

INTERVIEW WITH A PAGSIP ALUMNUS:

Neal Schmitt, PhD 1972

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With Purdue's rich history, we have a number of outstanding Alumni. For this issue of the PAGSIP Newsletter, we caught up with Dr. Neal Schmitt. Dr. Schmitt has had an outstanding career having published approximately 250 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, served on a dozen editorial boards, and won multiple awards, including the Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology's Distinguished Scientific Contributions Award and its Distinguished Service Contributions Award. Dr. Schmitt is currently Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Management at Michigan State University and the vice-president of Polaris Assessment Centers. His current research centers around the effectiveness of organizations' selection procedures and the outcomes of these procedures, particularly as they relate to subgroup employment and applicant reactions and behavior.

Dr. Schmitt, thank you for taking your time to connect with us!

Graduate School Related:

1. What inspired you to pursue your PhD in I-O psychology?

I may have backed into the choice of IO psychology. I attended a small liberal arts college where psychology was almost totally defined as clinical psychology. After a very challenging year as a volunteer Big Brother, I decided that clinical or counseling work was not for me. I then looked for other applied areas of psychology and found IO. The latter was due to the suggestion of one of our faculty members.

2. What drew you to Purdue specifically for your graduate studies?

The same faculty member who suggested I explore IO also suggested it was the best place to pursue graduate work so I applied there and was accepted. I visited in March of 1967 and found the place to be inviting and the offer of admission and support very exciting.

3. What was Purdue like when you were a graduate student?

Perhaps the biggest difference between then and now was the number of graduate students. There were 22 in my class and 25 in the class ahead of me, I think. There were only two women in my class—one became my wife, Kara. We were a cohesive group—often meeting to put

together mimeograph copies of class notes and readings and working together to study for comprehensive exams. Purdue and West Lafayette were a small community, few restaurants and little to entertain one that was not connected to the university. My first introduction to college football – a game with Notre Dame – was exciting. I believe Purdue won and it launched quite a celebration in the dorms and bars of West Lafayette.

4. What are some of your fondest memories from your time at Purdue?

Probably the best memories I have are those of PAGESIP parties. I think we had one monthly and people drank more than they do now. I also remember going to a restaurant in Attica Indiana, which seemed fairly quaint at the time.

5. How did your research interests grow, develop, and shift during your time in graduate school?

I started with an interest in personnel selection and developed a battery of tests to select first line supervisors at Alcoa (do they still have a plant in Lafayette?) for my masters thesis. Because I began working with Art Dudycha, I also began doing decision research using the Brunswik lens model from which to derive hypotheses. I also was interested in Social Psychology and ended with a minor in that area. I did continue to do applied and experimental research motivated by the lens model for at least 25 years, but gradually did more and more work that would be identified as personnel selection or measurement.

6. Was there someone who had a particularly large impact on you (e.g., mentor) during your time at Purdue? If so, how did they influence you?

I think that person would have to be Art Dudycha. He was certainly the source of my interest in decision-making as well as interest in quantitative issues.

7. How would you say your personal background and life experiences (e.g., growing up in a small town in Iowa, being drafted into the army) impacted your research and career?

Well that is hard to say, but I think working “all the time” was part of my farm background and certainly getting up early came from the farm background. Experience teaching at a community college while in the Army with nothing else to do helped cement an interest in an academic career. I also think academics appealed to me because of the independence it offered—also true of farming. No one ever told you what to do and I liked that aspect of academia.

Career Related:

8. What would you say has been your ‘secret’ to a successful career?

Perhaps the most significant part of my “success” is the collaborations with graduate students I have been lucky enough to develop over the past 40 plus years. Almost all my published work has been co-authored with graduate students. I also always tried to identify multiple outcomes that might result from applied projects or even teaching assignments I had. Some of the applied projects we worked on generated a dozen or more papers on different aspects of the work or problems that we encountered doing the work.

9. Looking back, is there anything that you would have done differently in your career?

No I never look back.

10. You have a very diverse career, with experience in both research and applied settings. Of all the work you did, what did you find to be the most fulfilling as an I-O Psychologist?

I think the most enjoyable of the projects on which I worked were those that satisfied some client organization and that generated research worthy questions and data. I also think these projects produced the best outcomes for the organization.

11. What were some of your favorite projects throughout your career?

I am sure I will miss some, but I think my long-term relationship and multiple projects with the National Association of School Principals, my work with the FBI, work with Ford Motor Company and Aon, and most recently with the College Board were highlights. On the teaching side, I taught the same graduate course in measurement for over 30 years and enjoyed the diversity (in terms of interest areas) of students. My most satisfying experiences derived from working with graduate students.

12. Based on your experience, what advice do you have for managing one's career?

If an academic, I would say most important is maintaining focus. Identify what you want to accomplish short and long term and make most, if not all, your effort or projects contribute to that focus. It is way too easy to get diverted by an interesting sounding project or someone else's project that sounds like fun. Do not try to get involved in too many things. I suspect the advice to one working in a consulting capacity might be different.

I-O Psychology Related:

13. Throughout your career, I am sure you have witnessed many changes within the field of I-O Psychology. Are there any changes that you think have been particularly beneficial and/or detrimental? If so, please explain.

I think it is increasingly difficult to maintain our doctoral programs in IO psychology. We compete with business schools for faculty and we are sometimes undervalued in Psychology departments partly because of the increased emphasis on NSF and NIH funding for which we do not compete well with other areas of Psychology.

There are also many more masters level program and students in IO psychology and I think practitioners are much more involved in SIOP and other professional organizations than has been true in the past.

Our studies have become increasingly complex. Many articles involve multiple studies and huge numbers of cases. The complexity of the data analyses (often not necessary) has increased tremendously. I think the review process has become increasingly focused on minutiae to the detriment of asking whether the project was worth doing in the first place and whether it

produces scientifically or practically important outcomes. This may produce better quality work, but not always.

The last two of these points have been both positive and negative implications. The first is highly important to our survival as a discipline.

14. What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges to our field today?

My answer to the last question certainly suggests the answer to this one. First, I think we must find ways to support good research-based doctoral programs in Psychology. We need to foster collaborations between academics and practitioners that results in published research. We are also becoming more active in promoting IO psychology in government and organizations and this must continue.

15. What do you see the role of I-O psychologists being moving forward in today's society?

I think we have a role to play in defining societal problems and in providing logical ways to address those problems and provide research based solutions. This is what I think defines a doctoral education and the disciplined thinking that is part of research is central to addressing problems in any area. I also think as psychologists we should find ways to better the lives of the people we study. Sometimes this goal is forgotten in pursuing the goals of organizations with whom we work. I do not think organization and people goals need to contradict each other if we keep both parties in mind when we design our research and develop interventions.

Advice for Graduate Students:

16. What types of experience would you recommend that students pursue during graduate school?

I think all graduate students regardless of career goals must do and appreciate research. So beginning immediately upon admission to a graduate program, they should seek research opportunities. These are most likely going to be faculty-generated, but students must strike out on their own as well. I don't think we should train students to follow direction carefully, they should be taught to GIVE direction in solving research problems in which they have interest. Academic oriented students must develop publishable projects and be able to write them for academic journals. Speaking and presentation skills are also critical. I think practitioner-oriented students should develop the same skills (how else will they publish later?) and I think for them it is also essential to get internships. I think all should aim to graduate in four, or at most five years. There is much more to learn and develop based on our work in other academic or work organizations and you might as well get paid while you are learning.

17. What advice would you give to graduate students struggling between staying in academia and going applied? What are some important things to consider?

One big think I think is your own temperament. Can you self direct? Do you have ideas you want to pursue? If the answer to these questions is yes, I think it would be best to go academic. I mentioned above that I enjoyed the independence academia has afforded me; if you like that independence then academia is the best place. I realize that similar jobs can exist in other contexts, but I doubt if they are common till one is much further into a career.

Academics will likely not produce the same monetary rewards (unless in business), but you often have three or even six months in which your activity is pretty much determined by you. This does not happen in most organizations. I also think you can pursue very different careers in academic institutions. You will likely teach and do research, but administrative roles can produce new and different challenges. I also spent sabbaticals taking care of an infant daughter, as a Fulbright scholar, working as a consultant and I think my job as an editor was almost full time for six years. I realize I am probably not giving practitioner careers a fair shake here, but hopefully some other interviewee can provide that perspective.

18. What advice do you have for graduate students just starting out in the field?

The answer is probably obvious from my other answers. Figure out what you would like to do. Maintain your focus. Develop good working relationships with your fellow grad students and those with whom you work as you begin your career. Remember the interests of the people who serve as subjects or clients in your research.