Hey Graduates – Give Small Firms a Chance!

By Kevin H. Chamberlain, P.E.

As I sit at my desk at work, the view out my window is not a typical office setting. Our street is a mix of residential and business use, near the center of town. I would not trade my view for anything. I am glad I do not work in a large city in a high rise, or in a bland suburban office park along a highway. I am also very glad that I work in a small firm.

What constitutes a small firm? ACEC categorizes firms with 50 employees or less as small firms, and about 75% of all ACEC member firms are “small.”

When I think of a small firm, I think of the six wonderful people at my office who are like a second family. I started at our firm as a summer intern over 25 years ago…and never left. As did all of our current engineers. That is rare these days. Most of my friends who are structural engineers have worked in no fewer than three firms by the time they are 40, and that is probably a low estimate.

To build our ranks, I often attend career fairs at a handful of universities I am familiar with to recruit graduating students. Over the years, I have found that it is tough to stand out as a small firm without a lot of marketing resources. I bring business cards and try to make personal connections by sharing my passion for what I do. I have tried everything, from bringing along inspection tools we use, to a mockup of a mortise and tenon timber joint, to a video loop of my partner giving a talk on the WTC collapse, to a huge dish of Halloween candy (the good stuff). I have gone solo, brought junior engineers, even had our office manager attend. Year after year, I leave career fairs feeling optimistic about some bright young engineer I want to land, only to feel disappointment in the coming weeks when the candidate takes a job somewhere else. Not always, but often.

There seems to be a perception among students, and probably some of their professors, that you need to take a job out of college at a large firm in a city. Face it; there is a certain wow factor that students feel when they walk up to a career fair table of a big-name national or international firm with a glitzy backdrop and cool swag. Throw in a signature project like a major bridge or stadium, and they are captivated.

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There are no exceptions. The majority of structural engineering firms are small firms and graduating engineering students would benefit from at least giving a small firm a chance by talking to engineers like me and scheduling an interview. We do not bite, and you may be pleasantly surprised at the opportunities awaiting you.

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