



## Architecture firms' leadership transitions benefiting from 'the right people'

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Posted: January 14, 2014

From Sid Scott's perspective, the architecture firm he co-founded in 1998 has reverted to a sort of startup.

Nearly a year has passed since Scott | Edwards Architecture co-founder Kelly Edwards stepped down from his management role and moved closer to retirement. Now Scott, six principals and six associates manage the Portland-based firm.

"I think of it as a new firm, new and improved; that's how it feels," Scott said. "I think a lot of energy has been added to the firm, so it's been really good."

Scott | Edwards Architecture isn't the only Portland design firm engaged in a leadership transition. Amid improving economic conditions, retirement plans put on hold during the recession are re-emerging.

"I think there are quite a few people (in their late 50s, early 60s saying, 'What's next?'" said Andrea Bainbridge, who founded Portland-based interior design firm Bainbridge in 1983. "We've had the same clients for 30 years. You don't want to close your doors on them."

Bainbridge said she's at least eight years from retirement; however, she is starting to gauge whether any of her employees are interested in taking on ownership of the business.

"I would like to see people take the Bainbridge name and run with it," she said.

Ensuring a successful leadership transition is a challenge, said ZGF Architects partner Bob Packard, who recently stepped down from a management position he's held for 29 years to serve as partner-in-charge on various projects. Choosing the right people is essential, he said.

"I think the feeling is not so much who steps into someone's footprints, as who do you think will take the resources of the firm in new and better ways," Packard said.

Two ZGF partners took over Packard's former responsibilities as managing partner of the Portland office and the firm, which also has offices in Los Angeles, Seattle, New York and Washington, D.C. Ted Hyman will manage the entire firm from the Los Angeles office and Jan Willemse will lead the Portland office.

Packard said dividing the single managing partner position among two staffers will be better for the firm.

"We had been really exploring a model where we had managing partners for all the offices," he said. "I think it gives us more breadth and we can probably apply more attention than we had been ... I was stretched."

Spreading the burden of managing Scott | Edwards Architecture among more principals has been a similar relief, Scott said. This has been especially important as the firm hired more staffers and grew into new markets, he said.

“I listed all the things that owners of firms have to do, and it’s a pretty big list,” he said. “What’s been great is we’ve been able to divide tasks up. I think we’re doing a better job of covering our bases.”

When Edwards decided to step down from management, Scott said he considered leading the firm himself or hiring partners from other firms. But he eventually settled on promoting from within, making careful decisions based on personalities and expertise.

“I felt we had a great base of people,” Scott said. “In thinking about this partnership, I really wanted a nice balance of skills.”

Principal Lisa McClellan, who has worked for Scott | Edwards Architecture for the past 11 years, said she gladly accepted the new leadership position. She attributed the firm’s success in the past year to more people having ownership in the business.

“That was an immediate feeling was confidence,” she said. “I think almost immediately people started to bring in more work.”

Packard said that to some extent choosing successors is a leap of faith that is made easier by taking into account client feedback.

“They need to agree that these people that you say are the right people are the right architects,” he said. “They can be some of our best advisers.”

Paul Gibbons was concerned about his clients when he retired from the business and shut down WGS Planned Interiors & Design, which he founded in 1980.

“I didn’t want to be in the situation where I left my clients high and dry,” he said.

Gibbons made a list of Portland-area firms he could potentially refer clients to. He eventually chose Bainbridge’s firm, he said, because she has a similar philosophy of building and maintaining strong relationships with clients.

Bainbridge said she was honored that Gibbons was willing to recommend her firm and take time to introduce her to his clients. He also forwarded three active corporate office jobs.

“It was actually a great way to expand our business model,” Bainbridge said. “We didn’t have that much corporate, which with health care slowing down right now, was a godsend.”

Gibbons said he would have preferred to find someone to take over the firm. He takes solace that he left his mark.

“I’ve looked back on my career, and our firm has trained a ton of interiors staff in this town,” he said. “There is some satisfaction in that.”