Future of Engineering Leadership Initiative

SUMMARY

In an effort to learn more about the perspectives of professionals across the generational spectrum on topics related to leadership – and its future – in the AEC industry, ACEC/M enlisted the services of MPact Partners to develop a survey and conduct subsequent focus groups with engineering professionals in the State of Michigan.

The survey consisted of eight quantitative data questions, which included "select all that apply" and forced-rank items. In addition, the survey contained two open-ended questions for all respondents, and a third open-ended question only for those who indicated that leadership in the industry was not attractive to them (21% of total respondents).

By dissecting respondent data according to age group demographics, we sought to discern whether generational differences among engineering professionals result in disparate attitudes and responses toward leadership, professional relationships, work-life balance, and association involvement. What emerged from the quantitative data was, instead, a fairly striking consistency in perspectives across the diverse age cohorts we surveyed.

In instances where responses to survey items varied by more than one percentage point, a question we posed (in our focus groups) was, "are these disparities in response a function of generational differences, or perhaps a function of stage of life and career?"

While the questions we asked of the focus group attendees were not explicitly related to generation or stage of life, the questions we did ask lent themselves to those conversations. The Focus Group Summary Report details those discussions.

Focus Group attendees were eager and insightful in their contributions to the discussions, and each group expressed gratitude not only for the opportunity to participate in the focus groups, but also for the chance to share their thoughts and opinions in the Future of Leadership survey.

The information garnered from the survey and gathered in the focus group sessions offers considerable implications for plotting the future success and sustainability of firms and ACEC/M alike.

The recommendations listed below are based on our analysis of the collective data, both quantitative and qualitative, derived from the survey results and focus group conversations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Relationship Building

All attendees in every focus group agreed that solid relationships among colleagues, clients, and even competitors are not only important, but they are, in fact, *foundational* and *essential* for success and sustainability in the industry.

Focus Group attendees recognize the attractiveness of remote and hybrid work situations for engineering professionals of all ages and experience levels. They also believe, wholeheartedly, that those early in their careers stand the best chance for learning, growth, career development, and, especially, developing those coveted professional relationships, by interacting with their more experienced peers in an in-person setting.

Attendees also overwhelmingly agreed that the responsibility for cultivating younger workers' understanding of the importance of building relationships lies with them (the more tenured professionals).

To strike that balance, firms might consider one or more of the following recommendations:

- Negotiating time in and out of the office with younger employees, with the express understanding that a priority of in-office time is for network building and relationship cultivation

- Assigning a tenured mentor to a new employee or group of new employees as a jump start for building the new employees' network, and ensuring sufficient numbers of more experienced employees are in-office to coach, guide, and answer questions

- Inviting younger employees to attend and observe meetings with colleagues and clients, then allowing opportunities for debrief (perhaps even formalizing this practice with thought-starter questions for the junior employee)

- Educating newer folks on *why* building a professional network is crucial not only to *their* growth and development, but also to their firm's success and longevity

- Offering networking opportunities during working hours, either within a firm (if large enough to warrant) or among firms located in close proximity, during lunch time, for example

Work-Life Balance/Flexibility

As noted in the Focus Group Summary report, we posed the question, "What does Work-Life Balance mean to you?" To ensure they were not influenced by others' responses, we asked that attendees provide their answers in the Chat window. Those responses formed the foundation for our discussions.

In every focus group, those discussions centered around flexibility regarding when and where work gets done, as opposed to a strict work time/personal time separation.

The majority of our attendees are in the middle of their careers – the stage of life in which most people have spouses and children. While these professionals are dedicated to their careers and their work, they also desire the authority to manage their time in a manner that allows them to balance work responsibilities with family and personal obligations. As this generation of engineering professionals are already taking advantage of flexibility in their work, they indicated they see no reason why that flexibility should not be available to the next generation.

A related topic of discussion centered on trade-offs: what employees are willing to forego in favor of more flexibility. While the extent to which employees are willing to make these trade-offs depend on career stage, personal circumstances, and the overall job market conditions, our attendees indicated they would be willing to relinquish office space, make less money, go to part-time, and accept that they may not advance as high or as quickly.

To ensure organizations can achieve their objectives while providing employees the flexibility to attend to their personal responsibilities, firms might consider one or more of the following:

- Establish and share clear expectations around flexible working arrangements, including the potential trade-offs employees must be willing to make
- Consider incorporating flexible working arrangements into other organizational strategies, such as:
  - Health and wellness initiatives/policies
  - Strategies to attract top talent
- Engage in open communication with employees to understand their specific needs and preferences regarding flexibility in the workplace, including effective and efficient feedback mechanisms for those taking advantage of flexible work arrangements, as well as their managers

Association Involvement

Survey data and focus group conversations both yielded actionable information for ACEC/M as it looks to sustain and grow its membership. While not all focus group attendees are active in ACEC/M, their insights are, nonetheless, valuable for any professional association.

One of our survey items asked respondents what they would need a professional association to offer to ensure their active participation.

We offered seven options and asked respondents to "select all that apply." Of the seven, four were selected significantly more often than the remaining three:

- Learning and development opportunities (in-person and/or virtual)
- In-person networking events
- Access to career and industry resources
- Clear opportunities for involvement

As ACEC/M is likely already engaged in most, if not all, of these activities, our recommendation would be:

- Dig deeper with your membership to determine what is most valuable to them in terms of ACEC/M's offerings
- Consider different (repeat) modes of delivery in networking opportunities, education sessions, community of practice meetings, etc.
- Create a multi-channel communication strategy to ensure the widest dissemination possible of available opportunities

Focus groups generated very interesting and enlightening discussions around association involvement. Detailed discussions are captured in the Focus Group Summary report; for the purposes of this document, we would tender these possible recommendations:

- Consider incorporating more social activities, as folks find it easier to get to know people outside of a work setting
- Think about how you might partner with your member firms to pair younger employees with tenured coworkers (who are active in ACEC/M); a sort of association mentor program, as many focus group attendees noted that knowing someone who is already an active member would make it much easier to network at association events
- Perhaps the most discussed and requested association "draw" from focus group attendees was the opportunity to become involved *locally*, as opposed to a single yearly conference, or having to drive several hours to a "local" event