ASK AN ENGINEER!

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Every month we at http://www.wastedtalent.ca/blog ask our panel of engineers a general question from a reader. Have a question? Send us an email!
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Andrew *asks*:
What part of your job frustrates you the most?
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Engineers have a reputation for not being 'people people', and while it's certainly not a universal truth, it's definitely evident in the answers below. If people would just speak plainly and leave us alone to do our work, everything would be just fine!

Jim - Cement Industry, Pennsylvania, USA

What frustrates you is probably very different from what frustrates me. I can't think of anything that's core to my work as an engineer that's really frustrating. Some of the peripheral stuff is kind of annoying though. For instance, I find the company expense account software to be very frustrating. So I found a young lady who loves using that software, and now I bribe her to complete my expense accounts for me.

Scott - Semiconductor Industry - Massachusetts, USA

 Far and away the most frustrating part of work is the office politics. I've worked for global companies that everyone's heard of, and little 15 person companies that nobody's heard of - office politics is constant.

I'm not much of a political sort of person, so I haven't figured out how to play that particular game. The best advice I can give is to get a good manager who can handle the politicking on your behalf.

I'd love to hear advice from others in the comments on how to avoid playing the politics game and yet not get thrown under the bus by the more ruthless coworkers.

Dan - Diesel Engine Manufacturing - Illinois, USA

Unfortunately, I do not work in a vacuum, or otherwise I'd get all my work done. Once other people (and departments, and divisions, etc.....) get involved, it can take a long time to get things done. On top of that, these separate entities don't always talk to each other, so 2 (or more!) groups think they have control over a part of a project and then no one gets things done on time. This extends itself to the bureaucracy, which

means it's hell to get anything done when you have to involve a lot of people. I plan on adding an extra week per person involved when I have to get simple tasks done because no one can coordinate what's going on.

Justin - General Contracting/Construction Management – International

The most frustrating thing I deal with on a day to day basis is interruptions while I am trying to focus on a task. In my line of work, it is quite common for issues to crop up during construction and it's my job to find solutions. However, it can be extremely bothersome if I am trying to focus on a report or complete another task and have to stop and start again in order to solve other problems. The way to deal with, at least that I have found, is to make sure you work to a logical stopping point whenever possible. That way, when you do get back to the original task, you can pick up right where you left off, rather than trying to figure out what you were thinking or remember the train of thought that got you to the point you are trying to make.

Thomas - Software Consulting – Taiwan

This question is especially relevant to me - I am actually dealing with it at this very moment. My biggest frustration is "corporate speak"; That language that keeps so many unqualified people in positions of power.

I have flown into the US to sit through 5 days of supervisors meetings. So much stuff is being "Bounced around" and "Run up the flagpole" that I am ready to "Reach Out" and find the "Synergy" between my hands and somebody's throat.

If you don't really know, corporate speak is rubbish. Suits find millions of ways to say the most simple things. Really it all boils down to "Work hard, Do your job perfectly, and Work as a team". Everything else is just useless fluff.

Unfortunately, until we have a world ruled by Engineers this is something we cannot escape from. People who have no skills have to justify their existence somehow and what better way than complicating the most simple concepts? I handle it by treating this sort of speech as null words, asking for clarification whenever one is used. Eventually the speaker will get the point that you aren't falling for their bullshit and will speak normally.

Dyson - Mechanical Technologist - Yukon Territories

If I ever get driven over the edge of insanity it will be by a manufacturer. Many manufacturers are posting their catalogues online and although these catalogues are convenient, it is rare that full design documentation is available to the designer.

Much of the time it's not the over-reaching aspects of the unit that

determines which product I choose, it' the little things. The depth of a locking collar or the type of gasket in a valve can determine whether I will specify that equipment or not. That information is very hard to find, and many times brings production to a halt while I go hunt down some tidbit of information.

Johan: Software, Domotics Industry, Netherlands

As a software engineer, I have the luck that I don't work directly with customers. Requests usually go through two layers of management/refinement before they land with me, and by that time there's usually a nice, clean set of requirements. Realistic ones at that. So frustration #1 for software engineers doesn't apply to me, namely the expectation to be a wizard and/or miracle worker.

So now the most frustrating things for me are persistent bugs, and reverse bugs. The persistent bugs speak for themselves, really. It's when there's a system, and it's not doing what it should be doing. When I can't figure out why on earth it's not doing what it's supposed to be doing, that can really get frustrating.

Reverse bugs are curiouser. It's when the system is doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing, but I can't figure out why they heck it does. All analysis points to the theory that it shouldn't be working, but it does. On the surface this looks great: it works, so don't touch it. But it creates a bit of a snag when maintenance is required on that specific part. Messing with anything might break the whole thing, but it needs to be done. So there's time that needs to be spend analyzing a working system to see why it works, and then documenting that for posterity so that maintenance becomes possible.

Thankfully, these situations are rare, and my job is pretty low on the frustration side of things :)

Angela – Sustainability Industry – Vancouver

Personally, inefficiency drives me up the wall. Whether it's the obtuse system that we have to use to triple-report everything, or meandering meetings that take twice as long as they need to, or work assigned to massive teams when a more focused effort will do just fine.

Sometimes there are good reasons for things to be the way they are, but often systems evolve over such a long period of time that no one has ever taken a step back to see if there's a better way from A to B.

Bruno - Polytechnique - Junior Software Engineer - Quebec (OIQ)

Well Andrew, that's a very good question: most people would ask about the nice things about being an engineer, you ask about the lesser part of the job.

The part that is the most furstrating depends on many factors. For example, I know people where I work who wouldn't be able to stand my job if it were theirs. For my part, I love it (well, most of it anyway ;)).

A part that can be frustrating for me is the very heavy process to submit code in my company. It is a very good process with code review and support if anything is not perfect, but when you are just doing a small fix, it's more of a hassle.

Another part that can really be a pain when you are a software engineer is compile time. Sometimes, it gets really long (like five minutes for a tiny local compilation). Let's say you compile every 30 seconds because you are currently fixing little compile-time bugs. The five minutes add up pretty quickly and it gets boring very fast. Those days are very long and whether you are multi-tasking or not, it gets frustrating: if you wait, it's too long, if you multi-task, sometimes it's hard to keep track of what you were about to do on each task.

Of course I didn't mention having coworkers that are hard to work with, which can really be a pain, but I don't have any right now. I used to have one a couple of years ago though, and it really makes it way harder.

Robert - Oil and Gas Industry - Texas, USA

There are several parts of my job that are equally frustrating. The first and foremost would be the boredom/tedium. I don't do much true engineering in my job, even though I have the engineer title. A lot of it is repetitive tasks and paperwork that a trained monkey could do, the main reason that my company hires so many engineers though is because of a little something called "Service Quality".

It adds to their reputation to have engineers on every or almost every job, even if all we do is either the ticket or quick and dirty fluid analysis on site. The times where we actually get to do some real engineering are few and far between, at least in the initial phase, or it might just be the district that I'm located in.

The second part that's frustrating is the lack of time. This isn't a 40 hour a week job, no where near that. We're lucky if we're at work for only 60 hours in the week, so you can imagine how little free time there actually is to really do anything, especially have a life outside of work. That part is pretty much uniform across the company. And since we're expected to be on call during the days that we're on, well it really isn't easy to do much of anything.

Now, if it was either of these just by themselves, like if the job was interesting and we had the long hours, or if the job was still boring but we worked a normal 40 hour a week schedule then it'd be a lot better and more tolerable. As it stands though, those two combined just make the frustrations experienced exponential.

Kimberly - Computer Science Undergraduate - United States

One of the more frustrating parts of my job is the many meetings that are involved to build consensus. My summer internship involves project management at a large software corporation. At my company, this entails data wallowing in a particular "problem space", identifying what needs exist within that space, and designing a piece of software to fulfill those needs. It's simple enough to come up with your own ideas on how you might design a piece of software or what features it might have, but, as you might imagine, you have to get other people on-board with these ideas, too!

Building consensus is a major part of my job, and while it's great to have it, it's difficult to get. There are so many meetings involved, and it can get very frustrating talking through parts of your design which you've already figured out. Meetings can get derailed by those one or two people who want their voices to be heard the loudest, even if their points are off-topic, or, worse yet, they never showed any interest in your project before that point. Sometimes you have to let other people think that they've come up with a certain solution or idea - even if you've already hashed those ideas out yourself - because it allows others to feel like they're contributing meaningfully, which encourages people's buy-in. Unsurprisingly, people are more likely support your design if they have (or think they have) a key part in the idea generation.

All of this can be very frustrating, and it's easy to feel stymied by a meeting that just didn't seem to go well. At the end of a day with many meetings, it can feel like you haven't made any progress on agreeing to a design. Each meeting only feels like an incremental improvement has been made, and sometimes it feels like you've taken a leap backward instead. In spite of all this, it pays off to get through this phase of the project, because then the development work can begin!

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