

—Are Engineers People?—

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We are living today in the age of supersonic planes, intercontinental missiles, subpolar atomic submarines, beep-beeping satellites, and fearful hydrogen bombs. All of these things have brought to the public's attention that inscrutable group of individuals known as engineers—a group that I am, for better or worse, a member of. To some they seem like superhuman miracle men, while to others they appear more like subhuman automatons.

This latter view is probably most often held by those who are closely associated with them in their work. A few years back, for example, there was a cartoon being circulated through many of the engineering departments of the country. It showed a hairy hulk, something between a Neanderthal man and an ape, writing involved equations on the wall of a prehistoric cave while nearby lay a crude slide rule made of bones. The caption of the cartoon said, "Engineers Are People!" One morning we came to work to find this cartoon posted on the bulletin board with the added comment, "How can you be sure?" This seems to be the prevailing opinion of many people toward engineers.

At meetings and social gatherings, for example, I often find my friends and acquaintances making good-natured but barbed references to the idiosyncrasies of engineers. Once at a business luncheon, after several such remarks, I confronted the men with a direct question.

"All right, let's lay it on the table. What do you fellows think is wrong with the typical engineer?"

At first there was a startled silence. Some of them later admitted that they had not believed that an engineer could really be interested in their views. Finally convinced that I was serious, they began a recital of stored-up grievances.

"To begin with," said the owner of a successful sporting goods store, "they won't concede that the other fellow knows anything, even about his own work. The average engineer comes into my place and right away starts talking about what an easy racket I've got. He complains about the high markup on hunting equipment, and then when I try to explain my large inventory and slow turnover problems he acts like I was trying to cover up with a snow job. If it's such a good racket, why did three out of four new sporting goods businesses go under last year? To top it off he's apt to say that someday he might start a little place like mine, as though any fool could run a sporting goods store!"

An attorney had a different complaint. "They don't have any concept of the realities of life, especially in regard to legal matters. Last week one came to me who had contracted to buy two houses. After signing for one, he changed his mind and signed for another with a different real estate agent. He wanted me to help him get his earnest money back for the first house. When I said it wasn't possible and that the purpose of earnest money was to protect the seller in such cases, he insinuated that I couldn't be much of a lawyer. After he also found out I couldn't break the lease on his apartment, he said that he didn't see why he should pay me since I had not done anything about the mess he got himself into!"

"That's typical of them," agreed the local banker. "They have no business sense whatever, yet they think anyone can make money if he is willing to be dishonest. Lord knows there are enough shady businessmen around, but they don't make money just because they are crooked."

"Of course not," said the attorney. "Much of my work comes from bankruptcy proceedings against such disreputable people. Despite what your engineer thinks, the law is based on sound moral principles, and it's not easy to circumvent it. An unethical man can still make money only if he knows his business."

One of the main points made by all members of the group was that engineers are very inept in their dealings with others. They seem to know and be interested in little but their own work. In general, they felt that the members of this profession were totally lacking in social graces and

