

Online Education Provides a Career Gangplank to an Attractive Civilian Job for a Retiring Naval Officer

Donald W. Mitchell

When I was a business school student, veterans of the U.S. nuclear submarine fleet surrounded me. These men were mature beyond their years and happy to be verbally jousting in the relatively unconfined, sunny arena of a graduate-school classroom. The submariners did well as students, and employers eagerly competed to hire them.

Why would such naval service be a good background for a business career? One classmate explained it this way, “If you can perform well with other men in a confined area under dangerous conditions for months at a time, you can easily meet any challenge that a business will throw at you.”

If every submariner had learned that lesson, the American missile fleet would soon be decimated by seamen headed for business schools and new careers with higher income potential.

Over the years since then, I’ve wondered about other business career benefits that might flow from the naval experiences of those who didn’t serve on submarines. For instance, one of my college roommates became a shipboard supply officer in the U.S. Navy and attended business school after his enlistment was up. He now heads a successful company he founded that makes custom rubber components for original equipment manufacturers. In addition, one of my favorite bosses was a retired naval officer.

In 2005, those conjectures steered me in a new direction after I had the pleasure of being an online advisor to an outstanding officer in the Hellenic (Greek) Navy, Commander Papantoniou, who was studying for an MBA degree in Strategic Management. From his first assignment, I knew that Commander Papantoniou was an extraordinary business student.

While many new graduate students seek to do the least and gain the highest grade, Commander Papantoniou wanted to learn the most and was prepared to go well beyond the assignment to be sure that he squeezed every bit of value out of his studies. In the process, he displayed astonishing interest in details that most people miss.

Of course, there's a reason for that attention to detail and doing the most: A ship can be sunk by a single mistake. Naturally, a naval officer would have to be detail oriented and able to use good judgment to advance very far in that service.

There was a bigger surprise. Commander Papantoniou's imagination was outstanding in performing his assignments. One of my favorite courses to teach is based on a book I wrote about making breakthrough improvements in performance. Commander Papantoniou did his finest work in that course, identifying a way to take a simple administrative procedure and make it dozens of times faster and much less costly to perform.

I had a unique perspective to use in examining his course performance. Another brilliant student had completed a similar assignment for a different organization a few months earlier. That other student's work was so effective that I still use it as an example. Commander Papantoniou, however, found a solution that was 96 percent less costly to use than my other brilliant student had discovered. Such a breakthrough made it seem the Commander was taking the course for the second time.

In the navy, an officer has to be continually prepared to outperform a deadly enemy and deal with the extreme conditions that nature can bring. The consequences of a mistake almost always involve potential loss of life and severe injuries, and many millions of dollars are at risk. Carrying that heavy responsibility provides a clear focus that makes finding operating improvements a breeze by comparison.

There's also a well-established hierarchy in the navy based on centuries of experience in assessing the qualities that lead to success. Anyone who prospers in such an environment has resources for achievement that academic screening and evaluation usually don't measure.

I asked Commander Papantoniou about my observations. Here's what he said:

A naval officer starts training in leadership very young, from the age of 18 or 19. An officer learns to live in a strict hierarchy. A naval officer climbs the hierarchy step by step, always from the stairways and not from the elevator.

The training is a perfect combination of theory and continuous practice, the essential difference from someone who has only a theoretical background by graduating from a civilian university. Additionally, a naval officer has the opportunities to face very different or difficult cases, and people in a variety of situations. The officer has to find the best solutions, perfect balance and discipline, and give motivation to the crew to give their best.

I believe that an ex-naval officer is different and maybe a better business leader because of the way that leadership aboard a ship differs from ordinary leadership roles. The sea gives people a different mentality and influences their way of thinking and leadership. Shipboard officers are open-minded, more adaptive, and more flexible than other officers.

But earning an MBA online was just the beginning. Commander Papantoniou decided to study for a Certificate of Specialization in strategic management from Greece's leading university and graduated first in his class. Then Commander Papantoniou enrolled in a second MBA program to earn a degree in Executive Management.

Commander Papantoniou next decided to retire from the Hellenic Navy with the rank of captain, an alternative that he had been considering before he started his business studies. What would he do next to use all of this new knowledge?

One of the largest, oldest, and most respected companies in the Hellenic marine industry soon hired Captain Papantoniou to be its Operations Manager. How's that for starting near the top?

Not satisfied with what he knew about business, Captain Papantoniou enrolled in an online program to study for a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree, emphasizing change management and leadership. He planned to apply his new learning to the operations he headed. Once again, I had the good fortune to be his advisor.

With his very first DBA course, Captain Papantoniou identified and put into place a superb new business model that will greatly increase the growth and profitability of his company. I believe that by the time he has earned his

doctorate the Hellenic marine industry will have been changed in fundamental ways through his insightful and effective leadership.

I asked Captain Papantoniou to share with me his insights into why online education had been so successful for him. He cited these reasons:

1. You can work at your own pace while continuing your naval career.
2. Costs are affordable.
3. Star professors who have written influential books are available at some online universities, enabling a lot of opportunity for one-on-one learning from the best.
4. You have the flexibility to design your own program and apply it to what interests you.
5. If your priority is to learn, there's no better way to go.

Captain Papantoniou is still a relatively young man. After he completes the DBA, will even more degrees be in his future? Who knows? But I can say for sure that he will always be finding great ways to learn so that he can accomplish more.

What are the lessons for naval officers? According to Captain Papantoniou, they should:

1. Study online learning to check their interest in other careers.
2. Use online education to add knowledge that can provide career alternatives based on their interests.
3. Get practical support for new careers through on-going online studies.

Naval officers, welcome aboard the online study ship for expanding your leadership opportunities!

Copyright 2008 Donald W. Mitchell, All Rights Reserved

Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University, an online school that provides flexible support for people changing careers. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your career options and effectiveness, visit

<http://www.rushmore.edu> .