

Engineer advises student

Reprinted from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Tech News. Does your brother want "to study to be an engineer," or do you know some high-school boy who seeks your advice? If so, you will be interested in this letter from a practicing engineer to his nephew. Case and letter are real, so names are withheld.

Dear Bill:
"You will be graduated from high school next June. Your father tells me you want to be an engineer (not just sure what kind), and asks me to advise you regarding your education and summer jobs. I am mighty glad to do this, because I think you have the ability to go places in engineering if you get the right start. For many years I have been thinking about this matter of job preparation and noticing which men got ahead and which didn't and why. I have discussed job training with many college professors and with successful engineers and business men in many industries.

"To get right down to brass tacks, I have laid out the attached job preparation chart, which sums up my observations and convictions.

"No two men ever see things exactly alike, yet I feel, Bill, that the average engineer of long experience will admit that this chart is at least 80 per cent correct. Certainly all successful businessmen and engineers agree about the importance of getting along with people and of being able to express yourself successfully in writing and in speech.

"A few engineers, and many of the professors, might claim that I have overstressed the importance of picking up a lot of practical skills before graduating from an engineering school. Yet the longer I live the more certain I become that certain elementary skills are as fundamentally useful as Ohm's law and the multiplication tables, because they enter into every move the engineer makes in actual life.

"Don't get the idea that you can safely postpone some of these things until after you get your diploma. Did you ever hear of a great musician who confined himself to the theory of music in his early years and didn't start thumping the piano until he was twenty-

five? No, youth is the time to learn to play an instrument, to skate, swim, ride a horse, sail a boat, dance, get along with people, or run a typewriter. I can't see any good reason why you should wait until after graduation before learning to write a business letter, swing a hammer, push a file, sell a bill of goods, or get along with a bunch of workmen.

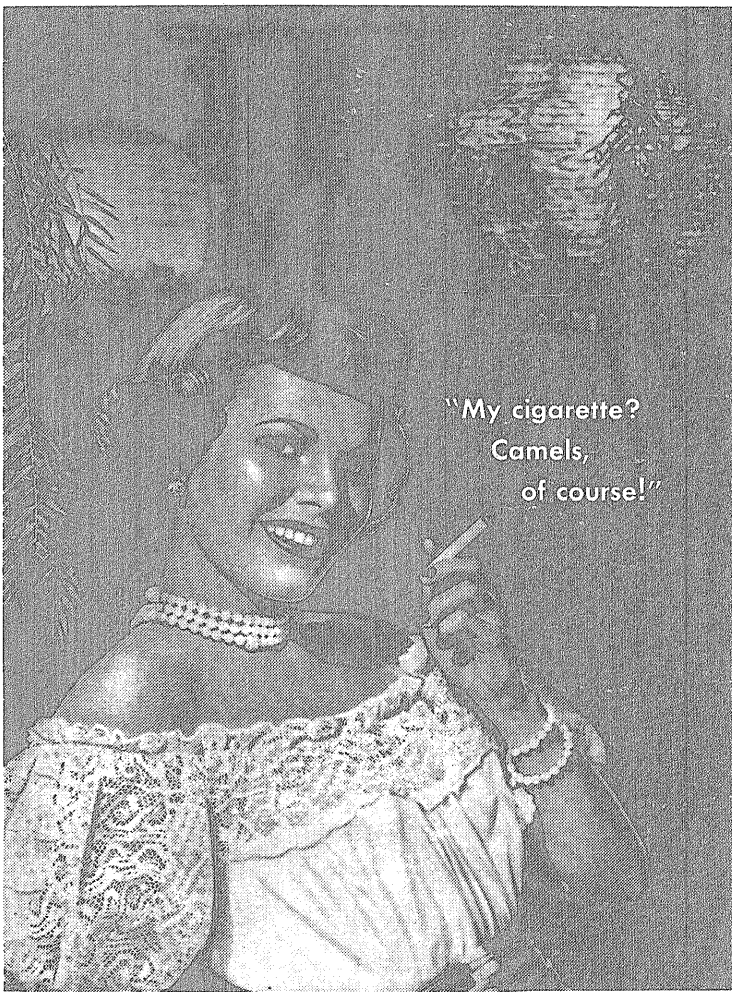
"Before I explain how to use the job chart I must deliver one more piece of advice, based on long experience and observation. You've probably read inspiring stories about men who start young preparing for one specific job. In general, I don't think it's a good plan, although there have been spectacular exceptions. I'm not underestimating the importance of having a definite purpose in life, but I feel that too-early specialization is very dangerous. Observe the ways of the cat, Bill. She knows more than one way to jump. Her outstanding talent is the ability to land on four feet under any and all circumstances.

"To be safe you've got to be versatile. How many men today are actually in the jobs they picked for themselves 20 or 30 years ago? How can you be sure about what you will be doing in 1970? When that day arrives, the job you planned may not even exist, or the rapidly changing world may have created a new, and much better, opportunity for you somewhere else. There is always a lot of chance and uncertainty in human affairs. Above all things, prepare yourself to land on your feet no matter where you are tossed. That means being able to do those simple everyday things that enter into all jobs everywhere.

"I hope you get this point, because it is important. Don't decide right now that you are going to be an air-conditioning engineer or a diesel engineer. Train yourself in the general fundamentals of me-

chanical and electrical engineering. At the same time, acquire some skill in the simple everyday operations of all engineering and business occupations. I repeat, start right now learning how to talk and write English, work with people, sell, handle tools and machines, write business letters, and keep simple accounts. Then you will be equipped to make a living with your hands and end as far up the line as you head, your adaptability, your energy, and your good luck can carry you."

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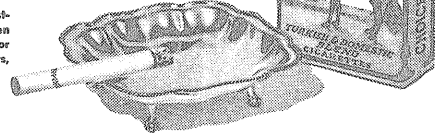


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