

Webinar: Balancing the Creative and Business Forces of the Architectural Profession

Date: 24 August, 2021, 12PM AEST

Questions & Answers with Steven Burns, FAIA at BQE Software and Michael Lewarne, Architect & Coach at unmeasured.

Could you talk briefly about the scale of practice and the challenges typical to each - small , medium, large?

Answered in live webinar (Transcribed):

Steven Burns: I actually get this question quite a lot because we build software. Firms will ask, “if that is right for a firm of my size, we’re a small firm, sole proprietor, 3-5 people, why do I need this type of software?”. Look, you probably use some CAD software, and it’s probably not dissimilar to the same software being used by multinational architectural firms out there.

People invest in making software that’s specifically for your business, so you should really always take a look at it because these people have been through the same pain points you have. It’s a small group of us who are building software to help manage firms that are for architects that actually have come through all the bumps and grinds and knocks of being an architect and try to help solve these problems.

In small firms, one person generally wears a lot of hats. They don’t have the luxury of specialists to help with HR, admin, accounting, etc. where everything else was taken care of by others and they can focus all their time working on design. When you have a smaller firm, people have to learn to juggle and wear many hats while balancing their day. This is what it is about, about balancing your work life, but also balancing the many hats you wear at work. Many people don’t put on the most important hat, which is the business hat, in my estimation. Most firms work hard to make their projects sustainable, but don’t invest the time and effort into making their firm sustainable. This is doing you, your employees and our clients a disservice. When it comes to technology in business there is no difference regarding size of firm. Every firm has email. Every firm has CAD/BIM software. Every firm has accounting software. On and on. We just need to recognise it as a tool when it comes to business and use it effectively.

Michael Lewarne: The thing that came to mind is skill and tasks and what you choose to take on yourself and what you choose to give to someone else. In a large office, you can obviously employ people to do that within the office. But I would argue that this is still

possible within a small office, you don't necessarily need to do the books yourself, you don't need to pay the invoices yourself, you don't need to issue the invoices yourself. Those sorts of things. So, it's all about choices, what choices are you making in your practice, whether it is big or small, about the things that you do. Talking to the SOM example, larger offices struggle with people that are used to being designers, getting promotions but having to deal with people underneath them and not necessarily wanting to choose to spend their time on that. They don't want to be people managers, they just want to design. So, there's no path through for them if they don't want to take on those extra responsibilities. It's about learning those extra skills that are necessary to be a leader and to be an architect and that is one of the differences between bigger and smaller offices. Ultimately in bigger offices you do still need to multiskill, but it's a different skillset.

I also note that managing staff is very different between the office sizes. Larger offices usually have someone managing "Staff & Culture" (HR) a luxury not afforded smaller and even mid-sized practices. I'd like to highlight one mistake I see these smaller offices make is not giving their staff space for autonomy and growth. The directors/principals of the offices often spend their time micromanaging which has a twofold impact, staff don't learn or are given the space to step-up and the directors/principals are not spending their time on the work they really should be doing. This happens less in the larger offices - although they're not immune to it.

There is one simple statement: you don't need to do this alone, there's always people that can help and whether it's for accountability, or consultancy, whether you're a one person firm or a 1000 person firm there's always help available.

Would you recommend any business courses?

Michael Lewarne: I'm not able to recommend any specific business course, in part because I'm not across many courses. I also think there's an important question that has to be answered first (everyone will have an answer specific to them), What is doing the business course for? Once you've answered this for yourself you should research the courses that best address your answer, or it might be that there's a better use of your time and resources. You might be better off, for example, hiring a business consultant, finding an accountant that takes on that role or employing someone to do that work. What I would recommend people do is to get a basic business grounding and do a Small Business Course for a basic understanding. I did one at TAFE a long time ago, not sure if it's still around, I would imagine there are many available.

The other question to ask is “What is the problem you’re trying to solve by doing a course?” It might be that you need help on the business side but also need to develop other skills. Find a course that suits that. It’s not for everyone but I did Seth Godin’s [altMBA](#) which developed my soft (or human) skills and entirely reframed how I saw many things about architectural practice. It’s the sort of work I’m doing now and I’m happy to talk about it to anyone that wants to reach out - either about the altMBA or what I do.

How does one determine what is the "right/best" business software for one's architectural business?

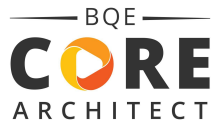
Steven Burns: You determine the best software (for your firm), through research and due-diligence. Ask colleagues at other firms what they use and if they are happy or recommend it. Don’t ask your dentist what scheduling software he/she uses and expect that it would work well for your firm too. Ask people in your own profession for recommendations.

I suggest you write a simple document that outlines what your needs are and ascertain if the solution you are looking at understands and solves that issue.

Look at software that was built for architects. Generally, developers, like BQE Software, that focus on your profession and have professionals on staff that are also architects (or engineers), understand your pain points and will work to solve them. They are also more interested in hearing from their customers about how to be better since it would benefit their user base as a whole. If you are interested in learning more about choosing the right software, download our whitepaper “6 Steps for Selecting the Perfect Project Management Software” in our whitepaper section [here](#).

Michael Lewarne: I agree with Steve’s answer. When I was in practice we found that there was no one affordable package (for a small practice) that did everything we wanted it to do. We spent a lot of time chatting to developers and other architects about what they used or what their software did. There are also many websites out there with reviews. Warwick Mihaly has written quite extensively on his research on his Panfilo blog, this is one article: [Predictable profitability](#). Unfortunately you may need to invest a little time experimenting to find the package and combination that’s right for you.

Can you please send us a copy of the quote that Michael mentioned about immeasurable elements of life?



[Enrique Peñalosa](#) - The ex mayor of Bogota made remarkable improvements to the public spaces in his city. This is what he said:

"The importance of pedestrian public spaces cannot be measured, but most other important things in life cannot be measured either: Friendship, beauty, love and loyalty are examples. Parks and other pedestrian places are essential to a city's happiness."

The skills are like that and that's why I think there's a whole lot of work that we can do that we can't measure.

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