IVY TSE



CEO of Halogen Foundation Singapore
Double Degree Programme - Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering and Bachelor of Business Administration (2011)

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Having begun her career in Supply Chain, Ivy Tse had never considered a career in the non-profit sector. A random thought that surfaced while dreaming of future plans, and a chance encounter with the then co-founder of Halogen Foundation Singapore, eventually led Ivy to switch from the corporate sector to the non-profit sector.

Currently, she serves as the CEO of Halogen Foundation Singapore, a youth development charity that empowers youth.

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INTERVIEW

Please share how your journey in NUS led to your initial career in Supply Chain, and your subsequent move into the non-profit sector.

I chose both my course and my career through a process of elimination. While I did enjoy the logic, rigour and practicality of engineering modules, Supply Chain had a soft spot in my heart. I was excited about optimising and making processes more efficient. Hence, in my penultimate year, I applied for a Product Supply internship with Procter & Gamble (P&G) after a friend recommended the company to me. What I enjoyed the most about the internship were the fast pace and the flat culture. I could really envision myself working there. Thus, when P&G offered me a full-time role after the internship, I took it up readily.

I eventually left P&G short of my 1-year mark, though it was not planned. There was a very well-respected manager in P&G, and initially I thought that if I worked hard enough, I could eventually be in his position. However, I soon realised that I was not sure what would come after. Thus, I went on a short spree of talking to people and asking them questions about why they stayed at P&G, or what had made them decide how long to stay in a job. By chance, I was connected with the then co-founder of Halogen Foundation. While we started with the goal of helping me navigate my career path, the conversation led to him sharing about Halogen Foundation's work.

I found Halogen Foundation's work exciting, and this chance encounter led me to finding out more. In the next few months, I went to a few visiting sessions that Halogen was running to find out more about the organisation. I found Halogen Foundation's work exciting and decided that since I knew what the P&G path would lead me to, I should try something else. Even if I was wrong about my career switch, I could return to P&G and start from scratch. This was the main reason for my eventual move to the non-profit sector. Rather than knowing certainly that I wanted to help people, the shift started when I questioned if the path I was on then had truly been for me. I did have my doubts initially but I thought that I should experiment when the perceived cost was the lowest. After nine and a half years of being in the non-profit sector, I have no regrets about my decision.

What was the transition like moving from a corporate role into the non-profit sector?

I believe that one's first job matters. Although my time at P&G was short, it was very rigorous because of the pace and the intensity of the work. I still credit P&G for many things that I have picked up, for example, understanding how to navigate work dynamics and learning to identify my work ethic.

Though there are some parallels between the corporate and the non-profit sector, the non-profit sector is a very different environment. We still have "customers", but instead of paying customers, we serve clients with social needs. Similar to private organisations, non-profit organisations need to earn an income to survive. The difference lies in the context: instead of selling products and optimising supply chains, we are focused on delivering an effective programme for our audience. The people that are attracted to the non-profit sector are also different. I think we could be deemed idealistic, because we left well-paying jobs in the private sector to do good. Yet, doing 'good' is an abstract and ambiguous concept as it is difficult to measure our impact tangibly.

The environment was very different, in terms of the size of the organisation, the dynamics, and the day-to-day life. My first year at Halogen had not been easy and the transition took almost a year – it was only after that that I finally felt settled and at ease with the differences.

What does Halogen do, and what motivates you?

Halogen is a youth development charity. We are excited to work with young people and believe that every young person has innate influence. People often view influence in the form of formalised leadership and think about what we can do to make a difference as a function of our position, resources, wealth, and titles. However, Halogen believes that influence lies in our everyday actions and words that could change another person's perspective or behaviour. We believe that fundamentally, influence lies in how you steward your character with the mindsets and the soft skills that you have.

We believe in developing these three aspects (Character, Mindset & Soft Skill) in youth, and our charity status allows us to raise funds and reach out to youth who may not be able to afford these programmes. As a society, we excel at the pragmatic things, but it's the "software" that is also what matters the most. Through the work we do, we aim to help organisations, schools and social service agencies bring all these opportunities for character development into our partnership programmes.

What does your role as CEO encompass?

For any small organisation, you have to be a jack of all trades, because you don't have the scale for specialisations. As a CEO, I look at how we can grow our income, partnerships and volunteer base, oversee fundraising and strategy, and look at future trends that we need to prepare for in light of the pandemic. One of my primary roles is also to look after the team by ensuring that they have the skills and resources to deliver our programmes well.

What do you think are some important qualities required to work in this sector?

I think it is important to develop a conviction for the causes you care for. There are very few people who know their calling early in life. This was the case for me as well. I was interested in youth development work, but I was not as passionate initially – it took time for me to grow and understand the ins and outs, and to feel a great conviction about what I do now.

Conviction is important because all jobs involve trade-offs and require sacrifices. The non-profit sector does not pay as well as the for-profit sector, and it can be very draining. Halogen does not have it the worst because we work with a spectrum of youths. However, if you serve on the frontline as a social worker, it can be quite tiring. If you do not have a deep conviction to anchor you and only possess the passion, burn-outs may occur. However, if you have something deeper than an interest or passion, you will still return after taking a break.

What is some advice you would give to students about their careers?

For youths today, finding a career is a lot tougher because there is a wide range of information available and work is becoming ambiguous and more dynamic, in light of COVID-19 and digitalisation.

A common method that can be applied when making a career decision is to lay out all your options and do a cost-benefit analysis. Personally, I don't think this is a good decision-making method especially when you're faced with many options. Instead, it might be more helpful to be introspective and aware of the values you prioritise in your career. For example, in the early stages of my career, I may decide that if I had to make a trade-off, I would prioritise learning and potential over financial rewards. By ranking these values, I know I would choose the higher-ranked ones at the expense of another value.

Once you have a clear idea of your core values, how you rank them, and what trade-offs are permissible for you, it becomes easier to filter through your options as certain options will stand out more.

This method is applicable even in the later stages of your career. At different life stages, you will have to decide if your priorities have changed and if you might have to consider a career switch. Being clear on what is important to you in each stage of your life makes a career switch easier as you will not feel like you are losing out.

In a nutshell, instead of evaluating your options straightaway, start from within. Think about what matters to you and use these core values as your guiding compass to assess options.