

HOW TO BUILD A BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CULTURE

Engineering leaders and marketing experts say many pieces need to come together, from fostering relationships to hiring the right talent and mentoring employees.

BY DANIELLE BOYKIN



Over the years, the architecture, engineering, and construction industry has overcome the challenges of a U.S. economy struggling to recover. Economic indicators reveal a turnaround, yet firms still face increased competition and scrutiny in the process to retain their client base, secure more projects, and tap into new markets. *PE* spoke to AEC firm leaders and marketing experts on how the current environment underscores the importance of helping employees to maximize their communications, marketing, and client-engagement skills by fostering a firm's business development culture.





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Firms can no longer rely on just a few key rainmakers to grow and develop new business, says Richard Friedman, president of Friedman & Partners, a marketing and management consulting firm for the design and construction industries. “Everyone must contribute to the business development process in a way that is commensurate with their functional role, career juncture, and their business development skills,” he says. “You can define those contributions from the receptionist on up.”

Firms also have to focus on distinguishing themselves in terms of the ultimate product or service that they deliver to stay relevant. This is particularly critical since most firms in the industry have access to the same tools and processes, says Thomas Chandler, founder of ChandlerGlobal, an executive coaching firm. “We all have access to BIM, for example, but it's our people being fully engaged and making good decisions who may be our only differentiator,” he says.

At the center of effective business development are relationships. Whether

employees are engaged on social media or attending conferences or community events—these are opportunities to foster relationships and grow business. “We have a lot of tools at our disposal, but at the end of the day it all boils down to relationships,” says Chandler. “It should be everyone's responsibility to understand that this is the foundation of business development and make a contribution.”

Building the Culture

The business development practices at Geo-Technology Associates Inc. were not as strong as they could have been prior to 2008, recalls Pat Klima, P.E., president of the 15-office national firm. When the Great Recession hit the industry, the firm quickly realized that its focus had to change from relying heavily on referrals to putting more emphasis on actively pursuing new opportunities. The firm maintained its traditional business, but reached out to prospects in markets that they never considered before, such as the chemical and the oil and gas industries. “Our business development skills improved through necessity during that period of a rougher economy, and we came out stronger than when we went into it,” says Klima.

GTA's corporate culture is relationship driven, rather than project driven. The firm maintains a seller-doer business style, where the professionals who are selling the work are also doing the work. “The relationships with our clients are strengthened because we designate a team member to work with them from the beginning and throughout the project,” says Klima. “It also allows for us to better understand the clients' needs.”

Building a business development culture that spreads accountability for these efforts throughout the organization will certainly not arise overnight. Klima says GTA's leadership is constantly looking for new approaches to business development and will bring in outside expertise to help staff improve marketing and communication strategies when necessary.

Fostering this type of environment involves establishing systems and implementing training to incorporate planning and strategy, mentoring, professional development, and review processes. “I occasionally come across firms that have a very unique business development culture,” says Friedman. “But rare is the firm that is able to effectively establish a culture, from the top down, emphasizing the importance of business development skills. It's hard to do, and requires leadership by example.”

Friedman recommends that firms take the following steps to establish and harness the benefits of a business development culture:

- Firm leaders need to operate from a strategic marketing and business development plan for each of their target markets.
- Employees need to know which strategic target they are targeting and why. The firm should develop “capture plans” to provide information about specific top targets of clients and prospects. These plans should explain how the firm is going to win over prospective clients or grow the existing client base.
- Firm leaders should identify key business development talent and make sure that they receive proper training and mentoring. This training and coaching should involve the development of robust goals that they will be held accountable for achieving. And if necessary, these employees should be incentivized to reach these goals.

The Talent

The focus on fostering a business development culture extends heavily into how GTA recruits talent and evaluates employees for advancements. If you want a position at GTA, you'll have to showcase not only technical proficiency, but also personality and communication skills that can translate well with clients. Engineers who are successful at business development have been the ones to move into

higher leadership positions in the firm, says Klima.

Klima and the firm partners serve as mentors to help their employees elevate their technical, business, and marketing knowledge and skills and establish goals. "It is in our best interest to teach people how to do this and show them the path," says Klima. "We encourage them to take risks and get out of their comfort zone when it comes to business development."

Lawrence Smith, P.E., has spent most of his career focused on client service and business development in the industry. He believes that an innate ability to engage with people is critical to a professional's success at business development. "It's always been in my DNA, but it was honed particularly because I started my career with small firms," says Smith, the president and chief executive officer of Haley & Aldrich. "I learned quickly that if you want to eat, you've got to sell."

When Smith and other firm leaders at Haley & Aldrich are recruiting technical professionals, they look for people who are natural "systems thinkers." They want

professionals who can recognize that when problems arise, they are often not generated by technical issues. "Systems thinking is the most valuable skill when it comes to business development in our industry. If you can do that, then you can sell the firm, solve client problems, and bring the right people to the table," says Smith.

Another attribute that is critical to engaging with the client, says Smith, is curiosity. "If you're not curious and you don't ask a lot of questions then you're not going to be good at business development," he says.

Smith recalls how a long-time client determined the staff member that he preferred to work with on a project. If this client could easily figure out the person's technical discipline, he viewed this person as someone who may not be useful for the project. The client wanted a professional with broad skills and a wide base of knowledge. "You need people who can talk on a variety of subjects, who are well-read outside of their core discipline, and are knowledgeable about what's going on in the world and in the markets," he says. "That's the type of professional we are looking for when we hire."

The Right Attributes

Firm leaders often say that they want to recruit and retain more engineers with the solid communications and business development skills, says Chandler. However, too many firms still default to what's easiest when it comes to hiring and workforce development by focusing on the technical knowledge and skills. Firms, he says, shouldn't wait until they are forced to change.

Employers who are walking the talk are using the interviewing process to assess if candidates have the attributes needed for effective business development. More firms are also using personality profiles to assess how candidates are going to mesh with the company or fit in a particular team role, says Chandler. "They look at a candidate to determine how much background research they did on the firm. They observe if the candidate asked really good, robust questions and if he listened well," he says.

"They take note of the energy level of the candidate and how they followed up after the interview."

Professional engineers will have an advantage, says Chandler, if they come to a firm with good presentation skills and the experience of serving on professional association committees and networking through social media.

When Theodore Scott, P.E., ventured out on his own to launch Stormwater Consultants in 2002, he had to stay attuned to and respond effectively to the market forces that could make or break his business. He understands how essential it is to bring the right talent on board to focus on business development, particularly for small businesses in an increasingly competitive environment. In 2010, when he wanted to expand into the municipal market he brought Jennifer Rauhofer, P.E., into the firm. She not only brought 10 years of experience in that market to the table, but she also possessed the essential traits for business development success. "She had the right contacts and knew how to engage with clients and market our firm," he says.

Rauhofer attributes her success in this area to a combination of formal and informal training and mentoring in addition to involvement in professional organizations. "I was exposed to more seasoned people throughout my career who were doing marketing and business development and observing how they were networking," says the firm president. "Over time, you're doing more and more of it on your own."

Although an employee may not have business development as a formal part of his or her duties, Scott believes that everyone, no matter the professional level, should have a "marketing mindset." A bottom-level inspector who is dealing with a client is incredibly important to our business development effort because of client service and satisfaction, he says. "One of the best things that the production people can do is to have an excellent product and keep the client happy," he says. "That in itself is the best possible business development out there." **PE**



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