



# THINK SMALL

FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, SAYS **WILL JOHNSON**, IF YOU WANT TO PLAY A BIG PART EARLY ON IN YOUR CAREER IT'S WORTH CONSIDERING WORK AT SMALLER COMPANIES

**O**NE of the core competencies of chemical engineering graduates is the ability to work in a successful team but what if you are the only chemical engineer in this team? Don't worry: I have found that working in a small start-up company can be a hugely rewarding challenge to a graduate engineer.

My journey from being a final-year chemical engineering student to the position I find myself in today has been one that may be of great interest to current students. Like many of my peers I went into the final year of my degree with the 'world is my oyster' mentality. With a solid set of exam results behind me, I considered myself a strong candidate for any vacancy. This outlook quickly changed.

After going through a number of online applications and psychometric tests I found myself asking: Am I wasting my time here? Often I would spend my entire evenings compiling 500-word answers, thinking every word through carefully, only to find out a month later that I wasn't a suitable candidate. The frustrating thing was that I wouldn't receive a phone call to tell me that my application had been unsuccessful but an automatic standard message saying "do not reply to this email."

Despite moderate success, including invitations to assessment centres and further interviews, my perspective had changed. I didn't want to fill in questions by time trial, I wanted my perfectly-written CV to be read. I wanted an interview with the CEO, rather than the HR department.

This led me to adopt a new approach: applying to companies speculatively – which, while often going unnoticed, shows the sort of initiative that employers so desperately seek in new graduates. My new tactic was working well and I had a number of interviews lined up after my final exams but fate had it that my current job would come from an entirely different source.

One of my lecturers was the research director of a start-up company, Arvia

Technology, and asked me whether I would fancy applying for a role. After a quick look at the work the company does in wastewater treatment I passed on my CV and was promptly interviewed for a position. During a series of interviews I met with the technical director, commercial director and CEO; ultimately it was this sense of importance that convinced me to accept a position with them.

As a start-up nearing commercialisation, my role was product development engineer, a position that involved engineering principles right through to commercial activities. This spread of responsibilities was exactly what I had been looking for, allowing me to keep my future as open as possible.

As a result of joining a smaller company, I have engaged in high-importance meetings, met prospective clients, been on numerous business trips, and all alongside developing key chemical engineering competencies. Working in a team with managers, chemists and mechanical engineers is very satisfying and reinforces the value of the profession.

Needless to say, every day in a smaller company is completely different. Although there was no graduate scheme, my employers fully support Chartership and through IChemE I have been assigned a very competent mentor who will guide me through the process.

The metaphor I often use is this: would you rather be a small screw somewhere in a car or one of the wheels? One may be important to a small function of the vehicle but without the other the car would not go anywhere.

Although I am sure there are equally rewarding roles in many of the big companies, I cannot emphasise enough the potential of small companies. We continue to hear about dramatic cutbacks made by the largest employers here in the UK and rises in graduate unemployment, I wonder whether SMEs and start-ups could be the answer.

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