

KEY FINDINGS

AEC Talent Decision Drivers Survey

Respondent Snapshot

GENERATION

- 36% **Millennials**
29-44
- 34% **Gen X**
45-60
- 22% **Gen Z**
13-28
- 8% **Baby Boomers**
61+

CAREER LEVEL

- 47% **Senior-Career**
15+ years
- 22% **Mid-Career**
8-14 years
- 14% **Entry-Level**
0-3 years
- 13% **Early-Career**
4-7 years
- 3% **Student/Intern**

FIRM SIZE

- 43% **Small**
50-99
- 26% **Midsize**
100-499
- 22% **X-Small**
0-49
- 8% **Large**
500+

Who Your People Actually Respond To

Small firm advantage: respondents from smaller firms showed significantly higher responsiveness to leadership outreach.

① HIGHEST ENGAGEMENT

- » Relationship-based outreach:
 - Friends or colleagues
 - Firm leaders
 - Hiring managers

② MODERATE ENGAGEMENT

- » Internal HR / Talent Acquisition
- » LinkedIn

③ LOWER ENGAGEMENT

- » External recruiters
- » Job boards
- » Career fairs

The Hiring Process

Silence kills, not duration.

TOP FRUSTRATIONS

- » Slow or disorganized communication
- » Lack of transparency
- » Process too long
- » Unclear expectations
- » Feeling like just a number

74% Said the hiring process influenced their decision to accept an offer.

40% Said four weeks is when it feels too long.

35% Said timeline matters less than communication.

Why People Leave

Compensation ranked first when evaluating a new role, but when asked what made them leave, it fell well below leadership and burnout factors.

30% **Poor direct management**

29% **Poor firm leadership**

26% **Lack of clear career path**

26% **Workload or burnout**

23% **Compensation misalignment**

22% **Feeling undervalued**

19% **Misalignment with culture**

18% **Lack of mentorship**

**Respondents could select multiple factors.*

The Five Retention Drivers

- 1 LEADERSHIP CREDIBILITY**
Trust in leadership is foundational across every career level and generation. Senior professionals ranked leadership trust as more influential than compensation in their decision to stay or go. This means being honest about firm direction, acknowledging challenges, and not overpromising on growth, flexibility, or culture.
- 2 CAREER PATH CLARITY**
76% of respondents said career clarity meaningfully impacts their decision to stay. Professionals don't just want to grow, they want to know how. Mid-career professionals (8-14 years) are most sensitive to this. If the path is invisible, they assume it doesn't exist.
- 3 WORKLOAD SUSTAINABILITY**
Burnout is a consistent departure driver. People can handle hard seasons. What they cannot tolerate is a culture that pretends the hard season is normal and permanent.
- 4 FLEXIBILITY (BUT NOT WHAT YOU THINK)**
When asked what flexibility means, the top answer was not remote work. It was the ability to attend family and personal life events. Followed by adjustable start/end times, then remote/hybrid options. Flexibility is not a policy. It is daily manager behavior.
- 5 TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION**
Professionals at every career stage want leaders who communicate strategy clearly and honestly. When communication breaks down, trust erodes. When trust erodes, your best people start making calls.

Benefits: Expected vs. Nice to Have

EXPECTED: absence creates friction

- » Parental Leave
- » 401(K) Match/Profit Sharing
- » PTO
- » Bonus/Incentive Compensation
- » Clear Path to Advancement
- » Strong Onboarding
- » Professional Development
- » Paid Licensure Support

NICE TO HAVE: appreciated but rarely decisive

- » Company-Paid Medical Insurance
- » Wellness Benefits
- » Gym Memberships
- » Compressed Schedule
- » Tuition Reimbursement
- » Student Loan Assistance
- » Mentorship Programs
- » Volunteer Time Off
- » Floating Holidays.

If these expected benefits aren't in your package, you're not competing.

The Reputation Equation

HOW PROFESSIONALS FORM THEIR PERCEPTION OF A FIRM AS AN EMPLOYER

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| #1 Word of mouth | #5 LinkedIn ranked |
| #2 Leadership visibility | #9 Instagram |
| #3 Industry recognition | #10 Facebook |

Your retention strategy is your recruiting strategy. Every person who leaves your firm is out there talking.

Five Questions to Take Back to Your Leadership Team

- 1** Is your hiring process a credit to your firm or a liability? Do you have a defined process with clear communication standards?
- 2** Do your people know how to advance? Not in theory, in writing. Is there a documented career path?
- 3** Are your managers equipped to lead, or just manage? Are you developing them and holding them accountable for retention?
- 4** Is your flexibility real or symbolic? Do your leaders model it? Do your managers normalize it?
- 5** What does a long-term financial future look like for someone who commits to your firm?

The talent war is not won through postings and perks. It is won through trust.

ELEVATE

NEED HELP BUILDING YOUR TALENT STRATEGY?
LET'S TALK. REACH OUT TO REBECCA@ELEVATE2WIN.COM
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