

Mentors are Wasted on the Young!



I don't really believe that, but it's a nice way to introduce the idea of mentors for more experienced practitioners in the geospatial technologies. That's right, I'm talking to you, a *GIS Professional* reader with a few years, or even a few decades, of work with GIS, GPS, imagery, and the like.

Note that "mentor" is both a noun, "an experienced and trusted adviser" and a verb "to advise or train (someone, especially a younger colleague)." I like to think that once individuals are working GIS professionals, they with input from a supervisor, can identify and access any training to fill skill gaps. Therefore, I prefer to think about mentors as experienced advisors. This definition expands the role of mentors to suggest that anyone from six to sixty (and beyond) might benefit from this kind of relationship.

When to get a Mentor

How do you know when a mentor might be valuable in your work? I think anytime you feel uneasy about what you are doing or how you are doing it. I can hear some readers saying, "That's all the time!" But seriously, I suspect some individuals feel that way just as they begin a job. I can report that my first six months at a new job were so busy with just learning what I was supposed to do, that I didn't recognise any "unease" until some months later.

Some mentors can be helpful for short term challenges of a few months, such as managing your first project or hiring your first employees. It may even make sense to have different mentors for different issues that come up. Other times, a mentor match can span years.

Why get a Mentor?

Mentors may or may not provide specific answers or action items to address a situation. What they do provide however is a different perspective. Have they seen anything like it before? How did they handle it? How did another colleague address it? Those observations and anecdotes can be very valuable. I always feel more comfortable returning to my situation knowing I'm not alone in tackling the problem and that others have seen similar things through with some level of success.

Who to Pick as a Mentor

You might think that someone who knows a lot about your position, maybe someone on your own team, would be a good mentor. In some cases that's probably a good choice. In others, it may be more valuable to choose a mentor on another team or from another office, or even another company, to provide perspective from further afield.

How to Get a Mentor

That's perhaps the toughest question. I'd start with your immediate supervisor, making clear if you think someone who works with you, or someone who does not, might be a better choice. Give the search some time; it may be that the request needs to filter through a few networks until there's a match.

Looking Back

I've met with my mentor for several months now. While she's made specific suggestions and provided pointers to courses and processes that were valuable, those have not been the big takeaway. Some of the most valuable input I received, that makes me feel more comfortable, is simply confirmation that working with other people is inherently a challenge. I'd been working on my own for about 17 years, so I think I needed to be reminded of that fact.

I'm convinced no one is too experienced to benefit from such a relationship. There's always value in exploring work challenges and successes with someone who's been in similar situations. Think about it: Is it time you, even if you have some gray hair, look for a mentor?

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