

Engineering Involvement

By Jim McLinn

My career in quality began a long time ago and is really a chain of events. They may seem related, but in retrospect, they seem to be more random.

At an event early in high school, we were asked what career we wanted to pursue. At 15, not knowing much about the real world, I decided it made most sense to do what I liked. In high school, I spent most of time taking science classes and messing around with physics and electronics. I even made my own cloud chamber to look at tracks of atomic particles.

A sound education

This interest in science led me to select physics as a college major, which caused me to select a college that had a strong physics department. As a freshman, there was an orientation for those planning to major in physics. More than 250 eager students attended. Four years later, however, only 38 of us graduated with physics degrees.

After graduation, I majored in solid-state physics at graduate school in Minnesota. This seemed to be on the cutting edge of technology in the 1970s, as semiconductors started to impact the manufacturing sector of the United States.

My first job out of school was as a reliability engineer working to improve the reliability of semiconductors. There, work started with a short internal class on the basics of reliability. This job kept me busy working with companies such as National Semiconductor, Fairchild, Motorola and Advanced Micro Devices to improve their quality. All of this fit well with my technical training and led unexpectedly to learning about the quality field.

Fitting in ASQ

When I was asked to take charge of a supplier quality group two years later, I knew I would have to learn something quickly. It was then that I decided to join ASQ. No one in my supplier group had ever been an ASQ member, and no one knew how to audit a supplier or the basic tools of quality improvement. To accelerate learning, I took a class in basic quality sponsored by ASQ's Minnesota section. This was a big help, for it introduced me to topics such as quality theory, statistics and sampling.

From there I continued with ASQ and began to attend the Minnesota Quality Conference and then the American Quality Congress (now the World Conference on Quality and Improvement). The interplay with a group of interesting and friendly people led me to getting more involved with ASQ.

As I became more involved in quality in the 1980s, I helped to get National Quality Month going and when I was Minnesota section chair I lobbied our state representatives to get a National Quality Award started. In the late 1980s, I started consulting, and this allowed me time to help with Koalaty Kids, serve on the reliability division board and then work on the exam certification committee.

Interesting choices

All of this activity brought me into contact with interesting, fun and motivated people in the quality field. Looking back, most of my choices followed the pattern of doing what held my interest and working with interesting people. The quality profession is really filled with quality people. This makes it fun, as well as educational.

Lots of opportunities and interesting work has made this a great career. This was also the way I met my wife. She was looking for some consulting help back in 1986, and I was new in this role. I got her to join ASQ, and we used to run into each other once in a while at local meetings. Five years later, we were married. Today, we work together on lots of quality projects and enjoy the relationship. Looking back, my decision to learn something about quality really changed my life.