

**Donald L. Heymann, writer**  
**203-366-7525**  
[dlhco@webquill.com](mailto:dlhco@webquill.com)

Remarks, Jack Goldfrank, President of Mead Paperboard  
Troy State University Commencement

Thank you very much for that kind introduction.

Chancellor and Mrs. Hawkins,  
Members of the Board of Trustees,  
Faculty,  
Parents,  
And fellow students...

It's a pleasure and honor to be with you on such a memorable day.

I hope you noted that I just addressed you as fellow students, which has to do with the one – and only – message I bring to you today...

I'm going to stick to this one message because I think it's compelling and relevant to our lives... and because I don't want to take up too much of your time...

After all, today you should focus on celebrating this terrific milestone in your life!

My message to you is this: Your student days aren't over and they never will be.

Now that's a message you may not want to hear, especially today...But let me explain. I addressed you as fellow students, not graduates,

because, while I've got more than a few years on you, I'm absolutely no different than you are in one sense...

If I'm going to continue to be successful in my professional life – and I plan to be – I must be a student ...

And if you're going to be successful in your lives – with all the years you have ahead of you – you will never give up being a student.

In essence, we never really graduate...

Now I'm not talking, necessarily, about getting advanced degrees or even being enrolled in a university...

I am talking about the fact that future opportunities will belong only – and I mean only – to those who are flexible, willing to gain new knowledge, learn new skills,

take on new challenges,  
and embrace what is totally unknown today.

How do I know this? Ah, that's where my experience comes in. I see it everyday, I read about it everyday, and my own career is a perfect example of it.

I left graduate school with a degree in chemical engineering. I worked in image science for Xerox, Kodak and Mead. And now I find myself president of a successful business in the paper industry.

I went from being a young Ph.D. in chemical engineering to managing a \$500 million business with 1500 employees.

How?

By being flexible... By being willing to gain new knowledge,  
learn new skills,  
take on new challenges,  
and embrace what is totally unknown  
– continually.

When I started out, back in the 1960s, the business world was very different – and about to change radically... At that

time, people in the business world accepted an unspoken rule that employers had with their employees...

It went something like this: You work hard and do what I ask, and you'll be employed for life.

But guess what? The rule – and the game – have changed...

Now the deal is this: We'll provide the tools you need to improve your skills or learn entirely new ones, and you can use that learning here or with your next employer.

Every employed person – no matter what level – is really a freelancer whose services are acquired only as long as they are needed. Once those services are not needed, you move on.

That's a very different psychological contract from the one everyone accepted in the 1950s and 1960s.

Both employer and employee today realize that lifetime job security can no longer be guaranteed, and employees must be much more self-reliant. The prevailing thinking is, "I will take care of myself and take responsibility."

That means you will play a much more active role in monitoring both your job duties and career development.

Those who can adapt to new challenges and learn new skills move on successfully and seize even bigger opportunities within one organization or at several...

Those who can't... well, they're stuck or they become unemployable.

All the downsizing we've heard about in recent years isn't really about getting rid of people to save money... it's about productivity, speed-to-market and staying competitive in a very tough world.

The difficulty is that the people who get hurt haven't been prepared to learn new skills and move into new jobs that are needed.

Here's a case in point. In our business, we employ people as order processors who communicate with customers over the phone. This is a very important and highly valued job, especially since they're a direct link to the people who buy our products. But increasingly, our customers are placing orders and picking up information electronically over the Internet. Over time, our order processors won't be needed.

We appreciate the important job they do. But we know the day will come when the business won't function that way anymore.

Those people who were crackerjack order processors must be retrained in areas that can use their intelligence, skills and talents. And at our company, we're setting up programs to do just that.

My chosen field of chemical engineering is no different. When I got out of school, the half-life of a chemical engineer was 7 years. That means it took 7 years for half the knowledge a chemical engineer possesses upon graduation to become obsolete.

Now it's down to four.

In other words, four years after a chemical engineer graduates, half the cutting edge information he or she has learned in college is no longer cutting edge.

That's how fast the pace of learning is... and it's not about to slow down.

Does that mean a chemical engineer hangs it up after four years? Of course not. It means that if he or she is

productive, he or she has to be willing to learn continually, and change intellectually, to remain at the forefront...

It's an ability that will determine your value in the marketplace. It's an ability that will determine whether you succeed or fail....

Back in the 1840s, a patent commissioner in Washington, D.C. actually petitioned the United States Congress to close the patent office.

Why? Because he truly believed that everything that could be invented already was. Imagine! Talk about a lack of vision, this poor fellow couldn't foresee radio, television and transistors, and certainly not computers and satellite dishes.

Fast forward to the 1980s and 90s. Take a look at the Fortune 100 companies. Many that were thriving in the 80s have vanished or are no longer in that elite group of leading companies, because they couldn't or wouldn't reinvent themselves...

And the Microsofts of the world were just getting up a head of steam to take their place.

Today, the acceleration of knowledge is simply mind-boggling...As industrialist Roger Babson once said, "The

future has a habit of suddenly and dramatically becoming the present."

And that's why the emerging psychological contract between employer and employee is one of shared vision and mutual benefit, rather than simple job security and corporate loyalty.

If the old relationship was similar to a parent and child – with one party having most of the knowledge and all of the decision-making responsibility – it is now becoming one in which both parties recognize their interdependence, with information widely available and decision-making more of a joint employer-employee activity.

Power and risk are shared. And the commitment now is to keep the relationship mutually beneficial.

For the employer, that means establishing and maintaining a culture that promotes ongoing learning and innovation. It's a culture that assumes the job is never done and that there are always better ways to do something.

And employees must have the skills that allow them to rapidly adapt or adjust to changing business requirements – which means learning how to learn and learning how to exercise good judgment in situations of uncertainty.



In short, developing the ability to learn what to do when you really don't – and can't – know what to do.

What this will mean, finally, is a whole new view of what a "job" is, the traditional organizational unit of work.

Historically, jobs were thought of as bound and stable.

But increasingly, in rapidly changing organizational structures, people are asked to take on "assignments," a more dynamic and accurate description of the nature of work today within an organization.

Assignments better define the relationship between the individual and the organization at a point in time... something that can and will be renegotiated as needs change for both the individual and the organization.

So, my fellow students, I guess your student days are not over and never will be. But if you think about it, that's a good thing...

On this commencement day, you can look forward to all kinds of interesting and exciting twists and turns in your life – opportunities you can't even imagine today.

And speaking of commencements, think for a minute about the definition of that great word... It doesn't mean the end of school, it means the beginning.... commencing a new life based on what you have learned...

It means the beginning of learning and, hopefully, an acquired taste for knowledge, a capacity to explore, to question and to perceive relationships between fields of knowledge and experience.

As Robert Kennedy once said, "The future may lie beyond our vision, but it is not entirely beyond our control."

Well, I hope some of my real-world experiences will be of some use to you...

Congratulations on your achievements...

And before you have to go on with your lifetime of learning in this tough old world, by all means, go out and have a good time celebrating... You deserve it.

Thank you very much.