

Young PE Quarterly

Advice to Young Engineers

While it seems to have happened in but the blink of an eye, I have been a civil engineer for 43 years and I still awaken every morning excited to be one. I am not sure there are many professions about which that can be said.

One of the infirmities of age is the irresistible urge to give advice and so I would like to share a few thoughts as you embark upon your engineering careers. Engineering is a calling and I am not sure that you can yet fully appreciate that you stand upon the threshold of a great adventure.

No doubt you have often been advised to: complete your studies, get your E.I.T. and P.E. as soon as possible, be active in professional and technical affairs, set goals, find a mentor and perhaps most importantly, continue your education — for much of the essence of being a professional is not so much continuing education as continuous education.

But there are perhaps some less obvious elements to a successful career. The first is teamwork. If you want to be a rebel be a poet (or a Sandinista). One of the secrets of great engineering is the ability to work effectively in often multi-disciplinary groups. Some people believe that working in teams somehow inhibits creativity but nothing could be further from the truth. No one can possibly know everything or be an expert in every area and teams are synergistic – their total effectiveness is greater than the sum of their parts. Teamwork is both an art and a skill and like any other can be learned, but it takes practice, and discipline and a dose of humility. Work on it.

Learn to communicate effectively both in writing and verbally.

The importance of reputation and character cannot be overstated. The engineering community is a small one, and if you develop a reputation for excellent work and for being scrupulously honest and unwaveringly dependable, it will serve you well your entire career.

Also, remember the magic words of career success, “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

Finally, life is as they say a network, and I don’t mean Facebook. Yogi Berra perhaps said it most eloquently, “If you don’t go to other people’s funerals they won’t go to yours.” Build your network of professional relationships and try to do something nice for someone every day. Never (or rarely anyway) turn down a request for help. You should help others without any expectation of reciprocity, but it is as if there is a cosmic bank of good will and if you make regular deposits, you will be able to make withdrawals when the time comes.

William James once said, “The greatest use of a life is to spend it on something that will outlast it.”

He could have been speaking of engineering.

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