Arcavia Consulting

CAREER ANALYSIS · ARCHITECTURE

The route to studio director

107 careers, and the pattern they share.

How long it takes to reach studio leadership, where the people come from, which rung they step up from, and how long they stay once they arrive.

18 yrs
MEDIAN CAREER AT APPOINTMENT

92%
FROM AN ARCHITECTURE BACKGROUND

2.7 yrs
TYPICAL STEP BETWEEN ROLES

George Dobbins, Managing Partner
george@arcaviaconsulting.com · arcaviaconsulting.com

IN SUMMARY

What the careers have in common

Studio leadership arrives about two decades into an architect's career, as often by joining a practice as by promotion.

We took a deep dive into 107 studio leadership profiles across 42 UK practices to find the patterns that recur on the way to the role: how long it takes, where people come from and the step they take up from. The findings are written to support practices recruiting a studio leader or assessing internal candidates, and to give aspiring architects a practical view of how the career path to studio leadership tends to run.

01 **Eighteen years is the median.** Half the panel reached studio leadership between fourteen and twenty-two years into a recorded career, with a median of 18.0 years. The distribution runs from 2.1 years to 34.5.

02 **Architecture is the background.** 92% of the careers where a background is on record are architecture. The rest lead discipline studios — interiors, landscape, graphics, urban design — inside larger multidisciplinary businesses.

03 **Two routes in, at almost equal weight.** 49 of 94 were promoted from inside the practice, after a median 6.6 years there. 45 were appointed on joining, and only 3 of them had held the title before.

04 **The step is taken from different rungs.** 20 of the 45 external appointees came from a director, partner or principal title elsewhere. Inside a practice, most promotions come from an associate grade.

05 **A move every two to three years.** Median gap between the start of one role and the next is 2.7 years across 523 steps, and 71% of all movement happens within four years of the last move.

06 **Then the pace changes.** Median time in the studio role is 4.0 years and median tenure at the appointing practice is 9.1 years. The studio job is where a fast-moving career settles down.



SECTION 01

Tenure to studio leader

Half of today’s studio leaders were appointed between fourteen and twenty-two years into their careers, at a median of 18.0 years. 30% got there inside fifteen.

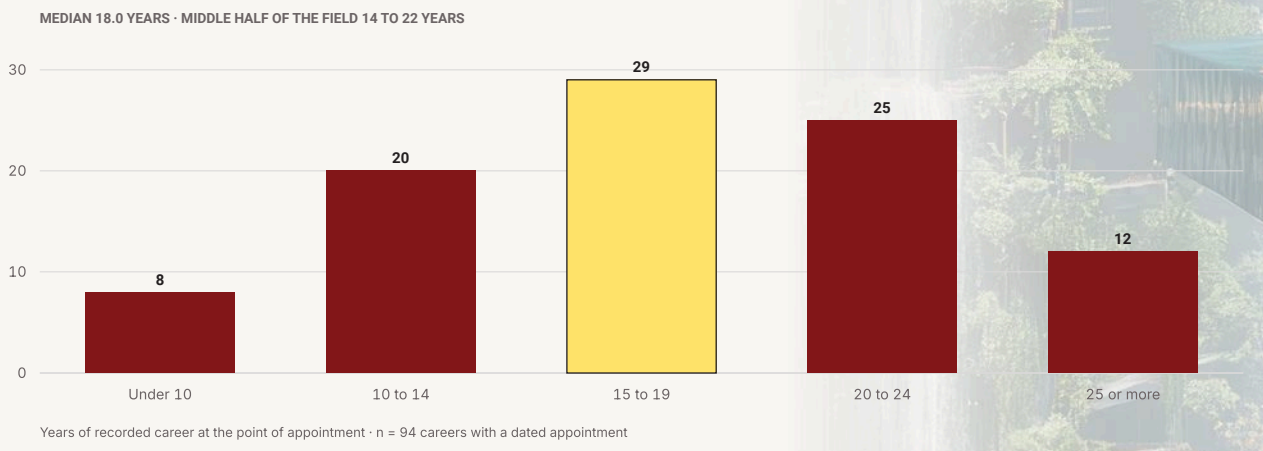
SECTION 01

Tenure to studio leader

The median studio leader was appointed 18.0 years into a recorded career, and the band from fifteen to nineteen years is the largest, at 29 of 94.

Below the median, 20 people arrived between ten and fifteen years in and a further 8 inside ten years, the fastest at 2.1 years. Above it, 12 were appointed at twenty-five years or more, the longest at 34.5. A single job title spans more than three decades of career length.

The earlier appointments split 16 internal to 12 external, and 24 of the 28 come from an architecture background. What they share is scope taken on early: founding or co-founding a practice, running a small studio independently, or leading a discipline team inside a larger business.



Years of recorded career at the point of appointment.

SECTION 02

Architecture is the background

92% of the careers where a background can be read are architecture. They trained at 72 different institutions, led by Sheffield, Cardiff, Leeds Beckett and UCL.

SECTION 02

Architecture is the background

Of the 97 careers where a background can be read, 89 are architecture.

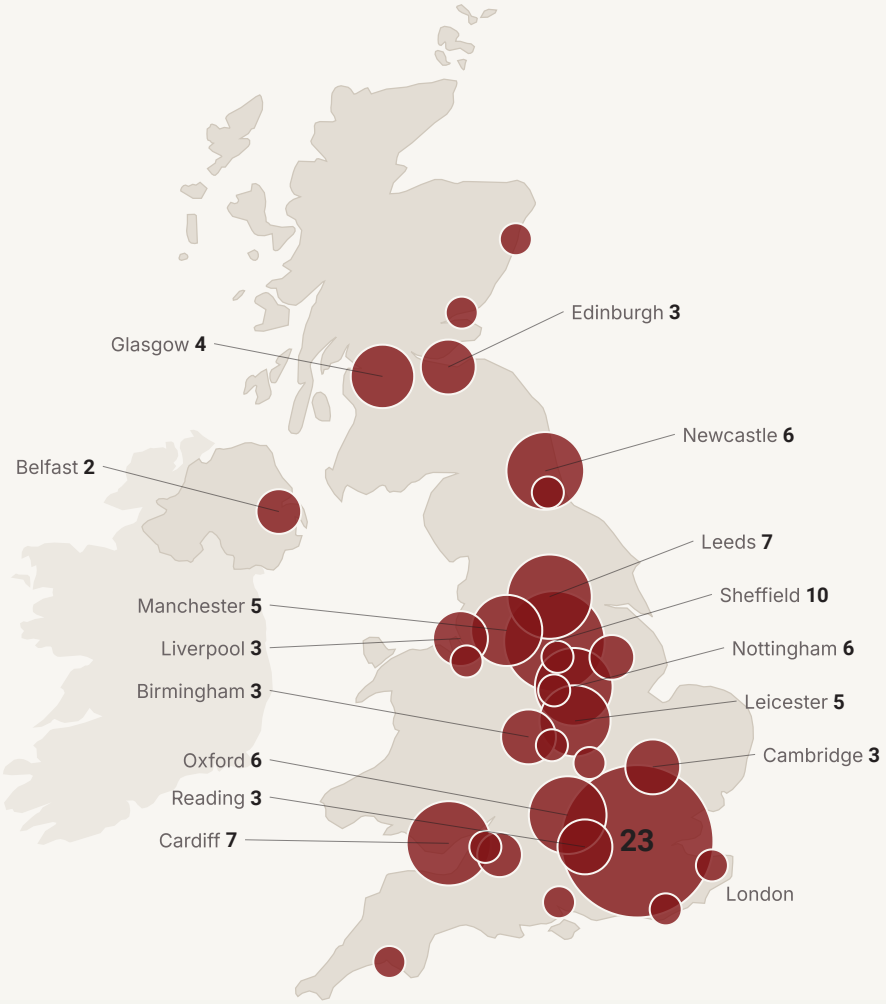


Background as recorded across the career. Architecture requires the word architect, ARB, RIBA or an architecture qualification to appear in the record. n = 97 careers where a background can be read.

The evidence is mostly direct. 75 of the 89 have held a role with architect in the title, which is a protected term, and the remainder are carried by an architecture qualification or an explicitly architectural skill set. 7 people come from an adjacent design discipline (interiors, landscape, graphics and urban design) and each of them leads a discipline studio inside a large multidisciplinary business. One career comes from infrastructure and economics, leading a cities team.

Where they studied

84 of the 107 list their higher education. Between them they studied at 72 different institutions, and 47 of those appear only once, so no single school dominates the route. 71 studied in the UK, and 21 list at least one institution overseas. By city, London leads with 23, then Sheffield with 10 and Cardiff and Leeds with 7 each.



Bubbles are sized by the number of studio leaders who studied in each city.

THE TEN MOST COMMON INSTITUTIONS

University of Sheffield	10
Cardiff University	7
Leeds Beckett	7
UCL, including the Bartlett	7
Oxford Brookes University	6
University of Westminster	6
De Montfort University	5
Manchester School of Architecture	5
Newcastle University	5
University of Nottingham	5

The ten account for 47 of the 84.

SECTION 03

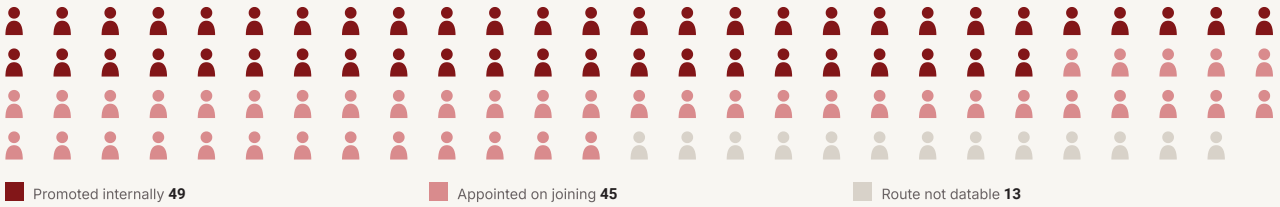
Promotion versus move

Internal promotion and external appointment split almost exactly 50:50, at 49 and 45 of 94. Only 3 of the 45 external appointees had held the title before.

SECTION 03

Promotion versus move

We found that the divide between internal promotion and external appointment is almost exactly 50:50. Of the 94 appointments we can date, 49 were promoted from inside the practice and 45 were appointed on joining.



Each figure is one of the 107 studio leaders. An external appointment means the studio role is the person's first role at that practice. For 13 the earlier career is not recorded well enough to date the route.

Internal promotion

Inside a practice, the studio role is most often the next step above an associate grade. 26 of the 49 internal promotions came from associate director, senior associate or associate. A further 13 already held a director-level title inside the practice, most often project or design director, and 10 stepped up from an architect, designer or specialist role.

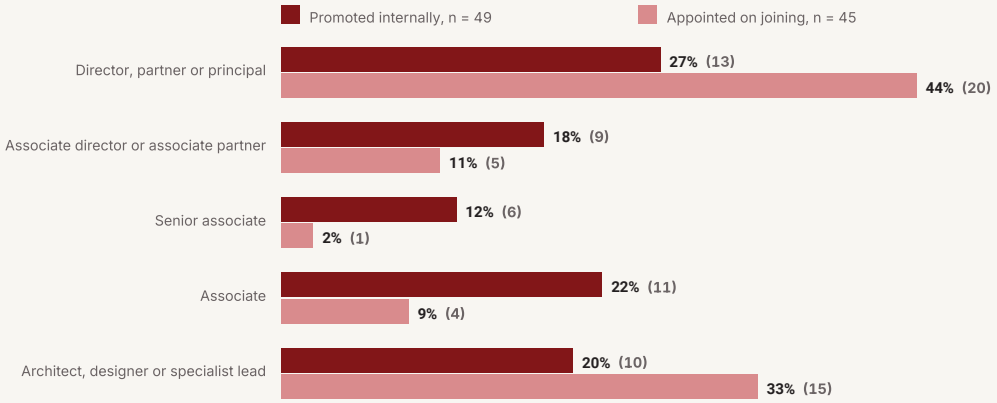
The median internal appointee had been at the practice 6.6 years before the promotion, and 41 of the 49 held three roles or fewer there first. Gensler is the largest group in the analysis, with 15 studio leaders, and has grown most of them from within: 10 of its 14 datable appointments were internal promotions.

External appointment

An external appointment is nearly always a promotion as well as a move. On title alone, only 3 of the 45 were already studio leaders elsewhere and moved laterally. 19 came from a director, partner or principal title at another practice, including regional and divisional directors and office principals. For them the step is into running a studio more than into a higher grade. The remaining 23 came from associate grades or below and took a clear step up on the move.

The two routes compared

The routes reach the same role from different distances. External appointees arrive 2.5 years further into their careers, and by then they have typically worked at 5 practices against 3 for those promoted from within. They also step in from higher up: 44% of external appointees held a director, partner or principal title beforehand, against 27% of internal ones, while associate grades make up 53% of internal promotions and 22% of external appointments.

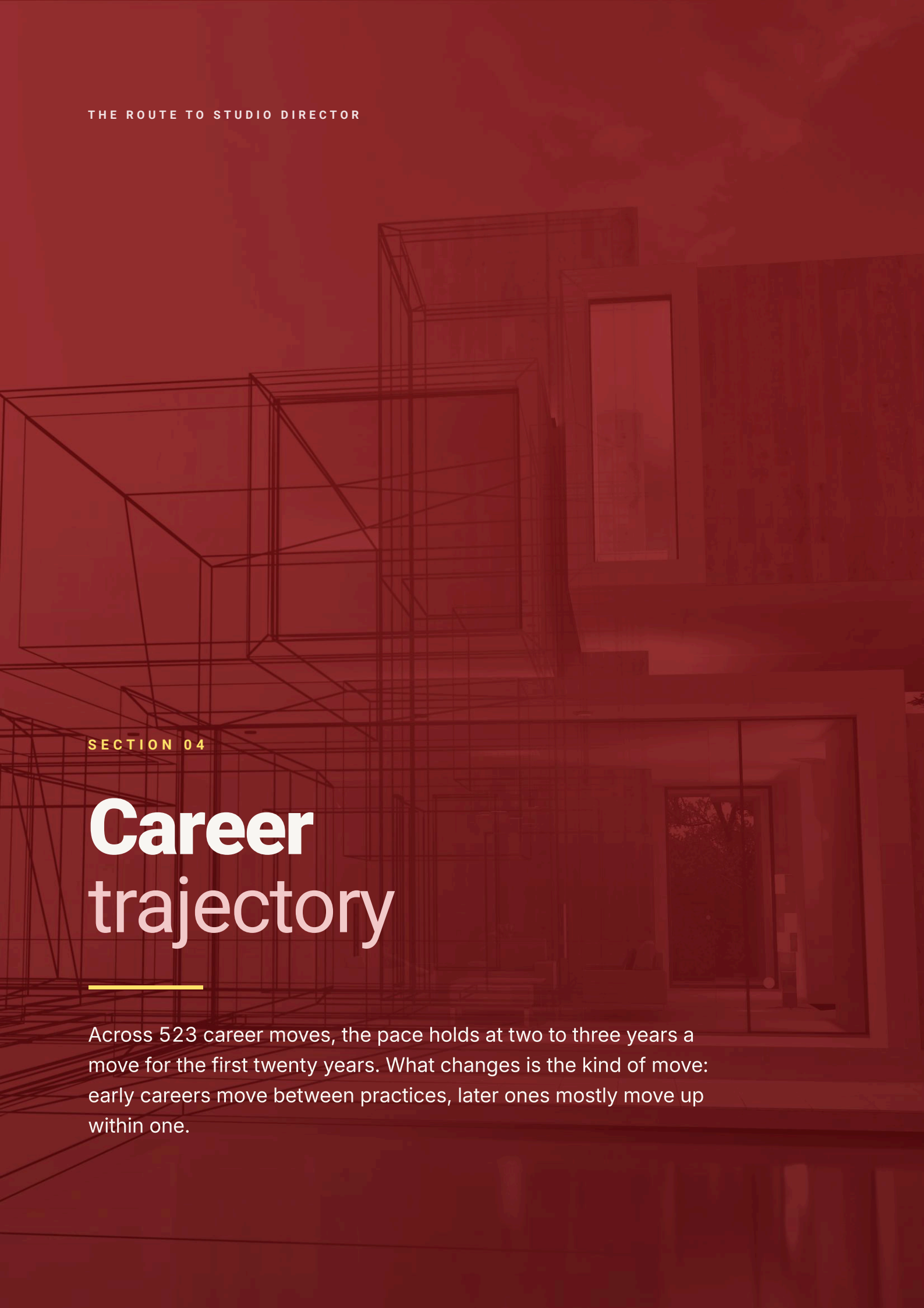


Role held immediately before appointment, as a share of each route. Bands are read from the wording of the title, and the 3 external appointees who already held a studio leadership title sit within them.

TABLE 2 · THE ROUTE IN, INTERNAL AGAINST EXTERNAL

MEASURE	PROMOTED INTERNALLY	APPOINTED ON JOINING
Median career at appointment	17.5 yrs	20.0 yrs
Median practices worked for, up to appointment	3	5
Median time at the appointing practice first	6.6 yrs	Joined into the role
Came from a director, partner or principal title	13 of 49	20 of 45
Already held a studio leadership title	–	3 of 45
Median time in the studio role so far	4.0 yrs	3.2 yrs

Datable appointments only, n = 94. Practices are counted up to and including the appointing practice, leaving out side roles such as tutoring and judging.



SECTION 04

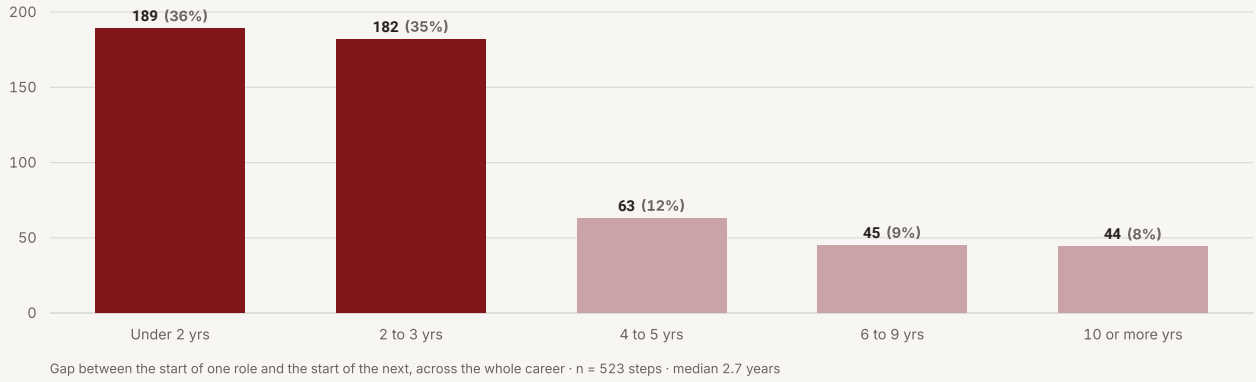
Career trajectory

Across 523 career moves, the pace holds at two to three years a move for the first twenty years. What changes is the kind of move: early careers move between practices, later ones mostly move up within one.

SECTION 04

Career trajectory

We explored all 523 career moves across the 107 studio leaders. 36% came within two years of the previous move and a further 35% at two to three years. Then 12% took four to five years, 9% six to nine and 8% ten years or more.



Gap between the start of one role and the start of the next, across the whole career · n = 523 steps · median 2.7 years

Gap between the start of one role and the start of the next, every move on every career. A move is a promotion, a sideways move or a change of practice.

How the pace changes as a career develops

The pace does not slow as careers mature. The median gap between moves sits between 2.6 and 2.8 years at every stage of the first twenty years, so a studio leader ten years in was still typically moving every two to three years rather than every four. The shape of the move is what changes. In the first five years 81% of moves are to another practice. From ten years in, more than half are promotions within the same practice. Across the whole career the two kinds of move run at a similar pace, at 2.8 years for a promotion inside a practice and 2.6 for a change of practice. Beyond twenty years the recorded gap shortens to 1.8 years, across a smaller number of moves.

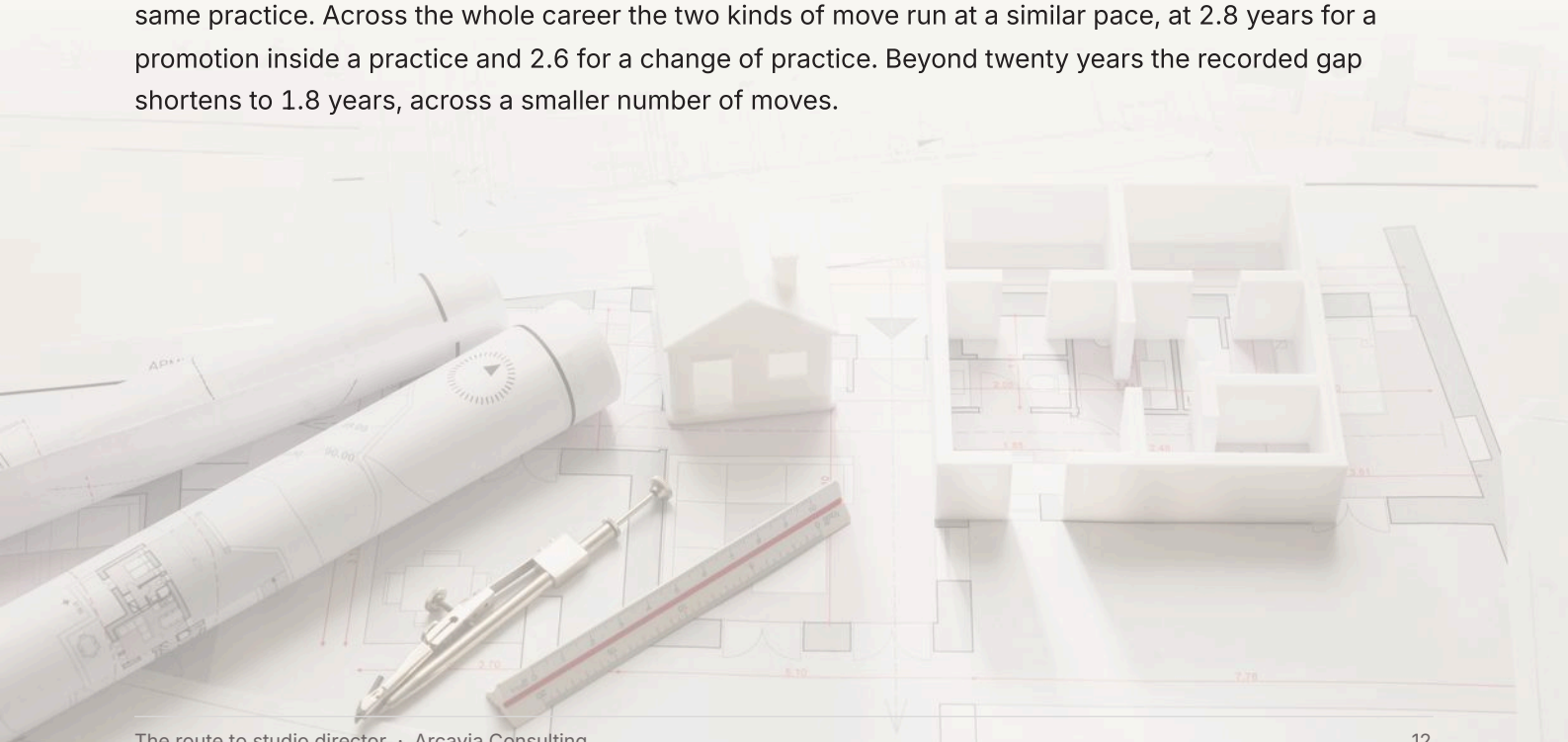
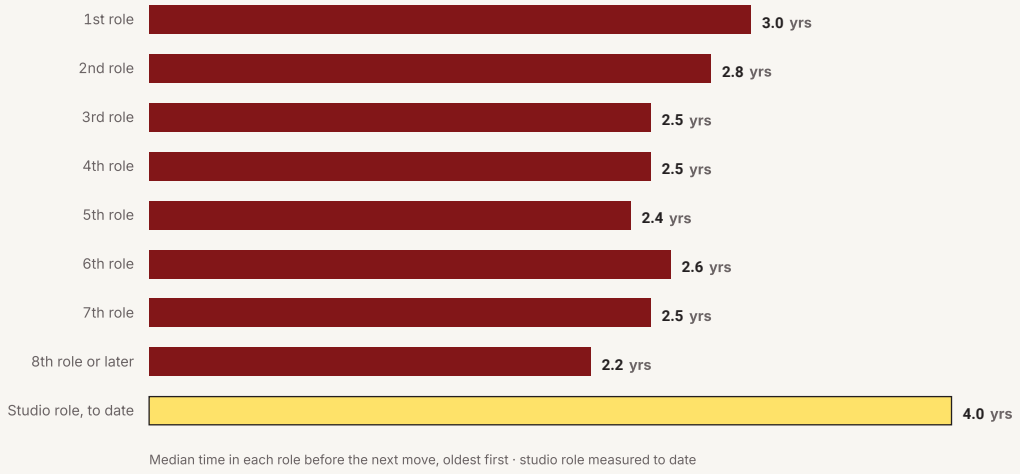


TABLE 3 · PACE AND TYPE OF MOVE BY CAREER STAGE

YEARS INTO THE CAREER WHEN THE ROLE BEGAN	MOVES	MEDIAN GAP TO THE NEXT MOVE	MOVES WITHIN THE SAME PRACTICE
First 5 years	221	2.8 yrs	19%
5 to 9 years in	116	2.6 yrs	31%
10 to 14 years in	83	2.8 yrs	54%
15 to 19 years in	56	2.8 yrs	50%
20 years or more in	47	1.8 yrs	40%

Time in each role, move by move

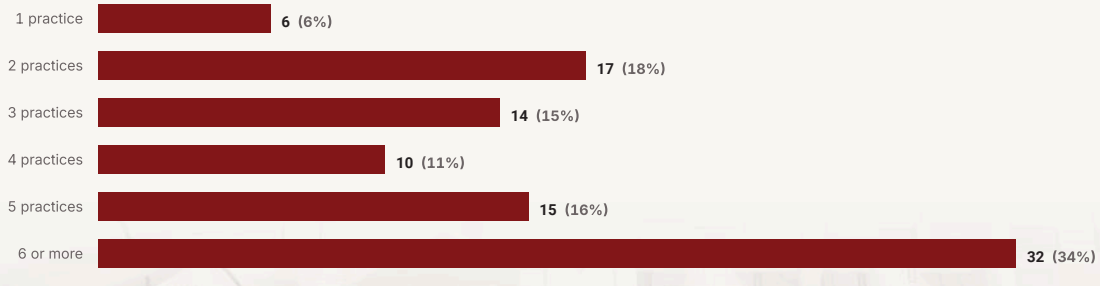
The first role is the longest, at a median of 3.0 years before the first move. Every role after it runs at between 2.2 and 2.8 years. Once appointed, studio leaders have held the role for a median 4.0 years so far, and that clock is still running.



Median time in each role before the next move, oldest first · studio role measured to date

Practices worked for before the appointment

By the time they are appointed, studio leaders have typically worked at four or five practices, counting the one that appointed them, at a median of 4.5. Only 6 have worked for a single practice, while 32 have worked for six or more, often including year-out placements and time abroad.



Practices worked for up to and including the appointing practice · n = 94



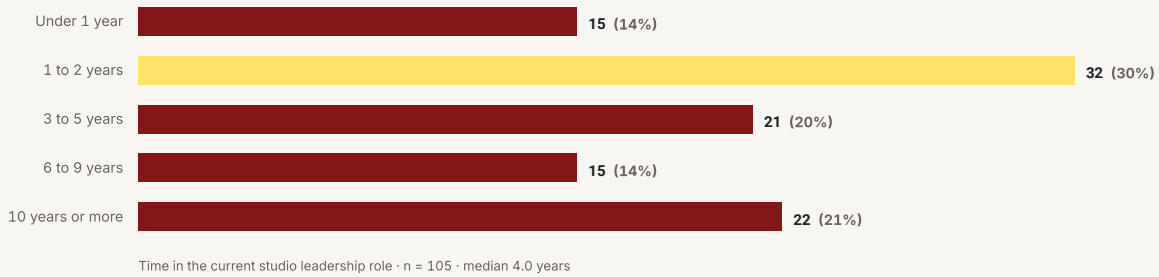
SECTION 05

Time in the studio role

Once appointed, people stay: a median 4.0 years in the role so far and 9.1 years at the practice. 43 of the 107 were appointed in or after January 2024.

SECTION 05

Time in the studio role



Time in the current studio leadership role.

The distribution holds two groups inside one job title. 47 people are within three years of appointment and represent the current wave of hiring, while 22 have led the same studio for a decade or more.

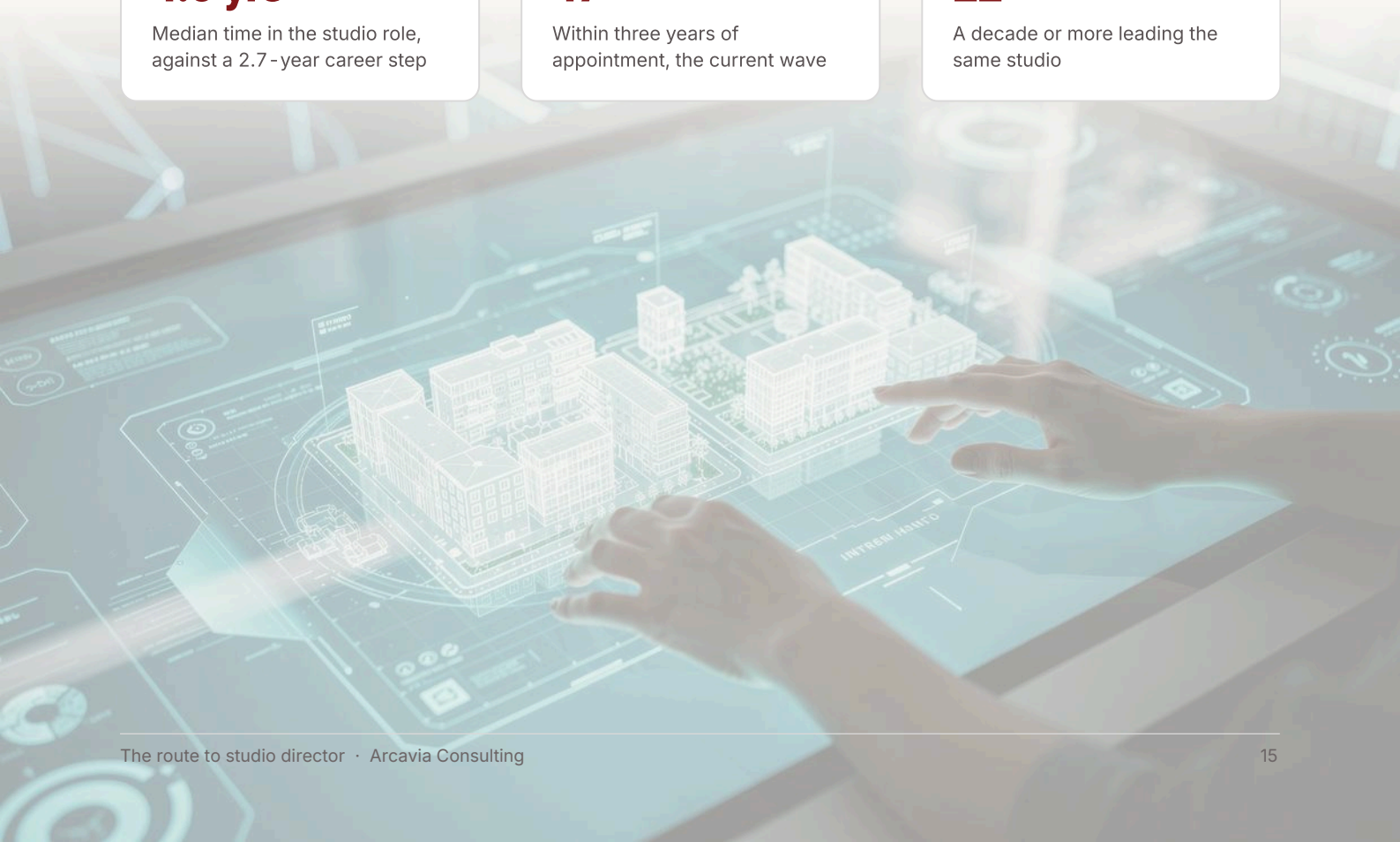
Internal appointees have been in post a median of 4.0 years against 3.2 for external appointees. Recent appointments come through both routes: 23 of 49 internal and 18 of 45 external appointments date from 2024 or later. Across the whole panel, 43 of 107 were appointed in or after January 2024.

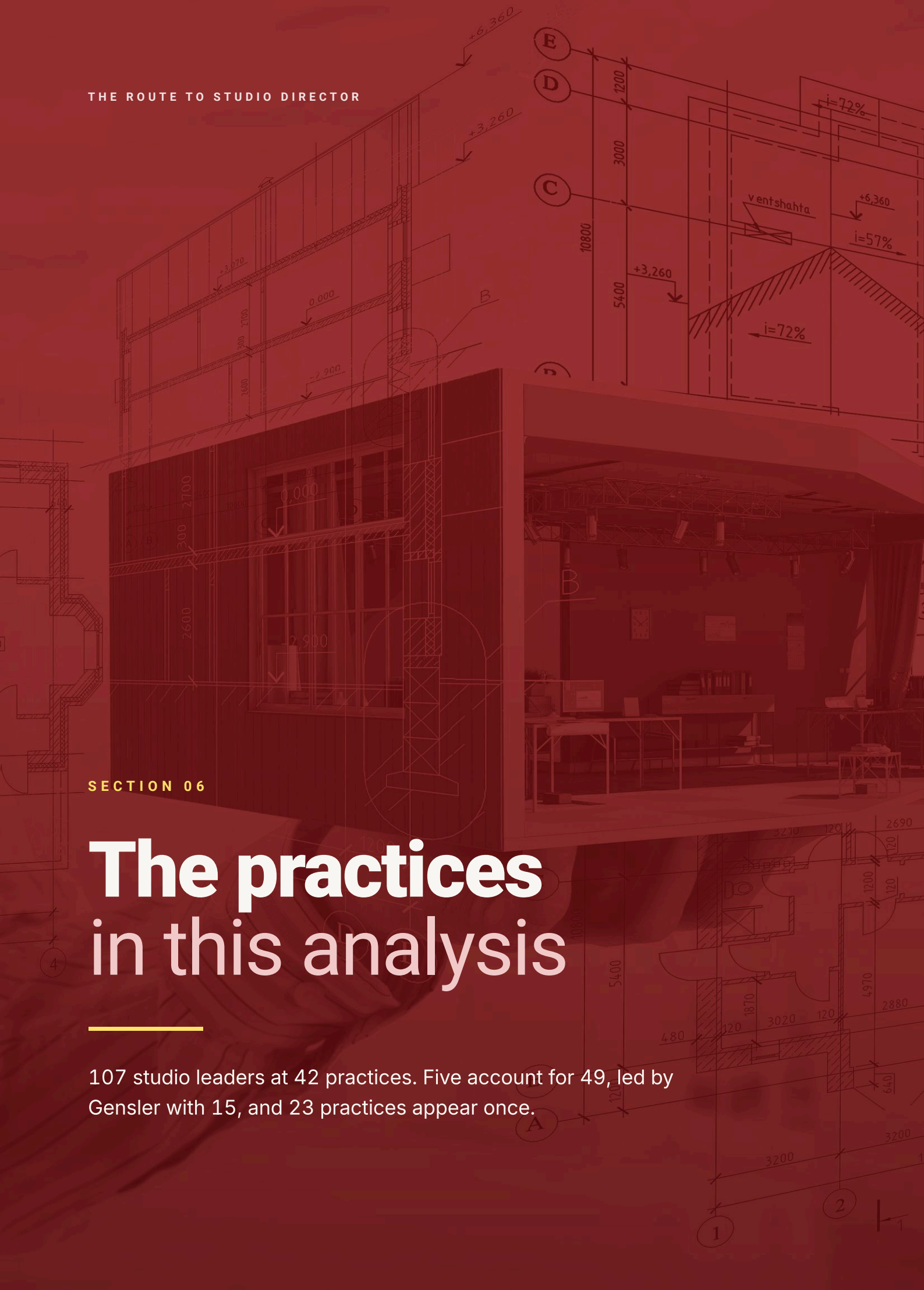
Everyone counted here is still in post, so these are tenures to date rather than completed ones, and the full length of a studio leadership appointment runs longer than 4.0 years.

4.0 yrs
Median time in the studio role, against a 2.7-year career step

47
Within three years of appointment, the current wave

22
A decade or more leading the same studio





SECTION 06

The practices in this analysis

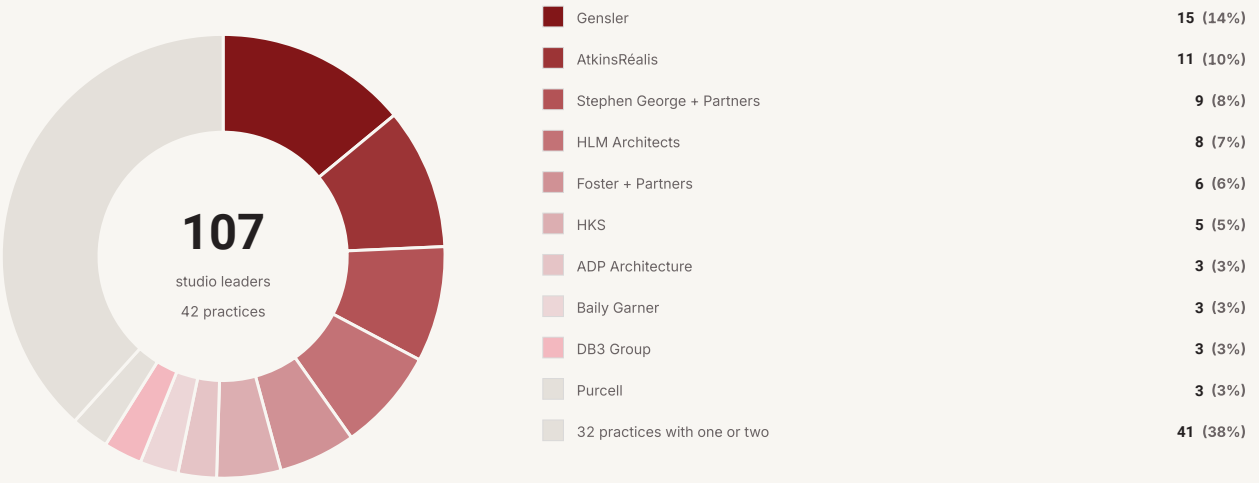
107 studio leaders at 42 practices. Five account for 49, led by Gensler with 15, and 23 practices appear once.

SECTION 06

The practices in this analysis

A concentrated top, and a long tail of single studios.

The 107 studio leaders sit across 42 practices, from global multidisciplinary groups to single-studio architecture firms.



Studio leaders by practice. Group entities are consolidated, so AtkinsRéalis includes careers recorded under Atkins, and DB3 Group includes DB3 Architecture.

49 of the 107 sit within five practices, and 23 practices appear once. That shape reflects two different operating models running side by side: large practices and consultancies that have built a named studio structure across several cities, and independent practices where the studio and the business are the same thing.

Gensler is the largest single group at 15, reflecting a practice that has built its UK business around named studio leadership and has continued to add to it.

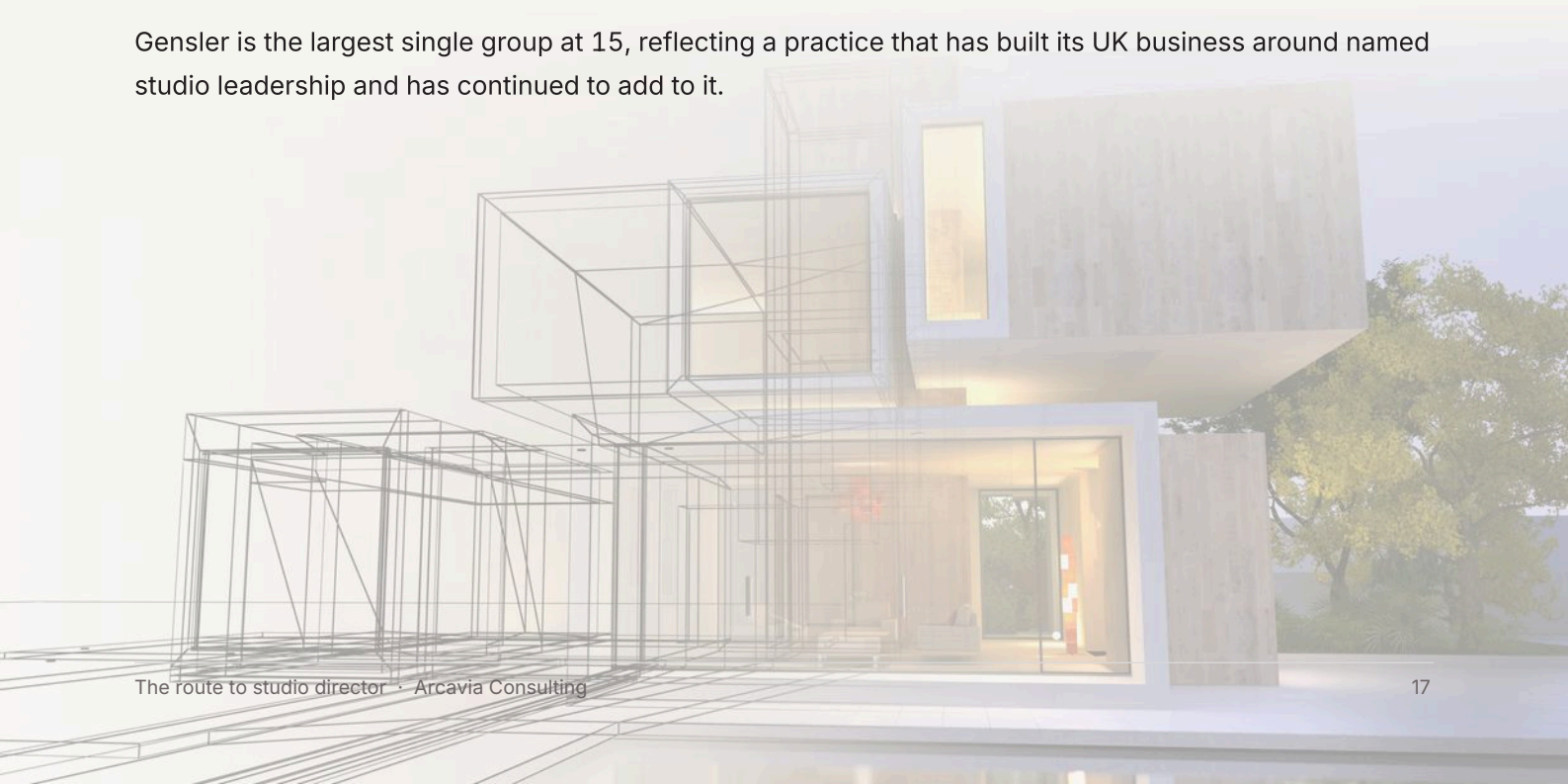
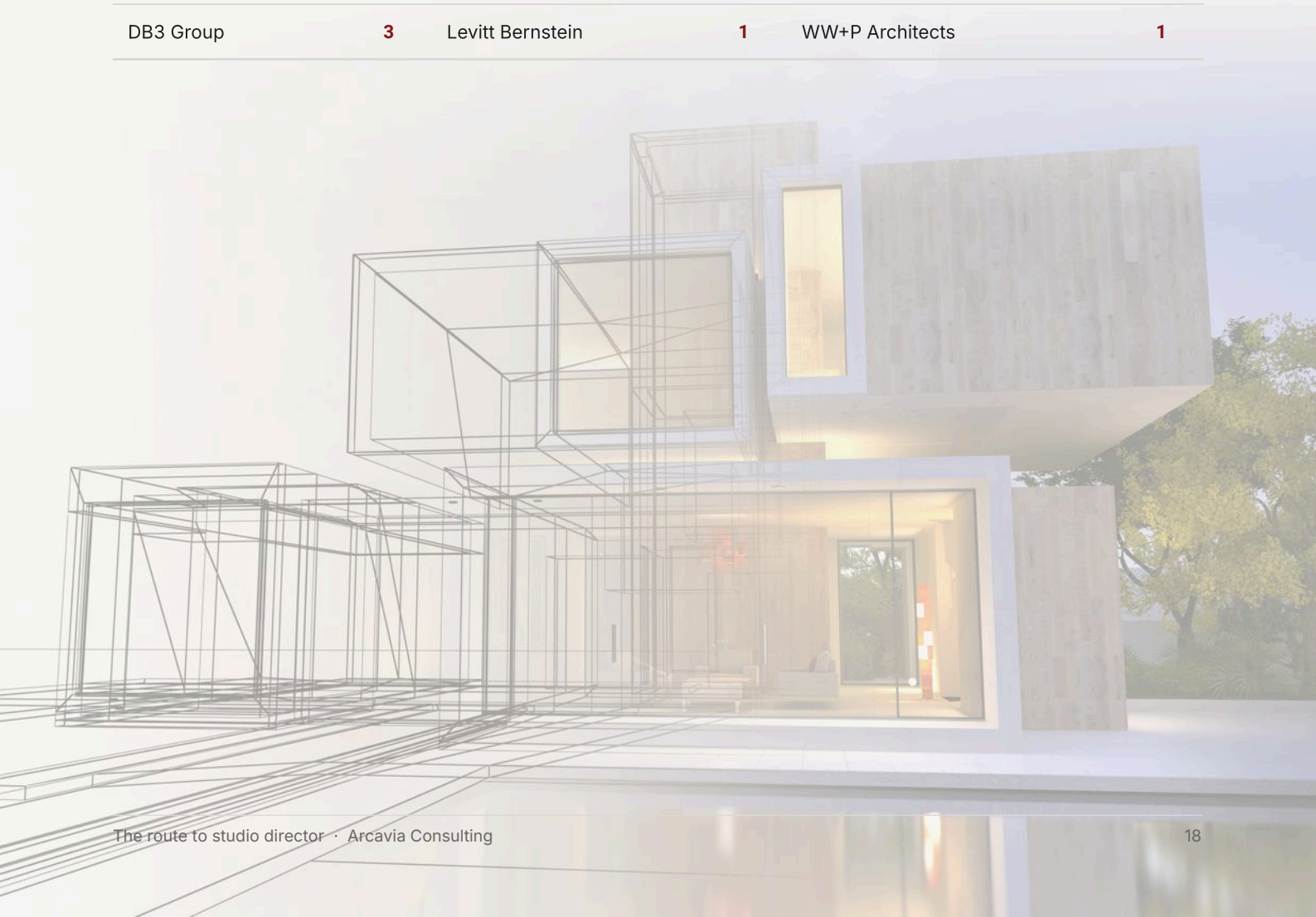


TABLE 4 · EVERY PRACTICE IN THE ANALYSIS, WITH THE NUMBER OF STUDIO LEADERS ON EACH

PRACTICE	NO.	PRACTICE	NO.	PRACTICE	NO.
ADP Architecture	3	EPR Architects	1	Maber Architects	2
AECOM	2	FaulknerBrowns	1	Morris+Company	2
Allies and Morrison	2	Foster + Partners	6	Mott MacDonald	1
AtkinsRéalis	11	Gensler	15	P+HS Architects	1
Baily Garner	3	Glenn Howells Architects	2	Pick Everard	1
BDP	1	GT3 Architects	1	Purcell	3
Belmond	1	Hawkins Brown Architects	1	Reddy Architecture + Urbanism	1
Benoy	1	HKS	5	Scott Brownrigg	2
Bond Bryan	1	HLM Architects	8	Skidmore, Owings & Merrill	1
Broadway Malyan	1	Holmes Miller	1	Smalley Marsey Rispin Architects	1
bureau^proberts	1	Jacobs	1	Stephen George + Partners	9
Corgan	2	JTP	1	WATG and Wimberly Interiors	1
Corstorphine + Wright	2	Kettle Collective	1	Whittam Cox Architects	2
DB3 Group	3	Levitt Bernstein	1	WW+P Architects	1



METHODOLOGY

How this was built

Arcavia's own research, read career by career.

We built a career record for every studio leader we could identify in UK architecture and read each one individually rather than sampling.

THE FIELD

107 studio leaders at 42 practices

Everyone included holds an identifiable studio leadership role: Studio Director, Studio Lead, Studio Leader, Studio Principal, Studio Practice Leader, Head of Studio, or Director of a named studio. Functional leads within a studio, such as a technical or BIM lead, are not studio leadership and are not included. The panel extends the 99 in *Who runs the studio* (September 2026) with a second pull on 29 September 2026, which added 8 studio leaders under the same definition.

TIMING

Career length at appointment

Measured from the start of the earliest role on record to the start of the studio leadership role at the current practice, so an internal promotion is dated from the promotion rather than from joining. Figures on timing use the 94 careers that record a role before the studio role. Population, tenure and practice figures use all 107.

BACKGROUND

Architecture, adjacent design, or another profession

Architecture requires the word architect, or ARB, RIBA or an architecture qualification, in a role title, in education, or in a declared skill. An adjacent design discipline is recorded where interiors, landscape, graphics, urban design or a creative title appears and no architecture signal does. Working at a practice with Architects in its name is not counted as evidence.

ROUTE

Promotion or direct appointment

An internal promotion is one where the role immediately preceding the studio role was at the same practice. Group entities and legal suffixes are consolidated first, so a renamed or restructured employer is not read as a move. The rung before the role is banded from the wording of that preceding title. Route figures use the 94 datable appointments.

TRAJECTORY

Moves in order, practices counted once

A move is the gap between the start of one role and the start of the next, read in the order each career lists them: 523 in all. Its career stage is the years from the earliest role on record to the start of the role it ends. Practices are counted once each, up to and including the appointing practice, and side roles such as tutoring, judging and board positions are left out of that count.

EDUCATION

Higher education, by person

Each person counts once at every institution they list. Schools below university level are left out, and renamed or merged institutions are counted together, so Leeds Metropolitan sits with Leeds Beckett and the Bartlett within UCL.

Notes on the figures

- Career records are as the individuals maintain them, so the level of detail varies. Where a career is recorded in grade titles alone we record the discipline as not stated rather than inferring it, and leave it out of the background figures.
- The analysis carries no pay data and no demographic data, and none has been inferred.
- Because the panel is larger, some figures differ slightly from those published in *Who runs the studio*, which was built on 99 careers.
- The full working sits alongside this report in *Studio Leadership — route analysis*: one row per person with every classification visible, the summary tables, and all 523 career steps.
- Analysis by Arcavia Consulting. All calculations, and any errors in them, are our own.

Arcavia Consulting

ABOUT US

The hires that move the business

Arcavia Consulting is a specialist talent partner to the design and construction market across the UK, Europe and the United States, covering design and strategic leadership, project and delivery, commercial, work-winning and planning. We are a search business rather than a database business: every mandate is run exclusively, with a named partner on the work from briefing through to placement.

WHY WE RUN ANALYSIS LIKE THIS

BRIEFS GET WRITTEN ON INSTINCT

Most search specifications encode a few reasonable beliefs about who can do the job. Measuring them against the market is the cheapest way to widen a shortlist before it narrows.

MAPPED, NOT LISTED

Every search opens with a map of the market rather than a shortlist pulled from a database, which is why work of this kind is part of the day job.

THE WORKING IS YOURS

The workbook behind this report goes to anyone who would find it useful, classifications and all.

Writing a studio leadership brief? Let's scope it together.

George Dobbins, Managing Partner · george@arcaviaconsulting.com

arcaviaconsulting.com