Multiple personalities: how firms with multiple offices handle identity, culture, and ownership

Practice Matters

By Kira L. Gould

Advances in technology have made it easy for people in different locations to share resources and work together. Nevertheless, there are still management hurdles for firms with more than one office.

Today, firms take a variety of approaches to coordinating the activities in their different offices. Many try to cultivate a "one-firm" image. The idea is that a client is hiring the same firm—people, expertise, and resources—no matter which office they work with. Architecture giant Gensler has honed this approach (sometimes called the Gensler model) and set the standard for brand building in the industry. But despite the advantages of having a recognizable name, some firms feel that the approach is too monolithic. They avoid a national or international profile that could make it difficult to win important local and regional work.

Some firms develop a network: Each office creates its own profile within the framework of a firm vision. An office in one city may grow faster, diversify, specialize more dramatically, or cultivate a stronger design orientation than those located elsewhere. Many firm managers see this kind of specialization as a way for the organization to capitalize on the strengths of different partners. They also note that the network approach allows offices to take advantage of local market conditions. There are risks, however, the most obvious being a disjointed identity. For example, when a firm has offices of dramatically different sizes, their client bases may be different. A larger office may have several national clients, causing the firm as a whole to project a national-market image. Local or regional clients of a smaller office in the same firm might be concerned that the firm's focus on national clients could take precedence over their needs.

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Ownership structure

Actual ownership at the local level is not typically a priority for "one-firm firms"; instead, they tend to value psychological investment and leadership. Interior Architecture partners David Mourning and Roger Vorhees, who oversee 320 people in 14 offices, explain: At IA, owners have a stake in the overall company, not solely in the office in which they work. "We encourage firm ownership and offer office-performance-based incentives, but this is not a franchise," Mourning says. "We would not be as effective with local ownership."

For firms whose offices operate more independently, local ownership is more common. Though they may depend on firmwide resources, the various offices may specialize in different areas and even have different names. With this network approach, local ownership is often emphasized as a way of solidifying the firm's commitment to people and institutions in its particular community.

The growth of a firm can be idiosyncratic. Over time, Bohlin Cywinski Jackson developed three offices in Pennsylvania and one in Seattle (opened to work on the Bill Gates compound in a joint venture with local architect Jim Cutler), with a total of 100 people. Managing partner Frank Grauman says the firm never intended to stay in Wilkes-Barre, but that office has turned out to be the headquarters from which regional and national work is marketed. And the Seattle office could have closed after the Gates project, but timely new work sealed its strong future.

Wilson Pollock, president of ADD, oversees offices in Cambridge, Mass.; San Francisco; and Miami. Cambridge came first, and the other offices were started by other firm leaders who wanted to move. ADD maintains a firm apartment in each city and routinely shares training teams, human resources managers, and marketing people on a firmwide basis.

Another successful network-based collaboration can be found at Leo A. Daly, an 85-year-old A/E firm with 800 people in 15 offices. Most of these were started by individuals from other Daly offices who typically modeled new locations on the ones they had left. Charles Dalluge, managing principal of the Washington office, says both the leadership of the individual offices and the particularities of the markets maintain the firm's diversity. Taylor Armstrong, managing principal of the Dallas office, agrees: "Our office got into hospitality because the market was there and we had someone who was good at it. It's great to have the flexibility that comes from allowing each office to create its own profile."

A firm's philosophy as the glue

Often, it is the ideas behind the architecture that keep a firm unified. Ed Rubin, a partner with Esherick Holmes Dodge Davis, which runs a 70-person office in San Francisco and a 14-person office in Chicago, says that his firm's philosophy of architecture sets EHDD apart and keeps its West Coast and Midwestern offices in sync. "We have an intellectual approach that is the backbone of the firm," he says, "and Marc L'Italien, who's running the Chicago office, is no less committed to that approach than those of us in California." The firm was founded on the belief that each project must be approached on an entirely individual basis and must draw significant cues from the region. "Thinking regionally has always been important to us," says Rubin, "and we think it's even more so in the context of increasing globalism. We see this as an honest, intellectual approach geared to the needs of the client, and a commitment to that approach is at the heart of our firm's identity."

For A/E firms, the philosophy of how architects and engineers work together can foster unity. Steven Einhorn, founding partner of Einhorn Yaffee Prescott, which has 550 people in seven offices, says, "We want to make traditional buildings more responsive to technology and technology buildings more human." He believes that EYP is set apart not only by this vision but also by the fact that it is shared by the entire firm. ■