

## **The Vacuum in Our Careers**

We're all familiar with bubbles. There was the dot.com bubble in the 1990s and the housing bubble in the early years of this century. They were overheated investments that ultimately fell flat. In our careers, however, we've done exactly the opposite. Most of us have invested little or nothing in our careers, and the resulting vacuum is strangling our future. That sucking sound we hear is our future imploding.

The notion that we could have everything for nothing in our career seems to have emerged with the rise of no-cost content on the Web. Consciously or otherwise, legions of us have come to the conclusion that we can find everything we need to manage our careers successfully among the free pages posted online. It was inevitable, therefore, that for the first time in modern history, the 2001 recession saw sales of career and job search books actually decline during an economic downturn.

This free lunch investment strategy is undoubtedly alluring, but alas, it's also completely irrational. Think about it. As scary as it may be in today's environment, most of us accept that investing is the only legitimate way to secure and improve our life. We invest to (hopefully) put money away for retirement. We invest in buying a house with the dream that it will become a home and, eventually, an asset we can leave to our kids. We even invest in gym memberships to improve our physical fitness and in health insurance just in case we need more intensive care.

We make all of those investments, but we act as skinflints when it comes to the one-third of our lives we spend in the workplace. Oh sure, we open our wallets when we first start out. Lots of us invest in getting an education, in college or a trade school, so we have a proper foundation in the world of work. And while our parents may help us in that endeavor, we recognize and accept the importance of doing so. But after that, we act as if the Bill of Rights guarantees us free job search assistance and career counseling and coaching. In fact, asking a person in transition to invest in his or her career is often viewed as a vile effort to take advantage of them.

And ironically, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, not asking us to invest in ourselves and our future is a startling denial of our own capacity to succeed. Setting us apart as some sort of protected class, while well meaning, inevitably has two perverse impacts:

- It creates a dependency that subliminally signals to each and every one of us that we don't have what it takes to mend our own situation and take care of ourselves; and
- It forges a sense of false entitlement that actually handicaps us and prevents us from taking the necessary action to help ourselves.

### **Setting Us Up for Even Harder Times**

Equally as important, when we're told that we need not invest in ourselves in tough times, many of us conclude that the same is true in good times, as well. That perspective, more than any other, is probably what's behind the deteriorating skills and knowledge we bring to work each day. We're falling behind the rest of the world in research, productivity and value creation because the conventional wisdom is that it's not our job to keep up. Whether we're a Boomer, GenY or a Millennial, we've been taught that we bear no personal responsibility for staying at the state-of-the-art in our field or for acquiring the expertise to manage our own career.

The most telling evidence of this situation can be found at a local "job club." Every meeting, these days, attracts hundreds of well educated, middle-aged professionals who have never before been unemployed. Now that they are, however, they lack the tools to get reemployed. They worked hard at their jobs, they were loyal to their employers, but neither of those attributes protected them from a pink slip and neither

can put them back to work. The structure and dynamic of the workplace has changed, and they haven't. They were misled by the free lunch crowd, so they haven't invested in upgrading themselves or in directing their career path toward a secure employment situation. For them, the sucking sound is almost deafening.

But, it doesn't have to stay that way. It is possible to turn our fortunes around. The solution is admittedly easy to offer and more difficult to implement. It has the merit, however, of being absolutely right for the times. The key to survival and prosperity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century world of work is continuous self-investment.

If you're in transition, go back to school in your field even as you look for a new opportunity. If you're lucky enough to be employed, get some training that will add to your ability to contribute on-the-job. And regardless of your situation, make sure that you get smarter on how best to manage your own career. Such investments will never produce a bubble; they will, in contrast, quiet the deafening din by filling the vacuum with opportunity.

Thanks for reading,  
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