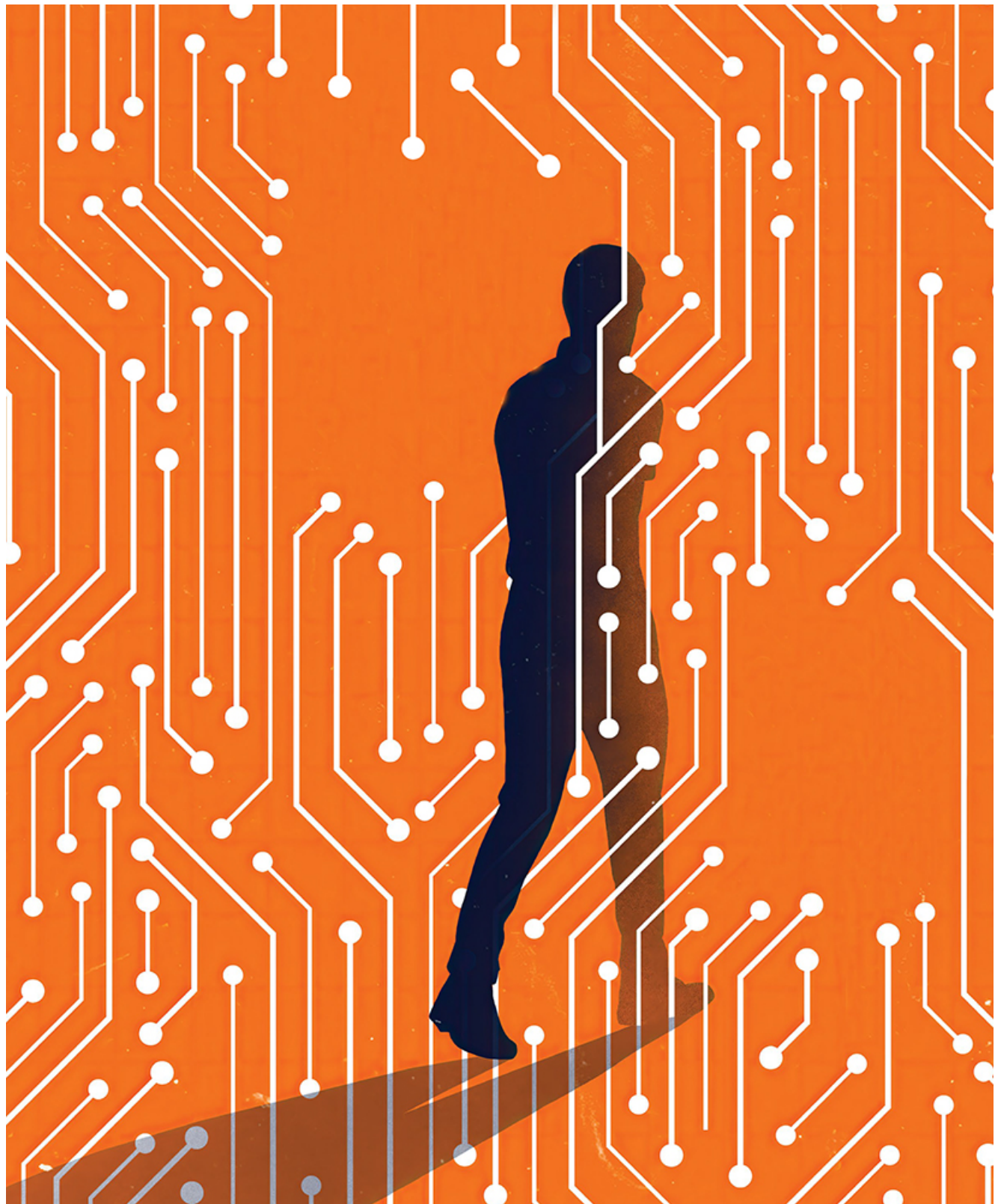


A Focus on the Future

Tech, Talent, and Teamwork are Top Priorities for the 2024-2025 ACEC Executive Committee

BY BETH BRAVERMAN



ROB DOBI/GETTY IMAGES

Between an increase in federally funded infrastructure spending and growing optimism about the state of the economy, members of the 2024-2025 ACEC Executive Committee (ExCom) agree that the future is bright for the engineering industry.

“Most engineering firms are doing well right now, and that’s because the funding is there,” says **Vice Chair Dan Meckes**, a principal with CMT. “But that funding doesn’t happen without our industry advocating for it. We know the benefits of that funding, whether it’s safety or economic viability.”

But such advocacy can be difficult in today’s contentious political environment—especially during an election year. Political disruption from the 2024 presidential campaign is among the greatest concerns for engineers this year.

“The discourse between the two prominent parties is making it difficult for companies to plan long futures,” says **Chair Dr. Gary W. Raba, PE**, chief growth officer at Raba Kistner. “We don’t know which tax laws are going to be reinstituted or killed, and we don’t know about public-sector funding, from education to transportation or wastewater.”

Still, there have been some recent wins, but challenges remain. The Relief for American Families and Workers Act (H.R. 7024), bipartisan legislation that will provide a needed temporary fix to the 2022 legislation that required firms to amortize research and development expenses over five years, rather than deducting those expenses in the year they occur, was passed in the House but is now held up in the Senate. Without that fix, firms are paying higher taxes instead of expanding their workforce and investing in research and development in emerging technologies that help them stay competitive.

“Priority number one is getting that bill across the finish line through our advocacy efforts, both at a high level and at the grassroots level,” says **Senior Vice Chair Derek L. Clyburn**, president at ECS Southeast, LLC. “It’s bad policy that stifled growth and our industry’s ability to continue to be able to provide innovative solutions to complex problems and allow people to live better lives.”

While legislation has passed the House, it remains uncertain when the Senate will take up the issue.

KEEPING UP WITH TECH ADVANCES

Chair-Elect John Rathke, vice president and principal at Mead & Hunt, believes that as the world becomes more interconnected, advancements in technology will enable ExCom leaders to work more with the International Federation of Consulting Engineers, an association of over 1 million engineers in more than 100 countries, to find solutions to challenges like climate change and housing crises. Solutions must consider the rapid pace of technology advancement across all industries, including engineering.

“We want to help put together tech strategies to make sure that we are able to protect the public and fulfill our mission, while being efficient and implementing technology that makes sense for our clients, our owners, and our communities,” says **Vice Chair Sean McCone**, executive vice president and chief strategy officer at JMT.

The emphasis on technology will, not surprisingly, include a deep dive into the rapidly evolving field of artificial intelligence.

“AI is obviously having a big impact right now,” Raba says. “We are all trying to figure out what it is and how we can use it to our benefit and to our client’s benefit.”

ACEC data shows that more than half of engineering firms already have an artificial intelligence strategy in place or are working on one, and 63 percent believe that AI will have a positive impact on their firm in the coming year.

Meanwhile, with funding flowing to communities and projects from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors Act of 2022, engineers also have an opening to educate the public on the essentiality of the industry.

“There are great opportunities for a lot of work to be done on national, state, and local levels with some of these discretionary grants,” says **NAECE President Adam Jones**, executive director of ACEC-SC. “And as some of these jobs finish up, we can celebrate what we’ve done.”

That’s been the goal of the Engineering and Public Works Roadshow, a joint partnership between ACEC, the American Public Works Association, and the American Society of Civil Engineers, which invites local news media and government leaders to events to shine a spotlight on what successful infrastructure investment means for the nation’s economy, jobs, the environment, and our future. ExCom members assist staff in identifying potential projects around the country for the Roadshow and help promote the event in their area.

GROWING THE TALENT PIPELINE

In addition to increasing public awareness, the Roadshow aims to foster interest in engineering as an industry and potential career path for young people. Such efforts reflect a focus among this year’s ExCom on helping member firms attract and retain enough talent to meet the increased demand for engineering work.

“We just can’t hire enough people,” says **Vice Chair Jim Hoffman**, president of Summer Consultants. “My firm could be 15 percent greater in size if we could find the people. There’s not a firm that I know of out there that couldn’t be doing more work if they had the talent available.”

In the first quarter of 2024, more than half of ACEC member firms turned down work due to workforce shortages, a figure consistent with the previous year.

“Since we have such a huge workforce issue, I really have appreciated all the efforts ACEC is undertaking to address that from multiple sides, from recognizing the value of engineering, to getting out there and helping states and companies introduce it to younger elementary, middle, and high school students,” says **Vice Chair Erica Jensen**, a senior project manager with DOWL.

ACEC’s attention to the workforce goes beyond future engineers, however, to include development and retention efforts for young engineers. For example, ACEC’s Young Professional Forum runs sessions on leadership, workplace wellness, and communication, while its Business of Design Consulting is a three-day course to help engineers transition into effective managers.

“Sometimes when you’ve been with a company for a long time, you understandably forget what it’s like to be a 20-yearold engineer right out of college,” Jensen says. “We can listen to what they want, whether it’s a career development pathway, flexible hours, or meaningful work.”

Still, the tight labor market in engineering will likely persist in the near term, as a large portion of the existing workforce is approaching retirement age.

“The shift in the workforce will have a huge effect on engineering companies in coming years,” says **Vice Chair Elizabeth Stolfus**, president of Stolfus & Associates, Inc. “We have to figure out how to map out what our companies need and what skillsets our individuals need to bring to the table in order to be successful. That’s changing, as compared to historically.”

BUILDING RESILIENCE

Looking ahead, members of the 2024-2025 ACEC Executive Committee agree that taking full advantage of the opportunities that arise from the recent funding influx will

require dedication and support for the business of engineering at both the national and local levels.

"I'm looking forward to a new level of understanding and collaboration with the Member Organizations," says **Vice Chair Peter Moore**, president and CEO of Chen Moore and Associates. "I come from a very active MO, and I'd love to share some of the great things we've done with other Member Organizations."

That collaborative, proactive approach is what has made ACEC so successful in the past and will allow it to keep making progress on behalf of the business of engineering—no matter what the future might hold.



"ACEC is strong and better positioned than ever before," says **ACEC President and CEO Linda Bauer Darr**. "Members of the new 2024 Executive Committee possess business practice expertise that will help the Council capitalize on future opportunities while also helping to address firm and industry challenges, including workforce shortages and navigating advancements in technology."

"What ACEC is good at is navigating the changing landscape that's in front of it," says **Chair Emeritus Jay Wolverton**, executive vice president and chief growth officer at CHA Consulting. "Things are constantly changing, but we can shift and adjust and

work with both sides of the aisle, especially with legislators that want to do things to make our industry better."

Beth Braverman is a business writer based in New York. She has written for Newsweek, CNN Business, and CNBC.com.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT BUSINESS STRATEGY THAT MEMBER FIRMS NEED TO IMPLEMENT TO BETTER POSITION THEMSELVES FOR GROWTH?



“Make sure your company’s vision is appropriate for what you want to try to achieve in a three-, five-, or seven-year horizon, and that you have a strategy to match that vision.”

—Dr. Gary W. Raba, PE, chair



“Succession planning with their people, and diversification in both their services and their geography. If you want to grow, you have to look at geographic expansion as well as service-line expansion.”

—John Rathke, chair-elect



“It’s crucial that engineering firms really focus on market segmentation that’s defined by what they have the capacity and expertise to do. In order to be successful and to grow, you have to be focused on diverse market segments.”

—Derek L. Clyburn, senior vice chair



“Small firms have the opportunity to be hyper-local or hyper-niche to differentiate themselves from other firms.”

—Jim Hoffman, vice chair



“The single most important thing a business can do to position themselves for success is focus on their staff: growth of current employees, recruitment of top talent, retention of existing talent, and a general focus on the well-being, success, and growth of the people in the company.”

—Erica Jensen, vice chair



“Being selective and having leverage in negotiations over the scope and the fee for projects that have never been done. I think we tend to sell ourselves short a little bit on that.”

—Sean McCone, vice chair



“Build a culture that first and foremost takes care of its people and its clients. In a highly competitive marketplace, workforce culture is a powerful currency.”

—Dan Meckes, vice chair



“Remembering that this isn’t an engineering business; it’s a people business. That’s the most fundamental thing any engineering organization can do. Our assets walk out the door every day and go home.”

—Peter Moore, vice chair



“Learning how to make our businesses and the things we do relevant for a new generation of engineers and, frankly, listening to what they have to say.”

—Elizabeth Stolfus, vice chair



“Our industry needs to get better at talking about the great work we do. We are so modest, and we need to do a better job of promoting the essentiality of engineering and the things we do in order to get young people excited and to want to be part of our profession.”

—Jay Wolverton, chair emeritus

“Fostering innovation is the most important business strategy for ACEC member firms to implement in order to be successful in today’s business climate.”

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—Adam Jones, NAECE president