

# The Art of Engineering with Denise McIntosh

Episode 007: Richalle Ritts, Manager of Process Engineering at [Integrated Project Services](#)

[Richalle Ritts](#) is not only the Manager of Process Engineering, but she's also a mom. When the lockdown happened in the spring, she quickly learned where the difficulties and the opportunities lay. In this episode, we'll learn about some of the unintended benefits of how working from home has helped her family and helped her team be more effective. Plus, a discussion about helping people find the right information about pharmaceuticals in an age when facts and details are coming from multiple sources.

**Denise McIntosh** *So welcome, everyone, to the Art of Engineering podcast. And today, we have Richalle Ritz who is Manager of Process Engineering of Integrated Project Services in Overland Park, Kansas. So welcome, Richalle.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Hello! Nice to be here.*

**Denise McIntosh** *So I've noticed that some of your career has led to some of the same places that we've done business with. The Paul Mueller Company, and Nowaco company, and I believe I saw Beringer Ingelheim, which we've provided equipment and shared projects with. So I'm always curious, Richalle, how did you get into engineering?*

**Richalle Ritts** *Well, it's a family thing, actually. I don't think I knew any better. My grandfather was a civil engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers. And when my mother was young, they traveled and lived near several dams. And his name is on the wall at several of those dams as one of the engineers that designed and helped to build those. So his son, then, my uncle, is a metallurgical engineer. He retired from shell oil recently. And then my older brother was an aerospace engineer. My older sister's a mechanical, and they both said that chemical engineering was the hardest one on campus at Rolla, so I had to show them that I could do that one.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Good for you! Sibling rivalry.*

**Richalle Ritts** *It was, really, yes.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Tell me about the career path and how you arrived at where you are today.*

**Richalle Ritts** *So my career path was very much like a zig-zag and a loop-de-loop. There was no straight anything. But, early in my career, I wanted to be close to my father in Springfield. And the [Paul Mueller Company](#) offered me a really great place to learn and grow. It also took me to very fun places, different clients all over the country and throughout the world that were buying cell culture equipment at the time. And then, in 2008, the economy started to kind of begin to collapse, and I thought it would be a good time to go to Beringer Ingelheim up in St. Joe. And I helped them with a very large expansion to their cell culture and fermentation capabilities there.*

*And then my husband and I decided it was time to work on our family. And so we moved to the Houston area. I worked at Nalco Ecolab there for, it wasn't for very long. And then we had our first baby, so that was baby number two for me. And then I took some time off, and then I had twins a year later. So then I took some more time off, and then we moved back to the Kansas City Area, and I was just really lucky to find IPS and really enjoying growing my kids there, along with my kids at home. And so it's just been a very strange career trajectory, but probably normal for moms.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Yes. So tell us what you do with IPS.*

**Richalle Ritts** *So I manage the process engineering team at the office in Overland Park, Kansas, which is our Midwest office. And that team is focused on the early design process for Greenfield and Brownfield expansions of different facilities. So, you know, we've worked on Elanco in Fort Dodge, Iowa providing them some support and assistance. We work for different big names in the industry, just providing them additional engineering and design support. And my main focus is growing my team and teaching my new recent graduates how to just behave, and how to do the technical work, and how to handle stress, and just how to weave their way through the world.*

**Denise McIntosh** *I saw an article, that I believe was in Kansas City, about how COVID has impacted your family care. So can you describe how COVID has impacted your family life and your work life?*

**Richalle Ritts** *You know, we, my best friend from college, lost her father a couple of weeks ago in Des Moines, Iowa to COVID. So that's been kind of rough to, you know, support her through that. But from a childcare perspective, we generally use au pairs. So it's a cultural exchange program, and the au pair comes from, we've had one from Columbia, and we're anticipating one from Brazil. They actually live with us, so it allows us quite a bit of freedom to be able to, you know, just take walks in the evening and have a date night. And the reason that we use that is because our Charlie, who is five years old, one of our identical twins of four children, he has type one diabetes. So we*

*can't use daycares because most of them don't have nurses on staff, and we can't really do before or after school programs due to the same reason. So in order for him to have proper care, we use that service to provide somebody that can, you know, better accommodate his needs, because they are sometimes acute if his blood sugar drops very low.*

*So J-1 visas, which is the visa that the au pairs use, were banned for the remainder of the year, I believe in an effort to try to provide more people in the United States with work. But what we're up against is, now that we're running out of friends and neighbors, college students for childcare, we have no childcare after the end of next week, unless we get an au pair or some other means. And we've looked for nannies, we've looked at daycares, no one can take Charlie. So I'm not sure what I'm going to do in a couple of weeks.*

*And I am design and lead process engineer on the Johnson & Johnson CMO that is going to be formulating and filling the COVID vaccine for Johnson & Johnson. So, not only am I working on the COVID vaccine, you know, we've been personally impacted, but now we have no childcare services due to the COVID pandemic. So it's been interesting.*

**Denise McIntosh** *So when you said, "What's sleep?"... So have you seen any, and good luck in your search because that is not something I've experienced for a lot of years, but it's, yes. It's stressful to find the right people and the right, and particularly at this point in our world.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yes.*

**Denise McIntosh** *So any other challenges of what you've seen experienced with coworkers, or any rewards?*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yeah, you know, we've had a lot of rewarding experiences. We have had a push in the last several years to kind of work in a boundary lists office, meaning, you know, we have offices all over the country and all over the world and really do more work-share amongst those offices. And until we all ended up going home due to the lockdown, we weren't really good at it. And now I'm working with colleagues in Canada, California. I'm working with colleagues in Europe, and it's really become quite seamless to have Teams meetings and Zoom and really kind of tear all those boundaries down that we kind of imposed upon ourselves. So that's been one rewarding aspect of all of this. I really think it's innovating how we work.*

*And then a reward just for my family, since my son was diagnosed with type one diabetes in November of 2019, the amount of care he's needed, I honestly don't think I would have been able to continue working full-time at the capacity I am had we not gone home, just because of we're really not sleeping a lot, you know? We're up in the evening two and three times overnight to check blood sugars, and make corrections, and just help him stay healthy. So it's been a blessing on many fronts.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Yes. I think that the opportunity that we've had with family members like that has been a reward. And, like you said, about communication with your colleagues, we've noticed that too, because we're now, well, we started, you're probably familiar with The Great Game of Business. But when this whole pandemic set in, we just launched it again, and said, "We're going to do this because we need everybody's eyes on what we're doing every day." So we've done a Teams meeting literally four days a week with a fairly substantial group of us. And then on Monday it's everybody. So we've had more communication even within our small group than we've ever had before. And maybe it's forced, but maybe we really needed to be doing it anyway.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yeah, and it's funny because I found that my communication interoffice, and then with my more entry level people that work for me, improved, but I also found that my communication with my more senior folks, it actually went the opposite direction. So I guess maybe it was kind of a trust thing that I, we just, weren't touching base as much, me and my senior guys. So we've had to reimplement now where we touch base just exclusively once a week to just make sure that we're not missing anything. So it's been interesting.*

**Denise McIntosh** *My husband and I were driving by a new building as we were coming to the office today. And I said, "I wonder if that is a business building?" Because I wonder if you'd change your mind at this point about office space.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yes, I do think that our company was run by a lot of folks that were kind of born in the business world in the 1980s, where you need to be at your desk working at 8:00am, and you take an hour lunch, and you don't leave before five. And if you're not doing those things, you can't be doing a good job. And they've really changed their mind and outlook on all of those things. And I do see that the level of flexibility in our office space and then our attitudes going forward has really been dramatically changed, because people that weren't productive before the pandemic at work are still not going to be productive at home, but people that were productive at work will still be productive at home. It's not going to change the inherent way a person is.*

**Denise McIntosh** Well, and we've even had, you know, there are some of us who miss the office interaction and all of that. And then there are some of us who, I spent thirty years in the field as a salesperson. And so I didn't have an office. I mean, my office was my car, or the plane, or whatever. So for me to be able to go home and work, it's like, "Wow, oh, I love this because I can literally work anywhere and get done what I need to get done." So how are you dealing with those folks who are missing the interaction? Or do you have any of them?

**Richalle Ritts** Well, so I kind of have a spectrum. There's always a spectrum. So I have, you know, a couple of my introvert engineers that are happy as clams just being left alone in their apartment or home, and just being assigned work, and not having to interact. It's kind of nice for them.

And then I have folks that, especially my younger staff that lives alone, I can kind of see there's some loneliness setting in there, and I'm really trying to keep my eyes out for those folks. And, you know, I'm encouraging them to get pets and take days off, even if it's just to, you know, go on a hike or just to take their mind off things. So I do have a spectrum of folks.

And then for me, I feel like I'm split. Like at first I was really loving being at home all the time. And now I feel like I need maybe a fifty-fifty split so I can have interaction and see people because I'm very social, but I need home time as well to, you know, be able to be at home and supporting my kids and, and to get some work done as well.

**Denise McIntosh** I saw a, I think it was a survey that was done asking people, you know, what it is like to work at home. And I was surprised, because I'm not one of them, but eighteen-percent said loneliness was a big deal.

**Richalle Ritts** Yeah, it's true though. I mean, I really like to be around people, and I, you know, when I'm in the office, if somebody's struggling with something it's much more apparent, I have to seek it out now, and it's more difficult to know if somebody needs my support.

**Denise McIntosh** Right, right. Do you, are you noticing that what's happened with COVID and having to deal with school, and children, and work, and all of this is impacting your women colleagues more than men? Or is that just a silly question? Like, of course it is.

**Richalle Ritts** I think that, in a lot of ways, it's kind of an emotional labor thing. It's not that it's impacting them, maybe, workload-wise, but I think that women tend to feel more

*responsible for everyone feeling at ease and being taken care of. And I think that's really taxing folks. I have several colleagues that are women that are in my position, managers and directors, and, you know, they're clearly stressed. They have, you know, parents that are elderly now that they're concerned about. They have children that are in school, and they're trying to teach. And, you know, we still, every night you gotta feed those kids dinner, which is a lot to ask of a person.*

*So we have, we've got a lot of things pulling us many different directions and, you know, my husband and I have a really good split of things going on. And we've kind of made a focus, instead of arguing about who's doing what, we've assigned the kids a lot of chores to do to help out. But we've also subcontracted things like lawn-mowing, house-cleaning. If we can have someone else do it for us, then we are trying to do that because we just can't keep up with it all.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Oh, wise move. Yeah. I mean, really, you know, it's interesting you say that because it's almost like looking at that from the same perspective that a company looks at things, is that, "What are we good at doing, and what should we be doing with our time versus what are we, what could someone else do better?"*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yes, if I'm getting five hours of sleep at night, lawn-mowing should not be putting stress on me.*

**Denise McIntosh** *No, no. Totally agree. So you said that you were leading a work-life discussions at IPS. Can you tell us about that?*

**Richalle Ritts** *No, we have not kicked that off yet, but it initially, I just, I thought, you know, I'm seeing my colleagues that are fresh out of college, they're lonely, they're living alone. I'm seeing, you know, folks my age that have children that are trying to teach their kid homeschool and work. I, you know, they're making big decisions on whether to go virtual school or physically go back to school and, you know, no matter what the decision they make, someone will judge them. And I'm just seeing so many different aspects and so many different stories out there that we're going to be kicking off just a town-hall-style chat to just talk through some of the struggles folks are having, because you know, who knows? Maybe someone in the California office is in a similar place in life as someone in our Massachusetts office, and they can make a connection.*

*One of our lead mechanical folks in the Pennsylvania office, his wife and two of his grown children now all have type one diabetes. And it was a breath of fresh air to talk to him, to see that, you know, there's an end in sight to this. We're going to get better. It's not going to be so difficult as we go. And just knowing that he's been through it, and the*

*kids are grown and through college, it's been nice to see that. So we're just making connections and hoping to talk through the different problems that folks are facing and give them a little bit of support.*

**Denise McIntosh** *So the other things that were in this, so this survey that I saw yesterday was from my favorite economist, who's in Kansas City, by the way, his name is Chris Keel. His, the survey that he found was that, "What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?" So twenty-percent of the people said collaboration and communication, twenty-percent said loneliness, and eighteen-percent said not being able to unplug, which you kind of address with those young people who live alone and probably need to go find something to do.*

**Richalle Ritts** *I, and yes, I kind of I cross the boundary of manager-slash-mom sometimes. And I need to be careful, you know, I can't suggest, "Hey, maybe you should go on a date" because I thought that, but maybe, "You should get a pet. Have you thought of yoga?" But I can tell that folks that don't have established hobbies, that maybe don't have like a church family that they go to, maybe their parents they're not as close with, that age group, just right out of college, they're still kind of trying to find themselves.*

*I feel like even though parents are really struggling in places right now, I, honestly, my heart goes out to the folks that have just recently graduated. This is a really hard time to establish yourself, find, make new friends, figure out hobbies, ways to unwind. You know, you can no longer play video games till midnight and wake up at eight and be on-point in a meeting. You know, those basic life things that they're working out in such a strange time, it's hard for them.*

**Denise McIntosh** *It is hard for them, yes. Well, I will forward this to you because you might find it interesting in talking with your colleagues about the things they discovered in this, that we're all discovering, really.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yeah, I think we're gonna see a lot of things that we didn't know were there. I know the pandemic is showing me a lot of my friends that I went to high school and college with are anti-vaxxers it's like, "How did I not know this?" So I'm, I've been trying to post things on Facebook and social media to educate and to try to maybe take some of the fear and apprehension out of those things. And I just, it's interesting, there's things I didn't know about people, this is kind of bringing things to the surface.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Well, yes. And, you know, we've, my husband and I are both over sixty-five. And so we've been trying to be incredibly careful. But you're right, I've been*

*surprised at the number of people who are anti-vaxxers, even some of them that are our age, which really surprised me. But I'm also reading that, perhaps, those of us who've been taking that flu vaccine all along may have some inherent immunity just because of the way the vaccines are developed every year to try to catch the array of viruses that are out.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yes, and I also get the pneumonia vaccine. I have asthma. That vaccine in particular has almost changed my entire prognosis. I would get bronchitis for two or three months every winter. Since I've gotten the pneumonia vaccine I have not had anything. Once I get a cold, it generally just goes away now. That pneumonia vaccine has really changed my winter months to be so much better.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Wow.*

**Richalle Ritts** *It's been a miracle, really. So I'm really trying to just help inform folks. And I think, you know, when there's a lot of fear and unknowns in the world people kind of lean on what's maybe more comfortable instead of doing research and thinking things through.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Yeah, so, you know, that's the one thing that I've noticed about the pharmaceutical industry and the people within [ISPE](#) who are sharing and collaborating. And it's just so good to see, because there are so many unknowns, and we're just all trying to figure this out.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yeah, and I think that when, you know, a nationally-recognized Dr. Fauci or Birx, or those folks, are saying, "Hey, take your vaccine," I don't know if people really respect that. But if it's a member of the community that can help share that information to not be afraid, and educate, and help, I think that speaks a lot more to just the local communities than a national person.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Well, yeah, it is interesting you say that, Richalle, because I had a friend from Chicago that I've known for several years, who is actually a life coach, and about mid-April sent me a text and said, "Who should I be listening to?"*

**Richalle Ritts** *Uh huh. Because there's a lot of different things out there that are sending information out, right, wrong, different.*

**Denise McIntosh** *So, good for those of us who have access to information to continue to share it.*



**Richalle Ritts** *Yeah. And I feel like it's our responsibility to not let misinformation go. As easy and convenient as it can be just to scroll past. It's like, "Hey," you know, you don't have to be mean about it, but you can, you know, very politely say, "Hey, you know, this post that you posted is not accurate. You know, this happened in, you know, a communist country in the 1960s, and it's not what pharmaceuticals are in the United States anymore. This isn't a good example of what a pharmaceutical product can do to our body is anymore. It's not." And I think it's irresponsible for those of us in the know to just let it go anymore. I have several friends who are physicians, and they are feeling the heat as well. So it's a lot to take in and a lot of responsibility on a lot of folks that I don't think they were expecting.*

**Denise McIntosh** *Right. Well, Richalle, thank you so much for taking this time with us today, given that you don't have a lot of sleep, and you have a lot of responsibility, not only with your family, but with your colleagues, just appreciate the time. And we hope to share these with the [Women in Pharma](#) group so that we can let others know how we're dealing with all the things we're dealing with.*

**Richalle Ritts** *Yeah, we're not alone. We're all more similar than we give ourselves credit for.*