

## A Case for Flexible Work

By Jordan A. Jarrett, Ph.D., P.E.

I believe that embracing flexible work environments can benefit the SE industry, firms, and employees – if the industry is willing to put in the effort to incorporate the change. It is time to create a new normal. I urge SE leaders to embrace the disruption caused by the pandemic and to grow and adapt instead of trying to “return to normal.” STRUCTURE’s April 2022 Editorial suggested that it was not possible to replicate one-on-one mentoring through an internet connection. I beg to differ.

As noted in the April Editorial, a common concern about flexible work is the coaching and mentoring of young engineers. However, many in-person interactions can be replicated in flexible work environments. As examples:

- *How do you replicate a young engineer overhearing a manager’s interaction with clients?* Managers can invite their engineers on conference calls to listen to those client interactions.
- *How do you replicate a young engineer’s interaction with colleagues?* Teams chats and Slack channels can be developed for project teams and technical topics. Most young engineers are already experts at interacting online with peers and can also communicate effectively with colleagues virtually.
- *How do you replicate sketching ideas or reviewing a drawing set as a team?* Take advantage of technology and buy engineers and managers a tablet with a touch screen and digital pen. Screen sharing and PDF editing software can allow everyone to contribute together.

These virtual interactions need to be intentional. However, deliberate communication and coaching can also allow for more productive time and fewer interruptions for both managers and engineers. These active training methods can be more impactful than relying on passive techniques like overhearing office conversations. While interactions in an office can be valuable, they are not necessary for 40+ hours every week.

In an increasingly online world, flexible work and improved virtual communication skills can have benefits beyond the development of young engineers. They can improve client relationships, as many architectural firms embrace hybrid work. They can strengthen intra-office relationships by facilitating more connections between colleagues in different

offices. They can strengthen the ability of engineers to collaborate and communicate across multiple platforms.

Embracing flexible work can also improve employee satisfaction. Firms invest significant resources in employees, and retention is imperative for success. As a firm’s most prized asset, employees who feel valued, trusted, and respected are more likely to stay. One way to show appreciation is to allow them to work in the environment that best suits them. In the 2020 NCSEA SE3 survey, 85% of respondents indicated that weekly schedule flexibility is desirable. Sticking with the idea that ‘the way it worked in the past must be the way that works best today’ is outdated. Employees are intelligent, hardworking, and care about their careers; leaders should trust their employees to set boundaries for themselves and to make decisions that enable them to accomplish their work efficiently and prevent burnout in the long term.

According to the same SE3 survey, employees with approximately ten years of experience were most likely to consider leaving the profession; these mid-level employees were also most interested in working remotely. These employees work well independently, tend to be the most overloaded, and are often working parents. Working parents have a finite number of hours to commute and work, pick up their children from school or childcare, and still be able to spend time with their family. Working from home removes commuting time and allows productive breaks (that may allow employees to clear their heads and complete chores simultaneously). Gaining personal time in a week is valuable for any employee’s work-life balance and job satisfaction, especially for working parents.

Refusing to provide workplace flexibility can cause more talent to leave. In a recent survey of A/E/C firms, 20% of employees would likely leave their position if preferred work arrangements were not met. This same survey noted that “women, BIPOC professionals, and parents of young children are most likely to want hybrid work options – and most are willing to leave their jobs if their preferences aren’t met.” The SE industry is already losing people to tech industries due to better salaries and increased flexibility. Flexible schedules should become a normal part of the culture of structural engineering firms to recruit and retain talented and diverse individuals.



2020 NCSEA SE3:

<https://bit.ly/3SOGypa>;

<https://bit.ly/3T24uFl>

<https://bit.ly/3rG5Ud2>

Survey of A/E/C firms:

<https://bit.ly/3MgRb1A>

These changes will not be easy to make, and there will be challenges. However, this is not the only time the industry has required a substantial adaptation. The change to LRFD and the shift to Revit are just two examples, and most would argue that those changes helped positively advance our industry. The recent disruption caused by the pandemic should be seen as another chance to adapt. Firms can still produce quality deliverables for their clients while better meeting their employees’ needs. Let’s be engineers and problem-solvers instead of limiting ourselves to how it has always been done.

Now, why did I (an academic) write this article? Because I am one of the many engineers who left the consulting industry. Even before the pandemic, I was growing frustrated with the industry due to workplace rigidity, the lack of diversity in leadership positions, and the seemingly singular path to success. So, I left the consulting world, and I am now teaching the next generation of engineers. I am inspired by their desire to make the world a better place, and I hope they enter an industry where they can be successful. For their sake and the benefit of those currently in the structural engineering industry, I hope industry leaders will adapt and embrace flexible work. Let’s ensure that the development of new structural engineers and the health of the profession do not fall victim to clinging to the past. ■



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