IN THE LATE 1970s Ginni Rometty was like most first-year engineering students at Northwestern: she knew she was good at math and science, but she didn’t know what she wanted to do with those skills. She decided to major in computer science, then a budding field, and so her undergraduate years were spent lugging around boxes of programming punch cards and scheduling time on the giant computer systems, which meant many late nights and an uncommon commitment to her studies. Rometty still remembers the computer she used: the PDP-11. “Anything we did on that computer you could do on your phone today,” she says.

Since then Rometty herself has evolved from engineering student to senior vice president and group executive for sales, marketing, and strategy at IBM. She’s been named to Fortune magazine’s “50 Most Powerful Women in Business” five years running, and she led the largest acquisition in professional services history. In her current position she is responsible for revenue, profit, and client satisfaction in the 170 global markets in which IBM does business.

At McCormick’s undergraduate convocation last June, Rometty reflected on how Northwestern helped shape her future. “I never would have guessed,” she said, “when I was sitting where you’re sitting now, that I would be fortunate enough to meet with hundreds of corporate and government leaders every year, travel millions of miles, and now help lead an organization with revenues that are higher than the GDP of three-quarters of the countries in the world. Much of what I have accomplished I owe to this great institution.”

Rometty was one of only a few female students studying computer science in the 1970s. She tells of running into a male classmate recently from an electrical engineering class and failing to come up with his name. “He said, ‘That’s okay. There was one of you and 50 of us,’” she laughs. “But it was a very nurturing educational environment. I was around lots of kids who were smart and bright and who had good social skills. But the thing Northwestern does above all else is teach you how to solve problems and how to think. Then you figure out what you are passionate about and apply that thinking there.”

After graduating in 1979, Rometty took a position that left her unsatisfied. That experience quickly taught her the difference between a job and a career: “I learned that jobs are what people do from 8 to 5, and careers are things they are passionate about. That’s what led me to IBM. I like technology, but I didn’t want to just do technology. I wanted to apply it. I learned how to think at Northwestern, and at IBM I could apply that thinking.”

Her résumé at IBM is impressive. Before rising to her current position she served as general manager of IBM’s global insurance and financial services sector, general manager of IBM global services, and senior vice president of IBM global business services. In that last position she led the successful integration of PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting into IBM — a record-breaking acquisition involving a global team of more than 100,000 business consultants and service experts.

“I’ve spent the majority of my life away from hard engineering,” she says. “I’ve been in technical sales, sales, and consulting. It’s the idea of being T-shaped. You need really broad business acumen, but you also need an area where your knowledge is deep. From that emanates your confidence to try other things. What Northwestern did was give me that foundation. That is what has allowed me to traverse different careers.”

Rometty takes that message on the road when speaking to potential female engineers. She is a leader in national diversity initiatives, such as the Women in Technology Council and the Women’s Leadership Council, and is one of the senior sponsors of the Women’s Executive Council at IBM. “I try to get women to go into math and science,” she says. “I try to convince them it’s a solid foundation that gives them the confidence to tackle just about anything.”

Rometty has been so successful in part because she believes in putting people first — she’s known for her customer service. “I have a huge passion for clients,” she says. “None of our businesses would exist without them. In my position I’m responsible for those relationships across the company, and today that’s all about how to change their businesses and make their businesses successful. It’s not about technology. It’s about how to drive outcomes for them in a world that’s become very volatile and complex and full of opportunity. I can’t think of a better job to have at a better time. An environment like this is always full of opportunity.”

Rometty credits her education with helping her broaden her skills beyond math and science. “I believe you can apply science to any industry, using both the left and right sides of your brain,” she says. “The interdisciplinary curriculum at Northwestern allowed me to develop that. It infuses the way you think and gives you a broad portfolio of skills.”

Now, 30 years after her graduation, Rometty is becoming more involved at Northwestern. This fall, she received the Alumni Merit Award and joined Northwestern’s Board of Trustees.

“I think as you go on in your career you get a little bit of wisdom, and you reflect back on what contributed to who you’ve become,” she says. “This is a small way to give back.”
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GINNI ROMETTY