

Professional Development/Internship Opportunities for Construction Faculty: A Win/Win Outcome

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As there is an ever-increasing need for university/industry collaboration, one way to create a win/win outcome for everyone involved is the continual support for faculty professional development/internship opportunities by universities and the construction industry. This paper addresses the basic reasons for faculty professional development/internships, considerations when seeking a professional development/internship opportunity, personal professional development/internship experience of the author, and win/win outcomes of professional development for construction faculty members and sponsoring construction companies.

Key Words: Faculty professional development, faculty internship, university/construction industry collaboration.

Introduction

As can be observed in recent advertisements for construction faculty positions by higher education institutions, three key requirements listed most often are educational background, teaching experience at the university-level, and relevant construction field experience. These position requirements are the foundation for the professional degrees granted by the various construction programs at the university-level (Griffin, 1999). Although the value of professional development for a junior faculty member is more readily apparent, i.e., enhancement for promotion and tenure, senior faculty can benefit by staying current in one's area(s) of expertise. The benefit for all faculties is to bring new insight and practical applications into their coursework.

The accrediting bodies for construction programs at the university-level, the American Council for Construction Education (ACCE) and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), reinforce the collaboration between universities and the construction industry and stress the importance of professional experience of construction faculty in their standards and criteria for accreditation documentation (American Council for Construction Education [ACCE], 1998). In fact, ABET now includes outcomes-based assessment as part of its accrediting process (Rosenbaum, 1995). What better way to promote further university/construction industry relations and to ensure "best practices" in coursework than for faculty to have periodic professional development/internship experiences?

This paper presents various elements to consider when a faculty member is seeking an internship with a construction company, the experience of the author in an internship program, and the win/win outcomes for faculty and construction companies.

Considerations When Seeking Internship Opportunities

There are certain factors that should be considered when seeking an internship/professional development opportunity. As a part of these considerations, there are certain constraints/restraints for the construction company. These considerations are not mutually exclusive, either for the faculty member and/or the construction company. These considerations include: identification of construction companies, type of construction, length of time for the professional development/internship, location, economic environment, deliverables, skills, and research potential.

Identifying List of Contact Companies

Obviously, the first thing the faculty member needs to do is identify a list of contact companies that would be interested in providing an internship opportunity. A good place to start determining potential interest is the departmental industry advisory council member companies. The fact that these companies are supporters of the department in other areas such as curriculum development, marketing strategies, scholarships, etc., there is a strong potential for them to also support faculty professional development/internship opportunities. For many construction departments, the concept of faculty professional development to encourage the connection between theory and practical applications of theory based upon relevant, “real world” information be taught in the classroom (Prados, 1997) is a recommendation received from their industry advisory councils.

Another good source is personal contacts with construction professionals and other faculty members within or from outside the department. The department head of the construction program is an invaluable mentor when seeking a professional development opportunity. He/she may also know and/or recommend companies and contact individuals.

Type of Construction and Size of Company

Some faculty have particular expertise and knowledge in certain areas of construction, i.e., commercial, residential, mechanical/electrical, labor relations, etc. Therefore, after the construction company list has been finalized, an evaluation of projects that could utilize the faculty member’s area(s) of expertise is recommended. This is a matching of knowledge, skills, and abilities with companies’ projects that would be seen as value-added by the companies. However, a faculty member might want to use the professional development/internship opportunity as a way to learn about a new area or practice of construction. If the faculty member is not familiar with projects by company, this allows for direct contact with the company to discuss any professional development/internship opportunities.

Another consideration is the size of the construction company. Logically, the larger volume companies (based upon annual would have more ongoing projects that could utilize the expertise of a faculty member.

Length of Time

Since the majority of faculty is on nine-month appointments, the summer timeframe (twelve to fourteen weeks) allows for a full-time commitment to work for the construction company. As most projects have a longer completion schedule than three months, it should be noted that this could be a limiter. Conversely, this allows the company and the faculty member to be creative on how to determine the scope of the professional development opportunity.

It is recommended the faculty member check on any departmental, college/school, and/or university regulations relating to outside employment. In most cases, professional development for faculty is encouraged (National Alliance of Business, 1998).

Location

Determining where the professional development/internship will be conducted also is a major consideration. For some faculty members who teach at a college or university where there are limited construction companies and/or projects, relocating for twelve to fourteen weeks is not possible. If this is the case, there might be some situations where work can be conducted off-site with periodic meetings or visits over the length of the project or at another location. With the advancement in telecommunications capabilities, certain location solutions can be found.

Economic Environment

Currently, the construction economic environment is healthy with no downturns forecasted (Grogan, 1999). This healthy economic environment allows for construction companies to expand resources and payroll budgets. The converse is true, as well. Therefore, it is more probable that a faculty member can secure an internship during good economic cycles.

Deliverables

The best scenario for a win/win situation, for both the faculty member and the construction company, is when predetermined hard deliverables (outcomes) of the professional development/internship are clearly identified prior to the starting date. This allows both parties to actualize benefit from the process.

Skills

The individual faculty member should have current curriculum vitae that outline his/her knowledge, skills, and abilities. The curriculum vitae is a good place to start the discussion with the sponsoring construction company regarding a professional development opportunities. Most construction companies want the professional development opportunity to be value-added to themselves and to the faculty members.

Research Potential

The challenge for any professional is to advance a body of knowledge through practice and research. Advancing the body of knowledge in construction through collaborative efforts between the construction practitioner and faculty member on a research project can also be a potential outcome of the professional development/internship. The faculty member should develop and propose research ideas and topics to the construction company during the finalization stage of the professional development opportunity. This is especially important for junior faculty members seeking promotion and tenure.

Professional Development/Internship Experience

Company Background

C.F. Jordan LP sponsored the author for a professional development/internship opportunity. C.F. Jordan is a multi-million dollar, El Paso-based, general contractor with regional offices in Dallas, Austin, Mission, and College Station, Texas (city in which the author resides) and field offices throughout the Southwest.

The firm has been actively engaged in providing professional construction services for commercial and industrial clients, as well as government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels since its inception in 1969. These projects consist of office buildings, hotels, parking garages, sewage treatment plants, airport hangers, airport concrete paving, warehouses, industrial plants, sports complexes, military defense projects and multi-family residential. In 1999, C.F. Jordan was 124 of the Engineering News Record's Top 400 Contractors (Engineering News Record, 1999).

C.F. Jordan is a member company of the construction department's construction industry advisory council (CIAC) with the Executive Vice President of the regional office serving on the CIAC's Marketing Committee. A letter of request from the author and a letter of support from the department head were sent to both the national and regional offices. Approval for the professional development/internship opportunity was made at C.F. Jordan's national office with finalization of scope of work was made at the regional office.

Faculty Member/Author Background

The author is a junior, tenure-track faculty member at a large Southwest university in a construction science department teaching and doing research in the areas of construction labor relations, leadership in construction, facilities and project management. The author received a Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. from a large midwestern university and has numerous years of industrial and teaching experience.

Professional Development/Internship Experience

The author conducted the professional development/internship at the College Station regional office. Types of projects the author was involved in were design/build (medical complex/hospital), fast track (telecommunications center/office complex), public/private partnership (office building and historic hotel restoration), and CM-at-risk (college expansion).

The matching of the author's expertise and area of interest with company needs was done in two ways: team development and team member interaction during preconstruction and construction phases of these projects (author was part of preconstruction and construction teams) and the assessment of leadership skills utilized by the architects, construction and project managers, and field superintendents (author was interacting with all parties in the office and on job sites).

A research project, in conjunction with the internship, was also discussed and finalized between the Regional Executive Vice President, Regional Vice President of Preconstruction, the Regional Vice President of Operations, President/CEO of the architecture firm involved in the design/build medical complex/hospital project and the author. The outcome of the research was to be part of the hard deliverables.

Hard Deliverables

Personality Profiling

There is a growing trend in the world of work to conduct personality profiling of employees for placement on teams for organizational effectiveness (Thomson, 1998). This is also true in the construction industry. The author administered a Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI)-based personality inventory (Thomson, 1998) to all full-time employees of the regional office and architecture firm to determine if there were any prevailing trends between and among organizational levels and job titles based upon personality type.

Internship Guidelines for Construction Majors

C.F. Jordan provides numerous internship opportunities to undergraduate students in many different university construction programs. Since the C.F. Jordan executives want the internship experience to be meaningful to the student, as well as value-added to the company, the author developed guidelines for internship assignments. These guidelines address the issues of meeting the internship requirements of the construction program(s), field and office experiences, and mentoring by C.F. Jordan construction professionals.

Discussion

Consistent with Johnson's (1996) research findings on the importance of industry work experience for faculty, the major factors that can contribute to a win/win outcome for the faculty member and the construction company relative to a professional development/internship opportunity are as follows:

- Opportunities for faculty to share/learn in the real world of construction
- Opportunities to conduct field research projects
- Opportunities to stay current in area of expertise (field), i.e., current practices
- Opportunities to develop new research areas/topics based
- Promotes industry/university relationships
- Integration of current, best practices in the field into coursework
- Supplemental income for nine-month appointment faculty
- Opportunity for faculty to learn a new area(s) of construction

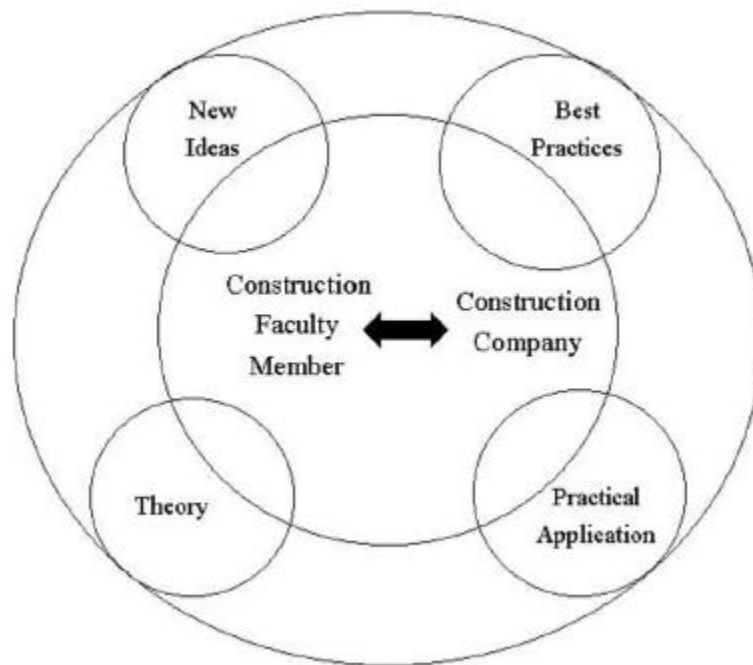


Figure 1. Win/Win Outcomes of professional Development for a Construction Faculty Member and Sponsoring Construction Company.

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