

WHITE PAPER / THE IMPACT OF INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION ON WORK CULTURE

USING INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION TO IMPROVE WORK CULTURE

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Design and construction firms are refocusing on the importance of culture and its role in acquiring talent and improving the workplace. Understanding the benefits of intellectual stimulation can improve customer service, advance company structure, elevate employee well-being and expand community involvement.



The pandemic forced many architectural, engineering and construction firms to close their doors or question and rethink every aspect of their business. In a world that has drastically changed, the fight for talent will become even more intense as firms face the challenge of a reduced resource pool. By focusing on intellectual stimulation, firms can change their own culture, transforming the work environment into a space that attracts top talent, customers and clients. Intellectual stimulation encourages all in the workplace to think, create and problem-solve in new ways. Rethinking how to manage talent, customer service, company structure and community impact will be a firm's focus when intellectual stimulation is at the forefront.

COVID-19 has changed the way many of us work — forever. No longer is it acceptable to “muscle through” a head cold and be in the office to save paid time off. In fact, working from home while sick is expected. By now, most professional services firms are partially back in the office after a year of a work-from-wherever approach just as long as employees remain physically distanced and get the work done.

However, the lasting effects of a year of reduced interaction in an office are not completely known. In many firms, new hires from the class of 2020 have yet to meet face to face with their teams. This has not been just a minor disruption for in-person connection and professional development that firms rely upon to train new staff, but it has led many to question whether they should remain in the industry or leave altogether. In a year consumed with a fear of togetherness, intellectual stimulation has suffered. Many firms have experienced an erosion of culture, and customer service



is in jeopardy. It's an ongoing battle — the fight for talent to be intellectually stimulated and engaged to create a dynamic team of professionals focused on delivering great customer service.

Intellectual stimulation involves rational thinking, creativity and the freedom to fail. This concept focuses on individuals learning how to think and apply their ideas. The ideas from those with consistent intellectual stimulation will often be both innovative and challenge conventional wisdom. Intentional thinking is a discipline that can be taught. Through sessions of intense, intentional and focused thinking, the brain is stimulated to create. Creativity becomes richer when it can occasionally fail. And it becomes richer still when an entire firm is engaged in intentional thinking focused on creative solutions.

12 THINGS FOR DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION FIRMS TO RETHINK

The design and construction workers who have migrated back to the office are looking at their work life through fresh eyes. Some see workplaces filled with people, energy and ideas they have sorely missed. Those dealing with lingering trauma or altered expectations may be less sure. As leaders plot their firms' futures, they must be prepared to rethink everything to succeed, especially since traditional business has significantly evolved. Whether it is the long hours or competition for the same talent from other industries, there is a tremendous lack of qualified talent within the architecture, engineering

Intellectual stimulation is defined as having a leader who encourages innovation and creativity, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving. Intellectual stimulation involves arousing employees' thoughts and imagination, as well as stimulating their ability to identify and solve problems creatively.

and construction industry. So how can firms attract top talent? One way is to better compete by balancing work hours and workday flexibility. A recent survey of people under age 40 revealed that the primary motivator at work is neither fame nor fortune. The thing they seek most from their jobs is intellectual stimulation.

Intellectual stimulation does not spring up spontaneously. It takes intentional planning and commitment to shape a culture that encourages creativity and risk-taking. If aptly inspired, intellectual stimulation challenges everything and motivates design and construction professionals to rethink how they practice in every area of their business. To capitalize on a firm's strengths and address its weaknesses, leaders must conduct a clear-eyed analysis of every facet of their business practices.

To become the workplaces that top talent join, companies may need to rethink 12 key factors as they contemplate deploying intellectual stimulation throughout their organization.

TALENT ACQUISITION

By reimagining the workplace as a space for thinking and creating, the transformed office setting becomes more desirable for talent looking to join a firm. In addition, building career case studies — highlighting intellectual milestones and accomplishments of team members, not just promotions — will entice the potential hire who wants to learn and develop better solutions.

TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Intellectual stimulation can be both formal and informal. Opportunities for advanced degrees, daily topic seminars, project site visits and informative performance feedback sessions are all attractive options that will help develop talent. Informal tools include training that allows individuals to learn how to teach and mentor those around them or assigned to their projects. Whether formal or informal, intellectual stimulation builds camaraderie, develops staff and passes along knowledge and skills.

LEADERSHIP

You don't need a title to be a leader. In fact, anyone in a design and construction firm can inspire others to think differently — to learn more, do more and

become more. A true leader has a way of impacting and inspiring those around them. They regularly challenge team members and intellectually stimulate them to grow to become stronger and more effective. A leader should look to intellectually stimulate employees through one-on-one interactions, group settings and regular communication. A leader should look to collaborate when and wherever team members feel comfortable. Being accessible to engage in meaningful conversations will serve leaders well in both intellectually stimulating individuals and building a bond with team members.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leaders can advance their leadership skills through intellectual stimulation. This requires active engagement with peers in other firms to learn best practices through professional organizations and other networking events. Utilizing best practice materials and engaging in both formal and informal discussions go a long way in intellectually stimulating a firm's leaders. Seeking speaking opportunities at industry conferences will challenge a leader to develop, too.

CLIENT EXPERIENCE

Many firms are reactive or only engage clients in response to formal requests for proposals. However, the top firms meet clients where their needs are regardless of whether they are being commissioned to engage or not. By hosting seminars, leading discussions and publishing thought leadership material created to meet a client's needs, a firm can use its employees' skill sets and capabilities to demonstrate extensive industry knowledge and experience. In order to succeed, firms must tap into a client's curiosity and innate drive to be intellectually stimulated.

CLIENT ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

A signed contract does not mean that further investment in intellectual stimulation with a client is complete. By building trust and collaborating with a customer, one can provide a truly intellectually stimulating experience. These factors help boost expectations, and the process itself becomes the intellectual stimulation. As the project develops, so does the entire team — including clients — and by fully understanding what is needed and what is expected, the firm can produce successful results.



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Research shows customers are willing to spend more to deal with a company that offers a superb customer experience from start to finish. Smart firms recognize this and spend a great deal of time making every interaction along the client journey an exceptional one. With globalization offering a plethora of choices, showing what a company is capable of providing for a client is an opportunity to understand and offer advice on how a client should be organized across an entire supply chain. This challenges a firm's team members to take risks and create solutions beyond which they may be classically educated. This then becomes another opportunity to develop and intellectually stimulate everyone involved.

RESOURCES AND THE WORKDAY

Traditional firms have set working hours and days of the week. In a world that has us facing a new normal, professionals are working from a wide variety of locations (office, home, coffee shop, etc.) at different times of day. Companies should see that no matter when and from where employees work, they have the resources they need to be their most productive. Having the most up-to-date

technology and tools will enable employees to produce high-quality results that meet both internal and external client needs. Flexibility is crucial and can open up new avenues for intellectual stimulation, while having access to the proper resources is the key to keeping workers motivated and engaged.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

A healthy organizational culture is the result of its people. A culture where any team member feels free to share thoughts and take a risk is attractive for top talent. This means that leaders should be open to feedback and be able to accept other ideas. Celebrating all levels of perspective only makes a team's culture stronger. In a healthy workplace, employees understand their responsibilities to their profession and the world around them. That means conducting business in ways that do not harm the planet or the natural resources we all depend on. Today's leaders must also take a long-term view so the decisions they make today will sustain their firms for the future.

OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE

Most firms have a set number of leaders who own the firm, or they are publicly traded. However, there is a movement to open the ownership to all employees through ownership structures like employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs). This concept was born out of the question of why can't all employees be owners? Research from Rutgers University found that companies with ESOPs have outperformed non-ESOP companies during the pandemic. They also have fared better than other firms in job retention, benefits and workplace safety and are more likely to maintain steady employment levels in boom-and-bust cycles. The future also looks bright, with ESOP companies being six times more likely to expect a return to normal than ones that are not employee-owned.

The specter of employee ownership can be a powerful tool for recruiting and retaining top talent. Employee ownership encourages employee engagement, being that employee-owners share the glory — and the financial rewards — when a company succeeds. Visit esop.org for more information: about this incentive.



Figure 1: Snapshot of ESOP Success. Source: employeeownershipfoundation.org.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Mindful organizations are committed to becoming a resource for improving the entire surrounding community. Science, technology, engineering and math programs that are led by mentors from within the firm will intellectually stimulate both the youth and the firm to grow and develop. Solving the problem of a lack of talent begins in schools. Companies focused on encouraging more individuals to investigate STEM careers helps to solve this problem.

HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Clients retain thoughtful and open-minded architectural, engineering and construction design firms to create solutions to meet their needs. A creative solution deployed correctly can create tremendous success for a design firm as well as its client. A firm should challenge its team members to create a pricing model that will most effectively maximize the firm's success potential while still creating a solution that will meet a client's expectations. Instead of reviewing a project's scope of work, generating tasks and assigning hours to assist in pricing a project, a team may choose to brainstorm and establish a realistic budget. This exercise can intellectually stimulate a whole team and unify all members toward delivering effective solutions to achieve comprehensive success.

COVID-19 dramatically changed how firms operate. Firms may go back to offices to work, but it is doubtful companies will go back to doing work exactly like before. Attracting, developing and retaining engaged talent is the focus of successful firms. Intellectual stimulation encourages new ways of thinking, creating and risk-taking and is required for firms to thrive today. It

creates an active, engaged and healthy team that is growing together and focused on client solutions. Intellectual stimulation challenges a firm to think differently. This rethinking process can make firms stronger, more resilient and better equipped to sustain through the next challenge.

BIOGRAPHY

JEFFREY W. GANTHNER, AIA, NCARB, is vice president and general manager for the Mid-Atlantic Region at Burns & McDonnell. As a licensed architect, he oversees architectural, engineering and construction projects and has led teams that have created federal buildings, museums, K-12 schools, higher education institutions, and healthcare, municipal and military facilities. With a background in design and construction, he has secured top architectural and engineering talent for the firm. Jeffrey's responsibilities involve managing staff development, directing certification and licensing efforts and helping young professionals navigate their careers.

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