



THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE
OF ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS

THE ULTIMATE SIX-STEP GUIDE TO GETTING YOUR FIRST JOB IN ARCHITECTURE

EVERYTHING FRESH-OUT-OF-SCHOOL ARCHITECTS NEED TO
KNOW TO SUCCESSFULLY LAND THEIR FIRST JOB.

*Your diploma is freshly inked.
You've polished your portfolio to
perfection. The years of hard work
have all led to this: landing your first
architecture job. It's time to step out
of the classroom and into the real
world of billing rates and construction
documents.*

In 2018 Black Spectacles partnered with The American Institute of Architecture Students to create Thrive: A Career Prep Program. Thrive brought together practicing architects and industry HR professionals to share their been-there-done-that advice about breaking into the profession.

This guide is chock-full of their tips about how to target the right firms, build your network, stand out in interviews and navigate your first job offer.

*“Picture your career like a dart board.
You need to aim for the dart board, but
not the bullseye. Make sure you’re going
in the right direction. Work harder than
that person next to you, and you could
do anything.”*

Matt Dumich

Senior Architect

Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture



STEP 1

SURVEY THE SCENE

“The most important resource in any firm is the people who work there. Regardless of size, the best and worst experiences come down to the people.”

— Troy Hoggard, Principal, Cannon Design

Where do you ultimately want to land? From small 10-person shops to international firms that employ thousands, different firms make sense for different people.

Every firm has its pros and cons. Though there can be many similarities between large firms, don't assume all the big guys provide the same experience. Same goes for smaller and mid-size firms.

At the end of the day, it's best to be realistic and open to different experiences, large or small. Your first job might not become your dream job — though it always could turn out that way! At this stage in your career, all firms will offer a valuable learning experience. It's worth exploring opportunities at firms of all sizes.

LARGE FIRMS

Large firms often hire young architects in groups, or cohorts. So if you land at a large firm, you can expect to start around the same time as people at a similar level and experience. You'll be in this together — but not everyone will work on the same projects or have the same opportunities.

Due to their size and the volume of clients, larger firms tend to have more clearly defined roles for new employees. You'll likely start off helping to execute a specific part of the architecture process for a specific type of project.

Large Firm Pros

Large pool of resources. The most up-to-date software, licenses, and technology.

Formalized onboarding, professional development and licensure programs.

Organized after-work social events to meet your coworkers and fellow architects.

Large Firm Cons

Little fish in a big pond. You may receive less individual attention.

Narrow project exposure. You could get assigned to types of work outside of your areas of interest.

May be required to follow formal company guidelines, which can feel more rigid.

SMALL AND MID-SIZED FIRMS

A smaller or mid-sized firm can be a great place to get exposure to different aspects of the architecture process early on. As a fresh-out-of-school grad, your first projects will be small but diverse. If you do well, you should quickly be added to more complex project teams. In a smaller firm, you also can have more impact. For example, the firm might not have an AutoCAD aficionado; so you can be the one who steps up and brings that knowledge and passion to the table.

Keep in mind you'll be working with the exact same group of people day-in and day-out on every single project. While every office has its fair share of strong personalities, make sure they're ones you can jive with.

Small Firm Pros

Greater responsibility from day one on a smaller, tight-knit team.

Immediate exposure to a variety of projects and tasks, with the opportunity to quickly grow your skills.

Family-like culture with direct access to architects at your firm from all levels.

Small Firm Cons

May have a less formal onboarding and professional development process.

Might need to be proactive to acquire resources such as new software or receive financial support to pursue licensure.

Learning on the go. You may be tasked with projects outside your experience level.

RAMP UP YOUR NETWORKING GAME

Many recent grads start their job search by filling out as many online job applications as they can find, then hoping they you hear back from a few.

This is rarely effective! Firms want to hire someone who does more than the bare minimum, even in the job search process. Being proactive will help you stand out. Your “in” to any firm will likely be through a personal connection. So it’s time to start making as many of those as possible.

Your in-person networking approach should be three-pronged:

1) BECOME A MEMBER OF YOUR LOCAL AIA CHAPTER

Membership provides access to local events where you can network with architects at different career stages who work at different kinds of firms. Attend as many events as you can.

2) GET ACTIVE IN THE ARCHITECTURE COMMUNITY

Go to architecture-related events where you live. Find an organization where you can volunteer, such as with your town’s historical society. You could also give tours of architecturally significant buildings. It’s a good networking move — and good for your resume.

3) REACH OUT TO ARCHITECTS TO SCHEDULE ONE-ON-ONE COFFEE MEETINGS

Use these meetings to learn about what it’s like to work in the field. Ask them about their own career path and lessons learned. Gather intel about the workplace culture at firms where you might want to work.



HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A COFFEE MEETING

REACHING OUT TO PEOPLE
YOU DON'T KNOW MIGHT FEEL
AWKWARD AT FIRST. THIS IS
NORMAL, AND IT WILL FEEL
MORE NATURAL AS YOU TALK
TO MORE PEOPLE.

AS AN ADDED BONUS, THESE
LOW-STAKES, INFORMATIONAL
MEETINGS WILL PREPARE YOU
FOR THOSE HIGHER-STAKES
JOB INTERVIEWS. YOU'LL
BECOME MORE COMFORTABLE
TALKING ABOUT YOURSELF,
ASKING QUESTIONS AND
JUST MAKING CONVERSATION
— WHICH ARE THE SKILLS
YOU'LL NEED TO DO WELL IN
INTERVIEWS.

IDENTIFY WHERE YOU THINK YOU'D LIKE TO WORK

What are a few firms where you'd like to work? Use LinkedIn to find entry and mid-level architects who work there. You could also reach out to architects you've met at AIA events and while volunteering.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

See if you have anything in common to kick off the conversation. Did you go to the same school? Do you know any of the same people? If so, can those people introduce you? Otherwise you can shoot them a note on LinkedIn.

OFFER TO MEET IN-PERSON

Always ask for an in-person meeting. Even if they opt for a phone meeting instead, you'll never know if they're willing to meet face-to-face unless you try. Suggest times you are available, but be clear that you're flexible and will work around their schedule.

MAKE IT CONVENIENT

Offer to meet close to their office — or even at their office — for just 30 minutes. This makes it easier for them to say yes.

PREPARE QUESTIONS

Review their firm's website beforehand to learn what they're about. Look at the person's LinkedIn profile again. How might this person be able to help you? Have questions prepared. It's okay to have an "ask."

SHOW UP EARLY

Show up at least 15 minutes early to grab a table and get settled. Get your own drink ahead of time so that you're ready to go.

OFFER TO BUY THEIR COFFEE

They're freely giving their time, advice and help. Always offer to buy their drink. It's the least you can do to show your appreciation.

MAIL A THANK YOU NOTE

Send a handwritten note afterwards to thank them for their time. It might seem archaic, but it's a nice gesture that will be appreciated. It will leave a positive impression and help keep you top of mind if a job opens up.

STEP 3

POLISH YOUR LINKEDIN AND RESUME

Before you apply for jobs, make sure to optimize your LinkedIn profile and resume for hiring managers and recruiters. Here's how to put your best foot forward.

POLISH YOUR LINKEDIN PROFILE

A good LinkedIn profile for an entry-level architect includes the following:

- Professional photo
- Summary describing your skills and architecture-related interests
- Detailed educational experience
- Volunteer experience
- Participation in relevant organizations



LEVERAGE THE RIGHT KEYWORDS

Before your resume reaches hiring managers or recruiters, it will need to “pass” the company’s online system requirements first. Recruiting platforms act as gatekeepers, and they sort through resumes by looking for keywords. Your resume may get overlooked if you don’t take the time to tweak your resume to include the correct language.

Don’t just skim job descriptions for entry-level architects; study them. Are there any similarities in what firms are looking for? Which skills and capabilities are specifically relevant to you? Incorporate those keywords throughout your LinkedIn profile and resume.

BE HONEST

Be honest about your skills and background. If you don’t meet the basic requirements for the job, don’t stretch the truth by using keywords that don’t match your skill set. Firms will also closely be reviewing your portfolio; if your resume or LinkedIn profile appear to be overpromising your abilities, they’ll move on.

APPLY FOR JOBS

“Don’t get discouraged. This takes time. Even if you get rejected from a firm, a door may open up down the line. A lot of times I can’t hire great talent because it’s not the right time for that skill set. A few months or even a week later, that might change.” — Amy Elstein, Regional Talent Acquisition Manager, Gensler

You should now be in a good position to apply for jobs. Here are a few tips to stand out among other candidates and make it to the next stage.

01:

Start small

Begin applying to just a handful of firms. Tailor your resume and application according to their job description requirements. You’ll likely see better results if you tweak your resume for a few firms’ requirements rather than sending the same resume to 50 firms.

02:

Write cover letters

Write a new cover letter for each job. These should be three short paragraphs each. Begin with an introductory paragraph about your background and skills. Next, explain what excites you most about this firm. Close with a paragraph about why you’re a great fit for this particular job.

03:

Ask for a referral

To stand out in a sea of online applications, it always helps to have someone from the inside refer you. Remember those coffee meetings? Start with the ones that went especially well. Ask those contacts if there are any openings at their firm and if they would be willing to share your application with HR.



04:

Keep track

Create a spreadsheet to keep track of where you applied and when. Two weeks after applying, reach out to the hiring manager to follow up via email. Tell them that you're excited to learn about next steps and ask if they need anything else from you to move forward.

05:

Be patient and polite

This is rarely a fast process. Even though you're eager to get a job ASAP, remember that hiring managers are juggling several candidates and jobs at once in addition to their regular responsibilities. Though it's fine to follow up once or twice over the course of a few weeks, calling or emailing every single day is overkill.

NAIL THE INTERVIEW

“It’s really valuable to ask a lot of questions. We learn a lot about you just by what you ask. Have a good list of questions to hit us with. You should never leave an interview early. Why would you? We’re sitting here. Use us as a resource.”

— Troy Hoggard, Principal, Cannon Design

Asked to come in for an interview? Congratulations! Even if you’re not totally sold on the job, take the interview. It’s good experience, and you might be surprised by what you learn about the position and the firm.

Do

01:

Get there early.

Dress professionally. If you’re not sure what the dress code is, ask.

02:

Practice ahead of time.

Most interviews begin with, “Tell me about yourself.” Come prepared with your answers to common questions.

03:

Bring copies of your resume.

Print at least five copies to bring to the interview. This gives your interviewers something to reference during your conversation.

Don’t

01:

Worry about being nervous.

It’s natural and expected, especially during your first few interviews.

02:

Expect every interviewer to have context.

You might speak with several people. Everyone might not have seen your resume or portfolio yet.

03:

Take your phone into the interview.

Leave your phone in your bag and make sure it’s turned off. Better yet, leave it in the car or at home. You don’t want any distractions.

04:

Ask lots of questions.

Interviews are a two-way street. Remember you're interviewing the firm, too.

04:

Ask about salary.

You will have the opportunity at a later stage to discuss salary, compensation and benefits with HR.

05:

Ask what a typical project looks like.

This helps you get an idea of how the firm might expect you to contribute to projects.

05:

Ask if you have to work weekends.

This sounds like you're not willing to work hard. Frame the question differently. How does the firm handle tight deadlines?

06:

Focus on your extracurriculars.

Since you don't yet have on-the-job experience, this will supplement your portfolio and resume.

06:

Oversell your capabilities.

Firm do not expect an entry-level architect to know everything. If you imply that you do, they won't buy it.

07:

Be succinct in your answers.

Make sure you leave enough time in the interview to go over everything your interviewers want to discuss.

07:

Close without asking questions.

This is your opportunity to demonstrate that you've prepared specifically for this interview.

08:

Mail thank you notes.

Send them to everyone you speak with. Do this within 24 hours while the conversations are still fresh. Thank people for their time and reiterate your enthusiasm for the job.

08:

Forget to write down names.

You brought a notebook, right? Write down the names of everyone you meet and jot down a few notes. Reference something you discussed in your thank you card.



WE CANNOT STRESS THIS ENOUGH: ASK AS MANY QUESTIONS AS TIME PERMITS.

Many candidates don't ask questions. It's a huge missed opportunity. Come prepared with an arsenal of questions. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- What's something you're excited to be working on right now?
- Why do you like working here?
- Why did you decide to work here?
- What has your career path been here?
- For someone at my level, what are the most important qualities to excel?
- What kind of work and responsibilities can I expect in this role?
- What are the firm's key priorities for the next six to 12 months?

NAVIGATE YOUR OFFER

“Save the awkward or sensitive conversations for HR. What do you need to ask that you don’t feel comfortable asking anyone else?” — Amy Elstein, Regional Talent Acquisition Manager, Gensler

Getting an offer is cause for celebration! But it can also be a bit overwhelming. If any part of your compensation package is unclear, ask for clarification. Look for answers to the following questions as you review your offer:

ARE YOU HOURLY OR SALARIED?

Compensation is handled differently at every firm. Make sure you understand how it works. At an hourly rate, you will get paid overtime if you work over 40 hours in one week. At a salaried rate, you’ll get paid the same salary no matter how many hours you work.

HOW MUCH PERSONAL TIME OFF (PTO) DO YOU GET?

Some firms combine sick days and vacation days into one pool of personal days. You may not get all of these days right off the bat. You may need to work for the firm for a certain period of time before you accrue PTO.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH INSURANCE OPTIONS?

Does your firm offer health insurance? Are there different packages you can choose from? Review all your options carefully before selecting one. If you’re unsure about the pros and cons between plans, bring any questions to HR. If the firm has a probationary period, you might not be able to access benefits for a few months. A probationary period is like a trial period so the firm can be sure you’re competent, reliable and qualified before you’re eligible to receive benefits.

A FEW POINTERS ABOUT NEGOTIATION

CAN YOU NEGOTIATE YOUR FIRST OFFER? IT DEPENDS. FIRST AND FOREMOST, BE REALISTIC. YOU’RE NOT LIKELY TO MAKE SIX FIGURES AT YOUR FIRST ARCHITECTURE JOB. USE GLASSDOOR TO RESEARCH TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL ARCHITECT SALARIES IN YOUR AREA.

THAT DOESN’T MEAN YOU CAN’T NEGOTIATE. THERE MAY BE SOME WIGGLE ROOM. IT NEVER HURTS TO ASK.

- Present a business case for a higher salary. “I want more money” isn’t compelling enough.
- Negotiate other parts of your compensation, such as your personal time off days.

There's no secret to getting your first job in architecture. The process takes persistence, patience and practice. Along the way, you may make a few mistakes or blank on an interview question. You might flat-out get rejected — or never hear back about your dream job. It sucks, but it happens. Keep powering through and use any mishap as a learning experience to improve.



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