



Brice Nelson

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## Grab the chance to do groundbreaking work

Every moment of every day, the focus in industry is on the bottom line. But for Brice Nelson, director of corporate partnerships at Michigan State University, the broad scope of research experienced in an academic setting continually expands the possibility for impact.

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Early in his career, Nelson was a technology licensing specialist at the University of Michigan. Curiosity about the experience from the other side of the table inspired him to switch gears and take a similar position with Toyota Motor Engineering and Manufacturing.

“It was a major company that was doing exciting things,” says Nelson. The move also appealed to his sense of adventure. “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t missing out on anything.”

Nelson immediately noticed more specificity in what he had to accomplish and how he would go about doing so. And circumstances changed quickly. “I was completely comfortable with it,” says Nelson. “But there was a bit of a cultural change.”

Toyota initially wanted to increase its technology licensing, which was Nelson’s specialty area. But the company soon changed focus to establishing research collaborations with universities. Managing these partnerships became Nelson’s job.

Nelson was content in the corporate world, but developments on the Michigan State University (MSU) campus caught his eye. MSU was forming a business engagement center, one of the first in the United States. He first took a close look to discover what industry could expect from the center. But the more he learned, the more he was convinced that helping lead the center was a huge opportunity to define a new space—and that he was the perfect person to do it. He pursued and won the position.

Nelson was prepared for the new role with transferrable skills he developed at Toyota, where he added university-industry partnerships to his licensing skills. He also added expertise in negotiation; while at Toyota, the company grew from 10 academic collaborative partners to 100 a year. He learned to focus on the pain points of a deal to streamline negotiations and to manage outside legal counsel efficiently. There is enormous value in all these skills, notes Nelson, because “organizations don’t know how to work with each other. When people like me can help guide that relationship, there is always going to be value.”

Nelson went to MSU with “eyes wide open” about the move’s impact on his future career advancement. “At Toyota, I knew that if I wanted to change my role, I could do that—cross-functionality is something corporations encourage,” he says. “I knew once I got to a university, I was going to be in a very

specialized role. The only position that I could aspire to would be the one my boss holds.”

The biggest adjustment in moving from industry to university was the decision-making process. In higher education, decisions often involve input from more stakeholders. “If one group doesn’t want to go forward, you have to convince them. And it’s not always easy because if you have the power to veto, then you don’t need to compromise.” In contrast, departments and decisionmakers are clearly defined in an industry decision. If there are disputes, stakeholders can appeal to higher management to make the final call.

Organizational goals also operate differently in higher education. At Toyota, says Nelson, “I could always tie in exactly what I was doing to how it fit the bigger company mission.” In academia, Nelson’s goals are to increase corporate interactions, but someone else’s goals might be to improve student satisfaction.

Compensation is also different at the university. Nelson has a base salary and matched retirement contributions, plus tuition remission for himself and his family. Toyota provided a base salary, allowance on a company car, discounts on Toyota purchases, stocks, matched retirement contributions, and annual bonuses.

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Job security is strong in higher education, although Nelson concedes that the pandemic could affect university finances. But “no matter what sector you’re in, if you can demonstrate your benefit to your organization,” your job will be secure.

### Nelson’s advice to early-career university professionals who want to jump to industry:

- **Understand what industry jobs are parallel to yours.** What can your experience add to a career from the industry perspective?
- **Become active in professional organizations** like UIDP that have members from different sectors so you can network and learn from peers.

### For mid-career university professionals who want to jump to higher education, Nelson advises:

- **Check the university’s financial health.** Some offices expand or contract, depending on economic realities.
- **Understand the options (or lack thereof) for advancement.** Universities may not offer as many options as industry to move up.
- **Ensure you like the people you’ll be working with.** “In higher education, people don’t rotate in and out as much as they do in industry,” he says.

Nelson is enjoying the diversity of research at MSU. While at Toyota, he focused on the “nuts and bolts” of mobility. At MSU, he is branching out into areas like smart cities and smart health. He is also exploring the social aspects of technology, which may be even more critical to industry than technology. “I’m discovering those sorts of resources at MSU, and I’m bringing

those to companies. “And I’m seeing a lot of excitement in that. We’ve focused for so long on the nuts and bolts that we haven’t thought about the social aspects. MSU has a lot of strength there, and companies want to want to talk more about that.”

The “cool things” in higher education continue to evolve, even after more than a decade at MSU. “We produce research results that make it into products that that affect people’s lives. It’s one of the things that’s really excites me about working at MSU.”



Nelson on campus with two corporate partners.