The First Five Years....

Making the transition from school to professional life is a great time - full of opportunity and promise. It’s a time to translate classroom skills into workplace skills, explore a career choice (industry, functional specialty, corporate culture), add skills, develop new relationships, and begin to build a reputation.

Building workplace skills

Graduates who have had co-op, internship and summer employments oftentimes have an advantage over their peers in translating classroom knowledge into workplace skills. They have had the opportunity to watch professionals in action and learn from their example; they also have the self-confidence that comes with experience.

Here are a few tips for building workplace skills:

- Ask your manager what skills you will need to be successful in your assignment. Meet with your manager for a periodic reality check to ensure you are on the right track and that you are building the right skills for success. Find out what other skills will make you stand out from the crowd and work to develop them.

- Observe some chemical engineers who have a few years more experience than you. Who is successful, who is less successful? What technical skills separate the two groups? What personal skills do you see? Observe their communication skills, their interpersonal style, and their attitude… watching others can suggest behaviors to adopt and those to avoid.

- Keep a file to chronicle your skills and experience. The file will help you assess your progress, prepare you for performance reviews with your manager, and help you write an updated resume.

Exploring a career choice

You are one of the lucky few if you know exactly how you want to direct your career. On the other hand, you are in good company if you expect to use the first few years to try out an industry, a functional specialty, and a corporate culture. As you learn the basics of your job, look around to see how other departments use chemical engineers. What are the options for your career development - both in a straight line directly ahead of you or through a transfer to a related or even different area? Determine if this industry is meeting your short term and long term needs.

Are you happy with the functional specialty you are developing? How well does it tap your preferred skills? How well does it fit in with your longer plan?

Does the company culture fit you-- your personal style, values and preferences? Not everyone is destined to be a small fish in a big pond; some prefer to be a big fish in a small pond. Still, others thrive in a predictable, stable environment while some are energized by a high risk-high reward setting. Figure out what turns you on and you will choose an environment that suits you.

Adding skills

Savvy employees develop skills that exceed a job’s requirements, making them ready for the next opportunity - either with their current employer or with a new one. What skills will make you more marketable? What will it take to acquire them? What is the timetable for action?

1 www.aiche.org
Make skill development part of your performance appraisal and write it into your goals for the coming year. Demonstrate to your manager that this skill is advantageous to you AND to your employer. Use your employer’s tuition reimbursement plan to enroll in a course; encourage your manager to underwrite a technical conference or workshop.

**Developing new relationships**

Keep up through email and phone with your friends. And expand this network beyond your school pals, family and existing friends. Join a softball team or volunteer for a community project. Introduce yourself to counterparts - engineers and non-engineers - in other departments and arrange to have lunch with them. By building good relationships throughout an employer and in the community, you’ll develop a mutually beneficial network.

**Building a reputation**

Join AIChE and participate with your local section. In a local section, you will get to know key players and leaders of major corporations, heads of research & development, independent consultants and more. In addition, you’ll find a volunteer assignment that will give you visibility to leadership and may even help you develop a new skill or talent.

**What Employers Expect from New Engineers: From the Interview Process through the First Five Years**

Employers expect a lot from chemical engineers. They expect you to have a strong understanding of the fundamentals and a good GPA to reflect that understanding. They expect you to demonstrate critical thinking abilities and attention to detail. They also expect you to have some industrial experience through an internship/co-op. Also desired is undergraduate research experience to develop analytical skills. More often than not, a student with a 3.3 GPA with internship or undergraduate research experience will be chosen over a student with a 3.8 GPA and no experience at all.

During the interview, employers expect you to be enthusiastic and interested and to ask questions regarding how the job fits into the scheme of things. They expect you to do some research on the company demonstrating an interest on a level above “just getting a job”. They expect you to give examples demonstrating critical thinking abilities and critical thought (design projects, undergraduate research, etc). Interviewers do not want to see over-selling/arrogance, lack of enthusiasm, or pre-prepared answers. Interviewers want to establish a genuine technical dialogue between two technical people.

Once hired, employers want to see you put in 110% effort to prove to them why they hired you. Upon hiring, employers want to see you demonstrate your technical capabilities. They also want you to be “coachable” and not stubborn. They want you to demonstrate that you can handle many tasks and that you have the judgment to know when and when not to ask for help. They want enthusiasm and a genuine show of interest to succeed.

After the first review, employers want to exploit your strengths and develop your weaknesses. They want you to begin to take the reigns on recognizing and developing your own strengths and weaknesses. However, they want you to be patient and not try to advance too fast. Most employers view the first few years of experience as a time for learning and therefore do not provide many opportunities for team leadership at that level. Although you should expect that to occur after the first 3-5 years. Employers want consistent, high quality work from enthusiastic, technically competent people who can adapt to an ever-changing environment.