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## Career Advice Q&A for Aspiring Leaders

By Howard J. Wolff, FSMPS

As a member of SMPS for nearly four decades, in addition to my primary role of helping firms build their businesses, I am often sought out for career counseling. Having helped architects, engineers, and designers define, articulate, and market their expertise, I was motivated by the theme of this issue to offer specific career advice for aspiring leaders in the A/E/C industries.

### How can marketers get more recognition within their firms?

First, just do your job well. If you produce results, recognition will follow. Focus on tasks that make the firm money or save the firm money. Quantify the ways in which you add value. In communicating the return on the company's investment in marketing, think in terms of educating and enlightening others rather than promoting yourself.

### What do you believe are the most important traits and abilities necessary for success in marketing professional services?

MEDS:

1. **Market knowledge** (which increases your credibility and influence)
2. **Empathy** (a sincere interest in helping others succeed)
3. **Drive** (ego strength and ambition)
4. **Superior skills** (accompanied by a desire for continuous improvement)

### Should I have a career plan or just go with the flow?

Create a two- to three-year career plan, but be open to opportunities that appear along the way. Those can often be within your firm, but sometimes you have to move out to move up. As much as they may be disappointed to lose you, employers can

no longer expect you to stay with one firm for more than a few years. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, students in school today will have 10–14 jobs by the time they are 38 years old.

### How can I increase my responsibilities with my current firm?

Earn people's trust and confidence. The best way to do that is to keep your word and promises. Be a person of integrity, and someone others can count on consistently.

Know what you're talking about. Do your homework. Conduct research. Come prepared. Look outside your industry for innovative ideas. Tell people something they don't already know that will leave them thinking, "That was valuable."

Seek opportunities to be billable. Offer to help, even if it's not your job. Listen. Learn. Teach.



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### **How assertive should I be? How much should I speak up if I don't like my current situation?**

Know what you want and fight for it. Don't worry about the other things. You can't change the firm singlehandedly, so make the best out of what you've got.

If you don't like your situation, you're not going to change other people. Your only two choices are to change your attitude about your situation, or change your environment (i.e., leave).

### **What works best in terms of relationships at work?**

Make friends with everyone. Help others. And don't treat the administrative staff with any less respect than you do the people above you.

Admit when you're wrong. Apologize. Don't blame or criticize others and don't

make excuses. Look for the learning in every situation.

Treat business relationships as you do personal relationships. There is no need to be a different person at work than you are at home.

Don't be a source of—or conduit for—gossip. Don't hang out with negative people who will sap your energy and enthusiasm. If you're not an effervescent cheerleader by nature, at least project a positive persona.

### **How do I ask for help?**

Use these nine words: "I have a problem, and I need your help."

Focus on your strengths rather than your weaknesses, and find someone to whom you can delegate stuff that you don't like or are not good at. (Example: Use an underutilized receptionist or hire a student

intern. These options likely would not cost the firm a great deal of money, so it's virtually impossible to get turned down.)

### **Where should I put my time and energy for the best results?**

In designing your non-work time in the office, ask yourself, "How is what I'm doing going to make a difference for the firm?" In designing your time out of the office, ask yourself, "How is what I'm doing going to enrich my life?"

### **Any other advice?**

Yes. It's very important to look both ways before crossing the street. ■