
Make a Difference Through Online Mentoring

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The growing demand for civil engineers and technicians, coupled with no significant growth in supply, poses a significant challenge for both the private and public sectors.

According to “The Crisis in Human Capital,” the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management report published in December 2000, more than 53 percent of the Federal Government workforce (that is, 900,000 employees) will be eligible for retirement or at retirement age by 2004. Recent estimates indicate that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service will experience similar attrition through retirements, with more than 25 percent of the engineering workforce retiring in the next 3 to 5 years. National estimates indicate no net growth in engineering bachelor’s degrees nationwide since 1981. The Senate report is posted on the Internet at <http://voinovich.senate.gov/humancapital.pdf>.

Along with local opportunities to get involved with science fairs and career days to promote interest in engineering and science, more organized national efforts include the USDA mentoring program and the National Society of Professional Engineers online mentoring forum to discuss areas of mutual interest between students and professionals in the engineering field. (See <http://www.nspe.org/discuss.asp>.)

Before developing new tools to more effectively attract and retain a competent and productive workforce, we must first focus on increasing the size of the applicant pool. By participating in programs such as MentorNet, you can make a difference.

In the spirit of e-Government initiatives, MentorNet is an e-mentoring network for women in engineering and science. The one-on-one mentoring program pairs women students (protégés) with male or female engineering professionals (mentors) for e-mail-based relationships. The program provides women with often-hard-to-come-by “real world” information, encouragement, advice, and networks. From 1998 to 2003, MentorNet matched nearly 20,000 protégés and mentors. According to MentorNet, protégés report a greater confidence and desire to pursue their field of study and work in the public or private sector. Similarly, mentors gained personal satisfaction from helping protégés, improved their mentoring skills for assisting employees in their workplace, and increased their own commitment to their field and employer.

As a MentorNet mentor, I have seen the valuable impact that listening and providing a few encouraging words can make in someone’s life. I have gained a better understanding of the issues and concerns facing today’s women as they pursue engineering degrees, as well as a renewed appreciation for my own personal mentors.

For more information on the MentorNet program and how you can get involved, log onto <http://www.mentornet.net>. It takes only a little time to make a big difference.

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