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Young Professionals *Point of View*

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A New Graduate's Lessons Learned

One year ago, I was putting the finishing touches on my senior design project, taking my last round of undergraduate final exams, and preparing to move to Cincinnati to start my new job in an engineering and operations rotational program at General Mills — my dream company. I was looking forward to meeting new people and experiencing post-college life. I thought I knew exactly what was ahead of me. However, I soon found that it is difficult to know what to expect when you leave college. Just like graduating high school and going to college, moving into an apartment and starting a full-time job brings with it new challenges and many learning opportunities. These are some of the most important lessons I've learned in the past year.

Technical knowledge isn't everything. In college, you are assessed and rewarded based on your ability to learn. At work, you are assessed and rewarded based on your ability to apply that knowledge and, more importantly, add value to your company. When faced with a problem at work, there will not be a simple equation to solve and you will not be told what assumptions to make — you have to determine these parameters on your own. Often, the problem you are given to solve does not have to do with chemical engineering at all.

In these situations, leadership skills are more valuable than technical knowledge. Soft skills are invaluable tools to influence others and gain support for your ideas. In many cases, your success is based on the achievements of a team or project you are leading. When I have been in a leadership role, I've found that my leadership skills were what enabled me to use my engineering knowledge to make an impact.

Network. Network. Network. I thought networking was only important when searching for a new job. However, I have learned that networking is the key to turning the general direction of your career into a solid career plan.

Reach out to others in your company, at your site, or at locations around the world. Utilize communities such as AIChE and university alumni groups to learn about other industries and diversify your knowledge. Networking helps you continue to learn and grow as an engineer because it opens career paths that you may not have realized existed.

Be smart with your money. When I accepted my job offer, the first thing I did was shop for a new car. A few months later, I purchased a brand new coupe. It's a great car, but, looking back, I wish I had thought more about my empty savings account and had chosen a less-expensive model. When making your first big financial decisions, think about the future and consider your expenses so that you can start saving right away.

Set up a budget, and decide how much you want to spend each month. If you use credit cards frequently, make sure you are spending within your budget so that you do not accumulate credit card debt. If you have student loans, set up automatic payments to ensure that your bills get paid on time. Late loan payments will hurt your credit and, like credit card debt, can affect you for years. Check your credit report and score frequently, and work to improve your score by paying bills in a timely manner and using credit responsibly.

If your company has a retirement plan, take full advantage of it and begin investing early in your career. Set yours up so that you are contributing at least the maximum amount your company will match. Meet with a financial planner and work out a savings plan with monthly savings goals. When you want to buy a house, go on a big vacation, or retire to the Caribbean, you will be glad you started saving right away.

Take time for yourself. During the first three or four months of living on my own, I ate fast food almost every day and went out to restaurants every weekend. It took me four months to realize there was no reason for me to eat such an unhealthy diet. I could afford a gym membership, and I had a kitchen and the time to cook my own meals. I decided to focus on improving myself outside of work.

For me, self-improvement meant finally making time to go to the gym, spending a day each week cooking my own healthy meals, and getting involved in organizations like AIChE that interest me and give me something to look forward to outside of work. I challenge you to create your own work-life balance. Your job might be demanding, and you might be overwhelmed by new pressures and expectations, but you must be sure to take time to unwind and do something for yourself.

While exciting, moving to a new city can be intimidating and lonely at first. It is important to socialize and make new friends, even if that means going outside of your comfort zone. Although it may seem challenging at first, it is worth it to find a group of people you can depend on.

I have also learned how difficult, but important, it is to stay in touch with my college friends. I often use my vacation days to go on short trips to visit them, and put reminders on my calendar to email or text them regularly, just to see how they are doing.

Everyone's first year will be different, but the most important thing is to take full advantage of every opportunity and be confident. You will face challenges that you did not anticipate, and you will experience many changes in your life — but you will learn to adapt and be successful.

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