



A Case Against Remote Work

By Kevin H. Chamberlain, P.E.

Your business development, and sanity, can benefit greatly from becoming an active member of CASE. I can speak highly of the membership benefits, and I'm not just saying that as the incoming chair!

Have you been to a national conference? If you get the chance, go! I returned recently from the ACEC Coalitions Winter Meeting in sunny San Diego, where CASE met over 2 days. Besides taking a much-needed break from a cold winter, it was an excellent opportunity to meet with structural engineers from all corners of the country. It was great to see familiar colleagues and make new connections. We share stories of pain-in-the-neck claims, demanding clients, hiring challenges, and lessons learned over laughs and a beer. To me, personal connections are the most important part of what we do to advance our profession. It motivated me to join CASE 5 years ago and it is why I remain engaged.

Unfortunately, for 18 months, we could not connect as we did because of an ugly 5-letter word. COVID sucked the joy out of many aspects of our lives, and the structural engineering profession was no exception. It transcended business practice issues, employment, hiring, retention, and professional development.

At CASE, we meet in person twice a year, winter and summer. Our showcase offering at our conferences is our roundtable. We all pack into a room and talk about business practice topics of most interest to our firms. We make a list of them and pick a few to discuss by a show of hands. For me, hearing business issues faced by the rest of the room is like binge-watching Netflix; pass me the popcorn! I always learn something from the roundtable, and I try to impart a tiny nugget of wisdom from my small perch back home in New England.

During COVID, we tried to do virtual conferences, but it is just not the same. For me, it was slightly more engaging than a manufacturer's lunch and learn, but without the lunch. So when we were able to meet together in the flesh last summer for the first time, it was like a ray of sunshine.

On a parallel track, the most prominent topic of discussion at our most recent roundtable was remote work. That is what I find the most fascinating because, at our firm, remote work has not been a "thing." The only remote work happens when one of the engineers has a sick child at home or when I decide to get "caught up" when the weather is bad on the weekend. We had a few weeks at the pandemic's start when we tried to minimize the number of people in our building simultaneously, but we have moved on.

I have learned that most firms offer at least some component for remote work. Some mega-firms have eliminated desk space and are renegotiating office leases to reduce their footprint. Many firms have a significant portion of employees working remotely. Although the remote work trend incubated and grew under a public health

emergency, it seems to be here to stay. Why? Because employees of all ages and backgrounds want that flexibility in their lives, we are told.

Is this shift towards remote work good for our profession? We cannot possibly know for a while. That would be like trying to predict the course of COVID. We are still in the early stages of this industry-wide transition to remote work, with primarily existing, experienced employees who developed under the old-fashioned method of working in a physical office around other more experienced engineers and learning from them.

So how are new hires supposed to learn? How do you replicate that one-on-one mentoring experience thru an internet connection? This may burst some bubbles, but I do not think you can.

Young engineers need to be in a setting

with more experienced staff in close communication every day. They were learning not just by direct instruction but by listening to all the goings-on around them, which you can't get in an office of one. Fine, but how long does that need to last? To answer that question, ask yourself when you think you will finish learning how to be a sound engineer. After a 6-month training period? After sitting for the PE Exam? After becoming a junior principal? None of the above. An excellent structural engineer stops learning when they retire and take up golf. The back and forth of the mentoring process should have no end date or age limit. I have found that when you meet a structural engineer who has "learned everything they need to know," chances are you will find that person is also a lousy engineer.

On the employee side, think carefully about what it is you're asking for. Do you have a home office with a door you can shut or one end of the dining room table with chaos encroaching from all sides? How do you set boundaries: for yourself, for your family, for your employer, and your firm's clients? Each has a different interest and goal. Will you be sidetracked by distractions that drop your productivity and mean you have to put in extra hours when the house is quiet? How will clients contact you? More and more, I see engineers listing their cell phone numbers on their email signatures. To me, that screams, "Hey, call me on weekends and after-hours." Giving out cell phone numbers at our firm is a good way to get fired. How does your employer know if you are happy? How do they help you grow professionally? Never forget that you are their most prized asset. Is a remote employment marriage doomed to end in divorce?

Hopefully, COVID can be buried on the scrap heap of history very soon. Let's hope that the development of new structural engineers and the health of our profession today and in the future does not fall victim to its legacy. ■

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