

Part-time work option

Heather Amundrud, P.Eng.,
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I read "Retaining female talent across all levels" with interest (*Engineering Dimensions*, March/April 2017, p. 10). My response: YES!

I have a degree in electrical engineering. I worked in high tech for 15 years before voluntarily leaving my job to stay home with my two kids. Why did I leave? Because the choice was either full-time worker with full-time childcare expenses (at the time, approximately \$1000/month per kid in the Ottawa area), or full-time mother. There was no in-between. The company I worked for was unwilling to let me work part-time (20 hours/week instead of 40+ hours/week). So I quit.

I have loved my time "at home" with my kids. I've been doing this job for seven years now. My kids are in school full-time and now I am ready to go back to work. However, I am still facing the same challenge: I am not finding meaningful part-time work! I've been saying for years that companies in my part of the world are incapable of wrapping their collective brains around part-time employment for skilled people. Yes, I can work at a coffee shop or as a cashier; that is well and good. But come on, Corporate Canada, please realize that many of us (mothers, fathers and others!) with education and experience would like to work 15 or 20 hours/week!

Kudos to PEO for this article! Fingers crossed employers in this country wake up and take note.

A closer look

Stephen Jack, P.Eng., Toronto, ON

Mark Bowling's article "Retaining female talent across all levels" (*Engineering Dimensions*, March/April 2017, p. 10) provides some reasons for a "noticeable gap in base pay between men and women (engineers) at the senior levels" but his explanation lacks the details necessary for a closer and more pragmatic look and whether inequalities are real or just apparent. Bowling does caution that "it is important to consider other factors that contribute to setting pay levels" but does not explain what they might be.

During my tenure at PEO and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE), I oversaw the conduct of both engineering pay surveys, employers and PEO membership (at the time), and published gender pay data (only then available

from the membership survey) in *Engineering Dimensions*. Here's an important factor that seemed to contribute to a pay gap at the time: An analysis of pay differences across major industry sectors compared to those sectors where female engineers were mostly employed showed that those sectors had lower average salaries. There are other factors as well that were found to show an apparent gender discrepancy but further analysis provided no credible evidence of pay discrimination. Perhaps Mercer could prepare and publish (in ED) a more thorough analysis on whether gender wage discrimination does indeed exist in our profession.

Incidentally, the graph on "Figure 3: Average pay of female and male engineers by years since graduation" shows median cash compensation numbers. "Average" and "median" have different meanings; medians are generally considered more statistically reliable especially when considering smaller sample sizes.

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On-the-job learning

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There is a current push in PEO to make CPD (continuing professional development) courses mandatory. It is believed that engineers would be maintaining professional standards and be looked upon more favourably by the public. However, my experience has been that the public does not care how many courses a person takes. They only care that you are doing your job honestly and to the best of your abilities. Example: For a project at my work, I had to figure out how to mix agar agar powder to a consistency that mimics the thermal conductivity of human vaginal tissue. There are absolutely no CPD courses that could have taught me how to do this. Nor did I really track how long it took me to research, correlate and interpolate any and all data I could find, even before working out a recipe.

When I am at work, I am on the company's clock, not PEO's. Sometimes I have my hand in seven projects in a single day at my company. I could easily claim any hours I needed for yearly PEAK satisfaction based on the variety of exposure

I have access to, but not all engineers have this kind of daily opportunity. Clearly, this indicates a need for PEO to be able to reconcile on-the-job learning and satisfactory job performance against the artificial construct of CPD learning.

Perhaps, with hindsight view on a mall collapse in Elliot Lake, where an engineer has duties involving inspection, verification, certification or other work directly in the public sphere, mandatory updates make sense. But most practising engineers are somewhat removed from direct public interaction in the course of their work. Consistent job performance and satisfied managers become more significant—and, most of all, satisfied clients of the company.

CORRECTION

On pages 23 and 29 of the March/April 2017 issue, we failed to include the verb "planning" in the definition of professional engineering. According to the *Professional Engineers Act*, a person is considered to be practising professional engineering if he or she is carrying out any act of planning, designing, composing, evaluating, advising, reporting, directing or supervising, or the managing of any of these acts as well as acts that involve the safeguarding of life, health, property, economic interests, the public welfare or the environment, and require the application of engineering principles.



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