



The Jerome Fisher Program in  
Management & Technology

## Fisher Program in Management and Technology Alumni Spotlights



"That's the secret, be personable, don't dismiss anyone along the way. And follow your passion. Don't worry about the right way to do things. Most people are too conservative nowadays; they only want to follow the right path. But the key is to follow what you love to do, think about it, but love it."

- Roland Van der Meer, M&T 1982

Roland Van der Meer, M&T '82, offers these two pieces of advice to both current and former M&Ts. Following this advice himself, Roland has watched his career go from being a summer Club Med sailing instructor to being a successful venture capitalist in a surprisingly connected way.

Roland's career started with college summers spent pursuing his interests: One summer was spent working on a painting venture while another summer was spent teaching windsurfing at Club Med. When college came to an end and it was time for full-time recruiting, Roland found himself in a tough situation. While he was able to pursue his interests during college summers, he found it difficult to secure a full time job that really interested him. The M&T program prepared Roland for jobs in both engineering and business - and that was the problem.

"The most difficult thing about M&T was that you would go on job interviews and people didn't really know what to do with you. I went to a number of really interesting engineering interviews and they just didn't know where to put me. Consulting jobs thought it was great, but I wasn't interested in being a consultant, especially when I didn't think I knew anything. I wasn't interested in finance either. I wanted to do something solid, something concrete."

In the end, after establishing a good relationship with an individual at GTE, Roland was able to secure an engineering job with the firm.

"The program was one of those great engineering programs that trains you to be in management. It lets you be an engineer for a while and learn about real world problems, and then it takes you out into management."

After working at GTE on projects ranging from VSI chip design to artificial intelligence, Roland's past as a sailing instructor finally caught up with him.

"When I worked at Club Med teaching windsurfing I became friends with a girl who a year later introduced me to a partner of Hambrecht and Quist. Two years later I ended up working with him, and eventually we became partners in my first firm. I was 27 and we co-founded a venture capital firm together."

While the fund did well, Roland felt that he was missing some part of his background. It was almost as if he had gotten into venture capital too early. He wanted real management experience - and it came through another random connection.

"I was sitting on one of our desks one day and it broke. I looked under the desk and called the guy who built the furniture. He was a third generation cabinet maker. Grass roots type of guy; knew business better than anyone and knew how to build a business. He was just amazing and a great person too. I watched how he worked for three years, called him every six months to see how things were. And one day, he told me about an opportunity at a furniture company. I worked with him on that venture; we bought the bankrupt furniture company, spent six months to get it to neutral, two years building it up to get it to about \$6 million and then sold it. I proved to myself that I could run a company, and then, I went back to venture capital and re-founded the same firm with my prior partner. Now, we're a big company."

That big company is ComVentures, a leading venture capital firm that invests in early-stage communications and infrastructure companies. The company manages \$1.5 billion in capital and

the partners of the firm have invested in more than 175 early-stage companies. And Roland just made the Forbes Midas Touch List.

When asked about how the M&T program helped him get to where he is today, Roland comments that "business is common sense applied, but you learn some tools and tricks ... [and in engineering], you learn that you can solve problems. You learn a way of thinking."

Roland found his way to the M&T program through the School of Engineering and Applied Science. After flipping through the New York Times classifieds in junior high and seeing want ads for computer programming engineers, industrial engineers, and other engineers - he put the pieces together and decided that engineering was the place to be. Then, when it came time for college, Roland decided that Penn was the place to do it at. With its four schools, Penn would allow him to take engineering classes, business classes, liberal arts classes, and even nursing classes.

As a freshman CSE major, Roland explored his interests in the other schools by dabbling in courses offered by all four schools. While the college and nursing classes were interesting, it was the Wharton classes that really caught his attention.

"I always knew I was going to be in business. I followed the stock market with my dad when I was young, tracked it, looked at making money all the time. I had also started a bunch of businesses in high school: a pool cleaning business, a painting business, a lawn mowing business - all with one employee, but good businesses nonetheless."

This interest in business drew Roland to a number of Wharton classes his freshman year, including accounting and marketing. Then, after befriending M&T students like Ken Glass and Steve Delbianco, Roland was encouraged to apply to Wharton and to the M&T Program. Once in the program, Roland pursued a concentration in Marketing on the Wharton side and Systems Engineering on the Engineering side.

During his time in college, Roland was a member of Phi Delta Theta and participated in crew, the sailing team, and the judo club. While he has fond memories of his social life at Penn, Roland points to the people as the undeniable key takeaway from his college experience.

"What's incredible about college is the friends and the people you meet. They will come back time and time again in your life - it never stops. The sooner you realize that, the better."

As for advice on entering venture capital, Roland supplies his input as fodder for the ongoing business or engineering debate.

"It really doesn't matter what you do to get into venture capital. Just follow your passion. There is no best way. But, if I had to make generalizations, the best way to private equity is probably through investment banking. But the only way to venture capital from banking is probably if you're an analyst of an industry and become product knowledgeable. Business schools don't get you into VC either. The guys we hire here as partners are veterans of the industry."

As for what type of people tend to thrive in VC, Roland once again emphasizes the importance of people.

"Early stage is different from later stage VC. Later gets more like public stock picking. Early is intuitive, instinctual, reaction to markets as they evolve and people - how people work, think and process. You really have to understand that to be good early on."

And lastly, as parting words, Roland emphasizes again the importance of following what you love.

"If you do something you love, you'll be good at it. If you're good at it, chances are you'll make good money for it."