

How A/E/C Firms Get Creative

BY SUSAN W. KEMP

There's no way around it: You have to set yourself apart. Finding new and creative ideas for projects and proposals is the only way to thrive in a world of increasing competition and commoditization.

However, the business world doesn't give you time to reinvent the creative process for every effort. That's why some companies are systematically creative. They have a "go-to" creative process. How does it work?

Collaboration Leads to Breakthroughs

One approach to greater creativity is collaboration, and that often means brainstorming sessions. Yet, the size and length of a successful brainstorming session can be different, depending on the company and its culture.

Mega-Storming. Flatiron Constructors, Inc., has a very specific brainstorming process that helps them win time and time again. During sessions that may last as long as two days, designers and constructors might come up with a hundred ideas to pursue.

"Half of those ideas die an undignified death," says Paul Mayo, Seattle area manager. The remaining ideas are assigned to subgroups to evaluate, then the subgroups come back together for further discussion. Engineers and builders continue to work on the ideas for two to four weeks. Halfway through the procurement process, a "tiger team" or "black-hat review" brings into the process executives who haven't yet been involved.

Collaborative Collisions. ZGF Architects, LLP, also uses collaboration and brainstorming to boost creative output. While most strategic initiatives are hatched in a structured, group setting, principal Leslie Morison values what she calls "creative collisions." Enhanced by the firm's open-office setting, some of the best ideas are generated during chance encounters with colleagues.

Explains Morison, "Someone will walk by, and I'll say 'Hey, I have something I want to test out on you. Can I follow you to your meeting? This will only take two minutes.' I like to catch them when they are NOT thinking about something. Sometimes the best ideas are borne out of impulse."

She also says it's important to get many voices in the office involved. Because it's hard to find cross-generational social time outside of the office, ZGF makes a deliberate effort to hold social gatherings during standard work hours. During monthly Pecha Kuchas, staff members present 20 slides—at a rate of 20 seconds per slide—on something that inspires them. "It has been a terrific way to get to know one another and understand how our personal lives can blend into the professional and stimulate creativity."

The A-Ha Moment. At Magnusson Klemencic Associates (MKA), a structural and civil engineering firm, staff participates in a series of internal brainstorming sessions to develop project ideas and concepts. These Concept Review Committee meetings, which are open to all but specifically include a hand-picked group of senior staff members, typically last a couple of hours. As part of this process, they bring in people who haven't yet been directly involved in the project.

Marketing manager Julie Jackson says an "a-ha moment" often comes out of these sessions, sometimes after many conversations. And the a-ha moment can result from combining two seemingly opposing requirements. For example, during the design of a new shopping center, half of the tenant clients wanted an open-air plan while the other half wanted protected space. MKA's creative answer was a retractable roof.

Online Collaboration. Innovations in technology open new opportunities to collaborate. MKA uses Synthesis, a social intranet for architects and engineers developed by Knowledge Architecture, to help tie together its software, images, and information and to

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support internal blogs. Jackson notes using this online knowledge community helps them to share more information and ideas internally than they previously had been able to share in person.

What’s the Question?

David Winter, vice president at Hart Crowser, a geotechnical and environmental engineering firm, explains why collaboration and brainstorming are so important. “No matter how competent each of us may be, we don’t individually have all the answers or experience.” He stresses that, in collaboration, the questions you ask can lead to the most important issues. After a recent strategy and brainstorming meeting for a particularly prestigious job, his team won the work, not by emphasizing the most obvious problem but instead the hardest to solve.

Your Personal Creative Contribution

While collaboration is important, each person faces their own individual creativity challenges, and not all problems can or should be solved by teams of people. What are some strategies for individuals?

For many people, stepping away from a challenge is the first step to opening yourself to a creative solution. According to Morison, “In this 24/7 world, there’s no place where we aren’t bombarded with information. Think time and down time are essential to keeping creative.”

Jackson agrees turning your brain off allows the answer to present itself. This is how she was inspired to use a flipbook to illustrate the complexity of the Seattle Public Library’s Central Library structural support (Google the building to see why it is so unusual).

Winter has learned that his most effective problem-solving time is between 5 and 7 am. Tapping into that, he can arrive more quickly at a solution to a problem that might take longer to resolve later in the day. Winter also looks at how other industries innovate to find creative ideas that can be adapted to the A/E/C industry.

What Will You Do Differently?

Although it’s helpful to know what works for you and your company, creativity is a moving target. Maybe your “systematic creativity” is working for you, but could you come up with more or better ideas by trying other approaches? What would change if you shortened or lengthened your collaboration/brainstorming sessions? What if you made them more formal or less formal? What if you asked different questions? Can you combine seemingly opposing concepts to come up with a great new idea?

You’ll only know if you try. [m](#)

About the Author



Susan W. Kemp is the marketing manager at Hart Crowser (www.hartcrowser.com) in Seattle. Contact her with your thoughts about marketing and creativity at 206.826.4632 or susan.kemp@hartcrowser.com. This is her first contribution to *Marketer*.

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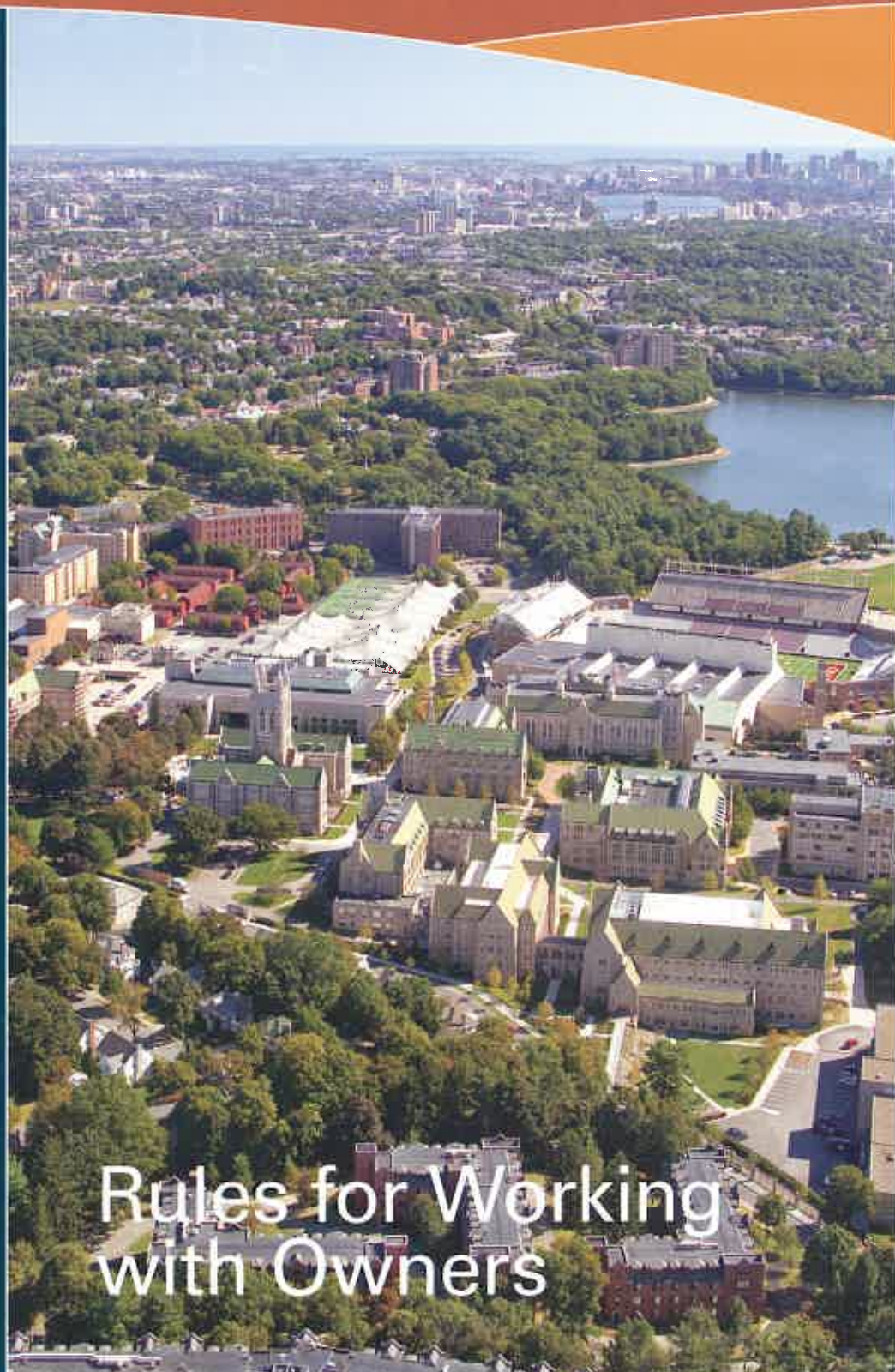
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