

## business issues

# REMAIN CALM (AND RELEVANT)

BY ANNE SCARLETT

How to remain relevant in an ever-changing  
business world.

**WHAT IS YOUR FIRST REACTION** to this statement: “To maintain career satisfaction and job security, you must remain relevant?”

Do you exclaim: “Challenge accepted!” Does it create anxiety? Does it perplex you because you’re not exactly sure what it means?

For the purposes of this article, let’s define relevance as the ability to provide practical, pertinent contributions to your sales process, clients, peers and design solutions. Here, relevance will be about making an impact and a difference.

Your reaction to the notion of relevancy may be guided by your generation as well as by your current position. Perhaps you are a well-known, highly revered business owner. Perhaps you are fairly seasoned, but you haven’t yet secured a position of ownership or senior leadership in your firm. Perhaps you are about eight years into your career and still aiming to make your mark. In any of those positions, you may find yourself stuck. Do others seek you out for advice, input and ideas? Do you often have a seat at the table? Are you involved in the firm’s strategic and sales efforts? If the answer is “no” to any of those questions, you may want to challenge your own relevancy.

### Obvious Steps

One way to stay relevant is continuing education—advanced degrees, CEU credits, certifications, online adult education and specialty training.

Many AEC firms recognize that your intellectual growth is mutually beneficial. And while they allocate funds for training and education, it’s your responsibility to proactively identify the best choices.

Questions you should ask: What will get you the most return for your efforts? Can you strategize with HR about what’s most needed at the firm? Do those needs align with your own aptitude and interests? Is it better to build upon your existing knowledge base or to learn a brand-new but complementary skill? Have you taken sales training courses? Does it matter? Are you up to date on the latest project management tools? Does it matter? Do you clearly understand the trends in your clients’ industries? Does it matter?

Find out what *matters*, and then make a plan to grow your credentials in that area.

### Less-obvious (but completely logical!)

Besides determining what sort of “growth” is most beneficial to your relevancy, consider these less-obvious tactics as well.

**“Findability”:** Are you findable? If someone were to search for you online, what would they discover? Would they think “savvy, progressive and intriguing” or would they think “out-

dated, stagnant and stale?” Or even worse, would they see very little—or nothing at all—about you? Are you the author (or subject) of articles, blog posts, speaking engagements or industry events? Are your profiles robust and up to date on sites such as LinkedIn, your company website and industry membership lists? Do you have any presence on social media? Conduct a vanity search, and then objectively assess the results. Consider the varied perspectives of your clients, employer and peers.

**Stay versed on the offerings of other business units (if you work in a multi-disciplined firm):** Years ago, I worked in the interiors studio at a multi-office AE firm. Our department was award-winning and profitable, and yet we felt like the firm’s stepchild. Why? Because we represented the least amount of revenue relative to the other business units. Our project scale was smaller, so we had to work extra hard to prove our value. But by remaining educated about the efforts of other business units, we were able to make a solid case for our own worth. Bottom line: It’s easy to develop tunnel vision and focus only on your area of the business. If you want to remain relevant, don’t let that happen. Broaden your point of view.

**Become proficient in at least one tool within each communication category.** Even if you are a billable technical professional, you are likely exposed to sales. The business developers in your firm have likely mastered the latest in terms of communications technologies. For example, rather than making in-person visits to the prospective clients, your business development folks may use Skype, Facetime, Google Hangouts, Citrix Online Meetings and other resources to communicate with them. Join them at the forefront of communication technologies. Experiment on your own time with these tools until you attain proficiency. This will keep you relevant.

**Stay abreast of current events and innovations.** Do you know about 3D printing and how it will impact your business?

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Have you tried to use the Uber car service app (at least once) to learn what the buzz is about? Do you have methods for quickly procuring top news items—whether from sources such as Daily Beast, Feedly (or other RSS feeds) or a customized home page in Google or Yahoo?

But wait a minute. What about all of your core responsibilities? And what about the decent amount of intellectual capital that you already possess? Won't additional content in your brain become a distraction?

Don't worry. It's not necessary to cultivate an in-depth understanding about the latest and greatest sales technique, computer-aided drawing software or public-private partnership approach. This is about establishing an initial awareness and then targeting areas worthy of a deeper working knowledge. You can file away some topics as "good to know" and keep other topics on the forefront if they truly add to your relevancy.

### **Is Relevancy Really Just a State of Mind?**

In addition to expanding your knowledge, there's a lot to be said for expanding your confidence as a means for increased relevancy.

Maybe some of you remember that old commercial featuring a brokerage firm that went something like: "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen." Imagine that feeling of everyone stopping abruptly to hear what you have to say. What are some additional ways that you can exude an aura of value and confidence, which will in turn encourage others to perceive you as relevant?

Here are some ideas:

**Physical fitness and appearance:** Do you believe in the impact of first impressions and how your appearance might convey and aura of relevancy? If yes, then aim to be impeccably groomed, reasonably fit and dressed with a fashion-forward sensibility that is suitable for your personality, work environment and client types. While the topic of physical looks may be somewhat taboo in business hiring circles, it doesn't change the fact that aesthetics matter, particularly if you are involved in sales and client interface.

**Reverse mentoring:** If you don't have people in your life that can help you to maintain a pulse on the current cultural landscape (kids, grandkids, etc.), then try reverse mentoring. Identify a younger, vibrant, promising staff member and schedule regular times to meet—much like a normal mentor-mentee relationship. Not only can these folks share what's happening from a general pop culture standpoint, but they can also converse about the latest terminology, trends, approaches and innovations in your industry. While you may already be somewhat versed with these topics, your reverse mentor will offer a fresh, highly curious and youthful perspective. Your awareness of their perspective will impact your overall relevancy.

**Teach at the university level:** An additional method to stay attuned to culture is teaching a university course. Not only will you grow to understand more about a younger generation, but you'll also master the latest communication technologies while interfacing with students. This translates to relevancy.

In a nutshell, try to be a lifelong learner, striving to be the best you can be. Or as the tech geeks might say, "Growth hack your personal brand, and see what happens!" ■