

## For the Love of the Profession

Part 3: We Want More!

By Robert H. Lyon, P.E.

*Structural engineers consistently rank high in levels of job satisfaction and public respect. Through the experiences and testimonies of practicing engineers, both past and present, this series of articles celebrates the joys and satisfactions of our profession. From this collection of personal accounts, sources of career satisfaction are identified and examined. Obstacles are also identified which can impede our level of job satisfaction. These observations are used to formulate keys for improving, advancing and uplifting the structural engineering position and its personal rewards. Whether an idealistic young professional or an experienced engineer in need of a career re-charge, reclaim the pleasures that make structural engineering a great profession!*

In previous articles, we considered the high level of job satisfaction experienced by structural engineers, and identified some common sources. There is the intellectual fulfillment that comes from “figuring things out”. There is the pleasure of seeing our work product become reality and impacting society in positive ways. The gratification derived from successfully devising solutions to complex problems, or creatively applying fundamental principles in new ways, and the professional camaraderie of working with men and women of integrity all serve as a foundation for our “love of the profession”.

But despite these many positives, the vast majority of us face difficulties in our work environments that rob us of our contentment and prevent our career satisfaction from being even greater. An informal survey of peers combined with personal experience suggests that we structural engineers also share some common frustrations.

- Unrealistic schedule and budget pressures
- Pouring ourselves into projects that never come to fruition
- Little diversity in job assignments
- Too much managing, not enough engineering
- Office politics
- Lack of responsibility
- Excessive corporate reliance on the profit motive

You might argue that these are realities that permeate the human workplace in general. Maybe so! But are we merely to accept them? Or are there attitudes and strategies that can mitigate these obstacles?

First, a word to those of you in management. It is paramount that you be aware of these

hindrances and that you are determined to create a work environment where morale is high. *The efforts and creativity of a flourishing, healthy professional group will almost always meet realistic administrative goals.* The temptation to wring additional productivity out of hard-working professionals for the sake of incremental profit gains is known to be a very short-sighted strategy. Conversely, there is no greater credit to a company than an energized, satisfied workforce.

Now to the rest of us. *The greatest responsibility for increased job satisfaction lies within ourselves.*

Structural engineering is a vast field. We do not all have the same aspirations. Each of us needs to know ourselves, what makes us tick and what gives us enjoyment in our work. For some it will be the entrepreneurial spirit, for others the continuing joy of design, and for still others the service that our product renders.

We must be willing to take risks and experience all that the profession has to offer. Quite often, this does not even require a change of positions or firms. We need to be flexible, imaginative, and willing to consider alternative routes to professional satisfaction. We need to choose our own path and not let someone else choose it for us! There are lots of directions to go. It is not uncommon for even mid-career professionals to be looking for their niche within the profession. But none of us should settle for unfulfilling jobs. Life is meant to be creative and stimulating. If that is not what we are experiencing, then we are in the wrong place.

After thirty-two years in structural engineering practice, I have come up with at least four keys for increasing levels of job satisfaction:

*Replenish yourself along the way.* Staying invigorated and imaginative does not happen passively. We must take the initiative and take advantage of opportunities for cross-training, professional development, diverse work assignments and possibly even job changes. We need to be protective of our work-life balance.

*Perseverance for the race.* Satisfactions should not be tied to the moment. We must cultivate an attitude of enjoying the journey. Amidst the challenges and frustrations, we can always look for opportunities to contribute positively to the work environment, to both the project and the people around us. Our legacy will be based more on our relationships with our fellow professionals than on our technical product.

*Look ahead, not behind.* Dissatisfaction often comes as a result of past experiences that we allow to influence our present attitudes. There are new opportunities and fresh challenges daily. Taking the broader perspective and striving to be constructive in moving the project, the firm and our own careers forward will increase satisfaction.

*Discern frustrations and opportunities.* View the frustrations (technical, managerial and inter-personal) as part of the problem-solving challenge. Engage yourself for the purpose of overcoming these obstacles, in whatever form they present themselves. Shifting the focus away from satisfaction as a result of outward circumstances to an inner satisfaction from effectively dealing with the reality of problems can do wonders for our attitude.

As we look to the future of our own careers and profession, we can be sure of one thing: It will be bright! Sir William Halcrow’s address to the Institution of Civil Engineers rings as true today as it did in the last century. *“The well being of the world largely depends upon the work of the engineer. There is a great future and unlimited scope for the profession; new works of all kinds are and will be required in every country, and for a young man of imagination and keenness I cannot conceive a more attractive profession.”*

We need to love what we do! ■

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