PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN | Shilan is editor of FromDesign2Build.com. Contact him at 201/783-2844 or jshilan@gmail.com.

The design/build brain

Q When creating job descriptions, what is the best way to separate the roles of design and production?

—Mark Muzio, The Landscape Design Group, Waltham, Mass.

A This is a great question that companies of every size constantly struggle with, regardless of how many years they've been in business. Although my answer is straightforward and simple, creating a highly functional design/build team requires a significant amount of work and efficient internal systems. The good news is that once these roles are defined and everybody is on the same page, your installations and your business will run much more smoothly and more profitably, with fewer errors and better communication.

I can't promise that you'll achieve landscape design/build nirvana, but I can assure you that there's a workable system that will help all of your employees become more successful.

Essentially, there are two basic theories about managing the design/build process. The first is to have your designer be responsible for everything. This means not only designing, estimating and selling the installation, but also taking on the additional production responsibilities of job scheduling, project management and job costing. The second theory is to define clearly the roles of "design" and "build," allowing each department to focus on one part of the process or the other. By the time you finish reading this column, I think you'll be able to tell which theory I subscribe to and why.

Regardless of whether or not you want to believe it, personality-wise, landscape designers are different from production people, and vice versa. There's a scientific reason for this. Designers typically are right-brained. They're visual learners. They are creative by nature—intuitive and free spirited—and depend more on visual cues to understand. As you probably know, they're emotional and easily swayed by their feelings. Unfortunately, they also tend to be unorganized, lack time-management skills and they don't prioritize well.

On the other hand, production people are typically dominated by the left side of the brain; they're auditory learners. They learn through listening rather than by seeing. Unlike the creative and inquisitive right side of our brain, the left side is responsible for organization and logic. Therefore, those who have a dominant left side are typically thorough, prefer schedules and deadlines and love rules and regulations.

All this means that regardless of how much you may want your design/sales department to manage the installations, it's nearly impossible to find a right-brained, creative, free thinker who is well organized and likes to follow the rules. The opposite is true as well. No matter how much you may want your ultra-efficient production supervisor to learn how to think outside the box and creatively problem solve, it's probably not going to happen; he's not programmed that way.

Although we all have a dominant side of our brain, none of us is either 100 percent right-brained or 100 percent left-brained. We are a mixture of both, meaning there is hope for you, your employees and your business.

Now that I've given you some scientific proof that there's a real reason why you need to split the positions, what's my advice to you? Save yourself a lot of time and aggravation and don't try to have one person manage the entire process. Instead, find a creative right-brainer and let him or her design, sell and schmooze the clients. Then set up your designer with a time-managing left-brainer who can keep to a schedule and get things done. Once you have these two people in place, you just need to establish some standard operating procedures or best management practices that allow both sides of your design/build brain to work together to install beautiful landscapes, profitably.

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.