

Giving an Extra Effort in Your Career

by: Steve Snelling

Introduction

Throughout my education and work history, I found there were many advantages to “*giving an extra effort in my career*”, and to look for activities that opened new opportunities for me.

Virginia Tech Co-op Program

When I was in college at Virginia Tech, I knew I wanted to be in their engineering Co-Op program which alternates school sessions with work sessions during the sophomore & junior years of college. But the program had very few openings, based on the jobs made available by sponsoring companies. I talked to the Co-Op office and asked them – if I could get my own job lined up with a company – if they would accept me into the program. It was rarely done that way – but they told me to try it – if I wanted to. With some local contacts, I was able to get an interview with a large company in my home town (so I could live at home during work sessions to save money). At the end of a half-day of intensive job interviewing – they agreed to sponsor my Co-Op job with them (it was an expansion of an existing program that the company had already set up, with Virginia Tech). By alternating work & school sessions during my sophomore & junior years (all with the same company) – I was able to pay for most of my college education. It made the engineering degree a five year vs. normal four year completion – but it was well worth it. I later went to work for the same company when I graduated and I received annual vacation benefits based on my years of service (which they started counting back when I was still a sophomore in college) – so I had several weeks of annual paid vacation, my first job out of college.

Special Study in College

My senior year of college I got an opportunity to do Special Study with one of my engineering professors. It came about during a casual conversation with the professor at an after-hours event (sponsored by the student chapter of an engineering society). I had enjoyed the Human Factors class the previous year with this professor, and I asked him if he ever sponsored Special Study for undergraduate students. He said he needed some help with a research contract assignment he was working on for the Navy in the Virginia Tech, Human Factors Lab – and offered to sponsor me for Special Study. I worked directly with him and several grad students on “*Visual capability, eye movement measurements – using different flight deck instrumentation arrangements, for Navy fighter pilots*”. It was my favorite class in college, and taught me a lot about doing independent research and writing technical papers.

Engineering Contracts Class

Another time in college I had to take some technical electives as part of my undergraduate engineering degree. I went to several engineering professors and asked them what courses they would recommend outside of my Industrial Engineering department. Several professors suggested I take a Contracts Law course – taught by the Civil Engineering department. It was a challenging class with a lot of technical documents to read – but it gave me a strong background in writing and performing to formal contracts (taught by a working civil engineer with a Professional Engineering license). Later, as a Management Consultant, I used everything I

learned in the Contracts class – to try and keep our clients out of court on complex engineering projects. I also got to work on several projects with Civil Engineers and found I could more easily relate to them from my taking the Contracts Law class in college.

Co-op Facility Planning Projects

As an engineering Co-Op student, while still in college, I was often given special Facility Planning projects – since I was viewed as extra help to the small engineering group at each plant I was assigned to. They often gave me some of their projects that they didn't have time to work on – but were anxious to see finally get started. They also wanted to see the project (and me), be successful – so I received a lot of project coaching and mentoring. They also took me to professional engineering society dinner meetings and paid for my dinner – so I got to meet Industrial Engineers from other local companies. Later, one of my first permanent jobs as an Industrial Engineer gave me an opportunity to work on some special projects. The coaching and mentoring that I received as a Co-Op student helped me succeed with several of my early project assignments. I found if I volunteered occasionally, for a challenging assignment – it often came with significant feelings of accomplishment, if the project was completed successfully. I also got to meet others in the company (outside of my own group) – who were working on challenging projects.

Site-wide Mobile Equipment Assignment

One of my early engineering assignments, when I was just out of college, was to coordinate the purchase of replacement mobile equipment (forklifts & electric transport carts, and battery charging equipment) for the large production plant site. It was a huge plant site and it had a lot of large and small pieces of mobile equipment. The senior engineer who gave me the assignment was glad to get rid of it – since he didn't like going around the large plant site looking at all the equipment and he had a hard time getting any new equipment purchased. I enjoyed going all over the plant site and meeting the department managers and forklift operators. I also had met some of the people at company headquarters – involved with equipment replacement approvals (back when I was a Co-Op student). I did a review of all our equipment needs for the entire plant site; then I talked to corporate headquarters about the replacement procedures and justifications needed. By proving our needs for the plant site, I was able to get a \$2 million annual replacement budget approved for our mobile equipment needs (more than 10 times any previous budget assigned to the plant site). I was also able to get an improved maintenance bay paid for – so we could upgrade all new and old equipment to better meet the conditions of our plant site's material handling needs. By using some of our own plant labor, we also got a maintenance pit dug & installed – so we could do under-carriage repairs and servicing, easier and quicker. I had fun with the special assignment and met a lot of people at the plant site – who were anxious to have their old mobile equipment replaced and set up better servicing of the existing equipment. Later, as a Management Consultant, I was able to do several similar projects – involving improved mobile equipment upgrades – with other companies.

In Summary

Over the years, first as an Area Industrial Engineer, later as a Management Consultant, and still later as a Special Projects Manager – I often utilized the early skills and learning experiences I received as a Co-Op student and as an early engineer-trainee. And later in my career – I was able to be a Projects Coach and Mentor to other young engineers – and also help them attend

professional engineering dinners & annual conferences (like others had done for me, early in my career). When I look back at the results from “*giving an extra effort in my career*” on occasion – I am amazed at the benefits that were achieved.