

• **NEXT STEP** •*Advice from Young Engineers Moving Forward in Their Careers*

Stay Determined and Don't Fear Mistakes

THALIA VALKANOS, EIT, A.M.ASCE, is not afraid to take risks. An environmental engineering professional on the consulting team at Wood in its Chelmsford, Massachusetts, office, she has switched majors, switched careers, and switched jobs several times in her nascent career. As one of ASCE's 2020 New Faces of Civil Engineering (Professional Edition), a member of ASCE's National Committee on Younger Members, and the youngest engineer to have held the presidency of ASCE's New Hampshire Section (from 2016 to 2017), she sets her sights high and remains determined in the face of obstacles. So when she says she aims to be president of the national Society, it's easy to believe her.

You have recently taken a new job with Wood. How did you find a position that was right for you?

I began my engineering consulting career in environmental compliance, and I enjoyed it. When I decided to return to engineering after working in policy, I started finding job openings in compliance. After finding positions of interest, I did a deeper dive into the respective companies. I discovered Wood and that they are a global firm, and my past experience was limited to a smaller firm. I had heard that larger firms can involve a lot of red tape, but I saw infinite room to grow with a company of Wood's size.

How did you do that 'deeper dive' and what did you look for?

I started on the company websites and LinkedIn profiles. On the websites, if they put a spotlight on their employees and the benefits they offer them, that to me was a positive sign about their overall culture. I remember skimming through Wood's website and being so impressed with all the resources and programs they offered to their employees. It made me much more interested in joining their team.

In preparing for interviews, I made a list of what I liked and didn't like about my previous employers or positions, and then I drafted questions to ask interviewers accordingly. During my first interview with Wood, I felt a little guilty about having so many questions and for clearly describing any deal breakers. But I quickly realized that both interviewers, who are now my supervisors, were happy I was being so direct. It indicated I had spent a lot of time thinking

about my future role at Wood and that I wanted to make sure this was the right move for me and the company.

The first question I asked during my interview with Wood was whether the company would support my substantial involvement in ASCE. I was very transparent with the travel and time commitment that come with serving on the ASCE National Committee on Younger Members. That was one of my deal breakers, and luckily, Wood was very supportive.

I strongly recommend that all job-searching engineers do some research on what kind of individuals are in positions of power in the office or company of interest. If all senior-level positions are held by white males, then maybe that company does not have a great grasp on diversity. And maybe you don't mind this fact, but I really encourage everyone to mind. We all benefit, personally and professionally, from working with people from all walks of life.

What are the chief skills you developed in your previous positions that help you now?

Confidence in myself and my abilities, which is truly the result of making mistakes and taking professional risks.

How did you develop that determination?

I suppose it started in college. I went to the University of New Hampshire, and I was originally enrolled in the business school. After an encouraging conversation with a professor, I switched majors to environmental engineering. On the first day of my first class that counted toward my engineering degree, I was seated early and was waiting for the professor to arrive. The class was comprised of almost all male students, and one of them asked me, very loudly and in front of the whole class, 'Do you know what room this is? Do you know what class you are in?' His tone implied that I must be there by mistake. That event made me realize I *especially* needed to be there—in that class and in the engineering field—that much more. It also opened my eyes to the fact that switching majors would be more difficult for reasons I had not originally considered. I accepted the challenge, fully committed to it, and never looked back.

Increasingly, civil engineers are required to develop both technical and nontechnical skills. How do you view that balance?

For those of us who pursue consulting after college, we're eventually told that we should choose between two career



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paths in our firms: becoming a technical specialist or becoming a project manager. We're not required or even asked to *perfectly* balance technical and nontechnical skills, but we are encouraged to focus on our stronger set of skills. The fact that we are given this option seems to be widely unknown to students who may be intimidated by the technical nature of engineering.

We practicing engineers need to do better in telling students of all ages that successful engineers are not limited to extraordinarily technical individuals or those who received straight As in all math classes. Successful engineers are not limited by one failed math test or even one failed math class—and that point is especially personal to me as I *barely* passed geometry in high school!

Some engineers are highly successful with business development and with bringing in new work to their companies. Some engineers are highly successful by doing the work. Both types of engineers can be highly successful, and they need each other to survive.

What do you hope to accomplish in this new position?

I enjoy the technical work in environmental compliance, and I enjoy helping private industry to uphold local, state, and federal rules and laws to protect the environment. That work is what I will always want to do. In looking further forward, I see an opportunity to focus more on business development, client relations, and increasing Wood's overall visibility.

What quote or principle do you try to live by in your work or your personal life?

I have a few. First, I'm allowed to make every mistake once and am grateful when I make it. It's one less mistake I'll run into later in life!

Second, I always remind myself that as long as I'm not scared to fail, then there is no limit on what I can do. I'll admit that this advice is tough to live by, but I do my best with it.

And finally, when setting a seemingly difficult goal, I remind myself that I'm not the first or last person to have that goal. It seems unlikely that every

single person who had the same goal was significantly more equipped and intelligent than I am. I'm sure some were, but some weren't. If each of those people can reach that goal, I can too.

What is one item that you can share from your personal or professional bucket list?

I realize this is a little ambitious, but eventually, maybe around 2030, I want to be ASCE's national president. The very first ASCE conference I attended was the fall Region One Assembly in 2013. At some point throughout the weekend, Randy Over [P.E., Pres. 14. ASCE] led a session on membership growth and asked all attendees what ASCE could do to increase membership. I volunteered to share my thoughts. I don't remember everything that I said, but I recall introducing myself as a newer member and admitting that this was my first ASCE conference. I suggested that ASCE needed to do a better job of retaining more younger members, like me, who are new and excited to be in the organization but unsure of how to get more involved. There was a moment of silence after I finished speaking, and I remember thinking to myself, 'Okay Thalia, maybe that was a little too honest for your first conference.' Randy then announced, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to meet the future national president of ASCE.' The whole room burst into applause. Strangely enough, that moment really stuck with me.

Where do you think the field of civil engineering is headed in the next five to ten years, and where would you like to see it go?

What I want to see and what I expect to see are the same: a greater focus on sustainability and resiliency. I don't think we have an option to go in any other direction. Congress, industry, and other countries are realizing this, and ASCE echoes that. The future of civil engineering will be exciting! —LAURIE A. SHUSTER

Are you a younger member who has recently taken the next step in your career? We'd like to hear from you. Email cemag@asce.org using the subject line "Next Step."

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