

A Guide to **Mentorship** in **Architecture**

Mentorship is an investment in people and in the long-term strength of the firm.



Introduction

Effective mentorship is one of the most important investments an architecture firm can make in its people. Strong mentoring relationships support professional development, strengthen employee engagement and retention, accelerate leadership development, and contribute to a more collaborative and resilient workplace culture.

This guide provides practical strategies, tools, and resources for establishing, strengthening, and evaluating mentorship programs in architecture firms of all sizes. Whether your firm is launching a formal program, refining an existing one, or looking for ways to better support individual mentoring relationships, the recommendations in this guide are designed to be flexible and adaptable.

Because every firm's culture, size, and organizational structure is different, these practices should be viewed as a framework that can be tailored to your firm's goals and needs.

Contents

03	How to Use This Guide
03	About the Task Force
04	Definitions
06	Rethinking Mentorship
09	Process & Timeline
12	Matching
20	Benefits & Guidelines
23	Post-Licensure Mentorship
28	Program Evaluation
33	Conclusion

Photos by Chad Holder

How to Use This Guide

This guide is the result of two years of discussion, research, and collaboration by the AIA St. Paul Mentorship Task Force. Drawing on the experiences of architects and AEC professionals across a variety of firms, we identified common mentorship challenges and developed practical approaches to address them. While the insights and suggestions shared in this report reflect our professional experiences primarily in the Twin Cities region, we have designed this guide to be broadly applicable across the architecture profession.

Although the guide can be read from beginning to end, each section is designed to stand on its own, allowing readers to navigate directly to the topics most relevant to their organizational needs.

The guide is organized around three primary objectives:

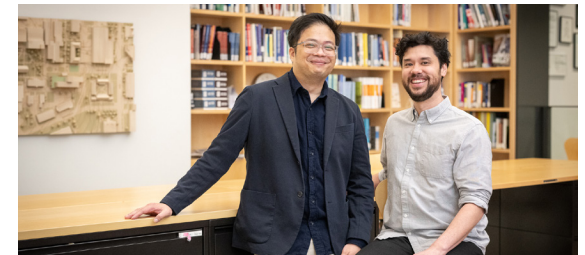
- **Help firms establish a mentorship program.** The first section provides foundational guidance, planning considerations, and resources for organizations developing a mentorship program.
- **Strengthen existing mentorship programs.** The second section offers strategies, tools, and best practices to improve the effectiveness of established programs.
- **Support mentors and mentees.** The final section provides practical guidance and resources to help both mentors and mentees build productive relationships and maximize the value of the mentoring experience.

While the focus of this guide is on firm-based mentorship programs, what is outlined in this guide could also be useful to mentorship efforts within other organizations that employ architects or architectural designers, and those schools of architecture, associations, and informal collectives (such as of small firms).

We hope this guide serves as a practical resource that encourages meaningful conversations about mentorship and helps firms build stronger people, stronger teams, and a stronger profession.

About the Task Force

The AIA St. Paul Mentorship Task Force was established in 2022 to explore how mentorship can better support architecture professionals throughout their careers. Composed of architects and AEC professionals from diverse backgrounds and practice settings, the task force examined common challenges, shared successful practices, and developed resources to help firms strengthen their mentorship efforts.



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Definitions

Mentorship can take many forms, and there is no single model that works for every firm. The following definitions establish a common vocabulary for the concepts used throughout this guide.

While your firm's terminology or approach may differ, these definitions provide a consistent framework for the recommendations that follow.

Formal Mentorship

A formal mentorship program is a structured, firm-sponsored initiative that intentionally pairs mentors and mentees to support professional development. Pairings may be based on career goals, experience, discipline, or other criteria. Firms typically provide participants with dedicated time, resources, and guidance to help mentees achieve defined professional objectives while supporting broader organizational goals such as employee engagement, retention, and leadership development.

Informal Mentorship

Informal mentorship develops organically through day-to-day work, project collaboration, professional associations, or personal connections. These relationships are generally self-directed and evolve naturally based on shared interests, experience, and trust. While less structured than formal programs, informal mentorship often plays a significant role in career development, knowledge sharing, and professional growth.



Definitions *(continued)*



Mentor (or Coach)

A mentor or coach is an experienced professional who provides guidance, shares knowledge, and supports a mentee's professional growth. Mentors help individuals develop technical expertise, professional judgment, leadership capabilities, and career strategies through coaching, feedback, and the sharing of experience.

Advocate (or Sponsor)

An advocate or sponsor is a professional who actively creates opportunities for another person's career advancement. Unlike a mentor, who primarily provides guidance and advice, a sponsor uses their influence to increase a mentee's visibility, recommend them for high-impact projects or leadership opportunities, and help expand their professional network. In many firms, sponsors also play an important role in staffing decisions, succession planning, and leadership development.

Two-Way Mentorship

The most effective mentorship relationships are built on mutual learning and a perception that both parties are gaining value. While the term "mentor" usually refers to the older or more professionally experienced person of the pair and "mentee" to the younger or less professionally experienced, in the case of two-way mentorship, both parties see themselves as mentors and mentees, valuing not just years of experience but also a more expansive view of knowledge, ideas, perspectives, skills, and ways of thinking and working. Viewing mentorship as a two-way relationship creates stronger connections and supports a culture of continuous learning within the firm.

01

Rethinking Mentorship



01 Rethinking Mentorship

The architecture profession has long relied on an apprenticeship model to develop emerging professionals. Traditionally, junior staff worked alongside experienced architects, learning through daily collaboration, observation, and direct feedback while contributing to project work. This approach not only developed technical skills but also the judgment, communication, and decision-making abilities that define successful architectural practice.

As technology has transformed the profession, however, many of these opportunities for informal learning have diminished. The transition from drafting to CAD, and now to Building Information Modeling (BIM), visualization platforms, and other digital tools, has changed how teams collaborate and how knowledge is shared.

And while the profession's formal pathways to licensure—including the Architectural Experience Program (AXP) and the Architect Registration Examination (ARE)—provide an important foundation, they are not designed to fully prepare architects for the complexities of practice. These programs establish consistent professional standards, but they cannot replace the firm-specific knowledge, leadership development, business acumen, and interpersonal skills that are best learned through intentional mentoring relationships.

For these reasons, mentorship should be viewed as a strategic investment rather than an informal byproduct of project work. Firms that intentionally develop mentorship programs are better positioned to transfer institutional knowledge, develop future leaders, improve employee engagement and retention, and strengthen long-term organizational resilience.

Challenges

Three significant trends are reshaping mentorship in architecture:

- Increasing project complexity and specialization
- Loss of institutional knowledge
- The growing divide between generalist and specialist career paths

While these challenges are not unique to architecture, they have an outsized impact on the profession because successful practice depends on both technical expertise and accumulated professional judgment. Addressing these challenges requires firms to be intentional about how knowledge is developed, shared, and retained.

Complexity and Technology

The tools architectural professionals use have evolved rapidly—from drafting tables to CAD and now to a broad ecosystem of BIM platforms, visualization software, collaboration tools, and data-driven workflows. While these technologies have increased efficiency and expanded design capabilities, they have also changed how professionals learn from one another.

Digital workflows can reduce opportunities for junior staff to observe how experienced architects make decisions, solve problems, and manage clients and consultants. Technical proficiency is increasingly specialized, while many of the skills required to lead projects—including communication, judgment, negotiation, risk management, and client service—are learned primarily through experience and mentorship rather than formal training.

Without intentional mentoring, firms risk developing technically capable professionals who have had limited opportunities to build the leadership and business and soft skills necessary for long-term success.

Loss of Institutional Knowledge

Architecture firms are particularly vulnerable to economic cycles. During periods of recession or market disruption, experienced professionals often leave the profession, change careers, or retire earlier than anticipated.

When this occurs, firms lose more than staff capacity—they lose institutional knowledge. Lessons learned from completed projects, client relationships, technical expertise, and practical decision-making are difficult to document and even more difficult to replace. Without structured mentorship and knowledge-sharing practices, this expertise leaves with the individuals who possess it.

Strong mentorship programs can provide an effective mechanism for transferring this knowledge to the next generation of professionals before it is lost.

The Generalist–Specialist Divide

Historically, architects gained experience across nearly every aspect of project delivery. Whether working by hand or in CAD, staff were exposed to multiple phases of design and documentation, allowing them to develop as well-rounded practitioners.

Today's firms increasingly rely on specialists in areas such as BIM management, visualization, sustainability, computational design, specifications, or project delivery. While specialization creates significant value, it can also fragment learning opportunities for emerging professionals. Developing a comprehensive understanding of practice may now require learning from multiple experts rather than a single mentor.

Specialization also has implications for workforce resilience. As automation and artificial intelligence continue to reshape architectural practice, professionals with broader knowledge, adaptable skills, and strong mentoring relationships will be better prepared to evolve with the profession.

For firms, this reinforces the importance of mentorship programs that intentionally connect employees across disciplines, experience levels, and areas of expertise, ensuring that both specialized knowledge and holistic professional development remain priorities.

02

Process & Timeline



02 Process & Timeline

There is no single implementation model that works for every firm. The timeline below provides a flexible framework for a formal mentorship program that can be adapted to your firm's size, culture, and available resources. While it is presented as a sequence of phases, mentorship programs are most effective when viewed as an ongoing cycle of assessment, implementation, evaluation, and refinement.

From the outset, firms should use surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other feedback mechanisms to understand current mentorship practices, identify gaps, and establish measurable goals. Once a program is underway, these same tools should be used regularly to evaluate outcomes and inform continuous improvements.

Suggested Implementation Timeline

Phase 1: Assess & Plan

Establish a baseline understanding of your organization's mentorship needs by:

- Surveying and conducting focus groups or interviews with employees across career stages to identify challenges and opportunities
- Defining program goals, success measures, and participant expectations
- Developing a mentorship framework that aligns with your firm's culture and business objectives
- Consider co-mentoring or mentor rotations, allowing mentees to benefit from multiple perspectives while reducing dependence on a single mentor
- Build in expectations for two-way mentorship, either as a feature of the program or as a foundational approach

Phase 2: Launch

Implement the mentorship program by:

- Matching mentors and mentees using established criteria
- Providing participants with orientation, expectations, and supporting resources
- Encouraging regular meetings and goal setting
- Monitoring participation and collecting early feedback to identify opportunities for improvement

Phase 3: Evaluate & Improve

Assess the effectiveness of the program through:

- Participant surveys and focus groups
- Reviews of program participation and engagement
- Evaluation of outcomes against established goals
- Updates to the program based on participant feedback and organizational needs



Following the initial implementation period, continue this cycle of assessment, refinement, and evaluation to ensure the program remains relevant and effective.

Implementing and Refining Your Program

A successful formal mentorship program evolves over time. Regular evaluation helps ensure mentor-mentee relationships remain productive and that the program continues to meet the needs of both participants and the organization.

Pilot the Program

Consider launching the program with a small group before expanding firmwide. A pilot allows you to validate your matching process, identify administrative challenges, and gather participant feedback before broader implementation.

During the pilot, evaluate:

- How well mentor-mentee pairings align with participants' professional goals
- The effectiveness of communication and working styles within each pairing
- Whether participants have the resources and support needed to succeed

Monitor Program Health

Establish regular checkpoints throughout the mentorship cycle to identify successes and address concerns early. Useful evaluation methods include:

- Short pulse surveys following key milestones
- Anonymous feedback forms
- Facilitated group discussions or advisory panels
- Structured reflection opportunities for mentors and mentees
- Periodic review meetings to identify trends and implement program improvements

Support Mid-Course Adjustments

Not every mentoring relationship will be the right fit. Building flexibility into the program helps maintain participant engagement while reducing the stigma of changing pairings. Consider incorporating the following practices:

- Create a straightforward, confidential process for requesting a new mentor or mentee
- Offer a “pause and reassess” option before rematching participants
- Schedule midpoint conversations to review progress and update development goals
- Conduct routine check-ins to identify concerns before they become barriers

Program Management Tools

Various software tools can help firms manage mentor matching, participant communication, and program administration. The best solution depends on your firm's size, budget, and existing technology infrastructure. Some examples (as of September 2026) include:

- Together platform: Provides automated mentor matching, participant management, and program analytics.
- Mentorloop: Offers customizable matching criteria, participant tracking, and reporting tools.
- Existing firm systems: Smaller firms may successfully manage mentorship programs using existing tools such as Microsoft Excel, Deltek Vision, or other internal databases and project management systems, providing a cost-effective alternative to dedicated mentorship software.

03

Matching



03 Matching

The mentor-mentee matching process is one of the most important factors influencing the success of a mentorship program. A thoughtful matching strategy helps establish productive relationships, aligns participant expectations, and increases the likelihood that both mentors and mentees will remain engaged.

There is no single matching method that works for every firm. The appropriate approach depends on factors such as firm size, program goals, organizational culture, and the career stages of participants. Some firms may benefit from a structured, data-driven approach, while others may prefer a more relationship-based process.

Four common matching approaches are:



Survey-based
matching



Mentor-led
matching



Mentee-led
matching



Randomized
matching

Each approach has advantages and considerations. Firms may choose one method or combine multiple approaches to best support their goals.



Survey-Based Matching

Survey-based matching uses participant information to create intentional mentor-mentee pairings based on shared goals, experience, preferences, and areas of expertise. This approach creates a structured process that reduces the potential for unconscious bias or mismatched expectations.

A survey can collect information such as:

- **Goals and aspirations:** Align mentees' professional goals with mentors' experience and expertise.
- **Skills and expertise:** Match mentees with mentors who have relevant technical, project, or leadership experience.
- **Shared interests:** Identify common interests, such as sustainability, project types, market sectors, or professional development goals.
- **Communication preferences:** Gather preferences for meeting frequency, communication style, and level of structure/formality.
- **Experience level:** Consider career stages, leadership experience, and professional responsibilities.
- **Representation and identity:** When appropriate, provide opportunities for individuals to connect with mentors who share or understand aspects of their background and experiences.

Survey information should not only be collected at program launch. Periodic surveys can help firms understand changing needs, evaluate program effectiveness, and improve future matching efforts.

Sample Matching Criteria

Once survey information has been collected, firms should establish clear criteria for evaluating potential matches. Criteria might include:

- **Professional alignment:**
Match mentees with mentors who have experience relevant to the mentee's interests or career goals.
- **Career development needs:**
Pair emerging professionals with mentors who can provide insight into their desired career path.
- **Communication and working style:**
Consider whether participants' preferences for feedback, collaboration, and communication are compatible.
- **Representation and perspective:**
Create opportunities for participants to learn from individuals with similar or different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Allowing mentors and mentees to identify preferred criteria, priorities, or potential limitations can help create stronger matches and increase participant ownership of the process.



Mentor-Led Matching

Mentor-led matching allows mentors to take an active role in identifying mentees they believe they can effectively support. This approach can increase mentor engagement by creating relationships based on shared interests, expertise, and professional goals.

Possible mentor-led approaches include:

- **Networking or matchmaking events:** Host a structured event where mentors and mentees have brief conversations with multiple potential matches. Following the event, mentors and mentees can identify relationships they would like to continue exploring.
- **Mentor-led learning groups:** Create small groups of mentees who meet with a mentor over several sessions. After participants become familiar with one another, mentors may establish more focused mentoring relationships.
- **Application process:** Provide mentors with anonymized mentee profiles, goals, or development interests. Mentors then identify individuals they feel they are best positioned to support.
- **Mentee pitch process:** Ask mentees to describe their professional goals, interests, and what they hope to gain from mentorship. Mentors then select mentees whose goals align with their experience and interests.

Benefits of Mentor-Led Matching

- **Increased mentor engagement:**
Mentors are more likely to invest in relationships where they feel their experience can provide meaningful value.
- **Strong alignment:**
Matches are often based on shared interests, expertise, and development goals.
- **Efficient relationship building:**
Mentors can help identify where their skills and experience are most relevant.
- **Greater ownership:**
Participants may feel more invested when they have an active role in forming the relationship.

Mentor-led and mentee-led processes can also be combined to create a shared selection process.

It may seem obvious, as commitment from both mentors and mentees is always necessary, but for this type of matching process to be successful, the buy-in of mentors is absolutely required; if they are not on board from the beginning, this approach will fall flat.



Mentee-Led Matching

A mentee-led matching process gives emerging professionals greater ownership in selecting a mentor based on their career goals, interests, and preferred learning style. This approach can be particularly effective for firms seeking to empower employees to take an active role in their professional development.

Possible mentee-led approaches include:

- **Mentor profiles or database:** Provide mentees with profiles of available mentors, including:
 - Areas of expertise
 - Project experience
 - Career background
 - Professional interests
 - Availability
 - Communication preferencesMentees review profiles and identify mentors they believe align with their goals.
- **Self-selection through outreach:** Mentees contact potential mentors directly with an introduction explaining their interests and why they believe the mentor may be a good fit.
- **Exploratory meetings:** Mentees meet with multiple potential mentors before selecting a long-term mentoring relationship.
- **Facilitated selection process:** Mentors provide information about their interests and availability, after which mentees indicate their preferred matches. A program coordinator can then facilitate final pairings.

Benefits of Mentee-Led Matching

- **Greater mentee ownership:**
Mentees take responsibility for identifying the support they need.
- **Higher engagement:**
Participants may be more invested when they actively choose their mentor.
- **Better alignment:**
Mentees can prioritize mentors whose experience, leadership style, and expertise match their goals.

For firms with many early-career professionals, a mentee-led approach can be especially valuable because it encourages agency and intentional career development. Do take care to consider mentor bandwidth, so as to not overload any one mentor.



Randomized Matching

Randomized matching creates mentor-mentee relationships without relying on participant selection. This approach can introduce new perspectives, reduce selection bias, and create opportunities for connections that may not have otherwise occurred.

Possible randomized approaches include:

- **Automated or lottery matching:** Mentors and mentees are randomly paired. Clear expectations and program guidance are important to help participants build successful relationships.
- **Randomized group mentorship:** Create small groups consisting of multiple mentors and mentees. Group size should reflect mentor availability and comfort level.
- **Career stage or interest-based matching:** Randomly assign participants within defined categories, such as career stage, project type, or professional interests.
- **Speed mentoring:** Organize short introductory conversations between mentors and mentees. Participants rotate through multiple conversations before identifying potential connections.

Benefits of Randomized Matching

- **Diverse perspectives:**
Participants may gain insights from colleagues outside their immediate teams or disciplines.
- **Reduced bias:**
Randomization creates a more equitable starting point by limiting personal preferences or existing networks.
- **Expanded connections:**
Participants develop relationships across the organization or profession.

When launching a new mentorship program, randomized matching can be an effective starting point because it provides a simple, transparent, and inclusive process.

Mentor-Mentee Matching Criteria

Regardless of the matching method selected, firms should consider several factors when developing mentor-mentee pairings.

Goals & Expectations

Successful relationships begin with alignment around purpose and desired outcomes.

Consider:

- What does the mentee hope to gain from the relationship?
- Does the mentor have relevant experience to support those goals?
- Do participants have a shared understanding of expectations regarding meeting frequency, communication, and commitment?

Compatibility

A strong match depends on more than professional experience. Personal compatibility can influence trust, communication, and long-term success.

Consider:

- Does the mentee prefer hands-on guidance, discussion, observation, or structured feedback?
- How can communication preferences support establishment of trust and mutual respect?
- Can the mentor can adapt their approach to support the mentee's learning/working style?

Learning & Coaching Styles

Mentors and mentees should understand how each person prefers to share and receive information.

Consider:

- Does the mentee prefer hands-on guidance, discussion, observation, or structured feedback?
- Can the mentor can adapt their approach to support the mentee's learning style?

Commitment

Mentorship requires consistent participation from both individuals—a function of both the level of support they receive from the firm and their individual commitment to supporting a successful mentorship experience.

Consider:

- What is each person's availability?
- What meeting frequency is expected?
- How much time can they commit to the mentorship relationship and activities?
- What is each participant's willingness to prepare, participate, and follow through?

Commonality, Diversity & Perspective

Strong mentorship programs create opportunities for individuals to learn from a range of experiences and perspectives.

Consider:

- What are the demographic, cultural, life experience, and career path commonalities that can be a basis for connection among mentors and mentees?
- What are the demographic, cultural, life experience, and career path differences that can provide new perspectives and broaden understanding?
- How committed is each participant to principles of trust, respect, and openness in the mentorship relationship?

Motivation

The success of a mentorship relationship depends on the commitment of both participants.

Consider:

- Does the mentor have a genuine interest in supporting another professional's growth?
- Is the mentee prepared to seek feedback, ask questions, and act on guidance?
- Are both individuals committed to ongoing learning and development?

04

Benefits & Guidelines



04 Benefits & Guidelines

Benefits for Mentors

Mentorship provides meaningful professional and personal benefits for experienced professionals, including:

- **Fresh perspectives:** Mentees can introduce new ideas, approaches, and perspectives, particularly when they bring different backgrounds, experiences, or areas of expertise.
- **Exposure to emerging practices:** Mentors can learn about new frameworks, technologies, workflows, tools, and industry trends through their mentees.
- **Leadership development:** Guiding others strengthens communication, coaching, empathy, and leadership skills.
- **Professional fulfillment:** Sharing knowledge and supporting the growth of others can reinforce a mentor's sense of purpose and connection to the profession.

Benefits for Mentees

Mentees benefit from access to experience, guidance, and professional support, including:

- **Accelerated development:** Mentees can learn from a mentor's experience, helping them navigate challenges and make more informed decisions.
- **Career guidance and support:** Mentors provide encouragement, perspective, and advice throughout the mentorship relationship and at key career moments.
- **Access to expertise:** Mentees gain insight into project delivery, professional expectations, leadership approaches, and industry practices.
- **Expanded networks:** Mentors can help mentees build professional relationships and increase visibility within the firm and profession.

Guidelines Specific to Mentors and Mentees

Successful mentorship requires active participation from both individuals. Establishing clear expectations early in the mentorship relationship helps create productive, meaningful relationships.

Effective mentors:

- **Listen and learn first:** Seek to deeply understand the mentee's goals, experiences, and challenges before offering guidance.
- **Establish expectations:** Discuss goals, meeting frequency, communication preferences, and the desired structure of the relationship.
- **Encourage independence:** Support mentees in developing confidence, judgment, and decision-making skills.
- **Share experience, not just answers:** Use personal experience to guide conversations while allowing mentees to develop their own solutions.
- **Provide constructive and feedback:** Offer feedback that is specific, actionable, and focused on growth. Recognize that if there are cultural or demographic differences between mentors and mentees, there can be a higher tendency for mentors to provide feedback that is vague and focused on aesthetic standards, personality, and appearance conformity. Aim in all cases to provide feedback that is very specific and is focused on the core practice, business, and career knowledge and insights mentorship programs are intended to further.

Effective mentees:

- **Communicate openly:** Share goals, challenges, and areas where support is needed.
- **Set goals:** Identify specific development objectives and be engaged in establishing ways to measure progress.
- **Be open to feedback:** Approach feedback with curiosity and a willingness to learn.

- **Take initiative:** Prepare for meetings, ask thoughtful questions, and actively participate in the relationship.
- **Request ongoing feedback:** Seek input regularly to better understand strengths and opportunities for growth.

Guidelines for the Ongoing Mentor–Mentee Relationship

Strong mentorship relationships are built over time through trust, consistency, and mutual respect. The following practices help create a productive and sustainable relationship.

Establish Mutual Understanding

Mentors and mentees should work together to establish:

- **Trust and confidentiality:** Create an environment where participants can have open and honest conversations.
- **Regular check-ins:** Maintain consistent meetings to discuss progress, challenges, and evolving goals.
- **Flexibility:** Adjust the relationship as professional responsibilities and development needs change.
- **Mutual respect:** Recognize and value each participant’s experience, perspective, and contributions.

Maintain Professionalism

Successful mentorship relationships require the same professionalism expected in other workplace relationships.

Participants should:

- **Respect boundaries:** Maintain appropriate professional boundaries and recognize individual preferences.
- **Value time:** Arrive prepared and respect each other’s commitments.
- **Follow through:** Apply lessons learned, complete agreed-upon actions, and demonstrate progress.
- **Express appreciation:** Recognize the time, effort, and support invested by both participants.

Meeting Frequency Guidelines

The ideal meeting frequency depends on the goals of the mentorship relationship, the participants’ availability, and the level of support needed. The following framework provides a starting point:

- **Initial phase:** Meet more frequently (such as biweekly or monthly) to establish rapport, define goals, and develop a foundation for the relationship.
- **Ongoing phase:** Transition to regular check-ins (such as monthly or every six weeks) to discuss progress, challenges, and professional development.
- **Goal-based adjustments:** Adjust meeting frequency based on specific objectives, project timelines, or career milestones.
- **Informal connections:** Use email, calls, or brief conversations between meetings for timely questions or support.
- **Accountability:** Periodically review goals and reflect on progress to ensure the relationship continues to provide value.

For firms implementing formal mentorship programs, providing participants with recommended meeting structures, discussion topics, and progress checkpoints can improve consistency while still allowing relationships to develop naturally.

05

Post-Licensure Mentorship



05 Post-Licensure Mentorship

Purpose and Goals

Post-licensure mentorship plays a critical role in supporting architects as they transition from technical contributors to firm leaders.

→ While licensure represents an important professional milestone, it is only the beginning of developing the broader skills required for long-term success in practice.

Effective post-licensure mentorship helps architects strengthen skills in project leadership, client relationships, business operations, and strategic decision-making. It also supports the development of individual design perspectives, professional confidence, and leadership capabilities needed for future roles in firm leadership, ownership, or specialized areas of practice.

For firms, investing in post-licensure mentorship creates a stronger leadership pipeline, improves knowledge transfer, and supports long-term employee engagement and retention.

Key Goals

Post-licensure mentorship should support the following areas of professional growth:

- Transition from practitioner to leader: Develop the skills needed to guide teams, make decisions, and take ownership of project outcomes.
- Strengthen project and business skills: Build capabilities in project management, client engagement, financial acumen, staffing, and firm operations.
- Develop professional confidence: Encourage architects to strengthen their design voice, technical judgment, and decision-making abilities.
- Prepare for future leadership opportunities: Create pathways toward firm leadership, ownership, specialized roles, or other areas of professional advancement.

These goals should guide mentorship conversations and provide a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of post-licensure development efforts.

Best Practices

Shift from Technical Development to Strategic Leadership

Post-licensure mentorship should move beyond technical skill development and focus on broader leadership responsibilities.

Mentors can encourage architects to take ownership of:

- Client meetings and presentations
- Project strategy and decision-making
- Proposals and business development opportunities
- Team communication and project direction

Support Professional Role Transitions

The transition from project architect to project manager, or from designer to design leader, or from specialist to broader management roles requires new skills and responsibilities. Mentorship should help architects develop capabilities in:

- Delegation and team leadership.
- Budget awareness and project financial management.
- Communication with clients, consultants, and internal teams.
- Balancing design goals with project constraints and technical expertise.

Provide Stretch Opportunities with Support

Growth often occurs through experience. Firms should provide opportunities for emerging leaders to take on increased responsibility while maintaining appropriate support and feedback.

Effective approaches include:

- Assigning leadership responsibilities with clear expectations
- Allowing mentees to lead meetings or project initiatives
- Providing timely feedback and opportunities for reflection
- Creating a culture where learning through experience is encouraged

Expand Mentorship to a Fuller Scope

Post-licensure architects benefit from exposure to the full scope of firm operations. Consider pairing mentees with mentors from different areas of the organization, including:

- Business development
- Operations
- Human resources
- Finance
- Practice leadership

Cross-disciplinary mentorship helps architects understand how decisions are made beyond project design and delivery.

Mentorship Tools and Formats

Effective post-licensure mentorship requires a combination of structured conversations, practical experiences, and opportunities for professional growth. Firms should consider multiple formats based on the needs of their employees and organizational structure.

Mentor Circles

Small groups of emerging leaders can meet with a senior leader to discuss professional challenges, leadership topics, and industry trends. This mentor circle approach provides access to multiple perspectives while reducing the time commitment required for one-on-one mentorship.

Peer Mentoring

Architects can be paired with colleagues who are just a few years ahead in their careers. Peer mentors can provide relevant guidance on navigating similar career transitions, project responsibilities, and leadership challenges.

Leadership Shadowing

Another approach is to provide opportunities for mentees to observe strategic conversations, such as:

- Staffing discussions
- Business development meetings
- Project reviews
- Firm leadership conversations

Shadowing helps emerging leaders understand the broader responsibilities of firm leadership.

Project Role Rotation

Rotating project roles creates opportunities for architects to gain experience across different responsibilities, such as:

- Design leadership
- Project management
- Client engagement
- Practice area initiatives

Exposure to different roles helps architects identify strengths and prepare for future career opportunities.

These mentorship formats should be adapted to support individual development goals. Evaluation should focus on whether the experience is helping mentees progress toward their professional objectives.

Career Conversations and Professional Networks

Mentorship should include intentional conversations about long-term career development. Regular discussions help architects identify opportunities, understand potential career paths, and align their goals with available opportunities within the firm.

Encourage Career Planning

Mentors should encourage mentees to consider:

- Three- to five-year professional goals as well as several long-term career paths and aspirations
- Desired areas of growth that relate to those goals and aspirations
- Leadership interests and opportunities
- Skills or experiences needed to advance within and potentially beyond the firm

Career mapping helps transform mentorship from a reactive relationship into a proactive development strategy.

Support Network Development

Professional growth is strengthened through meaningful relationships both inside and outside the firm. Mentors can help mentees expand their networks by:

- Introducing them to clients and consultants
- Connecting them with industry peers
- Encouraging participation in professional organizations such as AIA, NOMA, and other industry groups
- Recommending conferences, juries, and leadership opportunities

Develop Future Mentors

An important outcome of mentorship is preparing future generations of leaders to support others. Encouraging mentees to mentor emerging professionals reinforces their own leadership skills and strengthens the firm's culture of knowledge sharing.

Maintain Ongoing Check-Ins

Post-licensure development is an ongoing process. Firms should encourage regular check-ins—such as quarterly conversations—to review goals, discuss challenges, identify opportunities, and adjust development plans as careers evolve.

06

Program Evaluation & Recognition



AIA Minnesota Next Gen Leaders: Nathan Davies, Assoc. AIA, NOMA; Nate Anderson, AIA; Nicole Bauknight, Assoc. AIA, NOMA.

06 Program Evaluation & Recognition

Evaluation and recognition are essential parts of building and sustaining a successful mentorship program.

A consistent evaluation process helps firms measure progress, understand participant experiences, identify opportunities for improvement, and ensure the program continues to meet the needs of both employees and the organization.

Recognition efforts reinforce the priority the firm places on mentorship and how much the efforts of mentors and mentees is valued by the firm. It also creates opportunities to lift up models and examples for others to learn from.

Evaluation Methods and Questions

Evaluation should not be viewed only as a measure of success or failure. Instead, it should serve as an ongoing feedback loop that supports stronger mentor-mentee relationships and allows the program to evolve over time.

Evaluation methods may include:

- Regular conversations during mentor-mentee meetings
- Written reflections or feedback forms
- Participant surveys
- Focus groups or program review discussions

Broad Evaluation Questions

Questions posed should ensure a continuum of potential answers and encourage expansive, thoughtfully considered responses. Open-ended feedback provides valuable insight into participant experiences and helps identify opportunities for improvement.

Consider asking all participants:

- **What has been the most valuable aspect of the mentorship program?**
- **What changes or improvements would strengthen the program?**
- **What additional resources or support would improve the mentorship experience?**
- **Are there other comments or suggestions you would like to share about your experience?**

Evaluation Questions Specific to Mentors

Mentors should reflect on the effectiveness of the relationship and their role in supporting the mentee's development.

Consider:

- **Is the mentee engaged and taking initiative?** To what extent is the mentee actively working toward their professional development goals?
- **Is the mentee making progress?** How much has the mentee grown in the areas they identified as priorities? Are there barriers where additional guidance or support could be helpful?
- **Is there a strong relationship foundation?** To what extent do you feel comfortable having open, productive conversations about professional challenges and opportunities with your mentee?

Evaluation Questions for Mentees

Mentees should evaluate whether the relationship is providing meaningful guidance and support.

Consider:

- **Is the mentor providing valuable guidance?** How would you rate and describe the quality and usefulness of the feedback, advice, and perspective you have received?
- **Is the mentor helping address challenges?** To what extent have you identified obstacles or opportunities where your mentor can provide insight or support, and are you receiving it?
- **Is there a strong relationship foundation?** To what extent do you feel comfortable discussing goals, challenges, and professional questions openly with your mentor?

Evaluation Models

When designing a mentorship program, firms should determine how closely the program should connect to formal employee development processes. Two common approaches are the “professional development” model and the “safe space” model.

Professional Development Model

The Professional Development Model integrates mentorship with broader employee growth strategies, career planning, and performance development. This approach positions mentorship as a structured tool for building skills, preparing employees for advancement, and supporting succession planning.

This model works best when mentor-mentee pairings are intentionally aligned with development goals and organizational needs.

Benefits include:

- **Direct connection to career growth:** Mentorship can address specific skills, experiences, and competencies employees (both mentees and mentors) need to develop.
- **Alignment with firm needs:** Programs can support organizational priorities such as leadership development, project management, and future staffing needs.
- **Recognition of growth:** Firms may incorporate mentorship outcomes into broader development conversations, including opportunities for advancement, increased responsibility, or expanded roles.

For example, a mentee may identify a goal of developing stronger project management skills and work with a mentor to create opportunities for learning, reflection, and practical experience.

Similarly, a mentor may be identified as needing to grow in their communications or coaching skills. Feedback of a mentee may point toward growth or further development needed in these areas.

Safe Space Model

The Safe Space Model separates mentorship from formal performance evaluation systems. The goal is to create an environment where participants can have open and candid conversations about career development, workplace challenges, and professional experiences.

This model requires clear communication from firm leadership that mentorship discussions will remain separate from performance reviews unless participants choose otherwise.

Benefits include:

- **Encourages honest conversations:** Mentees may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics, such as career uncertainty, workplace challenges, or questions about advancement.
- **Builds trust:** Mentors can provide guidance and perspective without the relationship feeling evaluative.
- **Supports employee well-being:** Participants have a dedicated space to discuss challenges and seek advice.

Both models can be effective. The appropriate approach depends on the firm’s goals, culture, and level of trust within the organization. Some firms may choose to incorporate elements of both models by using mentorship for professional development planning while maintaining clear boundaries around performance evaluation.

Recognition & Reward

Recognition Matters

Recognition is an important part of sustaining participation and demonstrating that mentorship is valued by the organization.

—> Firms should consider ways to acknowledge mentors and mentees who contribute meaningfully to the program.

Recognition strategies may include:

- Highlighting successful mentorship relationships
- Recognizing mentors who dedicate significant time and effort
- Celebrating mentee growth and accomplishments
- Including mentorship participation as part of broader firm culture initiatives
- Ensuring mentorship is considered in the context of promotions, salary increases, or other rewards

Evaluation questions related to recognition might include:

- How well do you believe participants in the mentorship program are being recognized for their efforts?
- How meaningful do you find the firm's acknowledgment of mentorship engagement and outcomes?
- How might we celebrate successful mentorship relationships and outcomes?

Disparate Responsibility and Reward for Mentoring

Firms should go into the development of a formal mentorship program being aware of current patterns of behavior in their organization related to informal mentorship. Who tend to be those most expected or encouraged to mentor? Who takes time to do so, and who defers to others? Who is lifted up for their mentorship efforts, and does that praise or recognition actually reflect the time and attention put toward the effort and its outcomes?

Mentorship is often unevenly encouraged, expected, and rewarded. Some members of the firm may be more often encouraged or expected to take on mentorship roles than others, and expectations of compliance with all aspects of formal mentorship programs may be inconsistent based on role or various types of power in the organization.

Firms need to be aware of this potential unevenness, look for patterns, and address them. Disparate distribution of mentorship responsibilities, and uneven compliance with or reward for meeting mentorship program requirements, can undercut employee morale and the integrity of mentorship efforts.

Conclusion

The AIA St. Paul Mentorship Task Force has put forward these recommendations with the intention of prompting firm leaders, mentors, mentees, and others in the architecture community to take action: not just to start up a new mentorship program or to strengthen an existing one, but to make mentorship a stronger priority in the architecture profession for the benefit of all.

We hope that what is outlined in this report proves helpful. We also know that the perspectives and recommendations it contains are not the final word. As AIA St. Paul is a foundational partner in the AIA Minnesota Next Gen Initiative, which includes attention to mentorship for at least the next four years, we welcome readers' insights and suggestions related to this report and ideas for next steps to support firm mentorship efforts.



From our experience as both mentees and mentors, we know that **mentorship done well can be incredibly rewarding**; it can fuel the skills, knowledge, and networks that grow meaningful workdays and propel careers forward. Thank you for the work you are doing to make this potential a reality.



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