



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.

And yet, a small firm is an outstanding place to start a career in structural engineering. Hands down, in my opinion. Here are a few things for graduates to consider about starting a career in a small firm:

- You are more likely to be exposed to a wide variety of work tasks. One day you are brainstorming how to give a building a structure, and the next, you are crunching numbers or building the BIM. You are attending meetings with the design team, reviewing the shop drawings, and on the job site inspecting the work being built. You are not compartmentalized into only performing certain tasks. That is not how small firms typically operate.

- You are more likely to have a chance to design in all the structural materials, not just steel and concrete, because you are probably working on smaller projects. This is particularly true for wood structures.
- You are less likely to be “stuck” on the same project for years. No offense to colleagues who get to work on stadiums or megastuctures, but I do not think I could devote myself to one project for longer than the extended warranty on my pickup. Small firms have smaller projects that tend to cycle through more quickly. Variety makes your job more interesting.
- You will learn about dealing with demanding clients, which will benefit you as your career grows towards an ownership position.

Knowledge will come by hearing how principals deal with them, and in having to respond yourself after some training.

- You will become comfortable dealing with contractors, messy construction sites, and coarse language, and use those experiences to make you a better engineer. Contractors are not shy about letting an engineer know when a detail is not buildable. If you are in a firm where you are isolated from the construction trades, you will not benefit from those learning experiences.
- You are less likely to be overworked. An owner who works alongside his employees in a shared office is less likely to turn off the lights and leave you toiling away until midnight because he promised the

client an unrealistic deadline. You are also more likely to be paid for every hour you work and less likely to be expected to put in long unpaid hours.

- You are more likely to keep your job when the economy tightens, and work is slow. When the 1990 recession hit, our firm took on special inspection work to keep busy. When the 2008 recession hit, we took advantage of the downtime to put our people to work building a staff kitchen in the basement. With our modest payroll, we can tighten our belts and retain our best people and ride a crisis through. The firms who survive a downturn with all of their employees...survive.

Small businesses are the backbone of America. And engineering firms are no exception. 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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