A retirement ‘hobby’

A fter flunking out of undergraduate premed in 1957, spending 4 years growing up in the Marine Corps, returning to academic life, and falling in love with insects, I spent 37 happy years as a faculty member at a research-intensive university. When I turned 65 in 2003, I was shocked to face the looming doom of mandatory retirement. I still had my health and energy, and I wasn’t ready for lawn bowling. I wanted to work. Hanging around the university was not an option; the department chair had already claimed my office. So, with some trepidation, I moved to industry. I’m now in my 14th year on the “dark side”—and it has been a great adventure.

The day after I retired from the university, I became the research director at a small company that had set out to commercialize beetle pheromones from my laboratory. Up to that point, I had kept myself at arm’s length from the company because my academic work often led me to advise use of its products, but that conflict of interest no longer applied. I was excited to try something different, but I wondered whether I would fit in. Did I have the necessary skills to succeed in this new environment? Could I accept that I would no longer be charting my own course?

I soon came to realize that a career in academia is a fine apprenticeship for industry. The ability to design and conduct experiments that generate definitive results, honed in the course of academic research, is crucially important, no matter where one is doing the science. In addition, many of the other skills I developed as an academic have proven useful in my new career, including acquiring and managing money, designing and managing projects, mentoring, hiring and firing, resolving conflicts, and writing with clarity and precision.

But, of course, I needed to adjust to some significant changes as well. I had to put aside the academic inclination to follow my curiosity. Instead, I took pride in the fact that my work enabled the company to say that its products were “scientifically proven,” and I found satisfaction in the fact that others in the company were relying on my results.

I also had to accept that, unlike in my academic laboratory, I was no longer in charge, and I didn’t always agree with the person who was. One of my CEOs had little comprehension of science, bad judgment, and dreadful ethics. In one instance, I had to tell him that his plan to deploy 100,000 units of a pheromone-based product (a great sale in his mind) would potentially create a huge insect outbreak, causing untold environmental devastation. He was fired just as I was updating my CV in anticipation of a job search.

Other CEOs, all much younger than me, have provided valuable mentorship. My favorite (who was about half my age) decided that I had a future in business, which led to reading assignments, including a Harvard Business School book about pricing. It wasn’t exactly a page-turner, but I struggled through it, enjoying being a student again. At the end, I had the tools to argue effectively with the vice president of sales and marketing.

One of my worst fears is having a dull life, and my industrial career has been anything but. I have co-authored seven papers and composed the scientific examples for several patents, including one for which I am a co-inventor. I have run workshops for appreciative salespeople, explaining the science behind their products. I help foster partnerships between industry and academia, so I still have the chance to be challenged by bright young graduate students. I have survived five CEOs, a merger, a demerger, another merger, and a bankruptcy. At each turning point, I braced myself for the worst, but my capability as a scientist was highly valued and kept me employed—despite not having tenure. Every day, I wake up eager to go to work. Still breathing at the age of 79, I can testify that, for an ancient professor, working in industry is a great retirement “hobby.” And I’m not done yet.

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Science 355 (6324), 542.
DOI: 10.1126/science.355.6324.542