

ACEC/M Future of Leadership Focus Group Summary

In an effort to develop a fuller picture of the evolving landscape of leadership within the engineering industry and in ACEC/M, we conducted a series of focus groups to further explore data gathered in a survey to ACEC/M member firms (from January 8 – 19, 2024). The five focus group sessions were conducted between February 13 and 29, 2024, and comprised a cohort of 25 engineering professionals ranging in experience from 13 – 29 years.

The primary objective of the focus group sessions was to engage in meaningful discussions and capture the invaluable perspectives of these engineering professionals regarding the future of leadership in the AEC industry, both within the firms themselves, and in professional associations such as ACEC/M. The knowledge distilled from these sessions provides significant insights for navigating this future to ensure success and sustainability of firms and ACEC/M alike.

Based on the survey results, we elected to dig deeper on:

1. Professional relationships
2. Work/life balance & flexibility
3. Association membership & involvement

KEY THEMES

Building and Maintaining Professional Relationships

PURPOSE/VALUE

When asked to share their feelings on the value of building and maintaining professional relationships with colleagues, clients, and even competitors, attendees *unanimously* stated that those relationships serve as the foundation for growth and success of both individuals and the firms in which they work.

Common themes on the importance of cultivating strong professional connections included:

- Relationships are the most important part of business.
- As a means to establish trust between coworkers, clients, and competitors.
- Relationships provide the opportunity for professionals to learn from one another.
- Getting other perspectives and insights.
- A recognition that growth in the industry is built on relationships.
- Professional relationships help us stay in tune with what peers in the industry are doing.
- When there is an industry-wide issue, being able to call on your network is important.
- Creating a community that can come together for collective solutions as issues arise.
- Relationship development adds another layer of trust and likeability.
- No one person is an expert in everything. We rely on each other to deliver projects.
- Having relationships with clients makes it easier when things go sideways: might be hard news, but easier to deliver when you have that relationship and level of trust.

CONNECTING OUTSIDE OF WORK/MEETING VIRTUALLY

Focus group attendees meet with their colleagues, clients, and competitors in a variety of different ways. While every attendee noted a preference for in-person connection, they also recognized that in the absence of that as a possibility, meeting virtually is preferable to not meeting at all. The various ways in which attendees connect:

- One attendee saw a sharp rise in attendance (about 5X) at one organization's meetings when the option to attend virtually was introduced.
- Some folks are meeting virtually to study for professional exams together.
- Conferences were identified as a great place in which to connect – and reconnect with individuals in their professional network.
- Connecting with clients via activities such as golf is still a popular networking opportunity.
- Many focus group attendees use drive time to make calls to others in their professional network.
- Having lunch with colleagues and clients is a way in which many of our attendees say they make connections.
- Having drinks at a conference, or even after work beers was a common theme.
- After-work activities, such as industry-specific events, can be a way to connect with both colleagues and clients.

Work/Life Balance and Flexibility

DEFINITION OF WORK/LIFE BALANCE

To allow individuals the chance to think about what this term means to them – and NOT to be influenced by one another's responses, in each focus group, we asked attendees to type in the Chat function *their* definition of work/life balance. For these professionals, across the board, the definitions centered more on the desire for and importance of *flexibility* in their work and life than a strict “work hours versus non-work hours” distinction.

Our attendees told us:

- Work/life balance is mostly about having options – flexible hours/schedules, hybrid, WFH, etc.
- Not having to “punch a clock.”
- One attendee shared that everybody has so many things they have to address; it’s unreasonable to expect people to be sitting at their desk 8-5 and have a happy home life.
- Flexibility relies on trust and responsibility – those are hallmarks of a good corporate culture and a good team foundation.
- Having flexibility for family when needed; AND, then, can be on the phone with a colleague at 7 p.m. All work is not going to be happen between 8 and 5.
- Quote from a focus group attendee: “I had a 1-hour drive each way for 20 years. I worked 8:30 to 5, then, with drivetime and gym, I was gone 12 hours a day. Now I can work from home some. It’s a new life that’s *much* better.”

DRIVERS OF NEED FOR WORK/LIFE BALANCE & FLEXIBILITY

Because of our focus group attendees’ stage of life (virtually all have school-age children), the desire to be present, attentive, and active in their family/personal lives arose as a universal theme. Another common refrain centered on the “burn-out” folks are experiencing as a result of too much work and not enough qualified people to do the work.

TRADE-OFFS

When we explored what these professionals would be willing to concede as a trade-off for the needed level of flexibility, all attendees across the five focus groups shared that flexibility is SO important that they would be willing to work fewer hours (or go part-time), make less money, and concede office space.

Professional Association Involvement

VALUE OF ASSOCIATIONS

What attendees from our focus groups value most from a professional association or organization varied greatly. Included here are the most common needs and wants attendees expressed:

- The ability to experience innovative ideas/products and emerging technologies.
- Leadership opportunities for emerging leaders who might not have those opportunities otherwise.
- Formal learning, i.e., continuing education and career development, as well as learning centered around things like communication and organizational skills.
- Opportunities for building a professional network (and MANY expressed the desire for more LOCAL opportunities to build those professional networks).

DRAW/ATTRACTION OF ASSOCIATIONS

In addition to learning more about the value of professional associations/organizations in general, we were curious as to the attraction or draw to specific associations. Our focus group attendees had some interesting responses:

- Prefer activities over “business” events: Easier to get to know people outside of the work setting (Top Golf or go-cart events, for example).
- Knowing someone who is already a member (many folks expressed difficulty in just randomly trying to introduce themselves to a stranger).
- Where your co-workers belong is a draw, especially if you have a work mentor who belongs to a specific organization or association.
- The organization offering professional development and/or continuing education was also noted as a significant draw.
- One group in particular noted that while offering virtual is great, for networking opportunities, it’s KEY to have breakouts within the larger event, to allow for smaller, more intimate conversations.
- Opportunities to become involved *locally*, and not have to drive three hours, or just attend a yearly conference, was a common topic of discussion amongst all the focus groups.

A couple of the focus groups shared what they see as potential barriers to people getting involved in associations (perhaps even more so for younger professionals):

- Introverted/shy and because they don’t know anyone, are uncomfortable initiating conversations with others and networking on their own.
- Cost of memberships can be high.
- If the company (and even individual managers) don’t see networking as a value-add for their organizations.
- ACEC is not about how to be a better engineer but how to be a better engineering *firm*. On the business side of it. The downside is in the perception that no one but higher ups get to go.

What Can Firms Do to Engage Future Generations of Leaders?

While we did not ask this question directly in our focus groups, the conversations naturally veered into the topic of “what are we doing/going to do with the next generation of leaders in our industry?”

Focus group attendees across the board were thoroughly engrossed in these discussions, and offered a number of thoughts for firms to consider:

- This next wave of staff needs mentors, and we need to help them get there – invite them into meetings to sit and listen. It’s going to take a little more effort on our part. It’s on *us* to train our replacements and we need to emphasize to them how critical networking is.
- The younger generation wants a social, communal atmosphere. Those of us in the middle of our careers need to be there to mentor the younger folks.
- Relationships are still important – there is no substitute for getting to know your peers. Up to *us* to educate and show the value of that.
- Newer folks feel like they have to have all of the answers and are afraid to make a mistake. It’s up to us to create a safe environment and let them know failure is ok; that we are there to help support them.
- Mentorship is critical. Some will have the initiative and reach out. Some need a bit more encouragement and a little push. It’s our job to shepherd along and give others those opportunities.
- Re: professional associations – We need to show them what is available and possible. We can help point out where they may be a good fit.
- Re: professional associations – We need to be direct with them. Tell them to come along; bring them to the opportunities.

What Else Do Firms/Associations Need to Know?

As time allowed, we asked a final, “wild-card” question to provide attendees the opportunity to offer their insights regarding anything that was not already covered in the prescribed conversation questions.

- Firms should not forget that pay and benefits are important – not just traditional benefits, but things like parental leave for either parent, pet insurance, etc.
- The health and wellness of employees is important, both mental health and physical health. Make sure people are caring for themselves. No more man-up and push-through attitude.
- We need to ask questions of the younger folks – and learn from them.