

NAVIGATE YOUR FUTURE

Recent Bauer alumna gives her top three tips for young alumni

By Sana Mohammed

When I graduated from Bauer College in 2012, I felt confused. I was entering a competitive rotational program at a Fortune 500 company that would accelerate my career and expose me to a wide spectrum of opportunities. Still, I felt lost. Although my college years prepared me academically, I was unsure about the direction I wanted to take my career and how to navigate the years ahead of me.

Over these past two years, I've developed strong relationships at work and transitioned from a career in finance to marketing. I've served on the Houston board for a professional organization, and now, I'm moving to the executive board that oversees all of the global chapters. During this time, I've learned a great deal about myself and creating a career that I'm passionate about. Here are three key tips that have enabled me to get where I am today.

Own your growth and development.

As young professionals, we face a steep learning curve in our chosen professions. I started in the energy industry with limited knowledge of natural gas, NGLs and commodity trading as a whole, but unlike college, there wasn't a "recommended" path to follow. We don't have a college advisor, career counselor or a list of courses to guide us anymore, yet it's still essential that we continue learning and

striving to be an expert in our field. To do so, we need to take control of this process because no one else will do it for us.

Take the time to regularly assess your strengths and your weaknesses, and leverage the knowledge of those around you to find ways to fill the gaps. The once-a-year training your company offers pales in comparison to the development you can achieve if you are proactive in reaching out to others in your industry for advice and guidance. Create a development plan for yourself with concrete objectives, such as reading one relevant industry article a week, finishing one leadership or career development book a month or mastering a particular technical skill by the end of each month. Following through with this and updating it on a quarterly basis will help accelerate your professional growth and make you stand out among the rest.

Be a leader.

By our senior year in college, we have developed ourselves to be skilled leaders by driving initiatives across campus and serving as officers of student organizations. When we start work, however, most of us no longer use our leadership skills on a daily basis. We rarely present in front of large groups, run meetings or instigate change, and over time, these skills weaken. This happened to me, and I watched as my

confidence began to deteriorate as well. Research studies have also discovered that business college students often outperform employees who are 10 years into their careers in the areas of presenting and leading meetings. It goes back to the classic conundrum — "if you don't use it, you lose it."

Luckily, the solution is simple. Don't wait to be promoted to a management role. Take on a leadership role early in your career. Participate or lead an affinity group at work. Find a cause or a non-profit you're passionate about, and get involved. My first year out of college I experimented with a few organizations, and I became a board member for Muppies, an organization for Muslim professionals. This leadership experience rebuilt my confidence and gave me the courage and the preparation I needed to co-found and lead a women's leadership group at work.

Seek feedback regularly and adapt quickly.

People are often unwilling to give direct feedback. Sometimes, managers are trying to avoid hurting your feelings or they are uncomfortable with tough conversations. Perhaps they are waiting for the "right time," but that time is NOT your mid-year or year-end performance review because by then, it's too late. Their opinion

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of you has already formed, and they might be ready to write a subpar review. Meanwhile, you may not have realized that performance was less than expected.

Don't let this happen to you. Set up monthly meetings with your manager to recap your month's accomplishments and get their feedback on your performance. Your manager may simply be unaware of all the work you're doing behind the

scenes, or there may be aspects you need to improve upon that you are unaware of. If your manager only provides you with positive comments, ask directly how you can improve going forward or what your next step should be. Make it so he or she feels comfortable giving you constructive criticism on a routine basis.

And, get accustomed to hearing such feedback and learn to adapt. As a young

professional, you're not expected to be an expert from the get-go, but you are expected to improve and show that you're eager to learn. Your willingness to ask for feedback and adapt shows your humility, commitment and lack of complacency—characteristics that all employers value.