

Things We Wish We Had Known

The positive growth turned in by the American economy in the third quarter of this year suggests that maybe, just maybe this Great Recession is now in our rear view mirror. As it fades away, of course, the tales will begin about what we did during this terrible time. While recounting those legends is surely important, so too is sharing the insights we've acquired from our experience.

Cataclysmic events often alter our perceptions of the world around us. That was true during the Great Depression, and it will be true as we emerge from this Great Recession, as well. Some of these new views are opinions about what happened and why, but others are actually lessons that we've learned about how best to survive and prosper. They're the things we wish we had known before the event occurred because that knowledge would have undoubtedly enabled us to fare better than we did.

I think the sharing of this wisdom is good for us—it's cathartic to acknowledge that we've earned an advanced degree in the school of hard knocks—but it's even more helpful for our kids and grandkids. In a very real sense, we are giving them a gift, a roadmap for the future that may help them avoid the dead ends and dangerous potholes they are sure to encounter.

Each of us has our own view of the lessons we should pass along. For me, the following four insights are among the most important. They are realizations everyone must have in order to chart a successful and fulfilling career in the 21st Century world of work.

Seeking job security makes you vulnerable. In today's turbulent economy, employers have no idea what will happen tomorrow or the day after. They may promise you job security, but they can't deliver it. So, counting on it is likely to put you out for the count. A far better objective is career security—the ability to stay employed in a job of your choosing regardless of the condition of any single employer or the economy as a whole. Unlike job security, career security is a state you create for yourself. You don't have to rely on the good will of some employer. You anticipate the changes in your career—the timing of a move from one boss or organization to another, the refocusing or reskilling that's necessary to accommodate shifts in your industry or profession—and then you plan and execute those changes so they benefit you.

Recognition is something you give yourself. Most managers and supervisors mean well, but if you wait for them to recognize your accomplishments at work, you're likely to be disappointed. Some have the social skills of a brick and others are too worried about their own security to take care of yours. That's why it's important for you to keep track of your own "career victories." Sure, it takes a little effort to maintain a contemporaneous record of what you've done and how well you've done it, but that account will give you more satisfaction than most managers ever will. Don't just write it out, however; also review it regularly. Take the time to remember what you've done and pat yourself on the back when you deserve it or give yourself a little counseling if you've let yourself down.

Working tirelessly is a sure way to get tired. Sadly, many people in today's world of work find themselves wired up with no place to go. They've learned the hard way that staying continuously in contact with the office doesn't protect you. It exhausts you. We're all worried

about the H1N1 flu becoming a pandemic, but workaholism already is. If you have any doubt about that, look left and right the next time you're lying on the beach. Every other person will be glued to their Blackberry or iPhone checking their email. The impact of such behavior on both individual performance and wellbeing is already acute and likely to get worse. In a knowledge-based economy, your worth is measured not by your connectivity, but by your contribution. And, your contribution suffers when you don't give your mind and body a chance to rest.

Taking care of your career is the best way to take care of you. The conventional approach to career self-management has been to get an annual checkup and leave it at that. Historically, we paid attention to our career just once each year—during our performance appraisal and salary review. That approach was dangerous then; today, it's a sure-fire way to induce career cardiac arrest or what most of us call unemployment. The only safe course in a workplace as turbulent as the one we now have is to develop career fitness the same way you develop physical fitness. You have to commit yourself to building up the strength, endurance and reach of your career every single day. Yes, that's a lot of work, but it's also a smart investment. You spend one-third or more of your day in your profession, craft or trade, and you deserve an experience during that time that is every bit as good as the rest of your life.

We have acquired many insights from our experience over the past two years, but these four maxims are the key lessons we have learned. They are the things we wish we had known so they are now the things we want others to know.

Thanks for reading,
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