

The **ENGINEERING CAREER COACH** PODCAST SESSION #62

Creating a Focused, Productive and Stress-Free Engineering Career and Life – EYOS 6 of 7

Show notes at: engineeringcareercoach.com/productivity

Episode Intro: This is *The Engineering Career Coach Podcast*, the only podcast dedicated to helping engineers succeed in work and life. This show is hosted by engineering enthusiasts, Anthony Fasano and Chris Knutson. Both are professional engineers who found success early in their careers and now work together to help other engineers do the same. Now, it's show time!

Anthony: Hello! This is Anthony Fasano and this is the show for engineers who want to succeed in both work and life. Today's episode, I'm going to focus on a topic that ties right in to the mission of the show and that is productivity and work-life balance. It's a topic that I get tons of questions, emails, tweets, LinkedIn messages from engineers on. You become "successful" based on your salary and all your promotions you get but then you have more stuff to do and that affects you personally and you're juggling everything.

So since my book, the updated edition of my book launched in December, *Engineer Your Own Success - 7 Key Elements To Creating An Extraordinary Engineering Career*, I've been doing one episode on each of what I consider to be the seven elements and this is the sixth of seven. The actual title of this episode mirrors the chapter of the book which is called, *Creating a Focused, Productive and Stress-Free Engineering Career and Life*. And that's exactly what I'm going to give you. Strategies to do over the next half hour or so in this episode. Now before we get into the main segment of our show, I'd like to offer a brief word from today's episode sponsor. The sponsors from our show are really important to us because they help us to keep the show free for you, the listener.

If you want to be guaranteed the pass for FE, PE or SC exam, I recommend you check out PPI's review course. PPI is so confident that you will pass your exam after completing their course that if you don't, you can repeat the course for free. I'll have more information about PPI's review courses a little later on in the show.

Now, I want to give you a quote related to today's topic to bring us into the main segment of the show and this is one of my all-time favorite quotes. And it goes as follows: "Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things." And that's from Peter Drucker. And the reason that I love that quote is probably because I'm an engineer and as engineers, I think we always try to make things super-efficient, which is awesome. I mean, I do this myself but sometimes, we are spending time

making things efficient that we don't even need and that's where you want to focus on being effective. And that's a big part in creating more of a stress-free career in life, eliminating things if they are not effective. We will get into that in the main segment of the show which we are going to jump into right now.

Coaching Segment:

Anthony: Alright. Now for the main segment, let's jump right into this topic of productivity, work-family balance. And essentially, what I am going to do is I am going to give you three rules that you can follow to achieve "time management" because that's a term. I use quotes because that's a term that you know, how do you really manage time, can you manage time. But I'll say time management and work-family balance. And again, this is right out of the chapter eight in my book, *Engineer Your Own Success*.

So, **rule number one is you want to stay organized in all of your efforts.** This is very, very important because when you are physically organized, that helps you to be mentally organized or essentially, low stress or stress-free. So, when I say physically organized, I mean you know your office, how things are laid out, on your computers, there are stuff all over the places or icons all over the place; be organized physically and that will have a huge impact on your mental approach to the day. So, that's a big part of achieving that bounce. So, let's dive into that a little bit more. Let's dig deeper on the point of organization.

The first recommendation in order to stay organized is to **deploy this minimalist mindset.** Remember the quote we talked about? You want to be effective in what you actually decide to do and decide to work on. The best way to do this is to lean on my favorite rule which is the Rule of 80/20. The 80/20 Rule is also known as Pareto's Principle. If you're not familiar with Pareto's Principle, he was a scientist and he discovered a long time ago that 20% of our effort yield 80% of our results. And the way he came up with this actually was he actually studied wealth in, I believe it was England. And he looked at all of the money in England and he realized that 20% of the people that lived in England had 80% of the wealth or the money.

And he did this study over a certain number of years and also did it in different locations till he noticed that it was pretty much the same every time. So, then he decided to apply it in other areas and realized that it always work. It's not exactly always 80/20 obviously, but even if it's 60/30 or something along those lines, it makes a lot of sense.

So, to give you two examples of this, one personal and one professional. From professional standpoint, they are entirely likely that the engineering company that you work for, 80% of the revenue comes from 20% of your clients. Again, it's not going to be exactly but I bet you it's kind of close to that. Another example on a personal level, and I think I have mentioned this before on the

podcast, is you probably wear 20% of the clothes you own 80% of the time. So I took this idea and I actually applied it. And I live in the North East where I need to change my clothes every winter. And I got rid of so many clothes and I fit everything in one dresser and it was pretty much to 20% of those clothes that I would wear all year around. And that's eliminating a lot of stress and a lot of worry for me about not having to change all the clothes, take the trunks out of the attic and do all that stuff. But that's how you can actually apply 80/20 in your life. So, be vigilant with that.

The next thing you could do to get more organized or become organized is **organize your note-taking efforts**. If you're like me, you take a lot of notes throughout the course of the day whether you're on phone calls, or project meetings, whatever the case may be. So I recommend that you have two notepads, one that's digital and one that's hard-bound notebook. The bound notebook you could use, obviously whenever when you're on the go but you should also have some kind of digital version as well because we live in the digital world. I love Evernote. We'll link to that in the show notes. Evernote is an awesome program. I think there is also One Note. It's like a Microsoft version of that.

And these are nice because these digital notebooks can usually be carried across your different digital devices so you could have the Evernote on your iPad or your iPhone and on your laptop or computer. You could access these notes and share them with other people. So, if you do this in the organize notes, then you're not going to have the sticky notes all over the place or the loose pieces of paper or the one computer file here in Word and another one in another program. Again, organization. When you organize, the less stress.

The next point to help you with your organization efforts is to **manage your contacts effectively**. Have a system to organize your contacts, whether it's you use your Outlook or you use LinkedIn, whatever the case may be. Just have a system and have a good naming structure so that you could lean on these contacts because if you get all these business cards and you don't organize them and put them in a system that you could use, then what's the point? Apply the 80/20 Rule here too. You're collecting business cards and only 20% of the people you're ever going to talk to again then get rid of the rest of them. And make sure that you enter these contacts that you're collecting into the system periodically so that they don't build up on you. If you go to an event, come back the next day or the next evening or the morning and put them right into this system so you have them. The relationships in your career are your lifeline. You have got to make sure you have this information and stay organized with it.

You also want to be sure that you **organize your calendar and your appointments**. I'm hoping that you use a digital calendar. Most people do. If you don't, I highly recommend doing so. Some other tips you could do to keep your appointments organized is you could invite other people through your calendar. If you want to make sure that they are on the same page as you and they are supposed to be coming to the meeting, you can populate the appointments with information. A lot of times if I have to go to a meeting or have a phone call meeting, I'll put in some points about the meeting into the calendar appointment so when it pops up, I can open it and I know what the meeting's about. Also, I

recommend about confirming meetings. That can save you hours. If you have to drive an hour to go and see a site or for some kind of a meeting and you drive an hour and no one's there and you drive an hour back, you probably just wasted two and a half hours when all you had to do is pick up the phone, shoot an email to confirm the meeting and make sure that it was on. And your desk. Your desk is a big one when it comes to organization. This is kind of your home-base, right?

So, in addition to just affecting how efficient you are with your stuff all over the place, obviously not going to be as efficient, the appearance of your desk is direct reflection on you. Right? I mean a messy, disorganized desk may leave your supervisor, staff or clients questioning your capability as a professional. You know, I'm serious about this. I mean, think about it. If you're trying to manage a couple million dollar project and your client comes in and they see that you can't even manage a desk, how are they going to feel about that?

So, let me summarize. Rule one was being organized in all of your efforts and some steps or strategies that I gave you to try to become more organized is to deploy the minimalist mindset. Remember the 80/20 Rule. Get organized with your note-taking. Manage your contacts effectively. Have some kind of a system. Organize your appointments and make sure that your desk is clean. Again, listen, your desk isn't going to be clean at all times. You're an engineer. You're putting out fires all day. However, you can straighten it out from time to time. You can have a system where you put papers in certain places again, because all those papers are stress for you. Alright, we're talking about having less stress or becoming even stress-free which obviously is difficult but the less stress, the better.

Alright. **Rule number two is to stay focused and productive at all times.** Now, how in the world can you possibly do that? We are going to dive into here and I'll give you some strategies but, just to understand that your productivity level will dictate the number of hours that you are going to have to work to meet your project deadlines and ultimately achieve your goals, right? If you have to do X amount of work to finish a project, the more productive you are, the less time it will take. That ties in to this idea of life-balance. Some people work a lot of hours because they don't work efficiently or effectively. So, let me give you some points and how you could stay focused throughout the day. And at the end of the show, I'm going to give you one strategy that you can use immediately. Actually, my co-host, Chris Knutson introduced this to me recently and really pushed me on it. And he's been doing it, I've been doing it. It's really helpful. I'll give you that at the end of the show.

So, first point on focus is to **create consistencies through routines.** Implement routines wherever you can in your career and in your life. Just a couple of episodes ago, Chris and I went over our morning and evening rituals and we'll link to that in our show notes. But having a ritual, whether it is you come in the morning and do your time sheet every day, same time every day or you have a staff meeting same week, every week or you have a client project meeting same time every week. These rituals, they create consistency and people that are consistent tend to be productive. So, try to build those in where you can.

Second point on focus is to **establish your most important task early on**. This came from a wonderful book that I read called the *Power Of Less*, by Leo Babauta and we'll link to that in the show notes. Your most important tasks are these 80/20 tasks. These are the tasks that you want to, that if you achieve these tasks, they are going to have big impacts for you, your company or clients. So, you need to establish what these MITs are as early as you can each day. And then, the next point is to complete or assign them ASAP. So, in the evenings I typically establish my MITs for the following day and then in the next morning, I jump on to them immediately and I either work on them or sign them out to team members. So, establish your MITs and then assign them out. And when I say MITs they way you could look at a most important task is if you were to achieve, depends on the size of your tasks, but if you were to achieve two or three MITs in one day, that would be monumental. Everything else that there would be a bonus. That's how you craft these MITs.

Point number four here, on the second roll of focus is a big one, **don't let email dictate your schedule**. I heard somebody say, I don't know who it was but I'm paraphrasing, but they said something along the lines of, "Is email someone else's way of dictating your day?" And that's so true. Every time you take an email from someone, you're saying essentially to them that you're more important than what I'm working on at this moment. So, how can you avoid doing that? First of all turn off your email notifications. This is something that we had this big discussion about at **The Engineering Career Success Summit** down in DC in May and what we talked about essentially is just that distraction every five minutes of a little popup from Outlook, you know what that does to your design work, or just to your focus? It kills it.

In fact, one of our Institute for Engineering Career Development members who is on the show to do the career summary breakdown, he even mentioned in his dialogue on the episode, which I believe is Episode 60 and we'll link to it in the show notes, he said that he turned off his Outlook notifications and his little Microsoft link notifications and his productivity has been way up. So, turn your notifications off. Avoid checking your emails as they come in. Process your email effectively. I don't care if you do it once an hour every hour but just do it once an hour. Don't look at your email every couple of minutes. If you can't stop looking at your email for one hour, then you probably got a bigger problems than focus and work-life balance.

The next point on focusing is **meditation**. And I know meditation can sound like a word that can be scary to us as engineers and technical professionals but, meditation has proven to increase focus, reduce stress and facilitate better sleeping patterns. And this is something that I actually researched in my book and in my book, I have listed specific scientific journals and research that has proven this. Meditation does not have to be sitting you cross-legged somewhere on the ground just focusing and closing your eyes. That's a great way to do it. That's how I do it. But it could be taking a walk at lunch for two minutes or five minutes or ten minutes, and just reflecting a bit and just getting out there and getting away. That could be meditation for you. So, try to implement a form of meditation into your day. It will help you to definitely increase your focus.

The other part about focus is **you have to put yourself in a position of focus and do it consistently**. So, if you're in an office area where your doors are open and there's lots of people around, that's not a good position to focus. But if you're in a conference room where you close your door or you go to another space, then you have that ability to focus. I do that some time as well. If I feel like the office is too busy, I'll go out somewhere and I'll just get a place where I can focus. And that's important. So, that sums up rule number two which is being focused. Being focused at all times. Just to summarize, we talked about creating routines, establishing your MITs early, assigning your MITs early, getting a handle on your emails so it doesn't dictate your day, practicing some form of meditation, and then putting yourself in that position of focus.

Alright, let's move on to our final **rule number three, which is to avoid stress and worry at all costs**. And I'll give you my, probably my second most favorite quote of all time which is, "Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but gets you nowhere." And that's from Glenn Turner. Just think about that for a second. "Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but gets you nowhere." That's exactly what worrying stress does. So, I want to help you to get rid of some of that.

And some of the things that you could do to avoid stress and worry is to **simplify**. Simplify the devices you use, for example. How many devices do you have? Your computer, your laptop, the iPad, the iPhone; can you eliminate one of them or can you use certain ones for specific things? That might help you to worry less about certain things. Process your email inbox daily or weekly to zero. And I know that sounds like a big task but if you process your email inbox properly, we also have a podcast episode I did on this in the past and we'll link to this in the show notes where I went through my process for email. People associate the number of emails in their inbox stress, like is you said to someone, "Hey, how's it going today?" "Oh man, I got so many emails. I got to go through my inbox." So, if you could process them and get them out of your email on to a to-do list or some kind of other software, you're going to just feel better about yourself. It's going to reduce your stress.

Next point is to **have that to-do list**. I like to have a combination of an online and offline to-do list. I use a website called Asana. We actually use it with our team because we can assign tasks out throughout the team. I love it. I've never had a problem with it going down or anything like that. It's an online system and it works. But also, I usually keep my notebook and sometimes what I'll do is I'll look at my Asana and I'll write down some of the MITs and the key things for the day and I'll work off that notebook for the day. So, I'm not like glued to the computer for the list. Perhaps some kind of really solve to-do list that you build off of.

Next point, **keep your mind and body in shape**. This is important for avoiding stress and worry. I recommend walking, running, or jogging, something along those lines, the meditation like we talked about before and reading is a great one too. Reading fiction at night to wind the day down. I've read some actually phenomenal books this year and if any of you out there really enjoy fiction books, I'll

give you the ones I read this year real quick. I have read *Inferno* by Dan Brown, which is amazing. I read *The Light Between the Oceans*, which was an awesome book as well and I'll link to it in the show notes. And then right now, I'm reading *The Kite Runner*. I'll give you the authors and the books in the show notes for them. But again, I started doing this this year when I heard about this, I think from a podcast, where you read fiction at night and you just kind of, it relaxes you. Because I used to read personal development stuff at night and that would get my brain amped up. So, try the reading if you have trouble at night.

And then the last point on this topic of avoiding stress and worries is to **eat and sleep well**. Your diet and the quality of your sleep really impact your energy levels and your overall stress levels. And again, I'm not a doctor and I'm not making medical recommendations here but generally, I try to stay away from carbohydrates. You know, the bad carbs. Focus on the protein. Proteins, leafy vegetables, kind of the paleo-diet type of theme. That's been very helpful for me. And even your breakfast is really important. You get up in the morning, I mean, typically I have three eggs over easy with some kind of spinach or colored greens or charred, piece of avocado and peppers. So, I've got some good fats. I've got the vegetables. I've got the protein. And that really gets you going. Your breakfast is so important to get you going.

And then sleep is important as well. We talked about this in our ritual episode and I'll link to the book again. But, I just read a great book called *21 Ways To Sleep Smarter* by Shawn Stevenson, which is awesome, and I'll link to that one again in the show notes. To eat and sleep well because a lot of times engineers get into their career and they start going and going and going, but then they forget about the working hour, even just the meals. They don't even have time to eat. They go to fast food restaurants and that kills you. That's killing you. So, take some time to eat and sleep better.

And then I'll kind of end this up. This episode with the question of: is bounce really possible? Is bounce possible? This technique I'm going to give you in a few minutes here in our Take Action Today segment will help you with this as well. But, understand what balance is. Let's go back to the talk that Brett Howard, the author of *The 5 Laws That Determine Life's Outcome*. We did a meet up down in Texas with engineers and he gave us the example of a pie. And he said, "Listen, there is never going to be a pie that's cut exactly in half for you between life and work. It's just not going to work that way. So, what you need to think about is the depth of the slices of the pie."

If your personal part of the pie at this point of time is only really small, and you may be busy at work, you may be starting a business, just make sure that it's deep. Alright? So when you're there, when you're in with those people that you love at home, be engaged in getting to it and get the most out of it. So, I think if you think about balancing that way, it might be more helpful for you. Not necessarily the amount of hours you work or the amount of hours you're home, but really what goes into those hours.

And a couple of tips on how you could gain more balance in your career in life is have that working

definition of balance and understand it. So for example, one engineer that I worked with used to tell me that my definition is to be home by dinner three or four or five nights a week, whatever it was. Build flexibility into your career. Whenever you could build flexibility to your career, that's going to help you a bound. So, maybe it's negotiating working from home one or two days a week. I mean, that could be huge potentially. So, think about ways you could gain more flexibility and have more control. Obviously, starting home businesses you have a lot more flexibility but a lot of our listeners or engineers enjoy working in the corporate world. So, you have to think of ways you could build flexibility in there. And the last point is to be present. Be present in everything you do. That's kind of what I just talked about with the piece of the pie. Be fully engaged and that's going to help you because it's not always about bouncing the hours. It's being engaged and being present.

So, just to sum it up, we had the three rules which is to stay organized in all your efforts, be focused and productive as much as possible, and avoid stress and worry at all costs. And this will all be in the show notes for this show which will be at engineeringcareercoach.com/productivity . Again, that's engineeringcareercoach.com/productivity. So now, I'm going to take you into the Take Action today segment of the show where I will give you this one strategy you can use that's so simple and will have a dramatic impact on your engineering career and life.

Take Action Today Segment:

Anthony: Alright. So, we are here with the last segment of the show, the Take Action Today segment and before I give you this piece of advice, I'd like to offer you a word from today's episode sponsor, PPI.

It's no secret that passing the FE, PE and SC exams requires extensive preparation. Studying on your own can feel like a daunting task especially when you factor in the demands of your job, family and other priorities. This is where PPI review course can really help. PPI's review courses for the FE, PE and SC exams provide you with a structured study plan, lectures from expert instructors, and opportunities to engage with other students and instructors. Their courses also come with the passing guarantee so in a rare event where you don't pass the exam after completing their course, you can repeat the course for free. PPI is currently offering early bird course discounts of over \$500 through June 10. So, if you plan on taking your exam this year, I definitely recommend you enroll soon to save significant money.

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ppi2pass.com/coach.

So, the one technique I want to give you today that you can take away and implement immediately in your career is the pomodoro technique. I'm sure many of you have heard this. You can access this just by using the timer on your iPhone but essentially what this technique is, is that you set a timer for typically runs about even 20 to 30 minutes and you say for the next 20 to 30 minutes I am going to focus on X, Y, Z and you focus on that until the timer goes off. And I know that that sounds crazy, that's so simplistic, but it totally, totally works. So, that's all you have to do. Give it a try today. If you're going to work on a project, you're going to read some specifications, whatever the case may be; try it for 20 to 25 minutes.

What it does is it gets you to just start on something where you focus a small amount of time on it. And as you get better at it, you can really increase your focus and I found that, and also I know Chris Knutson has reported back to me on his kind of experiments with it, that he will put 20 to 25 minutes down and then he will end up over time being able to do something for two hours because he's really locked in. So please, try the pomodoro technique and we'll link some information about it in the show notes. I hope you enjoyed this episode today. I'd absolutely love to hear your feedback, comments and/or questions. Go to engineeringcareercoach.com/productivity. I'll monitor all the comments from this show and respond if you leave a comment. Until next time, please continue to engineer your own success.

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