

How to Recession-Proof Your Engineering Career

By Stephanie Slocum, P.E., in collaboration with SEI's Business Practices Committee

There is a skillset that makes your engineering career “recession-resistant.” That skillset is basic business development and has proven value to ALL structural engineering firms. Yet, many engineers actively avoid learning it for a variety of reasons.

This article explores why engineers with this skillset have an advantage, why learning these skills is of increased urgency in uncertain economic times, and how engineers can improve their skills.

Engineers with business-development skills have more options and job security than those that do not. The AEC industry – and by extension structural engineering – is known for being cyclical. Engineers with technical expertise are in high demand in boom times. In economic downturns, Management makes tough choices to reduce staff to match projected reduced workloads. Engineers identified as having a long-term benefit to the firm have a leg-up when making these decisions.

As someone who recently turned 40, the author has experienced a completed cycle three times to date, beginning with the 1999 dot-com bust. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new economic uncertainty.

When the 2008 recession began, project managers with direct client relationships were asked to help bring in new business and take over business development responsibilities, while pure business development staff was dismissed. This concept is not new and is often referred to as the “Seller-Doer” model. The Society for Marketing and Professional Services (SMPS) defines the seller-doer model as: “...technical staff who are also responsible for billable hours, and, to some degree, for securing contracts or projects for their firms, either through repeat clients or fostering relationships with new clients.”

This model is prevalent throughout the industry, largely because clients are demanding it. It is estimated that 84% of engineering, 70% of architecture, and 66% of construction firms use this model. There is a proven financial benefit; firms using this model are more likely to be high-performing, averaging at least 14% greater operating profits on net revenue than other AEC firms (*41st Annual Deltek Clarity Architecture & Engineering Industry Study, Data collected 1.21.20-3.23.20*).

History shows us that the seller-doer's role increases during uncertain economic times and that candidates with these skill sets are more difficult to find than strictly technical

engineers. There is also a perception that employers can always find someone with technical expertise when work picks up again.

Although technology has dramatically increased the speed of some design aspects, it cannot rekindle a broken client relationship or nurture a new client relationship. As a result, engineers with business development skills have a significant advantage over those only comfortable sitting behind a computer during periods of economic uncertainty.

“In times of economic uncertainties, a focus on business development and client relationships keeps the doors of engineering firms open.”

Structural engineering leaders share how important this skillset is:

“Engineers with great communication skills, a sense of the importance of teamwork, and good personal relationship skills are extremely important. These employees make every interaction with clients – day in, day out – a business development opportunity. Engineering is a service business, and the best way to create repeat clients is to exceed their expectations on the level of service.” – Mary Kay Knight, P.E., Principal, Uzun+Case LLC

“We try hard to encourage all of our team members to understand and to embrace the fact that every interaction is a *sales call*. The best client is a repeat client. That makes your best business developers the project managers in charge of making projects successful. This means the ability to develop a genuine business relationship, to be seen as a trusted advisor, and partner.” – Scott Rosemann, P.E., COO, and Structural Engineering Director, Rosemann & Associates, P.C.

It is never too early or late to learn business development skills. Primary functions of seller-doers include participating in client meetings and presentations, writing proposals, and participating in organizations that provide opportunities for client interaction. Seller-doers may also author articles for client publications, attend networking events, or provide content for their firms' websites.

Learning these skills takes time. But what if you are an engineer who knows they cannot afford to wait to start honing their business development skills?

“Get involved with local structural engineering associations and allied groups such as civil engineers, builders, contractors, and architects. Network with industry people, develop contacts, and nurture those relationships to last lifetime.” – Arpan B. Taylor, M.S., P.E., S.E., Arun, Inc.

Do not wait to take action on business development. In times of economic uncertainties, a focus on business development and client relationships keeps the doors of engineering firms open. Many engineers have worked at multiple firms or have clients with whom they have lost touch. Now is the time to be transparent about the relationships you have developed and rekindle them if needed.

A quick email to a client you have not spoken to recently, with a focus on service first, is a great start.

As an individual engineer, you can reach out to those clients and demonstrate that you care about them as a person or share something valuable, like a link to a newly advertised project of interest. You can also talk to your employer about how best to leverage existing relationships.

If you are an employer, do not rely on your monthly client newsletter or business development staff to keep these relationships strong. Empower the engineers who work directly with your clients on a daily basis to set aside time each week to focus on nurturing those relationships beyond the transactional. Not sure where to start? Ask them to send a personalized (preferably handwritten) note of gratitude to a client. Stress is currently high for everyone. A simple, thoughtful act helps your firm stand out when the number of available new projects dwindles.

This article is the author's opinion and is a collaboration of the SEI Business Practices Committee, of which the author is the Chair. If you would like to learn more about this topic, please see this FREE video presentation at <https://youtu.be/gZHLx3Zoy84>.



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