



## Turning lemons into lemonade. Mobilize underutilized staff to contribute to your firm's business development solution.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in *PSMJ's AE Rainmaker*

Of course, in theory we know that 'every person in the firm is a marketer.' Savvy architecture and engineering firms go the extra mile to train their people at all levels on areas where, regardless of their 'primary' role in the firm, they are better able to participate in the marketing effort. {See also this article: *What's your bizdev purpose?* <http://www.annescarlett.com/wp-admin/post.php?action=edit&post=253>}.

Lately, I have spoken with A/E firms that are struggling to hold onto their remaining talent (the firm's 'fat' was already released during previous layoffs). Their logic is that not only are these people valuable, but they also don't 'deserve' to lose their jobs. Further, these firms realize that in the long-term, it is expensive to recruit, train, and retain talent. Ideally, they'll keep their remaining staff intact and survive this economic storm.

When talking with these firms, my first question is often: *"What is your plan to keep the under-utilized staff busy with value-added non-billable activities?"*

Let's say that a firm's average billability goal for non-principals is around 80 percent, and yet, the reduced workload is resulting in only 50 percent billability. Add to that the tense and uneasy atmosphere. In this scenario, staff will pretend to be busy, and then struggle when it comes time to turn in their timesheets. Or they will eagerly offer to do something—anything—that is assigned to them, but yet they won't have the tools or direction to make their efforts meaningful.

*Meaningful* is the key word here. What can business development and marketing leaders do to turn a negative (low billability) into a positive (leveraging untapped value from these staff members to contribute quality, meaningful value to the business development solution)?

Smart marketing leadership will prepare a master list of 'to-do' assignments that can be done by various individuals outside of the 'actual' BD/marketing team. But even a thorough to-do list is only as good as the leader who is delegating, coordinating, and monitoring the effort. The more organized and formal the effort, the more likely you are to reap the highest and best results—assigning the work, plus giving proper direction and ongoing guidance to ensure the technical professional, who is a novice marketer, is on the right track.

Do not groan and think *'Look, it's going to take me longer to explain to them what and how to do something than to actually do it myself'* or *'They will not have a good attitude or intellectual bandwidth to do these marketing activities; why not have them organize project documents, clean out the resource library, etc.'* No. Adjust your attitude and look at this pool of talented individuals as your own expanded marketing force, to help you do important things that you've not been able to manage yourselves.

**Create a system!** Maybe even an internal campaign or blitz ('Operation: Grow our Firm!') Consider yourself the project manager of this effort:

**1. Prepare all the marketing tasks** that you know people with a brain can handle, and break them down into chunks of hours. Make note of skill sets that would be appropriate for particular tasks (i.e., graphics experience; photographer; good speaker).

**2. Prioritize those tasks**, based upon what activities will best supplement those of your existing full-time marketing team. Determine which efforts will lead to overall best results. For example, it would be fantastic to have someone go through the electronic image library, and fix certain images or insert those images into the right folders in your database. But, perhaps it would be wiser to use that same person to collect missing project data from your firm's portfolio that specifically relates to a hot relevant topic, i.e., sustainability. Or maybe that person would be best-suited to research a particular prospect pool that you are considering pursuing.

**3. Attend project manager meetings.** At this stage, the project managers may be struggling to keep certain people busy. So that's where you step up and say, 'I have these tasks and I'm interested in booking manpower for them.'

**4. Behave as a professional project manager.** This means you do not take a person away from billable time to work on your projects without going through the proper organizational structure channels first. This also means that you have to guide and direct your assigned staff to complete their assignments successfully. Further, you must now review their timesheets (if you do not do so already) to ensure they are applying their time accurately to your projects.

Clearly, your firm may not be able to carry all of its staff members for too much longer. Every firm has a different threshold for 'buying time.' However, during the interim, this is a chance for you to see what hidden talents/skills might arise in these staff members as it relates to marketing and business development. If executed properly, everyone will win. And hopefully, if all goes well with your expanded marketing efforts, your pipeline will start producing more work than ever!