

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Saturday 28 July 2018, 11.00am

Mr Ben Walsh

Senior Executive, Mercer

I remember, vividly, sitting where you sit today. Looking at the University staff up on stage and wondering what degree the gold coloured gown of the lady up the back might stand for. I was conscious of my family and supporters who were sitting next to me – and also those that were joining me in spirit from far away – proud of this moment, of this huge achievement – really of this marker in life where my student days were closing, and a new chapter of serious adulthood was about to begin.

Working. Not just to pay for beer and pizza, and dates on Saturday night. But a Career.

And I remember this sense of uncertainty around what comes next.

Do I need to buy a briefcase? I've seen on TV that people in real jobs have a briefcase. I better get a briefcase.

And as my mind wandered around these uncertainties of what comes next, it was brought back this room. To this occasion. To this moment.

I wonder when my name will be called. And gee, I hope I don't trip on my gown or those steps as my degree is being announced.

Perhaps you are more assured and mature than I was on this occasion – which for me was some twenty-five years ago.

For sure the world is a very different place now.

But having said that, I bet Graduands today are not too different from Graduands in my day.

I'm sure, right now, someone is reading the conferring of degrees booklet and saying quietly to themselves "are you serious, someone is getting a PhD for studying that"...

It's in this context - whilst time has moved on I think you're probably not too dissimilar as to how I was when I was in your shoes – that I want to talk about this occasional address and ask your forbearance to take a slightly different approach to how these addresses usually go.

You see I remember in my day, someone like me got up from their seat, and spoke to me about something important. Something really profound.

I'm sure it was profound – but I tell you – for the life of me, to this day, I can't remember what was said. I think because - maybe - I wasn't ready to hear the message. I remember that there was this moment – this really important moment in my life – but the Occasional Address was a little lost on me.

So, I'm not going to speak to you today about really profound things such as the importance of Purpose and Meaning in life and in a Career. These things are vital to be sure. But you've got time – perhaps even a lifetime – to think about these issues. And I'm not going to speak to you about Ethics and Integrity. As critical and as topical as these subjects are, I will leave others to help you think and reflect on these concepts.

What I'd like to do, simply, is give you two pieces of reflection that I wish I had received when I was sitting where you are now.

Two pieces of practical advice that I think would have helped me a lot in my quest to find and keep a good job. Two pieces of advice which, by the way, could also help to make the world a better place.

These two suggestions, when I tell you them, are going to seem easy and like you've already got them covered... and you're going to be tempted to start thinking again about the lady on stage with the gold sash, but stay with me and if you put into practice what I am now going

to suggest your life, that of your future employers and the world may become just a little bit more awesome.

So, here goes.

My number one piece of advice, that I wish someone had told me, when I was in your position twenty-five years ago.

Are you ready?

Here it is.

“Be yourself”

That’s it. I told you you’d think it’s basic and that you’ve got it covered.

But I tell you this.

Too often in my career, I have seen people act differently at work than they do at home.

I’ve seen people try to fit in, to be the same, to hide who they are and what makes them different and special. To compete on other peoples’ terms.

And doing that, takes energy. It’s tiring.

And it puts people doing this at a disadvantage to those that are simply being themselves.

You know, there have been profound technological advances that have occurred since I was a Graduant (when I graduated there was no email, no internet, no mobile phones, and certainly no smartphones, no Netflix, and no swiping left or swiping right) but in addition to technological change there has been meaningful social change too.

Most organisations have woken up to the fact that Diversity & Inclusion is something that needs to be nurtured, embraced and celebrated.

Find an employer that will allow “you to be you”.

An employer that believes that diversity of thought, style, religion, race, sexuality, gender is a good thing because it promotes better business outcomes and is the right thing to do besides.

Find a leader that wants their people to be successful – not “in spite of who they are”, but “because of who they are” and go work for them.

And one day, when it’s your job to hire people, be such a leader yourself, and pay it forward.

Okay, so here comes number two.

Number two is something I didn’t do and wished I had.

I’m sure I was told about its importance. Perhaps because I’m an introvert. Perhaps because I didn’t believe it was necessary. Perhaps because I was busy with things that were urgent (or more fun) I didn’t do something that is extremely helpful in ones’ career.

Before I tell you my number two piece of advice.

Let me take a step back.

When I was growing up, I knew everyone in the street that I lived. I was in and out of their homes, tearing up their front yards and stealing milk from their fridges.

When I was growing up, there was a sense of community where I lived.

People got together – at church, at the yacht club, at the park, in the street. People helped other people out. Not because they expected anything in return but because in a community that’s what you do.

The world seems to be different today. Maybe it’s faster. Maybe it’s harder. Maybe it’s more selfish.

I don’t know – but I tell you, as a society we’ve lost something, and I think we’re making a mis-step.

There is something you can do about this.

It will help you AND make the world a better place.

We all have our passions, our tribes, the people with whom we share a common interest.

I’m talking about a different type of tribe that you have in your grasp right now – but you could (and I did) easily let it go.

That tribe is sitting next to you in this hall right now.

The other Graduands of 2018 who are going to go out into the world and do interesting things, have experiences that will be different to you and end up in different areas of the economy to you.

It will be easy to stay in touch with the close group of friends that you have developed over your years of study. And you will. It will be quite easy to stay in touch with people that end up working in the same field as you – and you will for somewhere between 3-7 years. But it will be almost impossible to stay in touch with people who go into different fields than you, who work in different locations than you.

And these people, they will become Captains of Industry, Pillars of Society, Change Agents and Provocateurs.

When you are my age, you will have an endless supply of people and companies reaching out to you offering you networking opportunities to create mutually beneficial relationships with just such people.

But you have these people in your grasp already. And you have something in common that can give you a lifelong reason to be connected, to help each other out.

Because you are Graduands of one of top tertiary institutions in the World.

So, my second piece of practical advice to you all.

In addition to Being Yourself, you should direct some energy to Building and Giving Value to your Alumni Networks.

And if you can do that, you will have a rich source of skill, experience and perspective you will be able to lean on as your Careers unfold.

And in time you will be able to Pay it Forward to others.

Graduands, I congratulate you on successfully completing your studies and earning a degree from the University of Melbourne.

Best of luck, and do mind that third step from the top!

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

This morning we are fortunate to have as guest speaker Mr Ben Walsh, a senior executive from the world's largest human resources consulting firm, Mercer.

Ben has been Managing Director and Market Leader for Mercer in Pacific since 2000. He is also Australian Chairman at Marsh and McLennan companies.

In more than 20 years with the group, Ben has worked in four countries across many of its business areas, including seven years as a senior account executive at Marsh.

He spent time insurance broking in London at Lloyds, and in San Francisco with Sedgwick James of California.

Ben is a graduate of the University of Melbourne, completing his Bachelor of Commerce, with Honours in Economics, in 1993.

He became a Fellow of the Australian and New Zealand Institute of Insurance and Finance in 1996, and completed his MBA from Melbourne Business School in 2002.

It is a pleasure to call on him to address us this morning. Please welcome Mr Ben Walsh.