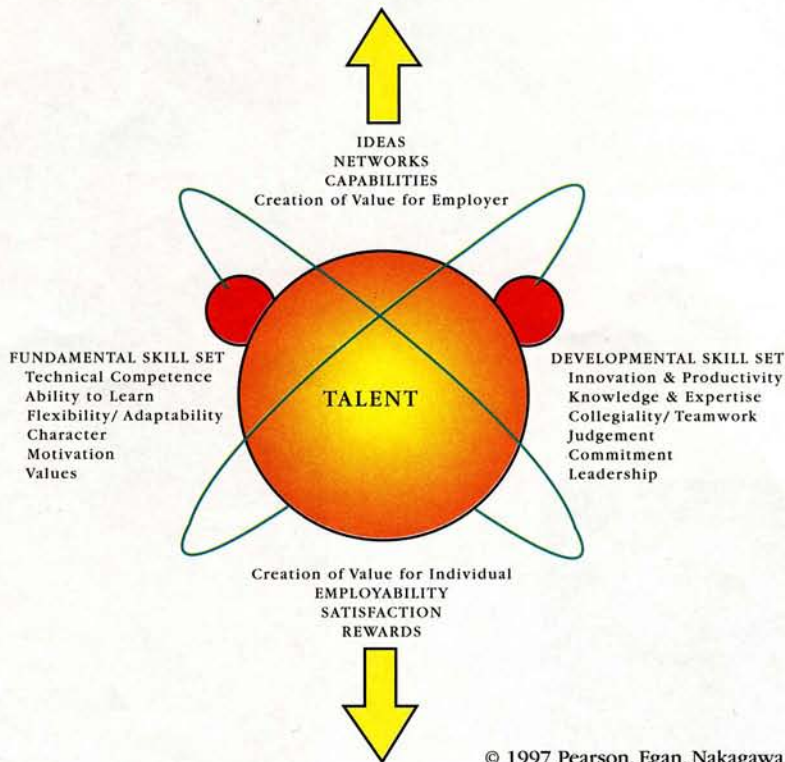
successfully climb today's career ladder By Marjanne Pearson, Nancy Cameron Egan and Paul Wesley Nakazawa

Skill Sets and the Creation of Value

WANTED: Architectural project manager with 10 years' experience. Must have track record of delivering complex projects on time and on budget, within or exceeding profitability guidelines. In addition, must be able to develop and sustain client relationships. Position requires excellent verbal and graphic skills, strong organizational skills and proven leadership and people management skills. Employer offers excellent compensation/benefits package, opportunity for personal and professional recognition, and potential for substantial career growth, including future equity ownership.

Does this sound like your job? When viewed from the bottom rung, the career ladder for designers seems to call for the skills of an acrobat as well as those of an architect or interior designer. Recent graduates may wonder if their course work was any preparation for today's interviews. Further, they may ask if they will be a multi-talented individual in 10 years—who can assume a position of major responsibility, with its concomitant opportunity.

Becoming a full-fledged professional takes more than what you can learn in school. Think for a moment about the constellation of skills that makes a successful design professional (see Skill chart). Every employee brings a fundamental "skill set" to each assignment—technical competence, ability to learn, and flexibility/adaptability—as well as personal character, motivation, and core values. As individuals grow and develop, they bring more to the job: productivity and innovation, knowledge and increased skill, collegiality and teamwork, professional judgment, personal commitment and leadership.



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employee creates increased personal value in terms of rewards and recognition, satisfaction and employability.

Defining success: Do you really know what it means for you?

The definition of "success" varies for every firm and every professional in the design field. It could be recognition in the form of published projects or peer accolades; it might a partnership or your name on the door; perhaps it's financial remuneration or control over your own assignments; and for some, it is the simple satisfaction of a job well done.

Whatever the definition, the most successful people are those who are able to leverage their talents and opportunities to create their own futures. For individuals, this process involves a long and steady progression of personal development. For firms, it requires organizational growth and development.

So how can you become a successful design professional? While no one can guarantee a better career in 10 easy steps, here are some proven suggestions to get you a foothold on the ladder.

• **Define your own measurements for success.** Articulate your personal goals. Ensure that your career decisions match up with

The relationship between the employer and employee mirrors the one between the design firm and its clients. To develop the sophisticated "skill sets" that successful design firms bring to their increasingly demanding clients, firm leaders rely on the consortium of talents available through their own employees. As talent- and knowledge-based organizations, design firms evaluate an individual's "skill set" in relationship to the needs of the firm, and then reward "value" through employment, compensation and benefits, plus opportunity for growth. By contributing to the success of an organization, an

your personal values and aspirations. Within a traditional firm environment there are four basic career paths—design, technology, management and marketing—each with a variety of subsets and detours (see Paths chart). As an alternative, a career in corporate facilities management, construction or program management, product sales, or teaching, might be more rewarding for you.

- *Deliver the goods.* Your basic skills—the willingness and ability to learn, teamwork and interactive skills, and core competencies—are your assets. Own them, invest in them, and use them wisely. Start by understanding your specific role and responsibilities. What is expected of you? Stay focused on your specific assignments, but seek opportunities to exceed expectations.

- *Reach out for responsibility.* Offer solutions, not problems. Don't think of yourself as just an employee: Be a "partner" in the success of your firm. Make certain you understand the goals and objectives of your organization, and the degree to which you can help your firm's leaders achieve them. Always ask yourself, as well as your superiors, how you can provide more measurable value to your firm.

- *Know what business you're in.* Learn to think like a client. What are the problems and concerns of the your clients' businesses? Listen to them, read their industry journals, and attend their trade shows. Understand the goals and objectives of your firm's customers, how they measure success. Then act like an advisor and help them to achieve those goals.

- *Nurture relationships.* Networking didn't die in the '80s; it has evolved to a new form of "connecting" that empowers individuals and firms. Establish reciprocal relationships to exchange ideas and solutions. Be willing to share your expertise and knowledge. Look for people with whom you share common values, and others who will provide a diversity of ideas and experiences.

- *Stay ahead of the curve.* Develop the capacity for "peripheral vision." Stay current with business trends that will affect your firm and your firm's customers. Find out what industry consultants are forecasting. Talk to your networking colleagues. Dedicate yourself to continuous learning: Learn something new every day. More importantly, incorporate the best ideas you discover into your own "skill set."

- *Request and receive feedback.* Take the initiative to work with your immediate supervisor or manager to develop a "personal" business plan. (See "How Am I Doing?" *Contract Design*, August 1996.) Ask for periodic "check-ups." In addition, seek feedback from your team members and others who can contribute observations and advice.

- *Learn to give leadership.* True leaders have vision, clarity, persistence, and courage. They understand the difference between leadership and management—the ability to define a path, enable

the process to achieve objectives, and bring people into the process.

- *Think globally.* Look at the changes that are occurring to your firm and to your firm's primary markets. Look at economic and demographic trends. Try to envision what you (and your organization) will need to remain competitive in coming years.

- *Get a life.* Seek opportunities to recharge your batteries. Spend time with friends and family. Go for a walk or a swim or a drive. Give yourself the opportunity to be yourself.

Evaluate your options: Why it doesn't pay to be shy about it

Traditionally, it has been difficult for design professionals to achieve their full potential without changing firms. And with the lessons of the last recession still resonant, you should look at all of your long-range options, today and every few years. Create tools that will help you see what the future holds for you.

Try writing a brief professional resume—not the one that goes in every proposal, but one that focuses on who you are, what you do, and what you want to do. Don't be shy. Craft a story about yourself that includes the contribution that you can make in terms of ideas, networks, and capabilities for the ongoing success of your firm/organization, and the "rewards" that you are seeking through your contribution. Articulate the outcome of your endeavors in quantifiable measures. But remember that numbers

are less important than actual results.

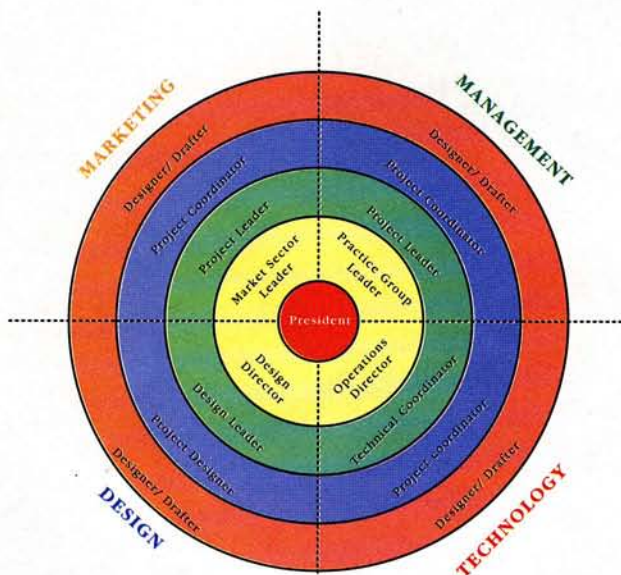
Candidly review your personal goals and assess your progress. Be honest. Have you had the opportunity to offer or develop innovative ideas? Have you developed new capabilities? Are you continuing to advance in your career, or have you "stalled out" for some reason? What opportunities are being offered to you? Would you be more successful in a different role, or possibly in a different firm? Should you consider a change in your career path? Should you consider a different type of firm or business? Or is it time to "bite the bullet" and go out on your own?

By developing several scenarios, you can

determine what you could gain from each of your alternatives. You have the ability and the responsibility to empower your future career growth. Or as Wayne Gretsky says, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take." Good luck. ♦

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Traditional Career Paths



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