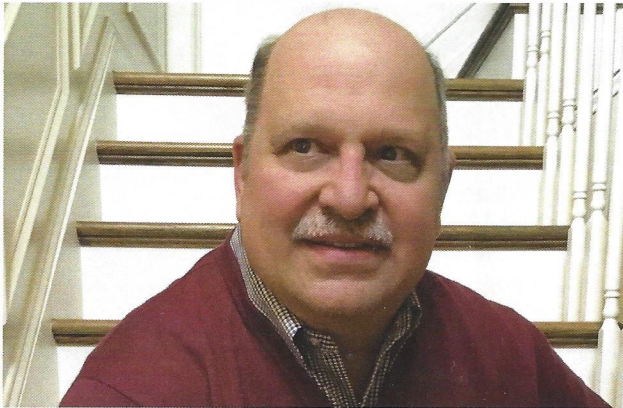


PrivileGEd: A Review

Review: *PrivileGEd: Experiences From My Unusual 40-year Career with One of America's Most Iconic Companies*, by Michael A. Davi

Review by Martin Strosberg



If you have little or no idea at all about what GE engineers do all day, either at the facilities in Schenectady or anywhere in GE's world, you will be in for an eye-opener with Michael Davi's book. His "unusual" 40-year career is remarkable for its twists and turns, as well as for the sheer variety of entries that undoubtedly appear on his C.V. For sure, words like routine, humdrum, or predictable simply cannot be used to describe his GE experience.

Warning: the language is often technical and full of insider GE terminology. But you don't need to be a mechanical engineer or a member of the cognoscenti (many of whom live in the Schenectady area) to appreciate his story.

Roots

Early in the book, Schenectady native Davi pays homage to his Italian immigrant grandparents, who first started working for GE in the early 20th century. It is obvious that Davi spent considerable time in the GE archives tracing their history. He expresses his gratitude for their sacrifices and accomplishments, and asserts that they would have been proud to see him become a professional engineer with the company. Clearly, GE was not just another job for Davi.

Work

On Davi's very first day at GE in 1976 as a "Measurement Service" engineer, even before he could complete all his employment forms, the recent RPI graduate was called away from his Schenectady base to help investigate the relationship between birds and GE aircraft engines. Several months previous, a DC-10 cargo plane had crashed after its GE engines ingested birds upon takeoff. The investigation was assigned to an elite team including an expert on aircraft engine noise, an ornithologist, and noted statistician Dr. Gerald Hahn. Davi joined the team as its most junior member.

This assignment was a prelude to more exciting things to come. Davi's very next job was testing the gas turbine engines on a large Navy cargo ship while crossing the Atlantic on rough seas. And this was just the beginning. Over four decades, Davi worked primarily with gas turbines such as industrial power generation equipment and aircraft engines. With the help of outstanding mentors, he was able to take on increasingly difficult and wide-ranging assignments with growing levels of responsibility.

Setbacks and Detours

Davi's career trajectory was by no means smooth, and there was no set career ladder to climb. Serendipity, not to mention the ups and downs of the turbine business, all had an influence. Indeed, after five years he was laid off due to a business downturn. Fortunately, he landed on his feet with a job at Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory in Niskayuna, an entirely separate division of GE. Here, on what turned out to be a three-year hiatus from the Gas Turbine Division, he experienced the austere and bureaucratic culture of nuclear defense contracting imprinted upon the organization by Admiral Hyman Rickover, father of the nuclear Navy. Nevertheless, during this time, Davi was able to form close, rewarding, and productive working relationships with his colleagues. Furthermore, with the support of the GE tuition-reimbursement program, he finished an MS in Industrial Administration from Union College. This degree helped him return to and advance in the Turbine Division.

GE Chairman Jack Welch

No story of the turbine business in Schenectady could be complete without a discussion of Jack Welch, whose tenure as GE Chairman coincided with a drastic reduction in workforce. Although Davi devotes only a few pages to Welch, he does not mince his words about Welch's relentless push to maximize profits, regardless of the cost. "Welch's management style of instilling conflict and fear caused havoc throughout the Schenectady plant, creating adversarial relationships with the union and the city of Schenectady itself. Welch seemed to be conducting a personal vendetta against the Schenectady plant, particularly against the labor union, which represented thousands of hourly workers."

Davi contends that Welch's fixation on improving the quarterly financial results, regardless of the stage of the business cycle, while at the same time shortchanging long-term investment in research and new product development ended up costing the turbine business for decades.

Lessons

Readers, regardless of technical background, can fully appreciate Davi's central message: innovation and problem-solving in a complex and dynamic industry requires teamwork based on strong interpersonal relationships built on trust and friendship among highly skilled, motivated, and dedicated professionals.

Davi's memoir is an important addition to the historical record of GE in Schenectady, and reminds us what it took to become an iconic American company.

Michael A. Davi, *PrivileGEd: Experiences From My Unusual 40-year Career with One of America's Most Iconic Companies*, The Troy Book Makers, 2018, 197 pages. For ordering information see WWW.MICHAELDAVI.NET.