



**PETER HARDING OFFERS
SOME SOUND ADVICE FOR
NEW GRADUATES ENTERING
THE WORLD OF WORK**

REMEMBER it as vividly as if it was yesterday. It was 07:10 on Monday 6 September 2010 when my alarm clock sounded the death knell to my life as a student, shaking me roughly into the world of work. It was approximately ten seconds later when the knot which had been steadily growing in the pit of my stomach over the past week tightened, as I realised the significance of the date staring at me from the side of the bed.

As I carried out (what was to become) my morning routine to prepare myself for work the self-doubt gremlins emerged from their slumber and started throwing hand-grenades into my conscious mind: from the generic “what if I don’t get on with my boss?” through to the ridiculous “what if they ask me to generate a model for three-dimensional transient two-phase flow analysis?” Thankfully neither of these premonitions turned into reality and I have enjoyed a successful start to my career. I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to work in a wide variety of roles across multiple manufacturing sites for GSK:

I co-ordinated recruitment onto the GSK manufacturing graduate programme in 2012 and was recently awarded the 2014 BASF Young Ambassador Award for the Chemical Industries Association (CIA).

Looking back, nearly four years on from that life-changing day, here is some advice I wish I had been given, which would have helped placate those nagging self-doubts. Advice which I am now passing on, to hopefully save any new graduates from experiencing those same first-day nerves.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

We’re often told “You only get one chance to make a good first impression”. Whilst technically true, thankfully, for those of us who have the unfortunate knack of making foot-in-mouth comments, making a good *long-lasting* impression at work takes more than a single meeting.

However, starting off a working relationship by leaving colleagues with a positive impression certainly makes the process of gaining their respect easier. I have been in four different roles at three

different manufacturing sites over the last four years; making a good impression is still difficult and requires a lot of time and effort. Reaching the stage where people respect your opinion will grow organically over time, by doing a good job and delivering on your objectives. If you succeed in this, colleagues' respect for you will grow and you will find you have made a good impression without having to force the issue.

Confidence is a powerful ally in creating this impression. If you are confident in your own abilities, others will be too. However, this must be tempered with the acknowledgment that no one knows it all, and especially when embarking upon a graduate role for the first time it is expected that there will be gaps in your knowledge. The key is not being afraid to admit to these gaps. The self-awareness that this demonstrates will help you to reinforce the competent image that you have generated though delivering your objectives, and generate a long-lasting impression with colleagues and key stakeholders in your career.

FINDING THE RIGHT MENTOR

We all have mentors. Friends or family to whom we turn for advice; someone whose opinion we value. I had one such mentor who helped me immensely during my final year of university when I was considering which direction I wanted my career to take. Without his advice and support I have no doubt that I would have made a number of key decisions in my life differently.

The beauty of having a mentor is that they can draw on their own experiences in life and approach a problem which is seemingly unfathomable to you from a completely different angle. In the process, if you are lucky, the conversation will open up a whole new avenue of options which you may not have considered.

The most memorable conversation I had with a mentor, which demonstrates the power of the relationship, was during my final year at university. Whilst deciding which job offer to accept, I informed the companies involved that I would contact them within a few days; the need to make a decision was imminent. I discussed with my mentor my thoughts on the various companies and industries and the key criteria I was using to differentiate between the offers. It was here that the power of the mentoring relationship was perfectly highlighted when it was pointed out that in the long term it is not the financial rewards which keep you at a company and make you strive to maximise your potential, but it is the working ethos. If you connect with the company on this level then you will enjoy your work and both parties will benefit.

Adding this advice to my selection criteria led me to my final decision.

Mentors in the workplace can have exactly the same impact. They can develop either organically or through a company mentoring scheme and are a two-way thing, with benefits for both parties, which may even develop into friendships. However, the key point is that advice from mentors, although useful, may not always be right in your situation. The role of a mentor is not to make decisions for you, but the discussions you have should lead to you making a more informed, well-rounded decision.

NETWORKING ISN'T A DIRTY WORD

I used to hate the thought of networking. Approaching strangers, engaging them in conversation in the hope of exchanging business cards did not seem like my idea of fun.

Thankfully, networking is not as painful as I imagined. As a graduate, the opportunity to build a network is around every corner. This will initially be with other graduates, relationships will be forged with colleagues in each department or site at which you work; furthermore you will meet many people on courses, at conferences or on school and university visits.

Once you have built a network you will find yourself using it on a routine basis to find out best practice, understand solutions to challenges you are trying to overcome and keep informed of new opportunities. Without a powerful network it is far more difficult to operate in an efficient manner in business.

STANDING OUT

I firmly believe that companies should ask their graduates to devote a portion of their time to one thing - working with local communities to foster a better understanding of the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) industries. The STEM ambassador programme in the UK (www.stemnet.org.uk) is one such scheme which has the added benefit of stretching its members outside of their core role at work.

It takes no more than a few hours to go to a local school, college or university and run a workshop with the students. Doing this type of work as a graduate is phenomenally rewarding not only for yourself, your company, and the industry but more importantly the students. From a personal point of view you will broaden your communication and presentation skills; if you can successfully go into a school and hold the attention of a group of teenagers for an hour, speaking to senior leaders at work will pose no problem. These new skills will also help your employer. The

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industry will benefit as you will break down the misconceptions which some students (and teachers) may hold.

However, the key benefit is that you may inspire some students to consider studying STEM subjects which they had previously dismissed. If every graduate manages to do this a few times then the level of talent we will see entering STEM-based industry will help to secure its long-term future.

If you want to prove to senior leaders at your company that you are committed to the industry, have good organisational skills and can approach problems strategically, then offering to coordinate visits or recruitment workshops for students or undergraduates can be extremely rewarding. If you prove yourself successful, it could lead to enhanced responsibility earlier in your career.

MAKING YOUR MARK

If you are reading this as an undergraduate then hopefully when you wake up on your first day at work you will be able to think back to this article, remember the advice within it and banish any self-doubts: make a long lasting impression by delivering your objectives with confidence, tempered with self awareness; build a strong relationship with a mentor you trust, listen to their advice and then make your own decision based on all of the facts; integrate networking into your daily life and use this to overcome challenges; and stand out by coordinating programmes outside of your core role.

If you manage to do this then I am sure that you will be able to take full advantage of the numerous opportunities for growth and self-development, enabling you to flourish during the rest of your career.

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