

OVERTIME IS NO FREE LUNCH

I believe it's time for some professional group to address the issue of unpaid or free OverTime (OT) from the prospective of the practicing engineer. Therefore, without prematurely declaring this as an official AEA position I shall, at least, provide my impressions, make some suggestions and solicit your response on the subject of "Free Overtime" or Overtime Abuse.

Early in my engineering career, I did my bit of free overtime, but the company had a flexible OT policy and it was a win - win situation. Overtime was balanced by time off and this flexibility satisfied the needs of all concerned. I was doing engineering work, unburdened by trivia, enhancing my engineering experience with drafting, technical and secretarial support. This was the work environment while the demand for engineers was good and engineering companies were thriving.

Later, as a Contract or Job-shop Engineer, I found that unpaid or free OT was prohibited because unrecorded working hours would deprive the third party or Contract Firm of their commission. This was unethical and unfair to the members of the Contract Firm.

The arrangement - recording and earning a salary for all hours including the premium OT pay - had no detrimental effects on the client, Contract Firm and engineer relationship and all three parties existed in harmony. Apparently, when the OT issue is agreed upon initially, few problems arise since all parties know exactly what is expected of them.

Unrecorded overtime is detrimental to all involved and the subject arose once in a small company when management decided to assign charge numbers to the various projects. The director of engineering was defining the program to the engineering staff and introducing us to the new time sheets. I was curious and asked how and where to record the overtime hours. The response was that overtime hours were not to be recorded. I could not fathom the reasoning for this decision and responded that a failure to record all job related hours would be detrimental to the department and company. Whether overtime was paid or compensated, failure to record all hours would deprive the department of valuable information, make it difficult to estimate future projects and make bidding on them inaccurate.

The recorded hours for the current project will be used as a basis or guide for estimating the workload for the next project.

Acknowledging the current learning curve, management might be inclined to make further cuts to the number of man hours estimated, further compounding the problem. Apparently, they were convinced and the final decision was to record all working hours.

Weeks later we were informed that required overtime would be compensated with half time off or every hour of required overtime would allow the engineer one half hour off. When asked why the short change, the administrative manager's reply was "well, how do we know you are really working?" The subtle message here is - people are responsible for all company activities and faulting the company only shields the problem. One must isolate the problem to the individual faulty component or, in this case, the individual abusive manager.

Falsifying time sheets is also an illegal act. Those who work on government-funded projects know that all hours are to be

charged to the correct project number and falsifying this information can cost a company its contract and its reputation. We know it's the individual's responsibility to keep their time sheet current to the day and that these time sheets are subject to government audit at any time. I believe this serves as a fine example for all to emulate, so let's use this as a guide, extend its application to all work and make an effort to be accurate.

There is no free lunch and there is no such thing as free overtime. Someone always has to pay. If you put in a Saturday at work, you still may have to pay someone to mow the lawn or fix your kitchen sink, so you are paying. Arguments are - You're a professional and on salary. Managers do it, but they get a bonus. I have never heard of an engineer getting a bonus.

One teacher said, "Work without pay is slavery." Another asks; what is the difference between an amateur photographer and a professional photographer? Professional ball players get paid and amateurs do not. Obviously, the rationale here is not whether you're licensed, but you are a professional because you do it for a living and therefor you are entitled to be paid.

It is not the few occasional hours of flexible over time that are of primary concern. It is the abuses by managers that drive their engineers fifty, sixty or more hours of work for forty hours pay. Every two engineers participating in this fiasco displaces a third engineer and deprives him or her of career opportunities. It has been noted that managers who are short sighted in this way also deprive their engineering staff of adequate engineering support. Engineers involved in free OT spend much of their time performing non-engineering tasks that could be performed by support personnel. Trivia takes time. When engineers spend 20 percent of their time on engineering and 80 percent on non-engineering tasks, then over a ten-year period, they will have accrued only 2 years of engineering experience. Not a healthy career situation!

To make our case against abusive free OT we should begin by keeping a daily log of **ALL** hours. Record all work hours ST & OT and remember, someone further up the chain of command may just want all of this information – Congress as an example. Record the days of the week, whether the OT is mandatory, suggested or inferred and by whom (put that managers name on your records), enter paid, unpaid and project identification. Test the system. When someone wants you to work free OT get him or her to make a commitment, a statement or an order. Bring the issue into the open. List all stress related issues, doctor's visits, medication, heart burn etc. Keep this record for all days both good and bad. Develop a form to facilitate your effort. Perhaps we can develop or locate some software for our AEA members to utilize. See attached "TIME SHEET." (www.aea.org/timesheet.xls)

Don't keep this AEA program a secret. Share this with your associates and the entire engineering community. Let them know that AEA is concerned about their members and their work habits. Give this issue maximum visibility. Write to us about your experience and your suggestions. As funds become available, we shall form an AEA committee to take further action.

Richard F. Tax, President, AEA
The American Engineering Association, www.AEA.org

The AEA - A Voice For Engineers

The American Engineering Association Inc. (AEA) is dedicated to the enhancement of the engineering profession and U.S. Engineering Capabilities. AEA is a strong advocate for providing opportunities for US engineers and is involved in issues of utilization, skill enhancement, salaries, unpaid overtime, loss of jobs, layoffs, and many others that affect the lives and professional welfare of our engineers. For membership information see; <http://www.aea.org/membership.htm>