



Mentoring in the Workplace

By Jennifer Anderson

Out of all the training and development programs to choose from, mentoring can have the most significant impact on the careers of everyone involved. Be it a junior engineer fresh out of college or a senior engineer with 20 years of working experience, mentoring makes a difference. Unfortunately, very few companies have an official mentoring program available; it is an area that is often overlooked.

For Junior Level Employees

At the college level, academic professionals try to create an environment for learning. Most of us can look back on our college years with fond memories of educational experiences that helped us to grow and learn as we developed our knowledge of concepts. Upon graduation and entering the workforce, most junior level employees receive a dose of reality when they realize that the real world of the workplace is entirely different from an academic setting. As these people join your organization, having a mentoring program available to help them understand the nuances of becoming an engineer is important for a successful transition. There is much to be learned in the workplace that cannot be learned in the classroom or a textbook. If your organization has invested in hiring a junior engineer, it is well worth your time and effort to invest in helping them understand the trade in order to increase the likelihood they will become long-term contributors to the company.

The reasons why mentoring junior engineers is important to your organization's bottom line include:

- If your company has a solid mentoring program, you can talk about it during the **recruitment and interview process**. This type of program is very attractive to Junior level engineers and will help your firm stand out from other hiring companies.
- Mentoring helps to **reduce turnover**. Junior engineers will typically stay with their first firm for 3 to 4 years before going elsewhere. During those first few years, they are evaluating how managers are treating them. If they do not feel supported, their desire to stay may waiver.
- Leveraging the knowledge of senior engineers will **help junior engineers come up to speed more quickly**. Time is money and

money is time, so take advantage of helping junior engineers come up to speed so that they can make a better impact on their assigned projects.

For Senior Level Employees

As a senior engineer, the benefits of mentoring come more from being the mentor rather than the mentee. Think back to those people who made a difference by helping you develop into the engineer that you are today. Wouldn't it feel great to know that you made an impact on the lives and careers of other engineers?

- At a certain point in your career, gaining knowledge is no longer as important as **sharing knowledge**. Being in an environment where you can be a mentor can be personally satisfying.
- Leveraging your experience and helping others get up to speed is invaluable to the firm because it will **reduce lost time and lost wages**, making your firm more profitable and productive.
- Even mentoring people outside of your company **pays dividends to your professional reputation** and the reputation of your firm, and contributes to the structural engineering industry as a whole.

How to Start a Mentoring Program

If your company does not yet have an organized mentoring program in place, here are key points to consider when starting one:

- Mentee requests the mentoring. The best mentoring programs are driven by the mentees, not the mentors. If the mentee is forced to have a mentor, it may feel like another layer of supervision. On the other hand, if the mentee is shown the value of mentoring to their career, they will likely desire to participate in a helpful program.
- Begin with the end in mind. As you begin a new mentoring program, be clear about what your goals are for establishing the program at your company.
- Someone needs to take the helm. If anything is to succeed in a company, someone needs to sponsor it. Perhaps that is you?
- Designate funding. Budgeting for a mentoring program does not require hundreds



of thousands of dollars; a small budget of \$500-\$1000 per person mentored is typically sufficient. The money can be used for occasional one-on-one lunches, purchasing books, and other activities to support mentorship.

- Start small. In the beginning, start with a small group of people who want a successful mentoring program in the company – at a minimum start with three mentors and three mentees. Have this small group determine how the mentoring will look. Mentoring programs can vary from company to company, so allow the mentors and the mentees the flexibility to be creative about what will work for your company's program and what will align with your company's culture.
- Trial period. Start with a six- or 12-month mentoring duration to see how the mentors and mentees do in this initial run.

At the end of the trial period, bring together the mentors and mentees to have a collective conversation about the successes and challenges of the initial mentoring program. Review your original goals, determine what worked and did not work, then use the knowledge gained to move forward with the next phase of the mentoring program.

If your company has a robust mentoring program in place, whether as a junior engineer or senior engineer, take full advantage of the opportunity and participate. If your company does not yet have a mentoring program established, do yourself and your firm a favor and help to get one started today.▪

Born into a family of engineers but focusing on the people side of engineering, Jennifer Anderson (www.CareerCoachJen.com) has nearly 20 years helping companies hire and retain the right talent. She may be reached at jen@careercoachjen.com.