

Lee L'Esperance



On fiber optics: "I feel very proud to have had a part in developing the online capabilities we have nowadays. My kids enjoy YouTube and I use Google all the time. The reason we can have all these things at our fingertips is fiber optics."

—Lee L'Esperance, July 1, 2009

The job Lee L'Esperance enjoys most is connecting people to the future. He started by getting information to people through fiber optics. After a while, he decided he wanted to have opportunities to be "a little bit closer to the customer." Now he works to bridge the gap between future technology and today's consumers.

Lee entered Camden County College's (CCC) laser electro-optics technology program immediately after high school. "When I was coming out of high school, the laser program was brand new," he recalls. "It sounded like the thing of the future." Lee has always been a forward thinker, so it comes as no surprise that being on the cutting edge of technology appealed to him. After receiving an associate in applied science degree from CCC, Lee started on what is now a 29-year career with the same company. "My first job right out of school was fiber optics measurement in the engineering research center at Western Electric," he says. "We've gone through mergers, spin-offs, and name changes, so it's called Alcatel-Lucent now, but I've fundamentally been with the same company for all those years."

While holding down his full-time job, Lee managed to earn two more degrees: a bachelor's in electrical engineering from Drexel University and a master's in systems engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. It was tough, and Lee sometimes struggled to see the light at the end of the tunnel. But working and going to school has its perks, as Lee explains: "The company paid for my education. I have three degrees and never paid anything for them. Some large companies have tuition reimbursement plans. As long as you're taking classes that will help you do your job, the company usually pays for it. That was actually part of my strategy. I knew I wanted to go to school beyond the associate degree, and I thought it would be great if someone else paid for it."

Although Lee has been with the same company for 29 years, he is quick to point out that he hasn't done the same job all that time. "Photonics was what got me in the door, but there are other

things you can branch out into as you move forward in your career and as technology changes.” After his work in performance enhancement of fiber optics, Lee got involved in the production of undersea optical communication repeaters. “There are undersea cables that go from the United States to Europe and they’re all fiber optics-based,” he explains. “They have repeaters at certain intervals and inside those repeaters are lasers.”

In the mid-90s, Lee’s company went through a major change. As he describes it, “AT&T spun off a number of independent companies and I went with Lucent Technologies. I was put in an organization that looked at how we manufactured things, such as photonics components. My job was called manufacturing systems engineering. That transformed into estimating how much a product needed to cost to provide the right amount of profitability to the company. That was called market-based target costing. I’m currently part of Bell Labs and we use market data to create business models that help us to understand consumers’ willingness to pay and what the market wants.” One of Lee’s favorite aspects of his long career is that he has successfully remade what he does several times over.

Lee’s career began with photonics and progressed in many unexpected ways. But it has always been exactly what he wanted to do. “Don’t look where you are now,” he says. “Don’t look behind. Look ahead.” Maybe that’s why Lee is already looking ahead for himself. When he retires from industry, he wants to teach in a program like CCC’s where he can help to prepare people “for the technical careers of the future.” For future-focused Lee L’Esperance, that would certainly be coming full circle.

Lee L’Esperance lives in Erial, New Jersey, with his wife, Susan, and their two children. He received his associate in applied science degree in laser electro-optics technology from Camden County College in Blackwood, New Jersey, in 1980. He received his bachelor of science in electrical engineering from Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1989 and his master of science in systems engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, in 1993. Lee enjoys hiking and mountain biking and is starting a car collection with his 1999 Mustang Cobra and his 1997 BMW Z3.