

“A Man for All Seasons”: The Genius of Peter W. Hart to Bridge Industry and Academia

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As research scientists go, few rival the volume of work that Dr. Peter Hart produced. His career reflects his willingness to guide budding pulp & paper scientists when he was the Director of Fiber Technology and Innovation at WestRock, as well as an adjunct professor in the Department of Forest Biomaterials at North Carolina State University. He brought his wealth of knowledge to those working in industry and academia; a rarity for anyone with his acumen. His support to graduate research reflects the quality of the publications of researchers such as Dr. Ricardo Santos and Dr. Juliana Jardim; both of whom tackled challenging subjects related to lignin degradation kinetics in kraft pulping and lignin precipitation from kraft black liquor, respectively. In his last academic project, Dr. Hart invested his remaining life to support PhD work to study how lignin-carbohydrate complexes influence lignin precipitation from kraft black liquor. Dr. Hart provided opportunities for young scientists to achieve their goals and provided them with a safe space to learn within research.

DOI: 10.15376/biores.20.1.4-6

Keywords: Peter W. Hart; Academics; Industry; Partnerships

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Who is Dr. Peter W. Hart?

Dr. Peter W. Hart (Peter) is many things, and we could list a lot of opening biographical, historical, and related contextual data typically done in most scientific editorials; however, we'd like to take a different tack by offering a more prosaic depiction of Peter to provide a sense and feeling of a man whose mark on the world was very profound. We open with a quote from a student: “I remember my first conversation with Dr. Hart where we were introduced, and the project was explained to me. We connected over the personality of his two small dogs, and his personality struck me. His demeanor humanized the daunting task of conversing with two highly skilled and technical people. His personality translated to the few meetings I had with Dr. Hart where I never felt out of place or uncomfortable sharing my thoughts or opinions.” This quote by one of the Authors neatly summarizes what most if not all recognized about Peter, *i.e.*, a genius to make human connections facilitating bridging what industry needed with what academia could provide. His list of students and colleagues, including the authors, were trained with an appreciation of the industry needs, but without ever compromising academic rigor. Peter knew firsthand the value of academic research and through his

involvement he arrayed a lineup of superstars that continue to this day to invest and support the pulp & paper industry.

The “West” Connection

In Bolt’s “A Man for All Seasons,” the protagonist reminds us of Peter in many ways: a man of remarkable intellect and wit whose genius lies in his unwavering commitment to his principles, even in the face of immense pressure and personal loss. Peter was never one to surrender in the face of any challenges. He served the “West” in Westvaco, MeadWestvaco, WestRock, and up until the announced Smurfit Westrock deal, he remained strong in his convictions and defended what he knew was right based on sound pulping & papermaking fundamentals. A few of his colleagues knew Peter well over his thirty-two-year career. By leveraging his academic training and immense body of scholarly work, a few of his greatest industrial accomplishments along with solving hundreds of smaller technical issues, he had a passion for optimizing kraft pulping and brown stock washing, pushed for and implemented ECF bleaching when the industry was unsure, and developed a deeper appreciation for lime kilns and their operation. If we are to look back, his crowning industrial achievement was developing the patented HiBAR™ process to produce pulp at an international scale with high yield and is still in use today. The details matter, the work matters, the love for the Pulp & Paper Industry matters.

The TAPPI Connection

Peter was a great source of guidance to TAPPI for scientific publishing for the past 15 years. He always almost immediately answered any question, no matter how small even while he worked in Brazil – just as he did for many, which is remarkable given his enormous range of responsibilities. In fact, he was still responding to texts about *TAPPI Journal* until just a few weeks before his passing in May of this year, just as he had throughout his illness. As editor-in-chief of *TAPPI Journal*, a role in which he led the editorial board comprised of scientists, Peter’s leadership and insight was invaluable, as was his great depth of experience in industry and academia. From his background, Peter always understood that while many things are possible, not all things will be practical. His artful negotiation between academia and the corporate world (all with his signature dry humor) were indeed unique and are greatly missed each day.

A Personal Touch

Peter was a friend to the Authors for many years if not for most of their careers and greatly assisted our trajectory to success. One of the Authors states, “Peter’s enthusiasm for this industry was tremendous. He led me to conduct some undergraduate research work that resulted in several oral presentations and a *TAPPI Journal* publication. A few years later, Peter asked me to be a co-editor for several paper industry symposia books. Ten to fifteen years ago, I wrote some chapters for brownstock washing and kraft pulp bleaching books, in which he was the book editor.” The above shares just one perspective on ways that Peter assisted us in our careers. There are multiple cases where he volunteered his efforts to help others. He loved spending his time with students, colleagues and co-workers. Peter was a rare person from both the academic and administrative point of view. He will be truly missed.

One of the Authors first crossed paths with Peter over 30 years ago while Peter was finishing his PhD at Georgia Tech, and he was starting graduate school at IPST. For

the first part of the Author's professional career, both were on mostly different paths and worked in different areas – but this Author is so glad he had the opportunity to work on Peter's team and publish papers at this stage in the Author's career. Peter was generous with support, guidance, and challenges. He helped him to grow as a writer and as a thinker. He provided opportunities and recognition that wouldn't have been otherwise available. He inspired to look beyond the self and to encourage and inspire others. He emboldened to continue pushing for fundamental research and collaboration in our industry. And this is just another account out of many whom he has coached and mentored. So many people know him, so many people have been influenced and inspired by him. He has been a presence in our industry for decades. It is absolutely remarkable what he has done in his career – from all the work internally at Westvaco, MeadWestvaco and WestRock to all of his publications and presentations to his dedication and contributions as an editor and a committee member to his teaching and guidance as an instructor and supervisor.

The Peter W. Hart Institute for Fostering Academic & Industry Partnerships

Finally, one of the Authors of this Editorial so valued Peter's genius that to extend his legacy, he is collaborating to establish an Institute at NC State University formally named The Peter W. Hart Institute for Fostering Academic & Industry Partnerships. Its purview will be to ensure that its clients are offered the best opportunities to seek to valorize their education for the benefit of society through industrial partnerships.

Conclusions

Most of those touched by Dr. Peter Hart will remember him for who he was as a person. Someone who worked incredibly hard to get to the position he attained, someone who is eternally kind and equitable, someone who cared about education and furthering research in the industry, and someone who I've only ever heard good things about. This is how he should be remembered. Unfortunately, a lot of my memories and interactions with Dr. Hart have been overshadowed by his undeserved health issues. I would have loved to know the man that so many have talked kindly about. I encourage readers who see this and had a personal relationship with Dr. Hart to remember the many positive traits that he exhibited during his life and career and take solace that you knew him during his illustrious life. A heartfelt thank you and deepest gratitude for all he's done – from all of us, his company, from the whole pulp & paper industry.