



Sloan Career Cornerstone Center

Profiles of Chemical Engineers



Bob Au

Engineer
Procter & Gamble
Cincinnati, OH

Education:

B.S. - Chemistry & Economics, University of Pennsylvania
M.S. - Chemical Engineering, Purdue University

Job Description:

Engineer working in product development; basically the research and development group at Procter & Gamble that is responsible for creating and improving all of P&G's products.

Advice to Students:

"I'm a strong believer that getting as many different experiences as you can will do nothing but help you."

Video Transcript:

"Right now, I'm working in product development which is basically the research and development group which is responsible for creating and improving all the products that Procter & Gamble makes. My current project is to develop a new shampoo formulation. On a day-to-day basis, I do a variety of different things from product technical testing to designing and executing consumer tests for some of the, product prototypes that we've developed to doing things like one-on-one interviews with panelists. "

Interview:

Au: I'm Bob Au. I work for Procter & Gamble and my title is engineer.

Q: What are you working on and what do you do?

Au: Right now, I'm working in product development, which is basically the research and development group at Procter & Gamble that is responsible for creating and improving all of P&G's products. Specifically, I'm working on hair care technology development. My current project is to develop a new shampoo formulation. On a day-to-day basis, I do a variety of different things, from product technical testing, to designing and executing consumer tests for some of the product prototypes that we've developed, to doing one-on-one interviews with panelists, to corresponding with our counterparts in Europe. Our project is to the point now

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where we're transitioning it over to a group in Europe, so we correspond back and forth. More recently, I've moved into more of a supervisory role. I have a couple of people reporting to me and I work with them, go through their data, and find next steps for their work.

Q: Who do you work with on a day-to-day basis?

Au: I've only been here a short time, this has been my first project. Initially, I was the only one working on it. Then about six to seven months after I started, I generated enough data that really excited people. Right now, there are probably six or seven people working on the project and our group in Europe wants to take it over. So, it went from me being the only person working on it a little over a year ago, to now maybe ten people. I work with a variety of different people, mostly people from different engineering and chemistry backgrounds, at all degree levels.

Q: How did your education get you where you are?

Au: My academic background is kind of unique. I got my bachelor's in chemistry and economics, primarily because I always felt that I wanted to get involved in technical management. I thought the two would give me the right background to do that. But, when I was getting close to finishing up my undergraduate degree, I really felt that I was lacking the stronger technical background. What I found that I really liked about the chemical sciences was taking the pieces of knowledge that I learned in the classroom and applying them. That led me toward chemical engineering. So I decided to go to Purdue and work on my Master's. Having that diverse background really helps me on the job, because the job requires diverse skills. I was able to get formal training in a bunch of different areas, but along the way I really got exposure to a lot of other different things, including the student organizations and academic disciplines that I was involved in. One thing that I really gained from grad school was the first opportunity to work on a really complex technical project. I had to write a thesis to do my Master's, and the experience of having to work on a project for two years to solve a really complex problem really prepared me for the type of job that I now have. It taught me how to dissect problems and do research effectively.

Q: Did your business background help you?

Au: I'm a strong believer that getting as many different experiences as you can will do nothing but help you. My long-term interests are to be involved in technical management. In order to do that, you have to understand two things: how technology works, and what that can translate to in terms of the business and its impact on the company. Having the diverse background that I have really helps me to understand both sides of the business.

Q: Did you have any kind of specific career guidance in either undergraduate or graduate school?

Au: I had a lot of career guidance when I was an undergraduate. We had a pretty good career guidance department. It had a very large database of information on graduate schools. That's where I first became interested in chemical engineering and found out about the different chemical engineering schools. The fact that they were willing to accept people with my background-being nontraditional and not having the bachelor's in chemical engineering-into their school, led me to decide to pursue a degree in chemical engineering. The other thing it helped me with was that they were very good at keeping information on file about internships. My junior year I did an internship at a consumer products company. The experience that

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summer really developed my interest in that type of business. That's part of the reason why I looked at Procter & Gamble when I was doing my job search.

Q: Do you like working for a big company?

Au: I actually prefer working for a larger company because of the types of things that it can offer you that small companies can't. One of the things that I was really looking for when I was job searching was a chance to take on a lot of responsibility early on. That sounds a little bit contradictory because you would think that you couldn't do that in a large company. But that's not true at P&G because of the way we're organized. We do business in a lot of different areas; for instance, my main focus is hair care. There's not a large group of individuals working on hair care product development, maybe 100 people worldwide. We're talking about a \$4 billion business for the company, so you get a lot of responsibility. My project has been extremely important and has gotten a lot of attention from upper management. One of the other things that I really wanted to do down the road was to work internationally or globally, something that a smaller company would have some difficulty offering. P&G is a very global company and I can take advantage of those types of opportunities down the road. So I really sort of gravitated towards larger companies because of their abilities to offer these types of things. Another appealing thing about P&G and its size is the diversity of its businesses. My two main areas of interest were consumer products-because I did an internship at a consumer products company-and health care-because the focus of my research working on my Master's at Purdue was part of a process for developing a cancer drug. The appealing thing about Procter & Gamble was that it had businesses in both consumer products and health care. Because those were my two main interests, and P&G is sort of unique in that it does business in both those areas, P&G really appealed to me.

Q: Has your graduate degree helped you?

Au: It has helped a lot. In terms of my current project, some of the things I worked on in grad school prepared me well to start immediately on the project. It also taught me how to solve problems and do research. That's something as an undergraduate, not having been involved in a lot of independent research, I didn't really have a chance to do.

Q: Is there anything you would do differently if you could do it all again?

Au: I really liked chemical engineering a lot, and I probably would have chosen it as a major as an undergraduate had I known more about it. If I were to do anything differently, or if I were to offer any advice, I would suggest that you really find out as much as you can about all the different disciplines that you think you may have an interest in. Even if it's kind of remote, really go out and talk to people in the field and read about the different opportunities available to somebody who would be majoring in that particular field. Have that information as up front as possible, because it could definitely affect some of the decisions you make.

Q: Do you enjoy your work?

Au: I enjoy what I do. I was fortunate; I had a lot of different job opportunities when I graduated. The reason I chose this particular job was because of the incredible variety of things I get to do on a day-to-day basis. It's kind of unusual for an engineer to be spending 20 percent of his time talking to consumers, organizing focus groups, and conducting one-on-one interviews. Because my interests have always been on technology and business, this is really an ideal position for me, since I get to go in the lab, formulate products, and see how they work. I also get to interact with a lot of consumers and see more of the business side of things.

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