

AT THE CROSSROADS:

TECHNICAL
MANAGERIAL

Technical vs. Managerial Careers and
the Common Ground for the Road Ahead

Lisa Silipigno-O'Brien

DAILY WE FIND OURSELVES AT A CROSSROADS BECAUSE WE HAVE TO MAKE DECISIONS. Although it is true that some of these decisions can affect or influence our future career paths, the outcomes are not irrevocable. In other words, a single “good” career pick made today does not necessarily predetermine a successful career in the future.

Technical and managerial career paths are not mutually exclusive. On the extreme ends of the job spectrum in the oil and gas industry there are unique talents like pure research or general manager. However, for the 80 or 90% of technical management roles in between, there is significant common ground with respect to the journey, accomplishments, recognition, and relative success.

All kinds of research are available that promote particular career paths. Numerous publications offer in-depth academic studies of industry employment trends, statistical compensation analyses, updates on the state of engineering and science graduates around the globe, the significance of personality profiling, the potential relevance of birth order, the differences in generations (baby boomers vs. millennials), the value of diversity and inclusion, the effectiveness of mentoring programs, and even attempts to plot career roadmaps Feng Shui-style. These types of studies do offer insight and encouragement as well

as being catalysts for self-introspection, awareness, and observation. They often provide a framework or structure that so many of us need or believe we need to organize, plan, and control our lives. They do their best to: explain “why” people act the way they do, delineate “who” might have natural abilities or aptitudes, and ultimately attempt to predict future behaviors. However, I do not believe that any one of them present a magic bullet, right answer, or single path to success.

In this article, I want to share a more personal perspective—a series of beliefs that has been compiled from dozens of people in the oil and gas industry, who survived, succeeded, persevered, excelled, struggled, thrived, and, in due course, influenced our industry and achieved success during the past 40 years.

From their stories and observations, there are at least seven ideas that define some common ground among their career experiences and aspirations. These concepts are: be patient, take risks, love what you do, be good at what you do, be cognizant of industry challenges and company trends, be aware that burnout can happen, and acknowledge that your definition of success will change over time.

BE PATIENT. Find comfort in not knowing exactly what the future

holds. Acknowledge that it is not possible to be an expert immediately. Be flexible and understand the various cycles in the industry, as well as stages in your personal life.

Having a plan, direction, and goal in mind is great. A plan will give you a short-term course of action. However, there are so many unknowns and external factors that can influence the future. If you strictly focus on a single ambition, you could miss another great opportunity or lose your focus and direction when your desired ambition does not come to fruition.

Many of us have experienced impatience with our situations. It takes time to really understand the importance of making peace with your personal constraints (family, financial, mobility, interests, etc). At the same time, the job market and demand for our specific skills are relative and we need to adjust to the constant changes in technology and fluctuations in the energy business.

Like most of the people whom I spoke with, I know that I have been impatient at points in my career. I wanted to fix everything that frustrated me during my first three years working in the field. I knew that I had the energy and desire to act, but I did not have enough knowledge, self-discipline, or a professional network to transform things. Taking literal notes of these situations earlier in my career has kept me grounded

and sympathetic to the challenges that my coworkers face on wellsites today. Now that I have both depth and breadth of experiences, I am in a much more influential position to effect change.

TAKE RISKS. Embrace unconventional opportunities. Real work experience ultimately trumps academics.

When it comes to career paths, do not think that you are automatically bound by your educational degree. It is understandable to look for a return on your investment from your college days. However, sometimes people find themselves in jobs that are not aligned with their course of study, and this can be frustrating. However, if you chose to embrace a role that differs from your course of study and dedicate 110% to it, you will always learn something. Maybe you will learn, "I love doing this," and this will bring you new opportunities. Or perhaps you will realize that you really can do something that is outside of your comfort zone. Either way, you will grow and develop not only as a contributing employee but as a person.

Relying on your academic degree alone will not propel you to your next job or promotion. Your real work experience offers much more value to a company than any particular degree, license, or certification. The best learning instrument often is on-the-job training. By building teams, managing projects, making mistakes, and presenting ideas, you will be best prepared to lead people and effect change.

Toward the beginning of their careers, some whom I spoke with felt apprehension. Some of their fears were that time was just passing; that they were missing something in life; that their colleagues were moving up the ladder faster than they were; they doubted their last decision; or they just knew that they needed a change. Author Susan Jeffers refers to a person's sense of fear, guilt, and other genuine emotions, and the ability to act in accordance with it in her book, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*.

One manager shared that it is tough for him to terminate employees. This feeling or fear kept him from accepting a management role earlier in his career. As he realized how this anxiety was affecting him, he decided to embrace that emotion and channel his efforts to train and develop his employees in such a way that they either excelled on his team or they discovered, in a

positive way, that they had talents that fit better outside of his organization.

Among the people I talked with, there was general agreement that the one job they least expected to be asked to do, or even the role they enjoyed the least, was the job from which they learned the most and, more importantly, they learned something about themselves. For many years I avoided the idea of a personnel position within my company. I had a perception that taking on a "soft skill" role would not be challenging enough for me. I soon learned just how rewarding my personal and professional life could be by coaching others to develop in their jobs and careers. Eventually I realized, like many others, that my individual strengths and advantages in the market place were a direct result of my unique experiences and career choices.

LOVE WHAT YOU DO. Recognize your natural abilities and interests. Have a passion for what you do. Do not waste your energy by constantly comparing yourself to others.

Comparing yourself to others is not the same as being competitive. Competition creates a business advantage. Being competitive is training yourself to be the best and most effective that you can be. When you win, your efforts and talents are rewarded. You are uniquely wired and will have your own passions in life.

When you accept your natural talents, find a way to pursue them so that they add value to you and the business. When you have passion for what you do, you will uncover a bountiful source of energy to get things done. One person whom I spoke with really enjoyed being a project manager. He enjoyed being in direct contact with the new gadgets as well as constantly forming new teams and developing people. He believed that his solid engineering and design background gave him a unique ability to relate to the technical challenges that team members encountered. As a result, he has chosen to build on his strengths and interests by continuing to manage bigger and more unique product development projects and influencing the global market.

BE GOOD AT WHAT YOU DO. Continuously educate yourself. Be actively curious. Share your knowledge with others.

The transition from academia to

the working world is not always easy. While pursuing an education, success is calculated by completing courses, achieving grades, surpassing scores, and defending theses. These metrics do not translate into key performance indicators in business. Bottom line, you have to know "your stuff" to make an impact and learning "your stuff" just takes practice.

Expand upon your academic background by actually doing the work and making the mistakes. Talk with people, make decisions, read books, and take courses. It is so important in engineering and science to achieve a deep understanding of your core fundamental technologies. Not only do you need to know the basics, you need to know how to apply the basics.

By having a genuine curiosity

"When you have a passion for what you do, you will uncover a bountiful source of energy to get things done."

and asking lots of questions about things in your core field as well as topics outside of your area, you will be able to understand the big picture and see how your hard work fits into the success of the whole team.

Sharing your knowledge and experience with others is one way to reinforce your own understanding of a particular topic. It also affords a chance for you to appreciate varying perspectives.

Typically, when I take on a new job I have one of a couple of targets in mind. Either I create such value in the role that my company eventually adds resources or people to the effort or I engineer and design my tasks in a way that processes are automated or delegated to others, enriching

their experience, and the need for my specific position eventually goes away.

BE COGNIZANT OF INDUSTRY CHALLENGES AND COMPANY TRENDS. Have a line of sight.

Match yourself with a suitable company culture. Appreciate the past for its essential lessons.

There are all sorts of reasons why people engage themselves at work and devote so much time and energy. Numerous surveys and research claim that when there is a line of sight among employee performance and company performance and direction, then people have a higher job satisfaction. So you can either wait for your managers to push information to you that they think you need or you can ask for it. By proactively seeking information about your company and the industry, not only will you be the first to learn things like how commodity futures, LNG imports, rig count, or the local weather affects business activity, you will also be able to contribute on a higher level.

Each company does have its own signature company culture. You can read about it in published value, vision, or mission statements. You can observe it from the quality of work the company delivers. You can hear it by the way customers and vendors speak of the organization. You can experience it by the way colleagues and managers interact with you. Ultimately, you want to be aware of the culture and environment where you work and match it with your own ideals and personality.

BE AWARE THAT BURNOUT CAN HAPPEN. Burnout—generally defined as long-term exhaustion and diminished interest—will affect your work, your personal relationships, your career, and your health.

Maslach and Leiter, in their book, *The Truth about Burnout* say that three things happen when you burn out:

you become chronically exhausted, cynical and detached from your work, and feel increasingly ineffective on the job. Burnout can come from several work-related factors, including staying in the same role too long, fighting a job for which you were not a natural fit, becoming passive or complacent with your knowledge and skills, unreasonable job demands, or even by being impatient and not experiencing the situation for what it is worth.

More than one person realized in

hindsight that there were periods in their careers where they suffered burnout. Most of them admitted that it was self-inflicted. One person tried hard to be something that he was not, but mistakenly felt that he had to do it to be successful. Another person experienced significant frustration because he continued to work very hard as an individual contributor after he was promoted to a higher-level job. His days got longer and longer and his personal life disappeared. In that role, he finally learned how to transition from being action-oriented, as an individual contributor, to balancing relationships and time, as a manager.

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOUR DEFINITION OF SUCCESS WILL CHANGE OVER TIME. Success is a moving target. Your definition of success will be very different from everyone else around you. Compromise and sacrifice will be required along the way.

So what did you want to be when you grew up? Maybe you said an engineer, a scientist, a manager or executive. As time has passed, so too may have your responses shifted to: "be successful;" "be happy;" "be financially independent;" and "be a good parent, spouse, or friend." The more comfortable you are with your decisions along the way, the more likely you will realize your accomplishments.

If you define your success by the standards of others, you might find yourself constantly searching for something that you won't find fulfilling at the end of the day. In one of Stephen Covey's analogies in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he refers to an ambitious person who climbed the ladder only to realize that when she got to the top, the ladder was against the wrong wall.

Life and work are filled with compromises. Depending on whom I spoke with, the metrics for success included elements of money, power, job title, respect, acknowledgement, decision making, being influential, making an impact, a level

of excitement, or just self-satisfaction of a job well done. Making any one of them the single priority typically results in sacrificing some of the others.

Almost 15 years ago, I made a decision to devote all my attention to my career. I finished my technical training faster than my colleagues, I was a front line manager for a multimillion-dollar business by the age of 26, and, by my sixth year in work, I had traveled to many oilfield locations around the world such as the North Sea, Colombia, Abu Dhabi, and Alaska. This was my definition of success.

About 8 years ago, I met a wonderful man and got married. According to my traditional parents' expectations, this was the definition of success. I find it interesting that it has taken me almost a decade to figure out that a successful marriage requires much more effort than a text message when I am running late, an email when I was flying out of town again, or a handwritten note asking him to fix the sink. In my current dual-career situation, surrounded by an environment of high divorce rates and work/life imbalance, the reality that my husband and I continue to grow in our relationship is what I now define as success.

The common ground for every single person who shared their experience with me was that they really just had to experience the career rollercoaster ride for themselves. They acknowledged that someone probably gave them similar career advice when they first started to work, but they were not able to absorb it in word form alone. So on they went with their career journeys in the oil and gas industry. By overcoming the perception barrier that they had to be either technical or managerial, they successfully navigated an array of technical management jobs. When I asked them if they had any regrets, all of them responded with the same answer, "I'd do it all over again in the same way." **TWA**



Lisa Silipigno-O'Brien is the Career and Staffing Manager for Schlumberger Oilfield Services in North America. Over the past 14 years, she has held a variety of technical and managerial roles in the industry. She started as a wireline field engineer in the Gulf of Mexico and moved on to front-line management; product development and commercial application of production-logging services; technical customer support; account management; and working with large teams on training, development, and staffing programs. Along the way, she became licensed as a professional engineer in petroleum engineering and certified as a Senior Professional in Human Resources.