Paying it forward (mentor and mentee perspectives)

Bob Chesla & Melissa Boskocevic - March 14, 2012

Editor's note: If you are planning to attend DesignWest in San Jose on Wednesday, March 28, please consider attending our "Engineering the Next Generation: Design West meet-up" and beginning your own version of the mentoring experience. Click here for more information.

A mentor’s perspective

Turning back the pages to when I started my career in the engineering field, my first manager, Jim, was a true teaching mentor. He patiently passed down engineering know-how that taught me to tackle problems from both text book and practical common-sense perspectives. He showed, by example, how to work methodically, to accomplish goals, to enjoy engineering as well as the people we worked with.

Jim sacrificed his lunch hours to help me with school assignments and spent time counseling me about life, much like a second father. He owned a plane and let me experience my first plane ride and engine stall, both in the same day. The combination of working with Jim and many other dedicated people, developing ground breaking products that are still functioning in the field, and being in a lab surrounded by sophisticated equipment gave me the feeling of being a kid in a candy store.

I once asked Jim why he hired me and his reply was, “not for what I think you know; but for what I think you can learn.” I’ve carried those words with me throughout my career and in following that advice, what I’ve learned turned into what I can apply and also pass on. Jim is long retired; but I see him occasionally and we have a rock solid bond that has stood the test of time.

Those mentoring days of shaping curiosity, passion and growing knowledge and experience have endured. As a long-time employee of Rockwell Automation (once Allen-Bradley); I continue to have a rewarding career in engineering. I’ve worked in design engineering, quality, component engineering, as well as engineering services. Contributing to company objectives included stints as an ISO 9000 instructor, quality auditor, and a global project manager. I’ve spent significant time in both engineering and chemical & materials labs, often being fondly reminded of my younger, ‘candy store’ days. Over the years, I’ve had the
opportunity to visit and audit many component suppliers, affording me the luxury to interact with some of the industry’s most knowledgeable people.

To give back to the profession and “pay it forward” has long been a goal. Teaching and learning moments arise throughout one's career, but the full potential of seizing a mentoring opportunity happens only when you have the ideal mentor-mentee match. To create an effective and positive experience, you must have a two-way commitment with set goals. Mentoring can go beyond the technical side of engineering and may include discussions ranging from ethics, company politics, constructing professional emails, and related career guidance.

When Melissa was assigned to me, I’ll admit to being unsure of how to balance my workload and spend time mentoring. If I was going to cultivate, to manage, to be a role model, and put my reputation on the line with an intern, I wanted to make sure she was willing, capable, and able to add value towards department goals and objectives. Happily, we quickly realized that our personalities matched well. Melissa is enthusiastic, competent, organized, and dedicated. She’s assisted with my work load far more than anticipated; although I’m responsible, and must verify her work, I am able to put some trust in it. I’ve not considered the time spent a chore; it’s proven to be a valuable and enjoyable experience. But that’s my perspective and I’ll let Melissa relate her own story.

And a mentee’s perspective

Electrical engineering is my major because I enjoy the challenge of understanding the inner workings of everyday electronic devices and their applications. The satisfaction of solving complex problems and implementing a process to make a component function has long been a subject of interest. For me, the field of electrical engineering just seemed a completely natural fit.

I began my internship at Rockwell Automation last summer as a Component Engineering Intern. Throughout my education, I have been interested in control systems; this exceptional opportunity has greatly enhanced my understanding of industrial processes and the engineering profession as a whole. Since beginning college, I’ve only heard praise for Rockwell Automation, based on excellent products, ethical standards, and continual improvement practices.

During my first few weeks, I was intimidated by the tasks that were placed before me. I had never worked for a large corporation and I was unsure of what was expected of me. However, all apprehensions quickly abated, as the Engineers at Rockwell Automation were not only extremely knowledgeable, but were more than willing to share that knowledge with me as a new Intern. I felt as if I hit it off extremely well with my mentor from the start. By the time my training was complete, I had begun feeling as though I was providing valuable assistance to my mentor, and contributing to Rockwell Automation.

Throughout the last nine months, I’ve aided in analyzing electronic components for industrial applications, reviewing suppliers’ specifications, identifying alternate solutions for obsolete components, and working with component suppliers to obtain various technical data. I’ve also had the opportunity to work in the Chemistry and Materials Lab performing competitive cross section analysis on micro SD connectors, utilizing x-ray to photograph components, analyzing parts on a HiLevel tester, and had hands-on time with lab equipment (microscopes, sand blaster, drill press, etc.). I have found that internships are extremely beneficial for the company, the mentors, and the interns.

My time at Rockwell Automation has far exceeded my expectations due to the tremendous
collaboration between my mentor, Bob, and me. He has done a phenomenal job and guided me through to the numerous departments within the company while teaching me the balance of responsibilities, opportunities, and hurdles faced as an Engineer. Beyond being my acting manager and mentor, Bob always finds time to answer questions, give career advice, and mentor me for a career in engineering; something I am even more enthusiastic about now.

When a mentor-mentee program functions properly, it’s a Win-Win-Win situation. A mentor has the opportunity to pay it forward, the mentee benefits from real-life engineering experience, and the company receives help in meeting goals and objectives. Not to be forgotten though, there are important, rewarding, and enjoyable bonds that can develop between mentor and mentee.

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