



MBA Program

Meet Elke Robbrecht, an MBA Solvay alumnus who became CFO of ENGIE China in Beijing.

Biography



Elke Robbrecht, was appointed **Chief Financial Officer ENGIE China** in September 2014. (ENGIE is former GDFSuez)

Next to her current role she holds several board positions within Joint Ventures in China.

Elke Robbrecht holds a **Master in Business Administration from Solvay Brussels School - ULB** and graduated from the Vrije Universiteit Belgium with a postgraduate in Management and a master in Civil Engineering. She had her first international experience through a one year exchange program at the Institut National des Sciences Appliquées in Lyon, France during her Civil Engineering studies.

In 2000, she joined Tractebel Engineering as a project manager on large infrastructure and nuclear waste storage projects within the Geotechnical department. After successfully obtaining her Solvay MBA degree in 2004 she moved on to General Electric where she held several technical-commercial positions in Europe and the US. From 2007 she rejoined the GDFSuez group within Electrabel Belgium where she held the position of market analyst within the risk asset liability management department working on major power generation investment projects

within several European countries. In 2010 she moved to GDFSuez headquarters in Paris where she was responsible for setting up and implementing the European Power Generation Controlling for business control of all generation activities from renewable to coal fired plants within Europe (except France and Benelux). In her role, she oversaw a transversal network of European generation controllers. In 2012 after an internal group restructuring she was appointed as Head of Generation Controlling for all generation activities in Europe.

In September 2014 she was appointed Chief Financial Officer of ENGIE China based in Beijing, China.

[Learn more](#) about the Solvay Executive MBA

Interview

WHAT ARE YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AT YOUR CURRENT JOB?

Chief Financial Officer ENGIE China

In 2014 ENGIE decided to step up its' development on the Chinese market. The then existing Business Unit in China was very limited in terms of size and means. Upon my arrival, I was in charge of **financial restructuring of the existing business unit** and the set-up of the financial management of the company. Within my role as CFO I oversee all accounting, tax and controlling functions for the fully owned and affiliated companies within China. Furthermore, my team provides support to the business development team within organic growth projects or M&A's through financial advice or within project negotiations.

CAN YOU SUMMARIZE YOUR PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE AND CHALLENGES?

Although my first experience as project engineer was the least satisfying on the professional field, it was **one of the most rewarding in terms of lessons learned**. It pushed me to really think about what I wanted to do in my career in so far that I took the decision after 3 years to quit my position and do **a full time MBA** at an early age. Since then my professional experience has been a **continuous flow of "self-imposed" challenges**. The MBA experience has shown me that putting myself out of my comfort zone allows me to evolve the quickest so at every move in my career I seek for a new challenge.

The challenges are **diverse**, it can be a geographical move bringing with it the cultural differences, a change in scope or a change in job field, but usually it is a combination of all this which makes it even more interesting. I am driven by new challenges, meeting new people and learning from each other every day.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THESE CHALLENGES?

Each challenge is an **opportunity**, which allows one to move on with off course more or less hurdles to take. Every position has allowed me to **learn new technical, soft and managerial skills**. I'll just mention a few of them here below.

Working with many different **cultures** has taught me that two-way active listening is of utmost importance in an interaction. If one gets no reaction from the audience, be it your team or any other, one needs to actively engage them to make sure they have understood the given message. It helps avoiding losing precious time since different cultural backgrounds might lead to different understanding. But it also means that one should adapt oneself to the new culture and put in practice good advice received from the local teams and peers.

I have learned that **one does not have to be perfect in every field but that it is important to surround oneself with experts**. Building up a good network with experts is a real necessity. It is important to know ones' own limits and to ask for help where needed. Being afraid to say one does not know is a totally wrong attitude leading to huge risks for any organization. I acknowledge that it is not always easy to admit one doesn't know and that in some organizations it is "not done". If this is the

case, I recommend you do it anyway, maybe you start a change in the company culture or you can built up your own fall back network with whom you can easily exchange.

The ability to work with professionals from all ranks and backgrounds is of utmost importance. The words to keep in mind in any relationship is showing respect, being humble and showing true interest but also "these are all people like you and me" so treat them like that.

"Putting myself out of my comfort zone allows me to evolve the quickest so at every move in my career I seek for a new challenge."

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR MBA EXPERIENCE AT THE SOLVAY BRUSSELS SCHOOL?

A very enriching experience on a professional and personal field.

HOW DID YOUR MBA SHAPE WHO YOU ARE TODAY?

I did my MBA at a relatively young age with only a few years of experience. It was for me **a way to move out** of pure engineering roles towards more managerial and commercial roles. But in the end it brought me much more.

The MBA allowed me **to grow a macro-understanding of the world economy** and develop a high level view on day-to-day problems by taking a step back.

Studying and working together with so many different cultures on complete new fields allowed me to **grow my managerial and soft skills**.


I built up a **network** of friends and acquaintances with whom I am still in contact today. Actually my network is still growing even if I do not often come back to Belgium. My network allows me to talk to peers, exchange and test ideas but also to keep a diverse look on the market and its' opportunities and not get stuck in my own professional field.

Going through the MBA **gave me more self-confidence** and gave me **the tools to get where I am now**.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO START AN MBA?

Doing an MBA is a life changing event on a professional and a personal level.

The courses allow you to get the theoretical understanding of a wide range of fields, though the interactions with your co-students is what really makes the picture complete. The different backgrounds,



professionally and culturally, allow you to learn how to look at issues from many different angles.

The MBA is a condense preparation of what you will deal with in the day to day life - but then without the daily stress of real business life!

Go for it and enjoy the ride!