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Mentoring the way to a better Afghanistan one intern at a time

KABUL – Ten Afghan students put theory to practice this spring by working side-by-side with U.S. professional engineers and Corps host nation employees learning about the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers methods, projects and construction practices being used to build millions of dollars worth of infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.

In March 2011, the Afghanistan Engineer District – North hosted its first internship program for engineering students that attend Kabul University and the Afghanistan Technology Institute. Upon graduating from the AED-N internship program, the students were given the opportunity to develop the skills they learned from the Corps by interning eight weeks with one of the premiere laboratories that works for the Corps in Afghanistan – Zurmat Material Testing Laboratories.

There, the students received hands-on training in the fields of concrete, soil, chemical analysis, masonry, steel, and aggregate material testing.

The two internships combined will give the students the opportunity to be leaders in the construction, design and engineering fields of Afghanistan. Even more importantly, it will provide them with the tools they need to rebuild a country that has been ravaged by years of war and Taliban rule.

“If the people aren’t made better by the work we’re doing here, then we’re not really helping the country,” said Col. Thomas Magness, AED-N commander. “For us to say, ‘We won,’ we have to say, ‘We built all of these engineers and companies’, so that the work can still carry on even after the Corps has left.”

Mentoring has played a large role in Zurmat’s current success. In 2009, the CEO, Hamed Amiri asked Corps official how the lab could improve its testing process so it could partner with the Corps on some of its construction projects. That quest to improve turned in to a fruitful relationship between the two organizations. “Zurmat is one of the finest geo-technical labs in all of Afghanistan,” said Keith Rudie, an AED-N geotechnical engineer with the quality assurance branch.

Zurmat's rise to success took lots of hard work and guidance. In fact, according to Rudie, when Zurmat first started working with the Corps, it was one of the worst labs in Afghanistan. "When I first became aware of their work, it was because their reports were unacceptable for Corps' use due to faulty calculations, based upon insufficient data, incorrect test methods and lack of professional oversight in the lab," Rudie said.

It took many site visits, multiple emails and countless phone calls between Rudie and the labs executives, but over time, Zurmat executives found a way to turn things around, even getting re-certified by the American Society for Testing Materials, a required Corps lab certification that had been lapse since 2004.

"Hamed and I have spent over 25 hours via email working to improve Zurmat's data collection and test reports, and he has been receptive to all of my questions and suggestions," Rudie said. "Zurmat is a great example of how anything is possible. They went from being way off track, to turning themselves around. This is a wonderful gift Zurmat has given these interns; I hope they all take advantage of it."

It was because of the mentorship and guidance provided to Zurmat from the Corps that Amiri and his business partner, Yousaf Zurmat felt the need to pass on their knowledge. "When Mr. Rudie told us about the interns, we decided to offer them our own internship as a kind of donation from Zurmat to the students and the Corps of Engineers," Amiri said.

The internship also teaches the students how to run a business. Amiri said he makes sure to show the students the administrative and technical sides of a lab by "taking them through the different offices, and showing them how we run a business." In the long run, learning the ends and outs of an office environment will give the students an even better understanding of how to be successful in life, Amiri said. "No matter what opportunities they are provided in life, I want for them to at least be familiar with the office environment so they can easily adjust when they leave the internship and have a good life," he said.

In addition to hosting student interns, Zurmat also is providing training for some of AED-Ns local national quality assurance representatives.

Afghans teaching each other is the way of the future and will help their country prosper, said Jeff Collins, a capacity development program manager at AED-N. "What we've found works best is Afghans training Afghans," Collins said. "We started doing that with our interns and Zurmat has exceeded our expectations. They're not just doing work for the construction of Afghanistan; they are doing work for a whole economy."

According to 20-year-old Kabul University student and intern Mohommad Shoib, the training he's received at Zurmat and with AED-N has only enhanced his learning experience.

“Zurmat has allowed us the opportunity to do things and apply our learning to our beloved country of Afghanistan,” Shoib said. “We are all so grateful to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for paving the way for us after we leave college.”

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Ten former USACE Afghanistan Engineering District-North interns learn how to test steel during an eight week long internship with Zurmat Material Testing Laboratory in Kabul. The students are all senior engineering majors at Kabul University or Kabul Technology Institute (photo courtesy of Zurmat MTL)

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