

Best of Two Worlds

Dean of Singapore Management University (SMU) School of Information Systems (SIS) and Vice-Provost for Research Steven Miller shares insights into academia and the commercial world.

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1) You started out as an assistant professor in Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) after getting your PhD. You then went into various management and consulting positions in the commercial world before joining SMU in 2002. Why did you leave academia and what made you come back?

As an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon, I did research on the impact of new types of automation and information systems on productivity, quality and labour costs in manufacturing operations. After doing this for 10 years (4 years during my PhD, and 6 years as an Assistant Professor), I wanted to go beyond just analysing this from an academic perspective and take a more active role in “doing it”.

I was able to create an unusual arrangement that enabled me to live in Japan for 30 months and work for the Manufacturing Engineering Division of Fujitsu’s Telecommunications Group. I then moved back to the US and became head of Manufacturing Engineering for Fujitsu’s telecommunications Facility. After 3.5 years in that role, I worked for another company in the US before joining IBM Global Services in Singapore in May 2000 as an e-business architect, doing consulting work in e-business integration. Before I knew it, I had spent 13 years in the commercial world.

While working in Singapore, contacts from Carnegie Mellon had put me in touch with the newly founded SMU. One thing led to another, and I ended up joining SMU in November 2000 to lead the effort to start up their brand new (at that time) School of Information Systems (SIS). In fact, I was the first employee in the new SIS.

Even though I have alternated back and forth between academics and the commercial world, management and consulting, my work and areas of interest have essentially remained the same: staying at the forefront of how infocomm can be used to improve the way people work together.

2) Which is the most important milestone in your career so far? Why?

The establishment and growth of SIS. Starting from scratch at essentially the beginning of 2003, our team has succeeded in developing a community that has created very good opportunities for many students; frequently helped both public and private organisations; and generated good ideas through academic scholarship, R&D projects, educational projects, and many types of real-world engagement.

3) You were recently conferred a Fellowship. In your opinion, which of the contributions that you've made to the IT sector have been viewed by SCS as being the most significant?

I think there are three reasons I was conferred an SCS fellowship. The first is the output of SIS. On the education side, our BSc (Information Systems Management) undergraduate programme, and our Master of IT in Business programme have become reliable and important sources of manpower.

On the R&D side, we have contributed to motivating and enabling the industry to accelerate its scope and rate of activities in many areas.

A second reason is the public outreach efforts of our SIS community. Each year we play a big role in events such as CodeExtreme, InnovateIT, and Apex Business IT Case Competition.

The third reason is that I personally do a lot of "national service" in the form of serving on review panels and committees such as IDA, MDA, EDB, ASTAR, MND, and NRF.

4) How do you contribute to the IT sector as an academic as opposed to the ways a practitioner would make contributions to the IT field?

Employers in both academic and commercial organisations need to do their best to give their employees a good working environment. As Chief Administrator for SIS, I spend a lot of time on such matters and this aspect is quite similar to working in a commercial or practice-based organisation.

However, a commercial organisation's fundamental goal is to make more money and stay competitive. A university of course needs money and must also stay competitive. But its fundamental purpose is to change the way people think about what is possible to achieve, and equip them to adapt to the current and future environment.

5) Would you advise youths who are interested in a career in IT to give both academia and the commercial sector a try before focusing on one specific path? Why?

Do what excites you. Whichever path you choose, you need to understand that in the process of pursuing your passion, you will need to go through a lot of basic everyday work--- even grunt work--- to get your basics right.

As a digital native, you are probably very good at learning in a way that is very fast and broad, but shallow. And that's okay, even necessary in today's and the future world.

However, please do not ignore the "old-fashioned" values and practices of learning that require focus and digging deeper for answers. Developing the capacity for this type of learning will pay off in big ways in your future career.