

Michele has accepted a position as a Senior Associate at 8 Hours Ahead. In this role, she is responsible for Clean Tech deal origination in addition to operational and market due diligence. She is a seasoned engineer with a decade of experience within the energy sector. She has worked in both operational and asset planning roles within infrastructure and production engineering teams. These experiences include leading operations excellence and methane reduction programs as well as overseeing development of large-scale pipeline and facility projects. Michele has an MSc in Climate Change, Management, and Finance from Imperial College London and a B.Eng in Chemical Engineering from Oklahoma State University.

Why did you decide to take time out of work to study and how did you decide which course? Tell us a little about the course.

In the words of the fictional Disney character Johnny Tsunami: “Go big or go home.”

While I haven't seen Johnny Tsunami since I was twelve years old, the creed has stuck with me.

Unlike Johnny, after nine years of working in onshore, unconventional oil and gas, my enthusiasm was beginning to fall flat and I felt like I was sitting squarely in the middle of that mantra. I genuinely enjoyed the complexity of my projects, the travel, and authenticity of the people I worked with, but I didn't feel that higher calling that I once did.

Then cue Covid – I feel extremely lucky that the first months of the pandemic in 2020 afforded me time to focus on my bigger picture. I had a fondness for technological innovation and a desire to focus on high impact issues, but had obvious gaps in the subject matters of finance and strategy. When things were getting bleak, WWJTD (What Would Johnny Tsunami Do) surfed back into my brain waves.

I chose to 'go big' and by that I mean I uprooted my family and moved from Houston to London so that I could pursue an MSc. Climate Change, Management and Finance (CCMF) at Imperial College London. I looked at a dozen programs in the States and in the UK and chose CCMF because I felt that it intersected the subjects that I was most interested in learning. I also felt that the programme's broad base of topics would give me the best foundations to choose between a 180° with my career or grow into a strategic position within oil and gas. I was particularly excited for the 'Innovation in Cleantech and Climate Change Solutions' and 'Energy Business and Strategy' courses.

What was challenging about going back to study? Have you had the support of an employer or another organisation in pursuing this additional qualification?

Going back to university was a multi-layered challenge for me. Not only had I been out of school for almost a decade but I was jumping into a school system that I was unfamiliar with (English vs. American), I was studying a highly topical subject within business when I had studied engineering before, and, last but not least, Covid was still in full swing. While different from my previous experiences, these challenges were not insurmountable and ultimately gave me an appreciation for people who easily adapt in new situations and more understanding and compassion for those who don't.

Was the course what you expected and did anything surprise you? What are the key things you took away from it and how do you think finishing the course will impact your career options and aspirations going forward?

I thought the coursework overall was particularly well structured to bring out engaging discussions and force us beyond the walls of our own echo chambers. Some of the key things I took out of the program was a better understanding of climate science, fundamental knowledge of corporate finance and management consulting principles, and the desire to challenge the status quo through the lens of climate change.

I was surprised at the access we had to scientists, policymakers, and academics who are at the forefront of their fields. The passion these individuals showed for their subject matter was contagious and their willingness to engage with students outside the classroom made up for some of the issues we experienced with Covid. On the flip side, I was possibly more surprised by my cohort. In a world where different backgrounds and beliefs generally shut down conversations before they begin, I found a comfortable environment where curious minds openly engaged with me on oil and gas topics. Ultimately, everyone was just as eager to find pragmatic yet ambitious solutions to the challenges posed by climate change and achieving an equitable energy transition. Having graduated, I firmly believe that Imperial's 'Climate Change Management and Finance Programme' was the right choice for me. The programme is grounded in science and established business principles and helped me understand the climate crisis from financial, scientific, and policy angles. Coupling these new-found learnings with my facilities and production engineering background has expanded my career opportunities immensely. I am now working with a specialist firm within the venture capital space that scales CleanTech (among other high-impact sectors) into China. The company saw value in my operations and engineering experience and my dual profile was an interesting fit. Without 'going big' I might not have uncovered this path where I reignited my career ambitions.