

Steps to success

MIKE CLEAVER, commercial vice president of M.W.KELLOGG LIMITED (MWKL), a full-service contractor serving the petrochemical industry, reveals six key stages in his engineering career.

STEP 1 Graduate engineer

1978–1980

I joined M.W.Kellogg's two-year graduate training scheme after graduating in 1978 with a degree in chemical engineering. During the scheme I worked in the office in many engineering disciplines, but I also had the opportunity to spend a year working on site in Algeria on the construction and commissioning of a liquid natural gas (LNG) plant. The value of working alongside experienced engineers in the field can never be underestimated.

STEP 2 Project engineer

1980–1989

Over the next five years I worked my way up from being a junior engineer in the process engineering group to become the section leader of a single-discipline team managing 8–10 people. The projects were varied (LNG, refining plants and offshore work) and I worked in various locations, including Norway, Houston, Amsterdam and Abu Dhabi.

In 1985, I was promoted to the role of project engineer, leading a multidiscipline team of 50 engineers with responsibility for technical management of projects, liaising with engineers from the client's teams, resolving conflicting issues and finding solutions to problems.

STEP 3 Project manager

1989–1994

Having worked in the industry for 11 years and gained broad experience, I wanted to move into project management. As a starting point, I completed a one-year masters course in project management sponsored by my employer. It was a challenge to go back to full-time education, but my industry experience set me up well for planning ahead, meeting deadlines and working well in study groups.

Returning to MWKL I moved into the project management group, working mainly on proposals for the first couple of years. But I also picked up small projects of my own to run. My first was the revamp of a brewery – I had no problems recruiting engineers to work on that project!



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STEP 4 Head of project controls

1994–1996

As head of project controls management I had responsibility for 100 people, estimating, planning, the IT systems, and much more. Alongside this I was also jointly responsible for going out to buy the company a new building. We were based in London near Wembley and needed more space. We were also keen to move out of the area before it became a building site for the new stadium. It was another opportunity to add variety to my career by doing something completely different, but in fact, the process of buying a building highlighted for me how transferable the skills of an engineer are – finding out the right information, seeking out people who know the things you don't, working to a tight deadline, and importantly, working as part of a team. From 1996 to 1998, I had another spell in project management.

STEP 5 Manager of engineering department

1998–2004

I moved back into department management with responsibility for all MWKL's engineering resources. The first nine months were tough. Like many other organisations at that time, we experienced the effects of the global economic downturn, which resulted in downsizing. However, by 2000 things were on the up again and we experienced the biggest upturn in business ever. The department grew to 900 engineers.

In 2004, I moved back into project management for a short spell, developing our LNG work, primarily in Australia and Indonesia. Travelling has always been a perk of the job and I've learned to sleep well on planes! Although work can be harder when you're away from home the experiences and extra salary gained usually outweigh the hardships. I've lived in different places and got to know them well, and I've had the privilege of visiting old aboriginal sites in Australia that are normally inaccessible – fascinating!

STEP 6 Commercial vice president

2004 onwards

As commercial vice president, I'm responsible for key business clients including BP and Total in Europe, as well as most of our business in the UK plus France, Holland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Korea and parts of the Middle East. At any time I have around 20 active prospects, which can range from small case studies up to full-scale multi-million-dollar projects. I have total responsibility for the commercial aspects of putting together proposals – setting and agreeing proposal strategies and then leading negotiations and contact with the client once a proposal has been submitted. I've been in the role since the end of 2004, so I want to sell a few multi-million-dollar projects before moving on to the next stage of my career.

Since starting out as a graduate engineer, I've stayed open minded and didn't get fixed too soon on what I thought I should be doing. I kept looking for fresh opportunities to gain new skills and experience. I've had to make some quick career decisions at times, but each experience has made me better equipped for the next role.



Mike has worked on many major projects around the world:

1. LNG plant – Nigeria
2. Chemicals plant – UK
3. LNG plant – Egypt