

Viewpoint

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Give time for mentoring

Practice's key role in developing employees.

As the industry is gearing up for growth and striving to attract future generations of engineers, initiatives like Tomorrow's Engineers week – which plant the seed for future careers in engineering and celebrate our profession – are vital.

To me, the week is also about celebrating and recognising those who influence youngsters – the role models and mentors who guide and help them on their way. Young technicians and engineers already on the civil engineering career path who themselves derive confidence from guidance and mentoring can play a key role. This helps in retaining, motivating and attracting staff.

Mentoring can take many forms ranging from informal learning from an experienced colleague through to formal succession planning for a new chief executive. Within civil engineering it is commonly used as part of structured initial professional development towards professional qualification.

Whatever format it takes, the mentoring process requires belief, commitment and trust. Mirroring world class sports coaching, the process comprises contracting, profiling, planning, doing and reviewing.

Contracting is about who does what. This includes the company's commitment to providing appropriate experience, the mentee producing learning records and the mentor making time.

Profiling defines the elements of the engineer's performance and how they currently match against them. The ICE's Development Objectives are commonly used as the profiling tool. Planning then sets goals for filling knowledge and experience gaps, often expressed in a development action plan.

Doing comprises the learner's

work experience and other continuous professional development. This is then reviewed through reflection on the learning, reviewing outputs, discussions with mentors and appropriate record keeping.

The mentoring process works best when it is clearly understood by all parties and entered into with the right spirit. Its success depends upon a useful working relationship.

Contracting involves open and honest dialogue about the working relationship, including responsibilities and what happens if things don't work out. Contracting elements include making time for mentoring sessions and commitment to the action points that were agreed last time. Lack of attention to these areas is often significant in the breakdown of mentoring relationships. Recognising this best practice in coaching and mentoring, ICE is currently updating the training agreement mentoring forms.

Professional coaches and mentors routinely discuss and check the contract's validity and relevance with their clients. Surprisingly many engineering mentors do not, despite working in an industry where contracts are central to their work. Professional mentors also have the benefit that someone is paying for their time, so the learner makes time too.

Mentoring relationships sometimes falter through lack of commitment. Deeper exploration can unveil perceptions that, because it doesn't have a job code, mentoring is classed as "non-productive". If that's a common perception in your company, look out!

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