

Being an Engineer at Home: Seriously?

by

Dr. Sridhar Raghavan

Preface

This is a rather long one, yet there is so much to write about on this. This is a satire, but the line between fiction and truth is evasive and blurry.

Basics

There are several plausible inferential connotations to this title. So I hasten to add that I am neither ruling any of them out, nor being comprehensive about any one of them.

This is a lighter vein reflection of a situation faced by many Engineers who aspire not to stop being one, when they leave the workplace.

Whether that means end of the work day, if there is a such thing, or when one is retiring.

I know from my personal experiences and firsthand data points, that this is quite a significant issue for many die-hard Engineers. Though, for some unknown reasons, I have not seen much written about this in any vein, serious or light.

Let us be bold and admit it. It is very hard to be an Engineer at Home and, with pun intended, feeling at Home while being so. It does not take much time before you have to run for cover from the surprising barrage of domestic backlashes and tensions it can generate. It simply becomes, not worth risking and disrupting the domestic peace!!

So What is Being an Engineer?

Being an Engineer at heart, somehow goes hand in hand with a few dangerous traits and orientations:

- You being a vibrant handyman with infinite energy for taking on unending stream of tasks and projects modern homes generate.
- Confident about multi-threading on several projects at a time
- Would Rather Build than Buy
- Take care of things by oneself rather than hire outside help
- That everything is precious and will always come in handy in serendipitous ways. A

different way to say “Nothing is a Junk”

- Ability and affinity to tolerate (and even create) chaos and complexities.
- That you know more on the ins & outs of Mobiles and Internet than the reps at the Xfinity, Verizon stores or their Technical Experts know and can learn even in several life times.

These spell trouble as-is, any one with common sense can tell you that. But you will also run into heads-on collision with other “Respectable and Implied” views on:

- What a Home is,
- How it should look,
- How it is run and maintained.
- That it is not a Workshop or Maker Space
- Is not a Hosting place for needless hobby/dream projects

Regardless, you are always responsible for the temperamental behaviors of the Mobiles, Computers, Internet and Printers at home, and have to calmly absorb the consequential angst of everyone. But, you have to keep the technology pieces ticking happily irrespective of when, how, and how much they squeeze you out of your available cycles.

Every possible arguments will be raised, and all kinds of non-engineering support from neighbors you have never seen, will be mobilized. Behind all that seemingly rational facade, the true agenda will remain well-hidden – arresting you on tracks and robbing you of the freedoms and actions you think due to you from the hard-earned Engineering and Career credentials.

Vanishing Things

Let me elaborate and explain with examples and scenarios which should ring familiar bells.

- Every time I return home, after a few days of being away on business travels, I would find many things that are precious to me missing and just vanished without a trace! Many things I use all the time, have been rearranged and reorganized out of my sights, leaving me spending endless time searching for them.
- I knew these things do not walk out on their own, but were declared as useless, eyesore and a string of more adjectives.
- Why? they were perceived as not congruent with the aesthetics of the house; they lead to an inevitable loss of class, grace and prestige in the eyes of those rare “imagined guests”, when they come over, and parade through the house.

- So it has become a routine for me to check the Garbage cans when I get out of the car, and before getting into the house. That, has emerged as a productive heuristics for catching things, in time, before they disappear into the garbage land.

You may wonder what I am talking about.. Here are some examples to make things concrete for you.

- I bought an excellent refurbished HP Laser printer 4050TN as a backup, as the main one has been amazing wonder, working flawlessly for 20+ years, and I was shuddering at the prospect of it dying on me all of sudden, and my inability to get the parts to fix it. I had safely kept this in the basement. I found that it was missing, but it must have disappeared months earlier, before I did.
- *Ever wondered why one can get any electronic part in the Gullies of Mumbai, Bangalore and Taipei but no where in the U.S. A possible indicator of the disappearing DIY Engineering culture? Just look at Radio Shack lost and not knowing what it wants to be.*
- I had moved my staple ergonomic Office chair (\$400+) into a bedroom, for trying another engineering marvel. Gone in a blink.
- I had saved \$3000+ worth of Lumber from the Fence Replacement project. I had spent 4+ days in back breaking labor, harvesting the planks, posts and hardware for my dream projects. All gone, when I came back from a short business trip. They were hidden in the backyard woods and so possibly could not become an eyesore by any stretch. But they would have led to me to the joy of working on an unending stream of dream projects like building sheds, four season decks, winter trap doors, shelves galore etc. Too dangerous for me to have that fun!
- After making a Table Saw with love and care, I had tentatively left it in the Garage, nicely clear and secure for any hindrance. But it was gone.. found out that it was occupying premium space needed for the firewood for those once in a few years contingency of dealing with winter storm power outages.
- I had saved a SUV battery which had become weak to start the car in deep freeze winter, but was as good as new for infinite other things. I had safely kept it in the Garage for creating a DC power grid, separate from the main power circuits, for interesting purposes like Solar Backup, Backup power to run the Internet during Winter Outages etc. Gone..it looks dirty, dark and heavy and occupying space.

You get the idea. There are 600+ such examples in the list I compiled a year ago, just related to the current house. That only keeps growing.

Now to those Contractor Projects

So far, I have talked about only "Things Vanishing". Now let us move on to Projects/Activities.

- A contractor was hired (not by me) for the Kitchen Island replacement job. A dream project I had planned for an opportune time. My protests and arguments were shunned aside -- as I was just an Engineer and not a Professional!
- Let me describe what now I have for the Kitchen Island.
 - It is an Ugly fixture with no Symmetry of any kind.
 - It is bolted to the floor and cannot move.
 - There is no power outlet on the Island though it was a pivotal requirement.
 - No provision for an optional future sink!
 - Usable space in the drawers are minuscule, in the name that it looks better and keeps out the clutter.
 - Under cabin doors have no handles or knobs to open them – sophisticated aesthetics!
 - So now they carry dark finger smudges on all the corners.
 - Worst of all, the marble surface top of the island is a design hologram that looks permanently smudged with white Yogurt Stains from every angle.
- There is this other Kitchen project, that got triggered when the pressure cooker released pressure with a mini explosion, sending food stains to the ceiling. I swung into action to take care of that like an disciplined engineer would. No, Not to be. The same contractor rolled in and argued for and won the bid for repainting of the whole house!!
- Aghast, and against my protests, the whole house was repainted.
 - This, when the original paint was fully washable and was a never-need-to-repaint category.
 - But the minimum things were never done: putting a metallic Splash Guard in the ceiling above the stove. I would have taken care of that under \$10 and within an hour, killing the house repaint project.
 - Guess what, after all that unnecessary repainting, we had another cooker blowout in few weeks, staining the ceiling above the stove all over again. I have let it stand as a testimony to contractor's foolishness.

I can write on and on. But it is good time to pause.

Closing Thoughts

I thought I was alone on this, a die hard handy man and a conceited(?) proud engineer. But, when I opened up to, and poked a few of my like-minded colleagues, I quickly discovered that this phenomena is much more universal and than I would have ever imagined.

- One can be very successful and a well decorated Engineer at Workplace -- any type, Electrical, Mechanical, Software
- Be exceptionally handy at Carpentry, building decks, Plumbing, dismantling and putting back central A/C & Heaters, Washers & Dryers, Fridges, Blenders, Garbage disposers etc.
- But at home if your better half does not belong to the WIE camp, you will have to fight all forms of irrational arguments, and, face dubious Technicians and Professionals.
- You will find that you have no "Engineering Rights". Above all, you have to fight the stigma that you are only an Engineer, and cannot possibly have any Artistic and Professional Aesthetics!!

I usually end up yielding to all the anti-engineering forces and withdraw to pursuing my [technology] engineering activities on my computers where others cannot see. Peacefully enjoy the immersive bliss of creating (or Engineering?) beautiful musical pieces.

Heads-Up to WIE

You have a far more important mission than you may realize -- enabling/helping Men Engineers to be Engineers at Home. Your success measure truly depends on, and will be graded on, how quickly you can get the pendulum swinging to the other side where "WIE Members" start facing these success problems!!