Internship Opportunities for Millennial Students

Lucinda K. Fowinkle
Austin Peay State University

This paper describes how industry can best aid engineering technology programs through the offering of internships targeting millennial students. In general, the millennial generation is considered to be those who reached adulthood around the turn of the 21st century. This group has grown up with electronic devices and is very comfortable with technology. Although they are “tech savvy”, many traditional millennial students entering college directly after high school lack experience with problem solving and hands-on activities. These students often seem disengaged and uninterested in the classroom setting. Some have suggested that teaching methods should be modified to be more entertaining in an effort to reach this generation. While modification of teaching methods may be part of the solution, another answer to this problem could be exposure to industry operations. First hand work experience can spark an interest in the field of engineering technology that cannot be duplicated in the classroom alone. Knowledge gained in the classroom has less meaning without exposure to “real world” application. Through the use of internships, students gain work experience that compliments classroom instruction. This experience gives the student motivation to complete their degree and enter industry after graduation. Internships benefit all of the stakeholders: the student gains valuable, marketable skills that give them a head start to a career; the employer has the opportunity to screen potential future employees; the engineering technology programs’ recruitment and retention rates increase.

Teaching in an engineering technology 2+2 program has given me experience with students of a broad age range. I began to notice that some of the younger students were not as engaged in the classroom, were absent more often, and seemed to only be concerned with passing the course and not necessarily understanding the concepts. The problem did not seem to be related to aptitude, but more of a lack of interest. I began to research how I might better reach this group of students that I identified as being from the millennial generation. Looking at the demographics of the students in my program, I determined that approximately 60% of the students were born between 1982 and 2001, the range reported to define the millennial generation. While the disengaged students did fall within this age range, the majority of this group did not exhibit these characteristics. I concluded that there must be another contributing factor. The students in the 2+2 program have completed an associate’s degree: Associate of Science (A.S.) or Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.). Most of the A.A.S. graduates were employed in their field of study and were returning to complete the Bachelor of Science degree to further their careers. In general, the disengaged students were not employed in their field of study. I propose that
industry can best aid engineering technology programs through the offering of internships targeting millennial students. This paper will describe the characteristics of the millennial generation, how to engage them through internships and what they have to offer in the workplace.

To better understand the millennial generation, one must first look at Baby Boomers and Generation X. The Baby Boomers born at the end of World War II are independent, rule breakers and creative thinkers that shook up the world as adults in the 1960’s. This generation was very driven and career oriented. Their children, Gen X’ers, grew up as “latch key kids” that felt that their parents didn’t have time for them. As a result, the Gen X’ers resolved to be the opposite of their parents. Their children, Millennials, were more protected and made to feel “special”. This over indulgences has led to many describing them as entitled, disrespectful and disengaged. They have also grown up in the digital/internet era and feel very comfortable with technology.

Fullerton conducted a focus group of first-year university students to evaluate attitudes and expectations of millennials. He found that they believed that the role of being a student was to get a better paying job. They saw themselves as a customer of the University and felt they should receive quality services from their professors for the high tuition they had paid. The students focused more on the end point of getting the grade, passing the course, graduating and getting a high paying job, instead of focusing on the learning process. Although many of these students earn high grades, they don’t always understand what they are learning, but are just memorizing information for the exam. Since they are lacking “meaningful contexts”, they can become disinterested and drop out. Pletka reports that there is a low percentage of students persisting in college and only 28% are remaining by the sophomore year. With more jobs of the future requiring postsecondary education, effort must be made to reach this generation of students.

To engage the millennial student, they must change roles from being a customer to being a citizen. They must see a connection between their future career goals and the curriculum being taught. Just asking “What does the professor want so I can pass this class?” should not be the primary concern. They should have an understanding of how the skills and knowledge are applied to actual job skills. Although I believe that most professors try to relate curriculum to industry practice, first hand work experience can spark an interest in the field of engineering technology that cannot be duplicated in the classroom alone. Knowledge gained in the classroom has less meaning without exposure to “real world” application. Coon and Walker state “Assessment by outside stakeholders particularly those who work in fields that will eventually employ our graduates can be powerful in engaging students’ egos while broadening notions of citizenship.” The student becomes a part of a community where they are responsible for obtaining knowledge to achieve their career goals. Internships can expose them to the importance of solving problems, critical thinking and teamwork.

Although this research may come across as being negative towards the millennials, they actually have a lot to offer in the workforce. With more and more baby boomers reaching retirement age, it is imperative that we identify the positive traits of the millenials and how to best utilize them in
our organizations. Some of their attributes that should be cultivated are high technology skills, civic mindedness, ability to multi-task, desire to do ground breaking work, and willingness to network. Millennials have a need for context and how they fit into the big picture. They are achievement oriented and want the pathway to promotion clearly stated. For them, rules and responsibilities should be defined in great detail. Because they are so connected with technology, they are less likely to carry around a lot of facts in their heads, but will rely on access to the internet to tap into the ever changing world of information. This skill allows them to keep up with changes in technology and research topics right on the spot. In a meeting, they may use handheld devices to answer questions instead of saying, “I will get back with you on that.” They can also bring a new perspective to everyday tasks and want to make a difference in the workplace. While some may want to write them off as inexperienced, listening to their ideas and collaborating with them can be beneficial to the bottom line.

Preparing the millennial generation for engineering technology careers is important for the further success of our nation. Giving this generation the so desired “context” through internships, gives them motivation to complete their degree and enter industry after graduation. Internships benefit all of the stakeholders: the student gains valuable, marketable skills that give them a head start to a career; the employer has the opportunity to screen potential future employees; the engineering technology programs’ recruitment and retention rates increase.


**LUCINDA FOWINKLE is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator in the Mechanical Engineering Technology department at Austin Peay State University. Professor Fowinkle manages a remote 2+2 program which allows community college graduates to articulate their Associate degree into a Bachelor of Science degree without leaving the community college campus.**