

Work Flexibility Strategies

for Recruitment and Retention in the
Metropolitan Washington Region

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Structural Engineering Engagement and Equity (SE3) Committee

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This document was developed by members of SEA-MW SE3 Committee. It is offered for your reference and is not intended to represent the single best or only approach. The findings reflect available information at a moment in time, which we hope is of use to SEA-MW members. This document is based on data from the National 2020 SE3 survey (<https://www.se3committee.com/publications>) as well as an informational poll of SEA-MW SE3 Committee members. Neither the SEA-MW SE3 Committee nor the individual members make any guarantee with regard to its accuracy, completeness or suitability, and they assume no responsibility or liability in connection with the use or misuse of any material. This document should not be construed as legal or financial advice, and users should seek appropriate professional advice to address specific circumstances.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges faced by the structural engineering community is attracting and keeping great talent. Understanding the motivations of qualified structural engineers who leave the profession has been pivotal to the work of the NCSEA Structural Engineering Engagement and Equity Committee (SE3 National) since its creation in 2015. Based on the 2020 SE3 survey, SE3 National published a “Topic Brief” on Work Flexibility, providing insight into the challenges faced by current and former structural engineers. The Brief addresses daily or weekly schedule flexibility, working remotely, overtime, parental leave, and other related topics. SEA-MW’s SE3 Committee has synthesized national data and local experience on these topics to provide a summary of the NCSEA 2020 SE3 data and propose strategies to improve recruitment and retention for each topic. In most cases, the strategies and examples are founded on a current policy from structural engineering firms in the Metropolitan Washington area.

Several of the suggested strategies include implementing a formal policy rather than providing a benefit on a strictly case-by-case basis. This lends credibility to benefits which otherwise may not be taken seriously, and is an asset for recruitment, as the benefit can be shown to potential hires. It also ensures that the policy is consistently and equitably offered to all employees and that the benefit is permanent, instead of relying on individual managers to approve it for each employee.

We hope this document facilitates a dialogue between all stakeholders and provides tools or a framework for firms to improve their recruitment and retention. This information was initially presented in the SEA-MW SE3 presentation in September 2021 (**more info here: <https://seamw.org/page-18148>**).

Daily or Weekly Schedule Flexibility

SE3 examined work flexibility as it relates to maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance with the ultimate goal of improving talent retention. Based on the SE3 survey conducted in 2020, the highest ranked category for desired work flexibility was daily schedule flexibility (including which hours and how many hours in a given day) and the second highest ranked category was weekly schedule flexibility (including which days and how many days in a week). In a competitive recruiting market, such as the Metropolitan Washington region, providing flexible work schedule options as an established benefit can make a company more attractive.

Within the companies represented by SEA-MW SE3 Committee participants, there is a wide range of flexible work schedule options. Some companies offer either daily schedule flexibility options or weekly schedule options; some companies offer both options. When comparing company policies it seems that smaller companies have less formal policies related to flexible work schedules compared to larger firms. For example, a manager may approve leaving work early one day but no official company policy establishes this privilege and its limits. The SEA-MW SE3 Committee recommends companies of all sizes consider establishing an official flexible work schedule policy that can enhance work-life balance and be used as a recruitment tool.

In the Metropolitan Washington region, an example of daily schedule flexibility is establishing core business hours (5-6 hours per day) and outside of those hours allowing employees to choose when to work the rest of their required daily hours. Establishing core hours during the day ensures that employees are available for meetings and team discussions, but then outside of those core hours they can make decisions that best suit their personal schedule, for instance accommodating care for any dependents.

Weekly schedule flexibility policies can be established on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. On a weekly basis the options could be to work four 10-hour days and have every Friday off or work four 9-hours days and take a half-day off every Friday. Some companies offer this option during the summer only. SEA-MW SE3 recommends providing this benefit all year round. The bi-weekly options are similar to the weekly options but over a two-week 80-hour period. One example for a structured bi-weekly schedule flexibility option is shown in Table 1. Alternatively, bi-weekly options may be flexible for employees to take any day off within the two-week period.

Table 1: Example Bi-weekly Schedule Flexibility (hours worked per day)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1	9	9	9	9	8
Week 2	9	9	9	9	Off
Week 3	9	9	9	9	8
Week 4	9	9	9	9	Off

Another weekly schedule flexibility option is to work reduced hours per week defined as working below the industry standard of 40 hours. Companies may opt to provide full benefits for employees working less than 30 hours per week. National data suggests that reduced work schedules correspond to greater work-life-balance satisfaction, which is critical to retention.

All of the daily and weekly schedule flexibility options presented should include discussions and final sign-off from managers. It should be understood employees must be able to fulfill their work responsibilities and obligations including adhering to schedules and deliverable requirements. Managers will likely need to coordinate and stagger schedules so that there is sufficient office coverage to ensure that client support and needs are not impacted.

Daily or Weekly Schedule Flexibility Summary

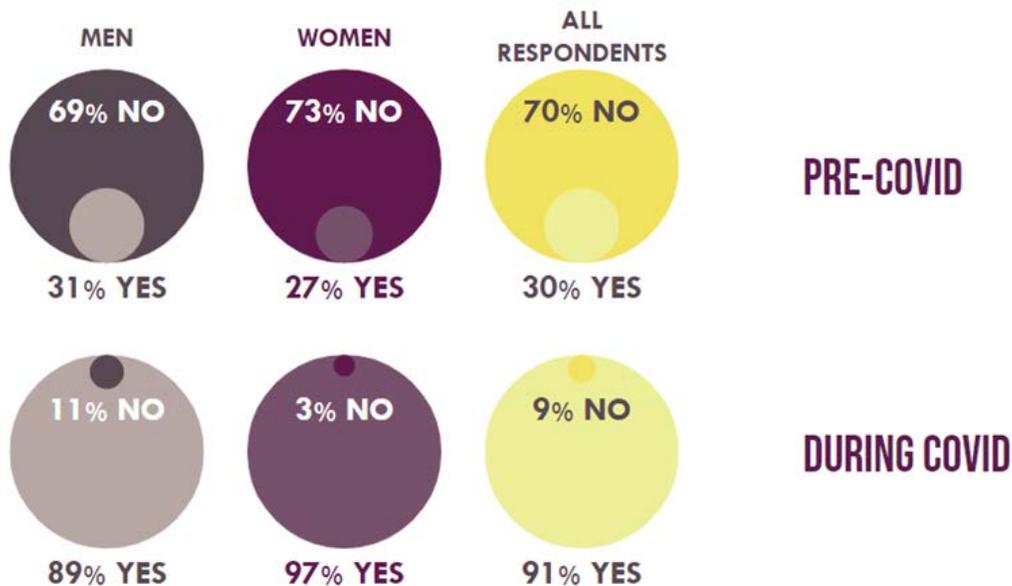
- Suggested Strategy: Implement a formal daily and/or weekly schedule flexibility policy.
- Example: For daily schedule flexibility, set core business hours (5-6 hours per day). For weekly schedule flexibility, provide flexibility in how many hours are worked in a day to then allow for half or full days off on a weekly or bi-weekly basis or work reduced hours per week from the industry standard of 40 hours.
- SE3 Data to Support Recommendation:
 - The highest ranked category for desired work flexibility was daily schedule flexibility.
 - The second highest ranked category was weekly schedule flexibility.

Working Remotely

Before March 2020, there was a common sentiment among practicing engineers that everyone needed to be physically together in the office to perform effectively. Remote work privileges were selectively granted on a negotiated basis, to staff with extenuating circumstances such as long commutes or dependent care obligations. These individuals negotiated the terms of their flexible schedules with their managers. The 2020 SE3 survey collected information from April through June of 2020 and provides key insights into how quickly our industry changed. The COVID pandemic forced businesses to test working remotely. The purpose of this section is to share some strategies and considerations for a hybrid-remote workplace, which includes some combination of in-person and remote workdays. This document does not address work productivity or epidemiological best practices for returning to in-person work.

The SE3 survey found that pre-COVID, a majority of respondents (70%) reported rarely or never working from home, but at the time of filling out the survey, 91% of respondents reported that they were working from home (see Figure 1). Additionally, the majority of respondents (80%) self-reported that their opinion of remote work during COVID was better or similar to their opinion pre-COVID. Although this information was collected (in retrospect) relatively early into the COVID pandemic, it suggests that remote work is becoming more acceptable in our industry.

Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents who Worked from Home Pre-COVID and During COVID



Looking beyond COVID, the SEA-MW SE3 Committee encourages local firms to be thoughtful about their remote work policy and allow for a hybrid-remote workplace. Previously, some local firms had formal remote work policies that were granted on a case-by-case basis. Although some individuals had success with working from home, others felt disconnected from the rest of their office since the default was in-person. At the start of the pandemic, most local firms successfully transitioned to remote work. Many firms are now implementing a hybrid-remote workplace. Moving forward, remote work policies should be comprehensive instead of being available on a case-by-case basis. A suggested strategy is to implement a formal hybrid remote policy allowing remote work

flexibility for all employees. Within the hybrid-remote policy, firms may allow work from home outside of pre-established core days when the employee is in the office (2 to 4 days per week). Alternatively, firms can provide a specified number of remote days per year or week for employees to use at their discretion, rather than a fixed weekly schedule.

Each office should decide what activities are best suited for in-person days. Although structural engineers work on a variety of tasks, this conversation will help each office create the framework for how to approach a hybrid-remote workplace. For example, in-person core days could be reserved for specific activities such as page turns, project team meetings, or office-wide meetings. Additionally, to encourage in-person collaboration, one local firm is working on blocking out external meetings during core hours one day per week.

Discussions should consider effects on training new employees, hosting meetings, and communication. The SE3 survey found that staff and entry level engineers were more likely to report a worse opinion of working remotely. Since newer staff and less experienced engineers benefit from frequent in-person interactions with managers, having in-person check-in meetings with newer staff should be a priority for the in-person workdays. Blocking out external meetings during certain times may help to promote these in-person interactions, as discussed in the previous paragraph. This will also provide availability for all team members to have regular check-ins to discuss project goals and priorities. When setting up meetings, whether internal or external, it is important to establish the goals of the meeting and confirm that available technology can support these needs. For example, if many team members are together in a conference room with a few remote members, it can be difficult for the remote members to be fully engaged or even hear the full discussion. As a team, they can decide if all team members should participate from their individual workstation or invest in an audio system that can pick up individual voices in the conference room. If a discussion involves sketching on physical drawings, the conference room could also have a camera to share this view to the video participants or the sketches are drawn on a computer or tablet that can be shared. In addition to meetings, communication in general is critical for maintaining a hybrid-remote workplace. Individuals should have a predetermined method for communicating on office days and remote days to the entire team, office, or company as well as having communication platforms that allow quick video chats and screen sharing to facilitate communication with remote employees.

While every company and every employee has different needs, tasks, and experiences, a strategy for employee retention includes firms providing formal guidance to employees during this transition period as well as moving forward by issuing a formal hybrid-remote work policy, clearly outlining the requested number of work days in the office and the goals for those days.

Working Remotely Summary

- Suggested Strategy: Implement a formal hybrid-remote work policy.
- Example: Allow remote work flexibility outside of pre-established core days when office attendance is mandatory (2 to 4 days per week).
- SE3 Data to Support Recommendation:
 - Pre-COVID, a majority of respondents (70%) reported rarely or never working from home, but at the time of the 2020 survey, 91% of respondents reported that they were working from home.
 - The majority of respondents (80%) indicated that their opinion of remote work during COVID was better or similar to their opinion pre-COVID.

Overtime

Overtime is common and expected for most structural engineering consultants. However, significant overtime is known to impact employee fatigue/burnout, retention, and quality of life as well as quality of work. The 2020 SE3 survey found that the most common reasons respondents consider leaving the profession are to reduce stress and improve work-life balance (see Figure 2). A thoughtful overtime policy can help address these aspects and improve retention.

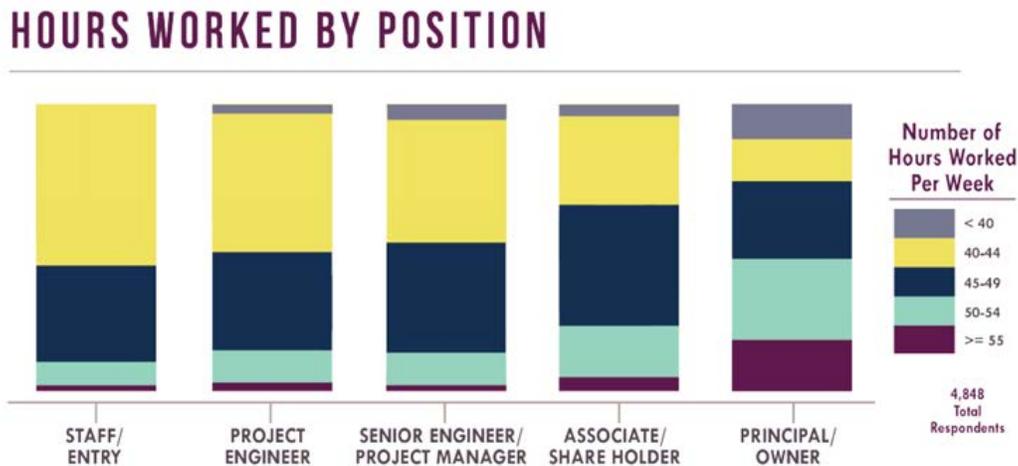
Figure 2: Reasons Respondents Have Considered Leaving the Profession



National studies found that productivity per hour decreases as hours worked per week increase. At 55-70 hours per week, the marginal production from each additional hour is less than the productivity loss across the work week. In other words, working more time has a net-negative effect on total work performed¹. The impact on productivity per hour is less in the 40-50 hour range. In the SE3 results, the typical work week varies by position with a greater share of respondents working over 50 hours at higher levels of management, as shown in Figure 3.

¹ Sehgal, Kabir and Chopra, Deepak. "Stanford Professor: Working This Many Hours a Week is Basically Pointless. Here's How to Get More Done: By Doing Less" [cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/20/stanford-professor-working-too-many-hours-is-pointless.html). 20 Mar, 2019.

Figure 3: Hours Worked by Position



The survey also asked participants to rate their satisfaction with work-life balance. 18% reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with work-life balance while 23% were neutral (59% were satisfied or very satisfied). Satisfaction ranged from 55% to 64% by position, with entry level and owner/principal level expressing the highest levels of satisfaction. The 2020 survey also found that a majority of respondents thought highly of policies for reduced schedules (see “Daily or Weekly Schedule Flexibility” section) and leaves of absence. This trend held among both men and women.

A majority of SE3 respondents (61%) believe that engineers without dependents should be more available to work overtime. The strongly held position of the SEA-MW SE3 Committee—many of whom have dependents—is that overtime prioritization based on demographic factors is not acceptable. Instead, managers should communicate with their employees about goals and availability, and should schedule overtime commitments based on employee preference.

Most firms do not set quantitative metrics for excessive overtime. A strategy to improve retention includes monitoring overtime on a weekly and/or monthly basis and tracking targets. One mid-size DC Metro Region firm sets internal targets or goals for maximum overtime. They monitor and evaluate overtime taking into account two goals: 9% max monthly overtime across all employees and 30% max weekly overtime for any single employee. This discourages over assigning work and helps to keep productivity, engagement, and employee satisfaction high.

Companies should consider implementing explicit overtime policies appropriate to the culture and recruitment goals of that firm. In addition, it is critical to keep up with hiring and cultivate transparency around work hours to prevent undocumented overtime and foster realistic project budgeting and staffing. In situations where no policy applies, it is important for managers to solicit and consider employee preferences when assigning overtime.

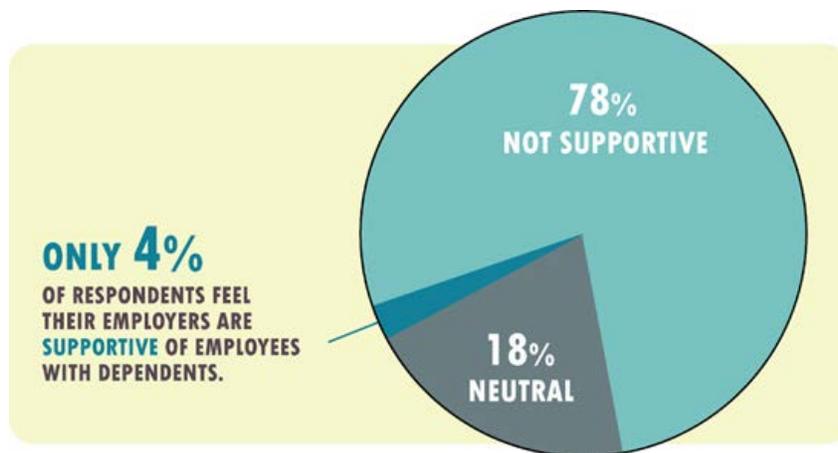
Overtime Summary

- Suggested Strategy: Monitor overtime on a weekly or monthly basis. Set maximum hour targets and clearly communicate them with all staff.
- Example: Set internal targets that no individual works more than 30% overtime in a single week and the average of the group does not exceed 10% overtime per month.
- SE3 Data to Support Recommendation:
 - Work-life balance and stress are the top reasons survey respondents have considered leaving the profession.
 - Reduced working hours is correlated to work-life balance satisfaction.

Paid Parental Leave

Only 4% of National SE3 2020 survey respondents consider their firms “supportive of employees with dependents” (see Figure 4). A strategy for recruitment and retention for firms of all sizes is to have appealing paid parental leave policies as well as internal programs to ensure potential parents are supported and not subject to discrimination². Additionally, the parental leave policy should be inclusive of every employee to ensure that all parents can successfully balance work and family. This section does not discuss the impact of long-duration absences on other team members, although the flexibility options discussed throughout this document can facilitate better planning and adaptation to many challenging situations.

Figure 4: Respondents Opinions of if their Employers are Supportive of Employees with Dependents

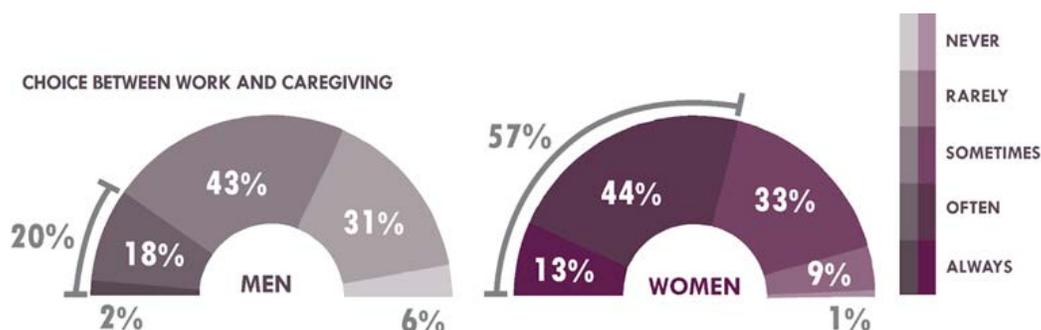


A summary of the 2020 SE3 survey findings on Children and Dependent Care is as follows:

- The percentage of employees with children increases with every level of seniority. At all staff levels, male respondents are more likely to have children than female respondents. 55% of male respondents have children, compared to only 33% of female respondents.
- Female respondents (87%) were more than twice as likely as male respondents (42%) to report being responsible for at least half of their dependent care.
- Of respondents providing dependent care, 61% of women felt it had a negative impact on their careers compared to only 16% of men.
- 57% of women reported choosing between work and caregiving often or always, as compared to 20% of men (see Figure 5).

² FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) provides job protection of 12 weeks of leave for employees in firms with 50 or more employees within 75 miles. While this job security is extremely important, this section focuses on paid parental leave, not job security.

Figure 5: Respondents' Choice Between Work and Caregiving



With many mid-career structural engineers and engineering graduates drawn away from our industry by attractive benefits in tech and government, improving paid parental leave policies is a promising strategy to enhance retention in structural engineering. The Federal Employee Paid Leave Act implemented in October 2020 provides 12 weeks of full pay for all federal employees with a qualifying birth of a child or placement of a child for adoption or foster care³. Many firms in the tech industry have parental leave policies with up to 16 or more weeks at 100% pay⁴. In the Metropolitan Washington structural engineering community, paid parental leave is generally much less. Some firms provide up to six weeks at 100% pay for all parents and additional pregnancy related leave totaling ten weeks at 100% pay for birth parents, while others lack a formal policy⁵.

Firms should consider a 100% paid combined medical and parental leave policy of between 12 and 18 weeks (not including any regular Paid Time Off provided to employees) to be used within a year with the goal of increasing toward the World Health Organization recommendation of 18 weeks of maternity leave⁶. The SEA-MW SE3 Committee recommends offering parental leave to any new parent at 100% pay for at least six weeks. Recognizing medical recovery from birth, total medical and parental leave may result in a longer duration leave for birth parents.

Survey data indicates that mothers are twice as likely to be responsible for at least half of their dependent care. Parental leave for all employees provides an opportunity for more balanced dependent care between parents early in a child's life with the goal of also reducing the percentage of women who report choosing between work and caregiving often or always (currently almost three times more often than men). By creating policies to facilitate equitable leave between parents, the SEA-MW SE3 Committee expects that the percentage of qualified women able to remain in the profession after having children will increase, to be more comparable to the percentage of men with children. In addition, to ensure effective use of paid parental leave, and to go beyond leave policies in showing support for parents, firms should consider strategies for fostering a supportive culture before, during, and after leave.

³ United States Department of Labor. "Paid Parental Leave." <https://www.dol.gov/general/jobs/benefits/paid-parental-leave>. Accessed 7 March, 2022.

⁴ Nickelsburg, Monica. "Tech Companies Are Doubling down on Family Leave to Improve Recruiting and Diversity." GeekWire, 24 Apr. 2019, <https://www.geekwire.com/2019/tech-companies-doubling-family-leave-improve-recruiting-diversity/>.

⁵ It should be noted that all employers within DC are required to provide a certain amount of paid parental leave under the DC Paid Medical Leave Act. See link for more information: <https://dcpaidfamilyleave.dc.gov/>

⁶ World Health Organization. "Breastfeeding and Family-Friendly Policies." July 2019, <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1239848/retrieve>.

Parental Leave Summary

- Suggested Strategy: Have a paid parental leave policy for all employees.
- Example: A minimum of six weeks parental leave at 100% pay for all parents and combined medical and parental leave totaling twelve to eighteen weeks at 100% pay for birth parents.
- SE3 Data to Support Recommendation:
 - Only 4% of the survey respondents consider their firms supportive of employees with dependents.
 - Of respondents providing dependent care, 61% of women felt it had a negative impact on their careers compared to 16% of men.

Conclusion

As a large dataset uniquely applicable to our field, the SE3 survey provides a rich repository of information for firms seeking to improve recruitment and retention. The SEA-MW SE3 Committee hopes that this document, which incorporates local observations as well as national data, will provide a robust set of tools for consideration by structural engineering firms of all sizes throughout the Metropolitan Washington Region. Each firm is unique in its priorities and policies and must make decisions appropriate to its individual needs. However, many firms in Metropolitan Washington and nationwide face similar challenges—some driven by competition with other fields more so than competition within structural engineering. Policies for schedule flexibility, remote work, overtime, and paid parental leave are all potential solutions, supported by the SE3 survey data, to attract and retain great talent in the structural engineering profession.