



Alumnus Subject

Dirk-Jan de Vos
Financial and Business
Economics BSc



**Graduated
Place of Work
Position**

2007
Cisco Systems
Operations Manager/Chief of Staff - EMEAR HR

With over 63,000 employees in more than 470 offices across 165 countries, Cisco is the worldwide leader in networking that transforms how people connect, communicate and collaborate.

In just five years since graduating, Dirk has progressed to the position of HR Chief of Staff for the Europe, Middle East, Africa & Russia region at Cisco, having initially considered a career in investment banking.

Great minds *go on to* great places

What made you choose Royal Holloway?

At the time I was applying to universities I was living in France, which made it considerably more difficult to go visit them in person. A friend of mine had applied to Royal Holloway and visited, but I hadn't seen it before I submitted my application. Getting my acceptances later on, I had an offer from the University of Bath but something about the way the campus felt just didn't resonate with me; compared with the leafy environment at Royal Holloway and the Hogwarts-style castle in the middle of the campus, I knew where I wanted to be. At that point I knew my friend was going there and on top of that the course, having financial, economic and business elements to it, really appealed to me. So the decision was easily made!

What attracted you to study Economics?

I went to a small international school in the south of France and Economics was not a subject that you could choose to study at high school level, so I didn't really have a benchmark to compare it to. I think that at the time my primary driver was the career I would eventually see myself in. The beauty of Economics is that you learn how to think in an abstract way, to take problems out of context, control variables and see how the outputs change based on inputs. I don't use Economics in a pure way at work, but the skill of analytical reasoning

that you develop at university is what you will end up using in the real world.

What were your favourite parts of the course?

I really enjoyed the Economics of Law module, looking at the economic drivers and implications on society, and examining concepts such as utility and externalities and how those could integrate into a legal framework were fascinating. It gets interesting when you look at the implications of crime and punishment through an economic lens! The course was run by Dr. Elaine Tan, who also taught us some Quantitative Methods modules. She was very inspirational, someone who you could really buy into because her enthusiasm for the material translates to you in class.

Was it hard to make the transition to working whilst you completed an internship?

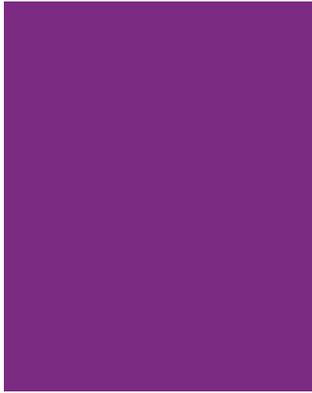
As I was leaving high school I had this view that I wanted to be an investment banker. However, I first completed a summer work placement at a yachting brokerage firm on the French Riviera in a Sales Assistant role, which enabled me to get my hands dirty on all sorts of things. In the summer of my second year, I realised the "dream" of a job in investment banking when I was accepted for an internship in Mergers & Acquisitions at UBS.

It was a great programme with excellent exposure and working on a number of different projects, but not really what I was looking for at that point. The transition from university to working life wasn't that bad though; I always wanted to be in the working world so I just considered this a natural evolution from one phase in my life to another. I think everyone realises you can't live like a student forever.

What has been your career path since graduating?

After graduating I decided to go back to the yachting firm, working in a slightly larger role within Sales and then in the Marketing department, which involved managing the publications from content to printing as well as attending the yacht shows where we exhibited. I then had the opportunity to get into the automotive industry, which is something that I had thought I really wanted to do. Going into it, I had my doubts, and that taught me to follow my instincts because, as it happens, it didn't work out at that company. There's nothing wrong with making mistakes, it happens to all of us and gave me the valuable experience of trying something that didn't work out. Through a friend who was working in human resources at an enterprise level, I started to gain a greater understanding of HR as a function and its importance in engaging human capital to





people with passion

“Don't be afraid to venture outside of your comfort zone, inform yourself of what's out there. Your dream job may be one you had never considered.”



achieve business goals. The biggest asset that most companies have is the people working for them, and HR has a big role to play in how you manage those assets, what you can do to enable them to deliver and how you get the right roles in the right places. This newly discovered area of business piqued my interest so I started to look around to see what was out there and came across the role at Cisco.

What is your role at Cisco?

Initially it was a one year placement within the HR department for the UK and Ireland. It was a step back from what I had been doing before, but you just have to suck it up and start from the ground floor when you start something new. My manager was promoted to head up the entire EMEAR region and I moved into a role supporting him, which eventually progressed into the official Chief of Staff position. I have a trusted relationship with him and everybody else on the leadership team; it's about balancing interpersonal relationships and acting as a sounding board for the team. With my boss, for instance, we will talk things through, come up with ideas, discuss what we want to do with the organisation, where the global team is going, how this department or individuals in it are going to react to that, moving people into different roles

and generally ensuring that the function turns up as well as it can in front of our clients. That's in addition to running the management system, which is about how we come together as a team, discuss our priorities, manage our talent, and record and track what we say we're going to be doing. We spend a lot of time looking at what's happening globally and parse that so that our goals are aligned regionally. The beauty of Cisco is that you can go after a lot of different things; you don't have to wait for someone to tell you you're allowed to work on something, you just get on with it.

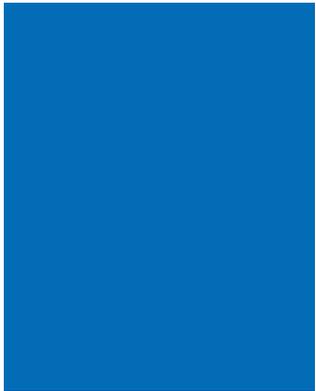
Where do you see yourself in three to five years?

There is this philosophy in the Western world which says we figure out what we want to do and then back-cast the path to get there. In the Eastern world, on the other hand, the philosophy is that you figure out what you don't want to do and then the path you take will create itself in between. I think you need to take a balanced view with that: go with the flow, but have an idea of where you want to end up. Though the operational aspects of my role are interesting and energising, I want to shift my focus to the strategic side of the business now, for instance developing into a business

partner role, in which you sit with very senior leaders in the organization to look at what their strategy is and what they need to do with their people to enable that strategy. Right now, for me, it's about exploring what's out there.

Do you have a top tip for current students?

It's really important to have an idea of what you want to do, but don't get too hung up on that one singular notion. You have to let life take its course sometimes, as there might be opportunities out there that you had never considered before. So when you are looking for a job, make sure to cast a wide net, put your heart into your applications, and don't be afraid to go for things you didn't otherwise think you might be interested in.



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