

TOP PLAYER

Dogged pursuit of success in his blood

Hot Firm leader has taken unusual path to success but determination never faltered.

In his first job, Craig Finley worked long hours, was paid below average and was held to very high standards. No wonder he's not a farmer in Kansas.

"I think in today's market conditions a couple of things must happen – you need some luck, a break, and the ability to expand beyond one's traditional markets or services and you need to understand the changing needs of the clients."

He is the managing principal of his namesake firm, **FINLEY Engineering Group Inc.** (Tallahassee, FL), a 36-person engineering firm specializing in complex concrete, steel, segmental and cable-stayed bridges. The firm, founded in 2004, is No. 71 in **THE ZWEIG LETTER 2011 Hot Firm List**.

In this interview, Finley talks about his military background and competing in an international market. He also thanks his mentors.

THE ZWEIG LETTER: What does it mean to be a Hot Firm?

Craig Finley: I am a very competitive person and try to instill this within FINLEY. We set high standards, maintain challenging goals for our business, we put the client's needs first and always try to get better. Industry recognition for being selected to the Zweig Hot Firm List is gratifying and gives us the opportunity to see how we compare to other firms. For me personally, I appreciate the opportunity to share with our staff that all of their hard work and successes in accomplishing our strategic plan has made FINLEY one of the elite organizations in the consulting engineering industry. It says a lot about whom we are and where we plan to go. We're grateful for being recognized as



Craig Finley
Managing
Principal, FINLEY

one of the best, proud of the accomplishments and committed to continuing to improve our position.

TZL: How did you get where you are today?

CF: Over the years, a lot of people have asked me this question and I have a feeling they might be surprised with the answer, based on a few of the detours I took along the way. From the beginning, my family was a key factor. They insisted on hard work, education and doing my best. My three years in the U.S. Marine Corps helped me to mature and provided me with an experience most people will never have.

I never had a plan or a timetable for what I was going to do. I worked hard, cared about my reputation, wanted to work with the best people on the best projects, and knew when it was time to make a change. I knew I wanted to manage and lead my own firm.

For over 30 years, I've tried to have some fun with what I'm doing, accomplish something I'm proud of and make some money along the way. This philosophy has served me well and gotten me to where I am today.

TZL: Do you remember your first paid job? What did you learn then that still influences the way you work today?

CF: My first job was working for my father in the family's grain elevator/agricultural business. The job didn't pay well and was a couple of steps below entry level. I was the one who always had to stay late or come in early, seemed to get the dirtiest jobs and was always held to a higher standard than the other employees. I learned a lot from this job and it taught me some very important lessons I still carry with me today

– I never want to base my future on physical labor, an hourly wage, or living in a small Kansas farm town and working in the family business. Years later, I learned that this was exactly what my parents hoped that I'd learn from my first job, too.

Some other positive lessons I learned were: never ask someone to do a job you wouldn't do; always do your best to make sure the customer is happy and feeling like they have gotten a fair deal – if a mistake is made, fix it immediately, no matter whose fault it is; and that Kansas summers and winters are much more comfortable inside an office.

TZL: What is it in your DNA that drives you to success? Is it audacity and risk-taking; a can-do attitude and a relentless pursuit of perfection; something else more abstract?

CF: I am a very competitive person and have a fear of failure. I think it must be in my DNA and leads to my being tenacious, calculating risks and not being afraid to take them, administering constructive self-criticism and a focused, dogged determination to succeed.

TZL: In today's difficult business climate, what does it take to succeed? Is the spectrum of failure a motivator?

CF: I think in today's market conditions a couple of things must happen – you need some luck, a break, and the ability to expand beyond one's traditional markets or services and you need to understand the changing needs of the clients. With this said, it's important to have the right business structure, an expertise that is not commodity driven or geographically restricted and a mindset to try something different, if that is what it takes to be successful. For me, failure is always my strongest motivator.

TZL: Where do you see this industry in 10 or 20 years? What trends are influencing it? What about your company?

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NEWS

International Green Construction Code released

A new model code for constructing and remodeling buildings is expected to make buildings more efficient, reduce waste, and have a positive impact on health, safety and community welfare. The 2012 International Green Construction Code (IgCC) will increase the energy-efficiency of structures, while providing direction and oversight of green design and construction, according to the International Code Council.

"Today, the Code Council and its sponsors announce a new green construction code that will make a contribution toward healthier, lower impact, and more sustainable building practices," said Richard Weiland, CEO of the ICC which developed the new code. "The International Green Construction Code published today was developed during the last three years with input from code and construction industry professionals, environmental organizations, policy makers

and the public. Our community was diligent in developing a code that is not only adoptable, usable and enforceable, but also flexible and adaptable. We expect this new model code, like the family of other ICC Codes, to be adopted across the country and used globally."

For more than 100 years, building codes in the United States have evolved to incorporate critical safeguards for building occupants based on the most current building science. More recently, communities have been calling for a regulatory tool that offers minimum safeguards against building-related risks for safe and sustainable construction, and complements voluntary rating systems. Several state and local jurisdictions already have taken this direction by putting into place early versions of the IgCC that were released during the development of the code. ▀▀

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CF: I'm 57 years old and hope some of the seeds I've sown will prove I have had a little foresight in positioning FINLEY for the future. Today, I think that every engineering firm is part of the global market, whether they are a service provider and taking advantage of new global opportunities or they are seeing market erosion and challenges from global competition. The Internet has changed how we access international markets, develop new clients and use technology to reduce costs.

There are several influences in our markets that have pushed FINLEY to change over the past few years, if we want to continue to grow. A few years ago, there was some experimentation with design/build procurement, private financing of infrastructure projects and establishment of international engineering firms into U.S. markets. None of these three items are trendy; they have definitely changed how the big bridge market is evolving. I don't see how any company that is not proficient in design/build, P3 or working with international engineering and construction companies can successfully survive in 10 to 20 years. In the future, I think every engineering firm must be able to transition location and clients with a certain set of services, or risk extinction. Also, firms need to remain flexible and embrace new technologies.

TZL: Do you hold someone as a spe-

cial mentor? How did this person influence who you are?

CF: I think my career has definitely benefited by having worked with some outstanding people, who took a special interest in me, gave me opportunities that challenged me, and mentored me into the person and bridge engineer that I am today. I will always be grateful to Bob Thorne, P.E., former managing partner of Finney & Turnipseed, who gave me my first job as a bridge engineering intern; Jean Muller for teaching me the importance of knowing how to build a bridge before designing it; and Gene Figg, P.E., who taught me what it takes to be successful in the engineering business and how to do it.

TZL: What's the one trait you most admire in people and why?

CF: Honesty. If a person is honest, then there is a good foundation to develop the skills necessary for success. Honesty in itself is never enough, but other positive traits can never make up for not having it. I have no patience for dishonest people and always expect the truth, no matter what the consequence.

TZL: Describe the most challenging thing you have ever done/the biggest challenge you have taken on outside of work.

CF: Without a doubt, it would be my three years in the U.S. Marine Corps. I was a young platoon sergeant at the end of the Vietnam War and forced to deal with people and problems I did not

know existed before. Those three years fundamentally changed how I saw myself and the world, how the smallest things could save your life, that leadership must be earned and respected, and what commitment to cause really means. The memories are 37 years old, but I still remember what a really bad day can be. Fortunately, I haven't had a bad day in long time.

TZL: What question would you ask of another Hot Firm leader?

CF: Every career is built at a cost. If you had to do it over, what things would you change and how do you think the outcome would be different?

TZL: What lesson learned would you pass along to a recent college graduate embarking on a career in the A/E/P and environmental consulting fields?

CF: If you want to be a bridge engineer get your masters degree before your first job. After that, find something that you have a passion about, work with people who can teach you how to do the job very well, be part of a company that has a reputation for being the best, and work hard at being a leader within that organization. Too many young engineers start with a checklist of "what's in it for me" and struggle to find the right opportunity or know what they want to do. It will never be more than a job if you're doing it for money or convenience. ▀▀