



The Consulting Advantage

Designers who have added consulting to their repertoire believe it substantially enhances their ability to provide effective and creative solutions for clients.

By Ernest Beck | Illustrations by Jesse Lefkowitz

When the University of Washington decided to install a mass-notification warning system at its Seattle campus as part of an effort to coordinate its emergency response system for fires and public safety threats, the logical choice for the work might have been a company that specializes in high-tech security. After all, the project entailed connecting 140 buildings with alarm systems and video monitoring devices, and integrating the systems to ensure campuswide communications. Yet the job went to Seattle firm EHS Design, a company that offers full-service strategic consulting as well as design and architecture services. The recently completed project was a big win for EHS, one that “reflects a coming together of the worlds of design and consulting,” says company chief executive Jack Emick. At EHS, “Design and consulting feed into each other and lead to piles of design work. It’s a newfound gold mine,” says Emick.

In addition to security, EHS’s consulting services extend to retail banking, where the firm’s strategic work includes market and competitor analysis, and branch audits. Such specialized services, along with offerings more common to design consultancies—such as corporate space planning—are providing stability for design firms roiled by the latest

recession. For small and medium-sized firms, like the 40-person EHS, adding strategic services “was born out of past downturns and this one,” according to Emick. In this context, consulting practices takes up the slack of the more fallow ones. And while the economy may have caused clients to hold back on building out new spaces, many design firms have discovered that these clients still need strategic services to help them resize, relocate, or plan for uncertain futures.

The Design Edge

Meanwhile, many large architecture firms that have offered these services for a while continue to expand their consulting practices, adding more comprehensive services around real estate analysis, change management, and workplace strategy, for example.

These firms can end up competing against specialist consultants, such as McKinsey for management/operations and Jones Long LaSalle for real estate—as well as companies like Knoll and Steelcase for furniture and space planning. However, design firms are able to provide a range from strategy to design services for a project, providing one stop for clients. In so doing, consulting becomes a value-added service while also potentially generating increased revenue.

How are design firms adding consulting services? It varies, but often by hiring staff trained in management consulting, real estate planning, or related fields, and teaming them with designers with strong strategic skills. Frequently,

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firms evolve into consulting and build expertise along the way. “You can’t just hang out a shingle and say, I do strategic consulting,” notes Jim Klawiter, IIDA, president of Klawiter and Associates, an interior planning and design firm in Los Angeles with a staff of about 20. He says a way design firms can move in that direction is by way of big corporate clients that ask you to participate in that area of work. “Then you build on this side of the business, and it becomes a part of your portfolio,” Klawiter said. Having a strong client relationship, where there’s already trust and respect for a designer’s advisory role can help you transition to consulting as well.

For its part, EHS already had a skilled staff available for the University of Washington emergency notification project, in addition to experience working with the school. The firm was on contract to provide design services to the institution and was therefore familiar with the school and administrators, as well as the facilities into which the cameras, sensors, and fiber optics would be placed. EHS’ advantage, Emick explains, was familiarity. “If they had hired an engineering or security firm they would not have been so sensitive in how the systems were applied,” he says. “We wanted to make sure that aesthetically we didn’t destroy the environment or historic buildings.” What’s more, the firm’s background in designing and space planning for banks, including complex, integrated security systems, helped, even though its bank work was not on the same scale as the university assignment. EHS did subcontract some aspects of the project but mostly used in-house staff, honing skills that can be applied to future business. Mia Marshall, IIDA, a principal at EHS says she learned on the job about the consulting side of the business by becoming involved in all aspects of the client relationship. Now, design and consulting are so integrated, “It’s like second nature to us, blurred and blended into each other,” Marshall says, noting that she often takes on the role of advisor and project manager and still keeps a

hand in design. For example, a project in 2007 for a Seattle real estate developer involved repositioning a 92-acre former microchip factory into office buildings on a site about 40 minutes south of Seattle. Marshall was involved from the start in creating a design vision and utilization plan, and then was client account and project manager with a distinct design role.



Chicken or Egg?

In many cases, strategic consulting acts as a lead-in for design services, but not always. Scott Francisco, director of discovery, Strategic Planning and Consulting at HLW in New York, says about half of consulting

clients go on to design projects. However, don’t think of consulting as a loss leader, he recommends, but rather a way to uncover and serve client needs. “You are not doing the work just to get the design project, but you hope you do,” Francisco, says. “We are problem solving, and that might or might not end with a design project.” Sometimes, a client first comes seeking design services, and consulting is suggested afterwards as part of a solution. In that sense, Francisco argues, both sides are “part of the design process and an integral part of how we work.”

Of course, it’s easier for large firms to tackle consulting and design by developing a separate operating division. At HOK, for example, the consulting unit, Advance Strategies, contributes about 5 percent of the firm’s total revenue and has around 70 staff with multifaceted backgrounds spread over nine offices. “These people have some foot on the dock with design,” notes Leigh Stringer, director of innovation with the unit, but there are also those with training, she says, in business, psychology, organizational behavior, and urban and real estate planning, as well as architecture. Those skills came together for a global financial institution, for example, when the company asked

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HOK’s Advance Strategies to create a standard design and change management program for its offices and then rolled out the project worldwide. Yet, some clients just require consulting services, such as devising a central database that tracks people and space changes for a global company. In that case, “There can be no design element to it all,” Stringer points out. That doesn’t mean there’s a total separation of consulting and design in a large firm. For small projects, the same person can do design and consulting, but as big projects are the norm at places like HOK, Stringer says, “We build overlap into work streams to ensure that the design team is involved in the programming process, and programmers are involved with the design phases of work.” Maintaining that connection is critical, because much can get lost in translation between teams. “You can’t just throw a document over the fence,” she says. At HLW, a global design, engineering, and consulting firm, there is constant cross-fertilization between the design and consulting teams, according to Francisco. “Representatives from both teams are involved from the beginning and every step of the way,” he says.

As awareness of the field expands and more firms get into the game—including design consultancies, like San Francisco-based IDEO—pressure has increased on fees. “We figure out what needs to be done, who is involved and the different billing rates and add up the number,” says Ross Cole, principal of BAM Studio, a small New York consulting and design firm. “And then we do a reality check and look at the market.”

According to Stringer, billable hours are somewhat higher than those for design because consulting projects are usually shorter term—averaging three to six months—compared with design. Emick, of EHS, says that because design and consulting don’t always take place at the same time, the firm often bills separately for each service as the project progresses. In the some cases, though, like

the university notification job, it was offered as an all-in package deal.



Design Is Strategy

Design solutions come out of a deep understanding of a client’s business, so translating that into consulting services is a logical extension, according to Cole. “A majority of design clients believe that if we just build the right thing, it will fix everything,” Cole says, adding, “But if you have fundamental issues with your business, you won’t solve that if the cultural aspects don’t align.” That’s where consulting comes in. For example, in 2008 BAM was approached by a developer to reposition a 1.3 million-square-foot space in Westchester County that originally housed the Union Carbine headquarters. “They didn’t know what to do with it,” Cole recalls. “It was a blue sky opportunity, not a design project.” BAM analyzed the space, floor plans, infra-structure, and visual appeal and came up with a new vision of a life sciences complex with expanded facilities. It then moved to the design side that was also handled by BAM. “Clients know what they want but not how to coalesce that into a road map and goals and concrete action,” Cole says.

Designers who have added consulting to their repertoire believe it substantially enhances their ability to provide effective and creative solutions for clients. Thomas Polucci, IIDA, AIA, director of Interior Design at HOK’s New York office, feels you can make a beautiful space for a corporate client, but you also need to make a functional space that helps attract and retain employees and has the tools to make that business successful. “You’re not just coming to it from the aesthetic understanding but really getting to know what’s systemic to an organization and its culture, where design can fit into the business. This level of knowledge becomes part of the design process.”