

## **A Mechanical Engineer Emigrates from Africa to Program a Better Career in European Information Systems Management**

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Look at your family's history. You will probably find that some of your ancestors lived in a different country. How much of your life today benefits from those geographic shifts?

Because many of my ancestors moved, the effects for me are enormous. One set of ancestors left Scotland about the time that the open land there was enclosed. Arriving in the United States in the 18th century, these Mitchells were farmers who kept moving westward in search of better land until they settled in central Illinois. One of those Mitchells, my dad, was uprooted by World War II to receive infantry training in Southern California. Once there, he met my mother. After dad realized that there was no snow in those green valleys during winter, he left California as little as possible.

My mother's side of the family came to North America from the Isle of Man. One of her grandfathers was a successful farmer who left Michigan to homestead in Alberta on the great plains of Canada. After my great grandmother developed tuberculosis, she needed a warmer climate. The couple loaded their daughter, an old pump organ, and a glass china closet into a covered wagon and headed for Southern California where they started a citrus ranch. My mother was born there many years later. As a result, I am part of the fourth generation of my mother's family to live in California . . . rare longevity at the time when I was born.

I must have inherited the itch to look for someplace better to live from both sides of my family. I moved to Boston for college and never left. The cultured atmosphere among hundreds of colleges fits my idea of heaven on Earth. With the Internet, I can also work with clients and students anywhere in the world any time I want. I don't find the cold weather troubling at all. It amuses me when my sister complains about a cold snap down to 50 degrees.

No one in my family had ever lived in Boston before. I'm clearly influenced by some of those earlier moves. People can detect my California accent even though I left there over 40 years ago. I understand the western

part of the United States in a way that few New Englanders do. I also try to spend some part of the winter working in California. I also feel a sense of peace in Scotland that I cannot match elsewhere. When I talk to unemployed people there, however, I'm glad that my family moved on long ago.

I began thinking about how important my ancestors' decisions were to me during some recent correspondence with Mr. Elhadi Ellassam who grew up in Khartoum, Sudan. His father, a politician, unfortunately died when Mr. Ellassam was young. His mother, a primary school principal, headed the family successfully, until she died while Mr. Ellassam was in college. Although he had four brothers and a sister for emotional support, after his mother's death Mr. Ellassam found himself quite alone in planning a life path.

His first decision was a good one: to finish college and earn a degree in mechanical engineering. Mr. Ellassam had the good fortune to be a student at the University of Khartoum, one of the oldest and most respected universities in Africa. After college, he chose the obvious career: working as a mechanical engineer in the Sudan, first in quality control for a sheet-metal company and later in industrial projects for a major bank.

After a lot of soul searching, Mr. Ellassam decided to switch careers. He took a very big step and moved to the Netherlands where he set out to accomplish two important preparatory tasks: to learn Dutch and how to work in information technology (IT) by gaining IT certificates.

As a result of his new knowledge, he was hired as a product analyst for IBM Help Net, providing second-line support to IBM employees world wide. Next, he worked at Hewlett Packard as a software support engineer who assisted customers. Hewlett Packard later assigned him to be an Oracle database administrator, managing and trouble shooting database problems. In 2002, Mr. Ellassam accepted a position as a database administrator for Phillips Consumer Electronics. While working in these IT positions, Mr. Ellassam studied on his own to earn the new IT certificates that qualified him for these more advanced jobs.

After joining Phillips, Mr. Ellassam had a new goal. He wanted to become a specialist in management information systems. To gain the necessary knowledge and experience for this career upgrade, he decided to go beyond adding certificate qualifications and to earn a Master's degree in

management information systems. During the Master's degree program, he wanted to gain business and management knowledge to complement his IT expertise. He also intended to use what he learned to eventually launch his own Web-based business. Here was his reasoning for adding the new knowledge to enhance his career:

“Understanding information systems is essential for managers and business owners because most organizations need an information system to survive and prosper. To be information system literate as opposed to computer literate, leaders must understand the broader organization, management, and information technology dimensions of systems and their power to provide solutions to challenges and problems in the business environment.”

Searching for a Master's program, Mr. Ellassam realized that he could gain some additional benefits from his studies: more skill in English and advanced practical experience from working closely with world-class experts to apply his new knowledge. For those reasons, he selected Rushmore University. The program there turned out to be just what he hoped for. He had a great learning experience and gained the valuable knowledge and experience he needed to enhance his career.

Since starting his Master's program, Mr. Ellassam has made the hoped-for shift into information systems. He now works as an IT program manager for Zain. His leadership effectiveness there has benefited from what he learned in the Master's program about how to turn ideas into practice. His improved writing skills also enable him to be more persuasive and coordinate better with colleagues. In fact, the benefits have been so great that he intends to return to earn a Ph.D. degree in management information systems.

With the rapid rate that Mr. Ellassam is acquiring new knowledge and skills, it's not hard to imagine that there might be more geographic moves in his future. I wonder what his great grandchildren will have to say about the way his move to Europe and his mastery of information systems impacted their lives. I'm sure they will see themselves as very blessed by their great grandfather's ability to choose a great path and to follow it.

How will you great grandchildren assess what your life decisions did for them? What will they see as your legacy to them?

How can you leave them a better legacy?

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