

From Engineering Student to Paraprofessional: Shifting Paradigms in Career Development

Chioma Ekpo, M.A

The Professional Experience Year (PEY) Internship Program
Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering
University of Toronto, Toronto, ON

Increasingly, educators and industry representatives are recognizing the importance of preparing students for the workplace, not just academically, but experientially prior to graduation. This is evident in the growth of internship and coop programs across the country, wherein students have an opportunity to apply their academic knowledge outside of the classroom. The University of Toronto's Professional Experience Year (PEY) Internship Program meets this need by providing students with 12-16 month paid internships through paraprofessional opportunities, crucial to the development of a professional engineer. In its unique delivery of an intensive student focused career development program, PEY is preparing students for these opportunities and the overall dynamics of the workplace.

The PEY Program's integrative approach presents students with a new way of viewing the world of work and their role in it. They attain an understanding of the difference between an employee (operating within a fixed mandate as directed) and professional (operating in relation to a larger organizational mandate with a focus and clear vision), thereby enhancing their ability to develop key career management competencies. By participating in a series of group workshops, seminars, and one-on-one consultations, students work towards developing a clear vision of where they are, where they are heading, and how to navigate their career path. More importantly, by aligning their passion and career objectives, and elevating their tolerance for risk, students are provided with opportunities to realizing their potential and taking on challenges that allow them to exceed expectations – both of themselves and of their employers.

With resources and support, this process fosters a sense of professionalism, commitment, and agency in managing their ongoing career path.

I. Introduction

Increasingly, educators and industry representatives are recognizing the importance of preparing students for the workplace, experientially as well as academically, prior to graduation. This is evident in the growth of internship and coop programs across the country where students have an opportunity to apply their academic knowledge outside of the classroom. The University of Toronto's Professional Experience Year (PEY) Internship Program meets this need by providing students with 12-16 month paid internships through paraprofessional opportunities crucial to the development of a professional engineer. In its unique delivery of an intensive student focused

career development program, PEY is preparing students not only for career opportunities, but the overall dynamics of the workplace.

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II. Philosophy: agents not widgets

With its inception in 1979, the PEY internship program historically operated primarily as a placement agency. As an administrative program, PEY facilitated the recruitment needs of industry partners/employers seeking undergraduate students for 12-16 month paraprofessional internships. Employers submitted job postings and the program facilitated the recruitment process – posting opportunities for students to view, accepting applications, organizing on-campus employer information sessions and interviews, and eventually presenting job offers to students. These activities were broken into two recruitment cycles (Fall and Winter). From the student's perspective, the motivating end result was achieving an internship placement.

In 2004, under new leadership and direction, the program underwent a significant philosophical shift from a placement agency approach to an intensive student focused career development program. This shift required not only a significant change in administrative practices, but also a radical change in the underlying philosophy guiding the program. Central to this shift was the idea that students are not mere numbers plugged into a placement calculus, but active agents with social, cultural, and emotional dimensions that require addressing. Focusing on career development, rather than employment placement, we shifted from merely fulfilling the employment goals of a given company and the placement desires of students to emphasizing the development of students as agents. Thus, the question that we addressed from students was radically reframed from “Will you find me a job?” to “Where am I now? Where am I heading? How do I get there?” As a development program, our focus shifted from churning out placements, to facilitating a process of engagement between the student and employer.

Through a process of redefinition and interpretation, the program thus offers students not only the opportunity to gain an internship placement but also to gain the skills to manage the internship and future employment opportunities. Students are provided with the tools for ongoing self-assessment of their evolving career paths with the internship as the first stage along that path. This is achieved via an intensive program of small to large size workshop development sessions and individual counseling and consultation sessions, framed by three key elements of our approach:

1. Viewing the Student as an engaged agent
2. Reframing the Employment Relationship (the definition of an employee is redefined from passive to active, employee to professional)
3. Reframing the idea or parameters of “Success”

III. Shaping students’ goals and perspectives

Every year, at the beginning of the academic term in September, students walk into the PEY program office and invariably declare, “I want a job,” or ask, “Will you find me a job?” The prevalent perception among students, faculty, and the industries we serve, is that the program’s goal is to find students jobs. In fact, since 2004, our primary goal has been to provide students with the tools they need to self-assess and identify their interests, skills, and passion as a means of connecting them with opportunities that will advance their career objective. The purpose of the program is thus shaped within a wider framework concerned with student development, rather than the narrow objective of simply finding a job. The idea is that if a student is not engaged and challenged in the workplace, if a student does not achieve the right “fit,” productivity is affected and the student is not producing a return on investment for the employer. To assist students achieve their optimum fit, we focus on challenging students’ perceptions of the workplace, redefining their preconceived notions of “success,” and elevating their tolerance for risk. Therefore, even students who are not interested in securing a placement decide there is value from participating in the development program.

a. Challenging students’ perceptions of the workplace

To challenge students’ perceptions of the workplace, a simple exercise is conducted each session during the PEY introductory sessions. A table with two wide columns is drawn on the blackboard and two questions are thrown out to the group – 1) why would you want to work for a particular employer and 2) why would an employer hire you. To the first question, the responses are consistent – to make money, to gain experience and knowledge, to develop skills, and to develop contacts. To the second question, the foremost response is cheap labour, followed by young people with fresh ideas. The first set of responses is listed on the left column with the heading “Student” and the second list falls under “Employer.” On examining both columns, there is no element of a mutual relationship where both student and employer benefit in the employment situation.

The exercise acts as a springboard for reframing a student’s understanding of the employment relationship, so that at the end of the session students take away a new concept – the only reason an employer will hire you is to generate revenue (make money) or reduce cost (save money), which produces a return on investment for the employer. By participating in an interactive series of workshop sessions and one-on-one consultation, students are presented with a model that offers a set of criteria that challenges them to assess and identify a fit between the employer and themselves, so that their career objectives are aligned with the employment opportunities.

b. Redefining Success

In a world where students determine their success according to academic criteria (pass or fail), we present them with a radically different approach to measuring success, which is determining a

fit between their career objective, their passion, and the employer's opportunities for challenge and growth. With direction and focus, students can thus manage their anxiety and be prepared to identify roles that will significantly advance their career path. At the end of the internship experience, they are able to confirm what they enjoy doing, what they do not like, what they are good at and passionate about, and what they would like to further explore when they graduate. At this stage, we work with students to understand that success is measured by fit.

Recognizing that the 12-16 month internship is the first extensive industry opportunity available to students, the task becomes teaching students how to express their fit during the recruitment and selection process, using their individual experiential base. Firstly, through individual and interactive group sessions, we guide students to identify their technical and soft transferable skills from their community work, volunteer work, design projects, course work, and student club activities. Using self-assessment exercises, they are able to find the right vocabulary to convey that experience in relation to the opportunities they are considering. The objective is to in turn generate a result-oriented resume, by understanding each employer's needs. Secondly, we assist them in developing a sense of context at this stage, for example the notion of a wanting a dream job is dismissed and replaced by a new attitude that understands that a career path is mapped out in stages with varying aspirations and challenges along the way, be it at 25 years old, 35 years old, and 45 years old. As a result, a new attitude emerges in which a career path is viewed as a set of building blocks involving a tolerance for change and adaptability. Therefore, finally, students develop a vision for themselves in the workplace, and how to navigate and negotiate their space within it.

Equally important to the success/fit equation is an understanding of the employer's hiring criteria and assessment of a student's fit for a particular role. Thus, we present a model that structures the fit relationship between both student and employer, and acts as a checklist for both parties:

1. Can do – does the student have the basic skill/experience requirement?
2. Will do – how does the student convey motivation and interest, through the body language and vocabulary?
3. Fit – will the student adapt into the workplace culture and what is the probability of the student enhancing the team?

Furthermore, even students who do not secure an internship placement gain from participating in the development program. Thus, if students do not identify an opportunity that will significantly improve their career objective, they are encouraged to continue with their academic work and remain in school.

c. Managing the Internship Experience

Before students go out on their internship, they are required to attend a Transition to the Workplace seminar. They are given an overview of what to expect at the workplace and how to get the most out of the experience. While students generally have the ability to perform technical tasks on the job, they are not yet experienced in, and undermine the importance of managing the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace. Issues such as office politics, working under different management styles, knowing how and when to take initiative, clarifying expectations of co-workers, managers, and themselves, are all areas where self-awareness is

created. Thus, they are encouraged to interact professionally and remain focused on the job at hand without getting mired in the various interpersonal conflicts that can occur during their brief period in that role.

d. Capturing the value of the Internship Experience

Beyond the experiential learning aspect of applying their technical skills and working on large-scale projects to meet employer's needs, over the 12-16 month paid internship period, the student focused development program allows students to attain an understanding of the difference between an employee (operating within a fixed mandate as directed) and professional (operating in relation to a larger organizational mandate with a focus and clear vision). The combination of their final report and final supervisor's evaluation, allows students to recognize their value and contribution in their role, and through interactive exercises in a debrief session, they further reflect on how marketable they are and find the vocabulary to capture their challenges and accomplishments as they prepare for full-time employment after graduation. Retuning to school with an increased level of confidence, students' grades improve and they are able to see the application of their academic work in industry and develop interest in new courses. More significantly, they have invested in a 12-16 month period to discover what they enjoy working on and what they do not, and whether to continue working in industry or return to graduate school.

e. Elevating tolerance for risk

By participating in the program and its development process, students have already taken a chance, a risk, on something new and unexpected. They come in seeking direction on how to manage their anxiety about their marketability and overall engagement in the workplace. They leave confident enough to push beyond their expectations of themselves. By shifting their views, and seeking opportunities based on their individual needs and experience, they elevate their tolerance for risk. They are able to manage their fear of rejection and challenge themselves to strive for a career path with a focused objective. They know to seize opportunities that will allow them to transfer their knowledge, skills, experience, interest, and passion to the next opportunity. This marks the essence of leadership – an ongoing process of developing one's passion and place in the world.

IV. Administering the Development Program

To achieve the program's shift to student career development services, a concurrent shift occurred in the administration of the program, requiring a changed set of guidelines and expectations for how students participated in the program. For example, prior to 2004, attendance at workshop sessions was mandatory, and no more than twenty job applications could be submitted per round. With the new focus on student development, students were treated as agents capable of making decisions in a supportive environment and taking responsibility for those decisions. This meant that mandatory workshop attendance was no longer required as students would recognize the value in the development process and attend workshops of their own volition. They thus obtained a sense of ownership and agency while remaining committed to gaining insight and being prepared for the recruitment and selection process. Similarly, there was no limit to the number of job applications students could submit; with the provisory that if students submitted more than ten applications they were encouraged to meet with us to ensure

their job selection criteria was aligned with their experience, interests, skills, and development. The probability of success was thus measured not by the number of applications submitted, but by the fit of the student's application and the employer's opportunity.

At the beginning of the internship, each student is advised to contact us if they have any performance concerns or are dealing with interpersonal conflict. Depending on the situation, we visit students on site, but in a private location, or students are coached on how to manage the situation independently. Additionally, the completion of a mid-term and final evaluation form is required to monitor the workplace performance. Recognizing workplace dynamics, mid-term evaluation forms are designed to flag any issues that need to be addressed. The idea here is not to interfere with how the employer runs its operation but to demonstrate to the students that interpersonal conflict and difficulty is normal and expected in the workplace, and if managed effectively, can be a learning opportunity for growth. If there is a safety concern it is treated with utmost priority.

But more importantly, they are reminded that they were hired because the employer recognized their capability and potential in the assigned role.

V. Conclusion

The PEY internship program as it exists fosters a particular way of viewing the world in its approach to transitioning students to the workplace. It achieves this by providing opportunities for students to take on responsibility and gain a sense of agency, control, and ownership. This is where the paradigms shift, in their ability to manage their world, the world of work, and their role in it. At the end, students develop confidence to further realize their potential and therein exceed their expectation of themselves. The program is an optional program that allows students to make a commitment to participate in the intensive process of shifting their perspectives and understanding that development is not a race to the finish line, but an ongoing journey.

CHIOMA EKPO, M.A

In her seventh year with the Professional Experience Year (PEY) Internship Program, at the Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering, University of Toronto, Chioma has played an integral role in the conceptualization, development, and delivery of a student focused development program. As the Internship Program Coordinator, she continues to develop new and maintain existing employer relationships, not only within Canada on a local and national level, but also in the USA and various international countries. Chioma works closely with her team to foster a career development program that provides students with a unique opportunity for not only an experiential learning experience within the workplace, but also an exciting and challenging roller-coaster ride as they pursue their journey.