

Data-Driven, A/E/C Strategies For Sustainable Success

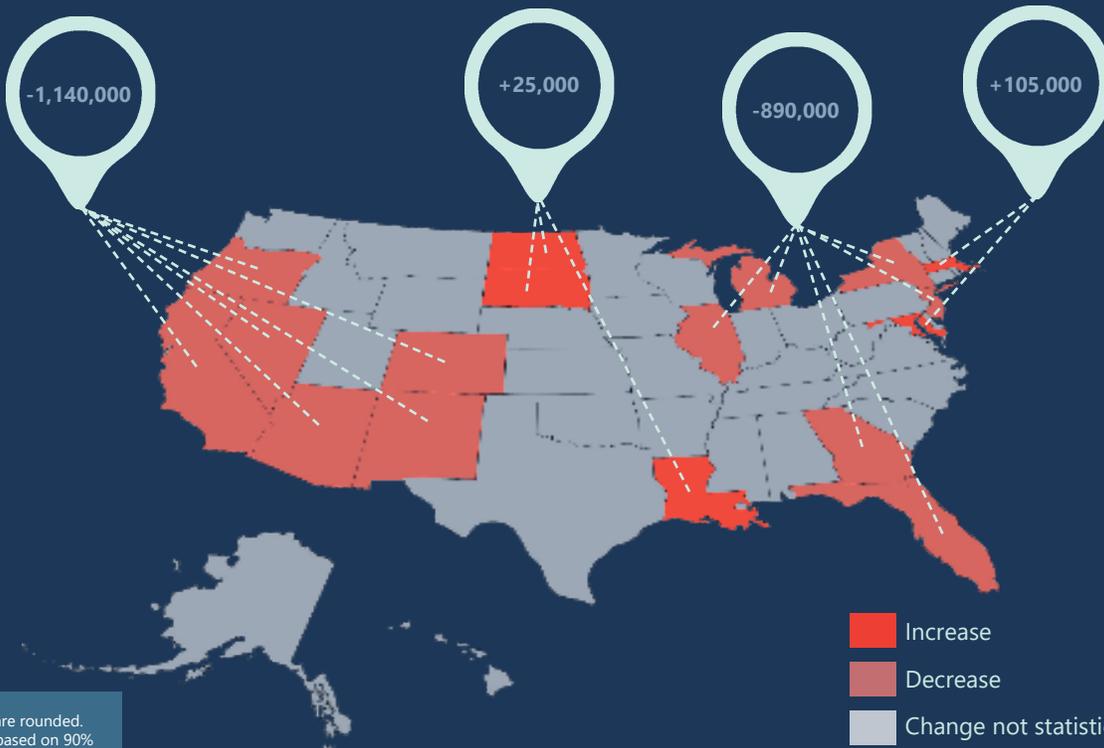
A/E INDUSTRY EMPLOYMENT IS RECOVERING RAPIDLY, EXCEEDING THE EMPLOYMENT LEVEL OF JANUARY 2019



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

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IMMIGRANT (UNAUTHORIZED) POPULATIONS CHANGED IN 17 STATES



NOTE: All numbers are rounded. Significant changes based on 90% confidence interval.

Red: Increase
Light Red: Decrease
Grey: Change not statistically significant

Statistically significant change, 2007 to 2017

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented U.S. Census Bureau data

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EXPAND AND KEEP QUALITY THROUGH PROCESSES

Expanding during a pandemic that at one point had virtually shut down your market? Sounds counter-intuitive to say the least, but it was the right move for Garmann/Miller, an award-winning, full-service design firm with offices in Minster and Columbus, OH. The firm has been selected to the PSMJ Circle of Excellence for 2020.

Eric Baltzell, principal and CEO of the firm, leads a team of 65 architects, engineers, interior and technology designers, and construction administrators who work on projects ranging from K – 2 and higher education facilities to healthcare, industrial, and religious. He explains why the firm recently opened a new office in Indianapolis, not far over the state line in Indiana.

PRE-COVID

“Before COVID-19 hit, we had been planning to expand into Indiana because of its proximity. But the pandemic actually encouraged us to accelerate rather than slow down the move,” he says. “State funding in Ohio has been reduced, and Indiana held some opportunities. Because each state does things differently when it comes to K – 2, we knew we needed to be there to succeed.

“In Ohio, K – 12 funding is mostly through the state,” he explains, “but in Indiana most education funds come from local sources. We felt like we needed to be local so decision-makers knew we were committed.”

SPENDING STALLS

And in fact, despite the pandemic, he says some Indiana municipalities are moving ahead with new K – 12 projects, and Garmann/Miller has already landed a couple of them.

Still, he says, the pandemic “has hit us heavily in the public sector. Ohio state budgets were cut, so there’s less money to go around. Even private projects that have been budgeted and designed were pulled back because of the public perception about spending a lot of money during a situation like this.”

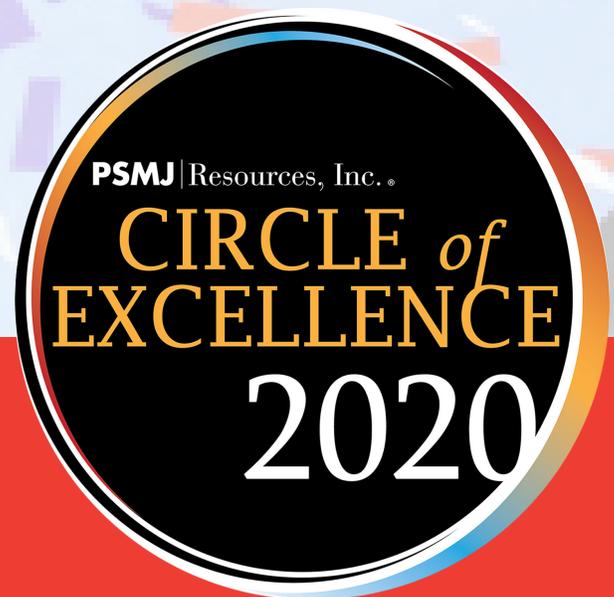
Through it all, Baltzell says, Garmann/Miller is guided by three principles: exceptional service, quality design, and what he calls “doing what’s right.” He explains: “No project ever goes perfectly. When there’s an issue, and we’re involved, we’ll own up to it and fix it, regardless of how it

affects us as a company. We do what’s best for the owner.” And when it comes to service and design, Baltzell says the firm takes particular pride in the quality of their drawings, which leads to fewer issues with contractors.

“The feedback we get from contractors says our intent is always clear,” he explains. “They know what we’re asking for, so there are fewer change orders during construction. About half our work is public projects with fixed budgets. We want to be good stewards of that money.”

Garmann/Miller has followed state guidelines and implemented responsible processes while continuing to service its clients, and Baltzell says they have experienced few challenges.

“We had already invested in hardware and software for remote work prior to the pandemic, which we offered as a perk for employees to work from home,” he says. “We could not have foreseen the need, but the move to remote work has been surprisingly smooth. And of course, our clients are in the same boat, so they get it. It’s been a very comfortable transition.” •



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MAINTAIN CULTURE WITH COMMUNICATION

Many people in the A/E industry will tell you their firm is a “family,” and they mean it. But Sarah Broughton and John Rowland might have a unique perspective on the idea. The husband-and-wife team started their architecture and design firm as young professionals 17 years ago and have nurtured it since then using their own set of values.

“This is our legacy. We want it to thrive, because it’s a reflection of the vision and the business philosophy we’ve cultivated from the start,” Broughton says. “We’re passionate about our work, and it shows. There’s an energy you feel when you walk in the door. Clients talk about it all the time. We never want to be complacent about that.”

LISTEN TO CLIENTS

From studios in Aspen and Denver, CO, Rowland+Broughton produces custom residential, interior design, commercial, hospitality, urban design, and master planning. The firm has been selected to the PSMJ Circle of Excellence for nine of the past 12 years.

They say they do it by listening to each client’s design goals, connecting with interested stakeholders throughout the project, conducting historical and community research, applying new technological solutions, and testing creative materials and applications.

“We’re a design firm. Our job is to produce beautiful work that attracts great talent and great clients,” Broughton says. “But it’s also a business, right? So as managers, it’s our job to make sure the people doing the work have our full

support. From our finance director who’s a CPA, to our HR director, to the marketing and business development teams, it’s all about nurturing the work.

“What’s that expression—you hire for attitude and teach for skill? We look for people with the traits we value, like gratitude and empathy.” She and Rowland worried about maintaining that culture through the pandemic. How do you keep it going in the new, remote workspace? For Broughton, it always comes back to communication.

The firm still holds staff meetings, virtually, every Monday (“One week it’s for inspiration—maybe a video or a dialog—and the next week it’s a project review”). But, ironically, management decided that the best way to get through the pandemic was to meet less often, not more: “We made a conscious decision to stop stressing about the numbers, and just put our heads down and do the work,” Broughton says. “It’s a way to maintain some sanity and some balance.

“We felt like we were over-analyzing everything. So we made it simple: how much great work can we get done in 40 hours a week? And we found that we could do better work in less time. All it takes is good communication from everyone on the team. To me, the most important thing you can do is keep it transparent.”

And how do you keep up morale in the new normal? “I think it’s the power of positivity,” Broughton says. “As managers, we have to be in that mindset. You show up every day with a positive attitude. That’s what leaders do.” ●

For more than a decade, PSMJ’s Circle of Excellence has set the standard for high-performing A/E/C organizations

PSMJ designed the exclusive Circle of Excellence to recognize firms that are successfully managed, based on 13 key performance metrics that demonstrate outstanding achievements in profitability, staff growth, cash flow, productivity, business development, overhead management, and turnover. The Circle of Excellence represents the top 20 percent of participants (on these key metrics) in PSMJ’s annual A/E Financial Performance Benchmark Survey.

In today’s ever-competitive business climate, this is a distinction that can give your firm an edge in areas such as M&A, recruiting, and more. The Circle of Excellence badge is a recognized indicator of proven success and management. On the recruiting front, touting that your firm has made it into the Circle of Excellence is hard evidence that firm “walks the walk” when it comes to being a well-managed organization.