PRIORITIZING

PROJECT

MANAGEMENT

Interior designers may not have entered the profession to become project managers, but the current business world is requiring more project management skills, and they’re going to have to step up if they want to stand out.

But in Interior Design, clients desire more than artistic talent. Designers must also know how to navigate the business side in order to set themselves apart.

“Construction of any sort is in desperate need of project management,” says Laura Ramsey Engler, ASID, CID, Design Principal at Ramsey Engler, Ltd., in Minneapolis. “As a creative profession, we’re pretty fertile with wonderful ideas, but if we can’t execute and coordinate them, the project won’t work.” Engler says that project management is essential for Interior Design because the complicated fabrication process requires constant communication and accountability.

“You can’t always count on meeting and producing the project face-to-face; you need communication systems and document management that transcends locale,” she says. “And when you’re conceiving things that haven’t been done before, there needs to be record-keeping and accountability.”

Cary Johnson, FIIDA, Chicago-based Senior Associate and Project Director at global architecture, design, planning and consulting firm, Gensler, agrees and says a project manager is always checking his or her cell phone and email to make sure a project is running smoothly at all times.

“In an interior design project, it’s a daily, even hourly conversation with the client and consultants,” he says. “A project manager is there from the kick-off to project close.”

SCENE CHANGE

Maturing technology and the current economy has made Interior Design a different industry than in the past, says Mary Bartlett, IIDA, AIA, LEED AP, Associate Partner of Marmon Mok Architecture in San Antonio. With technology bringing more integration, people are also expecting more from their designers. This means taking on additional tasks that might not have per- tained to you in the past in order to make you more marketable, according to Bartlett.

“The industry has changed so much with new technology,” she says. “Everything’s becoming more and more integrated; projects are becoming leaner.”

For example, Bartlett says she sees the integration in Building Information Modeling (BIM) technology, which consolidates the design information in one model shared by the architect, engineer, interior designer, contractor and owner. Moving from a two-dimensional set of drawings to a three-dimensional model (which includes structural members, ductwork and actual building materials) provides the capability of the interior designer to be an integrated team member, according to Bartlett.

“The more informed the interior designer is on the project, the more effective they are on the team,” she says. “Also, today’s economy is such that projects and profit margins are leaner than ever, so efficiency is critical. If an interior designer has multiple skills sets and can design, detail construction drawings, and manage a project, that is a valuable employee.”

Rusty Meador, a Real Estate Consultant with Plantation Development Services, a condominium development and

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consulting business in Wilmington, N.C., regularly hires interior designers through contracts and agrees that with the current economy, people are looking for a package deal — someone who can offer multiple services in order to provide more value per project. Meador says it’s a challenge to find project management skills in creative people because three to five years ago, the business responsibilities would fall to someone else.

“It’s becoming more and more important that my clients work with designers who understand the whole process,” he says. “There’s an expectation that they recognize the technical details of a project.”

ALL IN THE PREPARATION
Phyllis Harbinger, ASID, CID, Principal of Design Concepts/Interiors, LLC, in Cortlandt Manor, N.Y., and Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) says that the importance of project management is more valued in today’s Interior Design education. Interior Design students at FIT are taught comprehensive project management skills in “professional practice” courses. In the lower division, they learn the aspects of running a business, such as creating proposals and drafting invoices. In the upper division, some of their studio course work requires them to do group projects where they learn specifications on a commercial level and also how to work as a team. Usually one student takes the main leadership role and then delegates responsibilities, such as research, drafting plans, rendering, and conducting interviews.

“In addition to their individual performance grades, they’re evaluated on how well they work as a team and how they delegate.”

Harbinger says, “All of that helps prepare them on how to work in the real world.”

Having taken graduate classes in management, marketing and economics, Bartlett recommends checking a local university to see if it offers business law courses or management classes to get a better understanding of project management.

Once you attain the proper training, it’s important to present that knowledge effectively. Meador says that when he interviews interior designers, he expects them to prove that they know the process.

“One of the most important things to me is whether I understand their plan,” he says. “I ask them if they can define what their critical path process is.”

Being able to speak on all major elements of a project such as scheduling, risk management and working with other contractors, will show that a designer understands all the comprehensive requirements, making the recruiter more confident in their skills. Meader says that if they can demonstrate their decision-making ability and how they’ve resolved conflict without going over budget, they can become a front-runner for the job.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS
“It’s about stepping up and taking more responsibility,” says Bartlett, who thinks the strongest interior designers are the ones who show competent leadership skills because, acting as project managers, interior designers set the tone for the whole job.

“Good leaders should have the ability to see the big picture,” she says. “They understand that there are many viewpoints and ideas and are committed to the very best project outcome and able to produce results.”

Johnson says that because the project manager merges all different objectives — of the client, architect and contractor — he or she might not always be the most popular person. The project manager is the one who delivers the bad news, such as preliminary pricing from a contractor coming in higher than what was budgeted. But he says the key to being a successful project manager is being able to offer a solution, such as making cuts elsewhere where the effect will be least felt.

“A good project manager knows how to say: ‘These are our issues,’” he says. “They deliver the message right away and deal with the problem directly rather than just throwing their hands up.”

Bartlett agrees and says the true talent is in managing client expectations as well as the design team members’ time and schedule because they don’t always complement each other.

“For example, if a project manager promises a client finished renderings by the end of the
week, but the team is committed to another deadline, it causes stress and frustration on all sides," she says. "It takes the ability to see the big picture to ensure that the best results are met."

Harbinger says that project management can increase the professionalism of Interior Design because clients’ expectations of accountability are higher. "I think clients are much more savvy today," she says. "They’re asking you to follow up on every little thing, including price validation and getting different quotes from multiple resources. They’re requiring that much more checks and balances be employed in the specification process."

More accountability means designers are liable for every single thing, and according to Harbinger, applying project management methods of planning and recording will not only result in a happier client but also safer business practices.

**WHAT IT COMES DOWN TO**

Instilling project management requires a more organized and methodical approach to interior design work, and Engler says it includes simple practices such as regular team meetings to check in and guarantee that all areas are being covered.

"Make sure you’re creating that chain of communication so that information is being properly disseminated," she says. Engler also recommends documenting every decision and recording important discussions, making them available to everyone on the team. It saves time because it gives a record to reference if an issue comes up, and it makes the process as transparent as possible, which will ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Luckily, there is a great deal of software available that can create a project Web site or shared server so that everyone on the team can access information easily. Email communication is effective, but Engler says it’s also very helpful having “one project war room” officered by an administrator and accessible to team members. Having everything, such as schedules, renderings and documents, electronically merged in one place will prevent miscommunication and streamline information exchange. Engler recommends the construction software Procore, which offers a Web-based portal that allows users to store documents, photos and use automated emails.

Harbinger recommends Design Manager or Studio IT, project management software made specifically for interior designers that also incorporates accounting capabilities, such as budget analysis. For conferencing, Harbinger suggests GoToMeeting, which allows users to conference via microphones or Webcams and to record meetings.

**WORK WELL WITH OTHERS**

Interior Design is an integral part of construction, but it’s one of multiple professions involved. Project management not only helps things run more smoothly on a team, but it also aids collaboration with other teams. Decisions and tasks are rarely isolated. For example, Harbinger is currently working on a residential project where the client requested a specific wooden inlay border in the foyer, which flows into the living room and dining room. Harbinger says the decision involves discussions with the client, builder, architect and floor installer who “all have their opinions and input.” She says that although it’s a smaller part of the larger project, it requires many emails, site visits and documentation to make sure everyone is on board with the decision-making process.

Applying the methodical system makes for smoother collaboration, which makes for a more successful project, says Harbinger. "Using project management tools and software allows you to set up a work flow for the project," she says. "Being able to show ‘these are the steps you take for this task’ makes everything seamless."