



From the Boardroom to the Classroom

How business executives bring their wisdom and passion from the “real world” to enrich education.

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour-Lyell

Almost all of us who have had the good fortune to receive a sound education can remember our teachers and the effect they had on us – best and worst. Both of us can recall the stars of our MBA year, as we recoil at the memory of those less suited to academia. The contrast is striking, and we wanted to explore what it is that draws people to academia, if they are not born to it. Teaching at a local business school has traditionally been perceived as something it is nice to “slip into” on approaching retirement, when it is likely that there will be a shift in energy available, and that the accumulated experience of the executive will have some real value in the school’s curriculum. However, here we look at

the stories of five leaders who chose to enter the teaching space long before retirement. We examine what set them on that path, especially with regard to long-term plans and motivations, as well as how they are managing the balance between the corporate and academic worlds. The results may surprise and inspire you.

A self-confessed “under-performer” in high school, Dan had obtained a degree in engineering, through extra hard work and credits on a course that had started out being limited to geology. After some painful, unenjoyable years working in Canada’s oilfields, where money and being able to pay off student loans made up for the discomfort, the career Dan has carved out

seems blissfully free of over-planning or trauma, and packed with serendipity. When the oilfield work dried up, he found a role, via the local unemployment office in Toronto, working on clean tech issues for the city. He then became responsible for waste management in the city of Guelph, and rapidly dug into projects including a recycling program and a sustainable retail store.

Happenstance

While in Guelph, and developing the recycling and waste management program, Dan was fortunate to do a master's degree part time, benefitting from all the city data on waste management for his thesis. His increasing focus and expertise allowed him to apply successfully for a job leading the island's waste management program in Bermuda. He gave up the ocean lifestyle two and a half years later for the beginning of a twenty year career at the World Bank, where Dan became lead advisor on sustainable cities, traveling the world and solving many real and engaging problems.

However, while Dan loved his work, the travel took its toll, and helped end his first marriage. On meeting his current wife, a move ensued to Toronto, where she had strong ties. One connection was the Dean of the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, who was attracted by Dan's varied background, as well as the adaptability he had built up over all the different industry sectors, countries and cultures, and he asked him to consider a post in the Energy Systems and Nuclear Science faculty, where his experience and research would be of great value.

Dan is blissfully happy branching out to energy systems, convinced that teaching about his passion is "the best gig in the world". He obtained his PhD from the University of Toronto two years after moving to UOIT. He occasionally receives offers to return to international development work, but cannot imagine ever wishing to accept. His description of life is that of "living in a beautiful smorgasbord"! It is clear that Dan has found a new calling, despite his early reticence at the public speaking that was necessary in his city government jobs. "I

Name

Dan Hoornweg

Country

Canada

Teaching career

Professor and Research Chair,
University of Ontario Institute of
Technology)

Business career

International development, waste
management, World Bank, Jacobs,
Schlumberger



love teaching the final year students, particularly. It is a real privilege: they are like birds on the edge of a cliff, ready to jump into their career, and I get to whisper in their ears before they jump."

What were the surprises about moving into teaching? Dan highlights what he calls "widespread and unsanctioned incivility in meetings", the result, he believes, of too many brilliant minds enjoying intellectual sparring on subjects that "in the business world would not even make it to the agenda". Similarly, he understands that with a PhD late in life, he will never be perceived as the "A-player" type of professor, nor accepted totally by the group of career academics. But he has found a way to play their game, through research and publication, mentioning that the first paper he published was "on the cover of Nature Magazine".

As for advice to aspiring converts to academics, Dan uses the Nike slogan we all know, and alludes to the freedom of choice, recognizing that he was lucky, compared to those who find golden handcuffs too difficult to prise open, such as some of those at the consulting firms with whom he used to collaborate. His remuneration is distributed differently now, but his freedom has increased, with flexible time and focus, and a sense that he is doing the best job in the world for him. He recommends just starting with one course, as a taster, and then developing further. He also sees opportunities to be part of a sea-change in the world of academia, which is about to be

“Uberized”, in his opinion, and likely to have increasing needs for people who can straddle the different parts of society, bringing real world experience to the table. Fresh ideas are “desperately needed”.

Does Dan miss the World Bank? He misses the unusually passionate people, the dinners in countries all over the world, where groups of them would convene, using their sharp and socially committed minds, trying, and often succeeding, to solve significant problems. But he does not miss the travel and knows he is in the right place now, without any question.

A strategic move towards academia by our next subject sits as a stark contrast to Dan’s story of effortless serendipity. Although nothing could have predicted that Sandi become a professor, apart, maybe, from the fact that during his school years, his quiet, unimposing, but smart personality attracted those who were struggling academically, and he enjoyed helping them one-to-one. But never would he have imagined himself standing up in front of hundreds, delivering wisdom and insight.

Good Combination

His early corporate years were spent at McKinsey, and, post MBA, he joined an Iberian retail chain, happy to enter the corporate world, rather than being merely an advisor. His family had been in business for generations, so this was a familiar area for him. He settled into high performance until the company was sold to the larger French group Auchan. The merger brought changes of structure which made it no longer pleasant for him to work there, and, despite warnings from friends not to “jump”, he left without a safety net.

While he was figuring out what to do next, his father asked him to help out in a particularly thorny legal case, against former business partners. And thus he joined the family business, as right-hand man to the CEO of a diversified company with interests in Africa as well as the Iberian peninsula, and a massive battle ongoing. Meanwhile, Sandi invested with his brother in a separate entity – a car service master franchise, which they developed

Name	
	Alexandre “Sandi” Dias da Cunha
Country	Portugal
Teaching career	Assistant Professor (Adjunct), Director of the Family Business Initiative, Nova School of Business and Economics
Business career	Consultant, owner-manager, board member, McKinsey, family businesses

successfully for almost ten years, until 2011, when at the height of the financial crisis in Portugal the banks forced them to sell their highly leveraged business.

Three months of recovery from the trauma, mixed with brainstorming with his wife, trusted advisors and mentors, as well as a profound audit of his interests led to him realizing that his wish was to develop his passion for family business into an expertise on which he could consult and advise; and it was very clear to him that to gain legitimacy in this area, whatever his pedigree in business terms, he would need to get close to academia. So, teaching became his means to an end.

Intensive networking with friends and connections in the business school world of Lisbon commenced, and the stars aligned faster than he had imagined. Via some fellow MBA alumni, Sandi had met the Vice Dean of the NOVA Business School, who called him, relating his problem that a teacher of Global Supply Chain Management had suddenly left, and that he had thought Sandi might be able to take over, given his experience in retail and operations. He asked, “would you like to do this? And have you ever taught?” To which Sandi answered, “I am not scared of doing it” – so he started three days later.

He survived the craziness, but soon recommended to the Dean that he recruit a true supply chain scholar, at the same time preaching for a family business initiative in the

school, and was thrilled to receive a warm response. This time he had a whole three months to prepare, recognizing that “luck had found me trying”. After six years of teaching, Sandi absolutely thrives as a family business expert. His classes are “simple sincere, and full of passion”, obtaining consistently high ratings, and adding to his sense that the school is one of his “homes”.

While his role at NOVA is substantial, Sandi juggles this with a continuing activity in the family business, as well as a specialized consulting role at the Cambridge Family Enterprise Group, that came along only once he was an established academic. He is clear that he will “never be one of the top, research-driven, publishing professors”, in what he describes as a “two-level system” in the school. However, he has definitely become “one of the the family business go-to people in Portugal”, as he describes it.

Sandi expects to continue the three activities for as long as he works and sees no reason to shift this balance, nor to seek anything else, though he might tackle a PhD “for fun” at some point. To those considering a move to professorship, he recommends “Find something you are passionate about and the rest will work itself out!”. Also, Sandi believes that taking the time to explore and reflect iteratively is a luxury most should grab, if at all possible. Indeed, his experimentation while doing the supply chain teaching was invaluable for taking him out of his comfort zone, and trying out the world of academia.

What keeps him motivated? “The fact that these kids, while so much more au fait with economics and statistics than I was at that age, know so little about companies and real-life work. They don’t understand that companies belong to people and have little clue about how to manage stakeholders. So, I am helping them towards corporate life, using real-life, concrete examples, gleaned from my own career inside, as well as my consulting career now. It is a perfect combination”.

As a strong contrast, Sandi’s colleague, Constança, did not plan to teach professionally at all,

Name

Constança Monteiro
Casquinhoa

Country

Portugal

Teaching career

Assistant Professor (Adjunct) of Mindfulness in Leadership, Nova School of Business and Economics

Business career

Consultant, banker, EBRD, McKinsey, AT Kearney



even though, from the very first moment that she can remember she was someone who loved learning and was extremely curious about everything from agriculture through building furniture, to tackling traffic jams. She describes this as the “program she was born with”.

If I Could Teach the World

Having grown up in a middle-class Portuguese family with a teacher mother and a naval officer father, she became deeply interested early in politics, namely in the Marxist philosophy, in striking contrast to her family background.

Naturally enough she studied economics and aspired to creating a fairer system. Constança was always studying, even on the beach, and choosing to help support and teach her fellow students, not so much to earn money or kudos, but so she could learn more and create a win-win situation. On graduating from university, she says “I sort of sold myself to the system. I went to work at McKinsey where I could work with powerful CEOs and change the world while earning lots of money. I kidded myself this was just fine and forgot my dream.” Even before then, she had been teaching in the faculty for some years and had been invited to develop her ideas into a PhD, but pushed this aside in her excitement to join a top firm.

Many years of work in consulting ensued, in which she fought the obvious facts of her makeup. She remembered an interview she had had a few years ago for BCG where the partner had had the courage to tell her that she would

not be happy in this job and he would not offer it to her. Finally and ironically, having aimed to make her parents proud of her, she realized that she could be more proud of herself. While moving to London, Constança moved from consulting into the EBRD, all excited that once again she would have an opportunity to change the world – only to discover her colleagues looking askance at her when she told them of her lofty social ambitions.

On finding herself pregnant she decided to return to her roots and shifted her career aspirations: she “just wanted” to be a mother. On giving birth she bought her own place in Lisbon and vowed to stay, accepting work in the banking industry. However after several months of running between nursery school, PowerPoint presentations and “fake P&L statements” she quit, deciding that the idea of career had lost all meaning to her and decided to focus on raising her young daughter, pulling on her substantial savings to finance them.

As she moved further away from her original view of career and used both yoga and meditation to focus on the present, Constança decided to learn how to be of service “now”. While the risk is higher, this makes her much happier: “I cannot control what I’ll be doing in three months.” But the basic goal of service now kept her going and she allowed herself to be guided. Opening up in this way to serendipity brought her a part-time job helping a paraplegic to develop learning programs together, and learning about the power of positive thinking.

Meanwhile her savings from her previous lucrative careers begin to dwindle and she felt a need to do something more, especially as she was confronted with expensive school fees for her daughter. Once again destiny stepped in and a close friend at NOVA said, “We need someone like you at the University – come.” She first joined to lead a student consulting cell, but, little by little many other roles appeared, as if by magic. Suddenly, although she had not planned to teach, she was invited to teach the same Strategy Consulting program Sandi had been teaching. And later she taught it alone.

Her initial feedback from the students was really negative and she spent days wondering why they had “hated everything”. She was

Name
Anand Pillai

Country
India

Teaching career
Adjunct Professor, Strategy and Leadership, Co-chair HR & OB, IMT Ghaziabad

Business career
CHRO, Chief Learning Officer, Sales & Marketing, Reliance, HCL Technologies, Nortel



soresly tempted to give up but others helped her and she tackled it again and several times since, testing different versions with increasing confidence and better learning. Now she is confident that they get from her “what books don’t teach them”, adding “I teach them to be of service, and that makes me and them happy.”

Constança feels enthusiastic about this generation of students and youth, and feels that, good or bad, she wants to serve them. While we know that she will not plan or strategize, we do see that she has embraced this opportunity and will continue to pursue her service objective as long as she can.

Some 5,000 miles away from Portugal in India, Anand Pillai, a self-confessed “hobby teacher” by the age of eleven, definitely showed all the signs of ending up in academia early on, even though by now, he looks for balance in his work.

Everybody's Got to Learn Sometime

During his college years, Anand was the president of the India Youth Brigade, where he worked with teachers and leaders to serve the underprivileged through education, while studying for a BSc in Physics and Maths. He then went on to gain a computer science certification, in the early eighties, becoming one of the early entrants into the nascent Indian IT boom. Several years began of highly prestigious national and international companies’ training schemes and rapid progress, mixing IT with strategy, marketing and account management, thus he became early on an accomplished “all

7 sources of gratification for executives turned professors

1. Focusing on the person and their learning first rather than on business and results
2. Valuing years of previous business experience and building credibility in the marketplace
3. Helping students understand and move towards corporate life, using real-life examples
4. Combining teaching with other advisory or consulting activities feeling that the two worlds feed each other
5. The freedom that allows sabbaticals, flexible time and focus,
6. The energy and enthusiasm of the students that keep you moving forward
7. A sense that you are doing the best job in the world for you

-rounder”.

The scale and impact of his roles grew, still in companies recognized for IT excellence, whether Tata or the Modi Group or Hughes Communications, with national and regional leadership status soon awarded to him. In 1998, having built extensive ties between his Indian networking company and academia, Anand took advantage of its acquisition by Nortel to move on, and joined HCL Technologies, a jewel in India's IT crown.

Initially spending time as VP of Sales and Marketing for a large division, Anand then moved on to a thirteen-year stint of heading the Talent Transformation initiative for the whole group. This was where the academic links kicked right back in, and the build-up of experience of innovation in leadership development truly started. It was on moving to the U.S., to take on a global leadership position, that Anand's move towards teaching began to gather momentum.

His main focus at that time was to “breed intrapreneurs”, using Blue Ocean Strategy, and marshaling the company around the philosophy of “Employees First, Customers Second”. This approach was crucial in gaining Anand a reputation as a guest lecturer globally in business schools, from Harvard to MIT Sloan, LBS to most of the Indian IIM's. Not only was he successful on the business school circuit, but also he achieved accolades with HCL frequently winning prestigious business awards for its learning and leadership functions.

After over 13 years of service to HCL, Anand was tempted away to Reliance Industries Limited, where his senior role as head of HR and Learning sharpened his taste and abilities

in this area, and he created more innovation around learning and organizational development, once again working with external entities, such as McKinsey, to derive a reputation as an absolute thought leader in Talent.

By this stage, Anand was starting to observe an uncomfortable gap between industry and academic institutions. He realized that he wanted to “influence people and leave a legacy of transformed lives”, giving back to the next generation as well as simply generating profits for his employers. So, when invited, in 2015, to address an executive program at the top Indian Business School, IMT Ghaziabad, and subsequently invited to join the faculty, he was ready to jump. For the past couple of years, he has been leading Strategy and Leadership, as well as Human Resources and Organizational Behavior faculties.

Anand delights in his new focus “on the person, whereas the focus of businesses is on the business impact by leveraging both people and processes”. His assimilation has been eased by the fact that he had links with schools for decades before entering academia full time, and by his keen inclination all along toward relevance in research. The success he has gained as a teacher no doubt derives from his storytelling capacities, drawing on 36 years of corporate experience, thus leading to compelling case studies on which to work with students. It is as if the two worlds have collided, allowing validation of previous experience in a way he finds most satisfying.

The energy and enthusiasm of the students keeps him moving forward, while he finds “paperwork” as frustrating as one might imagine. What does he miss? “The interaction

with other functional departments” is the hardest thing to have left behind, and Anand states clearly that if he could go back, not full-time but part-time, to the corporate world, he would. He is fulfilled and grateful for his role at IMT, and for all the teaching engagements he held before, but clearly nostalgic for the “other side” too. He does have his own consulting firm also, and this may allow him the interactivity he is missing, so only time will tell if his “lifelong learning discipline” takes him back to further corporate experiences or not. It seems evident that his ability to create change in organizations is one that facilitates self-transformation also, so, we will see.

Charles has never moved far from academia, despite a resoundingly successful corporate career in HR, Learning and Development. Indeed, he says that most of his friends and those who know him would describe him as an academic first and foremost.

Back to School Again

He started out by studying business at Canada’s renowned McGill University. Then, being younger than his school peers by two years, moved on to Oxford, where he took a Master’s in Common-wealth History, and his interest in Africa and Asia began. Charles took on his first professional role with the UN where he oversaw a variety of development projects in Rwanda. His main reason for the choice was that it was difficult and would stretch him in ways not yet experienced. The hunger for learning was playing out already.

On completing his mission in Africa, Charles went to study an MBA at Stanford, where he, once again, sought the most different and challenging environment for him. What followed was a brief exchange in Paris that led to a longer stay than planned: he joined a consulting firm that was heavily populated with HEC professors, and thrived in this context that launched his teaching and corporate advisory career.

Then ensued almost eight years at L’Oréal, where Charles’s work in Learning and Development was part of a very high profile and dynamic professionalization of the HR function,

Name
Charles de Brabant

Country
Canada

Teaching career
Executive Director, Bensadoun
School of Retail Management,
McGill University

Business career
CHRO, Learning & Development,
Consulting, Valiram Group,
L’Oréal, United Nations



and much of his energies went into developing programs with INSEAD, NYU and so on. He was most involved in content development for innovative programs, both in the Paris head office, and in Asia, where he created links with local business school CEIBS of Shanghai. Here, his proudest achievement was a personal development program for high potentials in Asia, taking them from individual contributors to leaders. He became highly involved with both the content and the pedagogical approach, even though he was not, strictly speaking, teaching.

When the company asked him to return to a head office role, Charles took this as a sign to leave, and he co-created his own leadership development and recruitment firm, as well as creating and delivering a Luxury and Retail Management course at CEIBS, in addition to teaching in other business schools in Europe, including Lyon and Zurich. By this stage, he had worked closely with business school academics for twenty or so years and so the shift came quite naturally to him.

The unexpected struck in 2014. With a massive slump in the luxury sector in China, both recruitment and teaching dropped off considerably, leaving Charles and his family no choice but to look quickly elsewhere. He was invited to join the Valiram Group in Malaysia, as CHRO, where he led an intensive recruitment drive to support the growth the group was experiencing across Asia Pacific. However, despite success in his role, the leadership environment became unpleasant with significant tensions among the owners around cash

7 sources of frustration for executives turned professors

1. Having to take a pay cut – sometimes substantial
2. Self-directing your assimilation into teaching, moving beyond possible negative feedback from your first classes
3. The inevitable paperwork and bureaucracy of the academic environment
4. Dealing with brilliant colleagues who have a tendency for incivility and intellectual spar-ring
5. Not being totally accepted by the group of career academics
6. Realizing that you will likely never be perceived as an “A-player” professor
7. Being nostalgic for the “other side”, missing the interaction with other corporate functions and colleagues

flow and how to manage the growth and Charles was deeply affected by this. He became ill with cancer and had to stop work to tackle an aggressive treatment.

Once he was done with the chemo, Charles went back to Canada where fate took over and everything fell into place, even if this did not happen in quite a straight line. Just as he was about to reluctantly accept an offer from another school, a miracle happened, and he was appointed as the executive director of a new school at McGill University, the Bensadoun School of Retail Management, created as the result of a huge endowment.

While the current situation is a dream for Charles, in many senses – he works on an “incredible project” 100% supported by the dean of the Faculty of Management –, his input for now is limited to the leadership, and not teaching. However, his ultimate goal is to teach, and this has been promised. Meantime, he is involved in curriculum design, going back to his corporate-derived strengths, allied with his intellectual mind, and influencing his academic counterpart more than he might have hoped.

Is this his final goal achieved, then? It would seem so. He told us that “given the fact that I have taken a 70% pay cut, I would be crazy to do it if I did not love it”. He considers himself “very very lucky” to be in the unique position of a business school that is moving fast, which is most unusual for academia. Alongside the abundance attitude of “yes, let’s do it”, gives him scope to develop and grow, while enjoying himself. This is the wonderful combination that allows Charles the stimulation of creating something new while enjoying a far better lifestyle and an ideal work eco-system. His

friends were right, then: he is an academic first and foremost, but his skills to drive academia to new places are what distinguish him.

As we reflect on their stories, our five subjects have similar destinations, but highly distinct paths taken on the way. We believe that this may well be an indicator of the extent of the trend toward academia. There is indeed an increasing phenomenon in business schools and universities to engage teaching staff who have a background in “real life” business, and even arguments, such as that put forward in a recent Times Higher Education article, suggesting that all academics should be sent out into the real business world every three to five years. While this is, as yet, far from a reality, there is an opportunity for those who have had a substantial corporate experience in one specialized field or another to bring that to business schools, and win a place at the front of business school amphitheatres, sharing and challenging students around their favorite business topics.

Remembering Dan’s comment that education and academia need a drastic renovation, we can only hope that this younger, more worldly and experienced generation is going to achieve that Uberization in ways that suit the rapidly changing world and business landscape. Meantime, we can learn from their experience, so as to make such a transition for ourselves in the best possible way.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Harbour-Lyell** is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!