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**Describe how the pandemic has affected your work environment, work-life balance, and YMG experience. What are the greatest challenges and opportunities of working remotely, compared to working in an office? How can the structural engineering profession embrace lessons learned from the pandemic?**

I could write 10,000 words on the value of flexibility within the workplace; allowing employees to choose schedules and locations that promote the healthiest work-life balance and ultimately results in the highest rates of happiness, productivity, and retention long term. However, what I feel I gained most over the past year working from home during a global pandemic, is a more realistic understanding of our professions' role in perpetuating systems of silence and discrimination, and an urgent need to make changes that promote a more inclusive and diverse structural engineering community.

As a privileged, white female with a bachelors and masters degree, I stepped into the structural engineering profession with a pre-stamped badge of belonging and a confidence to climb up the corporate ladder if I so choose. The next 10 years of my career is a trajectory most of you could draw out on a map if given my background, education, and a photo. Although I pride myself in these academic and professional accomplishments, it is now coupled with a sense of guilt and complexity that I only recently chose to unravel.

Conversations around discrimination, injustice, and racism are always uncomfortable ones, even when taking place entirely in one's own conscious mind. After challenging my own biases, opinions and experiences around privilege, discrimination, and diversity, I was able to recognize the importance of these topics within the workplace. Shortly after George Floyd's death last summer, I constructed a letter to my company's president and department managers, addressing their unique responsibility to openly and loudly affirm the safety of all employees within the workplace, vehemently oppose and condemn discriminatory actions, and start mobilizing our company's values into actions. I will admit, the response from company leadership was neither immediate nor simple, but with the voices of many employees heard, the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion committee was formed in June of 2020.

Although the racial equity movement has been gaining momentum for years, even decades, it seems as though 2020 was the tipping point. Companies that had not previously established Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committees suddenly joined activists in demanding systemic change in and outside of the workplace. I am proud to be part of a company that followed suit when employees asked the hard questions and asked leadership to rise to the occasion. Through recruiting practices, community outreach, internal education, internal policies, and much more, my company and many others are taking steps to ensure that they dedicate resources, time, and a budget to support committee goals every year. Perhaps most importantly, DEI committees must realize that power is the critical piece for implementing change; leadership must be willing to listen and support the committee's path to change through action.

What I fear is that momentum will be lost, and people will lose sight of the passion and gusto they had amidst a worldwide movement. To help prevent this, committees must track progress, set long and short term goals, and encourage leadership to recognize their efforts through company-wide emails and statements. It is my hope that organizations like NCSEA, SEAC, SWE, and many others can also help companies continue DEI work for decades to come, and inspire others to take that first leap. Oftentimes, what you will find written within a company's mission statement (for example, my company's statement: "exceptional engineering solutions through our culture of integrity, service, creativity and quality to to benefit clients, employees, and community") is the backbone to many DEI efforts, and is what we all aim to foster within a workplace community.

I realize that my essay may not address the obvious challenges and opportunities of working remotely, and I apologize for going off course slightly. However, I believe that the out-of-office work style gave people a chance to look inward and reconsider what is most important to their community and how their work life should reflect both personal and professional values. We do a deep disservice to ourselves by turning a blind eye, both personally and professionally, and have a responsibility, especially as an industry with white leadership, to stay true to our values through action. This is one of the many ways the structural engineering profession can embrace lessons learned from 2020.