Case Study: Alumni

Mark, BSc Physics & MSc Applied Optics
Graduation Year: 1995

Job Title: Senior Optical Design Engineer
Employer: Surrey Satellite Technology Ltd.

What has been your career path up until now?
My career has been completely unplanned and rather like a random walk. During my time at IC, I was sponsored by EEV Ltd. (now e2v) in Chelmsford. When I graduated, I found that through the course, I made contacts which gave me the opportunity to work at the UK astronomy facilities in the Canary Islands while doing a PhD (sadly not at IC). The attraction of the adventure pulled me down this path; when I finished I was hired by the IT industry based on my computing skills acquired as a practicing physicist. This was to last two years, when, due to a conference I attended, I found a position as a lecturer in Puerto Rico, of all places. Although the experience of being an academic was great, I changed profession again a few years later when I had the chance to join one of the UK’s high flying small companies as an optical systems engineer, where I have stayed.

Do you use skills that you obtained during your Imperial course?
At one time or another I have used every skill that I learnt from IC. Moreover, I have used the connections from IC in my professional life and they are just as important as the course knowledge.

Name 3 things you like about your job
As a systems engineer for space borne optical instruments, I find the three things I like about the job are the variety, the international scope of the business and the romance of the subject.

Anything you are less keen on?
I am definitely less keen on the politics involved in obtaining and keeping business going and the international protectionism involved in the space industry.

Did you choose your course with this particular occupation in mind?
I chose the Physics BSc and the Applied Optics MSc not based on my objective occupation (I never had one of those!) but instead on following what I found to be interesting.
What part of your course did you particularly enjoy?

The best parts of the courses were the options available, and the Erasmus programme! I developed technical skills that have served me in good stead.

What skills did you develop within your degree that you find useful in your present role?

Something that I did not learn from IC, but came as a result of being a sponsored student was management of technical teams.

Did you gain work experience or an internship whilst at ICL?

I found that it was also important to try and become involved in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities (UROP) scheme available at IC at the time, as that taught me how a research group operates.

Could you give us one or more career tips for Imperial graduates?

Things that I wish I had known/done as a student:

- An internship at a national/international research facility and not just worked as a sponsored student at a company during vacation periods.
- Participated more with societies and clubs, since some of the friendships you make can continue for the rest of your life.
- Looked to adopt a mentor from amongst the faculty, e.g. more experienced postdocs. This can shortcut the learning curve when it comes to finding a job in a related field.

General Tips:

- Do what you feel is right for you at the time and don’t attempt to force yourself to go down a professional route that you don’t fully enjoy.
- Get as much experience through internships/volunteer work as you can during your time at IC. This will always reflect well with potential employers.