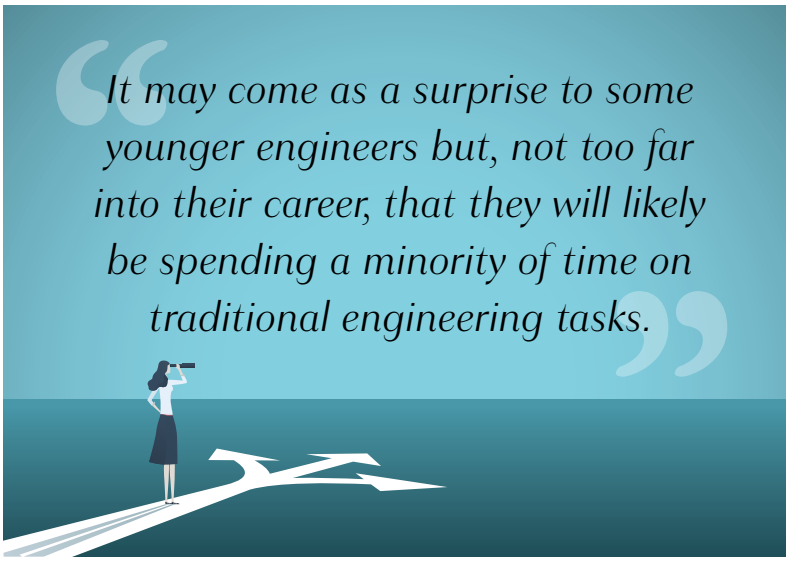
Boost Your Career Plan

Do Not Ignore Critical Soft Skills

By Nils V. Ericson III, P.E.

Do not neglect essential business skills that you never learned in Engineering School! Today's EITs, PEs, SEs, and Project Managers are tomorrow's firm leaders.

Staying abreast of code revisions, construction advances, and rapidly evolving technology is critical for today's structural engineer. However, do you pay the same amount of attention to the development and continual maintenance of skills that will be necessary when you are faced with issues related to firm management and operations? Building a foundation of technical expertise is paramount, particularly at the start of your career. But do not fail to train that other side of your brain, that part that generates revenue, avoids claims, contributes to your firm's culture, and weighs the relative importance of quality, client satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and firm profitability.



It may come as a surprise to some younger engineers but, not too far into their career, that they will likely be spending a minority of time on traditional engineering tasks. To successfully and profitably run an engineering business, engineers need to develop, practice, and train risk management, human resources, and financial management skills with the same commitment that they approach technical skills.

If you are a small or medium-sized firm without in-house financial, human resources or legal departments, you may not have a sounding board to discuss approaches and strategies to address current business practices and risk management issues. How would you like to have an open forum to consider the following example issues facing today's project managers, principals, and owners?

Recruiting and Retention – Does your firm offer an atmosphere and culture that interests and motivates today's graduates? How do you keep your staff challenged and engaged enough in engineering, so they do not consider a move to another industry? What benefits and creative compensation/benefits packages (beyond salary) do your competitors use to recruit and retain engineers? What strategies do you use for hiring a new employee with salary demands that do not fit your firm's compensation structure?

Risk Management – How do you prepare project managers to hold difficult conversations with clients and jurisdictional authorities? What are the contract terms/clauses that raise red flags, and how do you negotiate those terms with your client? What is the standard of care as it relates to delegated design? Do you need a teaming agreement when you are a sub-consultant on a design-build project?

Financial – How do you manage the increasing popularity of subscription-based software licensing models? How do employee utilization rates relate to profitability? What are some of the different fee development strategies used by leading firms? What are the project and firm financial metrics you most closely monitor?

Human Resources – How do you encourage a culture of inclusion and diversity? How do you develop policies regarding family and medical leave? What is the appropriate (and legal) way to interview, and how do you standardize your firm's interview process? How do you manage the multitude of potential disruptions from a worldwide pandemic such as COVID-19?

All of the topics above (and more) were discussed in varying settings at the Coalition of American Structural Engineers (CASE) February Winter Meeting in New Orleans. The most beneficial environment, perhaps, is one-on-one informal conversations between participants during breaks in the scheduled program. It is now easier than ever before to gain insight and knowledge from respected industry leaders at the CASE Winter and Summer meetings. No longer a full day of inclusive committee planning, these meetings kick off on Thursday with a dinner presentation, generally on a project or issue of local interest. Discussions continue with a half-day of presentations, industry roundtables, and expert panels. The remainder of the day is dedicated to open committee meetings, where you can find yourself discussing the most pressing issues facing practicing structural engineers with a group of generally ten or less firm principals and owners. Best of all, the meeting is open to engineers of all levels of experience, giving younger engineers and project managers unparalleled access to industry leaders.

I would also like to invite structural engineers of all experience levels to NCSEA's Structural Engineering Summit in Las Vegas this November. This year's Summit will include an all-new full-day program developed jointly by NCSEA and CASE, *The Business of Structural Engineering*, focusing on pressing business practices and risk management issues facing today's Project Managers and Principals.▪

Nils V. Ericson III is a Principal at m2 Structural in Atlanta, Georgia, and the chair of the CASE Programs and Communications Committee. (nericson@m2structural.com)