

CFA

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The Case for Project Staffing in Architecture

Why the most talented designers — and the smartest firms — choose project work. A forty-year perspective from the firm that created the category.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that started everything

In 1984, a "temp" in architecture carried a quiet stigma — shorthand for someone who couldn't hold a full-time post.

Consulting for Architects was founded on the opposite premise: that the most talented designers might work job to job by choice, moving between firms because range made them better and kept them in demand. That idea created a new category — the career project architect — and it solved a problem the profession had wrestled with for decades.

This paper makes the case for project-based staffing from both sides of the table: why it advances a designer's career and income, and why it is, all things considered, a sound economic decision for the firms that hire them. Every claim is grounded in public data.

THE PROBLEM

Architecture's hire-and-fire cycle

Architecture runs on cycles. Work arrives in surges — competitions won, deadlines stacked — then ebbs between projects. Staffed entirely with permanent employees, a firm is pushed into the hire-and-fire pattern the profession became known for: expanding in the fat years and laying off in the lean ones.

The cost is real, and rising. Recruitment and retention now rank as the single biggest challenge that AEC firm leaders report, and staff turnover climbed to about 14% in 2024, up from roughly 12% a year earlier, by Zweig Group's industry data.⁴ Each departure is expensive: replacing an employee runs an estimated one-half to two times their annual salary once recruiting, lost productivity, and ramp-up are counted — a range Gallup calls conservative,³ while SHRM puts the typical cost at six to nine months of salary.² And because changing firms, not staying put, is how architects tend to win their largest raises,⁵ the cycle feeds itself.

THE MODEL

What project staffing is

Project staffing breaks that cycle by matching talent to the work rather than to a headcount plan. It takes three forms: contract (freelance) engagements for a defined project or period; project-to-permanent, where designer and firm test the fit on live work before either commits; and direct permanent placement. CFA pioneered the first of these for architecture and has practiced all three for four decades.

THE CASE FOR TALENT

Why designers choose project work

Range beats routine

Stay full-time at one celebrated firm and a designer can spend two or three years on a single slice of the work — and that is largely what the portfolio shows. Move through projects and the same span looks different: a few months of those details, then a corporate interiors job, then residential, then commercial. The result is a broader portfolio and a more marketable professional. It also aligns with how the field already behaves: changing firms, not waiting for tenure, is what tends to move a designer's pay.⁵

On your own terms

Project work is also the fastest route to independence. A designer who works inside a dozen studios learns how practices actually run — and builds the network and judgment to eventually open their own. Between engagements, time is the designer's own: a long trip a salaried calendar would never allow, a teaching post, a research interest, licensing exams, or a passion project.

Paid for every hour

A salaried year is built on 2,080 hours. In practice, design teams routinely work well beyond that through deadline season — and because most salaried design staff are exempt employees, those additional hours carry no overtime pay.⁹ That gap quietly lowers the real hourly value of a salary. A project professional, by contrast, is paid for every hour billed.

The independent-contractor advantage

A designer who works across firms as a genuine independent contractor — a sole proprietor, with or without a DBA or LLC — is, for tax purposes, running a business. That carries a cost and an opportunity. The cost is self-employment tax: 15.3% of net earnings (12.4% Social Security plus 2.9% Medicare), paid through quarterly estimates, though half of it is deductible.⁶ The opportunity is everything a business can deduct — equipment, software, licensing, continuing education, a home office, mileage — expenses a W-2 employee generally cannot claim,⁷ plus the qualified business income deduction of up to 20% for those eligible.⁷ For many, the net effect is a lower effective tax burden than the salary it replaced.

Note: This is general information, not tax advice. Tax outcomes depend on individual circumstances and current law — consult a qualified CPA before acting.

THE CASE FOR FIRMS

The true cost of a hire

A project rate looks expensive by the hour — until it is set against the fully loaded cost of an employee. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, benefits account for roughly 30% of total compensation for

private-industry workers, which means wages are only about 70% of what an employee actually costs.¹ In practical terms, a \$100,000 salary carries closer to \$143,000 in compensation cost once benefits and employer taxes are added — before recruiting, onboarding, and the salary a firm keeps paying through slow stretches when there is no billable work to assign.

COST COMPONENT	PERMANENT HIRE	PROJECT ENGAGEMENT
Base compensation	\$100,000 salary	Hourly rate, productive hours only
Benefits & employer taxes ¹	+ ~\$43,000 (~43% of wages)	Carried in the rate; none added
Recruiting, onboarding & turnover risk ³	½–2× salary per departure	None
Idle time in slow periods	Paid regardless of workload	Not paid — engage only when needed
All-in	~\$143,000+ before turnover & idle cost	Pay for output; scale to the work cost

Illustrative only; figures vary by role, market, and engagement. Benefit load derived from BLS Employer Costs for Employee Compensation: benefits ≈30% of total compensation, ≈43% of wages.¹

Flexibility without the cycle

Project staffing converts a fixed cost into a variable one. A firm scales up for a deadline and back down when it passes, paying for productive hours only — no benefit load, no idle carry, no severance, and none of the turnover cost a layoff-and-rehire cycle repeatedly incurs.³ It is, in short, the solution to the very problem that prompted CFA's founding.

DOING IT RIGHT

Worker classification

None of this works unless the classification is correct, and that is determined by law, not preference. The IRS applies a common-law test weighing three categories — behavioral control, financial control, and the relationship of the parties — under which genuinely project-based, independent work supports contractor status.⁸ The U.S. Department of Labor applies a separate, broader economic-reality test under the Fair Labor Standards Act, revised effective March 2024, and some states — California among them — apply a stricter "ABC" standard.⁸ Misclassification carries real penalties, so a freelance model has to be built and maintained properly.

[Setup — for David: a counsel-reviewed line on CFA's classification track record belongs here, worded so it states experience and diligence without implying a guarantee. Have your attorney approve the exact language before publishing.]

CONCLUSION

The right idea, then and now

The project model CFA introduced in 1984 began as a way around a stigma. Four decades of public data make a stronger claim: for designers it builds careers and income; for firms it lowers true cost and ends a destructive cycle. It was the right idea then. The numbers say it still is.

"In 1984, a temp was someone who couldn't get hired. I thought — what if project work became the choice of the most talented people in the field?"

— David McFadden, Founder, Consulting for Architects, Inc.

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9. U.S. Department of Labor, Fair Labor Standards Act — bona fide exempt salaried employees are not entitled to overtime pay. dol.gov/agencies/whd/overtime

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