

Professional benefits

Young fire engineers will benefit from trusted and experienced advisers under a new mentoring scheme from the Institution of Fire Engineers

By Glenys Southworth

AT THE 2005 Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE) Annual General Meeting (AGM), Conference and Exhibition, many members expressed an interest in providing support to the Young Professionals Network. Indeed, speaking at the event, the vice-chancellor of the University of Birmingham stressed the role of professional institutions in developing their members. He explained that the UK is unique in having professional institutions which contain both fully qualified individuals and those progressing in the various membership levels. The role of the IFE therefore embodies a responsibility to care for fire engineers in the future.

Research evidence suggests that most people achieve better levels of professional success if they have the guidance and help of a mentor; a wise and trusted professional friend with whom they can discuss their career plans, evaluate options and achievements, and work through issues. Many members of the Institution have a wide array of knowledge, experience and talent within the field of fire engineering which they could use to help and support others. In the light of this – and since many organisations now expect staff to take responsibility for their own development – the IFE has developed a mentoring scheme for young professionals.

Defining a mentor

The IFE defines a mentor as a suitably experienced person who is willing and able to act as a confidential helper, to encourage and guide another fire engineer in stimulating their professional and personal development to make it more effective. A good mentor can better ensure that a person's professional development plans are most appropriate to their ambitions and aspirations. In addition, the mentor will want to ensure that the person they are mentoring gains confidence and independence as a result of being mentored and is able to take full and effective responsibility for their own development over the next career stage.

The role of a mentor requires particular skills, such as being a good listener, the ability to create an open and candid relationship with the person being mentored, and the ability to encourage growth of trust and confidence.

Other requirements include the ability to:

- challenge assumptions and act as a sounding board
- share knowledge so as to help others progress
- respond to the development needs of the person being mentored without imposing their own agenda
- provide valuable impartial advice
- encourage young professionals to redefine problems/situations and seek solutions
- provide a vital link between learning and doing, imparting skills and knowledge
- provide a summary of progress and future steps which the person being mentored would consider valuable

Operating the scheme

The Young Professionals Network area on the IFE website, www.ife.org.uk, contains a register of members who are prepared to be mentors, along with their areas of expertise. Those seeking a mentor can use the website and make direct contact. To help the scheme operate smoothly, guidance documents are available on the website, setting out rules of engagement and advice for both mentors and those being mentored. This approach allows both parties to develop their relationships with the minimum of formality.

Not all communications will need to be face-to-face; they can take place by e-mail or telephone, where agreed to be appropriate. The relationship

between both parties should last for a mutually agreeable period of time, whereupon it can either be continued or terminated.

Some mentors may have the time and inclination to help many young professionals. Others may only manage to mentor one individual because of their busy schedule. Once a mentor notifies IFE headquarters that they are fully booked, a note indicating this will be placed by their name on the website.

There is a valuable role for retired members to become mentors. They can bring to the role the benefit of a lifetime's experience in coping with a number of different situations. Regardless of the individuals' specific area of work, certain fundamental principles remain the same, such as the ability to know when to step back and view a situation calmly or imaginatively.

Benefits for all

The mentoring process itself can develop the competencies of both parties as professional fire engineers; and 100% of the time involved in the process can be recorded as a continuous personal development activity.

The benefits for mentors include:

- satisfaction from helping others and seeing them progress
- enhanced coaching, counselling, listening and modelling skills
- additional recognition and respect
- the opportunity to exercise creativity and best practice
- learning new perspectives and approaches
- the opportunity to broaden and deepen their knowledge
- gaining satisfaction from being able to encourage, support and guide other fire engineers at key stages within careers
- continuing their own professional development
- contributing to the future development of the fire engineering profession

In addition, those who have taken advantage of mentoring find that it can:

- enhance their training and career development
- guide them around major procedural obstacles and pitfalls
- improve professional confidence
- broaden horizons and experience
- improve performance
- increase networking opportunities

Ground rules

To ensure that both mentors and those being mentored gain personal satisfaction and experience personal growth during the process, it is envisaged that a few ground rules will be agreed. The role of the mentor and the boundaries of the mentor's involvement and influence will be clearly defined by both parties at the start of the relationship.

While both parties should take equal responsibility for progression of the mentoring partnership, it is advisable to agree contact arrangements and the frequency and methods of contact. Those being mentored should remember that their mentor is giving them their time, confidence, experience and respect, and should therefore:

- prepare thoroughly before making contact or meeting
- not make too many demands on a mentor's time
- review their progress
- be clear about their development needs and resulting objectives

- have a willingness to learn from the guidance that their mentor gives them
- be open to suggestions and trying out ideas
- provide feedback to their mentor

The new IFE mentoring scheme provides a valuable resource for young professionals within the Institution and has the potential to provide a 'win-win' situation for all concerned.

More information on the mentoring scheme is available via the Institution's website, www.ife.org.uk, or by contacting Gail Savage at IFE headquarters on e-mail: gail.savage@ife.org.uk

