



editorial

Adequate "Scope of Work" and Compensation

By Joseph C. Gehlen, CASE Chair

My term as CASE Chair has been very full in dealing with issues that affect the structural engineering profession. I am always amazed, and very pleased, at the dedication to the profession I see in the individuals who make the various organizations remain viable. Many wear multiple hats of CASE, SEI and NCSEA, as well as other related organizations. Many also hold critical positions within their firms. In interacting with many of these people, whether their firms are large or small, it seems we share substantial common ground when it comes to the need to learn ways of improving our businesses.

As this may be one of my last opportunities for access to an editorial setting, I want to address something that has bothered me for some time.

Important issues currently affecting our profession include the increased liability exposure of structural engineering projects (perhaps partly associated with complex and ever changing codes), aggressive construction schedules, poor risk management practices, poor quality of structural construction documents and reduced quality in the training of the engineering graduates coming into the profession.

Is this a symptom of inadequate compensation to do the job right? SERMC and CASE have had articles and white papers raising concerns about aspects of fee bidding for professional services. I share these concerns, but I know that competition for projects has been aggressive in recent years and fees have been an issue for clients. Often we have not been aware that several firms were being asked to provide a proposal for a project until after it was awarded to another firm. In following up on why we may not have been selected, we find the client elected to use a firm that appeared to have a similar scope of work but substantially lower fees.

I can appreciate why firms might have a varied scope of work for a project and, therefore, different fees. However, it is hard to imagine that our costs can be so much more than another firm, as much as 50%, when the scope of work was supposedly the same. It would appear that perceptions of quality, and what constitutes doing a complete job, varies among firms. I suppose it is our job

to sell our value to the clients if we feel our services exceed those of the competition. It is nonetheless frustrating to see engineers ignoring the messages available to them through professional organizations and insurance industry concerning completeness and quality of work.

Our inability to get the message out to the major segment of the engineering community is one of our biggest challenges. It would appear there is a significant portion of engineers participating and promoting bidding, or trying to develop the lowest fee they can, rather than promoting the value of the services they can offer. I read articles about our profession being reduced to a commodity and I believe the bidding mentality promotes this. Current problems associated with high cost and unavailable E & O insurance is a symptom of not providing enough scope of work and, therefore, getting inadequate fees for the effort necessary to do a complete and quality job on our projects.

I don't have an easy answer. Professional organizations need to do a better job of promoting "good practice" education to the engineers who aren't active on committees or in organizational activities. CASE has contracts and guidelines to help an engineer recognize and account for scope of work. There are also guidelines addressing quality of documents and services that can be helpful in providing thorough documentation.

Those of us involved with organizations need to do a better job of educating our colleagues both within and outside our firms. We need to make a commitment to good quality documents and consistent processes within our firms, and stand by them when faced with the temptation to be fee competitive on a project. We need to sell quality to our clients. We need to educate our clients concerning the complexities of the codes and the impacts of poor management practices. We need to elevate the perception of who we are and the value we bring to the project, and be adequately compensated for the huge responsibility we take on when we are providing structural engineering services for any project. ■

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