

Alyssa Belisle Discusses Her Role as Program Manager in Boeing's IT Career Foundations Program



MEMP Alumna
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By Margaret Kuleshova



While some of her coworkers won't be in until 8 to 10 AM due to the timing with their global teams, Alyssa turns the key to her office at 7 AM and switches on the lights. Being a program manager in Boeing's rotational IT program, she knows all about the importance of timing, particularly sticking to your schedule. First things first, she checks her email and goes through her priority list. Like any day at Boeing, there are going to be distractions. People will come in and out of the office with questions and, if they can't get to her in person, they'll be sure to reach her electronically. If she was going to get anything done, she had to leave some buffer time to deal with them.

Boeing is currently going through a massive managerial transformation into a horizontal management structure. Unsurprisingly, not everyone was all that happy about it. And who better to calm their fears than Alyssa? After all, managing conflict is one of the key attributes of any good project and program manager. Despite the battle ahead with a few unenthused employees, there were a lot of things she couldn't get enough of: the new site, the support of the company, and the people. She couldn't help but get excited about the fact that she got to support the entire Boeing enterprise through her work in IT, from missiles to rockets and satellites.

Her eyes shot to the post-it note next to her desktop which read: "Duke Informational Interview, Wednesday, 4 PM." With all the details of work flying around her head, she would have completely forgotten about it if she hadn't jotted it down.

Just before the scheduled interview, her meeting ran late as usual, but she still made it in time for the phone call.

"Hi, Alyssa! Thanks so much for giving us your time. Are you available now?"

"Hi, Margaret. Yes, I just finished a meeting. I'm good to talk."

"Great, thanks! If you don't mind me asking, what was the meeting about?"

"It was a typical status meeting, which is pretty important. I had to answer some questions from the department leaders and find out how I could support them. I also reported to the main project manager as well as our VP and our CIO. We have daily stand up meetings as well, which cover time, cost, resources, and where we're at. Not to mention spontaneous meetings—those happen pretty often."

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“Sounds pretty hectic. How do you manage?”

“It does get overwhelming sometimes, but management is kind of my thing so I have to figure it out one way or another. Prioritizing is really key, and so is sticking to what you said you’re going to do, even if it means going overtime. I don’t recommend killing yourself for work, but an extra hour here and there really gets you noticed.”

“I get it. Don’t drop your work when the whistle blows, right?”

“Yeah, wrap it up if you can. But don’t work past a due date. People hate that. Keep your work ethic sharp and meet deadlines. You learn that in project management – you’ve got to stick to the schedule.”

“I’m sure that course has definitely helped you. Are there any other courses or books you’d recommend?”

“Oh, yeah. Hone your IT knowledge as best as you can. Take an ITIL foundations course if you can. That doesn’t require an IT background. Learn what a server is, what it does. Just so you can talk the jargon, understand what’s going on. Being a good leader and a good manager, you have to know what your people are working on. Our IT Infrastructure VP recommended a book called *The Phoenix Project*. It compares the IT world to the manufacturer world and it takes you through the problems you might face as any manager or employee in IT. Anyone interested in IT should definitely look it up.”

“Excellent, thanks! What about skills? How do you use what you learned in MEM at work?”

“Coming out of the MEM program, you can do so much more than you realize. So many doors open just having the technical skills and business on top of that. Within IT, we have eight different units. I’m in infrastructure. We do all of the architecture and network design, but we also have the unit called Business Partners and their sole job is to market our IT services to our customers. Although you may not be typing up some of the numbers that we did in Marketing or you may not be putting together different advertisements, like in the simulation, you’re definitely using those skills – what appeals to customers and how can we sell this to them. And you also need to be able to know how to sell what you do and who you do it for. I had to do some recruiting effort where that definitely applied.”

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“Can you tell us more about the specifics of the rotation program you’re in?”

“Absolutely. I’m in a 3 year IT Career Foundations Program with one rotation per year. I’m currently in my first rotation in the Infrastructure program management office. Here I was assigned to help a project manager with people management, resources, reaching out to leaders of different organizations, headcount, organization, and communication with employees.”

“What’s that like, dealing with people in the industry?”

“You definitely need some emotional intelligence and people skills to back you up. You can always brush up on your technical skills, but being able to communicate well with people and communicate technical jargon and manage different people’s emotions – there’s a lot of value in that. Professor Ryan said, “Managing people is not easy,” and that is very true. A meeting planned to take 20 minutes can sometimes take up to two hours just because of different opinions. The best way to learn how to deal with that is to watch seasoned employees who have more experience with these kinds of situations. Those are the hardest things to deal with – at least for me – in the real world. You can know the technical stuff in and out but every person is different and really being able to lead them is much harder.”

“How did you acclimate to the culture?”

“One of the things that really helped me was Boeing’s mentorship program. As soon as you come into the company, you’re paired with a peer mentor as well as a mentor who is going to be in your immediate working group to give you working assignments. It’s kind of a tripod effect. That really helped me build a relationship with people, starting from them. And whether a company has a mentorship program set up or not, it’s about owning your career. If you meet someone and you want to get to know them better, you can reach out to them and ask them how do you this process or how do I order supplies. I think coming out of the MEM program, we are taught very well how to communicate. Just be willing to ask – don’t feel like you need to know everything.”

“That’s great to know! I think mentorship programs are extremely helpful, especially for anyone new to industry. It’s always great to know which companies offer them.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Alyssa, thank you again for all the info! We’re really grateful to have insight from you. I’ll let you get some work done before you have to run to another meeting!”

“Too true. Thanks and send word if you need anything.”

“Of course, you too! Have a good one.”

Alyssa hung up the phone. On top of her work and meetings, she also had IT training outside of her rotational program to attend to sharpen up her skills in the company. She knew she could do it. Boeing depended on her. ■

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