

EVERYTHING INTO ACCOUNT

Paul Gillis, professor, IMBA program co-director and accounting blogger

Text by Mike Cormack, photo by Sui



I am a professor at the Guanghua School of Management at Peking University. I teach China's future business leaders. It is an awesome responsibility, and wonderfully rewarding. I mostly teach in our International MBA program, where students from all over the world come to learn and to get a top ranked MBA education.

My first career was as a partner with PricewaterhouseCoopers. I spent 28 years with them, about half in the US and the rest in Asia. PwC brought me to China 15 years ago. I had taught while I was in graduate school and wanted to do a second career. Fortunately PwC had a generous early retirement program that let me do that. I retired at 50 and went back to school – first studying theology at Fuller Theological Seminary and the getting a PhD at Macquarie Graduate School of Management in Australia.

Most of my career has been in international business, and I have lived abroad for more than half of it. Life as an expatriate can be exceptionally rewarding if it is approached with patience and perseverance. I am not naturally gifted

with either skill, yet I acquired them along the way. The most important thing I learned about succeeding in an international environment is to be authentic. People in every culture can spot someone trying too hard to fit in a mile away.

I teach using the case study approach made famous by the Harvard Business School. The case study approach is a great way to teach business, but it is a real challenge for Chinese students.

I grew up next to a firehouse and would run out when the fireman scrambled to go to a fire. They would let us play in the firehouse, and the best part was sliding down the fireman's pole from the top floor to the ground. I never had that job, but we did build a fireman's pole in our apartment in Beijing.

Every job I had was a great learning experience. In the early years I learned how to work, then developed deep technical skills. In later years I learned how to influence others, win new work and develop talent. Gandhi told us to live as if you will die tomorrow, learn as if you will live forever.

A career is made up of a few really important projects that punctuate long periods of routine. You need to work hard on every project because you never know which will end up changing your life.

I work on one of the most beautiful university campuses in the world. When I need some inspiration I often take a stroll around Weiming Lake. I love being with young and intelligent people. They keep me young.

One of my goals is to keep the kids off the street – Wall Street. Too many of our graduates end up in finance, yet the world desperately needs their talent directed towards more important problems. I encourage students to find careers that will build business, create jobs and solve social problems. It is tough, because the

Street pays too well, and we do a pretty good job preparing them for life there.

Most of my students want international careers. For international students the best option is often to return to their home countries and establish their career. Competition for entry level positions in China is too tough, and it is important to have high level skills that are needed in China. Just being able to speak Chinese is not much of a selling point in a country with 1.3 billion fluent Chinese speakers.

My best boss was always the client. If you always put the client's interest first – whether that client is a graduate student or the CEO of a Fortune 500 client - everything else takes care of itself. I usually ignored the people I reported to, which you can get away with if your clients love you.

I was given two great projects in my career with PwC – building an expatriate tax practice in Singapore and building the China practice. My current project, helping Guanghai School of Management become one of the world's best MBA schools, is very exciting.

I need to stay current on what is going on in China business so I can bring relevant experiences into the classroom. My research is focused on US listed Chinese companies, so I spend a lot of time with regulators and on Wall Street. I will make at least seven trips to the US this year, so jet lag is my major challenge.

I teach China's best and brightest. That is an incredible responsibility – shaping the minds of the people who will shape the 21st century. My students also come from all over the world, and they will be playing important roles facilitating business between their countries and China. I really enjoy the cultural diversity in the classroom, and it really helps to prepare students for international careers. 

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