IE ALUMNUS ERIC AYANEGUI ENGINEERS SAFETY, RELIABILITY AND LIFELONG RELATIONSHIPS

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It was 1995 and Eric Ayanegui (BSIE ’95) was an industrial engineering undergraduate student at the University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering. He found himself in unfamiliar surroundings – at the Cintas Facility and Uniform Services plant a few miles from UH – nervously presenting findings from his class project on improving quality control in their garment inspection department.

The presentation went well, you could say: Ayanegui was offered an internship at Cintas that day.

Now, 22 years later, he walks by the conference room inside Cintas and remembers standing at the head of a long conference table, delivering the first presentation of his professional career to the group of Cintas managers.

“This conference room has a lot of significance to me,” said Ayanegui, director of quality and engineering at Cintas Corporation. “This is where it all started.”

And where it has continued ever since. Through the opportunity afforded him as a Cullen College student, he was allowed into a growing company he is still working for today.

Combining engineering with industry and education

“I’m an extrovert – a very people-oriented guy,” Ayanegui said. Originally inspired to follow in his father’s footsteps by becoming a chemical engineer, a pamphlet on industrial engineering changed the course of his career forever.
The pamphlet explained what industrial engineering is, how the field focuses on people and processes. It listed the courses for the curriculum—human factors, facilities planning, analysis of industrial activities. It was a mix of engineering and business, which really attracted me, he said.

Ayanegui excelled in his engineering coursework, devoting himself to the field while working full-time to pay his way through school. I only went to one UH football game, he said. I had rent and tuition to pay. But that hard work brought a sense of maturity.

Project-based learning is the rule at the UH Cullen College of Engineering. In many undergraduate courses, students are assigned projects—often sponsored by industry—to find solutions to critical engineering challenges faced in the field.

While pursuing his bachelor’s degree, Ayanegui worked on projects proposed by NASA, a local machine shop and an oil company before tackling the quality control project at Cintas that landed him an internship with the company.

Working as an industrial engineering scholar at Cintas in his final year of college, Ayanegui took on projects streamlining and improving processes in the Houston plant.

As I was learning at UH, I was literally applying it at Cintas, Ayanegui said. And it definitely helped that I was getting paid for work that eventually ended up in my classroom.

In addition to the technical work he was doing at Cintas, Ayanegui said his supervisors provided him with opportunities for management training and leadership experience.

I learned about motivation, leadership, different engagement phases employees go through as they learn and how to get different personality types to be top performers. We are a very people intensive industry, so they teach you that very early on, he said.

The experience ignited Ayanegui’s passion for his field. My internship completely rounded me out and solidified the fact that industrial engineering was the degree for me.

Ayanegui’s focus and drive at Cintas caught the eyes of his supervisors, as did his ability to speak fluent Spanish. Cintas operates plants in North America, Canada, Mexico, Honduras and China, and Ayanegui’s way with people and lack of language barriers helped him quickly move up the company ranks.

Cintas and you

You might not know it yet, but Cintas is a company that likely touches many aspects of your workday.

The uniform you put on for work, the entrance mat you wipe your feet on in front of the office, the fire extinguisher you walk past in the hallway, the hand soap and paper towel dispenser you use in the public restroom? Cintas designs and distributes all of these products and much more, providing specialized services to businesses.

The company is one of the largest in the industry, employing more than 35,000 people to service more than 900,000 business customers. Cintas has grown tremendously in recent years, most recently acquiring its third largest competitor, G&K Services, last March. Known for their commitment to impeccable customer service and employee relations, Cintas has been named among the Most Admired Companies for eight consecutive years by Fortune Magazine.
At the center of Cintas’ success is its position that people always come first. “At Cintas, if you don’t have the people behind you the process isn’t going to work the way you want. The results won’t be there,” Ayanegui said.

And in that place where people and processes meet, Ayanegui thrives, employing his industrial engineering skills to increase the safety, quality, reliability and efficiency of the company’s processes while maximizing employees’ trust, happiness and room for personal and professional growth.

**Cougar climbing the corporation**

After his internship, Ayanegui was hired on full time as a production supervisor, overseeing plant processes and rolling out new ones to increase efficiency. From there he moved to the Cintas headquarters in Cincinnati to assist in the construction of new plants. Another promotion took Ayanegui to the manufacturing division, where he implemented process improvements at garment manufacturing plants in South America, Central America and Mexico before moving to California to manage plants in San Diego and Los Angeles.

“Around every corner when they’d change my assignment I had some sort of basic understanding of that topic from my coursework at UH, so my learning curve was shorter,” Ayanegui said.

In the early 2000s, Cintas began an effort to improve safety processes across the company’s global plants and offices. Ayanegui’s industrial engineering skills were once again put to the test when he accepted the position of regional health, safety and environmental coordinator in 2004—a job that would bring him back to the Cintas offices in Houston where he gave his first professional presentation as a University of Houston undergraduate student.

**Engineering safety, reliability and diversity**

Employing a combination of the technical engineering skills he gained in college and the leadership skills he learned during his time with Cintas, Ayanegui analyzed several processes to improve safety across all of its plants. Once new processes were developed, Ayanegui and the Cintas safety team were responsible for training employees and managers on the new safety measures being rolled out.

“I had to influence leaders to buy into new ideas. I was applying the leadership skills I learned over the years to people who didn’t directly report to me. I had to influence their decision-making process and earn their trust and buy-in,” Ayanegui said.

Since 2007, Cintas’ total recordable injury rate fell more than 67 percent, with 36 Cintas locations achieving the Voluntary Protection Program Star Certification, the highest safety designation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

For the last 10 years Ayanegui has served as director of operations engineering, providing technical direction for plants across North America and China. He currently oversees the professional development of engineers and develops and coordinates implementation of reliability programs to reduce equipment downtime and maximize throughput across Cintas’ plants.

To ensure the proper implementation of safety measures, Ayanegui provides hands-on training to Cintas’ over 500 plant technicians. As you can imagine, he’s learned a lot about leadership and management in his current role.

“One of the things that works well with me is I never see myself as your boss. I see myself as your most effective assistant,” he said. “I’m the person that will work really hard to make sure you have all the tools you need to be successful.”
Ayanegui is now applying his the skills and lessons he?s learned as a member of the company?s executive diversity committee, which is charged with ensuring its workforce, suppliers and customers are inclusive and ethnically diverse.

?Cintas has a very deliberate and active diversity initiative. I?m extremely proud to be involved in employee resource groups devoted to improving diversity at all levels,? he said.

The science of relationship building

It seems that one of Ayanegui?s natural strengths is bridge-building. At Cintas, Ayanegui connects-the-dots between high-level engineering principles and the people and processes they impact the most. He connects managers to the workers on the floor of the plants; he effectively communicates technical information to non-engineers, bridging the gap between the technical side and the people side of business operations.

So it only makes sense that Ayanegui would also build bridges between Cintas and the UH Cullen College of Engineering, where he actively recruits students and alumni for internships and full-time positions.

That?s not the only reason Ayanegui keeps coming back to his alma mater.

?Being around industrial engineering students at UH energizes me. It reminds me why I chose this field and fell in love with this work,? Ayanegui said. He serves as a member of the Industry Advisory Board for the Cullen College?s industrial engineering department and has served as the industry advisor for the Regional Student Conference of the Institute for Industrial and Systems Engineers.

In a recent workshop for students in the Program for Mastery of Engineering Studies (PROMES), Ayanegui gave a talk focusing on career advice: ?The biggest piece of advice I give to engineers early in their careers is to choose a company with a corporate culture that fits your personality and your values. It?s very important to find out what a company?s values are and how they align with yours.? In the case of Cintas, a company that prominently displays its corporate values, policies and goals on its website, Ayanegui couldn?t have found a better fit.

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