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Buoyant market conditions and positive changes for workers

Krista Shearer

Thanks to the buoyant market of the past five years, Australian architects are experiencing positive shifts in the sector. These include flexible working, new opportunities and improved benefits, as firms realise the need to attract and keep the best staff.

The gender imbalance in many firms has increased the uptake of flexible working, which is now commonplace across the industry. Up until 2015, most practices were not open to flexible hours or part-time work arrangements. More women are now returning to practice after children, and more men are choosing flexible work arrangements to help with childcare. We have seen an increase in these roles offered within the architecture sector. An impressive 45% of workers who responded to our recent job satisfaction survey are now permitted to work from home.

2017 was a great year for employees globally, with 42%* receiving an annual bonus – this is a significant change in a sector where bonuses are not traditionally paid. In comparison, only 20% of Australians received a bonus.

The new year has seen a subtle correction to salary levels. This is after five years of steady increases and practices trumping each other with offers. We are now seeing salaries level off. Practices who were short staffed for project requirements throughout the boom hired hastily as a result. Despite practices slowing the pace of hiring, there is still a huge shortage of strong architects at all levels. Along the Australian east coast, it is a competitive market for practices to attract the top architects. We often see strong candidates receive up to three or four offers and a counter-offer throughout the recruitment process.

Our global job satisfaction survey showed that 35% of Australians (compared to a worldwide average of 45%) are looking to move roles in the next 12 to 18 months. The number one reason people are looking to move roles is that of salary and the hope of a pay increase. Interestingly, only 34% of Australians expressed satisfaction with their current salary package. The second reason is a lack of career progression. Firms need to ensure they are paying fair salaries and looking at softer 'sells' to attract the best people, such as career progression, work-life balance and culture. These are top factors that candidates look for in a new role.

When it comes to hiring staff, it is crucial to have an appealing culture to inspire and engage teams. Some practices offer study tours as in-house design competition prizes and take graduates to Europe to attend the World Architecture Festival. Other firms bring their entire practice to annual conferences for innovation and research.

Over the last year, there has been a shift in the demand for skills: with the multi-residential sector decreasing, demand for skills in infrastructure, urban and education projects are increasing. The landscape and BIM sectors have also picked up in the past six months globally. The growth over the past five years for many practices has also shown a spike in roles at the strategic level. Where practices may have grown their leaders from within in the past, the quick growth has meant that many are now looking to source external candidates. We have a high number of roles for potential principal-level staff.

What are the people looking for in a new role?

In order of importance from Bespoke Career's recent global employee survey

- Pay increase
- Work-life balance
- Career progression prospects
- Company culture
- Training & development
- Promotion / increased responsibility
- Flexible working
- Commute time
- Company reputation
- Benefits package
- Holiday allowance
- Bonus
- Other
- Work from home
- Corporate social responsibility

We have also seen an increase in architects moving into new in-house roles for submissions coordinators, practice managers and innovation leaders. Where practices may have relied on directors to look after certain areas, they are now hiring architects into these positions as stand-alone roles. Architects are also moving out of the sector into the construction and developer realm for design management and in-house design roles. Movement in the interior and architectural building product market has also increased.

It's good news for those at the top of their game in their sector or strong all-rounders. There is high demand for them across Australia, the UK, US and Hong Kong. With firms competing for the best talent, and attraction and retention strategies sitting high on the agenda, many architects are hopefully starting to enjoy improved benefits, including work-life balance, some inspiring upskilling and even a bonus.

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* Stats from the Bespoke Careers global job satisfaction survey