

The pandemic has been a challenge for the entire world, and of course that extends to us in the structural engineering profession. Fortunately, many aspects of our work are compatible with remote work, work-from-home, or (for some of us) even work-from-anywhere. From March 2020 to Q4 of 2020, our office was closed to employees and clients alike, and when the office was reopened, strict mask requirements and restrictions on visitors of any kind were put in place. During this time, it has been hard at times to create a dedicated workspace in the home and at times it has felt isolating. It was easy to take the advantages of the office for granted before, but it can be very energizing to work directly with colleagues and clients, face-to-face. Balance has also been an issue, because when the office is in the house it's much easier to work irregular hours which run long to compensate for distractions and lack of productivity. My state SEA group here in Wisconsin had to cancel events and (later) schedule virtual-only events.

Working remotely has created opportunities that didn't exist pre-pandemic: more time with family, no commute, and a more flexible schedule – just to name a few. My wife and children are the most important part of my life, and I have really enjoyed all of us being at home, together, more often than ever before. It would be a shame not to recognize these important advantages. However, there are also challenges. The time around family makes it much easier to be distracted, the lack of a commute makes it harder to segment work time and non-work time, and the irregular hours have led to a certain level of burnout and lack of productivity. Not to mention, living in a rural area, cell service and internet speed (more important than ever before) are inconsistent at best and unusable at worst. Access to the company server from outside the office is slow by design (for security reasons) and it sometimes feels like it takes about twice as long to do the same amount of work at home compared to the office.

The pandemic emerged so quickly that companies and employees both needed to adapt without any advance notice. Pre-pandemic, our office did not have a formal work-from-home policy and with a couple specific exceptions, everyone was expected to be in the office during business hours Monday through Friday. I personally had no experience working from home since doing homework in college, and there was a learning curve associated with the start of the pandemic. As we near the 18-month mark since the pandemic caused widespread lockdowns in the US, there are some lessons to be learned by the structural engineering profession. First of all, many have discovered that they enjoy working from home and have proven themselves productive doing so. Some of us (I am in this category) do not care for it and find it harder to be productive. Our company has introduced flexibility to its employees, allowing for employees to choose whether to be full-time in the office, full-time working from home, or a mix of the two. The data are not yet in, but it is easy to imagine that allowing employees to choose how they work will increase productivity. In addition, the company has increased the emphasis on holding cash, so that in case of emergency or just a normal economic slowdown, payroll can still be made and normal operations can be maintained even with diminished revenue. I think one of the major lessons from the pandemic is the limits of technology to make us feel connected to one another – colleagues, clients, mentors, and more. Zoom, Teams, phone calls, and messaging are not a full replacement for in-person meetings, collaboration, and even national conferences. Moving forward, businesses and organizations would do to remember that it's important for all of us to feel connected and on a common mission, and in-person meetings and conferences are a very important part of that experience.

Thank you very much for your consideration of my application for the Young Member Summit Scholarship. This would take a great deal of financial pressure off of my attendance of the conference, and this will be the first national conference that I attend.

Thank you,

Brian Richerson