

What a Way to Make

OUTTA SIGHT

"The trick is to get them to reproduce in space."

Name: Heidi Platt
Age: 31
Company: SHOT
Position: Chemical Engineer



Have you ever thought about living in a space station? Could you stand eating that freeze-dried food all the time? Imagine how great it would be for the scientists to have a fresh egg to eat. Heidi Platt is trying to make it possible.

Platt works for SHOT (Space Hardware Optimization Technology) in Greenville, Ind. She is currently managing a project that could make a huge difference in space travel, called the Avian Hatchling Habitat. This device will actually go up on the next space shuttle to be delivered to the space station. "The facility will hold up to six adult quails from egg to maturity," says Platt. "In the experiments that the Russians did on Mir, the quail were not able to adapt to the microgravity and the quail would continuously spin like a ping-pong ball with air blowing on it! The only time they would eat was when an astronaut would hold the quail in his hand. The quail could not survive.

"The most unique challenge for us is to come up with a concept to give them the flexibility to move around and get to their food and water without spinning."

According to Platt, the quail will also be used to study the effects of microgravity on the inner ear and bone research to gain a better understanding of how things work the way they do here. They could also provide a valuable food source for travelling to far away destinations such as Mars.

The Avian Hatchling Habitat isn't Platt's only responsibility at SHOT. "I wear a lot of hats. I love the flexibility of what I do and the casual atmosphere. Above all, I love the people here. Everybody is excited and happy to be here. You don't have people trying to get out of doing the work. They want to be here and they take it personally and really strive hard to do a good job. The hardest part is the technical part – the challenge of design, but that makes it interesting. We have a lot of fun, but we get the job done."

Platt also loves the flexibility of her schedule. "Generally, it's a 40-hour work week, with nights and weekends off. If I have a sick child and need to come in at night instead of during the day, that's an option. I have deadlines to meet, but I create milestones in my Franklin Planner to keep me on track. There's no day-to-day stress."

Platt's two children, ages 3 and 6, are proud of their mom. "My daughter thinks I'm a 'Quail Engineer,'" she laughs. "I'm usually home by 5 p.m. I pick them up from day care. It's a great career for women. Rich Boling and I actually visit schools and talk about what we do in order to get kids interested in the field."

For salary ranges in the engineering field, Platt suggests salary.com on the Internet, due to the variety of jobs available. Boling says that the average employee at SHOT earns \$52,000 per year. – CS