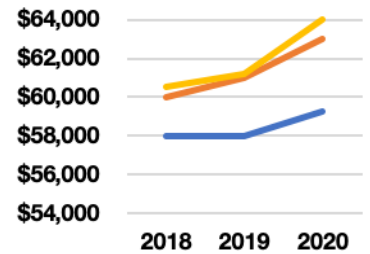


## TRENDLINES

### Entry level engineer salaries



Zweig Group's *2020 Salary Report of Central Engineering Firms* provides salary intel for engineers of all levels from centrally located states. Looking specifically at entry level engineers in this region, there is an upward trend in median salaries for **civil**, **electrical**, and **mechanical engineers**. Between the three positions, this increase in salary surpassed 4 percent over the last three years.

Participate in a survey and save \$320 on any Zweig Group research publication. Visit [bit.ly/TZLsp](http://bit.ly/TZLsp) to learn more.

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## Executive search advisors

The value you will add and the time you will save is worth the cost almost every single time.



John Bray

**Y**ou vigorously and regularly review all of the latest surveys and industry reports to ensure your compensation packages are competitive. You know your company has a **Best Firm To Work For** culture, and you have the plaques to prove it. You consistently hit your growth goals and have paid out bonuses company-wide like clockwork for more than a decade.

You feel like you've done everything right to make your firm an attractive destination for potential employees, but still have little to no success finding the director-level talent your firm needs to continue growing. As if that wasn't enough, you know you're likely going to be paying your new hire an arm and a leg just to be competitive in the market. You realize you may need to consider other options, and you wonder – why should I have to pay an advisor on top of everything else to find this person for me?

It is a tough pill to swallow for many AEC firm leaders, but working with an executive search advisor may be the best (and cheapest) solution for your director-level hiring needs.

Nobody likes paying for a service that you can complete yourself, but, in a tight labor market that only gets tighter as you move up the org chart, you may be surprised by the value that can be added by working with an ES advisor as an extension of your team. Here are a few things you should consider when deciding if an external advisor is right for your hiring needs:

- How long have you been trying to fill this position? If it's been more than a year, it may be time to consider outside help. It is possible you could put forth great effort for another year and still get nowhere. Bringing in an ES advisor will help to fill the position quicker and relieve a lot of the stress that builds up when your team is working hard to fill a difficult position for an extended period of time.
- Is there anyone internally who could be considered? This is somewhat of a rhetorical question, as there are probably no internal candidates if the position is still open. That being said, you should think twice about your internal candidates before hiring an ES advisor. Zweig Group's ES team is often brought in to make an external hire when there is a great candidate right there in-house who has been overlooked for the position. It is not easy to find a qualified candidate externally who is also a good culture fit, so letting the best internal candidate grow into the position will not only save you money, but it will also show the rest of the staff that there are great growth opportunities in your company. Don't have any internal candidates? You need to create more professional development and mentoring opportunities for your staff right now.
- What level of the company will she/he fit into? What are your

See JOHN BRAY, page 2

## TRANSACTIONS

**DAEDALUS PROJECTS & JBS PROJECT MANAGEMENT ARE NOW CHA** CHA Consulting, Inc., a highly diversified, full-service consulting engineering firm, announced its recent acquisitions, Daedalus Projects and JBS Project Management, are now fully integrated into CHA. This integration bolsters CHA's one-stop-shop suite of services to include project management and cost estimating and provides unified solutions to clients under one brand.

Daedalus Projects in Boston and JBS Project Management in New York City were acquired in 2019. Both firms have decades of experience in project management. Daedalus has traditionally focused on education and municipal construction in Massachusetts for a wide variety of building types while JBS's project and construction management expertise and experience is primarily in the commercial, residential and hospitality markets.

"Bringing our project management and cost estimating services under the CHA brand reaffirms our aspiration to elate our clients by offering them a truly one-stop-shop for design, engineering, and project management," said

Michael Carroll, CHA president and CEO. "We have integrated our teams and service portfolio under a stronger, united brand as we continue to responsibly improve the world we live in."

"The complete integration and rebranding of these two market leading project management firms as CHA aligns with our strategic approach to providing clients with fully integrated solutions and seamless delivery of services," said Chief Strategy Officer Jim Stephenson. "The integration further supports our approach to serving clients with extensive resources and consistent delivery from across the enterprise and throughout CHA's entire geographic footprint."

CHA is a highly diversified, full-service engineering consulting firm which, along with its subsidiaries, provides a wide range of technology-enhanced planning and design services to public, private and institutional clients. With technical personnel and offices throughout the United States and Canada, CHA offers engineering, architectural, survey, construction, project management, and other services necessary to complete projects on time and within budget.

JOHN BRAY, from page 1

expectations for them at your company? If this new hire will be entering the firm at the director level or higher, it is safe to say that you have high expectations for them and you expect them to be there for the long haul. As you move up the org chart, the value that an ES advisor adds will increase as well. While you may be able to find someone at this level on your own, the insight and industry expertise from the right ES advisor will not only help you fill the position quicker, but could deliver someone who exceeds your expectations and has the potential to change your company. For example, our team at ZG was once hired to find a new director of marketing for a 90-person architecture firm. The woman we found became the CMO on day one and was pegged as the future CEO of the company – not a bad investment for a new "director of marketing."

- What does your in-house HR staff look like? Is firm leadership involved in the hiring process? Some companies place a high priority on having experienced recruiters in-house, and others view it as an unnecessary overhead expense and prefer to take a "hands-off" approach to the hiring process altogether. If you have a hiring team with extended experience in the AEC industry and leadership (principals) that take an active interest in the hiring process, you may have everything you need without hiring an ES advisor. This is rarely the case with firms in the AEC industry, so you may just be spinning your wheels if you expect an average effort to yield significant results in your hiring process anytime soon.
- What is your budget? What type of contract and time commitment are you expecting from the advisor? In a tight labor market where candidates are contacted about "amazing" opportunities on a weekly basis, it is hard for even the best companies to engage and convert qualified candidates into new hires. A retained contract can cost anywhere from \$25,000-\$60,000 depending on the level/difficulty of the search, and a contingency contract could cost even more at 15 percent to 30 percent of the first year's salary. If you are not prepared to spend that much money and take an active interest in the search, then an ES advisor may not be the right choice for you right now. Although, you may be surprised by how much of your own time you will spend trying to find a suitable candidate otherwise. How much is your time worth?

**It is a tough pill to swallow for many AEC firm leaders, but the value you will add and the time you will save by hiring an ES advisor for your key hires is worth the cost almost every single time. ▀**

JOHN BRAY is an advisor with Zweig Group's executive search and recruiting team. Contact him at [jbray@zweiggroup.com](mailto:jbray@zweiggroup.com).



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THE **ZWEIG** LETTER

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## OPINION



# The undervalued HR function

“Top management is largely responsible for HR’s ineffectiveness on many levels in the typical AEC firm.”



**Mark  
Zweig**

Over the last 30 years, I have often been critical of the human resources function in AEC firms. Keep in mind, I **WAS** an HR (and marketing) director in the two AEC firms I worked in before starting the company that is today called “Zweig Group,” so I haven’t been bashing out of ignorance of the difficulties associated with the job.

There are a wide variety of reasons for my dissatisfaction with the HR function. I would summarize it by saying that really, top management is largely responsible for HR’s ineffectiveness on many levels in the typical AEC firm.

Here are my thoughts:

■ **HR needs to be part of top management.** If you have an operations group or executive committee that regularly meets to talk about the business, HR should be part of that discussion. They may also need to be at BOD meetings. Cutting them out of these critical discussions, and only including marketing, finance, and line management in these discussions does not help HR’s ability to contribute to the business.

■ **HR needs to be in the right place in the organization chart.** That means it really should not report to whomever is in charge of finance in the firm and should instead be on equal footing with finance, marketing, and IT. This is critical for a number of reasons.

■ **The HR role has to be properly defined.** It should be wide-ranging. Human resources should include responsibility for recruitment, retention, development, **AND** employment-related liability reduction – not just employment-related liability reduction and benefits, as the job is too often narrowly cast in AEC firms. We are in the professional service business. We sell labor. That elevates HR beyond what it may be in a different type of business.

See MARK ZWEIG, page 4





## BUSINESS NEWS

**ENDEAVORS BREAKS GROUND ON FIRST OF ITS KIND VETERAN WELLNESS CENTER** State and local officials joined leaders of Endeavors and the Cohen Veterans Network to break ground on a new Veteran Wellness Center, the first of its kind in Texas and a new location for the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic.

The Wellness Center will offer comprehensive integrated health services to support the daily wellness choices of any era veteran and their families. The Center will also house the expansion of the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic to continue caring for post 9/11 veterans and their families.

Jon Allman, Endeavors president and CEO, welcomed Senator Donna Campbell, Dr. Anthony Hassan, Jason Puchot, and Endeavors leadership, among others, to the site of the new Veteran Wellness Center and Cohen Clinic.

"We are excited to offer low cost wellness services under one roof to veterans in the San Antonio community," Allman said.

The groundbreaking took place on the lot adjacent to the headquarters showcasing Endeavors' campus expansion. The Veteran Wellness Center will cost \$5 million to build along with an additional \$1.7 million in renovations for the new Military Family Clinic facility. Completion is scheduled for Fall 2020. The project architect is **RVK Group** and **F.A. Nunnelly** is the general contractor along with **Pape-Dawson Engineers, MEP Engineering, and Lundy & Franke Engineering.**

"Endeavors is tackling the issue of veteran suicide. We have a crisis and progress will be made on that pressing matter," Senator Campbell said. "I know that [Endeavors] is going to be there and continue to be the leader

in that battle. We have got to establish hope. When hope is gone, where do they turn? This will be a Center to help our veterans." Suicide prevention is a priority for the Wellness Center. "The Veterans Wellness Center will offer services that are supported by the six principles of wellness. Veterans continue to die by suicide more often than their non-veteran peers. The Wellness Center will allow for veterans and their families to have increased access to integrated health, dental, mental health, and holistic activities which can save lives by improving quality of life," said Dr. Jill Palmer, senior director of clinic operations. "The Veterans Wellness Center is Endeavors' way of igniting the community to decrease suicide."

"I am proud to say the Network has delivered on our promise and so has the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Endeavors, here in San Antonio," said Dr. Anthony Hassan, Cohen Veteran Network president and CEO. "Locally you have treated more than 2,300 clients since Spring 2016."

The clinic is one of 14 locations in the Cohen Veterans Network. While 46 percent of the clinic's client base are veterans, 54 percent represent military families served by the clinic.

Texas has the second largest population of veterans of any state in the U.S. It is estimated that by 2020, Texas will pass the state of California's veteran population.

"As a 28 year veteran myself, one of the many things that attracted me to Endeavors was the incredible support and services we provide veterans and their families in need. The Wellness Center represents a first in Texas to provide integrated wellness services to those who have sacrificed so much already and I

am privileged and honored to be a part of it," said Chip Fulghum, Endeavors chief operating officer.

The target population for the Wellness Center is any era veteran and their families. Services will include long-term therapy, medication management, primary care, dental services, physical therapy and occupational therapy, nutritional services, massage, acupuncture, yoga, and tai chi among others.

"We are very excited to be able to offer these expanded services to our clients. Referring our clients to quality mind, body, spirit set of services will allow the veterans we serve the opportunity to achieve complete health and wellness," said Annie Erickson, senior director of community and veteran services.

RVK provides intelligent, efficient, and sustainable architecture, interior design, and landscape architecture solutions for public and private organizations.

F.A. Nunnelly Company is a full service, commercial general contractor. It is a family owned business that has been in San Antonio since 1922.

Pape-Dawson Engineers has locations in San Antonio, Austin, Houston, Fort Worth, and Dallas. The Pape-Dawson team is qualified to handle civil engineering, transportation, water resources, environmental, and surveying projects.

Founded in 1995, MEP Engineering, Inc. is an established and respected Texas professional services firm specializing in mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineering.

Based in San Antonio, Lundy & Franke Engineering, Inc. is a fully qualified and licensed engineering firm in the state of Texas.

MARK ZWEIG, from page 3

■ **You have to have the right person in the job.** It takes someone with a strong personality to do this job properly. It should be someone who can sell, because not only do they need to help sell new employees on joining the company, but they also need to help sell existing employees on staying there. They also need to be able to sell themselves and their ideas to top management. Someone who is too docile and too subservient, or has too low of an opinion about themselves and the HR job is not going to be able to fight for the resources and respect required to fill the role properly.

■ **HR, like all functions in a firm, has associated metrics that should be regularly monitored and have goals set for them.** There are so many numbers to track – the number of open positions, number of candidates for each opening, offer to acceptance rate, time to fill a job, cost per hire in terms of recruitment fees and signing bonuses, forced and voluntary turnover rates, as well as a wide variety of employee satisfaction measures. One could even argue that the productivity ratios typically tracked in an AEC firm are also influenced in part by the HR function and how good of a job they have done with helping assemble and maintain

"It's been said before that an AEC firm's greatest assets go home each night. If you really believe that, maybe 2020 is the year you should take a hard look at the HR function in your firm, and actually make some changes to help it become more effective."

the design, production, and management team. It is a broad role and there is plenty of data that can be monitored to help determine their effectiveness.

It's been said before that an AEC firm's greatest assets go home each night. If you really believe that, maybe 2020 is the year you should take a hard look at the HR function in your firm, and actually make some changes to help it become more effective, don't you think? ▀

MARK ZWEIG is Zweig Group's chairman and founder. Contact him at [mzweig@zweiggroup.com](mailto:mzweig@zweiggroup.com).



# 2020 Seminar Calendar

Learning is your competitive advantage. Zweig Group is your life-long learning provider of choice.



## FEBRUARY

- 26 Elevate Your Recruiting & Retention Strategy  
*Seattle, Washington*
- 27 Elevate Learning Series: The Basics of Business Development  
*Seattle, Washington*

## MARCH

- 12-13 The Principals Academy  
*Dallas, Texas*
- 26 Elevate Learning Series: The Basics of Business Development  
*Washington, DC*

## APRIL

- 2-3 CEO Roundtable Retreat  
*Atlanta, Georgia*
- 8-9 Elevating Doer-Sellers: Intensive 2 Day Workshop  
*San Francisco, California*
- 23 Elevate Your Recruiting & Retention Strategy  
*Toronto, Canada*
- 30 Elevate Learning Series: Communicating With Confidence  
*Phoenix, Arizona*

## MAY

- 19 Project Management for AEC Professionals  
*Tampa, Florida*
- 21 Elevate Learning Series: Communicating With Confidence  
*Detroit, Michigan*
- 27 Learn The Language of Business: Financial Management  
*Dallas, Texas*

## JUNE

- 11-12 The Principals Academy  
*Detroit, Michigan*
- 17-18 Leadership Skills for AEC Professionals  
*Seattle, Washington*
- 24 Elevate Your Recruiting & Retention Strategy  
*Denver, CO*
- 25 Elevate Learning Series: The Power of Positioning  
*Denver, CO*

## JULY

- 14 Learn The Language of Business: Financial Management  
*Chicago, Illinois*
- 23-24 The Principals Academy  
*Portland, Oregon*
- 30 The Power of Positioning  
*Washington, DC*

## AUGUST

- 5-6 Elevating Doer-Sellers: Intensive 2 Day Workshop  
*Chicago, Illinois*
- 12 Project Management for AEC Professionals  
*Dallas, Texas*
- 20 Elevate Your Recruiting & Retention Strategy  
*Orlando, Florida*
- 27 Elevate Learning Series: Building a Persuasive, Powerful, Pursuit Strategy  
*Vancouver, Canada*

## SEPTEMBER

- 24 Elevate Learning Series: Building a Persuasive, Powerful, Pursuit Strategy  
*Raleigh, North Carolina*
- 30-2 2020 ELEVATE AEC Conference & Awards Gala  
*Denver, Colorado*

## OCTOBER

- 14 Project Management for AEC Professionals  
*Minneapolis, Minnesota*
- 21 Elevate Learning Series: Creating a Championship Interview Team  
*Los Angeles, California*
- 22 Elevate Your Recruiting & Retention Strategy  
*Los Angeles, California*

## NOVEMBER

- 5-6 The Principals Academy  
*Phoenix, Arizona*
- 12-13 CEO Roundtable Retreat  
*Napa, California*
- 19 Elevate Learning Series: Creating a Championship Interview Team  
*Nashville, Tennessee*

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## PROFILE



From left, Will Swearingen, director, ownership transition, and Chad Coldiron at the 2019 Elevate AEC Conference in Las Vegas.

# Path finding in uncharted territory

As Zweig Group's director of ownership transition, Will Swearingen understands the emotional stakes at play when a firm founder decides it's time to pass the torch.

By RICHARD MASSEY  
Managing Editor

Sometimes Will Swearingen feels like a paramedic or a psychologist showing up at the scene of a crime. Perhaps a bit of hyperbole, but it speaks to the emotional stakes oftentimes at play when a firm founder decides to hand his or her legacy off to the next generation. Lives change. Identities transform. The routine of decades is upended. It's an uncertain time that requires sound financials and a can-do mindset, both of which Swearingen can deliver.

### SEVEN QUESTIONS WITH WILL SWEARINGEN.

**The Zweig Letter: In your role at Zweig Group, how do you Elevate the Industry?**

**Will Swearingen:** Since coming to Zweig Group, I have worked in multiple roles and tried to make myself available to fill the highest priority need that I can. I led the research group for awhile and became fascinated with how much information Zweig Group collects each year from the AEC industry, and by how much the industry needs that information. I have used that insight, and additional experience, to better understand how we as a company

can truly Elevate the Industry. We do this through quality consulting based on sound data.

There is an old saying that comes to mind here: Only two things are certain in life: taxes and death. The industry is highly fragmented with a large percentage of design professionals in the AEC industry working in small, privately held companies. In these companies, firm owners grow older, and younger staff need to see their career trajectory to remain engaged. Ownership transition couples these two components. We work with firm leaders on succession planning, leadership development, and, ultimately, ownership transition. We want more architects and engineers to get a piece of the action and unlock the true potential for growth in the design industry.

**TZL: You are building out a new business line in ownership transition. While exciting, this certainly has its share of growing pains. Tell us about creating an advisory service from the ground up, the good and the bad.**

**WS:** This service line has been a staple of Zweig Group for



many years, but I stepped into the role out of necessity as we continue to find the right mix of talent and drive to grow our advisory services. But re-building this particular unit has been an incredible opportunity. I have experience with the entrepreneurship/new venture development concept through my education, and this role has positioned me to utilize a unique skill set I acquired during my MBA. Understanding business structure, how value is built and harvested, and how to communicate these phenomena to clients has been a fun ride. Of course, learning from the firm's founder, Mark Zweig, on how to handle the variety of clientele and navigate each project independently has been one of the biggest growth areas for me. We have a great team here and can bounce ideas off so many in our leadership team that no project can stump us.

I will say that one area we are building from scratch is a service line to help firms with compensation assessments and benchmarking. We saw a need and have responded. We collect immense amounts of data from the industry and are learning how to repurpose the information to fit our clients' needs. This particular service is an offshoot of ownership transition consulting. Owner compensation and incentives are key drivers of the success of these plans. Noticing the need to understand compensation profiles at that level, and then realizing we have dense data on all technical and non-technical positions, gave us the opportunity to deliver a one-of-a-kind service for AEC firms. We have built a team of talented staff, allowing us to take this service to our clients. Look for more on this in 2020.

"You can't underestimate the emotional component of these transitions. It's on both sides of the coin. Selling and buying in this space is hyper charged with anxiety."

**TZL: When we talk about ownership transition, we're oftentimes talking about an owner, or owners, handing off a company they worked many years to build. Blood, sweat, and tears. Talk about the emotional component of ownership transition.**

**WS:** You can't underestimate the emotional component of these transitions. It's on both sides of the coin. Selling and buying in this space is hyper charged with anxiety.

As advisors, all we can do is roll out the numbers, facilitate discussions, develop goals, and generate targets and milestones for these teams to track against. You can't make anyone do anything for which they are unprepared. Knowing that Zweig Group has given 110 percent to a project is all we can do. For firm owners, the best policy in these situations is to be honest with themselves and be honest with their peers. When you add unnecessary secrecy, mistruths, and confusion to an already hyperactive environment, the results can only be difficult.

"For many, [ownership transition] is uncharted territory and they just need assurance from a third party that what they are doing is normal or reasonable ... Being consistent with our messaging and delivering accuracy with the numbers is critical to developing trust."

Some clients are on a fact-finding mission to create that long-term plan, and others are up against a wall or, more appropriately, a clock. The mysterious founder transition is one that requires special attention. These companies are their children, their identity, their purpose, and the definition of their persona. Entire lives – social, economic, and routine – have been built around that role. Being conscious of all these facets is critical when you are planning to detach someone from their identity. Take time to develop the plan. Respect the people, both incoming and outgoing, and keep communication open.

**TZL: As an OT advisor with a proven background in financial modeling and benchmarking, what do you bring to the table when a client calls?**

**WS:** I had a call the other day and the gentleman asked, "Have you ever worked on one of these that didn't work?" And I thought, "Hell yes!" Sometimes I feel like a paramedic/psychologist showing up at the scene of a crime. But seriously, when you are looking at ownership transition, you need a team that is experienced and has been through this before. I feel very confident in my ability and our team's

See PATH FINDING IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY, page 8



**SPOUSE AND FAMILY:** Wife Melisa, son Lucas (2.5 years old), and new son born in December 2019. Supporting them is the only thing that REALLY matters to me.

**FOOD:** I love food. Seafood, steak, and Italian are all high on my list of favorites.

**MOVIE:** I really like stupid movies. The more it makes me laugh the better.

**BOOK:** I have not read books nearly enough lately. I used to read when I worked offshore on boats and found myself reading what I was supposed to have read in college, but never did. One I keep around is the *Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thom Luckman.

**TRAVEL:** My wife is a travel junky. She is from Costa Rica and as a young sailor I got conned into buying some property in Nicaragua in 2009, so we try to go down there once every two years at least. We also just went to Sicily and found it to be quite incredible. It was cool to be in a place that was central to Homer's *The Odyssey*.

**PET:** Big stinky dog, Nico. He is an 8-year-old Golden.

**HOBBIES:** Fishing and golfing.

Will Swearingen can be reached at [wswearingen@zweiggroup.com](mailto:wswearingen@zweiggroup.com).

## TRANSACTIONS

**LINCOLN DESIGN FIRM STUDIO951 JOINS SHIVE-HATTERY** studio951, an 18-person architecture design firm in Lincoln, Nebraska, has joined **Shive-Hattery**. This integration will strengthen design capabilities for both organizations in the commercial, retail, multi-family, and healthcare markets and offer clients a wider range of design services including architecture, engineering, interior design, and landscape architecture.

“Both Shive-Hattery and studio951 share the belief in consistently delivering an unparalleled experience which clients have come to know us for and expect,” said Jim Lee, Shive-Hattery President. “Sharing a high level of employee-focused development is integral to our successful, trusted, long-term relationships with our clients and continued growth.”

Founded in 1994, studio951 will operate as studio951, a Division of Shive-Hattery.

“Joining Shive Hattery provides opportunities for staff to grow and advance in their careers. This connection creates benefits for our clients through design, project management and business development,” said Dave Johnson, studio951 president. “We could not be happier with the synergy that we have with them.”

Shive-Hattery is a 425-person architecture and engineering firm with offices in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Nebraska.

PATH FINDING IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY, from page 7

depth to deliver results. A lot of this confidence comes from my years of experience and my ability to develop sound financial models.

Here at Zweig Group, we do track what is normal and acceptable during a transition. We monitor financial performance and understand how metrics and ratios dictate the viability of a plan. As I said before, we can roll out the numbers and present a transaction, the impact it will have on cash flow, and the obligation for incoming staff, but it is the people and their decisions – both prior to the engagement and during the engagement – that truly control the transition and its viability.

My minor in college was anthropology. The most impactful study I remember was by a guy named Bronislaw Malinowski. He studied Pacific island culture and a trade phenomenon called the Kula ring. Though this was not an economics course or financial theory, it was a primary case study for me in the concept of transitioning ownership. The cultural components studied, though unique in nature, still had very fundamental rules for any exchange. “The right of participation in Kula exchange is not automatic; one has to ‘buy’ one’s way into it through participating in various lower spheres of exchange. The relationship between giver-receiver is always asymmetrical: the former is higher in status.”

**TZL: From your vantage point, what’s the biggest pitfall when it comes to ownership transition?**

**WS:** These are the biggest pitfalls:

- Time: Transitions take time and require planning in advance.
- Communication: You need honest, open communication leading up to and throughout the transition. Not just with the people involved in the transition, but with the next level down so that they can help communicate change to a broader audience.
- Profits (or lack thereof): A portion, and perhaps even the vast majority, of payouts come from profits generated through the business, so running a successful, efficient firm is key.
- Leadership and business development training/mentoring: The next level of leaders needs to be competent and comfortable running a business and leading their peers.
- Role definition: People need to know what they are expected to do, and their peers need to know what to expect of them so that everyone is pulling their perceived weight.

**TZL: How do you gain the trust of your clients?**

**WS:** Listening to them and letting them know that they aren’t alone in the endeavor. For many, it is uncharted territory and they just need assurance from a third party that what they are doing is normal or reasonable. I also think that being consistent with our messaging and delivering accuracy with the numbers is critical to developing trust. One thing that helps us is our brand recognition. Zweig Group has been around for 30-plus years and many clients and customers know that our products and services will live up to a certain standard. That is a great first step in developing trust, but then it comes down to listening and helping them execute on the actions and goals they need to move their project forward.

“Zweig Group has been around for 30-plus years and many clients and customers know that our products and services will live up to a certain standard. That is a great first step in developing trust, but then it comes down to listening and helping them execute on the actions and goals they need to move their project forward.”

**TZL: Before joining Zweig Group, you were at Anheuser-Busch InBev for four years, ending up as an analyst for a \$2.5 billion category. What did you learn at AB Inbev that has served you well in your current role?**

**WS:** I learned a lot. I had a good grasp on data analysis before, but I honed my technical skills in Excel and improved my understanding of database management. I also learned a great deal about the retail environment and how pricing, product placement, and product assortment all impact consumer behavior. A considerable amount of Zweig Group’s revenue comes through online product sales. Making sure our messaging and product portfolio are communicating what we offer is a continual process.

I also learned about the need for younger staff to see career advancement. That is one of the most often cited areas of improvement for architecture and engineering firms. Staff want to see themselves contributing in the future and want to know what their role in the firm will be in two, five, or 20 years. Ownership transition is an opportunity to help leaders develop plans and communicate opportunity to their staff so that they don’t feel like they are up against a ceiling three years into their career. ▀





## Sabbatical programs

A well-designed sabbatical program can combat burnout and disengagement, ensuring your organization's long-term success.



**Peter  
Atherton**

**H**as the new year already lost its luster? Are you or your leadership team already feeling overwhelmed or uninspired? We are living in a new era. Our personal and professional goals have expanded, change is accelerating, and so many of us in leadership and management continue to be too busy and consumed.

A well-designed sabbatical program will combat the growing epidemic of burnout and disengagement and ensure your organization's success over the long-term. And, at least right now, it can position you to be different and more attractive in the workplace, marketplace, and recruiting space.

Here are the benefits:

**1) Planned refresh cycles.** Top leaders and organizations realize that not every season can be a harvest season if they are to attract and retain the best talent and achieve long-term growth.

More than ever, we need routine refresh cycles – likely every seven to 15 years – to grow and excel over the long-term. These periods are also important in helping us successfully transition into new work and life seasons without falling prey to the otherwise inevitable “peaking” and “declining” phases.

Our typical seasons as professionals are illustrated in the graphic at the top of the next page (and you can also check out my past article on our work and life seasons entitled “[Employee Engagement, Part 4](#)”).

The Sigmoid or “s-curve” defines all human phenomena. And, as depicted in the graphic on the next page, it is only through routine “pivoting” and new learning and development that we are able to continuously grow.

A well-designed and timed sabbatical program is more than annual PTO. It is a one-, two-, or three-month period away that allows us to focus on aspects of our lives – both inside and outside of the office – that we've been neglecting and need to either establish or re-establish.

Through my personal experience with burnout and my work with other executives, I've seen that there are multiple approaches we can take to restore, rediscover, retarget, and revitalize.

See PETER ATHERTON, page 10



### OUR WORK & LIFE SEASONS



PETER ATHERTON, from page 9

The goal of any sabbatical should be to help us think bigger and more strategically about work and life, and to prevent and reverse the burnout-disengagement cycle that is plaguing more and more of our organizations and leadership teams and stunting growth.

And while top senior talent is refreshing, top organizations can benefit too – especially in the areas of resilience testing, succession planning, and internal development – the areas often overlooked, postponed, or abandoned in our busyness.

THE SIGMOID OR S-CURVE PHASES



**2) Designed resilience and succession planning.** Key-person “protection” and the identification and development of future leaders is essential to propel organizations forward and improve value for all stakeholders.

A sabbatical program can be designed to provide this protection in a planned and methodical manner – and without an emergency.

Such a program works to continuously identify successors and provide targeted opportunities to further develop and “test drive” this talent while increasing connectedness and support throughout an organization while others are away.

**3) Designed teamwork and engagement.** What happens at the highest levels of any organization filters into all levels and forms the basis for its culture.

A sabbatical program can be designed to help establish the type of culture desirable by targeting senior-level talent, including operational boards of directors and executive management teams.

Well in advance of a senior leader’s time away, an effective strategy requires peer-to-peer teamwork, collaboration, and reciprocity to ensure all internal and external needs are met during the sabbatical. This builds awareness and improves communication, trust, and camaraderie amongst senior leaders – and throughout the firm.

The program would also require one’s staff development to be a priority in order to ensure smooth operations while away. This would build engagement and loyalty within a leader’s team, especially with the “high-potentials” who are likely to be looking forward to these opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and shine.

**4) Differentiator in the marketplace and recruiting space.**

All things being equal, who wouldn’t want to work for an organization or leadership team that cares enough about the long-term growth and development of its best talent that it offers sabbaticals?

What client wouldn’t want to be served by an organization that offers great teamwork, engagement, growth, loyalty, and stability?

It’s really a no-brainer if we take the time to think about it!

The only real question is how best to do so in the context of our talent and our organization today.

**ACT NOW TO WIN.** Like so many of the essential “people” and “purpose” aspects of our business, time is not our friend if we want to stand out.

The benefits of an effective sabbatical program are so clear that it is just a matter of time before your competitors develop one as an essential strategy to attract, engage, develop, and retain top talent.

**Don’t be left behind! We can begin today to take advantage of a proven concept to win personally, professionally, and organizationally. ➤**

PETER ATHERTON, P.E. is an AEC industry insider having spent more than 24 years as a successful professional civil engineer, principal, major owner, and member of the board of directors for a high-achieving firm. Pete is now the President and Founder of *ActionsProve, LLC*, author of *Reversing Burnout. How to Immediately Engage Top Talent and Grow! A Blueprint for Professionals and Business Owners*, and the creator of the I.M.P.A.C.T. process. Pete is also host of *The AEC Leadership Today Podcast*. Pete works with AEC firms to grow and advance their success through strategic planning, executive coaching, performance-based employee engagement, and corporate impact design. Connect with him at [pete@actionsprove.com](mailto:pete@actionsprove.com).



## Safety first

Implementing a formal, systematic safety program will benefit you, your employees, your clients, and your greater community.



Zac  
Elliott

**“W**e always put safety first.” It’s easy to say, but does your firm really put these words into action? And more importantly, why do they need to?

On one level, it’s easy to see why being safe should be a top priority – unsafe conditions in our industry can have devastating consequences, up to and including loss of human life. But it’s not always obvious that a firm needs a formal, systematic safety program in place. However, we increasingly see that that’s exactly what needs to happen to really keep everyone safe – from employees to clients to our greater communities.

Why should an AEC firm invest in a comprehensive, strategic safety program?

- **People come first.** While safety has historically been based on rules, regulations, and discipline, we must not forget the underlying purpose of the business: the people. The first priority of a safety program should be the wellbeing of your people.
- **Clients care.** More and more, clients want to know about a firm’s safety program. If firms do not have a strong program or have poor safety statistics, it will become increasingly difficult for that firm to find work.

“All AEC firms can benefit from a comprehensive safety program. It’s important to remember what’s really at stake when we talk about safety – the health and well-being of our people.”

- **Injuries are costly.** If you want your firm to remain strong – both financially and culturally – reducing injuries is a necessity. In the long run, it’s more cost efficient to prevent injuries and illness through investments, such as proper training and equipment, than it is to pay for losses. From a cultural perspective, injuries impact employees’ quality of life and are terrible for employee morale. Reducing and eliminating injuries is an important part of building a strong culture, which in turn will help retain your workforce.

See ZAC ELLIOTT, page 12





## ON THE MOVE

**RLG CONSULTING ENGINEERS ANNOUNCES DAVID GOODSON'S RETIREMENT** RLG Consulting Engineers, a Dallas-based civil, structural, surveying, and forensic engineering firm announces the retirement of David Goodson, P.E., principal and chairman of the board, from full-time day-to-day operations of the company.

After 43 years in the structural engineering profession and 38 years at RLG, Goodson will step down as board chairman and assume the role of senior director, where he will continue to be involved in select projects, mentor the younger staff, and assist in the firm's strategic decisions. His retirement is the latest step in a well-planned succession that has been in the works for several years.

Stuart Markussen will continue as CEO and assume the chairman of the board position. Mike McLaren will continue as chief operating officer. Andy Ayers will manage the structural division and David Cumming will serve as chief structural engineer.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed my career and have a lifetime of wonderful experiences and good memories from my time at RLG. I am proud to have contributed to and continued the legacy started by my father, Ray Goodson Jr., and continued by past CEOs Norman Harper and John Stull. RLG's future is bright under Stuart's and Mike's leadership."

For more than 66 years, RLG has been recognized as one of the top engineering firms in Texas for its ability to attract and retain a talented, experienced team. The firm has maintained a reputation of trust, building the company's legacy as an industry leader. In 2018 and 2019, the firm was recognized as a Best Firm to Work For by Zweig Group. Since RLG's inception in 1953, the company has grown to include three offices and annually serves more than 250 clients across the nation.

Goodson was also the 2018 recipient of Zweig Group's Jerry Allen Courage in Leadership Award. The Jerry Allen Courage in Leadership Award is given each year to a recipient working

in an AEC firm who has demonstrated personal courage and impacted their firm in unique and extraordinary ways.

"I cannot think of a more qualified recipient of the Jerry Allen Courage in Leadership Award than David Goodson. As CEO, David has demonstrated courage by staying true to his beliefs of leading with the interest of his employees, shareholders and clients first," Markussen said. "His courageous leadership has inspired our team to continue RLG's legacy of engineering excellence for the next 65 years and beyond."

For more than 66 years, RLG has been recognized as one of the top engineering firms in Texas for their ability to attract and retain a talented, experienced team. Known for thorough and meticulous work, RLG has designed major projects in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and throughout the country. The staff includes professional engineers holding licenses in 47 states, graduate engineers and registered professional land surveyors.

ZAC ELLIOTT, from page 11

■ **It's not just about us.** We have the ability to positively influence the safety of our clients and all those who use our products. Our actions can have real, far-reaching, positive effects. It is our responsibility to keep everyone safe to the best of our ability, not just our employees.

You may be thinking, OK, great. Now we've established the importance of having a safety program. But how can a firm achieve this? To successfully implement a safety program, there are several considerations to keep in mind:

■ **Cultivate a strong culture.** Building a strong safety culture is key, but you can't have a strong safety culture without a strong company culture. At its core, building a strong company culture is about making your employees feel valued. If your employees feel that their safety is important to the company, they're going to be more inclined to comply with policies and procedures to keep themselves and others safe.

■ **Control yourself.** While the environments we work in are often out of our control, what we can control is our own safety culture. This can be accomplished through trainings, teaching people to have an awareness of their surroundings, encouraging employees to report concerns, and rewarding positive behaviors. We can only control ourselves, so let's do that to the best of our ability.

■ **Understand the "why."** Rather than simply enforcing rules, a safety program should focus on employee wellbeing. Educate employees on the reason behind the rule and the potential safety hazards of complacency.

■ **Focus on leading indicators.** While lagging indicators are important to look at as well – such as incident frequency, severity, and experience modification rates – these are indicators that tell us where we've been and do nothing to influence prevention. Leading indicators, meanwhile, look forward and give an understanding of what you're doing to improve: Are employees receiving the appropriate trainings? Are your staff coming forward to report concerns and near

hits? Are the reported concerns being addressed? Do audits take place? These are things you can actively change moving forward, improving employee safety and culture.

■ **Understand what you're facing.** Having a crystal-clear understanding of the hazards your employees face, and subsequently addressing them through discussions and training, is key. How can you attempt to mitigate something if you don't have a clear conception of its causes and effects? It's important not to assume you are aware of all the hazards your employees face. To truly understand this, you must spend time with your employees, build their trust, listen to their concerns, and address those concerns.

"It's easy to see why being safe should be a top priority – unsafe conditions in our industry can have devastating consequences, up to and including loss of human life."

■ **Comply, comply, comply.** There is of course a large compliance aspect to safety. Numerous agencies, such as OSHA, have regulations that firms are legally required to follow. It's important that your company has someone who is familiar with these requirements and updates to keep you on the straight and narrow, and ultimately keep you safe – hey, these rules are in place for a reason!

All AEC firms can benefit from a comprehensive safety program. It's important to remember what's really at stake when we talk about safety – the health and well-being of our people. ▀

ZAC ELLIOTT is Mead & Hunt's resource for workplace safety knowledge, training and preplanning. Through communication with employees, various trainings and preplanning, he strives to use a team effort in determining potential hazards and mitigating them to the greatest extent possible. Contact him at [zac.elliott@meadhunt.com](mailto:zac.elliott@meadhunt.com).