



The Future of Remote Work

By Bruce Burt, P.E., SECB

For the first time in nearly a year, my firm recently hosted an in-person employee gathering. It was a social event involving masks and social distancing. Everyone was quite happy and maybe a little relieved to be together again. I had the opportunity to talk at length with two recent hires, Shery and Jon. I had met Shery once, at her interview just before closing our physical office last March, and only knew Jon through his remote interview and videoconferences. Both were thrilled to meet their co-workers in person, and they shared their excitement at the prospect of one day soon joining them in an office environment. They were equally anxious to ask a nearby teammate the basic questions every new hire has. My experience at this company outing was the strongest confirmation possible that it was not a question of whether we *should* ever return to the office, but *when* and to what extent.

Like most engineering firms, our work process has dramatically changed in the past twelve months. A year ago, we had no formal remote work policy and were forced almost overnight to adapt as a matter of survival. Fortunately, we had recently made investments in network capabilities and remote teaming software. But the learning curve for the use of web-based communication tools rose steeply. Quality control procedures were adapted to assure that the product clients received differed little from what they expected. Some firms likely carried on with an office-bound, business-as-usual approach, but that was not possible in our region of the country. And with the benefit of over a year's experience working remotely, I had to ask myself whether a traditional, office-centric strategy was the best approach in an engineering profession that has fundamentally changed.

My firm, like many others, is developing a remote work policy that addresses the needs of the staff while maintaining and hopefully strengthening the company and its culture. Having spoken with many of our staff, it will not be a one-size-fits-all policy. For some, freedom from long commutes and the ability to structure their workday around other responsibilities have been a blessing; for others, the distractions of home life and the lack of daily interactions with co-workers have been a curse. Companies should carefully survey their changing landscape and adopt policies that mutually benefit both company and employee to address an increasingly mobile workforce's varied needs.

The needs of the firm. For an engineering firm to thrive, it must deliver high-value services to its clients consistently, on-time, and at a profit. Attracting, developing, and retaining talent is the key to a firm's success. Having policies that evolve with the needs and expectations of existing and prospective workers is a vital component in recruiting and

retaining talent. But those policies must also allow the firm to function efficiently. Managers may need to be in the office more often than non-managers. Entry-level staff may need to work almost exclusively in-office to gain the greatest benefit from the knowledge transfer that entails. Rules regarding internal and external response time to emails, calls, or team communications should be determined. The minimum amount of office presence must be established to maintain the cohesiveness of the workforce and continuity of corporate culture.

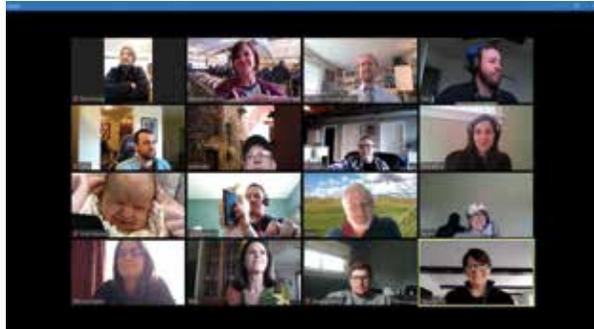
The needs of the worker. Employees' perceptions of their workspace options have evolved. The changes employers made to keep the virtual, if

not the physical, doors open have allowed workers greater efficiencies when working away from the office. Workers have gained flexibility in work schedules to tend to childcare needs and other responsibilities. These benefits should be preserved to the greatest extent possible. For employees working from home, necessary resources should be provided, along with technical assistance from the firm's IT department. With a return to the office, quick surveys can be a valuable tool to reveal attitudes toward flexibility, safety, technology, or even the need for more human interaction.

Once your remote work policy has been established, make your

firm's expectations clear. Then communicate, communicate, and communicate some more. And offer a virtual suggestion box to employees – an anonymous way for them to provide insights for improvement.

The conclusion I drew from our recent company outing is that there is still a need for community within an organization, and the office is the locus of that community. This realization has probably been reached in many engineering offices. A recent survey cited in a January STRUCTURE article indicated that only 12% of those surveyed wanted to work from home full-time, and 70% wanted to work in the office most of the week. That should not be surprising. It is in the office where the ties that bind people together are developed. It is where synergies are achieved, ad hoc teams meet to creatively problem solve, and where new hires absorb almost by osmosis the engineering craft and the company's work ethic and esprit de corps. The office-as-primary-workplace concept has not become outmoded, but the workplace concept needs to adapt and become more flexible to address the post-pandemic realization that to efficiently provide a high-quality service, much more of the work can be done outside the office than was once imagined. ■



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Bruce Burt is Vice President of Engineering with Ruby+Associates, Inc., located in Bingham Farms, MI. He is a member of the CASE Contracts Committee. (bburt@rubyandassociates.com)