Editorial | *When Opportunity Walks in the Door*

By David W. Mykins, P.E., Chair CASE Executive Committee

Some time ago, one of our project engineers came to my office late in the day and asked if I had a minute to talk about something. "Sure," I said, and he came in and quietly closed the door behind him. Now, I've learned that when someone wants to talk to you and then closes the door, whatever is coming is probably not good. So I took a deep breath and braced myself…

What he had come to tell me was that his wife's career path was going to require that they relocate to another state for a couple of years. The town where they would be living was small and remote, and there were not many (or perhaps any) prospects for a structural engineer. He was wondering if it would be possible to continue to work for us from this remote location. Compared to some of the things that ran through my mind when he closed the door, this came as somewhat of a relief and we agreed to both look into how it might work.

Remote working arrangements like the one suggested by our project engineer would not have been impossible 15 or 20 years ago. But with the advances in technology and collaboration software, telecommuting has not only become possible, it is quickly becoming an expectation of today's workforce. A survey conducted by SkiptheDrive.com in October 2015 showed that 22.5% of millennials work from home at least part of the time. Here are some additional statistics based on the 2014 US Census and compiled by Global Workplace Analytics:

- 50% of the US workforce holds a job that is compatible with at least partial telework, and approximately 20-25% of the workforce teleworks at some frequency
- 80% to 90% of the US workforce says they would like to telework at least part time. Two to three days a week seems to be the sweet spot that allows for a balance of concentrative work (at home) and collaborative work (at the office).
- Fortune 1000 companies around the globe are entirely revamping their spaces around the fact that employees are already mobile. Studies repeatedly show they are not at their desk 50-60% of the time.

So, the reality is that, in order to attract and keep the best and brightest, structural engineering firms will need to address this issue. Most firms today probably have some means of allowing employees to work remotely at least part of the time. This typically involves the use of a networking solution that allows employees to connect to the office from home, such as a virtual private network (VPN). With the technical means of allowing telecommuting already in place, the next step is managing expectations.

There are some significant differences for someone who is going to work from home for a day and an employee who will be telecommuting full time, so it is important to have honest and open conversations in advance to set the ground rules and expectations. Some of these issues may depend on how long the telecommuting arrangement is expected to last. Is it temporary as in the case of our engineer, or open ended? There are practical considerations like what the work hours will be. This is especially true if the employee will be living in a different time zone. Who will provide and own the required office equipment (computers, printers and telephone) and how will office supplies be provided? What about the reference materials and codes that are needed?

Perhaps some of the more relevant conversations involve what remote working means with respect to the employee's career. Working out of the house can be convenient and efficient. You are free from many of the minor distractions of the day to day office environment, but your ability to ascend to more senior leadership positions within the firm may be limited. This is often the tradeoff. Additionally, the size, complexity or type of projects you can be assigned may be limited.

Consideration also needs to be given to how employees and projects will be managed. How will performance be evaluated, and on what schedule? How will quality control reviews be done and by whom? For some firms, it is important to have remote employees physically in the office on some regular basis. This helps both the telecommuting employee and the regular office staff maintain personal relationships that promote teamwork and efficiency.

There are lots of other practical and functional details that will need to be discussed and agreed to before implementing a successful telecommuting arrangement. It is best to have either a written policy (if you have many employees in this situation) or a memorandum of understanding (if this is a unique situation) to ensure that the ground rules are understood by all. Aside from the obvious advantage of being able to keep a valuable employee, telecommuting can have other intangible benefits. Providing this type of workplace flexibility can both promote loyalty and be a substantial motivator.

A changing workplace environment is the new reality, and keeping up with the business best practices that are unique to the structural engineering community is a daily challenge for owners and managers. Fortunately, we are not alone in facing these challenges and we have many resources through our professional organizations to provide help and guidance. For example, CASE's recently published National Practice Guideline on Project and Business Risk Management includes topics like project communication and the Standard of Care as well as staffing, continuing education and even a section on working remotely.

We are coming to the end of our project engineer's telecommuting experience and are looking forward to his return to the office. While this arrangement has had its challenges, in the end, it has been a success for both the firm and our engineer. And maybe I'll be a little less nervous the next time I hear that door close, because it might just mean a window has opened somewhere.▪

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