IN FOCUS

We know that 2020 has been a tumultuous year for many reasons and with only three weeks until 2021, we still have many things that hang over us both personally and professionally. A few things you can count on is that there will be a new year, we will eagerly await Punxsutawney Phil’s announcement in February and we will “spring forward” in just a few months. These events may not seem like much, but we can all know what they are talking about when someone mentions them. Simple but these are all things we can relate to.

So, where do we go from here and how do we create a better 2021? I wanted to share an article written by Richard Freidman who talks a bit about the Lessons Learned and where we go from here that you might find interesting. Hopefully, you find the information helpful.

2020: Lessons learned and where we go from here

If there’s one phrase that describes 2020, it is not “business as usual.” The ways in which A/E/C and environmental consulting firms have fared in this unprecedented year have been as varied as the businesses that they run. In this issue of The Friedman File, we’re sharing some lessons learned, how firms have coped (or thrived) and what we see as ways forward in a still uncertain landscape.

Leading during crisis

While I’ve long advocated for transparent management, 2020 has required that on a whole new level. At times of economic uncertainty, employees look to their leaders to chart a course, to have a plan and to enact, if necessary, transformational changes or survival measures. It hasn’t been easy to be a leader this year, but many have risen to the challenge: enlisting staff in the need to create new services, implementing firmwide business development efforts, providing sound rationales for layoffs or furloughs, acknowledging bumps in transitioning to remote work and more.

We have also seen firm leaders prioritizing more frequent communication with staff, individually and as an organization. Some, such as 210-person Conco Construction (Wichita, KS), have incorporated personal messages, such as the importance of voting, following COVID-19 health guidelines and recognizing individuals who are putting company values into action.
Ways forward: While we talk about the “new normal,” leaders in 2021 will have to think more expansively about what they want “normal” to look like at their firm going forward. That means asking new questions: Do we want to fully return to our previous normal (and is that possible)? How do we mentor, lead and maintain culture if we’re not in the office? What does this firm truly need to thrive?

“We shouldn’t assume that once we’re back in the office, things will be great,” says Shannon Nichol, founding principal at 50-person landscape architecture firm GGN (Seattle, WA). “We should think about those things now. It will be a different world and staff will come back with emotional stress that has accumulated.”

Financial management

During the 2007-2009 global financial crisis, industry firms across the board were laying off in large numbers. This year is different. The impacts have not been uniform, we’re only 9 months in, and as a result, staffing needs and salaries have generally not reset. For many firms, utilization and productivity have increased. Cash flow has been helped by major reductions in travel, event and marketing expenses, as well as economic stimulus money that cushioned the blow for some and provided strategic reinvestment opportunities for others.

“We have clients who are having their best year ever,” says David Cohen, Managing Director at Matheson Financial Advisors (Natick, MA). “For others, the sky is falling. If anything, what we have seen is the importance of diversification and a strong balance sheet.”

Ways forward: This is the time to scenario plan around your top and bottom performing markets. It’s also a good time to revisit your expense lines to see what 2020 adjustments you may want to keep, and to reevaluate whether you have the capital structure that you need to weather an extended storm. Many firms who are doing well are leveraging this time to plan for growth, make key market hires, and pursue acquisitions to grow their staff or diversify their markets.

Workforce planning

Although few industry firms were managing remote teams before the pandemic, many moved rapidly and smoothly into a remote environment. All year, we’ve heard firm leaders asking questions such as: Is now the time to thin out nonperforming staff or practice leaders who may not be the right fit? Will we fully return to the office or maintain a hybrid workforce? What have we learned about project staffing, scheduling and efficiencies?

Ways forward: While it’s unlikely that our future is 100% remote, there will be consequences from a year of working differently. Flexibility is already more important. Employees have given up their commutes and enjoy more flexibility in balancing their work and home lives—even if there have been tradeoffs in face-to-face communication, collegiality and mentoring. Not all are eager to return to the old ways. “There will be companies who offer flexibility, and if yours doesn’t, your employees may leave for a different path,” says Cohen.

Brick and mortar offices will likely see innovative new options, such as trading large urban offices for multiple small suburban locations closer to employee homes, hotel-style co-work spaces or smaller footprints to accommodate a hybrid work model.

Business Development
As conferences, events and client visits have moved online, traditional face-to-face BD has nearly disappeared. Firms have had to get creative, leveraging technology to their advantage, to create lunch and learn series for clients, implement robust CRM systems or take their positioning and thought leadership to social channels where they can follow up. This year has also made the case for two foundational must-haves: a firmwide culture of – and system for – business development and pre-positioning your firm’s expertise with relevant and thoughtful content.

Forty-five-person architecture firm Dyer Brown (Boston, MA), for example, leaned into helping their corporate, retail and hospitality clients understand and navigate an eventual (safe) return to the workplace. The firm published and distributed Future Shift: Workspaces in Transition: A Post-COVID-19 Playbook for Returning to Offices and Shared Work Settings, along with a related blog series and an off-the-shelf system of social distancing signage.

Ways forward: We won’t know what the new landscape of BD looks like until we get there. Sales cycles may be longer or different. Client needs may have changed. Communicating solid expertise, a clear point of view and connecting the dots for your clients is increasingly important. Prioritizing relationship management and systematizing your outreach (via scheduled check-ins, client surveys, sharing content that speaks to their new normal, establishing a clear CRM) will put your firm ahead while we wait for the face-to-face.

Conveying and Adding Value

One of the biggest lessons learned this year is that firms must enhance and communicate their value to clients, instead of waiting for them to share their needs. HRP Associates (Farmington, CT) has done health and safety work for many years, but has now launched a suite of COVID-19 Health and Safety services, including preparedness and planning, decontamination, construction site health and safety, and a COVID training course for universities. The 125-person firm also revised its health and safety compliance audit delivery to a hybrid virtual and in-person model.

Likewise, Haley Ward (formerly CES, Inc.) (Bangor, ME), a 120-person engineering, environmental and surveying firm, partnered with the University of Maine System to help them establish an innovative systemwide wastewater testing program across their statewide campuses. Each week, wastewater is tested for the presence of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, to help the system respond quickly to potential outbreaks.

Ways forward: In a rapidly changing economic landscape, it pays to be proactive and creative in how your firm partners with and communicates with your clients. Find new ways to ease their pain, reduce their risk, find them money or save them money. Don’t assume that you know what they need, ask. Then position your firm to help through creative adaptation, new services and sharing (or building) expertise.

“You’ve got to be nimble and open, and you need to set aside time for ‘spaghetti-off-the-wall’ meetings to generate ideas,” says HRP COO & President Tad Goetcheus. “That was the genesis of our new YouTube channel (which showcases the firm’s expertise while educating clients). Our subscribers love the channel, and our employees are lining up to be an actor, director, or content manager. In doing so, we’re also bringing in more younger people.”

Business Planning
Depending on what markets you’re in, it may feel hard to plan right now. But whether they’re thriving or surviving, re-evaluating the business plan is on many management team agendas. Services, markets, and locations may have opened or closed, boomed or busted. Longstanding problems have been brought to the forefront. Some, like HRP, saw an opportunity to dissect every part of their business and improve each area, with a goal of improving their overall client experience.

One of the positive outcomes of 2020 is that it has, by necessity, opened minds up to change in an industry that can be conservative and change-resistant. There’s nothing like a year with a pandemic, economic disaster and presidential election to usher in plenty of change.

As the CEO of one 150-person architecture firm shared, “COVID was a blessing and a game changer because it forced us to rip off the Band-Aid of some things that needed to be changed and forced revolutionary, transformative change versus incremental change.”

Ways forward: Much remains uncertain, and right now, business planning needs to include more flexibility and truth-telling. Plan now for markets that may be poised to benefit from pent-up demand, or those, like infrastructure, that may be impacted by funding delays. And don’t miss the opportunity to be proactive in addressing what needed to change before 2020 along with what’s happened this year. There’s never been a better time to be a change agent in your firm.

What’s your firm’s biggest lesson from 2020, and what are you putting into your 2021 playbook? I’d love to hear from you at rich@friedmanpartners.com or (508) 276-1101.

Leeann

Leeann Sherman, MPS, CAE
Executive Director

LEGISLATIVE

Stay on top of issues pertaining to transportation and other legislative matters.

• Transportation Recap - Read it here
• Capitol Recap - Read it here
• Bill Tracker - Read it here

Wolf: COVID-19 Restrictions Looming
If worsening coronavirus trends continue, Pennsylvanians will likely see additional mitigation measures imposed this week, but they won’t be as extensive as the
lockdowns imposed in spring, according to Gov. Tom Wolf, speaking during a news conference Monday…Read more

Putting Off Short-Term Disaster, Pa. Lawmakers Must Once Again Face Transportation Funding Woes this Winter
Hundreds of road and bridge projects across Pennsylvania are temporarily funded until early winter on short-term debt as lawmakers negotiate a fix for a pandemic-linked budget gap that shows the holes in Pennsylvania’s transportation funding…Read more

Chair DeFazio Delivers Statement on WRDA on House Floor
Watch here

ACEC Action Alert: Call for Essential Changes to the Paycheck Protection Program
Urge your Congressional delegation to make important changes to PPP loans in legislation before the end of 2020…Read more

Pa Treasurer Pledges Loans to Avert Highway Project Shutdowns – But Future Projects are Stalled
The highway construction industry averted the shutdown of nearly 400 construction projects across Pennsylvania this week as Pennsylvania Treasurer Joe Torsella pledged to shore up the Motor License Fund through the end of the fiscal year…Read more

ACEC Comments on CMMC Interim Final Rule
With the interim final rule for the Cybersecurity Maturity Model Certification taking effect, ACEC has submitted comments noting the industry’s concerns over the lack of clarity and definition related to Architecture-Engineering-Construction (AEC) documents…Read more

2021-22 Legislative Agenda to Focus on Policies Targeted Toward “Bringing Pa Back”
The Pa Chamber’s 2021 legislative agenda, which was approved at the Board of Directors meeting held last week and details our organization’s advocacy focus for the coming year, is focused on pro-growth policies to help propel the state out of the pandemic era and into a brighter economic future…Read more

Feds Nearing Approval to Relief Bill ‘Help Those in Greatest Need’
With time running out, lawmakers on Sunday closed in on a proposed COVID-19 relief bill that would provide roughly $300 in extra federal weekly unemployment benefits but not another round of $1,200 in direct payments to most Americans, leaving that issue for President-elect Joe Biden to wrestle over with a new Congress next year…Read more
Pa Chamber Expresses Disappointment with Gov. Wolf’s Veto of Critical Liability Bill
On the last day of the 2019-20 session, Gov. Tom Wolf vetoed H.B. 1737, legislation that the PA Chamber championed throughout much of the year to temporarily protect employers complying with public health guidelines from unwarranted, frivolous COVID-19 related lawsuits…Read more

'A Tremendous Loss to Our Nation': Chuck Yeager Dies at 97
Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Charles “Chuck” Yeager, the World War II fighter pilot ace and quintessential test pilot who showed he had the “right stuff” when in 1947 he became the first person to fly faster than sound, has died…Read more

GOP Legislators Seek Emergency Court Order to Void Final Certification of ‘Severely Flawed’ Pa. Vote Count
A group of Republican state legislators opened a new front in the legal battle over the outcome of the 2020 election Monday by calling on Commonwealth Court to issue an emergency order to at least temporarily halt the certification of a Pennsylvania vote count they insist is “severely flawed.”…Read more

Trump Asks for Pa. House Speaker Cutler’s Help to Overturn Election as Republicans Ask to Reject State's Votes
President Donald Trump spoke with Pennsylvania House Speaker Bryan Cutler twice in the past week, asking one of the state’s highest ranking Republicans to help him reverse Joe Biden’s victory in the state, The Washington Post reported Monday night…Read more

UPCOMING EVENTS

2020-2021 Calendar of Events
Please mark your calendars for these important dates of our upcoming conferences, networking, educational opportunities, scholarship fundraising, board meetings and more.

Monthly PennDOT Clearance Transmittal Webinar
December 17 ● 1 p.m.
Join Skype Meeting
Toll number: (267) 332-8737
Conference ID: 56863635

Monthly Member Meeting
December 18 ● virtual

PennDOT Secretary Gramian will participate in a virtual discussion and provide the
membership with an update on several PennDOT initiatives.

Register Now

Western Chapter
January 8 ● virtual

Government Affairs
January 13 ● virtual

Central Chapter
January 13 ● virtual

January Eastern
January 19 ● virtual

2021 Diamond Awards for Engineering Excellence
January 28 ● virtual

We are excited to announce that the 2021 Diamond Awards for Engineering Excellence will be free of charge as we celebrate the industry and recognize the many consulting industry professionals for their expertise and dedication to our profession. Sponsorships will be available shortly.

Register now

ACEC/PA Spring Conference
May 12-14, 2021

COMMITTEE NEWS

You Are ACEC/PA
We have 22 different committees looking for your leadership and expertise. Check out the committee page to see which one is for you. Those interested in learning more should contact the ACEC/PA office at (800) 651-1946 or ACEC/PA Executive Director Leeann Sherman.

PARTNERS


**The Influence Insider**
The *Influence Insider* is a monthly digest of episodes from ACEC’s podcast, Engineering Influence. Catch up on missed episodes or revisit favorites on its [channel page](#).

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**ACEC Diversity & Inclusion**

One of the highlights of our recent virtual Fall Conference was the keynote address by Daisy Auger-Dominguez on Diversity & Inclusion (D&I). Recognizing that this can be a difficult issue, Auger-Dominguez, who is the chief people officer at the Vice Media Group, addressed both the challenges and opportunities of implementing effective D&I policies. Numerous studies, she said, have shown that diverse workplaces are more innovative and one national survey found that they are 33 percent more likely to outperform their competition. But, she stressed, D&I “is not easy. It takes courage to dismantle inequity in the workplace. One-and-done quick fixes don’t work. It requires a lifelong effort.”

President-Elect Biden clearly views D&I as an important issue and is assembling the most diverse group of cabinet nominees in our nation’s history.

At ACEC we have already embraced the challenge. Diversity & Inclusion is one of the five pillars of the ACEC strategic plan. We have established specific objectives to improve the diversity of the ACEC leadership, enhance the diversity of the ACEC membership, and increase engagement in ACEC by diverse individuals at member firms.

We have created the Inclusion, Diversity and Equity Committee (IDE Committee) with the mission of ensuring “that ACEC is a welcoming organization where all members are included, involved, and have the opportunity to pursue key roles in the life of the council.” The committee will be open to all ACEC members.

Earlier this year, we hosted two free online classes and a virtual roundtable addressing D&I issues in firms and we had more than 1,100 participants. You can access the two free online classes [here and here](#).

Responding to that demand, we offered a four-week online course, Strategies for Developing a Respectful, Diverse, and Inclusive Workplace Culture, and it sold out almost immediately. The response was so strong that we are offering the course again in January. Combining live discussions with the instructor with pre-recorded presentations with group problem-solving, the course provides foundational knowledge and practical strategies that any workplace can implement. Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

The Design Professionals Coalition (DPC), which includes our largest member firms, published *Diversity & Inclusion: Keys to Success & Lessons Learned* over the summer. A working group within the DPC worked for a year to gather information from firms and to synthesize the data, best practices, and lessons learned into the 40-page report.

We have also reached out to other professional organizations in our industry, including the National Society of Black Engineers, Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, and American Indian Society for Engineering and Science about working together to improve Diversity & Inclusion.

Finally, within the national office, we have created a D&I taskforce to manage staff initiatives. In July, we held a two-part online program for all staff with a leading national
D&I consultant, and we are conducting a thorough review of our governing documents for unconscious bias.

If you’re looking for resources on this vital issue, start with our D&I website, where you can access our programs as well as broader information.

All the best,
Linda Bauer Darr
ACEC President & CEO

RESOURCES

**ACEC Q3 2020 Economic Impact Brief**
Read it [here](#).

**Open Roads Designer – Roadway Training Available to Business Partners (Limited Space)**

As stated in the [September 10, 2020 letter](#) that training opportunities would be made available to business partners starting in January 2021, we have now made available the Open Roads Designer – Roadway training to our business partners beginning with the January 4, 2021 training class.

The class runs for a total of nine days which is not clear in the course description. A link to the course on the PennDOT’s training calendar is provided below. This class will have seven dedicated spots for our business partners. With the limited amount of spots, we are going to limit the number of individuals per firm to one per training class unless spots remain available when the registration closes.

[Click here](#) for information regarding the course entitled Open Roads Designer - Roadway.

**PennDOT’s e-Ticketing Specification & Pilot Projects Deployment Webinar**

Please join PennDOT’s e-Ticketing workgroup for an overview of the Department’s e-Ticketing Special Provision for material deliveries to PennDOT projects. The Department will be piloting e-Ticketing during the 2021 construction season for aggregate, asphalt, and concrete.

Maintenance operations will include aggregate, asphalt, concrete, liquid asphalt and salt. Also included will be a high-level overview of the Department’s mobile application proof of concept. All Department and Industry personnel are invited to attend and learn more about this new initiative directly from members of this workgroup.

Register for PennDOT’s e-Ticketing Specification & Pilot Projects Deployment Webinar on December 14 ● 1 p.m. [here](#).

*After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar.*
ACEC Business Insurance Trust

The ACEC Business Insurance Trust invites you to a free one-hour (60 minute) webinar to discuss trends affecting the architect and engineer industry along with insight into some of the potential changes and exposures for design professionals.

Topic: **Design Professionals Risk Impacted by Changing Technology and Inexperience**

Date: December 16 ● 4 p.m.

During this webinar we will review and discuss:

- How design professionals are becoming more reliant upon technology;
- How a reliance on emerging technologies is affecting claims and overall liability exposure;
- How technology is impacting the standard of care and what constitutes reasonableness for the work performed by design professionals;
- How a lack of experience can lead staff to rely too much on technology, putting them at greater risk to violate the standard of care; and
- How design professionals can help limit their risk through the use of best practices risk management techniques

ACEC/PA Needs Your Help

- Do you have committee news to share or know of a colleague/firm making a difference? We’d want to share that news! Please send ACEC/PA Executive Director Leann Sherman the information for inclusion in an upcoming edition of forward.
• We want to communicate with you. Please take a moment to update your profile with us so you don’t miss any important news or events.

**Did You Know?**
The first artificial Christmas tree was made in Germany, fashioned out of goose feathers that are dyed green!

**Connect with Us on Social Media**
News travels fast. Please follow ACEC/PA on social media to keep up-to-date with the latest company news and industry highlights, and benefit from a range of useful resources.

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