

Return on Investment: Starting a YPG at Work

by Justin Siegrist

I'm just going to come right out and say it – I'm a millennial. There, it's out there. I'm one of those that some feel has received preferential treatment in the workplace. So why does everyone care so much about making sure millennials are happy at work? I'm not sure, but I do know that it's extremely important to invest in your future. Realizing this, we started a company-wide Young Professionals Group at Wade Trim. I'll get into why the group was created, but before I do, I want to first share the story about my journey into civil engineering, as it relates to why investing in the development of younger staff is so important.

In the summer of 2010 – the summer between my Junior and Senior year of college – I completed an internship at a large international architectural/engineering firm's Bellevue, Washington office, which happened to be the second largest office in the company at the time. Working in an office that housed about 250 employees coupled with the fact that I was 2,300 miles from home in a large city where I knew exactly zero people, I initially felt a little bit like a kid lost at the zoo. However, one of the things that gave me solid footing was my involvement with the office's Young Professionals Group (YPG). My participation in the YPG allowed me to feel comfortable at work and provided me with opportunities to grow both professionally and personally. One of the most beneficial skills I learned was networking. When I arrived in Bellevue, the thought of entering a room full of strangers – and talking to them – terrified me. Through my participation in the YPG, the act of networking and the art of conversation slowly became less and less terrifying, until it eventually became commonplace. Thanks to that newly crafted skill, I was able to make a lot of connections throughout the office. I can recall at a Happy Hour during the last week of my internship one of my coworkers commented that after 3 months I knew more people in the office than he did after working there for several years. I think he was at least

half joking. All kidding aside, it was the networking that allowed me to work on multiple projects across all civil engineering disciplines, which ultimately set the course for my eventual career in Water Resources engineering. On top of that, I became a different person. No longer was I reliant on others to get me work or look out for me. I was empowered. I took charge of my career.

This is a tremendously important point to note – on top of all the skills and personal and professional development that occurred because of my involvement with a YPG, I became empowered. This was not a mindset I held prior to joining the YPG, but it is one that has stuck with me ever since. I have no doubt that the success I've experienced to this point in my career is directly a result of my involvement with a YPG. My participation in that YPG so early in my development as an engineer set a strong foundation from which I was able to grow in a direction that I believe has enabled me to reach my full potential.

After completing my internship, I came back to Ohio to complete my bachelor's in civil engineering from the University of Dayton, and accepted a job offer from Wade Trim in their Cincinnati office in the summer of 2011. At the time, Cincinnati was Wade Trim's newest market, and because of that, my employment doubled the size of the office – I was one of two people. Keep in mind that my most recent experience with the world private sector consulting was my internship in an office that had around 250 people in it. It was certainly an adjustment for me. And while I wasn't quite the kid lost at the zoo anymore, I still felt a little lost. But this was a new kind of lost – instead of overwhelmed, I felt isolated.

In time I would eventually begin networking with many people in other offices because of their involvement with a large project with a client of ours in Cincinnati. People would visit the Cincinnati office, or I would work with them remotely. I also started getting involved with projects in other offices, often requiring some travel. Over the course of a few years, I would eventually work with a lot of people throughout the company, and on top of that, our Cincinnati office continued to grow. And before I knew it, my fit with Wade Trim suddenly felt very different from when I first began working there. I began to understand and sense the size of the company, and instead of feeling isolated, I felt connected to my coworkers that were spread out across the country. Suddenly, distance didn't really mean anything. Once again, I became empowered. I knew people; I was connected. Picking up the phone and asking someone for help was no longer a daunting task – it was comfortable for me. Because of this, my ability to



Pittsburgh Big Brothers/Sisters Bowling fundraiser YPG Event.



President/CEO Andy McCune talks to the YPG in March 2018 during the group's Phase II Kickoff event in the Taylor, MI office.

produce high quality work increased, and because I knew I had a network of expertise that I could always turn to when I needed help, taking on more responsibility wasn't a scary proposition anymore.

So now there are couple more points to note before going any further. First, just like when I joined the YPG, getting connected to my coworkers once again empowered me to take charge of my career, which increased my contributions to Wade Trim's product, and thus increased my benefit to my employer. Further, one other aspect not yet mentioned, but equally important to note, was my view of Wade Trim as my employer. When I began working at Wade Trim, there wasn't anything tying me to working there – not uncommon for someone's first employment in the working world. I wasn't sure at the outset if Wade Trim was a place I wanted to stay. That changed after I became more connected to my coworkers across the company. Suddenly I felt grounded, and Wade Trim became my home. Because of that, the thought of just leaving my "home" to work somewhere else didn't seem right. This shift in my mindset and development in my skillset occurred because I was engaged in my work.

To some of you reading this who are early in your career, you can probably relate to some of my experiences – feeling a bit lost, unsure of where you fit in with your company, and wishing you had more people that you could reach out to. And to some of you reading this who are more experienced – some of the younger staff that you're responsible for can probably relate to some of my experiences. It's important not to forget this: entering the workforce and finding your way is hard.

But is there a way to help younger staff transition from the unknown into their chosen career path, and provide them with opportunities to fully engage in their work, just like I was fortunate enough to experience? When

thinking back on all my experiences – the YPG during my internship and how that helped me, the transformation of how I fit with Wade Trim after getting connected with my coworkers, and my increased ability to contribute to projects – putting all of that together, the answer to that question became obvious: start a YPG!

The Wade Trim YPG officially kicked off in August 2017, with the first of its many events taking place the following month. At the time of writing this article, the YPG has grown from its initial membership of 90 members to more than 140 members (roughly one quarter of the company) company-wide. One of the main themes of the first year of the YPG was to provide networking opportunities to younger staff to "introduce" everyone to each other and begin establishing lines of communication between all members of the group. To date, the YPG has collectively gotten together over 60 lunches and 15 happy hours between 10 different offices.

After the first full year of the Wade Trim YPG, we administered a survey to gauge members' overall satisfaction with the group. When asked how satisfied they were with the YPG, 94 percent of respondents indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied. Eighty eight percent of respondents said the YPG made them feel more engaged with their work, and 93 percent felt the YPG helped them network with their coworkers. A few responses to an open-ended feedback question really stood out, as they embodied exactly the aim of the group:

- ◆ "Getting to know my coworkers changes everything if I need a hand with something or have a question. It really helps out in the work place knowing your coworkers a little better."
- ◆ "So far the lunches [have provided] an opportunity to get to better know co-workers and helped with communication on projects."
- ◆ "Getting to know people who do different jobs than I do has led to us including other disciplines more in projects and broadening our group's work."
- ◆ "I was really welcomed into YPG when I first started working for Wade Trim and that definitely made my first few weeks of working and living in a new city much easier. I appreciate the variety of activities YPG participates in and the welcoming nature of the group."

So What does all of this mean? In general, it means a stronger future for Wade Trim. Equally as important,



Cincinnati hosts a remote YPG luncheon.

I believe it also means that the opportunity for a more fulfilling career for each YP member is available to those who want it.

For anyone reading this who has the opportunity to join a YPG, my advice is to get involved. You'll be surprised what you get out of it. For anyone reading this who manages younger staff, I encourage you to think back to when you first started your career and some of the challenges you faced. Maybe those challenges seem trivial to you now, but at the time, I bet they were substantial. It's important to never lose sight of that experience, and to encourage younger staff to take advantage of every opportunity to grow what they can. Those who want to join a YPG, but one isn't offered where they work, most cities have some sort of YPG that you can join, and there are always some great YPGs available through professional organizations such as ASCE, and of course OWEA, for example.

And for those of you who read this article and thought to yourself, "I bet I could start a YPG where I work" – you're right. You can start a YPG in your workplace. Ask questions and get involved in company strategic planning. Craft a plan for a Young Professionals Group, and be sure to have backup, including what other companies have started a YPG and what similar groups offer. You can even use this article as a reference! Lastly, ask those around you for help and ideas. Whatever you do, don't forget that like me, you can grow by leaps and bounds with a "home" network to lean on in the workplace, and that it's important to invest in that network as soon as possible.

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