

Mentoring program puts engineers on right course

The practice of mentoring dates back to at least the time of Socrates and Plato, when learned elders took aspiring prospects under their wings and developed esoteric expertise in a number of professions. In conjunction with the Engineer Internship Training (EIT) program, PEO is exploring the use of mentoring to help applicants for licensure meet the requisite criteria while assisting them to assimilate into the engineering profession in Ontario.

by Dwight Hamilton

One of the goals of PEO's Strategic Plan is to have engineering students recognize acquiring their P.Eng. licence as the culmination of their engineering education. To this end, PEO is endeavouring to create a seamless transition from its engineering Student Membership Program to its Engineer Internship Training Program (EIT) and finally on to professional licensure.

Another goal is for PEO to ensure that the standards of qualification, practice and professional conduct of its members engender ethical and competent practice. The EIT program, therefore, aims to help fill any gap between the knowledge obtained in university and the skills required to practise professional engineering. Mentorship is expected to be an integral part of this process. As a result, a pilot program was begun in the Toronto area in September 2002, with plans to take it province-wide by this coming winter. The program is being piloted in a controlled geographic area to see if an adequate number of potential mentors and interns can be found and to ensure a mix of Canadian and non-Canadian interns.

The program matches experienced P.Engs with engineer interns (EIs) and has them meet on a monthly basis to review the EI's progress. During these reviews the mentor should:

- ◆ assist the intern in understanding his or her role and responsibilities as an engineering intern;
- ◆ appraise the intern's progress in the development of his or her career; and,

- ◆ in the event the intern does not appear to be attaining suitable engineering experience, bring it to his or her attention, as well as to PEO's.

Dos and don'ts

"The mentor should help the intern assimilate into the engineering profession," says Gerry Meade, P.Eng., manager of the EIT program. "It is not unusual for recent graduates or new employees to be reluctant to approach their boss about a problem that they might be expected to have the answer for. This is a common area of stress for a new employee. The mentor is a non-threatening individual who can help the intern work through this type of problem."

However, under no circumstances are mentors allowed to offer technical advice to interns, since this would undermine the relationship between interns and their employers and create possible exposure to liability.

With mentoring, a good fit is vital. It's not very helpful to match an intern with a mentor simply because they graduated in the same discipline. The goal is

to pair interns who aspire to work in the industry in which the mentor is currently working. If they share a common area of practice, the mentor-intern relationship is more beneficial. Because of this, PEO needs more mentors than interns who apply for the program. The program is labour-intensive and involves considerable individual contact between participants. The mentor must help the intern set clear directions and expectations and provide orientation support to the intern.

"The primary values that we expect the mentor to help instill are those of the role and importance of the professional engineer in Canadian society and the workplace," says Meade. "The aspects of ethics and the responsibility of the engineer to serve and protect the public will be the definite outcomes of the mentoring relationship." The mentor's main role is to act as a counsellor for the intern. Mentors need to understand they are dealing with relatively new entrants to the job force as engineers and often individuals from different backgrounds, who may have very different demands and

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needs than the mentor. “It is important to establish rapport and there must be mutual respect,” says Meade. A critical element is the skill to listen with an open mind, he adds.

Jon Gudelis, P.Eng., is a senior vice president at Symcor Inc., and a mentor in PEO’s pilot program. He feels engineering graduates are equipped with some skills, but not enough to manage their lives in the working world. “Mentors appreciate the tool sets EIs were given technically, but the mentor has experience that can put it in perspective. You’ve got to assist the intern as to how you navigate your life, given the tools you have and the circumstances you are in.” One of the unusual but useful exercises Gudelis gave his intern was to compile a potential resume of where he wants to be in five years time. Is it working?

“I was kind of skeptical about the program at first, but I’m surprised at what it’s been able to do,” says Max Leone, EI, the intern paired with Gudelis. “A lot of young people just chase the money, that’s the mistake I made, but you’ve got to look at where the position will take you. It’s all about planning today and understanding the consequences of what is going to happen 10 years from now.”

A career in professional engineering is challenging at any time, but much more so at the outset of one’s journey. “The role of a mentor goes beyond that of a supervisor-employee relationship,” says Meade. “Mentors should direct, not dictate. Mentors should help interns in understanding the situations and alternatives and in assessing the options, while allowing them to make the final decision. If the intern lacks self-esteem, mentors can help them through a combination of encouragement and direction for improvements. They must be careful not

to belittle the intern and strive to address any weaknesses in a forthright and constructive manner,” he adds.

To find out more about becoming a PEO mentor or protégé, contact Gerry Meade at gmeade@peo.on.ca. ◆

