

Small Firm Roundtable Questionnaire –
Responses from Lanny McIntosh, AIA

1. Seventy-nine percent of member-owned firms are small firms (under 10 employees). Large firms tend to have integral leadership training. What new steps will you take to increase access to leadership development training for members working in small firms?

One challenge is firm's willingness to continuously develop themselves and their employees in leadership and business. Small business owners are so immersed in their work that this is a lower priority. We've all heard of the need to work ON our business.

A small percentage of firms pay for AIA membership for their employees. Same for taking time off to participate in and lead committees; attend conferences and continuing education and volunteer in their community.

As long as our professional association places leadership and business skills development at the bottom tier of importance (as evidenced by our messaging), our small business owners will act accordingly. We, as the AIA, should REQUIRE education in these areas and illustrate their importance through our messaging, our awards programs and our actions. I will work to change the focus of AIA to be more supportive of small business.

Specifically, within the AIA I would like to develop rigorous programming on leadership, soft (interpersonal) skills, marketing & business development, project management and business management (finance); they should be designated HSW and they should be available locally. After all, a healthy business is better able to focus on the health, safety and welfare of the public.

Small business owners and the AIA will benefit from peer group roundtables to share real-time business issues, challenges and problems. We should develop a program that allows firm owners to do this in a non-competitive, supportive and confidential setting.

2. What would you say to a small firm practitioner who does not see the value of membership, would you do anything differently to increase or promote the value AIA provides?

It's a "catch-22". Surveys have shown the more someone is involved in AIA, the more value she or he gets from that involvement. I have found that to be true myself. Perhaps we should ask those who are not members and those members who are not involved why. Ask them to give us ideas. If we can engage them in a conversation maybe we can show them things about the AIA they may not know. Perhaps we can involve them in solving a problem they identify. Show that we care about their point of view.

Perhaps we can set up a pilot program at the local level to identify potential and minimally engaged members whereby we invite them, free-of charge, to an event, and assign to them a member peer who's job it is to find out what their interests and skills are and invite them to participate on a committee or introduce them to others with the same interests and skills, such as a Knowledge Community. Follow their passion. From my experience, I got really involved when someone invited me to participate on a committee.

Another thing to consider is leveraging our new technology platform to utilize analytics to identify and target potential members based on their interests and preferences.

3. What do you believe are the prime issues facing small firms?

Access to local market-level intelligence is one, and training on how to find and use that information to make good decisions about their business.

Access to training and skills development on how to run a business, how to access capital, how to research and develop a business and marketing plan.

We talk a lot about relevance and prosperity. I believe them to be linked. A prosperous business is almost certainly relevant. A healthy dose of innovation and entrepreneurial thinking would do our profession some good. A small business is faced with the problem of balancing finding new work and researching new markets and services, while they are also doing the work. Most of us struggle with that. Most of us struggle with how to negotiate the best contract. Most of us struggle with articulating our value. We need help with these things.

Lastly, finding and keeping great people. We all want to do good, but many small firms don't provide comprehensive benefits and don't see the value in doing so. But in fact, all medium and large businesses start out as small businesses and the ones that do grow, generally find a way to attract, develop and retain talent as a core element of their strategy. The one thing the AIA can do is help us (I am a small business owner) by shining a light on great business models, great business practices and providing best of class business skills development.

4. How do you think the AIA public awareness campaign should acknowledge the work of small firms across a broad range of project types?

The AIA, by and large, celebrates individual achievement, such as an individual architect or an individual building. Since the average firm has 5 people or less, there is a good chance small firms' work will get some exposure. Unfortunately on the awards front, small firms must invest significant money in high-end photography to compete with the larger firms.

The issue that I see is that we do a great job of talking amongst ourselves, celebrating great design of buildings. We can do a much better job of leveraging our investment by making the general public (our clients and the parents of our future colleagues) aware of how great this work is and more importantly why it is great and why it makes a difference to them.

We don't talk about or celebrate innovation or entrepreneurial practices or business models, but it is really important that we do. The more we celebrate these things, the bigger impact we have on our members' understanding of the unrealized potential we have. The more we share this with our clients and the public, the better they will understand the value we bring. This will expand our reach.

As the question suggests, the majority of our members work in small firms. Specifically seeking out and highlighting the work, accomplishment and cultures of small firms in our publications, awards and external communications would go a long way toward leveling the playing field and making the investment pay off.