Cory King

Dale DeRoche

ENGT 279 – Final Paper

December 20, 2019

What I learned While in School, Again.

It was just another day. Nothing that would initially indicate that I would be thinking about making any major changes to my current life. I was just a hard-working technician that was going about his workday, testing steel and sweating as usual. Then I would be approached by multiple members of management questioning my previous experience and wondering if I would be interested in any promotion opportunities. It was known by certain members within the front office that I had experience within management with other employers. Being the ambitious and competitive person that I am, I am always looking to take that next step. So, of course, I would let all of them know that I would be quite interested in any movement up the ladder that could become available. If I remember correctly, this would have been in the spring of 2014. Just the thought and possibility of having the opportunity, started to set things in motion that I did not give much consideration to prior. It was time to start thinking about the long term and not just the present.

The short conversations and looking ahead is what made me start to re-think where I was going and what I was doing with my life. Even though I was still younger, I had some strong work experience from being in mid-level management in my early 20’s. I also knew that to many, the lack of having completed my formal education could hurt me if I ever wanted to do more. The bonus was that being professionally certified in Ultrasonic Testing, any education completed in science or engineering would reduce hours needed to advance certification levels within the field.

After some debate, I had finally decided over the summer that I needed to go back to school. All throughout my life, without even thinking about it or realizing it, I had always been strong and gravitated to Math and Sciences. It never really mattered what type of Math or Science, but both were always there throughout my schooling. In high school I was only required to take 2 years of Math classes, which I believe was 4 credits. What did I do? Took and completed every math class that the school offered, including advanced placement classes. It was the same way with science, never had a semester without either. So, after being out of school for over 10 years and being in a physics-based profession, I decided that the only way that going back to school made sense was to pursue an engineering degree. I did not want to repeat the same mistake I made the first time around with college. I liked Math, so thought that an accounting/business degree was the way to go. It would figure that I would get a semester away from having an associate degree finished to foolishly decide that working a dead-end job and having fun with friends was more important. This would be a mistake that I continue to pay for today.

Now the decision had been made to go back to school and study engineering. Uh oh, but where to go? Living in Fort Wayne, there are a decent amount of options. After talking with advisors at IPFW, at the time, they suggest getting started at Ivy Tech and then consider transferring after a couple semesters. I had been talked into it, I went ahead and made an appointment to talk with a counselor and see what I needed to do to get started. After a short meeting, I took my pamphlet home to review. That week I went ahead and filled out my application online and waited to see what was next. A short time after, and application was accepted, it was time to get placement tests taken. Like I said earlier, it had been more than 10 years since being in school. Even so, I still felt quite confident heading into the testing. School had always come to me easy, so it couldn’t be too bad, thought maybe even test out of a few classes. Plus, I had passed multiple certifications that were heavily physics based. People always tell you, “if you don’t use it, you lose it”. This saying could never have been more accurate. English was first, which went well, tested right into English 111. Maybe a little rusty, but not doing too bad I thought. Next up was Math, this should be easy… Now the rude awakening. This Accuplacer test told me that I had to take a remedial math class that would not even count towards my degree and then would have to take a second that would not count. So, what else do you do, must suck it up and get through it.

First semester. Have first semester schedule set and time to get started again, it was the Fall of 2014. Classes were moving along, I started to get back in the habit of being in school. Working long days, plus going to class in the evening, kept my life busy and moving at a fast rate. My remedial math class had refreshed topics that I had completely forgotten. This led to me re-taking the Accuplacer again before the semester was over. This was a good choice, because it allowed me to skip a class and put me in a class that counted towards my degree. The first couple semesters were easy to stay focused and kept passing along with ease.

School was progressing well, but work had seemed to just keep going without moving forward at all. It was not something that was required, but a decision I had made on my own to get back to school. Even with hearing it was going to happen every few weeks, at some point, I had given up on the idea of my promotion. I still had a decent job and stayed busy enough that it didn’t matter to me after a while. I was in habit with getting to work, going to school, and completing homework. Completed my first two semesters, which covered mostly general courses such as math, English, Speech, etc.

During the Fall of 2015, work had thrown a wrench into my school plan. We had taken down the old melt shop and were in the process of adding three new buildings in its place. A big part of this project was a new finishing line that was supposed to lead my move up within the company. The problem that it gave me with my schooling, was the two-week training trip to our other plants in Italy. I knew this would make things difficult to keep up with classes and must travel without access to any homework. My thoughts were to just take the first part of the fall semester off and pick up an 8- or 12-week class once I got back home. After being introduced to what seemed like a whole new world, I looked to see what I could take that semester. What I found out, was that there was nothing offered that would help me out at all. The only choice at that point was to just pick class back up during the spring semester. This ended up working out well, due to all the travel that followed for pre-acceptance of systems that would be installed in our new buildings. It gave me a bit of a break from school, got pampered a bit by vendors, and learned a lot from being in other countries that I would have never even thought about before.

And then it would happen. I was called to come into the office during an off day. Business in the oil and gas industry had become slow. Being a family owned company, to avoid permanent layoffs they were choosing not work lower seniority workers for a week as needed. It was a Thursday at the end of October, and I went in and sat in the quality managers office. We talked a bit as we normally would on occasion. After some discussion about being ready for the next step, the official offer letter was put in front of me. I took my time reading it over, and then got down to the bottom. I still remember it clearly; I pretty much just froze, and I am sure had a blank stare on my face. Which led to me being asked if everything was alright. My only response was, “It’s a lot of added responsibility and not much pay”. This led to a lot of talk about bonuses being more and raises that could be achieved. Even with what was a much lower than expected raise, I took on the extra responsibility and signed the offer. Over the months that we kept talking about the opportunity, I had done some research and found that the position should be paid around 83k per year (payscale.com). Even though I did not expect pay at that level, I did not expect it to be about 50% of that either. In the end I figured that being sure I had a paycheck coming in, was better than wondering if I was getting another week off.

A new chapter had begun for me. In addition to going to school, I had started to attend multiple training sessions that would add to my collection of professional certifications. As a company, that was adding new buildings, new equipment, and new positions there was a lot of opportunity to gain a lot of experience in a short amount of time. With that being said, there were many days that included a lot of work and not so much sleep. We were a company that had most of our eggs in one basket, the oil and gas industry. With the new capabilities that equipment would bring, it was a decision to target the automotive market. To get that started, a trainer was brought on-site for two separate weeks to train selected people from management on principles and practices required by the automotive industry. These classes covered statistical process control, control plans, design and process failure modes, and internal auditing. These are all quite standard within the automotive industry but had just been introduced to most of them in the middle of 2016. Now equipped with new knowledge, plans were put into place and implemented throughout processes.

The long days at work and long nights at class were starting to take its toll. With all the new equipment installs and acceptance testing and developing processes and organizing work cells, there were many workdays that exceeded 12, 14 and sometimes 16 hours. All this while keeping up with classes 3 days a week and homework for all 3 classes. Something had to change. This was a point that I had decided that I needed to limit myself to 2 classes per semester to be able to keep my performance at both work and school at a high level. Because repeating my mistakes from earlier in life and not finishing school was not an option, but my job was what allowed me the ability to go to school, pay my bills, and not have any new student loans. This choice slowed down my timeline but helped me keep up with schoolwork and bring my grades back up to the expectations I have for myself. Now once things had normalized a bit, I had a tough decision to make.

I had an offer for a new job. Yes, I had some interviews and kept my eye on opportunities that were in the area, but never really thought about having to leave. I had been with the company for a decent amount of time and become close to many people within the company. I had helped set up for parties, had dinners with the owners, multiple trips to Italy, and gained a ton of knowledge and experience while with them. I received my offer late on a Friday afternoon, when my boss had already left for the day, so I had the weekend to prepare. This time did not help at all, and probably made it even harder. Monday morning had come, and it was time to turn in my letter of resignation, probably one of the most nervous times of my life. I think I was shaking when I turned it in and started my two-week timer. For days, upper management would not even talk to me and did everything they could to avoid me. I put a twist into their plan and some I am sure felt betrayed. These were people that I dealt with daily at work and spent a quite a bit of time doing things outside of work. Even now, it is hard to say whether it was the right choice or not. But it is part of the road that I have taken to lead me where I am currently.

After Thanksgiving break in 2017, I started my new job. Had two weeks to work with the current supervisor, which had been in the job for 37 years. Not big shoes to fill or anything. I hit the ground running and took as much from her as I could in the time given. With the help of our chemical engineers, I picked up all kinds of technical information on foam and its characteristics. With being the crown jewel of the company, we produced all the technical foam that was sold to customers. We had some of the tightest specifications in the company and the hardest materials to pour. While continuing to learn all the ins and outs of testing the material, which I was responsible, I also picked up everything I could about pouring, cutting, and handling the product. In a short amount of time, I had made a big impact and impression on my lab technicians and management throughout the company. I continued to take on more responsibility within the quality system as well as helping production. I would say that we survived our re-certification audit which finished up shortly before I decided to move on again.

This time, I had been offered a chance to become a quality manager with a purely automotive company. Again, this took a lot of discussions at home and debating on whether to accept or not. Not only was this a tough professional decision, the timing could not be worse as we were ready to have our first child within a month. Prior to accepting, there was a conversation that I would be taking time off work when he was born to be sure it would not cause any problems. After being assured it was not an issue and glad that I was upfront about the situation. Additionally, I knew I was a new quality manager and pay would not be to the reported average of 78,775 annually (glassdoor.com), so I accepted and submitted my offer letter.

This was a big step and a lot of change in a short amount of time. My training plan included spending time with each quality manager from our other 4 manufacturing facilities prior to starting at my assigned location. I had a ton of information thrown at me, took a lot of notes, and did not remember any of it. Without spending any time at my plant, I had no idea what to ask questions about or what to pay any attention to. I had to be a sponge and try to soak up as much as possible without knowing what I needed. On what was supposed to be my last day of training, is when labor pains started, and I spent that Friday and that weekend in the hospital. After what felt like an incredibly short, but long, week at home with our baby it was time for me to head back to work.

The first Monday that I was in my plant I felt quite lost and was a bit of a mess. It was a lot like the first day of each class in a new semester. There a lot of awkward introductions and you only remember about a third of the names of people that you meet. Some people feel the need to tell you what they do, while others don’t want to say anything at all. I spent the first couple days cleaning up my office and re-arranging things from previous managers. In my experience, it would normally only take a few weeks to get acclimated to a plant and be comfortable in my position. It could be with the addition of a child, or that it was a more complex than expected position, that it took many months to feel confident in my new position. The automotive industry surely brings it own nuances to any position, and it takes a team effort to be able to effectively achieve your goals and meet all the requirements of the industry. Starting in a new industry, with products and materials that I am unfamiliar with has allowed me to lean on others in my team to gain the knowledge necessary to succeed at a high level. While doing this I have also been able to instill confidence and teach new methods to my team that benefits the entire company. I learned a long time ago that a company or department’s strength is not only made up of one person but is only as strong as the team. Developing the team, teaching people new things, helping others look at problems from a new angle, and making everyone else stronger is maybe the best thing that I can attempt to accomplish daily. It is not just my work that has helped me be able to accomplish this goal, but also the variety of things that I have learned in school, and classes that I have taken.

At the end of the day, continuing my education has helped me provide a better home and a better life for my family. I was not always someone that supported going back to school. There was a time when I thought that a degree was “just a piece of paper”. But over the last 5 years, yikes, of going to school part-time I have changed my perspective. I have gained so much more than just a few bucks on my paycheck. From taking basic electrical classes, EECT 111/112, I can change out light switches or outlets confidently. Materials class helped reinforce things I learned in the lab and in the steel mill, while giving me some of the extra technical definitions. Drafting classes, Autocad/Solidworks, help me to understand part prints better than before. Having presentations and projects with deadlines simulate the things that you must deal with daily in any industry. Working in teams or groups with various types of people, like you do throughout several classes, is the exact same thing that you must do in the real world.

Most of the time, you do not get to pick the people that you work with. Each person, has their own strengths and weaknesses, being successful is about making your weaknesses stronger. The thing that school and life has taught me in the past few years, is that to eliminate your weaknesses, you need to make yourself uncomfortable at times. It is not easy, it takes time, work and some tough decisions to become stronger. There will always be something that comes along to make things tougher, but this also gives you the opportunity to become tougher. If it was easy, everyone would do it. When it all comes down to it, school is just like work. It takes time, planning, effort, and execution to be able complete it successfully and it never ends. There should never be a time in life when you stop learning, and that may be one of the biggest things that I have learned throughout the past five years.

Works Cited

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