



# BRIDGING THE GAP

**ENGINEER STIJN MOENS**  
EXPLAINS THE BENEFITS  
TO BE HAD FROM LEARNING  
ABOUT THE BUSINESS END  
OF YOUR VOCATION BEFORE  
ENTERING THE WORLD  
OF WORK

**Y**OU'RE approaching the end of your chemical engineering degree. You're on course for a decent grade, so you've got several choices – you can apply for jobs, or go for a Masters or PhD in engineering. Or, like me, you could broaden your experience and do a Masters degree in a completely different discipline before entering the engineering workplace.

When I was faced with one of the most daunting decisions of my life, I had the choice between finding work when the job market was particularly bad, or devoting the next four years of my life to an engineering PhD. In the event, I opted for a curveball third option – an MSc in managerial and financial economics, and haven't looked back since. What at first seemed like a random, incompatible career move made perfect sense to me at the time, and does so even more in hindsight.

I first realised I could improve on my soft skills during my undergraduate summer internship at a paper manufacturing plant in Manchester, UK. Working in that industrial business context I realised the importance of the interaction between the engineering needs and wants, and those of the business. I also had some trouble integrating into my team, as I was by far

the youngest there, as well as the only intern, not to mention naturally somewhat reserved. I realised how difficult it was to work with and relate to types of people I do not normally encounter, with very different mind-sets and perspectives.

There are three main advantages to studying a business or economics Masters after your engineering degree: the hard skills you pick up, the soft skills, and the interactions with people with very different mind-sets and backgrounds.

## HARD AND SOFT SKILLS

So how was it, being the only engineer on a course studying managerial and financial economics? Well, it was certainly an intellectual challenge – but it broadened my academic horizon and provided a way to truly learn about subjects in a totally different discipline. Learning about strategy implementation and change, industrial organisation, financial economics and monetary policy, corporate finance, microeconomics and behavioural economics was very different, but no less useful than learning about engineering topics.

It allowed me to begin to grasp the overarching business principles ultimately guiding every successful company.

Engineering decisions do not solely adhere to physical constraints, but also to economic constraints. And because the engineering and manufacturing industries play such an important role in modern-day society, it is not unlikely that you will come across a more directly pertinent course as well – the energy and finance certificate I did as part of my degree has certainly helped me both to get the job I have today as a crude oil analyst and to keep doors open for my next role.

There are several different soft skills you will also pick up doing a business degree. First of all, it will expose you to different ways of approaching a problem, and introduce you to a different way of thinking. I have found that a lot of emphasis was placed on the structure of answers, and the way problems are tackled, rather than the final solution. Presentation skills are also both a prominent and another useful string to your bow. Furthermore, you will get job-hunting training, like the best way to find and apply for jobs, the best way to write a CV and covering letter, and how to do a successful interview. I've found all these transferrable soft skills really useful during the job hunt and in my professional career to date.

### LEARNING FROM PEERS

Finally, some of the most important lessons I've picked up have come not from the lecturers, but from my classmates. I found that my peers in the programme came from a wide variety of backgrounds, each one bringing a very different skill set. Merely interacting and socialising with people you would not normally deal with is a learning opportunity in itself, and can be a very useful skill in a business context.

Having a network of friends beyond the engineering world also opens up your eyes to different opportunities, and may come in handy in a professional sense as your career develops.

I definitely feel doing a business degree after a chemical engineering degree has been an invaluable experience, and while its influence in my current role is more indirect than direct, it has already opened doors for me in terms of the different types of roles I can look at as my career progresses. It's definitely worth considering as an alternative to the more obvious choices.

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MERELY INTERACTING AND SOCIALISING WITH PEOPLE YOU WOULD NOT NORMALLY DEAL WITH IS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY IN ITSELF, AND CAN BE A VERY USEFUL SKILL IN A BUSINESS CONTEXT. HAVING A NETWORK OF FRIENDS BEYOND THE ENGINEERING WORLD ALSO OPENS UP YOUR EYES TO DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES.



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