

DI's Firm of the Month: HKS

CEO Ralph Hawkins Speaks out on Growth, Recruitment, BIM Technology, and the Future

D*esignIntelligence:* What recruitment and retention techniques does HKS use to attract top talent?

Ralph Hawkins: We feature a large open house each year—last year we saw about 150 people come through—and set up a series of interviews and presentations on what HKS is trying to achieve in this profession. As we go through the interview process, we talk in more detail about our values and their particular goals and try and match the candidates with our own. This is a very effective way to interview and hire new graduates, and we aim to hire the best talent we can get. We will pay a little more for great people. This year, we hired about 30 summer interns who hopefully will become future employees.

As far as retaining talent, we are trying to accommodate the needs of young mothers by offering work-sharing programs that allow them to spend more time with their families. They can coordinate this with other mothers working within the firm and make up each other's time, or they can work it out on their own by only working part time. We also offer flex time to those people with genuine needs. Our program is more formalized versus EVERYONE working flexible hours—it has to be approved, you can't just decide you want to sleep late one morning.

And it seems our efforts have paid off. HKS was named a 2005 top

20 finalist in the Best Overall Company category by the American Business Awards, and *FortWorthChild* magazine gave us a Best Family-Friendly Company award in 2004. Also in 2004, HKS was voted one of the top 25 companies to work for in Dallas and one of the top 25 companies to work for in America by the Society for Human Resource Management.

We try to stay in close contact with our staff through company surveys, and the last one gave us pretty high marks. If you can keep a person happy at work, you are telling them they are doing a good job, listening to them, and helping them grow in their career.

DI: What do you think the biggest disappointments are for today's younger architects trying to carve out a career in this profession?

RH: I get asked this question quite a bit. My first response is that until now, these people's whole lives and careers as architects have been divided up into short semesters of projects. In our firm, projects last much longer, and sometimes it shocks and disappoints recent graduates that the projects can be so time consuming. Another thing that overwhelms them is the amount of knowledge they have to process in a short time to become registered. They have to take their exam in eight parts over two years rather than taking it all at once, which means they have to wait a long time to know if they have passed or failed.

DI: In terms of the younger generation, how fast do they assume broad responsibilities at HKS?

RH: You find that in any profession some people will take on a lot of responsibility because of their aggressive nature and knowledge, but some will try and take on a lot *without* the proper knowledge. We try to give them as much as they can take, which also helps to retain staff.

These young architects are so anxious to take on responsibility and to be accountable for their work. They ask questions when appropriate, and they produce great projects as a result. Any CEO will tell you that those guys out there on the edge, pushing themselves, are the ones who will grow the quickest.

DI: What are your biggest challenges in the future?

RH: There is so much work out there right now, we have to be able to take appropriate commissions on projects we are passionate about, being careful what we take on and what we turn down. With repeat clients, we will do anything for them, anything they ask us to do. The second type of client we will take on is one with multiple projects so we can take advantage of doing several jobs for them. Third, we take on large complex projects, and after that, we really have to make some careful decisions.

DI: How do these challenges shape your schedule and priorities as the firm's president?

RH: I go by the 80/20 rule and select the top three issues I need to address each day and spend 80 percent of my time on those. In terms of strategic planning, we do the same thing by identifying the top three issues we want to focus on, for example, human resources, information technology, and project

delivery, and those are the areas in which we spend our time.

HKS Quick Facts

Yearly revenue: \$180 million

Employees: 803

Locations: Dallas (corporate office), Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Fort Worth, Atlanta, Orlando, Tampa, Richmond, Washington DC, Mexico City, London and smaller offices in San Francisco and Irvine, Calif.

CEO Quick Facts

Education: University of Texas

Arlington, BS in Architecture; Rice University, Masters in Architecture; University of Texas Health Science Center Houston, Masters of Public Health

Years with HKS 30

Car he drives: Chevy Tahoe

Book he is reading: Sleeper Cell by Jeffrey Anderson, MD

Favorite film: To Kill a Mockingbird

DI: How significant is the transition from 2D to 3D BIM to the growth of HKS?

RH: BIM is essentially a computer program that shows your project in 3D as you draw it in 2D. It is a very complex process, but it reduces the amount of errors that can occur and shows you what might be missing on your drawings.

The GSA has said they want all of their projects done on BIM by 2007, but I am not sure this is possible because the software is not yet where it needs to be. This is a huge issue for large firms that are trying to adapt this new technology as quickly as possible. There are also a lot of training issues involved as well as multi-user access issues. The interoperability between BIM and 2D software is difficult to communicate, but hopefully it will all get worked out. HKS is hosting a large-firm roundtable discussion in September on this issue and where the technology is headed.

DI: How prepared are your employees for this transition?

RH: We have several teams training on BIM technology, and they are beginning to accept it. They see the advantages but also know that this is a whole different animal. BIM is not just for the architects and engineers, it is also used on the construction side in terms of scheduling and costing. Many times it is even referred to as 5D because it zippers together the architect and the contractor as well.

DI: What leadership issues are CEOs and managing principals of firms most concerned about today?

RH: From our perspective, the biggest issue we face is getting paid by clients. Most of our clients (95 percent) pay on time, but those other five percent are consistently late—we are constantly strategizing as to how to get our money from them. Keeping our expenses down is another concern, especially when in good times, people tend to spend more than they should.

Most CEOs would say litigation is a huge concern. We make a policy not to pursue certain types of work, for instance, residential high-rises, because no matter how good a job we do, we can still get sued if the homeowner's association partners up with some predator attorney.

DI: We have touched a lot on the main issues, is there anything else you would like to add?

RH: The only other concern I deal with is controlled growth. We tend to grow quickly during good times, and unfortunately, when the bad times hit, we have to decrease in size pretty quickly. We are trying to solidly grow versus taking on as many new projects as we can.

—Chelsie Butler