



What I Wish I had Known When I Graduated from College

BY JILL S. TIETJEN, P.E., VIRGINIA ALPHA '76

Above: Final graduation exercises at the University of Virginia.
Image Credit: Rob Seal, UVA School of Continuing & Professional Studies

INTRODUCTION

Do you really get wiser as you get older? Is it true that good judgment is the result of experience – and experience is the result of bad judgment (a paraphrase of Mark Twain)? What I do know is that I have learned a lot over the course of my life and career. Would I have listened if someone had tried to tell me years ago about the nuggets they had learned through hard experience? Maybe or maybe not. But I am hopeful that there is at least one kernel of knowledge in this article that will benefit you – the reader. I have provided what I wish I had known when I graduated from college and some lessons learned over the course of my life.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication skills are first on my list, and in this article, because in my opinion they are the most critical. And, contrary to what many of us think, there are actually three important communication skills: writing, speaking, and the key communication skill — LISTENING.

In caveman days (that is, when I was going to college), engineers didn't think they needed to learn how to communicate. They were wrong. Even if you work in a highly technical job, you will need to be able to sell your ideas – to your boss, to your team, maybe to higher level management. How will you do this? — through some form of communication that might include presentations, reports, memos, emails, letters, proposals, or business plans.

The wise individual will then take every opportunity presented – and make more as necessary – to improve their writing, speaking, and listening skills. Professional societies are a great place to start; you can work on their newsletter, write technical articles, or develop all three communication skills through working on a committee. There might even be speaking opportunities through the professional society – either in the schools or through presentations of technical topics.

If you want to improve your speaking skills, find a Toastmasters to join. Take advantage of any class or workshop offered by or through your place of employment or at a local university or community college.

MOTIVATION

In real estate, the three most important words are location, location, location. In the workforce, the three most important words are motivation, motivation, motivation. What do employers look for in their hiring process – basic skills . . . and motivation. For a book on leadership that I have been writing in 2024, the 28 CEOs interviewed all said the same thing – working hard and producing excellent results is not optional. This is a basic requirement for being promoted and moving forward in your career.

Look at your personal level of motivation. What are you doing besides whatever your job is (whether that is being an undergraduate or graduate student or being out in the workforce)?

Do you act on your passions – play a musical instrument, volunteer at the humane society or at Ronald McDonald House, hold newborns at the neonatal intensive care unit, coach a soccer team, serve as a Scout troop leader? If not, why not? What could you learn and how might that benefit you in your life and career? I found that I have gotten more out than what I put in for every “extracurricular” activity in which I’ve been involved.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES

I love to quote Thomas Edison on this one – “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” Yet, taking advantage of opportunity has been a key attribute of my life and career. My ebook in the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers’ Women in Engineering series is titled “Recognizing and Taking Advantage of Opportunities.” A friend of mine said the title really should have been “Seize Opportunities.” Keep your eyes and ears – and heart – open. You have to first recognize an opportunity *before* you can capitalize on it.

If the organization that employs you provides a tuition reimbursement program or an in-house series of classes through their “university” – take advantage of those opportunities. While working for Duke Power, I was trained as a member of the Speaker’s Bureau to make presentations to community groups. That training has been invaluable in almost every area of my life, including the many years spent as an expert witness and the speaking associated with marketing my books. I earned my MBA at night while employed at Duke Power, utilizing their tuition reimbursement program. Every job and every board seat I have had after leaving Duke Power required that MBA and the skills I learned while earning the degree have been invaluable.

NETWORK

I cannot overemphasize how important a skill networking is. Every job I’ve had for the last thirty years, almost every speaking opportunity, and basically every book I have written occurred because of networking.

The three steps of networking are 1) connect, 2) don’t lose touch, and 3) give and get.

Connect: Meet all of the people you can in your company, your industry, your neighborhood, professional organizations, through the sports you play, and your religious affiliation. Build RELATIONSHIPS with these people. You never know when someone you have met at a conference or through one of your activities outside of work may lead you to a job prospect or other type of opportunity. Participate in the golf league or the tennis ladder. Make presentations at conferences or serve as a member of a panel discussion. Doing so gives you more visibility than sitting in the audience; therefore meeting more people. They will even seek you out.

Don’t lose touch: The networking I am talking about here is the kind that results through relationships. Thus, it is incumbent on you to not lose touch. I am famous for sending newspaper articles (or links to newspaper articles) within my circle. I send birthday cards. I send notes (and never, ever, forget to send a thank you note when it is appropriate). Text someone when you find something you think they would be interested in. Maintain the relationship.

Give and get: Remember that networking is a two-way street. Yes, you might be interested in getting a job or a referral but you must also give in order for there to be a relationship. Another word for getting is receiving and many of us are particularly bad at receiving help from other people. Remember that no one can give to you if you are not able or willing to receive. Receiving might be a good skill for you to practice.

SENSE OF HUMOR

I was on a panel years ago with two other technical women and we were chronicling for a non-technical audience many of the issues that we faced in our work and lives. One of the audience members came up to us afterwards and said what marvelous senses of humor we had. I don’t quite know how anyone survives without one.

One of my lessons learned in life is that everyone will face adversity, **absolutely everyone**. Attitude is important. One of the key ways to face that adversity and to adjust your attitude is to use your sense of humor; if you don’t have one, you need to develop one. Trust me, it will make your life easier. Getting angry and upset doesn’t make the situation any better. But the effort to find something humorous in your situation will help it pass more quickly and will make you feel better as well.

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LOOK OUT FOR #1

You must look out for your own interests – everyone else is looking after themselves. Know that although your job performance may be excellent, economic forces may still mean that you might get laid off. Be thinking about what is just around the corner. Shortly after I moved to Denver in 1981, the energy boom started to recede and layoffs became common in the industry. I found another job shortly before I would have been laid off. Be aware at all times of other opportunities available in the market that you could be considered for. Don't get complacent – no one is irreplaceable.

CORPORATE POLITICS

Many engineers would prefer not to get anywhere near corporate politics. But, alas, that is not life. Politics are a part of the work environment – actually politics play a huge role in many families as well – and I'm not just talking about the major political parties. As long as there are three people in any situation, two can always gang up against the other one, so there are always politics.

Teamwork is exceedingly important. Almost all of your projects will be done in concert with team members. And in any team, politics – which is understanding and working with people – really will be part of the scene. It is very important for you to understand how to get things done. If playing the corporate game is required, and you don't play, you will not get the rewards that go with playing the game.

GRASS IS GREENER

Why is it that whenever we get in a line at the grocery store, the airport, or wherever, the other line always seems to move faster? Someone else's job, someone else's organization, someone else's field of employment may often look better than your current situation. Sometimes, the grass IS greener on the other side of the fence; sometimes it is a lot browner.

No matter what job you're in, there will probably always be something, little or big, that will not sit right with you. One of my Society of Women Engineers' colleagues calls these things "warts."

They include the people you work with, the work that you are actually asked to do, the projects that you work on, and your boss's management style.

Rest assured that in almost every single instance, there will be something that you just don't care for in your current employment situation. While it's the normal human condition to complain, you do need to look at the warts and decide how significant they are. Is it something that you can live with or do these warts mean that it is time for you to look on the other side of the fence?

SPEAK UP ABOUT YOUR ABILITIES

Have you designed a product that became a best seller? Was your cost-saving idea implemented and shown to be effective? Have you recently published a paper in your industry's premiere trade journal? Make sure that your boss knows about it. Write an email or have a conversation with your boss (those old communication skills again). If you don't tell your boss, chances are no one else will either and then how will your boss know?

Do you think it is time for you to get a promotion and nothing (to your knowledge) has been done about it? Speak to your boss. Find out if you have been considered. If not, find out what the requirements for the next level are. If you are not currently meeting those requirements, find out what you can do specifically to attain that level of performance which would indicate that you are ready for that promotion.

Don't overdo it though. Make sure that your "tooting your own horn" has a reasonable basis. Save this technique for special occasions.

CHOICE NOT CHANCE

My friend, Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, the former President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the first African American woman to receive a Ph.D. from MIT, and an inductee into the National Women's Hall of Fame, said her life philosophy was to ensure that choice not chance determined her destiny. She did not allow her skin color or her gender to impede her life and career progress. She made choices to ensure that chances did not limit her.

Physical characteristics can't and shouldn't determine your life path. They occurred by chance: you inherited them from your parents (and you didn't get to choose your parents!). Attitude. Work ethic. Motivation. These characteristics are your choice. By making choices, and not allowing chance to rule your life, you will determine your own destiny.

CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT

Like most people, I have somewhat of an aversion to change. Yet change is the only constant in our lives. When you think about change remember this – the sun rises and sets at a different time EVERY DAY. As I like to say, as soon as you think you know all of the answers, all of the questions change.

Jill delivers her keynote address at the 2019 Tau Beta Pi Convention in Denver, Colorado.



“IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT NOT MAKING A DECISION IS ACTUALLY MAKING THE DECISION TO LET EVENTS AND OTHER PEOPLE CONTROL YOUR LIFE AND DESTINY.”

DETERMINE YOUR PATH

Many years ago, one of my work colleagues and I were having a discussion about our futures and where we were headed. He told me about the classic interchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll:

Alice: I was just wondering if you could help me find my way.

Cheshire Cat: Well that depends on where you want to get to.

Alice: Oh, it really doesn't matter, as long as...

Cheshire Cat: Then it really doesn't matter which way you go.

Alice: ... so long as I get somewhere!

Cheshire Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if you only walk long enough.

The bottom line – if you don't know where you are headed then any path or any action or any direction will get you there. And, it is very important to remember that not making a decision is actually making the decision to let events and other people control your life and destiny.

TAKE RISKS

As we mature in our lives, many of us become risk averse. Yet, as a baby, you learned to walk – and it didn't happen the first time you tried. Maybe you were one of those lucky kids who didn't fall off your bike the first time you tried to ride it. I know the first time I snow skied, I fell so often I was covered with bruises from stem to stern – but yet a few years later I moved to Denver in order to be able to ski.

Why can't we think more like we did when we were younger as we face risks in our adult lives? It can be amazing what happens when you take those risks. What types of risks am I talking about? Oh, just things like getting married, having children, moving to a different location, taking a new job, taking a new direction in your life. There are many possibilities.

If anyone had told me in 1994, when I got divorced the first time and actually started thinking about the direction I wanted my life to take, where I would be today, I would have rolled on the floor laughing. But taking those risks has been very worthwhile – moving to Denver, changing jobs, remarrying after my first husband moved out on our 18th wedding anniversary (you can't make this stuff up), changing career paths, and getting divorced a second time. By the way, I didn't decide not to have children – that was chance – I was unable to get pregnant. But I say that I give birth to books. Every decision had elements of risks but I couldn't be where I am today without taking those risks.

STRIKE A BALANCE

Remember as you go through your life, that you need to strike a balance between your professional and personal lives. That balance has to be your balance – the one that is right for you – not the one that is right for anyone else. You get to choose. And, the choosing – taking that responsibility – is the difficult part.

CONTINUE TO LEARN

You must be a lifelong learner. The pace of change is so rapid, you will otherwise be left behind. Many of the readers of this article will not know what an IBM punch card is but those of us cavemen used those punch cards to program computers in college and early in our careers. IBM punch cards sent astronauts into orbit and to the moon! The smartphones of today with their apps were not even a dream at the time. Technology has changed so much over the course of my career. Someday, in the not-too-distant future, 2024 technology will look ancient!

Which nugget or kernel of knowledge I shared in this article spoke to you? I am hoping there was one. There is so much to learn, so many opportunities to take advantage of, so much networking to do. Keep your eyes, ears – and heart – open. Hopefully, when you look back on your life and career, you will realize that change and adversity happened but you persevered, determined your life path, and emerged with your sense of humor intact. I wish you well.

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JILL S. TIETJEN, P.E., is an author (16 books and counting), international speaker, and electrical engineer. She spent her career in the electric utility industry and sits on the board of directors of Georgia Transmission Corp. of Tucker, GA. Tietjen has received many awards including the 2004 TBII Distinguished Alumni Award, has been inducted into the Colorado Women's Hall of Fame and the Colorado Authors' Hall of Fame, and elected to the National Academy of Construction. Tietjen received her B.S. degree from the University of Virginia and her MBA from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is a licensed professional engineer in Colorado.