



# *EARNING A SEAT AT THE TABLE*

*Industry Leaders Share Strategies for  
Identifying and Investing in Emerging  
Leaders — and Why it Matters*

*By Andy Johnston*



**F**irms are adapting and changing to attract and retain young, up-and-coming engineers. Principals and owners in search of top talent and emerging leaders, who are seeking more opportunities to grow their careers and make a difference, are building a culture based on a mutual appreciation and shared values.

During a recent roundtable discussion hosted by *Engineering Georgia*, questions about how to identify talent, how to invest in young professionals and how to earn clout early in a career sparked a lively discussion between emerging and established industry leaders. Here's a peek into the conversation... ▶

# MEET THE P



RANDALL BAGWELL, P.E.



ANNIE BLISSIT, P.E.



ALBERT G. EDWARDS

## **PRESIDENT AND CEO NOVA ENGINEERING AND ENVIRONMENTAL**

With more than 30 years of experience, Bagwell oversees geotechnical and testing/inspection projects, has helped develop geotechnical engineering, pavement design/evaluation and IBC Special Inspection guidelines, and is a registered Professional Engineer in 11 states. NOVA, a multi-disciplined engineering and environmental consulting firm, has approximately 350 employees in 13 offices across the Southeast and annual revenue of approximately \$40 million.

## **WATER TREATMENT ENGINEER GRESHAM, SMITH & PARTNERS**

In addition to being selected as an ACEC Young Professional of the Year in 2016, Blissit was named an *Engineering News-Record Southeast* 2017 Top Young Professional, ASCE Georgia Section 2017 Young Engineer of the Year, ASCE Georgia Section 2016 Volunteer of the Year, and was a recipient of the Gresham, Smith & Partners 2014 Commitment to Excellence Award. She graduated from Carnegie Mellon University and is currently pursuing her Master's of Science degree at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

## **FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTAL RISK MANAGEMENT (CERM)**

With more than 25 years of experience, Edwards provides strategic direction for CERM's business management, project delivery and client management functions. He has a Master's in Business Administration in technology management from Southern Polytechnic State University and a Bachelor's of Science in industrial technology from Mississippi Valley State University. CERM provides engineering, environmental and program management services to a variety of clients.

# PANELISTS



**ANGELA L. FANNÉY, P.E., LEED AP**



**BRUCE MCNITT**



**CLINT PARKER, P.E.**

## **ASSOCIATE KIMLEY-HORN**

One of *Engineering News-Record Southeast's* 2017 Top Young Professionals, Fannéy recently served as Project Manager for Atlanta's new Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Fannéy, who provides site civil consulting services for a variety of project types, including office, retail, multifamily, and parks and recreational facilities, is also on Auburn University's College of Engineering Young Alumni Advisory Council and Civil Engineering Advisory Board.

## **SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT ARCADIS**

As Director of Operations for North America Infrastructure, McNitt is involved in a range of initiatives, including strategies for employee engagement, recruitment and retention. He has more than 35 years of experience in project management, planning and the engineering consultant services industry.

## **DIRECTOR OF TRANSPORTATION HUSSEY GAY BELL**

A recipient of the Exemplary Service Award for Engineering, Parker has 20 years of experience managing and designing large transportation projects throughout metro Atlanta. He is a graduate of the American Council of Engineering Companies' Future Leaders Programs I and II, and his affiliations include the Council for Quality Growth, the American Council of Engineering Companies of Georgia (ACEC Georgia) and American Society of Highway Engineers (ASHE). He is a graduate of Prairie View A&M University. ▶



## EMPLOYER/EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS

**MODERATOR: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A POTENTIAL EMPLOYEE WHO IS TRYING TO DECIDE WHERE TO WORK, WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES THAT MAKE A POTENTIAL EMPLOYER APPEALING?**

**ANNIE BLISSIT:** When you're first approaching a company, you're looking for atmosphere — or environment. You can immediately tell if it seems like everyone's in-sync or there's some discord. I also really admire flexibility, which I think you'll start to see more and more. Even though we're young and most of us don't have families yet, we still appreciate and want flexibility.

**ANGELA FANNÉY:** I know what was important to me when I was evaluating firms was that I had the ability to separate from my peers and really advance quickly, rather than be stuck in lockstep. I think that, coupled with performance-based compensation [rather than a lockstep, seniority-based pay structure. Both of those are very important.

**CLINT PARKER:** I like to evaluate, as best I can, the company's leadership and their reputation in the industry. This includes determining whether or not they are actually investing in the development of their employees, what type of investments they are making and whether it's investment on the technical side or on the professional development side of the coin.

**BLISSIT:** Another important aspect is meaningful project work. Asking: What would I be working on? What does that mean to the world? How would I be improving things? Would I be able to work on several different things in different areas, or am I going to be focused in one area? I really look for breadth of exposure.

**MODERATOR: LET ME PUT IT TO THE EMPLOYER SIDE. HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR FIRM AND MANAGERS ARE INVESTING IN YOUR UP-AND-COMING PROFESSIONALS?**

**AL EDWARDS:** This is important to us because, the fact is, we're in the people business. We've consistently increased our training budget to increase the investment in professional development for all of our folks. And, one of our core values is community service. Community service is an optional performance metric at CERM. So, everyone is not required to be involved in the community, but if there are some programs you're involved with that you care about, we want to support you. We want to make investments where people are investing their time in community endeavors. We believe that this helps them to expand as professionals and even to see what we do slightly differently.

**BRUCE MCNITT:** We've got a focus on youth. It's interesting work to help create an environment and culture where we can grow our future leaders, and where they can grow themselves. We have programs where we actually encourage our young people to create their own groups and they bring in their own speakers. They're doing a great job and it's really interesting because those sessions involve everything from leadership and people skills to tactical training. It's exciting to see these groups organize themselves more formally, with no oversight from our senior leadership. We also provide a budget, so they can develop social activities that are meaningful to them as a group – anything from helping in the community to just purely social activities.

**RANDALL BAGWELL:** It's got to be a multifaceted approach, and it really comes down to the individual employees; it also comes down to the individual offices. With 13 or 14 offices, each one of my offices is unique. It is up to the local leadership to be the ones who understand their employees and, in turn, generate programs or incentives that will motivate them, train them and get them involved. We've done a lot of the same things that Al was talking about. For example, we have a program where we have non-management, but senior-level people, who mentor groups of eight to 10 employees: our up-and-coming future leaders.

**MODERATOR: HOW INTENTIONAL DO YOU HAVE TO BE ABOUT MENTORING IN A WORLD WHERE, AS A RESULT OF THE GREAT RECESSION, OUR INDUSTRY DOESN'T HAVE AS MANY MENTORS AS WE HISTORICALLY WOULD HAVE?**

**BAGWELL:** It is absolutely critical. We can make excuses and say we don't have the numbers or time to do it, but you just have to do it. It's a corporate risk management function as much as it is retaining and growing future leaders and technically qualified persons. I will tell you, we struggle with that because we have about 350 people and there

may be 50 true senior-level people who can mentor – in some shape or form – 300. It's a challenge.

**FANNÉY:** We have to accept the challenge that we need to grow young people and we have to be willing to stretch our limits to hire more than we may even feel comfortable hiring.

**PARKER:** Mentorship is a shared responsibility throughout the company, whether it's your peer with three or four more years of experience or it's a senior-level person.

**MODERATOR: WHEN YOU HAVE AN EMPLOYEE THAT ISN'T WORKING OUT, HOW MUCH OF THAT IS A REFLECTION OF WHAT MIGHT BE A MORE LAX STANDARD IN THE HIRING PRACTICES (BECAUSE OF THE OVERALL SHORTAGE OF ENGINEERING GRADUATES) VERSUS MAYBE FIRM LEADERSHIP NOT DOING ENOUGH TO MANAGE AND COACH NEW EMPLOYEES TO PERFORM UP TO THE LEVEL OF THEIR ABILITIES?**

**BAGWELL:** It's a little bit of both. I think sometimes management lowers their expectations during the hiring process and does not push for the right person. There is also a generational change in people wanting far more of a work/life balance than what we expected when I was a young engineer. We talk about the culture of a company and how senior leadership must all be in concurrence. Well, at NOVA, we are. Work comes first. I mean if you're not at the morgue or on life support, you need to be working. Obviously, I'm exaggerating...

**FANNÉY:** Are you really exaggerating, Randall?

**BAGWELL:** There's people that say I'm not, but you look at the generations entering the workforce and they don't want that. They

want no part of it. As firms, we've got to change and adapt, to a certain extent, but we need to change recognizing and respecting their desires, not changing and just settling. There needs to be a reason for it.

**PARKER:** There are certain boundaries that should not be crossed when you're dealing with company culture. I think we should value the differences that each person – our diversity – brings to the table. It makes the company better. It makes our industry better.

**MODERATOR: IF THIS ENTERING GENERATION HAS A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, BUT THEY'RE ONBOARDING INTO A FIRM CULTURE THAT'S NOT THAT DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL CULTURES – "THE SQUARE BOX" THAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT HERE – HOW DOES THAT TENSION RESOLVE ITSELF FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RETAINING AND ATTRACTING TALENT?**

**BAGWELL:** For those firms who insist on staying in the box and not thinking outside of it, those will be like the firms that insisted on continuing to make wagon wheels after the invention of the car. They're just going to go by the wayside. They're certainly not going to grow. ▶



## IDENTIFYING AND INVESTING IN TALENT

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### MODERATOR: HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY TALENT? WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO HIRE SOMEBODY? IS IT WORK ETHIC? IS IT PROFESSIONAL SKILLS?

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**BAGWELL:** I was at a career fair and a young man came up to me. He handed me his resume and apologized for his grade-point average (GPA). It was 3.02. I told him 'You owe me no apology.' I said I would much rather have a young man or woman with a 3.0 GPA who has diversity in his/her life – in the sense that they're doing more than going to school. I want to see if they're working their way through school; they're involved in extracurricular activities; they communicate well.

I mean, I'm not looking for the valedictorian of the next graduating class at Georgia Tech. I'm looking for someone who has ambition and drive, who is well spoken, and who has the basics from an engineering standpoint and can be taught my business. If I can get that in them, that's what I want.

**EDWARDS:** I agree with that – having high initiative, beyond a basic skill set, outranks grades. And, you do see them taking initiative. For example, a young man in our firm, who eventually went through ACEC Georgia's Future Leaders Program, demonstrated that to us early on in his career. He had excelled in his civil engineering program and was the starting point guard on the basketball team. I said to the hiring manager, 'You've got to find something for him to do here because basketball players really had it hard.' I knew from that that he was going to work hard for us in whatever role he was given. So, looking for that ability to take initiative is what we're trying to sort through during our interview process. Basically, who's going to go to that next step?

**MCNITT:** When I see a resume, I try not to go to the GPA. I look at the resume and instead ask: did this person successfully complete their education? Were they participating in community activities – were they part of a sports team? Do they have a positive attitude? Those are the things that I look for, and then we'll work with them on technical skills beyond that. Certainly, they must have a sound aptitude, but attitude and the ability to show that they have diversity of interests are really important. Often, those activities demonstrate their people skills.

**FANNÉY:** I agree, Bruce, attitude is huge. But, I'll add one more that is very important: curiosity. I don't want someone that's the 'trained monkey.' I need someone who has a sincere curiosity about our business, about what we're doing, about real estate and about our culture; and I think you can see that fairly quickly.

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**MODERATOR: WHAT OTHER THOUGHTS DO YOU ALL HAVE RELATIVE TO RETENTION, ATTRACTION, CULTURE AND BUILDING A WORKFORCE?**

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**EDWARDS:** One topic that really jumps out at me, and one I'm excited about, is our initiative with the Technical College System of Georgia. That's low-hanging fruit for us as an industry to find good folks to come to work for our firms, and even in the economic development space. Our state has underwritten it and put a good infrastructure in place. It's affordable. I think we should nurture that program.

**MCNITT:** Our understanding of the value of our Technical College System in Georgia is severely underestimated. One of the things that is particularly compelling to our young people when we're recruiting and retaining is that they understand there are options. They come into your organization, and as they learn and grow, they're going to be presented with opportunities to pursue multiple paths and challenges; it's not just a single track.

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**MODERATOR: HOW GOOD ARE ENGINEERING FIRMS AT BEING INTENTIONAL AND TRANSPARENT IN SHARING INFORMATION ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH IN YOUR FIRM WITH THEIR NEWEST, MOST JUNIOR EMPLOYEES?**

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**PARKER:** We've had that conversation internally, as far as being intentional about the exposure that we provide to a new hire, even though one group may need that hire. We're talking about creating opportunities where an individual is exposed to different disciplines within the organization, and also different offices. So, the question may come up in an interview: How open are you to traveling to a different office and working there for a while to help develop a certain skill set? I think when they hear us share that opportunity, it lets them know that this company will invest in their development.

**BAGWELL:** You've got to show them a willingness to do those things that will help them develop.

**PARKER:** This is a great time to be an engineer – coming out of the recent recession that we've experienced, the future really looks bright for our industry. ▶



## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGINEERS





**MODERATOR: WHAT CAN WE DO AS AN INDUSTRY TO BETTER 'SELL THE SIZZLE' OF WHAT WE DO?**

**BLISSIT:** Technology is exciting, and I think it's important. But, at the end of the day, for a lot of the people I know – and at least the stereotypical Millennial – we really want to make a difference. So, show me how your company makes a difference. Do your transportation designs improve the community? Or, provide clean water for a community? What impact is there beyond the paycheck? And most importantly -- tell people about it!

**MODERATOR: WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER GIVEN OR RECEIVED?**

**FANNÉY:** Never get too big for your britches. Listen for all of those small opportunities, whether it's a small relationship or it's a small job, and treat them all at the same level of importance because it can blossom into pretty amazing opportunities for your career.

**BAGWELL:** You can judge a person during good times, or when things are great, and not know the real person. The true character of a person shows through when they're faced with adversity.

**PARKER:** Learning is lifelong. Also, one of the practical pieces of advice that I use daily is: Don't assume, ask questions.

**MCNITT:** A piece of advice that I got years ago, and has served me well, is that everybody has a voice, and their voice matters. They're not wrong, so give everybody an opportunity to share that voice with you.

**BLISSIT:** One of my very first goals when I started working, that my supervisor set for me, was to grow my internal network and to meet people outside of my office, even outside of the water space, get to know them and learn from them. One of the valuable things I've learned from expanding my internal network, especially as a young professional, is that it makes it a lot easier for people to say yes when you have what may be an 'out-there' idea. They're more ready to give you that support to go do all the crazy things that you ask them.

**EDWARDS:** The golden rule is to treat people the way you want to be treated, but the platinum rule is to treat them the way *they* want to be treated. That requires work, but it's worthwhile.

