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Why Mentorships Are Invaluable For Community Banks -- And The U.S. Economy

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As the summer winds down, millions of American students are going off to college, where they will prepare themselves for the professional world that lies beyond.

Fortunately, they are likely to enter a favorable labor market when that day comes. Last year, roughly 55% of college graduates reported starting a job in the same year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that number is projected to be even higher this year. After dipping below 60% in 2010, the employment-population ratio for the 20 to 24 age group is now closer to 70% — on par with pre-recession levels.

With a stronger labor market comes fiercer competition for young talent. Today's job-seekers have more options than they did a decade ago, and greater expectations for that first job. Forward-thinking employers must take meaningful steps to differentiate themselves from competitors, not only in terms of salary offerings, but also in tangible benefits for employees.

Today, young professionals want more than just a paycheck. They want an opportunity to learn on the job — to be taught by superiors. In other words, they want mentorship opportunities, programs that will help them confront problems and find solutions in the near future and over the long haul.

Whether formally or informally implemented, a mentorship program is often the most important predictor of long-term success in the workplace. According to Harvard Business Review (registration required) research, millennials prefer a boss who will mentor them and a company that will develop their skills for the future. And for good reason: Based on a 2013 study in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, mentees are more satisfied with their jobs and more committed to their respective companies than those not being mentored.

Community banks like mine understand the importance of mentorship. Naturally, because we are smaller organizations than the largest banks, workforce development is integral to our success. We pride ourselves on maintaining a personal connection with customers and investing in the local communities that depend on us. That requires hard-working, good-natured people who know the ins and outs of the banking industry. In a people business, talent is everything.

Only by grooming talent can we adequately serve our customers and communities. Nearly a dozen of our bank's 135 current employees — including our controller and assistant treasurer — began their careers as interns. Each summer, we hire about 10% of our staff as interns — most from nearby Maine communities. Since its inception in 1996, more than 100 college students have participated in our internship program.

Over time, grooming talent can exceed even your highest expectations. The C-suites of corporate America are filled with seasoned business leaders who began their careers as curious, wide-eyed interns and entry-level employees. One of our own employees, Craig Garofalo, served as an intern for three summers in the early 2000s. Today, he is

Kennebec Savings Bank's executive vice president and chief operating officer. As he often tells me, that internship taught him countless soft skills and set him on the path to professional success.

He is by no means alone. Before becoming the president of Hannaford Supermarkets in 2015, Mike Vail began his Hannaford career as a retail management trainee. Melissa Smith, the president and CEO of WEX, joined the Maine-based company as a senior financial analyst. She worked her way through numerous roles, including chief financial officer and president of the Americas, before landing the top job.

They are now visionaries in their respective fields, but their success may not have been possible without that "foot in the door" so many decades ago. Such talent is identified at a young age, but it must be cultivated — year after year — in order to realize its full potential.

For interns to realize that potential, mentors can take several actionable steps. First and foremost, with each new group of interns, it is important for mentors to meet individually with each intern or in a group to discuss corporate culture and the wide range of opportunities in the workplace. Interns must have access to senior leadership periodically throughout their internship so that they feel like part of the workforce and not on the outside looking in. To that end, senior leadership must show interns "the path" to success in their respective roles — that is, a road map to how their career could unfold.

This is especially important in the banking sector, which often isn't seen as a "cool" or "hip" industry among young professionals. However, banking encompasses so many different roles that young professionals can take advantage of unique opportunities tailored to their specific strengths. Whether it's an English major drafting bank policy or an economics student interested in sales and business development, banking can be an attractive profession for all kinds of young professionals.

Interns need to understand those ins and outs of the industry at hand, and that's where communication between mentors and mentees comes into play. This year's batch of college students will include the next Mike Vail, Melissa Smith or Craig Garofalo. But it won't happen right away: It is our responsibility to mentor young professionals and build them into the leaders that they will one day become, brick by brick.

Community banks depend on it, and so does the broader economy. Let's keep laying a foundation of mentorship, one brick at a time.

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