

How Much Respect is Enough?

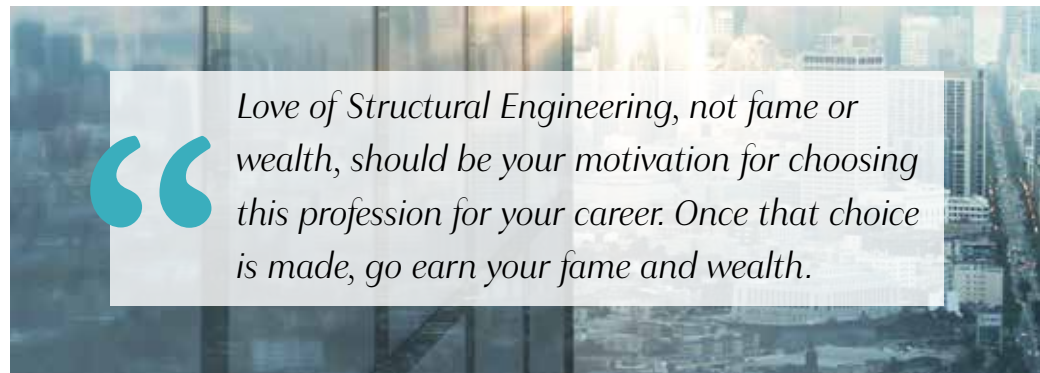
By David L. Pierson, S.E.

I am a structural engineer and quite happy with who I am. Call me a simple guy. I grew up in a small town, and I was happy. I went to public schools, played little league baseball, and learned the value of hard work from a dad with a solid work ethic. It was not until much later in life that I learned my family lived well below the government's established "poverty line." Nobody told me, so I did not know we were poor. I did not know I was supposed to be miserable.

Now here I am working at a job I really love. It is only when I read articles in engineering magazines or when I listen to speakers at engineering conferences that I learn that I am not adequately respected and that I am not sufficiently compensated for what I do.

When I hear someone say that Structural Engineers do not get the respect we deserve, I wonder what exactly that means. The statement implies that there is a proper amount of respect that we should have. Who established that benchmark for "adequate respect," and how does someone know if the benchmark is or is not being met? In our society, there is a pernicious virus that is attacking the fabric that holds us together, what some call the "Entitlement Mentality." Every time we decide that we are entitled to anything beyond that which we are willing to work for and earn, we promote the growth of this virus. So, are we saying that we are "Entitled" to more respect? Or ought we to simply earn it, as we expect others to earn it? Robert Herjavec (of "Shark Tank" fame) stated it well to an entrepreneur seeking his investment, "Here's the truth about life. You don't get what you think you deserve – you get what you earn."

One of the common ideas I hear bantered about is the concept that Structural Engineers save lives – as if this needs to be recognized by society so that others will respect us more. I suppose that this idea may help some engineers feel better about themselves, but what does it really mean? The reality is – we do not save lives in the same way that Doctors save lives. The way we save lives is much more akin to how a Truck Driver or a Farmer saves lives. Without food, I would die, and much of the food I need comes from farmers, delivered to the grocery store by truck drivers. Farmers and Truck Drivers each provide vital services for our economy, and if they do not do their jobs correctly, people could die. Ditto for Structural Engineers. But



an average engineer makes quite a bit more than an average farmer or truck driver.

Which brings me to the most often heard topic of discussion at professional society meetings – the inadequacy of compensation for Structural Engineers. And then I see some of these same individuals and organizations out lobbying youth to choose engineering as a profession. The first question is this – who gets to say what the "Right" compensation is for Structural Engineers? If you do not think the free market ought to decide, you probably should not practice in the United States. And if you believe that the free market and capitalism are the best way for our services to be valued, then why in the world would you lament that fewer students are choosing engineering as a profession. Basic Economics was part of the core curriculum for us in college, correct? Is the Law of Supply and Demand not sufficiently clear? I know this – when I graduated from USU, I could have commanded a much higher salary had I been the only graduate that year. And some of my smart peers who chose Accounting or Computer Science may have become Engineers instead.

One positive thing I see happening at the national level of our Engineering Organizations is the push to raise the barriers to entry into our profession. The push for more education requirements is a straightforward way to keep less-qualified people from becoming licensed engineers. Unfortunately, at the same time, there is a movement in some states to remove professional licensing requirements, which would be a step backward for the engineering profession in the United States.

Ironically, I did just learn some very interesting things about Switzerland and Structural Engineering. During a discussion with an Engineering Professor from Switzerland, I asked how hard it was to get licensed as a

Structural Engineer in his country. He told me that in many areas of Switzerland, they do not have licensing. Stunned, I asked what qualifications were required by the Building Department when applying for a building permit. He said little to none. Sometimes you must show evidence of a degree from a recognized school of Engineering, but often that is all they want. *He thought it was strange that we would rely on the government to regulate this.* He said several times, "In Switzerland, engineers have the responsibility to do what is right. They have the right to do engineering, and with that right comes the responsibility to only do what they are qualified to do."

It seems that, in Switzerland, engineering practice is based substantially on reputation and honor. Owners and Constructors only hire engineers they trust and, therefore, the Design Professionals essentially self-regulate. It seems they embody ethical standards similar to those we espouse – but like the ancient Hebrews, their word is their bond.

It sounds like the engineers in Switzerland have earned quite a bit of respect.

I wish I lived in a country where that worked, but our culture is obviously much different from Switzerland. I would not advocate for no governmental licensing in the U.S.

As I tell my students, "Stiffness Attracts Force." That, of course, is vitally important but irrelevant to this article. I also tell them, "Love of Structural Engineering, not fame or wealth, should be your motivation for choosing this profession for your career. Once that choice is made, go earn your fame and wealth." *Auf Wiedersehen*



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