

My First Job, part 2

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Selling Shoes, Surviving Black Monday, and Shaped by Chicken Lenses: Alumni share stories, strategies, and lessons learned from their first experience with the world of work

Hey, everybody, it's Dan Morrell, host of Skydeck. We're covering a topic that's back by popular demand. Last year we set up a recording tent on Spangler lawn and asked alumni returning for reunions a simple question. What was your first job and what did it teach you?

The first collection of these that we ran last year has been one of our most popular episodes to date, so we decided to put together a second collection of those conversations. One quick note, the first interview was recorded in our offices and the rest of them took place on campus during reunions. OK. On to the episode.

I'm Jimmy Childre from OPM '18. When I finished college I went to work in my father's automobile dealership. Now, I had grown up in the business all of my career, and when I finished college and came back I was a full-time employee for the first time. After a year or so I was promoted to work under my dad as one of the department managers.

And within a few months I realized that I was developing personal conflict with one of my coworkers, a manager from a different department. He and I had had a wonderful relationship as I was growing up in the business, but now that I had come back and joined the business and had been promoted to manager, I felt like the relationship was deteriorating. I concluded that it was all his fault.

Well, after several complaints from the customers, other staff members, I began to share with my father that I thought this manager was not doing his job. And one Friday afternoon I walked into my father's office with a complaint. My father was working at his desk. He never looked up as he heard me out. And then he said, Jimmy, if you want to, just go fire him. I'm really tired of hearing about all of these complaints.

And I asked my dad to repeat it. I said, Daddy, tell me that again? He said, son, if you want to, go fire him. And I stood up proudly and thought about my mission. And as I was walking out of the door my dad looked up and said, son, when you finish firing my manager I expect you to replace him with your manager. And yours better be as good as mine.

So as I was on the way back to take care of the job at hand, I stopped in my office and I sat down and I started reflecting. The first thing I was concerned about, where am I going to find a manager to replace him? This was a difficult department to find just anyone. And then I started wondering, was the problem really all him or could it be me as well?

So I came up with another strategy for Monday morning, and that is to start trying to rebuild our relationship. And instead of finding fault and blame with everything that went wrong in that department, could I help offer solutions and actually be there to carry out the solutions? I did. And it worked wonderfully well.

Within the year our relationship was good, both departments were succeeding, and this man retired. Two years later I found myself opening my own auto dealership in our community, and it was time to hire my own staff. I went to this gentleman's house, sat on the back porch, talked him out of retirement, and asked him to manage the same department in my new dealership. He did, until he retired for the second time.



HBS Alumni

The great lesson learned for me was, anyone can go fire someone. It takes more effort, but the rewards are so much greater, to solve the problem that exists-- whether it's a relationship problem or a process problem or a resource-based problem-- so that all the stakeholders can succeed.

I've had an additional career in health care. I've been the CEO of my local hospital, and I took these same principles forward there. And instead of looking for blame and firing people, we moved the culture to one of accountability and people working together to solve problems.

This is Chuck Callan, 1982. My first job-- oh, that's going back a ways. Well, I guess I was somewhat industrious as a kid and I used to rake leaves and stack wood, cut grass for people in the neighborhood when I was probably 8, 9, 10 years old.

One of the things that was special to me about that was that I did it for elderly people. My neighbors were advanced in years. And I loved talking with them, just to hear their life lessons and all about their experiences.

That was something that grounded me even more, I guess, in ways than the kids in the neighborhood. These were people that had just tremendous love. And it was everything from, I think, those bigger lessons, to little things like how to properly prune a rose bush and put it up for winter.

Mitch Hill, and I was in Section F in the Class of '87. So first job was working in the investment banking division for Goldman Sachs. And it was kind of an interesting experience I thought I'd share quickly. We started the training program in about September of 1987, then in October of 1987 there was a big stock market crash. And we had a six-week training program, so we were going through the training.

And one day we were there in the conference room at Goldman and all the partners disappear. So we're sitting there. There's about a hundred of us as the new associates, and they were gone. And so we were just looking around-- you know, what should we do? And about an hour later they came back and we said, what's going on? And they said, well, you know there's a huge stock market crash today. We've been upstairs in the conference and meeting, trying to figure out if we were going to fire you guys or not.

But, you know, things turned around and I was with Goldman for about four and a half years, two years in New York and then a couple years in Los Angeles. And it was a wonderful first place to work. Very tough place to work in terms of hours and things like that. And we had decided to live in suburban New Jersey, a place called Millburn Short Hills, and so I would ride the train to work. And I'd always take the black car home because you really never came home until midnight or something like that.

And people ask me to this day, hey, what was it like to live in New Jersey? You know? And I'm just like, you know, I don't actually know.

[LAUGHTER]

I can't tell you much. I can't tell you much about New Jersey at all.

I think I sometimes see younger people today and they say, well, I don't want to work at a place that really requires a lot of hours and sacrifice and things like that because, you know, I'm not in for that. And I think that could be a mistake. You know, so I think sometimes people will be a little bit too much in a hurry to say, oh, here's what I want to do long-term, and so I got to jump in and do that right now.

But to have the opportunity to work for a really well-established company that's a big brand and to do that for a few years, I would recommend that actually for most people.





HBS Alumni

I'm John Fitzgerald, Class of '97. So my first job out of business school was executive assistant to the CEO of my old company. And really interesting, actually, because when I went in to interview with Kerner, he said, I've got about 30% of your time. I need that for projects that I have. The rest of it, we're doing a turnaround of an 8,000-person company, and I need people who can add value. So I had this amazing job for two years where I had to figure out my own job inside this company.

I learned how to be an entrepreneur from inside a company. I learned how to go find value. I learned how to bring people with you as you're turning something around. Today I'm a founder. I've founded several companies. And those are the skills that never leave you. You know? I mean, the greatest way to create value is to be able to connect dots, find where the value is that all the people aren't seeing, and then visualizing it, and then putting a team together to capture that value.

My name is Jennifer Tisdal Schorsch, and I'm MBA Class of 1992. My first job was in a shoe store, and my responsibility was to be the only sales person selling shoes to mostly women who only wanted to try on shoes. There was a lot of box-carrying. There was a lot of different sizes, colors, heel height, and very little buying going on.

So it did teach me to be persistent and responsible with regard to recognizing not everyone was going to buy the shoes. And also with regard to just taking my job seriously and being responsible. And it was also-- you know, as a first job, you have to show up on time. I was closing the store at night and so there was a lot to be done in terms of making sure that everything was safe and secure. So I think I learned persistence, patience, and responsibility.

Jugal Choudhary, AMP 2012. My first job was with a company called Babcock and Wilcox, designing boilers. So I joined straight out of my engineering school, started the job. To me I think I was one of the brightest students in the school, but when it came to doing a real job things were slightly different. At school you could just be right and that was great, and at work you needed to do things in a way which could be implemented.

So it's not just being right, it's being practical about other people's preferences, about the economics of the whole thing. So a lot of other constraints came in which kind of made me think differently. I think most of us realize that perhaps we do become wiser, we call it, about other things. Prior to that experience it was just being correct, just being right, technically the best solution, et cetera, not bothering too much about how you have to convince 10 other people before I can do it.

Steven Torok, Class of 1977. First meaningful job was actually before business school, out of college, waiting to go to business school. I had taken a degree from a liberal arts college in medieval history, and the only job I could get at the last minute was the junior cost accounting trainee at an automotives machining plant, wherein I learned the wisdom of going on for further education, the discipline of making sure all the numbers actually add up across and down, and that in fact a lot of people have a whole lot more to contribute than those of us from elite eastern prep schools think we did.

Mauricio Gonzalez, Class of 1982, Section I, Skydeck. My first job was as a consultant for BCG, for Boston Consulting Group in London. And it was wonderful because I actually spent five years there and traveled a lot. Because at that time there weren't that many offices. And so out of a London office we covered Scandinavia, Ireland, all the British Isles. We had Holland and the Netherlands and Spain and Portugal, as well as South America. So I spent my time in many of those countries, and it was just a wonderful internationalization, if you want to call it that. Because I, in those five years, I spent the vast majority of my time outside the UK, and so I was pretty much returning to London for the weekends.

Well I learned a lot about that and about strategy and looking at the big picture, trying to really find some kind of an insight into how the business model might work. And so by seeing several industries in a very short period of time, then it really did teach me how to think strategically. And I think it's something that's served very well the rest of my life.



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The thing I want to highlight that served me a lot was presentation skills, because I would have to give presentations frequently to senior management. And one develops very good presentation skills, the way one writes one's slides, the story one tells. And so that work was very relevant in that area, and that served me the rest of my career.

Brent Dibner, Class of 1977, Section H. The story that I will tell is the one after I graduated the B school. In our freshman year we had a case that was called the "chicken lens case." I don't know if it survived. It was about a farmer in California who invented contact lenses to prevent chickens from attacking each other.

We went through the case and most of us didn't believe it was real. And, by coincidence, sitting up in the skydeck of the room in Aldridge was the actual man who had invented the chicken lenses who was a simple Californian chicken farmer, and his son, who had graduated from HBS a few years before.

And suddenly we all thought, well, these are actors. And the two of them came down and they answered questions. And at the end of the class someone said, well, he has gone to the Merchant Marine Academy and he's some kind of a management consultant, the young son. And so I went down to meet him because I was from the marine industry, wanted to continue in it, and so I walked over.

And that led to meeting each other. And he said, well, I work in Wellesley. Here's the name of the firm. Contact me. We might be interested in talking to you. And the long and the short of it, it led to a wonderful 25-year career. The firm had been founded by three HBS graduates. At the time it had fewer than 20 people. When I joined I was the 25th.

And the long story short is, I worked there for 25 years. Today that core, through many, many, many mergers and acquisitions and takeovers, is the third or fourth largest pure management consulting firm in the world, Oliver Wyman. And we rode that horse for 25 of those years. Not to the peak it is today. We didn't have the greatness. But we left it as a firm of thousands.

So that's my story. I followed what I loved. I heard a case about chicken lenses, and then my whole career was shaped by this.

Kevin Murphy, MBA, 1982. The first job my son had was when he was six years old, and I encouraged him to go around the neighborhood putting numbers up on houses. And as we did that together we learned all the basic principles of HBS Marketing class. The first place he got to was, they needed numbers. And so they said, how much? And so he knew how much he'd paid for the numbers, but he couldn't figure out what to charge.

So with a little encouragement from his dad he learned value pricing. What's the value of this problem you're solving to these people? The next thing, he came up and he said, well, you know, the firemen are going to get your house quicker. And then the guy said, well, yeah, but also my pizzas will get here quicker. So now he had a new marketing line.

And the third house he went to he asked the guy, where is your wife? And I was wondering, why is this guy asking him where his wife is? And he says, well, she's out shopping. He says, well, because when she gets home and sees these numbers, she is going to be very happy with you. So now he was innovating his own marketing strategies.

And, of course, when we got home and he added up the sales versus the inventory, there's a difference between profit and-- you know, how much you spent for these things and how much you made. So he learned kind of the difference between an income statement and a balance sheet and the cost of inventory, and cost of goods sold.

How old is your son today?

Today he's 25 and he's working on Wall Street.



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