

My Two Bits

I'm on my way back from another successful meeting of ASFE/The Best People on Earth. What makes these meetings so great is the people and what they have to say. A tremendous amount of networking goes on; a lot of knowledge-sharing; war stories.

The latest war involves the lack of good employees. "Where will the next generation of engineers, geologists, et al. come from? And what can we do about the work ethic of the 'youngsters' now employed? Many are unwilling to put in more than 40 hours a week. Few like to travel and some simply refuse to accept transfers to new locations. In fact, they're not the least bit as selfless as the Boomers now in charge, most of whom were reared by parents who had tasted at least the tag end of the Great Depression. What are we going to do? What's going to happen to our profession?"

Now that I have time to think about that lament, this thought occurs to me: If in the near future the majority of technical professionals are unwilling to spend more than 40 hours a week on the job, so they can devote more quality time to themselves and their families, utilization rates will decline and overhead will increase. And if these "gen-nexters" are involved in professional pursuits at all, the meetings and continuing education opportunities will have to occur during the workweek, *not* during "traditional" times; i.e., evenings and weekends. In other words, utilization rates will decline even more and overhead will increase even more, meaning that, no matter how remuneration is determined, clients will have to pay more. Contrast this situation with one I thought about 20 years ago on my way back from an earlier meeting.

"Information technology is the way of the future," I heard. "We'll be able to do more, better and faster, for less. We'll be able to charge clients the same and make more money at the same time." But what happened? Firms invested a fortune in first-generation information technology (IT) and – oops; surprise – much more in personnel training, updated software, new hardware, and so on. Yes: They were able to do more, better and

faster, but not for that much less. But they could lower some costs, and they did, only to also lower their rates, evidently embarrassed by the notion of making more profit. “You want more profit?” they seemed to be saying. “Earn it the old-fashioned way: Work 80 hours a week and take no vacations.”

I’m convinced that the current leadership generation of technical professionals – the Boomers – was heavily influenced by their parents’ fear of the potential for economic collapse. (I can whisper that I’m really no different, and I’m far, far from being technical or even, some might say, professional.) The “establishment” generation’s general willingness to work long, hard hours for a lot less money than they are worth – they are custodians of the planet, after all – proves the point. They continually look for outside events to save the day – to justify higher rates, for example – and then, when those events finally transpire, they scurry about like spit on a griddle looking for ways to lower their prices.

So here comes the new generation, seen by some as lazy, self-indulgent, and totally self-absorbed, raised in the lap of luxury by absent-parent workaholics. Interestingly, though, they were raised with IT and work with it far more efficiently and effectively than their elders, so they actually are in a position to work smarter, not harder. They also seem to want to live smarter: “We’re going to get married later and have kids later so we can have more fun,” they say. “We’re going to work smarter than our parents, but not as hard. We’re going to come home at a reasonable hour during the week and we’re going to do things together on the weekend. Our employers will have to tolerate our attitudes and they’re going to have to pay us well. They will have no choice but to charge more and clients will have no choice but to pay.”

“Wait a minute,” I say to myself. “These younger folks are doing exactly what their older peers said they wanted to do, but didn’t, because they were afraid to.” So does that mean that the inheritors are brave? Not at all. They simply feel entitled. Now, you may think that’s a bad thing, but it’s not! If they can get away with that attitude, more power to

them! And, by all accounts, they will be able to do it. We have fewer people selecting technical careers, in part because the current professional leaders do not have what it takes – the time and/or professional pride and/or enthusiasm for an 80-hour-a-week career plagued by liability problems – to urge young people to make the same career choice they did.

Imagine the impossible: The next generation comes along, works smarter, gets paid more, and spends more time on family and self. As a consequence, the new practitioners better appreciate engineering and its allied pursuits, arrive at work more refreshed (or at least less put upon) and enthusiastic every day, and are willing to spend some time here and there to proselytize, given that they can do meaningful things, enjoy life, and not dig themselves early graves in the process. As a consequence of the new outreach, more young people enter engineering and engineers are able to do more than they otherwise would, because – when they walk – they no longer carry an anvil on their shoulders. And because these people are paid more, they are appreciated more. (If something costs more, most people simply assume it's worth more, explaining why any number of the Napa Valley cabernet sauvignons that sell for \$80 are snapped up by collectors even though the high-priced quaffs are not as good as wines selling for one-quarter the price or less. And wine is only one example among many.)

So, here I sit, thumping away at my keyboard, approaching the bottom line, about to say something I never thought I would: The next generation of engineers and related technical professionals – the self-absorbed, life-is-for-having-fun, not-willing-to-work-that-hard, you-owe-me, I'm-entitled generation – may be right, and those they are preparing to replace may have it wrong. And – horror of horrors – engineering may be all the better for it.