

Editorial | *Slow Engineering?*

By Ed Quesenberry, P.E., S.E.



On a recent flight to an NCSEA Board Meeting, I decided to detach a bit and surfed the in-flight entertainment selections on the seat back screen in front of me. A TED Talk titled *In Praise of Slowness* caught my attention because my brain seemed to be craving a break from mulling over drag strut connections and Board agendas. For those of you who are not familiar, TED is a non-profit organization that promotes the sharing of ideas through brief, thought-provoking talks given by people from all different industries, cultures and backgrounds. This particular talk was given by Carl Honore, a Canadian journalist who has been following and writing about various so-called “Slow Movements” around the world.

I had heard of the Slow Food movement before but, being from Portland, I thought it was just another hug-your-chicken scheme and of no relevance to my personal or professional life. However, Mr. Honore informed me that the Slow Movements that started in Europe have progressed well beyond food and lifestyle focuses, and have spread into the workplace in many countries as well. The premise of the Slow Movement is to curb the effects of the fast-paced, frenetic lifestyle most of us lead today by finding ways to slow down. In places where the Slow Movement has taken hold, the results are apparently astounding. According to Honore, Western Culture is “...losing sight of the toll speed takes” and that the Slow Movement has proven that “...by slowing down at the right moments, people do everything better.” Perhaps the impact of this video on me was heightened because, when I boarded the plane, I was still buzzing from my harried pre-flight routine of responding to emails using one hand, while handling my grande Starbucks and pumpkin bread with the other. Mr. Honore’s message was like a glass of water in the desert for me and, ever since I heard it, I have been thinking a lot about how I might slow down my own life and if our profession or the built environment might benefit from us engineers stepping off the treadmill occasionally.

I know I am not alone in my hectic everyday life because I see evidence of it everywhere. Speed has consumed our younger generation who, at a very young age, become technology junkies and demand that life be as fast as the 4G network their phones are on. As

Honore aptly puts it, for today’s youth, “...even instant gratification takes too long.” Speed dominates our higher education system, which seems to be more focused on minimizing the time it takes for students to earn their degree rather than on preparing them for their professional lives. Fast food chains tap into the need for speed, popping up all over the world as fueling stations for the full-throttle set. This same demand for speed permeates the structural engineering profession, with the ever-increasing

expectations for us to be able to do more work in less time, and for less money, greeting us daily when we sit down at our desks.

So, is it time for a Slow Engineering movement? Effects of Honore’s “road runner culture” on the practice of Structural Engineering may be seen by some to be positive and beneficial. For instance, being able to multi-task is a vital attribute to have as an engineer. Being spawned out of a high speed culture, our multi-tasking skills have been honed and serve us well in our professional lives. However, lurking in the shadows of our “road runner” workplaces, there are risks and tangible detriments that a high speed existence carries. On a personal level, we may face health issues or burn out when our bodies and minds simply cannot keep up the pace anymore. Likewise, our profession may suffer from the effects of speed in the long term if we do not take some steps to slow down soon.

The most obvious part of our profession that is increasingly at risk at the hands of speed is the accuracy of our work. QA/QC programs are increasingly difficult to implement due to the schedule and fee pressures today’s projects impart. In addition, to meet shrinking design budgets, young engineers are being put in charge of designs that are at or beyond the limits of their professional development, opening the doors for oversights, errors and omissions. Lastly, increasingly complex code provisions are stumbling blocks as we race to get our documents assembled, and are often overlooked or outright ignored. Another pillar of our profession that is on shaky, speedaholic ground is creativity. As we try to find ways to do more with less, we resort to tried and true solutions to building problems rather than innovating leaner, more cost-effective ones. As engineers, we are professionally obligated to ensure the safety of the public through providing accurate, code-compliant, cost-effective designs. If speed is being allowed to degrade our ability to fulfill this obligation, is it time to make a change?

Because this Slow Movement concept is so new to me, I do not pretend to know exactly how to go about slowing down. However, I am now trying to find ways both at home and at work to drop the intensity a bit. The jury is out as to whether or not I will be successful, but I figure that I can only benefit from this effort, so there is no reason not to try. I recommend that all of you take a 20 minute break from your busy, but hopefully not frenetic, lives to watch Honore’s video (www.ted.com/talks/carl_honore_praises_slowness) and reflect on his message using your life as the lens. If enough of you buy into the concept, Structural Engineers could be on the ground floor of a Slow Engineering movement, and the world will be a safer, happier and more relaxed place as a result. ■



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