



Matt Wolfe, Sue Pruchnicki and Art Bond, pictured here outside the new Maplewood Public Library, a former pool house that they redesigned for the library.

Blueprint for growth

Bond Wolfe Architects hit \$2.25 million in revenue by stressing productivity

BY RICK DESLOGE
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How do you grow a personal service firm?

The classic way has been to add more billable employees as business grows.

But the 15-year-old Bond Wolfe Architects Inc., now with a staff of 18, plans to expand its expertise without expanding its staff much.

"We're going to limit our (payroll) growth," said Art Bond, who co-founded the architecture business with Matt Wolfe in Wolfe's basement. Bond Wolfe expects to max out with between 20 and 25 employees.

That will allow the firm to keep its prime strategy in place: One of its three principals — Bond, Wolfe or Sue Pruchnicki, who joined the business in 1998 — will oversee all work that comes through the Clayton business. In a field that bills out its time, such a strategy potentially limits profits. Bond Wolfe's answer is to grow the expertise of its people and capitalize on new technology for the architecture field. That plan should translate into higher billable rates for the firm's work, Pruchnicki said.

"We think we can increase profits in ways other than by adding billable people; we're adding resources to make the people more profitable," she said.

The approach helped the firm reach \$2.25 million in revenue last year, and the revenue trend for the firm in 2007 is ahead of that total.

Bond Wolfe competes with other architecture firms here for work on public projects, primarily school buildings, which comprised about 40 percent of its revenue last year, Pruchnicki said. About 20 percent of the firm's revenue comes from residential work, and the balance comes from commercial assignments.

Pruchnicki said the ability to handle diverse assignments on public projects, office and retail design, and residential design has allowed Bond Wolfe to thrive during cycles when commercial work in one of the building segments suffers.

The firm's technology investments have included software and equipment that can scan a building's interior in two hours, normally a several day, tedious process for any firm. The firm also uses technology to develop 3-D images for its clients.

Bond Wolfe's investment in its staff includes continuous training and other professional development, the company principals said — a practice that has allowed it to promote people from within to more senior positions. For example, Jenny Reed, now a senior interior designer, said she started 10 years ago as a receptionist while in school; Jillian Oxler, director of marketing, is taking advan-

tage of the firm's tuition reimbursement while she studies interior design at St. Louis Community College at Meramec.

Bond Wolfe's clients have included about two dozen area school districts, and in July the firm won the architecture assign-

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ment for a new, \$5 million Hillcrest High School in Springfield, Mo. The firm's current work includes a rehab assignment to convert a former pool house into space for the Maplewood Public Library; a new building for the Hazelwood Middle School; and a new interior for Cejka Search, which is moving from Clayton to Creve Coeur. Architecture fees typically run from about 6.5 percent to 8 percent of most projects, Bond said.

Bond Wolfe competed for and won the assignment to aid the Maplewood Richmond Heights School District on its long-range facilities planning several years ago. That work caught the attention of Maplewood Public Library officials when they started considering plans for new space, said Natasha Webster, a member of the Maplewood Library Board and for-

mer director of communications for the Maplewood Richmond Heights School District. Bond Wolfe worked pro bono with Chesterfield city officials even before the city began work on its \$18 million new city hall, which opened in 2001, said City Administrator Mike Herring. "They helped us realize early on, it was not just a building. It was where the community was going to gather for years to come."

Bond Wolfe operates from 3,800 square feet of leased space at 200 S. Bemiston Ave. in Clayton, with two conference rooms and a library of interior samples but no offices for its principals. They all work in the same open area as the rest of the staff.

For years the staff operated without titles, a practice that's slowly changing at the business, which includes seven architects and eight designers. Wolfe serves as the lead designer for most projects. Pruchnicki is the office manager and lead on most interior projects. Bond oversees business development.

Professional services: Allan Ivie, president and chief operating officer of The PrivateBank, is Bond Wolfe's banker. Dudley McCarter, with Behr, McCarter & Potter, is the company's lawyer. Cathy Goldsticker, an accountant with Stone, Carlie & Co., handles the company's tax matters, and Dennis Wilhelmi, an accountant who has a financial management consulting practice, is Bond Wolfe's consulting CFO.