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A YP's Lessons Learned & Bridging the Experience Gap

by Amy West, Project Engineer, Brown and Caldwell

February will mark my two-year work anniversary of being hired as an engineer for the first time. I will undoubtedly remind my co-workers at Brown and Caldwell how just 30 days prior to receiving the offer, I posted to social media my horoscope for the month which read, "January will see you making money. Career too will progress well," followed by my snarky remark, "30 days to get a job!" At the time, I had just moved back in with my parents after living in Washington D.C. for six months where I worked as a baker. I had no leads on an engineering job (or any job), and while I was so grateful I had a family that could help me out, moving back in with my parents was hard. Thirty days to find a job felt totally impossible. But it happened, and I love the work I get to do every day! Working as an engineer in an office environment was completely new to me and I may only be two years in, but I have learned so much within that short time. I've worked in a variety of industries and one thing is certain...I belong in the water/wastewater industry! A lot of my enthusiasm for the work that I do stems from the people I get to meet and work with every day. My passion is deeply rooted in the potential for great things to happen within the industry to help communities adapt to changing climates. However, this potential can only be tapped when we decide to work collaboratively and effectively share information.

This article is based on a presentation which originally was called "Bridging the Generational Gap". I was tired of members from different generations blaming the other for problems and refusing to work together instead of learning from each other. After a few failed attempts to deliver this idea to small groups, I was disheartened. I believed that this was such an important topic, but I couldn't figure out how to talk about the generational gap in the workforce in an amiable way. I ended up offending people even though my intention was to break down stereotypes. Thankfully, one of my trusted mentors was able to make it click for me. I realized that the "generational gap" was really one of many types of "gaps" that are everywhere: generation, gender, race, or language, but the issue is the same – they prevent the sharing of information and experience. They are walls, where there should be bridges. So instead of learning from our mistakes and improving our ideas, we get stuck in a repetitive cycle of slow progression.

How do we change this? How do we bridge the gap? We must continually work to improve our understanding of each other by building authentic relationships and engaging with the people around us. I hope that by sharing my following experiences in the past few years will aid in building those bridges that we do desperately need.

Multiple Mentors

I credit a lot of my success to my mentors who I can confide in and trust to have my best interest at heart.

One mentor of mine was among the first people at Brown and Caldwell to make me feel like I was doing the whole "engineering" thing right, and their words have stuck with me during every time I start to doubt myself. But I have multiple mentors, and I have found that having a variety of mentors allows me to see many different sides of the industry, helping me to figure out what my career goals might be and how they might change in the future. I see it as, "How can I select a future for myself without seeing all the possible options?"

Finding someone you connect with may take time - it's something that needs to happen organically and can't be forced. Mentoring programs and meeting people outside of your circle are great ways to connect with people that can be mentors and mentees. At Brown and Caldwell, we have a program called Mentor Circles which is a group learning system where all participants understand that they have something to learn and also have something to teach. The Mentor Circles have provided a space where I can present new ideas, ask for advice when I need it, and receive unbiased feedback. In fact, my Mentor Circles group helped me improve the idea of "Bridging the Generational Gap". I know I wouldn't be as successful as I am today (and I still have a lot to learn) if it wasn't for the willingness of my mentors to share their knowledge with me.

Continue to grow

I often hear people talk about plateaus that they reach after years of work. They have become good at what they do but stay at a good enough level which has led them to "burn out". They are good enough at what they do and do it efficiently. However, they no longer feel the drive they had when they started. This is what can happen when we forget to take time to reflect on our work and enhance our skills which allow us to grow. I get it, life is busy, and it often feels like we don't have time to make mistakes. But the problem is that if we are always performing then we are unable to improve. So how do we escape the cycle of doing work followed by more work, especially if we have deadlines to meet? We can start by taking small steps when risks are low. For example, make a goal to learn (and use) one new word a day. Or, if you have a stack of unread magazines on your coffee table that you will "one day get around to reading," make a goal to read one article every two weeks. If you are willing to dedicate so much time to your place of work, you should also be willing to invest time in yourself to grow. Ask the most successful person you know what they do to better themselves – you might be surprised how easy it can be.

Learn your organization's values

Finding a company whose values aligned with mine was very important during my job search, and I am often reminded that I made the right choice in joining Brown

and Caldwell. But organizations are often a lot more than what is advertised. If you are a YP, you might have the opinion that for now, putting your head down and completing all the work that is given to you is fine – you’ll worry about the economics of business when you have more experience and your role requires it. However, a better understanding of your organization’s values will show you how to better position yourself to contribute more, earlier on in your career. This is also applicable to the industry as a whole. Demonstrating that you not only understand the “what”, but also the “why” behind your work will help you elevate your contributions and show that you care about your work. Speaking to other YPs and asking what they value has given me the opportunity to understand what they consider success and how business models could shift to better accommodate them. This has allowed me to be an advocate for new employees and contribute to improving their experience.

Be authentic and be yourself

During the first few months as a YP with no prior office experience, I felt completely lost when it came to how to professionally interact with people in the office. I wanted my co-workers and peers to take me seriously, but I also wanted to use exclamation points and smiley faces in emails. It took me awhile to stop feeling intimidated and remember that those on the other side of the emails were just people! Be appropriate but be yourself. Embrace what makes you “you” and own it. Be genuine in all that you do, and people will notice and appreciate it. When you show your genuine self, others respond by doing the same, which develops trust and strengthens relationships.

I am a very curious person who will ask way too many questions if you let me, and as an engineering consultant, I anticipate that someone at some time is going to think that I am only asking these questions to obtain sensitive information. It bothers me that I would make someone feel that way. I must remind myself that I cannot control how people react to my actions, but I can control my intent. In my experience, people can tell I am sincere and in return, are sincere as well. Authenticity is the support beams of the bridge between people.

Be hungry but know when your stomach is full

I am a true believer in saying yes and taking every opportunity, and as a YP, I want to demonstrate that I am hard working and dedicated to my job. However, knowing when to say no is a skill that is usually learned the hard way. My advice to anyone new in the workforce is to demonstrate quality rather than quantity. Favoring quantity is a quick way to burn out early in your career and can also come off as ingenuine ambition. Take your time to invest in your work. Even if you make mistakes, your mentors will see that you care about what you’re doing and willing to put in the effort. Additionally, spending your spare time investing in yourself rather than using it to catch up on producing high quantities of low quality work will improve your ability to take on more work in the future. The ability to produce quality work is the foundation of trust for relations within your career.

What will be your legacy?

I’ve talked about how important I believe mentoring is, but it wasn’t until my final year of college that the power of mentoring revealed itself. While studying at Ohio State University, I signed up for a class called, “Women in STEM: Leading with Confidence.” I didn’t have any female engineering friends and thought this class might help me find women I could relate to. This class changed my life. Each week, this group of sixteen women discussed topics such as emotional intelligence and personal branding, and each week we all became increasingly confident to face our career challenges. As we grew to trust each other, we were able to have vulnerable conversations about what we experienced in our day to day lives – study tips, interviewing tactics, advice for having difficult conversations...things that I wish I had learned before my last year of college. That’s why mentoring became a passion of mine. I want to be the mentor that I needed when I was younger.

So, now I ask you: what drives you to act? When your career is reaching its end, what do you hope to say about it? Will you be one who retires with all the information you have learned locked inside your mind, or will you retire having mentored the new and successful workforce because you taught them everything you know? Will you take revenge on how you had to learn everything you know, or will you do your best to leave things better than how you inherited it? Will you reinforce the walls, or build bridges?

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