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Stand By Me

Mentoring the next generation will keep the industry fresh and moving forward.

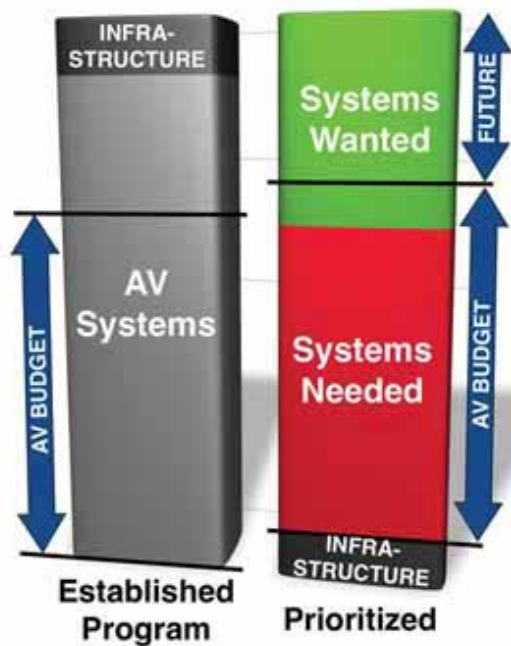
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By Thom Mullins

My interest has been piqued by discussions in the past few months regarding credentials and certification within our industry. I am sure this discourse will produce two things: a better understanding of our industry's needs, and a way to best meet the needs of our clients that also will benefit us.

While the discussion has been fruitful, I've been wondering from where the next generation of practitioners will come. I define "practitioners" loosely and purposefully to include contractors and system integrators, consultants, engineers, sales staff, the whole gamut of people who are involved in the sales, design, and installation of audio/video systems.

Our industry is projected to grow significantly, and we usually define that growth in terms of systems installed or the gross dollar volume of sales in a year. Those numbers include some hidden items that are not explicitly stated: the people who make up our industry. The quality of those people will directly affect the quality of work we do for our clients. The year-over-year growth in terms of sales or numbers of systems installed carries with it the implicit assumption that there also will be an increase in the number of people needed to do the work.



Or at least it should. I'm concerned that it has not, and that leaves me a bit worried. Every week, I hear from contractors and system integrators of their difficulties finding and keeping qualified installation staff, or I find out that someone has left Company A and joined Company Z. I see the impact that this lack of qualified staff has on the ability of a firm to complete projects on time. The consulting community is not immune to these issues, either.

Whether it is drafting, design, or senior consulting staff, there is a dearth of qualified and interested people. A friend of mine in the contracting world traces it back to the explosion of the Internet and the business opportunities created in the 1990s as a result. During that period, a fair number of people in the AV industry left to join startup firms with dreams of riches dancing in front of their retinas. Another significant group of fresh graduates from two- and four-year technical or engineering programs went directly into the IT field, leaving a 10-year hole in the ranks. To this day, the "youngest" people I see on projects are in their middle to late 30s. I am only just beginning to see men and women in their middle 20s with a passion for the AV industry.

We all have come through different entries into this industry. More often than not, fellow travelers of my generation came in through an interest in music, either as a player or a technician, or through radio or television broadcast. Or they were the ones who figured out how to operate the AV equipment in school.

Some of us went on to obtain associates or bachelor's degrees in a technical or engineering field. A few of us started with a keen interest in a related field, such as acoustics, electrical engineering or mechanical engineering, and get our degrees in those.

While that type of ad hoc assembly of talent and people served us well in the early days of this industry, the emphasis is shifting as our industry matures and deepens its roots.

I'm certain that what we all had in common were mentors who encouraged us, taught us, allowed us to learn from our mistakes. I can name a dozen individuals who mentored me along the way in everything from installation, to design and business, to marketing. They include contractors, consultants, broadcasters, musicians, friends, parents, and clergy. Each of them influenced me differently, most of them unaware of their impact on my life. Some of them encouraged my curiosity;

others challenged and pushed me to do my best.

My interest in the field came quite by accident. One guy I hung out with in college set up and operated the sound system for the university. I started out as a roadie, gradually working my way behind the board. One of my student jobs happened to be as a DJ at the campus radio station. These experiences sparked a lifelong interest in music, performance, acoustics, and sound systems.

From there, I went on to work for sound system contracting firms and mixed for churches. I estimated, drafted, wired racks, hung clusters, and did final systems testing, adjustment, training, and operation. One of my most agonizing memories is coming back into work on a Monday morning, looking forward to wrapping up a set of shop drawings and submittals for a major project. What is black on white with red all over? My almost completed system diagrams. I was devastated to find my vellums covered in red ink with questions and comments from the owner of the company.

I also had the opportunity to meet and work with a variety of acoustical consultants and systems designers on the West Coast as a result of these jobs. My career goals shifted toward consulting as these people guided me.

What can be done to fill the ranks? Participate in events such as InfoComm International's AV Week, this year Oct. 21-27. Volunteer to speak at job fairs at local high schools, technical colleges, or university engineering programs. Join professional organizations such as the Audio Engineering Society or the Acoustical Society of America.

On a more personal level, encourage someone who has potential and may be interested in pursuing a career in the AV industry. I think one of the most important things we can do is mentor someone. Take time to answer and ask questions; look for training opportunities from which that person could benefit. There are excellent resources available through InfoComm, the National Systems Contractors Association, and SynAudCon, or from manufacturers such as AMX, Crestron, Extron, or Blonder Tongue. Encourage employers to participate in training and certification programs available through trade organizations.

Our formal education gives people the grounding to recognize mistakes and successes, learn from them, then shape the next project. Teaching and learning at this level requires a commitment to mentor those around us and allow others to take advantage of our experiences. As it has been said, we don't have enough time to make all our own mistakes and learn from them. While maintaining billable percentages and bringing in the next job are important, as is executing a biddable and buildable set of documents, these issues must be balanced with the need to pass on our knowledge to the next generation. Unless we actively pursue the goal of education, the next generation of consultants, contractors, and owners will suffer.

"If I have seen further, it is because I have stood on the shoulder of giants" wrote Sir Isaac Newton. I'm sure those giants, each of whom was pursuing their interests and feeding their curiosity, had no idea of the revolution that Newton would start one day. Each of them passed on a legacy, however, that enabled Newton to see new horizons.

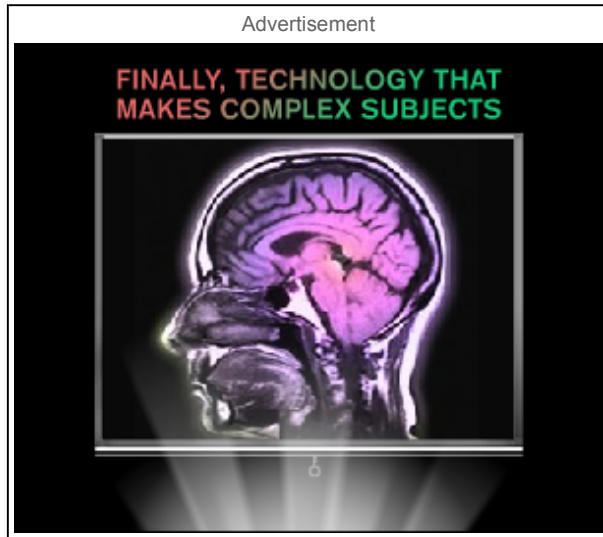
Our investment will yield returns we may not be around to appreciate. Along the way, we'll resolve the vital issues of certification and licensing. Let's just make sure we have people who are interested in pursuing those certifications.

Who is standing on your shoulders?

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Feedback

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