

# Mentoring?

## *What's in it for me?*

By Joseph B. Sabol  
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During much of the past 30 years, the political and economic climate was dominated by the “I’m in it for myself” mentality and the futile chase for quarterly sales, profits and fame. The events of the past year have rekindled “We’re all in this together.”

We all need to return to our roots and help others, especially those of the younger generation. Etched in my mind forever are memories of a few special professors, those who took me under their wing and encouraged me to investigate and apply myself. Mentoring, per se, was relatively unknown when I was a student in the 1970s, but it was practiced and opportunities abound more than ever today.

Fewer and fewer persons have the lifetime comfort of a regular paycheck and good fringe benefits. Opportunities for entrepreneurs exist, but many career service offices remain focused on solely on employment and cannot provide information on starting one’s own business. It’s a shame if someone has an idea for a product or a service, but not the skill set to get it off the ground. I wish I knew then what I know now.

Whether you own a business or work for someone else, you can make a difference by becoming a mentor, volunteering at your local school, or otherwise giving someone else sound advice on getting business skills or starting a company.

Recently, I attended a banquet in Milwaukee where the keynote speaker told about his experience, working on a science fair project forty years ago: He found a company that sold some of the materials needed and he ended up phoning a staff scientist for an hour or so about the project (luckily it was a local call.) The conclusion was that the approach was misguided, but that the systematic procedure of asking and answering questions was valuable.

Years later, the speaker happened to meet [then-retired] president of the company and told him of his initial contact, adding that he didn’t think it was in the company’s best interest to spend time discussing science projects with a high school student. The president retorted “Nonsense. No other activity was more important!” No doubt that hour invested years ago paid dividends many times over.

What can you do to leave the woodpile a bit higher than when you arrived? Make a commitment and get involved!

If you have a technical background, spring is the time when science fair projects are being completed — contact your local school and offer to help, not by finishing

the projects, but by asking the students to explain their work to you and to make sure they understand the questions they are asking. Call the principal and ask what is needed.

“If business is your forte, offer to discuss business plans, structures, marketing methodology and the like. Show the students your business plan and explain what needs to be shown in order to create a viable company that can grow. Offer to judge a business plan competition.

“Join a national mentoring organization, like MentorNet.net - I’ve been with MentorNet for several years, joining when I could not find a similar local vehicle. It takes me less than an hour each month to stay in touch by e-mail with my protegee. MentorNet has a need for experienced individuals and they emphasize expanding diversity in the pool of scientists and engineers.

“See if your professional organizations have elements that encourage the mentoring of entrepreneurs. I’m a member of the American Chemical Society and its divisions of Small Chemical Business and Business Development and Management. Both of those divisions have programing directed toward helping others start and grow a business. We make an active effort to reach out to younger members, through the Younger Chemists Committee. At a reception during a recent national meeting, one undergraduate student took more than three minutes to introduce his work to me. I advised him about the concept of a concise 15-second elevator speech, to pique the listener’s interest and evoke discussion. A few weeks after the meeting, I received an e-mail from the student, saying that my suggested approach was taken and it resulted in fewer blank stares from his fellow students and it caused him to see the big picture of which his project was a part.

“Other mentoring opportunities exist — go out and find them!

Whatever you decide to do, it will have an impact on somebody’s life. Starting tomorrow and for fifty years or more, somebody will remember that you took the time to share your unwritten lessons. Indeed, the woodpile will be higher.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Joseph E. Sabol is a consultant to the chemical, materials, and semiconductor industries, with offices in Marquette and Racine, Wis.

Mentoring opportunities exist in Northwest Lower Michigan. Contact Betsy Kaylor at Northwest Michigan Council of Governments: (231) 929-5048 or email her at: [betsykaylor@nwm.cog.mi.us](mailto:betsykaylor@nwm.cog.mi.us)