

Engineering can be soooo frustrating!

Mike Brace, EV World.com



When I think back to my early years as a jet pilot in the Marine Corps I usually close my eyes, put my grin on, and imagine myself slipping those surly bonds of earth once again as a means to escape the complexities of life. As of late though another 'memory' from those days seems to be ebbing its way back into my psyche; work overload.

We had a problem in the Corps way back then, one that cost the lives of several close friends & fellow aviators, and I recall the time when one retiring CO brought it to the forefront. His message was simple: If we spend millions of dollars training the best and brightest to fly the fastest (and most complex) machines mankind has ever designed, and then again expect them to train and retrain everyday in this difficult profession (so as to 'stay on top' of their game) why [in the world] do we expect that same young officer to be accountable for any other supervisor job that he was not trained for? Why do we ask them to learn the ins-and-outs of being a Supply Officer, or a Logistics Officer, or an Intelligence Officer without making that job their primary job (instead of being a pilot)? Aren't we asking too much?

Each of these jobs were just as important in saving lives as the next, yet I recall how callously the military would rate their pilots on these other functions if they failed to do a good job at it. In the case of the Marines 'doing a good job' usually meant that [even if you were on the flight schedule] you still needed to show up at your desk at 0730 and be the Squadron Logistics Officer until 1630 (that's 4:30 pm to you civvies) then turn out your office lights, go suit up and fly a night hop until O'late Thirty. Not a tough schedule by some standards, but the only problem was the mental exhaustion that would creep in about 2 hours into the hop. Did I dial in the right transponder code? Did I remember all of the pre-decent checklist completely? What was that approach frequency that Air Traffic Control just gave me? What's my minimum safe altitude? Forget one and it's usually fatal, especially when you're flying in the dark at 360 mph.

Life as a jet pilot would have been a lot less complicated if I didn't have to worry about whether or not I remembered to send out that PO yesterday for more of the hydraulic fluid that my aircraft so dearly depended on. And now, as an engineering manager, I see the same trend of events creeping into our professional careers.

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It was hard to suppress how bad I felt when I told my wife that I missed the 10-day window to renew my annual Flexible Spending account that our corporate insurance has set up for us. Without an Office Manager to keep us on those things that we didn't do 5 years ago (but now have to) I failed to remember it myself. With HR, Accounting and Payroll down to the bare minimum number of employees (needed to keep the department open) more and more of their duties and responsibilities fall on me to see them through. If I miss getting my technicians into the flavor-of-the-day OSHA training we all get screwed. Since payroll no longer prints out and distributes paystubs it's up to me to log on and print it out myself every other week so my other half can balance the check book. I am not kidding the least little bit when I tell you that I have over 50 separate email accounts that require a unique log-in and password, so many so that I have a small address book almost full of different IDs and passwords to internet accounts that do something that (at one time or another) was somebody else's responsibility.

And now, since I was pre-occupied (and up to my eyeballs) in my daily tasks as the manager & Sr. R&D engineer of this test lab, researching the new mileage rates for my expense report that I now file myself (and a myriad of other 'no support' positions) I missed labeled the one [out of 100] emails I get a day telling me that I had to download, fill out and mail in my annual Flex Account by 15 December or I will no longer enjoy that benefit afforded to me by Uncle Sam. That feeling, the feeling I got when explaining to my wife how I failed in my new responsibilities as Office Administrator/Benefits Coordinator, that we will no longer be eligible for tax-free reimbursement, and that that mental slip cost us \$1,200 over the next year, brought back some darker memories of what happens when organizations try to become too lean and still expect above-average results from professionals who already have a different kind of an 8-hr-a-day job. Today you might call it sour grapes...a long while back we called it Notifying the Next of Kin. Jeeze I hate that feeling.

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