

Correcting the Notion of a Self-Correcting Career

A lot of people are angry and frustrated with their careers these days. They played the game and obeyed the rules, and still, they've been blindsided by circumstances that have battered their security and self-respect. They expected their career to be able to accommodate the situation, but it let them down. They thought their career was a self-correcting system, only to discover it needs a guiding hand.

There's been a lot of commentary about the career prospects of lawyers these days, so let's take a look at that profession as a case in point.

According to news reports, the number of people taking the law school entrance exam rose dramatically in 2009. Not surprisingly, law school applications did so, as well. At schools ranging from Washington University in St. Louis to the University of Iowa's College of Law, applications were up from 20 to over 40 percent. Having evaluated their prospects of success in other occupations (including their own), more and more people have apparently decided that becoming a lawyer is a smart idea.

The New York Times, however, featured a report that suggested exactly the opposite is true. It introduced Daniel Lukasik, an attorney who runs a Web-site called lawyers with Depression, and described what he has encountered:

"Mr. Lukasik recently received a call from a man who said he was a fifth-year associate in Manhattan who complained that he felt expendable even though he was a top performer.

He said to me, 'What more do I have to do?'" Mr. Lukasik recalled. "I'm billing a large amount of hours, I'm a team player,' but he said it's very possible he might lose his job. And he was a Yale graduate, at a top-20 firm."

The associate was paralyzed by his sense of betrayal—by the feeling he had that his occupation and the economy had let him down. He assumed—he believed—that because he was doing all the right things, the world of work would treat him right. He was simply unable to comprehend or accept that the workplace is not governed by physics-like laws of mathematical certainty and predictability. It is, instead, a frontier that cannot be manipulated into orderly behavior or preferred outcomes.

How Can You Deal With Such a Situation?

Careers are not self-correcting systems so they have to be guided into a state that provides you with security and satisfaction. And, career activism is a strategy for doing so. To become a career activist, however, most of us will have to change our outlook. In the case of the lawyer, for example, he would have to accept the responsibility for managing his own career. He must be willing to work as hard on his personal future as he does on his legal briefs for his employer. He must stop worrying about his job security and start working at his career security.

With that commitment to himself in place, he could take the first step toward independence in the workplace. He would set aside the time to ask and answer a frank question: Is his current profession—is the law—employing him at his talent or is he working, instead, to reach some idealized lifestyle? The fact that he is performing at a high level doesn't ensure that he also loves what he is doing. And no lifestyle—regardless of how plush and comfortable it may be—can justify employment at what another lawyer called “an absolute torture shack.” There is no standard of living worth employment by water boarding, in the law or any other occupation.

If the law isn't employing his talent, it is his job—his most important job—to find an occupation that will. If, on the other hand, the law does in fact enable him to express and experience his gift, then the next step in managing his career would be to assess, as accurately and candidly as he can, if he is performing at his peak. If he isn't, it is also his job to fix those aspects of his work where he is falling short.

If he is doing his best work, then it is up to him to create options for himself. He should:

- assess whether he is being fulfilled in a big Manhattan law firm and, if not, where he would be better able to pursue Happiness in his profession.
- if working in a big firm is the right place for him, he must take steps to protect himself should his current employer be unable to sustain his employment. He must work to increase his visibility and stature among other potential employers to ensure that he, rather than his current firm, can determine the state of his employment.
- if working in some other sphere of the legal profession—in a boutique firm, the government or the not-for-profit sector—is better aligned with his talent, he must initiate and develop a robust network of contacts that could facilitate his move into that kind of work at a time of his choosing.

Such career activism is already on the rise in the American workplace. A 2009 Executive Mobility Survey conducted by BlueSteps, an executive search firm, found that an astonishing 75 percent of currently employed executives describe themselves as likely or very likely to consider taking a new job in 2010, despite the lingering effects of the Great Recession. They don't see themselves as anchored to their current employer and they are looking ahead to alternative employment opportunities that would better serve their career goals. Assuming they act on those plans, they will have corrected their careers.

Even with a recovery from the recession, the global marketplace is too unstable for us to return to the halcyon days of the past. Our careers, therefore, will continue to face disruptive threats and roadblocks. But those situations can defeat us only if we let them. Each of us has the capacity to correct the course of our career. We just have to make the commitment to do so.

Thanks for reading,

Peter

Visit my blog at Weddles.com/WorkStrong

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