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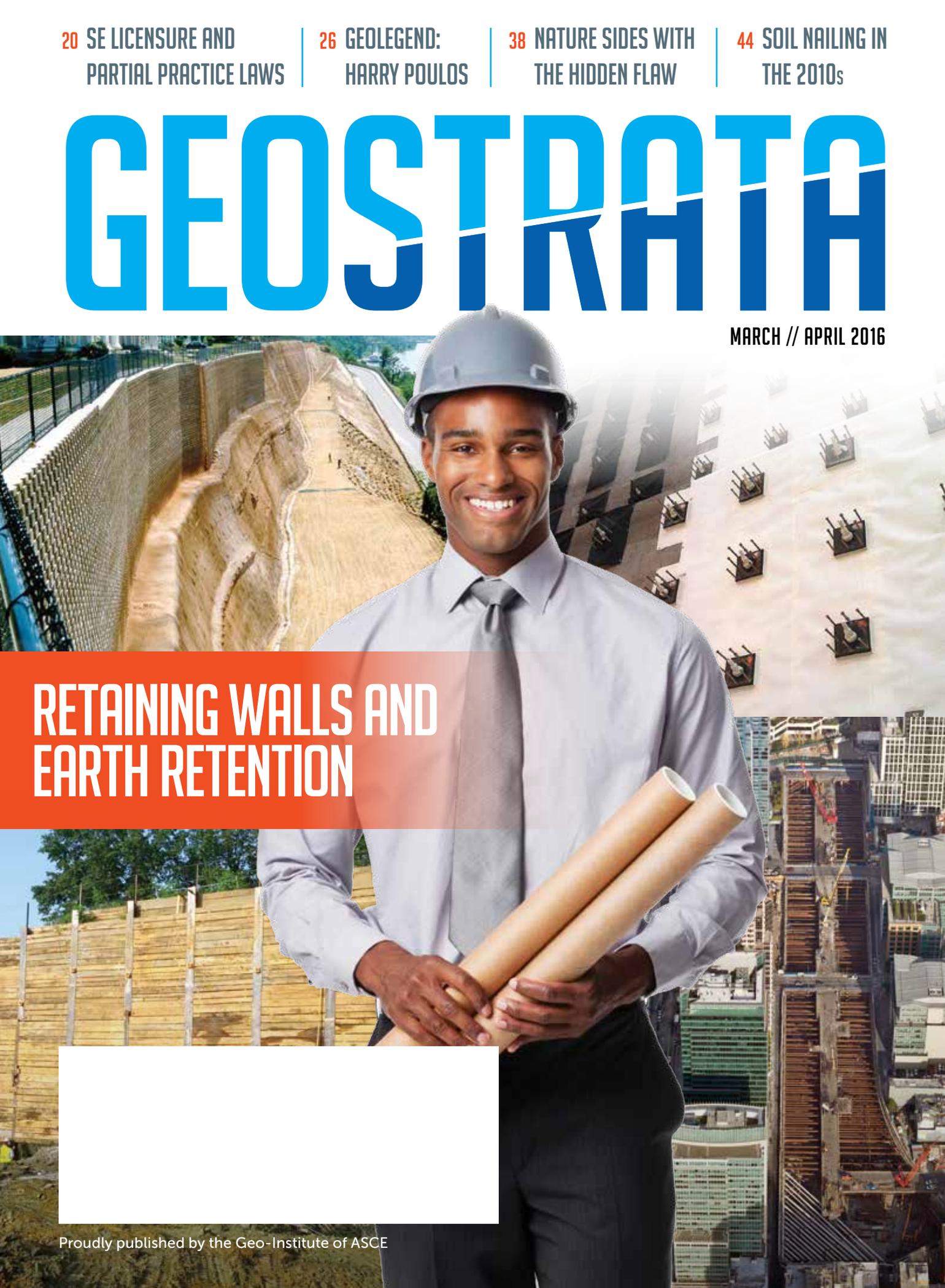
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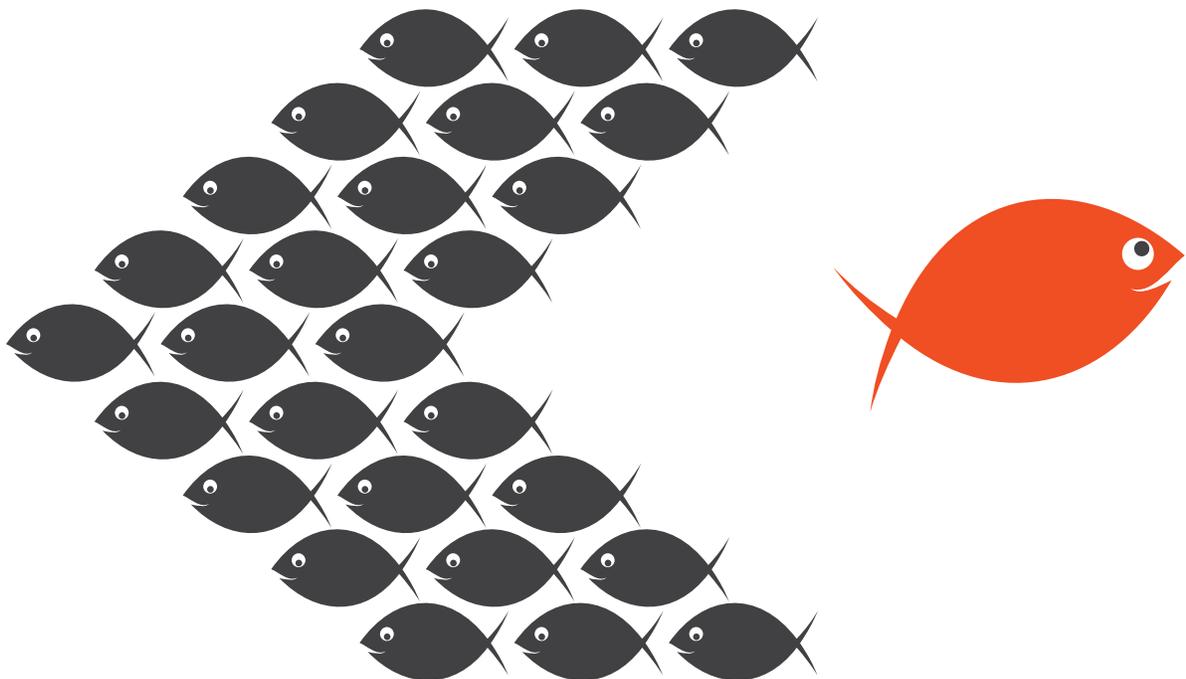
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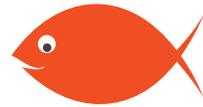
# On the Benefits of Being Different

By John P. Bachner

“What makes your firm different?” Insofar as geotechnical engineers are concerned, only one answer is universally applicable. That answer is *not* “Nothing,” although it sometimes seems to be. For as much as geotechnical engineers lament, “We’re treated as though we’re all the same,” they seem to go out of their way to actually *be* the same. Consider proposals and reports that you issue to client representatives. How often do the cover letters or emails begin with, “Enclosed please find...,” “Attached please find...,” or “Please see...”? How often do they conclude with, “If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask”?



In fact, if you want to stand out from the crowd, you have to deliver technical excellence that is unsurpassed; on a par with others who are the best...



And while we're at it, let's talk about geotechnical engineering reports: How many of them feature the mind-numbing black-left/right-justified-type-on-a-white-background style that was so popular before the invention of the Internet? My guess? 95 percent or more. And how about the writing style used? How many geotechnical engineering reports demonstrate passive-voice addiction – PVA, also mind-numbing – so that things happen without human involvement; e.g., “The study was conducted...” and, “The findings were developed...”? In my experience, the number has to come close to 100 percent. What about changing to something more contemporary; you know, a writing style that became common in, say, 1950, vs. the 1870s when passive voice was so popular!

And how about geotechnical engineers' routine emails? How often do they conclude with something along the lines of, “I hope you have a great day” or “I hope you have a great weekend”? Again, from what I've seen, that hollow hope is used extensively. (Personally, I've never understood why senders so limit their false hopes. Why not say something like, “I hope the rest of your life is wonderful”? It costs no more than a hope for a good ten more hours or even a whole weekend. And you only have to say it once!)

What about your offices? Do they rely on cubicles? Are those who inhabit them given the freedom to have a variety of personal articles on display,

so that visitors to the office are treated to a wholly unprofessional, visual hodgepodge? What's on the walls? Are they bare, for the most part? And tell me about the furniture: Is it modern and comfortable? Or does it not even get a second thought... or cleaning?

Here's the issue in a nutshell: If you do the same things as every one

of your competitors, how can client representatives and colleagues *not* think geotechnical engineers and their firms are all the same? And if they think you're all the same, how can you get upset when they ask you to submit a priced proposal or just a price? *You're doing this to yourselves!* By making no serious effort to do the obvious,

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little-things-mean-a-lot things differently — by doing things almost exactly as all your peers/competitors do — you have turned your professional community into a professional commodity where price seems to be the only real differentiator.

Now imagine a geotechnical engineering firm that delivers its proposals and its reports' executive summaries via YouTube videos, in addition to the written word. And imagine those documents that convey written words doing so in the active voice while complementing that difference by using photos, color, and hyperlinks to make the documents more similar to modern websites than 19th-century treatises prepared as cures for insomnia. Imagine a proposal that allows recipients to connect to videos that convey one- or two-minute autobiographic summaries

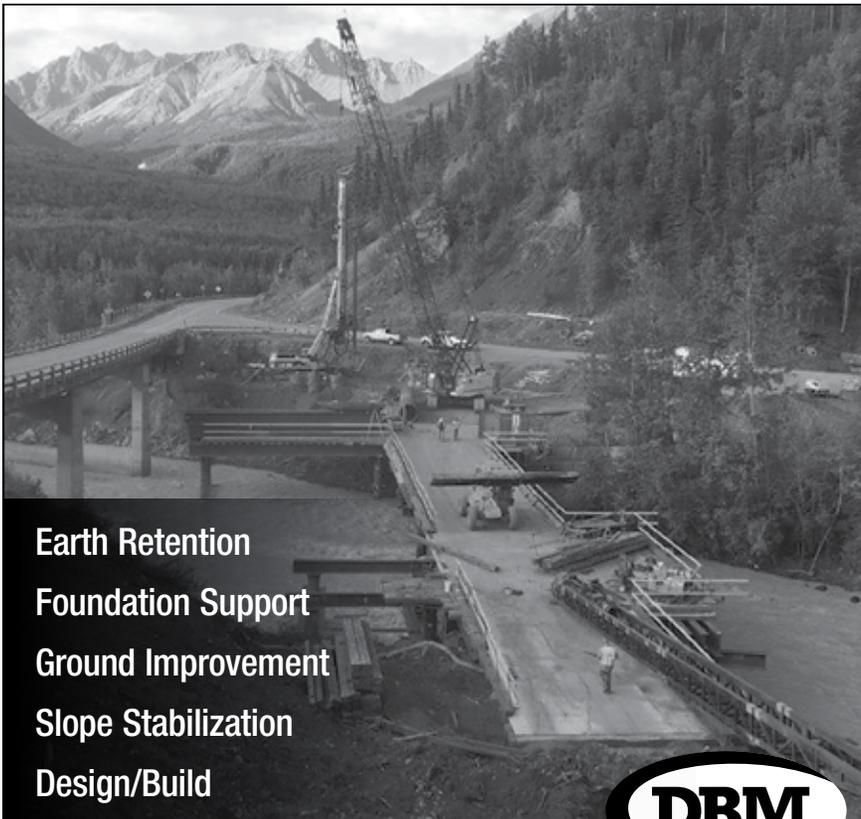
of each proposed team member. Imagine an office that uses interesting colors on the walls, and good graphics — good art of some type, perhaps even the art of youngsters who created their pieces as part of an area-wide contest sponsored by your firm.

Do you realize that, if you broke the mold, you would be more or less alone? You wouldn't have to answer, "What makes you different?" with lame responses like, "We really care" or "We're employee owned." Your business cards would be different (maybe printed on clear plastic); your proposals would be different; so would the appearance and content of your reports and your offices. But you would not be different just to be different; you would be different to better relate to the times we live in and the profession you represent. That superior difference

would not excuse you from performing your technical services well, of course. In fact, if you want to stand out from the crowd, you have to deliver technical excellence that is unsurpassed — on a par with others who are the best of the best... but whose penchant for looking and sounding like all the others just about nullifies their technical advantage.

But what about that one universally applicable response to, "What makes your firm different?" Do you know what it is? It's this: "I do," preferably augmented with something like "... because mine is the only geotechnical engineering firm that provides *me* to handle your account and show you what truly world-class service is all about." Of course, few if any geotechnical engineers would dare say anything like that, because that's not what anyone else in the herd does. And that needs to change, because — until geotechnical engineers and their firms dare to be different — the best of the bunch will look just like the worst: the ones that feed on the bottom. If that's not acceptable to you, do something about it. I dare you. **GS**

► **JOHN P. BACHNER** is an independent consultant who served as the Geoprofessional Business Association's (GBA's) executive vice president from 1973 through 2015. GBA is a not-for-profit association that develops programs, services, and materials to help its member firms and their clients confront risk and optimize performance. GBA-Member firms provide geotechnical, geologic, environmental, construction-materials engineering and testing (CoMET), and related professional services ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoprofessions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoprofessions)). GBA invites geoprofessional constructors, educators, and government officials to become involved. Contact GBA at [info@geoprofessional.org](mailto:info@geoprofessional.org).



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