



IN SEARCH OF

RECRUITING TALENT IS NO LONGER AS SIMPLE AS POSTING A HELP WANTED AD.

BY WENDY GILMARTIN

Good managers will have a sense of needs before the staffing crunch happens, but *how* a landscape design practice hires can be as crucial as *who*. Where to post advertisements, how to narrow the field and interview, and post-hire mentoring are only a few of many considerations. Principals at four landscape design practices explore the means and methods of recruiting new staff in their respective firms and onboarding them once they've been hired. *Interviews have been edited and condensed.*

HBB LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

SEATTLE

JULIET VONG, ASLA, PRESIDENT

Do you post ads for positions, and where do you do that? Before that even happens, is there an internal

search or reaching out via word of mouth to other colleagues in the field?

When we've made a decision to bring on new staff, we don't do it on a project-by-project basis; we wait until we feel like there's enough capacity overall for us to support a new position. But once we make the decision to bring on new staff, we will talk about it internally in a staff meeting, so everybody knows what we're intending to do. That allows for us to get the word of mouth out to everybody who does currently work here. At the same time, we will then put out a notice. We typically advertise statewide, not so much nationally, and we use the Washington State ASLA chapter website. That's probably where we get most of our résumés and interest. We also post with the state unemployment office. We do that because it's a requirement of a number of our public contracts, but it also helps us

target some of the different types of populations that might not otherwise be looking on an ASLA website, like veterans, for example, and this gives a chance for anybody who might not be as active in the ASLA community to see a notice or a posting.

How is hiring different at entry, mid, and upper levels?

I think it's definitely more of a challenge to bring in an upper-level person, especially into a smaller office. So our first step is generally to look within. The vast majority of our upper-level positions are promotions from internally in the firm. It really comes down to a mentorship culture in the office, and how we hire the lower and mid-level staff. Most of the time when we're hiring, we're not really saying, "Oh, we need support in graphics," or "we need support in this or that."

ABOVE
Lyna Nget, Associate ASLA, and Gina Kim, Student ASLA, at HBB in Seattle.

“WE POST AT THE STATE UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE— IT HELPS US TARGET DIFFERENT POPULATIONS.”

—JULIET VONG, ASLA
HBB LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

If we're truly at the point where we're growing so fast, or we're just struggling in the short term in regard to managing larger projects or complex projects, that's when we've had better success with bringing upper-level people in on a short-term basis. Sometimes the fit is great and they are interested and stick around for a while, but sometimes that fit works in the short term and it just doesn't quite work as well in the long term.

What's your interview process like?

We do one round of interviews, and the only time we do a second round is if we're down to one or two people and we can't make a decision, or if for whatever reason, as the president, I haven't actually been part of the interviews. I want to meet the person before we hire them. Sometimes we'll do a second round of interviews just so I can meet the two people who are at the top of the list. But I've heard of people doing three and four rounds of interviews, which seems kind of crazy.

CIVITAS, INC.

DENVER

CRAIG VICKERS, ASLA, PRINCIPAL

Is there a system for recruitment at Civitas?

We work within our own network and the network of universities and university chairs and that sort of thing. We try that first. You know,

a lot of people just find their way here. We've always valued the people who take the time to research us; we place a value on that, and it's sort of unspoken. And then we definitely rely heavily on our network from the various programs that are ready to put talent out onto the street. And of course, here locally, we do have a lot of Colorado State students and University of Colorado Denver students on staff because of the proximity of those academic programs.

Are principals teaching at any of the universities?

Mark Johnson, FASLA, the founding principal of Civitas, often teaches at Harvard, and occasionally he'll do guest-type spots at UC Denver and other places for lectures. Both Scott [Jordan, ASLA] and I will do lectures, portfolio reviews, and that sort of thing at the university.

What is the typical timeline for the hiring process?

We vet résumés first. We will go through those individually and then we rank them, based on portfolio, experience, and that sort of thing. The hiring committee gets together as a group and we talk about all our top choices and narrow the list. We conduct a few phone interviews and then narrow again, and we'll fly them in. If they're close by or if they're here, we sort of work it out with their schedule,



BELOW
The Civitas office
in Denver.

and at that point we have a first face-to-face interview with the principals. Often Mark Johnson is flying about the country, so he is either available for that or not, and if he's not, sometimes that could lead to yet another interview with Mark as a final filter. I've seen it take as long as two months. It can be a month. I can tell you, though, we've tried never to be in a hurry.

Post-hire, what is the process of integrating new staff into the office?

We bring someone into the office, and we're now trying to immediately train them on how we think as a group, how we approach design more explicitly and less organically.

How does that work?

We bring new hires immediately into design discussions, and we hit the ground running. It's a constant stream of design dialogue—trying to diagnose the problem, coming up

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—CATHY GARRETT, ASLA
PGADESIGN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

with concepts or ideas about it, sifting and synthesizing those and then refining—all of it involves all of us.

PGADESIGN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

CATHY GARRETT, ASLA, PRESIDENT

How do you let folks know you are hiring at PGA?

We do advertise and have advertised both on Craigslist and through ASLA, but I would say that that’s not necessarily our primary form of connection. If we’re hiring a landscape architect, we might first draw on who we know and how we’re connected.

And you know, we’ve gotten wind of who might be a good fit in the long run, so we cultivate a relationship with them, and sometimes they end up working here and sometimes they don’t, but they’re still good friends and colleagues. And that’s true with junior people who may still be at university as well as people who may have worked somewhere else or have maybe done an internship here and then they’re working somewhere else, and so we stay in touch. It’s hard to put a timeline on that process, but in terms of running an ad, if we have a very specific task, we’ll run an ad and interview people and then make a decision. That’s a

very sort of clipped process, but I would say that that’s not all of the time, that’s not even a major part of the time, unless it’s something like admin or bookkeeping.

Have you ever used a recruiter or a recruiting service?

Yes, we have. We used one, one time. When we’ve got something very specific in mind, I think that you can recruit at the high levels, and that’s a good place to apply that.

How does social media help with hiring?

We use Facebook, Twitter, and Land&Lounge. Probably like a number of firms, we use it to some extent, but not an enormous amount. LinkedIn is actually something we use quite a lot. We connected with our bookkeeper through LinkedIn.

What’s the post-hire process like?

Usually one of us gives them a full tour of all of our systems that morning and hands them the office manual, but by and large, they’re sort of off and running. There’s a staff meeting every Monday morning, so that’s a good opportunity to see what jobs are in the office, what’s happening, who’s working with whom. They will be assigned to work with someone on a particular project, or perhaps two to start with, and that’s sort of the introduction. We check in with



RIGHT
The PGADesign Landscape Architects office in Oakland, California.

“I STARTED A TRADITION CALLED THE GAUNTLET—IT SOUNDS MORE INTIMIDATING THAN IT IS.”

—DENNIS RUBBA, FASLA
STUDIOINSITE

them on an informal but fairly regular basis, the principals particularly. And usually the principal who gave them the tour checks in and asks, “Is there anything you need to have a recap of?” If something goes off the rails and there’s really a problem, then we speak with them privately and say, “You know, maybe this isn’t the best fit.” I can only think of one occasion where it occurred, and I think somebody had a very different expectation in a way of working and we agreed to part company, but that is by far the minority. In more than 20 years, it has happened once.



STUDIOINSITE
DENVER AND OMAHA, NEBRASKA
DENNIS RUBBA, FASLA, FOUNDER

How have you changed or updated the hiring process over the years?

I have actually started a tradition in the office, and it goes back to my very first employee. I call it the gauntlet, and it sounds more intimidating than it is. But, when there’s someone

that I’m really excited about and my partners agree, I will have a conversation about expectations: What are your expectations for salary or for benefits and project type? And once we are both in the general ballpark, and I think this person would be a wonderful fit and they would fit a role and salary structure, then I ask the office staff to organize an event outside the office. We invite the person that I’m really interested in hiring, and they have just an evening of conversation—neither myself nor my partners attend. So, they go out and have a conversation, and often they don’t even talk about their work; they just talk about who they are and their culture. And the next day, I call the person up and I say, “Hey, are you still interested?” And hopefully they’re still yes, and then I go to the rest of the insiders and I ask them what they thought. And if they all give me a thumbs up, then I’ll go ahead and make a formal offer, because I feel when we hire someone, we’re bringing them in as part of the family and not as a surprise, and if we all agree this is the right person that we want to hire, we are sort of all accountable to each other, not just to me.

It sounds like a good process that’s worked for you.

It has. And you know, what’s really interesting is that by having that,

people bond in these meetings, especially younger staff we’re hiring at entry level. Often they will help that person find an apartment, or they can stay with them and help them get set up, so when they walk into the office, they already know they’re welcomed. And when I send out an e-mail and say, hey, you know, Ben has accepted our offer, I include Ben on that e-mail, and then often people will just respond directly to Ben, congratulate him, ask if there is anything they can do to help so he feels welcome. It’s a family, and it’s part of the culture.

What’s different about higher-level hiring?

When I hire someone senior, I’m looking for someone who has an entrepreneurial spirit and wants to be a leader, who has relationships and is willing to take the firm and shape it. I’ve been doing this for years, and I tell you, one of the most surprising things I’ve encountered is how hard it is to find professionals who have an entrepreneurial spirit. They’re so risk averse that they wouldn’t step across the line and have their name on it. For the firm to grow, it needs leaders, and it needs leaders who are willing to lead and take risks. ●

WENDY GILMARTIN IS AN ARCHITECT AND JOURNALIST IN LOS ANGELES.

ABOVE
The founder of studioINSITE, Dennis Rubba, FASLA, (center) consults with staff.