

Episode 1

Career Kickoff: Tips and Insights from Industry Experts

Intro: Welcome to *Ground Breaking: Where Consulting Meets Innovation*.

Jad Sobh: Welcome everyone to *Ground Breaking: Where Consulting Meets Innovation*. My name is Jad (pronounced jahd) Sobh (pronounced SOO-buh).

Peter Nabhan: And I'm Peter (pronounced PEE-ter) Nabhan (pronounced Nuh-bon). For those of you who are tuning in for the first time, Jad and I work for an engineering consulting firm called ECS. *Ground Breaking* is a new podcast that is geared towards the architecture, engineering and construction industry, which is commonly referred to as the AEC industry. We will be interviewing thought leaders within our industry and providing them a platform to share their experiences and knowledge with you, our listeners.

Jad Sobh: Yes and we are also hoping to reach students and young professionals that may be interested in learning more about entering the AEC industry. We're here today with Matthew Jacobson, Matt Robbins and Caroline Ringler. We will let them introduce themselves momentarily, but first, we wanted to give some info on what today's episode is all about. Today, we are going to be discussing advice for students and people are entering the AEC industry, some ways to get your career started off right and much more. So, with that being said, Matthew, want to go ahead and introduce yourself to our listeners?

Matthew Jacobson: Sure. Hello, everyone. And thanks for having me on here. My name is Matthew Jacobson. I'm a civil analyst with Kimley-Horn Associates in our Los Angeles office, working on ITS projects throughout Southern California. I am also the incoming chair of the committee on younger members of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) and I graduated with my civil engineering degree from Cal Poly Pomona.

Peter Nabhan: Matthew, thank you so much for joining us today. I appreciate you bringing that wealth of perspective and being engaged with ASCE young members. So, I want to give Matt Robbins a little bit of space to introduce himself.

Matt Robbins: Thanks for having me. My name is Matt Robbins. I'm a subsidiary regional manager at ECS. I oversee our Austin, San Antonio and Houston offices. I have a bachelor's degree from Texas A&M in civil engineering and a master's degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio, also in civil engineering. Thank you for having me.

Jad Sobh: Awesome. Thanks, Matt. We're excited to have you on today. You know, to impart your knowledge with our listeners. And last but certainly not least, Caroline, go ahead and introduce yourself.

Caroline Ringler: Thank you for having me. I'm Carolina Ringler. I'm an intern level two at ECS in our Greenville office. This is my second summer with ECS. I am finishing up my degree in civil engineering at Clemson.

Peter Nabhan: That's fantastic, Caroline. Again, thanks, everybody, for joining us today. We're very thrilled to have all three of you. And I'm going to take this opportunity to dive right in. I'd like to start with you, Caroline.

Caroline Ringler: Yeah.

Peter Nabhan: So, you're just telling us that you're still a student at Clemson and you've been an intern at ECS for about two years or two summers? Do you mind telling us a little bit about your journey? What have you learned throughout your internship?

Caroline Ringler: So far, during my internship last summer, I spent a lot of time in the field. This gave me hands-on experience to really apply what I had learned at Clemson. A lot of the things we did in our labs in my civil engineering classes at Clemson, I got to apply in the field—testing concrete, testing house lots. This summer, I've spent a lot of time working on the geotechnical side and doing behind-the-scenes work in the lab or office. I've written a lot of proposals, read many reports, gone to sites and talked with drillers. It's been very applicable and interesting to me so far.

Jad Sobh: That's awesome that you're finally getting the chance to apply what you're learning in the classroom to what you'd be doing every day in the field. Pivoting a little, what do you think students should look for in a potential internship? Are there any red or green flags they should be aware of when going through that process?

Caroline Ringler: A few red flags I'd be aware of are companies that don't seem very invested in their interns. ECS has done a great job of spending a lot of time developing us. Right from the start, it felt like they cared about us and our learning. I would look for that when searching for an internship.

Peter Nabhan: Caroline, is there anything that could be a potential challenge while looking for internships for some of your classmates who've had less-than-optimal experiences?
Caroline Ringler: Definitely. A lot of my classmates and I have had internships where it feels like you're doing typical intern tasks—organizing files or grabbing coffee, little things like that to help the office, but not applying the knowledge you've learned in class. It's great to make money, but you don't feel like you're advancing toward anything.

Peter Nabhan: Yeah, I think you make a good point. It brings me back to my interning days; I've had some experiences where I was the latte guy and others where I learned a lot. So, that's a very good point and I appreciate that you shared that with us. With people trying to get a job post-graduation, I want to switch the conversation to you, Matt. Since you're a hiring manager, what are some of the things you look for in a candidate?

Matt Robbins: Yeah, so I'm honestly looking for folks who are self-starters, whether they're interns or recently out of college. I'm looking for people who can self-manage their time and be proactive, because most of what they're going to do in an organization involves skills they're learning on the job. As Caroline mentioned, college is great and gives you a good baseline knowledge, but on-the-job training is really needed to take the next steps in our careers. A lot of times, I'm looking for people who are willing to learn and ask questions. That really helps me find the employees who excel at ECS.

Jad Sobh: Yeah, there's definitely some good things to look at, for sure. You mentioned that being a self-starter is a big factor, but are there any other qualities that might deter you from considering a specific candidate, or perhaps make them stand out in a good way?

Matt Robbins: Yeah, so I'd say not having any real-world experience can be a bit of a detractor when I'm reviewing resumes. It's hard to gauge someone's work habits if you can't ask them about what they've done or what they've liked or struggled with in a real-world situation. College doesn't always translate directly to the real world. Resumes that stand out are those that describe field, lab, or office experience in detail, whether it's internships or previous employment. I like being able to ask, "I see you worked at Company X as an intern. What did you learn while you were there?" and getting good feedback. That interaction helps me determine if they really learned something or if, as you mentioned earlier, they were just the 'latte guy.'

Peter Nabhan: Yeah, that was me, Matt. It's a good segue into my question now: I appreciate you sharing that you look for self-starters and can gauge that by asking questions and seeing if they've actually learned from their internships. But what advice would you give to someone who, unfortunately, couldn't land a good internship but still has the right skill set? How can they get an opportunity to start working at a company like ECS or others?

Matt Robbins: So, describing leadership skills in an interview is very hard, especially for young professionals or interns. But once you're with an organization, a way to show leadership is by being that self-starter, as I mentioned. Show me how you can complete your assigned tasks effectively and efficiently. Then, take on tasks that add value to the organization without being micromanaged—that shows management that you can at least manage yourself.

Over time, you're likely to be given people, projects, or other roles to lead. I also really recommend that young professionals work on developing good communication skills early in their careers. It's not emphasized enough in college, but you have to remember that when you join an organization, it's already running at full speed. So, you need to be ready to learn, take notes and ask questions. If you need additional help, communicate effectively and quickly so you can gain the skills to become proficient within that organization.

Jad Sobh: Yeah, those are definitely some great traits to have to start developing yourself as a leader, you know, being a self-starter in the workplace and then having those time management skills, for sure. So now we're going to throw it over to Matthew and get him involved. Can you talk to us about the importance of time and time management, especially early on in your career?

Matthew Jacobson: Yeah, definitely. I think this is one of my favorite topics to talk about for early career professionals. You know, you've just graduated college, entered the workforce and that can be a really difficult adjustment sometimes and you're not really sure how to navigate that. But I think just working to find the balance of work, family, friends and balancing that professional life.

I think what I've realized, too, over my young career is that things will come in waves and sometimes it's okay to prioritize work over friends because you're studying for your FE or your PE and that might take a little more precedence than going out on the weekends. And then other times, it's okay when family takes precedence because someone is sick, or you need to be there for family, weddings, or different events—then that can take precedence over work. I think balancing those out and realizing there's a time and place for everything is important.

I think that's kind of what's really a hard adjustment, because up until this point, for most people, school has kind of been everything and then shifting gears into what the real world looks like and settling into that and just being able to balance it all out, can be hard. But really understanding that there's a time and place for everything and as long as you can balance all of those, you'll be able to excel quickly.

Peter Nabhan: No, I love how you spoke about the balance. And I think a lot of us are still working to find that balance. I mean, personally, I've been in the business for more than 10 years and sometimes I still struggle to find that balance. But you and I have spoken a few times before and you've shared your goals with me. I really appreciate how you have very lofty goals for the future. I was hoping you could share how time management has allowed you to reach some of those goals. Or maybe, what are some of your future goals as well? We would love to learn more about that.

Matthew Jacobson: Yeah, definitely. I talked about creating that time and space for everything. So, for me, that comes down to keeping a very detailed calendar and schedule. I always say to my friends that if it's not in the calendar, it doesn't exist. That's just the reality of it. I mean, there's so much going on in our day-to-day lives, whether that's work, family, or other outside things. So, just make sure that you're able to set aside time for the things you want to do and for what's important to you.

For me, currently, that is working towards my PE. I have passed the eighth-hour exam, but in California, we are required to take two additional exams: the seismic and surveying exams. I'm taking one of those this month and the other next month. So, again, setting

aside time and space to study for those after work might mean that I don't get to watch as much Netflix or YouTube as I would like. But that's the personal commitment I'm making to advance my professional career.

Jad Sobh: That's awesome. I, admittedly, am horrible at using my calendar; I need to get significantly better at that. But, Matthew, while you were in school, how do you think being a part of organizations and engaging in the ecosystem outside of the classroom helped you advance your education?

Matthew Jacobson: For me, I was very involved with ASCE as a student and now as a professional. I joined my local ASCE chapter in my freshman year and progressed to become president of our student chapter. Once I graduated, I transitioned into the younger member group and got involved with the Committee on Younger Members.

Getting experience and exposure outside of the classroom is really important, both as a student and professionally. You get to see what's happening outside of the classroom in terms of labs, clubs, or extracurriculars. Once you graduate, being involved with professional organizations allows you to develop different leadership and communication skills that you might not have the opportunity to develop right away when you first start working.

If you're involved with an organization and you're running events, you might be in charge of a small budget, contacting attendees, following up and ensuring that social media posts are made. All of that ties together as you progress technically and professionally in the workplace, whether you're working on proposals, understanding cost estimates, or putting together marketing materials.

Being involved allows you to grow these skills in a safe, low-risk, high-reward environment. If you run events well, you develop those skills and if you struggle, the consequences aren't as severe as they could be in the workplace. So, it gives you a comfortable space to grow.

Peter Nabhan: Matthew, I love how you described transitioning from leading events to the work that you do every single day. You're absolutely spot on — just doing things at a lower risk level early on in your career but being able to learn and see the bigger picture will help you tremendously as you develop, especially when your career and the stakes are high.

Matt Robbins, I want to switch this conversation back to you. You're mid-career now. You've been in this industry for quite some time. If you take a moment to think about your career, what are some of the major things that have helped you become the subsidiary regional manager at ECS?

Matt Robbins: A lot of it started with learning the skills needed to succeed in the engineering world by continuing to learn, right? Professional degrees and certifications are definitely a gateway to entry, but I'm always willing to learn and stay active in professional

organizations. I've worked in the Texas Society of Professional Engineers (TSPE) for a number of years.

Echoing Matthew, staying organized and proactive with tasks, not doing some of the extracurriculars that maybe your friends and family are doing to devote more time to work. Also, not being afraid to speak up and developing ideas that help better the organization are a couple of things that have helped me stand out.

But also, the number one thing that I really believe in is I'm always willing to try.

Everyone makes mistakes, but if you don't try new things, you won't develop the critical thinking skills needed to excel in this industry. Experience goes much further than early education. Gaining that experience takes time, but if you don't actually work at it, it takes even longer to gain that experience because you're not willing to take on challenges that help you develop.

Jad Sobh: Yeah, I think it's a very important point that you made there with always continuing to learn. That's such a crucial thing for sure. Taking it back a little bit for you, Matt, coming out of college, what were some of your biggest hurdles? And how did you overcome those?

Matt Robbins: Honestly, it was my communication skills. I was an introverted guy. I didn't really realize or appreciate how much writing I would be doing in an engineering-focused field. But jumping right into it early in my career, I was writing reports and emails and I had to talk to people at meetings and professional organization events, as I mentioned.

I quickly realized my introverted persona had to adapt and develop to be more effective in this field. I honestly just overcame my fears by immersion therapy. I would attend every professional organization event I could and often volunteer for committees and board positions, which helped me really develop. Most people who know me professionally wouldn't really consider me an introverted person nowadays.

Peter Nabhan: So, I met Matt Robbins about a year ago. And I would have never thought you were an introvert, Matt. Here's a funny thing. I as well was very much introverted coming out of school. So, it's essentially like a muscle and you continue to work it and you continue to be better. It's about making some mistakes, obviously, at low risk and just continuing to try. You learn so much by doing. You learn a lot more by doing than you learn in school, that's for sure.

Matt, something that I always seek is mentorship advice from people who have done this before me or even people who are younger than me just to be able to relate my knowledge to different generations and just to be able to get advice from people. Have you had that throughout your career? Have you had some mentorship support?

Matt Robbins: I have; I was very lucky. Early in my career, I had a couple of really great mentors. One was a senior engineer and the other was a technical department head. That kind of diverged. One really helped me focus on the engineering groundwork, you know, got me to where I was, or am today. Then the department head really helped me learn some of the management skills that I've developed over time. The biggest thing is they both took time out of their busy schedules to allow me to bug them with questions and I soaked it up like a sponge. But yes, mentors, I'll say, are a big key to my success.

Jad Sobh: I've been fortunate enough as well to have some great mentors, whether they be marketing professionals, or even here at ECS, some engineers that have taught me some of the ins and outs of what it is that we do so that I can be better at my job. So, with that, for somebody who might be seeking out a mentor, what are some of the key qualities that you think they should be looking for in that mentor?

Matt Robbins: Yeah, that's a great question. I think you have to realize that mentors may not always seek you out. In our professional world, we're pretty busy. So, they don't typically know what you don't know. You have to use those communication skills to express where you may fall short and need guidance and ask for that help. A good mentor will pick up on those cues and figure out what you want to learn. And they'll take you under their wing. So, my biggest advice is to be persistent. The first mentor that may get in front of you may not be the right mentor. And it doesn't mean you only have to have one; you can have multiple mentors in different aspects of your career that help you grow and develop over time.

Peter Nabhan: So, what it sounds like you're saying, Matt, is it's about being open and being open to receiving mentorship, being open to connecting with people, especially early on in your career. You're essentially becoming a sponge, trying to absorb all the knowledge around you so you can develop yourself and fast-track your career development. I'm going to take the conversation back to you, Matthew. Does networking play a big role in your life? How has it been supportive of your career?

Matthew Jacobson: Yes, absolutely. I think my favorite thing to tell people is to always network; you never know where a connection will lead or a new relationship will form. Those relationships and connections can help open doors for you, beyond what you can even imagine. I think being able to form those relationships, especially in school, you never know where someone's going to start their career or might transition their career, whether that's public, private, or different agencies and organizations.

I've had the opportunity to meet, I think, a decent number of people in my early career and have kind of used those connections to gain insight on different ideas or ways of doing things or just having others to bounce ideas off of either personally or professionally. Being able to connect with those people all started with networking.

Jad Sobh: That's great stuff. I'm definitely going to have to take some notes here. Because much like the calendar, I'm just starting to get into the networking side of things nowadays.

We're going to throw it over to you, Caroline. So, after hearing some of the things from Matt and Matthew, what sort of additional advice would you be willing to impart to college students who might be preparing for internships?

Caroline Ringler: Kind of touching on what Matt and Matthew said, I think networking is hugely important, really seeking out those opportunities, because it's not easy. There are not a lot of open opportunities just waiting for you, as it may seem for a lot of engineering students. Really, just putting your foot forward into anything possible and leaning on those mentors who are there to help guide you through those processes.

Peter Nabhan: That's very cool. Caroline, you've done two internships now. So, you have a little bit of experience. Looking at your classmates or folks at Clemson who are younger than you, what would you advise them on getting an internship? How many internships do you think they should have?

Caroline Ringler: I don't think there's a set number; I think it's really the experience that matters. I think definitely getting an internship is important, so you can see and get a taste of what you would like to do in the future and look promising to other future jobs when you enter the workforce.

But I would suggest just putting your foot in and not getting discouraged. So many people have come to me who are younger and say, "I've applied to 10 different places, 15 different places and I can't find anything." I would just say, don't get discouraged, keep trying, keep pushing and keep reaching out to people and making those connections with other career mentors or teachers.

A lot of teachers have opportunities that are available, whether that be research or other job connections, so I'd reach out to them too.

Jad Sobh: Yeah, I like that not putting a threshold on how much experience you can get before you graduate college is definitely valuable. With your internships, you've been here with ECS for two summers. How did you find your internships? Whether it was ECS or anywhere else, did you have a career center on your campus that you went to? Was it networking events? Were there any other resources like a teacher? How did you find them?

Caroline Ringler: Specifically with ECS, I saw opportunities through hours of research on Google, looking at what was available—different jobs, LinkedIn, that kind of thing. For past internships, my freshman summer, I worked solely through a connection I had with one of my close friend's dad. I reached out to him and asked if he had any internship opportunities available. He created a role for me and I was very fortunate. But I would have never known that had I not reached out. Then, during my sophomore year summer, I did research under a professor because I reached out to her and asked if she had any available opportunities. She took me in for that summer. So, definitely seek out all routes possible.

Peter Nabhan: That's absolutely true, Caroline. It sounds like if you're looking for an internship, you can go on Google, meet people, speak with your professors, or network on LinkedIn. There are a lot of ways to seek out opportunities and hopefully join the industry. It's good to hear that there's a support system for students graduating.

So, I think we're getting close to the end of our episode today. I want to thank all of you for sharing some of your journey and giving us some advice. Before we wrap up, we want to ask you one last question. This is a question we ask everyone who joins the podcast. Are you up for it?

Matthew Jacobson: Yes.

Matt Robbins: Yep.

Caroline Ringler: Yep.

Peter Nabhan: It's the same question for everyone. Can you tell us about something in your life that has been groundbreaking?

Matthew Jacobson: Sure. So, every year around June and July, our company does promotions. I was recently promoted, effective July 1, to what's equivalent to an engineer three position. So that's really exciting. It comes with a few extra responsibilities, but I'm really excited to take those on and look forward to continuing to grow and develop in my professional career.

Jad Sobh: Matt, you're up next.

Matt Robbins: Yeah, a groundbreaking moment for me was really the culmination of a lot of the things we talked about today. Working on myself through my communication skills, interning during my college career and getting heavily involved in professional organizations all culminated a couple of years ago in me being selected as the Young Engineer of the Year in 2022 for the Texas Society of Professional Engineers, for the Bear County Chapter. I never thought I would achieve such a high honor in my career. It's really humbling and groundbreaking for me.

Peter Nabhan: Well, congratulations to both of you, Matt and Matthew. That's a great promotion, Matthew. And Matt, that's a phenomenal award. I'm happy to hear that you received that award a couple of years ago. Now, Caroline, what has been groundbreaking for you?

Caroline Ringler: So, being still very early in my career, I don't have any groundbreaking specific moments. But something groundbreaking for me was having younger students start to come and ask me questions and reaching that point in college where I felt like I was becoming a mentor to younger future engineers.

Jad Sobh: Good stuff. That's definitely some groundbreaking things that everybody's got going on. So, with that, thank you, Matthew, Matt and Caroline, for your time today and your insights. Don't forget to subscribe to our podcast on Apple, Spotify or wherever you listen to your podcast and thanks for listening to *Ground Breaking: Where Consulting Meets Innovation*.

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