



THE CHALLENGE OF HIRING PROJECT MANAGERS

A combination of technical and people skills is required for success.

By Sheryl S. Jackson

Project manager is one of the most critical and difficult positions to fill in a design/build firm. But Timothy Nguyen, Senior Vice President, ESI Group USA, believes there is a misconception that a project manager is focused only on tasks and technical activities needed to complete the project.

“When I interview applicants for project manager openings, they tell me how organized they are, how big the projects they previously managed were and how familiar they are with the technical aspects of the job,” Nguyen says. “Technical knowledge and experience are important, but I’m not just hiring a project manager, I am looking for a ‘people manager’

– someone who can communicate effectively with clients, subcontractors, vendors and other members of our team to keep the project on track.”

Project management is handled slightly differently from company to company, which makes it important to clearly outline the traits and experience applicants are

expected to have. As design/build has grown in popularity, the role of project manager has expanded well beyond that of construction manager – making it more difficult to find top-notch talent.

For example, at ESI Group, a program manager, which is a senior level position, oversees the initial assessment of the client’s needs, develops the scope of the project and prepares the proposal for the client. Once the client accepts the proposal, a design project manager has day-to-day oversight of the design process that includes architects, mechanical and structural engineers and other team members.

“An important part of the design project manager’s responsibility is to ensure that there is no ‘scope creep’ during the design process that will cause the costs to increase,” says

Nguyen. If there are necessary design elements that were not anticipated in the proposal, the project manager communicates with the client to make sure there are no surprises.

Following the completion of the design, the construction project manager at ESI takes over to put out bids, hire subcontractors, schedule work and oversee the project budget. “While technical knowledge is important, project managers must be able to clearly communicate with all people involved in the construction and with the client,” says Nguyen.

At Coldbox Builders, the project manager is the “hub of the wheel,” says Paul D’Agostino, Director of Design Build for the company. “The role requires a high level of technical skill but the most important trait is the ability to understand the strengths of each team member to make sure the right responsibilities are assigned to the right person,” he says. “Everything for the project flows through the project manager who manages processes and actively communicates with clients and team members.”

Project managers at ARCO Design/Build begin working with the client on day one of the concept, says Jake Stefan, President of the firm. “They conduct the site assessment and create the conceptual design that includes everything from bay sizes and door layouts to electrical, HVAC and refrigeration systems to size of steel needed,” he says. “Our project managers also do all of their own estimating, which is helpful as the project progresses because they know exactly what was involved in the creation of the project budget.”

Because not everyone has the ability to work effectively as a design/build project manager, Coldbox Builders uses a behavioral and cognitive assessment tool to help identify the model candidate for the job. “This helps us identify candidates who are a natural fit for the role, which leads to successful hires,” D’Agostino says.

Attracting Talent

Developing project managers in-house is a long play for Coldbox Builders. There are project coordinators or junior project managers at the company who demonstrated early in their career that they possessed the right traits for the role. “Not everyone is cut out to be a project manager, but when we see

someone at our company with potential, we have a pathway to develop them for the role,” says D’Agostino.

A M King focuses on promoting from within and developing young talent into team leaders, says Dan Crist, Vice President of Operations. “We’ve found that growing our talent in-house produces better results than

hiring from outside the company,” he explains. “We focus on a strong internship program and the majority of those interns join A M King after graduation.”

An aggressive training and career path process for employees throughout the company, including project managers, is one way that A M King focuses on “training our

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replacements,” says Crist. “We encourage our managers to develop their subordinates and ensure they have the tools to become future leaders of our company.”

“Our company is not a title-driven organization so we don’t have many different levels such as project manager, project coordinator or assistant project manager,” Stefan notes. “Someone who has been a co-op student or intern with us can be hired as a project manager immediately after graduation, which is the same job title for someone we hire with five years of experience at another company.”

“When there is an immediate need due to rapid growth, we do hire from outside,” D’Agostino explains. Internal referrals from current employees, job boards and recruiters within their network are the most common sources of applicants, he adds.

Traits for Success

Because project managers at his company handle such a breadth of tasks and responsibilities, Stefan looks for, “very sharp people who can process lots of information.” A high level of motivation, sense of responsibility and results-oriented approach to work are also important, he says. “We want people who want the ball, have the drive and energy to complete the project and are willing to take the initiative to find solutions to problems.”

“Communication skills are paramount because the project manager must be able to effectively communicate with an owner of a multinational group as well as the foreman of a concrete crew because they both have very specific and different needs on a project,” says D’Agostino. Leadership and sound decision-making skills are critical because the project manager must keep a project moving forward even if there is missing information or an issue that causes one part of the project to slow, he adds.

“One of the most important traits is the ability to work with others because our company is very much a team environment,” Nguyen notes. This also means that project managers must be able to understand that they don’t have to be perfect and an expert in all areas, he says. “We don’t want people – even project managers with many years of experience – to think that they can’t ask for advice or input from other people on the team.”

Retaining Project Managers

Making sure the project managers are engaged and planning to stay at the company



is just as important as hiring a good project manager. Company culture plays an important part in retention and providing an environment that recognizes talent, offers growth opportunities and supports the project manager is important.

“A M King refrains from micromanaging our employees,” says Crist. “Our project managers are given the opportunity to forge their own paths, develop client relationships and build their own teams,” he says. Unlimited growth opportunities and a focus on work-life balance as part of the company culture also lead to retention, he adds.

“I’ve always been a self-learner – seeking out people in the field or at the drafting table to teach me something I didn’t know when I first started in this field,” Nguyen explains. “Today, younger employees want a more formal training program, so as the company grew, the senior level employees presented lunch and learn forums, and we are developing more training for younger employees.”

An informal mentorship program where supervisors mentor their team members to provide guidance or to recommend others in the company who can answer questions because they handled similar projects in the past is effective, points out Nguyen. “We encourage everyone, regardless of experience level, to ask questions and to share information.”

ARCO Design/Build has a two-year, formalized training program that includes everyone in the company – from estimators to technical experts to project managers. “ARCO University begins the first day of employment,” says Stefan.

The new employee is assigned an ARCO advisor who serves as a guide to company resources as well as the best contacts for specific questions or advice. A series of videos provide a quick – five to 10 minutes – discussion of a specific subject or demonstration of a specific activity. “We will also give newer project managers a chance to partner with senior project managers on a large project to get on-the-job training as they learn new skills,” he adds.

When asked for advice for design/build firms that are facing challenges when hiring project managers, Crist recommends, “patience.” He adds, “Building a group of strong, experienced project managers takes time. You must first focus on finding talented, hardworking employees that are willing to learn and understand your company’s culture and that foundation will lead to the development of top-notch project managers.”

SHERYL S. JACKSON is a freelance writer based in Alpharetta, Georgia, who specializes in industry issues and trends.

EMAIL: sheryljackson@bellsouth.net