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November 24, 2016

ABE 29000

Professional Interview

I interviewed my father, David Atherton, the Vice President of Engineering and Technology for Unilever for my professional interview on Wednesday, November 23, 2016. My dad has always been my hero and role model, and I would like to be like him when I am older, which is why I chose him for my professional interview. Though I do not want to go into chemical engineering, I am considering working my way up through the executive side of a company with my engineering background.

David is “a degreed engineer, educated to the level of Master of Engineering” at Nottingham University, in Nottingham, England. He is also a professionally chartered engineer in the United Kingdom, which like ABET Accreditation in the United States, allows him to design and practice certain things as an engineer, though the UK accreditation does not transfer to the United States. As previously stated, he is the Vice President of Engineering for a Fortune 50 Company.

Prior to his current role, he has been an “operations manager in a factory”, an “innovation commercialization manager”, which helps convert new products from research labs to be manufactured in factories, “a TPM leader”, which is a “Total Productive Manufacturing” leader that works with continuous improvement, a “strategic project manager” that was involved in “reconfiguring [Unilever’s] manufacturing network and running the investment projects”, and finally he has been an “engineering and technology manager” who investigates new ways to do things and plans capital projects.

He decided on Chemical Engineering when he was in high school because he “was always mathematical and technical.” He claims that “it was kind of obvious that [he] would do something to do with numbers and science, but [he] didn’t want to be a scientist. [He] wanted to do something more practical.” He “kind of just fell into chemical and process engineering” because he didn’t want to be a civil or mechanical engineer, was “never very good at the electrical bits”, and liked chemistry. He also had the chance to talk to someone who had recently graduated from university as an engineer, which helped him make his decision about his career path. From there, he prepared by choosing classes that were “scientific and mathematical, physics and chemistry based”. Once at Nottingham University, he “got the chance to do an internship using [his] chemical engineering experience.” After graduation, he applied to companies looking for chemical engineering students and got a place on the Unilever Engineering Management Training Program.

In his current role, he works with what he calls “manufacturing and technology development and equipment development work.” When Unilever needs “a new way to make a product faster, or cheaper, or to a higher quality”, he works with engineers to develop the equipment to do so. He is also involved in the “management of Unilever’s capital investment program” and helps determine “where does the company invest money and how much money it can invest.” He works with research and development teams on “new products and new package innovation programs.” He works “a lot with engineers themselves on their skills and personal development.” Finally, he works with other parts of Unilever’s organization to figure out “what engineering needs to do to enable [the other parts] to function properly.”

Over the years he has had several different mentors. In the earliest parts of his career one “really helped [him] to be an engineer and really helped [him] understand what is the role of a good engineer and how engineers add value to Unilever.” When he was in a manufacturing role, he had mentors help him develop the skills to “manage and lead people”. In the last few roles he has had, his former boss, Nicola Roube helped him in “understanding how you build integrated business strategy and technical strategy” in order to “create brand differentiating capabilities” for a “competitive advantage.” He has also had many mentees. “Lots of people who have worked for [him] and then gone on to different jobs have stayed in touch.” He has helped them with the new challenges and questions that they face.

When asked about the most rewarding aspects of his career, he cited “the people side” of the job, “more than the engineering side.” He enjoys “helping people exceed their personal expectations, perform beyond levels they thought they could perform, and helping them get to the next steps in their career.” This is something I have seen in him growing up, as he has always pushed me to be the best I can be and reach new levels in my own capabilities. This is a trait I admire in him, and I hope to be able to apply to my own career, wherever I end up.

The advice he gave me as an engineering sophomore was his take on what the future world will look like. He says “it will look very different from the industrial world that [he’s] grown up in.” He doesn’t think companies “will operate like they do today.” He believes that “engineers and people with good technical skills will be very high in demand, so you’ve got to be prepared to work with anybody in the world.” He also iterated that “the ability to work in different industries and think creatively and innovatively will be more important than it ever has been.” Finally, he believes that the future is not in big business, but in “being prepared to be your own company, creating your own brand, your own competitive differentiation.”

His final words for my interview were inspiring ones about the impact of engineering on the world. He says this:

“Whether it’s the year 2050 or it’s the year 1750, engineers are the people who change the world. So be it, James Watt who invented the steam engine, or Michael Faraday who invented the electric motor, engineers transform the world.”

He went on to talk about how things we take for granted, such as plumbing systems, toilets, and electrical power distribution are all “massive engineering inventions.” Without these, “our quality of life would be impossible.” He claimed that, though “everyone talks about the internet being the great one, the internet is an outcome of all those things.” He talked about countries without plumbing systems, toilets, and electrical power distribution aren’t worried about not having the internet as well. It’s the basics which we take for granted that “engineers have done which have really transformed the world.” His final piece of advice to me was “think transformatively, not incrementally.”