



ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT LAUMANN

IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE

CONSISTENT BEST PRACTICES HELP DESIGNERS DELIVER VALUE AND EFFICIENCY. HOWEVER, WHAT'S "BEST" FOR ONE PROFESSIONAL IS NOT ALWAYS UNIVERSAL. BY ROSS FOTI

Creativity is electric, powerful and free flowing, but if it's not grounded, someone's going to be shocked. Best practices, culled through trial and error, provide good insulation. These methods, often derived from industry standards, allow designers to deliver effective and efficient service to clients. Employing consistent, time-tested practices actually frees designers to think beyond the ordinary, says Patricia Grierson, IIDA, Vice President

and Director of SmithGroup's interior studio, Washington, D.C. "I think that if you're building on what you already know to be good, you allow yourself time on a project to innovate and go beyond that," she says. "Why reinvent the wheel? Let designers use consistent practices and just reinvent what will be special to that project. For example, I think it's clear that

companies like BMW have design and quality standards, but not every car looks alike." While best practices are more about process and research than template design, that's not to say that innovation is secondary to process. However, you must have a firm grasp of industry-accepted norms before you can adapt them. "We all love it when someone

breaks a rule successfully, but everyone is in agreement with what success is," Grierson says.

CONSISTENCY VS. CREATIVITY

At face value, you may think that imposing structure on design stifles creative expression. Repeating tasks the same way could stick you firmly in the box.

Actually, it's just the opposite, allowing more focused time for creativity, according to Dan Lee, IIDA, AIA,

the project. A year ago, as Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects began re-examining and realigning its strategic plan, active solicitation of client feedback became a greater priority, Lopez says. Feedback ensures that you're on track with the current effort and allows you to monitor and tweak your process along the way. "We're constantly asking them what they like," Lopez says. "We work actively to take our clients to other facilities to determine their preferences and measure what's appropriate."



"IF OTHER NATIONAL FIRMS ARE GOING THROUGH THE SAME ISSUES, WE WANT TO LEARN FROM THEM."

– Dan Lee, IIDA, AIA, ASID, Corporate Forum Advisor, Principal Interior Architecture, HDR, Dallas, Texas

ASID, Corporate Forum Advisor and Principal of Interior Architecture with HDR, Dallas. "Best practices should be so woven into the creative process that they provide just one more tool by which you manage a project and ultimately deliver what the client needs and requires," Lee says. "Large firms seem to have more design standards and best practices in place for risk management reasons. They tend to have a fairly organized approach to best practices."

Although best practices and standards must be institutionalized to permeate the organizational culture, the idea of "best" is largely subjective, individual and really defined through the customer's eye. "In the healthcare field, what we categorize as 'best' is what is durable, maintainable and continues to perform," says Amy H. Lopez, IIDA, Principal with Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects, Houston, Texas. "In the healthcare arena, things are built to last. When you put something in a hospital, clients want it to stay that way for a good 20 years. For retail, 'best' would be something totally different."

In addition to performance, designers must consider context to meet expectations. "We take into consideration what's culturally or regionally appropriate – materials and finishes that are familiar to an area so people feel more at home," Lopez says.

To ensure you understand your clients' wants and needs, you must keep them actively engaged throughout

APPROACH THE BENCH

Watkins Hamilton Ross is not alone, as most successful firms seek continuous improvement. But it can be tough prying good ideas out of your competitors. That's where industry benchmarking comes in.

By comparing their work processes with those of other companies, design professionals can capitalize on efficiencies or customize best practices. At the basic level, the benchmarking process includes three steps:

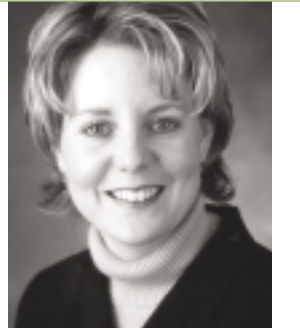
1. Evaluate and measure your firm to identify strengths and weaknesses.
2. Initiate a study of industry leaders and your closest competitors to determine how their creative processes work and how they maintain profitability.
3. Determine how to adapt the successful processes to your business strategy.

Firms benchmark with the Building Owners Management Association (BOMA) and other benchmarking groups, says Kim Mikula, IIDA, Facility Planning & Design Forum Advisor and Facilities Planner with USAA, Tampa, Fla. These groups conduct a survey of process-focused questions, collect data from a number of related companies and populate a report for participants.

This industry snapshot helps professionals move toward continuous improvement – firms that remain

stagnant in their approach to the business of design often are left behind. "I don't see best practices as defining what design is best, but determining that the process you used to get there is best," says Meredith Thatcher, CFM, CFMJ, President of Carroll Thatcher Planning Group, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. "Best practice comes from sharing with each other and viewing the project from different viewpoints – is it about saving money, time or creating an environment that best suits the needs of the client?"

As part of the normal project flow at Carroll Thatcher Planning Group, all staff can assess each other's projects from an objective viewpoint, ensuring that clients benefit from all the designers' best thinking. "Nothing leaves this office unless it's been reviewed by someone else in this office, both from a quality viewpoint and to ensure it meets client needs," Thatcher says. "Not everyone here is a designer, so if you can defend what you've accomplished here in the



"IN THE HEALTHCARE ARENA, THINGS ARE BUILT TO LAST. WHEN YOU PUT SOMETHING IN A HOSPITAL, CLIENTS WANT IT TO STAY THAT WAY FOR A GOOD 20 YEARS."

– Amy Lopez, IIDA, Principal, Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects, Houston, Texas

INTROSPECTION

Sometimes you can learn more from yourself than from others. In refining processes, designers can collaborate to great effect. "Everybody has an opportunity to review and comment on what's being done by our office," Thatcher says. "We do a lot of research and development with our clients. We're constantly looking at the methods we use. We keep the lines of communication open and recognize the right of everybody to have a say."

office, you're more likely to be able to defend it with the client."

In this respect, large firms with many, diverse voices can be considered to have an advantage over smaller offices. "At HDR, we connect with all our offices that offer interior design services once a month and address specific concerns on different projects," Lee says. "We also look at what the competition is doing regionally. We adapt to fit our clients and their expectations. It's

KNOWANDTELL

Imagine a world where all designers are plugged into a central database, sharing collective experience and growing as a community.

If you think this vision is far-fetched, take a look at Dunlop Architects Inc.'s Project Information and Best Practices Database. The database, which received a national Award of Excellence for Innovation in Architecture last year from the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, contains best practices templates with detailed information for more than 500 different room and space types. These plans can be applied to a new project, allowing

professionals to quickly generate basic project-specific information and options. The database also is linked to additional tools such as CAD floor plans, with easy navigation, tracking updating and output reports.

"Until a few years ago, like other architectural firms, we had no way to quickly and easily access our prior knowledge," says Principal George Bitsakakis. "Our new database has allowed Dunlop to capture and organize the wealth of

knowledge from our extensive experience, and assemble additional information and comments from consultants and clients through the Internet. It also speeds up preparation of project documents, reduces duplication of effort, improves quality control, provides a secure and stable environment for information and allows us to conduct effective research."

For more information, call 416.596.6666.

interesting to learn what's happening in other parts of the country. If other national firms are going through the same issues, we want to learn from them."

What's more, a firm like HDR can invest resources to formally and rigorously search for process gold. "We have a best practices committee that is concerned not only with existing best practices but also with fostering new ones," Lee says. "We offer HDR University

practices, educated your staff and done your best, the only way to know if you've satisfied a client is to ask. Many firms employ a post-occupancy evaluation to track what worked and what didn't. "For example, in space planning, you may want to know if the design meets proximity needs," Mikula says. "You ask about furniture, layout, lighting, aesthetics of interior finishes and the working relationship with the designer."



"I DON'T SEE BEST PRACTICES AS DEFINING WHAT DESIGN IS BEST, BUT DETERMINING THAT THE PROCESS YOU USED TO GET THERE IS BEST."

– Meredith Thatcher, CFM, CFMJ, President, Carroll Thatcher Planning Group, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

to all employees so that once a week staff can elect to have lunch with someone in our organization to train them on a specific subject."

And don't discount the opportunities in your community. "I expect from my own staff that they participate in continuing education, and that if they hear about something, they share," Thatcher says. "When they come back from conferences, they give presentations on what they've learned, and that in turn impacts the way we do business."

ENCORE?

In the end, after you've communicated closely with the customer throughout the project, employed consistent

Aside from gauging the customer's perception, the firm also should conduct its own project retrospective. It's not about laying blame; it's about learning and moving forward. Once you've compiled results, action can be as simple as a staff debriefing or as formal as updating a searchable lessons learned database. Some firms have gone so far as to implement an electronic forum for knowledge management, essentially enabling online chat to brainstorm solutions.

"A firm is responsible to mature its work force and help staff to understand best business practices and how businesses make decisions," Mikula says. "The more that firms can help foster that internal knowledge growth, the better." 📌

LEARN MORE

American Productivity & Quality Center

An internationally recognized benchmarking authority, APQC offers access to best practice research, metrics and measures.
www.apqc.org

Benchmarking Network Online

This online statistics repository assists organizations in benchmarking.
www.well.com/user/benchmark/Files/Online.html

best-practice.com

This forum of companies and organizations provides best practice information and services.
www.best-practice.com

Best Practice Basic Foundation

This site is designed to provide base-level coverage of best practices and basic information.
<http://isds.bus.lsu.edu/cvoc/learn/bpr/mprojects/bp/bpbasics.html>