

editor's note



ONE NICE THING ABOUT WINTER WEATHER IS IT GIVES YOU A LOT OF TIME TO THINK— especially when you're in a car for what should be a four-hour trip but that turns into a nine-hour journey.

The impetus for this winter interlude was a visit with the Great Lakes Fabricators & Erectors Association. A talk by my friend James Walker, executive director of the GLFEA, started me thinking about some critical issues facing the structural steel design community and construction industry.

Specifically, he touched on the issues of globalization and immigration. While closely related, the two subjects require different thought processes.

Clearly we live in a global economy. The obvious impact is on material. Demand for steel scrap in China results in a upswing in the cost of steel in North America. But the more subtle, and probably more important, impact is on labor. We've already seen much of the detailing industry move off-shore. And we're also seeing a small growth in off-shore fabrication. At the same time, some engineers are increasingly concerned about foreign workers taking positions at U.S. companies (though the numbers seem far greater outside the structural engineering profession).

Of course, the flip side is opportunity. We already see a lot of U.S. designers performing work on projects overseas. And the growth of off-shore work creates the need for top-notch project managers. (Which leads, unfortunately,

to another flip of the coin and a growing shortage of good project managers.) We can't stop globalization; the trick is to see and seize an opportunity in it.

Immigration is the other big trend. Knowledge of Spanish is rapidly becoming de rigueur for anyone in industry. And it's not a situation confined to the Southwest or California; I know of shops in the Midwest that face the same issues. But note that I said they were issues—not problems. It simply requires companies to adapt to the changing workforce, to understand current immigration laws, and to adapt their shop practices to the customs of their new workforce.

The best advice I can offer? Remember you're not the only one facing the issues of globalization and immigration. Reach out to your peers and learn from your competitors. Seek out venues to exchange ideas with other fabricators and designers.

In the meantime, enjoy our winter weather. While my kids love frolicking in the snow (or maybe it's just the hot chocolate their mom always has ready for them when they come back inside), I'm looking forward to some warm weather in New Orleans next month.

Hope to see you at NASCC: The Steel Conference!

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