



AN INSIDE PERSPECTIVE: REMOTE ENGINEERING

By: Lydia Bengler, PE | Technical Manager



Two years ago, March 2020, was the genesis of the COVID19 global pandemic. Our company was, perhaps unknowingly, technically prepared for the shift to remote work. We had recently undergone a tech refresh, equipping most employees with new laptops and several folks had been experimenting with Microsoft Teams.

Looking back through my calendar appointments from 2020 tells an evolving story, "I'll be working remotely through the end of next week", "end of the month", "maybe June", "I don't actually know when I'll next be in the office." I bought a travel trailer, along with the rest of my generation, to escape my house safely, and by the end of 2020, I bought a house further from the office. My first house was a compromise between being close to work and being close to family, and over the course of 2020, I decided that being close to family was more important than being close to an empty office.

My work is 95% remote, and that 5% onsite is generous. In my 10 years at Elliott Bay Design Group, the bulk of my work has been engineering for vessels located on the East Coast of the United States. My primary focus for the last two years has been new designs for two ferries to be located on the East Coast. As you can probably assume, I live on the West Coast, and I can count on my hands how many times I've been in the office over the last two years.

In mid-March 2020, Elliott Bay Design Group "flipped a switch" and said we're "all remote" until local regulations at our different locations allow us to reconvene again. Here's what happened: we continued engineering and designing vessels for our clients. We continued to be part of your team.

Of course, there were changes. We traveled for fewer client meetings. We had virtual project meetings. We had happy hours over Zoom and Teams. We commuted through traffic less. We did not gather for our annual holiday party. We talked to our coworkers less. There were struggles. We missed each other. The "in-office" experience provides automated social bonding and instant collaboration.

But here's the thing, EBDG is a distributed company and has been for much of its history. We have offices in the Gulf Coast and Seattle. We have individuals in Idaho, Nevada, Alaska, Michigan,



South Carolina, Texas and New York. One third of our employees live away from the "home office"!

When we went remote, the challenges of our distributed employees diminished. It's like the Seattle office suddenly realized the communication challenges our team members in other states have been struggling with for years: "We're in a different time zone." "It's difficult to hear everyone in the conference room." "I'd love to be considered for that opportunity, but you don't see me." The pandemic leveled the playing field for our employees outside of Seattle.

I have a theory. Engineering for an engineer is not hard; just as sales, for a great salesperson, is not difficult. Ok, so if engineering is easy, where is the challenge in my work? Communication. Communication of the engineering is the most difficult part of my job. I put together drawings, add general notes, write reports, and write specifications. Then I probably answer a handful of emails, phone calls, and video calls to confirm all of the above.

The remote office is the Communication Challenge 2.0. We can no longer depend on the lunchroom, the coffee pot, or a lap around the cubicles to provide chance social interactions. We cannot overhear a discussion between coworkers a few cubicles over and stumble into prime collaboration. We likely are not going to walk up the street to the same pub. We must learn to replicate these necessary activities in the virtual sphere. We can schedule check-ins and coffee breaks with our coworkers. We can plan to be at the same brewery on a particular day. We can collaborate in public virtual spaces so others can "overhear" and offer to contribute. We can be intentional. I know these suggestions are concessions or compromises for the real deal, but the future must remain flexible for the needs of our employees. We can offer remote work, regardless of location, family situation and health mandates. We can hire the best people which will allow us to respond faster to our clients' onsite needs. We can engineer remotely, but to do so we need to take on a new challenge in communication.



So here we go, mask mandates are ending, in person gatherings are happening, we're all collectively sighing in relief as we put the past two years behind us. Do we all buy new pants and rush back to the office?

I'm not planning on returning to the office of two years ago. The pandemic highlighted for me the importance of family, friends, hobbies, travel, and basically all the life side of the work/life balance. Don't hear me incorrectly! I value work. I enjoy deep thinking, problem solving, and helping people. I envision a future where work and life are not in conflict, not something I need to "balance," but something that blends seamlessly together. To do this I intend to work hard at communicating my availability, my assumptions, my abilities, and my needs. I intend to make dedicated time for my coworkers and to listen to their needs. I will dedicate time for in-person work gatherings, but it won't be for the sake of "going to work." It will be for relationship building to reinforce our digital work experience. Bring on the new communication challenge! It won't be easy, but it will be for the betterment of my life, my coworkers' lives, and my community.



LYDIA BENGER, PE

Lydia Benger joined EBDG in 2012 and serves as the Technical Manager for Naval Architecture. As a mechanical engineer, Lydia has the opportunity to support EBDG projects as lead engineer. Her keen mechanical design skills have provided practical and efficient vessel operations in all types of vessels including passenger vessels, ferries, barges, tugs and workboats.

Prior to joining EBDG, Lydia was a mechanical engineer at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, Washington. There she prepared technical documentation for maintenance and repair including technical direction, quality assurance and test requirements.

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