

A self-made Hot Firm leader

Good employees, good clients and good leadership all contribute to high quality, an essential ingredient to success.

Harrison French has led **Harrison French & Associates, LTD** (Bentonville, AR), from a one-person operation to a 150-person architecture and engineering firm that has landed the 53rd spot on *The Zweig Letter* 2010 Hot Firm List. In this interview, this president and CEO shares some of the secrets of his firm's success.

The Zweig Letter: First of all, how does it feel to be a Hot Firm?

Harrison French: It is reassuring to know that we are doing well in the marketplace. We know that our success can be a springboard for new opportunities and we intend to capitalize on that. It is also reassuring to our employees that we are competitive, profitable, and stable. This is one indicator to them that they are at a good place.

TZL: How did you get to where you are today?

HF: We feel fortunate that all of the basic pieces seem to have fallen into place. We have some very strong clients who have not been hurt much by the national economy. We built a great team of individuals who understand what we need to do and work hard to get it done. We found some great leaders who know how to manage the business of what we do as well as the craft. We are maximizing our strengths as much as we possibly can and we always look for ways to improve what we do.

TZL: What is the best part of your job?

HF: Knowing that we are providing a good and stable livelihood for our employees. We want our employees to rest assured that the leadership is doing everything it can to make our company as stable and

profitable as possible and that in these uncertain times they can feel secure in their careers. Our employees know that they don't have a free ride though. They know that they themselves have some responsibility in keeping the company successful and stable.



Harrison French,
President and CEO,
Harrison French &
Associates, LTD

TZL: What is the number one business issue you are facing right now? What do you do about it?

HF: Even though the job market might favor the employers right now, we are not necessarily seeing that to a significant degree. Good people who fit our business profile are not easy to find, but we are looking hard to find them. Also, maintaining a good work environment is a challenge when we are trying to find additional office space.

TZL: How has the A/E industry changed since you first started your career?

HF: Technology, communication, and client expectations. With the increased efficiencies in technology and communication, client expectations have grown as well. We have to have information readily available. Our clients are corporate people who have a tremendous amount of responsibility and if we cannot assist them in their job performance then we are not fulfilling our responsibilities.

TZL: What do you think it takes to be successful?

HF: Good employees, good clients, and good leadership. We focus as much on the business as the craft, but we always say that our top priority has to be quality. At the core of what we do has to be excellent quality. If we have the skill and ability to provide excellent quality, then most everything else can probably be managed well.

TZL: Do you have a mentor?

HF: I wish I could say I do, but I really don't. However, that is not to say that I don't try to learn from successful people who I know and meet. I do. It is just that this firm has grown from a one-man firm at a fairly consistent rate and it seems as though we have learned mostly on our own. We have made mistakes along the way, but we have done a pretty good job of correcting them quickly and learning from them.

"Find a niche and maximize it."

TZL: What would be your advice for future and current professionals in the A/E field?

HF: Find a niche and maximize it. Clients want professionals that are experienced in their field and that they can have great confidence and trust in.

TZL: What's the most difficult part of your job?

HF: Expanding the senior structure. When it comes to having an excellent senior structure it seems to always get a little complicated. Levels of responsibility, authority, compensation, incentives, ownership, peer relationships, and of course, egos and personalities, all contribute to the complexity. Poor decisions here are not easily corrected and many people can be affected, so we are diligent and thoughtful when it comes to expanding the senior team.

TZL: What lesson learned would you pass along to a recent college graduate embarking on a career in the A/E field?

HF: Be knowledgeable of the whole industry and understand that the business side is just as important as the creative and technical side. Also, understand the necessity of being a team member and communicating well. Education will most likely focus on an individual's talent and technical skills, but it if you can't function as part of a team you will struggle to progress. ■