



The ENGINEERING CAREER COACH PODCAST SESSION #28

Nine Steps To Writing Proper and Meaningful E-mails for Engineers

Show notes at: engineeringcareercoach.com/podcast

Episode Intro: Welcome to *The Engineering Career Coach Podcast*, where it's all about helping real engineers to overcome real challenges and get real results. And now for your host, who is on a mission to inspire as many engineers as possible, professional engineer and certified career coach, Anthony Fasano.

Hello, hello, hello! Anthony Fasano here and I have a great show for you today, one I believe will give you powerful information on how to write emails better because I think we can all write emails a little bit better, a little bit more to the point, a little bit more powerfully in a powerful way. And I have a great guest, Pat Sweet, who I'll introduce to you in a minute and we're going to dive in and really get through a bunch of different strategies, nine specific points on writing proper and meaningful emails.

So before I do that, just a few quick announcements. I've gotten many emails from TECC Podcast listeners on what is the *Institute For Engineering Career Development*, also referred to as the *IECD* and it is a community that I'm building of the most motivated engineers in the world that want to be the best they can be as engineers but also help others in the process. So we've just put a new application process up on The Engineering Career Coach website so simply go to engineeringcareercoach.com, click on **Community**.

You do not need to know a member to get in although there is a referral application, however you can just apply and we'll get back to you in a few days to see if you fit the criteria, which is basically what I just said. If you're an engineer who wants to be an extraordinary engineer, kind of create your own opportunities in your career and you want to help others do the same, then you fit the mold. We help each other through forums, through phone calls.

It's a very powerful community and to that end the community is putting on an event just a few days away here in San Diego, where you can come whether you're a member or not. You can network with motivated engineers. You can learn from successful CEOs, Presidents and also business development people in engineering how to communicate effectively, how to build strong relationships and network better and also how to develop your leadership abilities. We have two days of sessions. We have tours. We have dinner parties. Please come be a part of this. It's going to be powerful. I want to meet you. I want to network with you.

You can check out the website at iecdfallmeetup.com. We still have seats left. If finances are a

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problem email me at afasano@powerfulpurpose.com and we'll work out some kind of a financing plan so you can get to the event. We put a lot of effort into getting these speakers here so that we can help you.

So with that let me give you a quote. It's kind of comical but it's a good quote to get us into this show about writing emails. **“Men wont read any email from a woman that's over two hundred words long.”** And that's a quote by Doug Coupland. And I know that that's in humor but we do talk about how to write the emails so that you get more people to read them, which can certainly be a problem. So with that let's jump into the main segment. I'll introduce Pat to you and we'll get rocking.

Coaching Segment:

Anthony: Alright, now it's time for the main segment of our show today and I'm happy to have here with me Pat Sweet. Pat is a full time electrical engineer and an MBA student living in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Pat maintains a blog at engineeringandleadership.com, where his goal is to teach engineers everything he knows about leadership and becoming a better engineer. Pat has held various leadership positions throughout his career already, even at a young age.

So with that I'm going to say hello to Pat. And I've known Pat for a little while now. We've both been blogging so we kind of met each other online and we've done some work together and I've gotten to know him. Pat it's great to have you on the show.

Pat: Hey, thanks a lot Anthony.

Anthony: So Pat before we jump into the topic today of how to write proper and meaningful emails, just tell us a little bit about your background. I know you are doing electrical engineering right now, working on some big projects but what kind of led you down this road of blogging and engineering leadership?

Pat: Well it's a good question. I mean it's something that has always interested me. It's kind of a, I guess a collection of my own thoughts as I've gathered them over time in an effort to better myself as an engineer. I'm the kind of guy who if I can squeeze a little bit more out of my day I want to do it, both for my own sake and to be a better contributor to the teams I work on. So as I went on through the years I found that there was a lot of advice that I had started to give my own colleagues just in passing or someone would be looking over my shoulder at a certain tool that I was using to manage a to do list. It could be silly little things like that but over time once you gather all this stuff it becomes very useful in aggregate.

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So that it just, it's been an interest of mine for quite a while and as I've moved forward through my career I've realized more and more that I'm interested in things like leadership and management and the business side of engineering. So it's kind of a venue through which I can explore those ideas and develop those skills myself.

Anthony: That's great. I agree with you a hundred percent. I feel like I've written some of my most valuable blog posts almost as my own journal entries, just digesting something that happened to me or understanding how I learned something and I end up writing it down and publishing it and I get a lot of great feedback from engineers. So I kind of agree with you that writing is a great way of kind of learning yourself or taking what you've learned and going deeper into it and kind of reflecting on it. So I tend to agree with you.

And those of you out there you'd be surprised, and kind of just based on what Pat said and some of my own feelings, you'd be surprised at how many things that you know that are very valuable to other people but we just take them for granted because something might have happened to us that seemed silly but there could be a hundred engineers out there that could help. So if you have an experience like that certainly volunteer for your local professional association to do a talk or just to get out there. It feels good to just be able to help people like that so I think do it wherever you can and use it to reflect.

So we have a very interesting topic today and this is a topic that's based on a series of posts that Pat had written previously on his website, engineeringandleadership.com about how to write kind of proper emails. And I had remembered reading through those posts at the time and that he published them and when I was looking through some potential guests for the podcast I knew that that was a perfect topic. I actually did a show, the last show that I did was kind of focused on actually overcoming that addiction to email that I got some great feedback on and Pat's show is kind of right along the same lines but more into the actual act of emailing itself and how to write proper emails because there are so many emails written back and forth today that I really wanted to have Pat on to discuss this.

So what we're going to walk through today is Pat's going to give us nine very specific steps for writing proper and meaningful emails. So Pat why don't we jump right in here and why don't you get us going with the first step here or the first point.

Pat: Right on. That's perfect. Okay so the first step that I wanted to share is don't even write the email. Okay, so all too often it's kind of a reflexive thing that you go, you want to tell someone something, you go to write them an email but the thing is email is only one thing that you have at your disposal. Right, you know before the digital age people actually talked to one another and it seemed to work out pretty well right?

Anthony: Right.

Pat: And quite honestly that's probably the favorite part of my day is actually talking to the people that I work with because they're interesting people and in many circumstances it's a better way to get your message across and it's a better way to get feedback from other people. Right? So think to yourself, "Is this something that I could or should actually talk to someone face-to-face about or call them or write?" I mean heck you might even be better off writing like a formal letter. Right, depending on the situation. So to me that first step is ask yourself, "Should I even be writing this email?"

Anthony: Yeah, it's a great point Pat and I think especially in our world of engineering sometimes speaking with someone to explain something on an engineering project is really the way to go to make sure that you understand kind of every aspect of whatever they're speaking about because it's not always easy to explain an engineering problem or solution in sentences. So I think that just kind of reinforces what you're saying there as far as is it the best way to communicate in that instance? And that's something that I certainly think everyone should consider because I'm sure that there's hundreds or thousands of emails a day that get written that probably don't have to.

Pat: Yeah and I think that totally feeds, just like you guys were talking about in your last podcast, it feeds that addiction. If you have these emails constantly coming in at you, you have that kind of reflexive reaction. Right?

Anthony: Yup. Great. Alright Pat let's go to number two. What do you got?

Pat: The second tip is just to know your audience, okay. So you should only be writing to people who really need to receive that email. Okay. You shouldn't send emails to everyone you know just in case, right, because that leads to email inboxes getting bloated and people tend to, well they start to ignore emails, right. So if you train people that when you send them something that it is actually for them, that it is actually important, they're more likely to open it and more likely to respond to it.

And the other side of this is if you think about who your audience is, if you think about who you're trying to communicate to, it should also influence how you write the email, how formal it should be, the kind of language you should use, the acronyms that you know the other person will know what you're talking about or not. It's amazing how lost a message can get if you're not thinking about who you're actually writing to.

Anthony: Yeah, that's a great point Pat. I just want to kind of dig a little bit deeper on this one. For those engineers out there that are listening that are just getting involved with maybe client correspondence, how do you know who you should be writing to? I know Pat you manage a lot of big

projects. You're involved in a lot of big projects. How do you figure out or at point do you figure out who should be getting these emails?

Pat: To some degree I think probably the best thing to do is that if you're not sure, ask. Right you know maybe you have a client relationship manager who works with this certain client, who knows the client really well. That's one step you can take. And the other thing you can do is you can, like we've talked about before, or if you don't know who you're writing to maybe you should be picking up the phone and really talking to people to get to know who they are, what they do and what kind of information they might be interested in.

You know I think in most situations the worst-case scenario is that you're a slight annoyance to someone and that you have to send them another email later. It's probably not a big deal but I would always err on the side of caution. If you're not totally certain be a little bit more formal than you need to be and if over time as you develop relationships with both clients and colleagues you can adjust to suit.

Anthony: Sure, and one thing I would add to that too, when I was managing projects or at least when I was involved in projects often we had, whether it was a pre-project meeting or some kind of meeting where we decided who was kind of going to be in that communication loop. And if you're a younger engineer maybe you're not in that meeting and you need to ask, like Pat said, or if you're a Project Manager or an Executive then you should be aware of who that project team is and who needs to be included and you should communicate that to everyone on the team so people know that if you're going to send an email out with certain information, these are the four or five people on the team that should be included. So that's just kind of a tip from some of my experience. Alright Pat, let's keep moving here. What do you got for number three?

Pat: This next one is one of my favorites. I'm kind of surprised I didn't make it number one. This is only use reply all if you really, really, really mean to respond to everyone. We've had, where I work, email servers crash because a whole office was on kind of the reply all line. And everyone kept replying to all saying, "Hey, stop replying all."

Anthony: Oh gosh.

Pat: It was a disaster. So to me that button should be removed altogether from emailing clients. Ad the reason I say that is just because someone was being copied on the first email doesn't mean that they are still, that their participation in the conversation is still important. I think it's important for every email you send to, like I said really evaluate who needs to know this information otherwise things tend to get messy.

Anthony: Yeah I agree with you on this one and this is really kind of bothersome when you get all these reply alls. But one of the things I've been doing lately, that's been somewhat helpful is if I'm sending an email out to a group of people and I'm asking for a response, sometimes what I'll say is please reply to me only and then once I receive everyone's replies I will summarize for the group or something like that because I just feel like if it's not important for everyone else to hear everyone else's reply I'm trying to save everyone on all of these emails. So it's been helpful. It's worked a bit. But you just have to be pointed about it because people just don't get it. I mean people just don't respect other people's time and they'll just reply all day unless you ask them not to.

Pat: Yup, one hundred percent. I mean I was getting emails for over a week about a light bulb that needed to be changed somewhere in Quebec. I know it sounds ridiculous but it's true.

Anthony: Alright Pat, let's keep moving to number four. What do you got?

Pat: Number four is to use descriptive subject lines. Okay. So my rule of thumb is your subject line should be meaningful a month from now. So anyone who's like a software engineer already knows that if you don't comment your code really, really well a month from now you won't have a clue what you were trying to do if you open up that code again. Emails are the same way. If you're looking for something, if you're digging through your archives and the information you're looking for is buried in the email and the subject line is 'a question for you,' or something broad and generic like that, it's impossible to find what you're looking for.

I've seen in some companies, some offices, people have specific syntax that they use for their emails. So you know it might be project name-action required-sub-subject or subsystem. There's a lot of different ways to do it but the important point is make it descriptive, make it meaningful.

Anthony: Okay. Yeah, great point and I like this point a lot and I remember reading your post about this Pat. And Pat gave some great examples in his post as far as putting the subject and the date of it, thinking in the way of an engineer on a project and if you were to have a list of project emails and you just looked at them all by subject would you have the information that you needed to look up quickly something about that project that you were looking for.

And I thought that was great. I mean I'm big on productivity and trying to get the most out of my day and if I can look at a group of emails and look at the subjects, which dates or what specific things on them and it helps me to find things quicker, I think that that's just a huge plus. Alright let's keep moving here. Number five Pat.

Pat: Number five is related to couple of the previous ones and that's to use the to and the cc fields appropriately, okay. So in my experience, kind of the best approach that I've seen today is that anyone who really, absolutely needs to know something that you're writing in an email or someone

has asked for something or some action is required from a certain person, they belong in the to field. Everyone else would go in the carbon copy field okay. And what that does is that helps to communicate to people in the to field that you really do need to read this and the cc people can you know, file it away for later - it's not urgent. And it helps you understand when you go back to an email who you need to be chasing for certain information or who you would expect a reply from.

Related to that there's also the third field. There's the blind carbon copy. I almost never, ever use that and the reason is - you may disagree with this, Anthony, I'm curious to get your thought on it but - to me I don't like the idea of keeping it secret from some people that a third party is in on a conversation. It seems almost deceitful to me. Right and I don't know, I only see room for bad things happening in that regard. So I was going to say I was going to try and think of an example when I've used bcc but I don't know that I ever have. What do you think about that?

Anthony: It's a good question. I don't use it often at all myself. The only times I might use it, just to name a few, is if it's something that's going on for family related like with the kids or something, I just want my wife to understand what's going on but she doesn't really have to be copied on it. Something silly, like a soccer game or something for the kids. Or if someone on my team, like an assistant or something, I want he/she to be aware of a situation but don't need to necessarily copy them, like if it's for travel plans or something that's not necessarily very important and I just kind of put them on it.

But other than something like that, where they're harmless things, yeah I tend not to use it. I mean I think that if I want someone to know about it, I think yeah I agree with you the other person probably should know about it as well and I'll put them on there. So for the most part I don't use it except for those couple of rare instances but yeah I don't see a lot of value to it really. I don't really see a lot of places where it would be better to do that than not.

Pat: Yeah, yeah cool. Okay so you and I are on the same page then.

Anthony: Yeah we're on the same page there. Alright let's move on to number six.

Pat: So number six I think is kind of the heart of writing an email, right. Before you sit down to the keyboard I highly recommend that you sit back and take a deep breath and you think to yourself, "What's the point? Why am I writing this email?" Okay. And I know it sounds silly, like probably 98% of the time you just sit at your computer and you start typing because you want to tell someone something. But the reason I suggest this is understanding why you want to communicate to someone will shape what you actually write.

So once you decide like what the point is, what action you want the other person to take there's a certain sequence that I like to approach my emails in. I say what I'm going to say. I say it and then I

conclude by saying what I've said. And it's probably the same thing everyone's heard in like high school English, that that's how they should structure an essay. And no, this isn't an essay but still forces you into a system right and it helps to make your emails clear and concise and at the end of the day you communicate what you wanted to.

Anthony: Yeah, great point. I agree with you in that you have to understand the main point of your email. I mean really, on a bigger scale, this is important in anything you do to understand the point.

Pat: Totally.

Anthony: Obviously when you're talking about an email you can use kind of a simple formula like you just mentioned but whenever I do things that might be bigger than an email, like whether I'm writing a post or doing a podcast a lot of times I'll draw a mind map or just sketch out some thoughts. And the main point has got to be right in the middle of the page and everything has to build off of that. And obviously that's more extensive for bigger projects but for an email just more simple; what is the point, keep it to the point and stay focused on the point otherwise it becomes difficult and there's a lot of extraneous information.

Pat: Yeah, yeah totally. It's easy, it's really easy for emails to get rambly and off topic. That's for sure.

Anthony: Alright Pat, let's keep going here, number seven.

Pat: Number seven is to write using proper grammar, punctuation and spelling. Okay, now I acknowledge I'm the kind of guy who's a little bit anal about this stuff like I properly punctuate my text messages to my wife, right. So I feel I'm a little bit weird like that but at the same time, again, this relates to you being able to clearly articulate your message, okay. If you're not using proper grammar, punctuation, spelling, all of that kind of stuff it's easy for people to misunderstand or easier for people to misunderstand what you're trying to communicate. The other kind of a side benefit of doing this is whether you know it or not your email could get forwarded to a hundred different people before you leave for home at the end of the day, right.

Anthony: Sure.

Pat: Your work is very easily transmitted to the world around you and even a simple email can be reflective of the kind of person you are and the kind of engineer you are and the attention you pay to detail, right. So again, it might be something as benign as trying to organize some pick up soccer next Wednesday, which is great, but it still reflects you in the way you work.

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Anthony: Sure and one thing I really don't like is when I get an email from someone that says on the bottom, "Pardon the typos, I'm sending this from my iPhone or my iPad or something."

Pat: Right.

Anthony: And it's like I feel like that just gives you, people are trying to make an excuse for not paying attention or necessarily writing in the right way. And the thing I don't like about that is what else are we going to end up doing if we're, like we're going to go out to dinner with someone and say, "Oh excuse me for throwing food in my mouth but I've got to run." You know what I mean? I mean it's like you can continue to make up different excuses. So I agree. I think you've got to be really good with your grammar and your punctuation because it's just a reflection on you. Everything is a reflection on you and your company and your department. If you send an email to a client and it's improper grammar or you say certain things twice or you misspell things, it can reflect very poorly on your entire company really.

Pat: Yeah.

Anthony: And I think it doesn't take long, just an extra minute or two, just to read through it.

Pat: And I've found that you know iPads are pretty sophisticated things. They've got spellcheck you know. There's no excuse.

Anthony: Right.

Pat: Just turn it on.

Anthony: That's right. Alright Pat, what do you got for number eight?

Pat: Number eight is similar to number seven but this has to do with formatting. A lot of people don't spend a lot of time bothering with formatting in an email but I'm telling you using things like headings, bullets, tables, lists they can make a huge difference in communicating your ideas and they can actually serve to shorten your email, make them more concise, more punchy and better get your ideas across. I think a good example of this is like if you look at any of, Anthony any of your blog posts, you're really good about putting headings in and images and whatever you can to kind of break things up and make it easy to digest. Emails are the same way. Right.

I did an experiment a little bit about putting my emails in a, like basically a 1x1 table that is only a certain width so that my lines don't go all the way across them. Mines like a 40-inch monitor. It's impossible to read, right?

Anthony: Right, right.

Pat: And I've actually, I was surprised that I got comments about that and people were asking me how do I do that, it's so easy to read. It's amazing what little things can do to improve your communication like that.

Anthony: It's true. And first of all thanks for the comment about the blog post. I do kind of work hard to do exactly what you're saying to make things readable, to make it easy for people to digest the content and I do the same thing in my email. I'm a big proponent of bullets because I know, especially engineers, love to read in bullet form because it's quick, it's easy, you can go through the steps. And like you said, again, people remember these things. When you send someone emails on a regular basis and they're able to read them easily, digest them, they're working with you on a project that makes people look at you in a better light and it really affects the entire relationship you have with them and the communication back and forth.

So I know we're sitting here, going through all these different tips and steps and some of them sound really small but they can really have a big impact and kind of a big reflection on your reputation. And I think that's obvious why Pat took the time to write all these articles on his site but I don't want you to think that these are little things because they really can become big things.

Pat: Well that's just it and if such a simple thing like using headings in an email can differentiate you from your peers, man you've got to do it.

Anthony: Right.

Pat: It's very, very little things that other people could do, could very easily do but aren't thinking to do that can set you apart.

Anthony: Yeah, absolutely. And I just heard this recently, in a quote somewhere that I saw online, where a very successful person said, "Successful people do the things that other people don't even though the other people know that they should do them." I mean some people know that they're just writing these long emails but they don't want to take the extra time to format them, make them easier to read, make them more easily digestible basically. And people that are successful, people that are good communicators take the extra time to do that. So hopefully you'll be able to implement some of these steps. Alright Pat, let's go on to the last step you've got here, number nine.

Pat: Yeah, the last one is to use, to actually use an email signature at the end of your email. I'm amazed at people who still don't have that at the end of their email. And it's an easy thing to set up and it can be a powerful thing. See, if you think again of your email as a communication tool you want to make it as easy as possible for people to reach you, to respond. And if you set yourself up

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with a text based email signature - I'll explain why text based in a minute - you make it that much easier for people to reach out. If maybe a different medium is most appropriate then they can do that. Maybe they can call you right. Maybe someone needs to mail you something, well your mailing address is at the end of your email. It's easy for other people to respond.

Now the reason I say a text based email is that sometimes people like to use images and they can put things like logos or more artsy signatures and that's fine I guess. It's not for me. But the one major drawback to that is you can't, for example like highlight a mailing address, copy and paste it on like a label that someone's making on Microsoft Word. Again, it's just a little thing that you can do to make it easy for people to use your contact information and reach out to you.

Anthony: Yeah, I spent about ten minutes today because I wanted to get someone's contact information. So I was looking through all my emails and they didn't put their contact information in their signature and it was super frustrating.

Pat: It drives you nuts, yeah.

Anthony: Just like, I just wanted to be able to get in touch with you or send you something or call you and I can't get the information. I think, again, like all these things come back to you always want to make it easy for people that you're communicating with, easy for them to find information, easy for them to be able to contact you. And I think a lot of the stuff that Pat went over today really just make it easier. They facilitate communication and again, that's how you become a great communicator. It's in every kind of communication, conversation in the hallway, at a meeting, your email.

And your email is really one of those forms of communication that I love in that you can work on it because it's not in the moment. So when you're in a conversation with someone, it's very hard if you're trying to become a better communicator, to work on certain strategies because everything is moving so fast but when you have an email you can take the time and look at it, review it before you send it out or review it before you reply to it without knee-jerk reaction. And that's why I think these points that Pat gave are powerful and that's why I wanted to have him on because this is a very powerful form of communication and sometimes people don't realize that and they aren't respectful in a lot of things they do. So we're going to end off the show with the take action today segment, where Pat's going to kind of pull one thing out that you can start to do immediately to get results.

But before we do that let me just summarize these nine tips that Pat provided, at the end here, so that you can kind of just over them again in your mind.

- First of all, think long and hard about whether or not you should really write the email. Is it something that you need to write about or can you make a phone call?

- Secondly, know your audience. Only write to the people that really need to know about it. Again, that's when you start to get these long email strings.
- Three, only use the reply all if you really, really have to.
- Number four, use descriptive subject lines that you're going to understand down the road. If you look back on your emails it'll make it easier for you to understand what the email was about and why you sent it.
- Number five, use the To and CC fields appropriately.
- Number six, understand the main point or focus of your email and let that guide you in your writing of it so that you don't go off on tangents like so many people do in their emails.
- Number seven, use proper grammar, punctuation, spelling. Remember that your email, any kind of communication that you engage in is a reflection upon you. So remember that when you're writing your email, right before you hit that send button.
- Number eight, format your email properly. Headings, bullets, tables - make it easy for people to read and digest.
- And lastly, use a text based email signature so that people can easily contact you, find your contact information. It's even a way of marketing if you want to just put your URL at the bottom of it. And I do that all the time and I get people that click through that they tell me and they checked out my podcast, they checked out different things. So make sure you have some contact information.

So with that, I hope that these steps were helpful. And Pat's going to stick on here with me for a minute. We're going to come back to you with our take action today segment.

Take Action Today Segment:

Anthony: Alright, now it's time for the take action today segment of the podcast. And I recently changed the name of this segment because I really want it to be something that's actionable. I want you to be able to do one thing after you stop listening to this podcast and make a change. So Pat, you went over a bunch of tips today on email writing and hopefully our listeners will be able to digest them and maybe read up on some more of your information.

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But if there's maybe one action item that you recommend that our listeners take right away, that could generate some results for them, what would you say it would be?

Pat: I think to me the one takeaway is number six. Ask yourself what's the point of the email. It's kind of a strategic thing. Before you engaged in any email writing or any communication for that matter, take a deep breath, stop and think, "What am I trying to accomplish by doing this?"

And I think you'll find that having that kind of a strategic mindset will help in terms of clarity and actually getting your point across and eliciting whatever action you're looking for from the people receiving the email.

Anthony: Yeah, and just to add to that. One thing that you can do to work on this is after you've written an email go back through it and see what you can cut out. I do that a lot because I'll start writing and I'll try to stay focused on the point but you know you start adding other things in. And then I'll go through the email at the end, understanding that people are busy. They don't want to necessarily read longer emails and often times there's a bunch of fluff in the email that I can cut out and still get the same message across.

So if there is one thing that you take out of today's podcast episode, please try to make your emails to the point or at least stay focused on the main point that you want to get across in your email. So with that I want to thank you Pat for coming on. I mean you shared a lot of great tips with us here and I appreciate you taking the time to do that.

Pat: I'm happy to do it Anthony. I had a lot of fun.

Anthony's Closing Remarks:

So everyone please check out Pat's website, engineeringandleadership.com. He really blogs some great articles about becoming a leader in the industry, moving up in your company and I know the listeners here are very interested in those topics. And if you want to get the show notes for this show, which we'll post in of course Pat's site and these tips and other email hints and tips, you can go to engineeringcareercoach.com/podcast and just look for episode #28 and you can get all the information there.

Until then, I look forward to catching up with you on the next show and I hope that you continue to engineer your own success.

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