

Industrial Engineer Grows Alternative Career in Bakery Start-up Management

Claudia Vasconcelos started industrial engineering in El Salvador and was pleased with her work.

Years later, she has taken her knowledge and woven it together with a new-found passion for food, baking and Canadian business that has resulted in a rewarding alternative career.

Welcome to British Columbia!

December 6, 2010 was the day the Vasconcelos family arrived in Vancouver as well as the fourth birthday of the youngest family member. The family of three was optimistic about life in a new country.



Claudia Vasconcelos stops for a quick photo just outside the plant she manages in Burnaby.

Like many mothers, the industrial engineering newcomer had earlier found a way to combine her parenting with her work. Her pre-child years involved continuous improvement engineering work in factories, work that she really enjoyed. Then, after the birth of her daughter, she found a new passion in baking and cooking with whole and natural ingredients, which led her to start a small bakery business that she could combine with parenting. She was motivated by the idea of creating healthy food for her daughter. "I wanted to have the best foods for her."

After landing in B.C. this engineering mom had planned to start working by the fall of 2011, after she would have settled her daughter in school. However, before the expected time she found an opportunity to work at a local bakery to follow her passion while contributing to the family income. Like so many newcomers, she started out at the most entry-level position available: a helper. But she quickly moved up. Within a few months, she was running the bakery.

Getting Job Search Help

Finding the bakery job had not been difficult. Yet although she moved up the ranks quickly, the minimal salary didn't match her skills. After assessing the situation and her future at work she decided it was time to return to the idea of running her own business. With the assistance of ISSofBC, she joined a nine-month self-employment program. Business wasn't new to her, but the Canadian context was. After the course, she set up her home-based baking operation. Unfortunately, as with many start-ups, the business was not paying back as quickly as she needed. The job market seemed a possibility again.

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In the summer of 2014, she re-assessed her situation and knew that growing her business would take time and financial resources. She wanted to go back to the labour market but this time using her skills as Industrial Engineer. She decided to pursue a position as Continuous Improvement Specialist and reconnected with ISSofBC. A year before, she had learned about the MAPLE 2.0 program. She started an internship at a food manufacturing company and participated in a continuous improvement position. During the three months, she strengthened her confidence and learned that her previous experience was a great asset to find the position she desired. Soon, two fantastic offers came her way.

One was a continuous improvement specialist with a large company. However, the interview process took months to complete before the job offer eventually came. Three months after the first contact, there was no assurance the job would really be hers.

Another offer was to set up and run a new Industrial Food Manufacturing Plant in Burnaby for gluten-free baked goods. This opportunity came through her network, from people she knew and trusted. And this offer came one day before the other. She didn't hesitate: she accepted and has been the Plant Manager since early 2015. She turned down the other offer in favor of her current work.

"It fits like a ring," she says, "An opportunity to start from scratch...like living my own business dream."

Looking back, this industrial engineer would never have predicted that she would have followed this path. As a young professional in El Salvador, she never baked or cooked, but followed the convention of hiring someone to do that work. That has changed for her over the years. "I didn't know I had this passion for cooking," she says.

Immigrating to Canada brought this self-knowledge. "This experience makes a more complete you."

The Future

As the first staff member of the organization, the Plant Manager has hired other workers and trained them. She's completed numerous other tasks involved with scaling up the small business to a larger producer. That's included adapting the company's recipes from small size to industrial proportions. Currently she is also directly involved in the R & D process of the company, from the creation of new products to defining the manufacturing process.

There are many other tasks involved in her work, including securing various licences related to food and growing customer and supplier connections. That will continue in the future.

She doesn't plan to work toward a Professional Engineering designation. She simply doesn't need it. Other opportunities for career growth have appeared.

"The learning experience has been wonderful," she says, "I am at that place of contentment and peace."

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