

Become a Career Activist

The most successful people in the world of work understand the importance of professional development. They know that the heart of a healthy career is one's expertise in their profession, craft or trade. More than simply being competent, they want to be experts in the knowledge that defines their field and masters of its application on the job. While that level of capability will likely set them apart from many of their peers, however, it is not enough to ensure that their careers are truly meaningful and satisfying.

What's missing? A commitment to effective career self-management. That activity is often confused with the continuing education that marks a savvy careerist, but in actuality, it's very different. Professional development provides the continuous learning that is essential for a successful career, but it cannot achieve that end by itself. Only savvy career self-management can do that because it alone encompasses professional development and all of the other activities that will ensure you achieve the goals to which you aspire at work. It is a big job and one that only you can offer to yourself and only you can accept. I call it appointing yourself your very own "career activist."

What does the role entail? It is the practice of:

- knowing yourself, your values and principles, your priorities and dreams;
- understanding what interests, motivates and, ultimately, fulfills you in the workplace;
- designing a career plan that will make you competitive for employment opportunities that can deliver those benefits to you;
- implementing that plan on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly basis in your career; and
- continuously assessing your performance and adjusting your course to ensure your work always advances you in your quest to be the best of who you are.

In short, a career activist accepts the responsibility of taking charge of their career. They commit to investing the time and effort necessary to accomplish goals they will cherish both during and after the one-third of their lives they will spend at work.

Now, I know what you're thinking so let's get it right out in the open right now. It's hard enough these days to do everything you have to do in the job you already have, so why would you want to take on the additional burden—the extra work—of being a career activist? In my view, there are at least several reasons for doing so.

First, too many employers today act like bullies. These organizations talk a good game about the importance of their workers, but the way they manage them belies their words. In reality, they view you as a cog, not a cognitive being. They view human resources as the management of a supply chain of disposable carbon-based widgets, not as the leadership of human beings with talents to be engaged in the accomplishment of a mutually beneficial mission. In that kind of perverse environment, you have only two choices:

- you can bounce from one dissatisfying job to another at the whim of employers who care more about quarterly earnings than they do about genuine relationships with workers;
- or
- you can pick and choose among employers and accept only those jobs that will work as well for you as they will for the organization that hires you.

A career pacifist gives up and lets the bullies push them around; a career activist confronts the bullies by taking matters into their own hands.

Second, we now have a better understanding of what proactive career self-management entails. It is a personal commitment to doing all of the following:

- keeping yourself at the state-of-the-art in your career field;
- building recognition of and stature for your personal brand;
- acquiring ancillary capabilities that can extend your potential range of contribution on-the-job;
- pacing your work so that you both stretch yourself with appropriate challenges and rest yourself for sustained peak performance;
- evaluating alternative employment opportunities continuously so you identify and, where appropriate, successfully compete for those that will best serve your career goals;
- expanding the flexibility and courage you bring to the examination of nontraditional roles and paths in your career; and
- using your talent in some way that will benefit others in your community or around the world.

Career activists see the accomplishment of these tasks as their primary occupation while the work they do for employers is a second job. That's not self-indulgence; it's savvy career self-management. By ensuring that they are always at the top of their own game, they also ensure that they will deliver a fulsome return on investment to the organizations that employ them.

Finally, for the first time in history, you now have easy access to the tools and information you need to be an effective career activist. All you need is access to the Internet. Whether you use your own computer and Internet service provider, the local library's or a government employment center, you can find all of the following and more online:

- open jobs in your home town, in other regions of the country and even around the world;
- career counselors and coaches who can help you identify your career strengths, frame your career goals, and plan and execute a successful job search campaign;
- resume writers with the expertise to help you craft a career record that will differentiate you from others and highlight your special capabilities;
- articles and information based on surveys and studies that probe the ever-changing needs of employers and their impact on the job market;
- research on specific employers and their cultures, missions and values so you can pinpoint those organizations that are most likely to advance your career objectives; and
- networks of peers in your career field, enabling you to meet and get to know more of those who might be able to help you advance your career in the present as well as the future.

Career activists take advantage of these resources in a planned and methodical way that ensures they will always have the knowledge, the insight and the tools they need to achieve their career goals.

In the 20th Century, it didn't matter all that much if you ignored your career except for those rare times when you were actually looking for a new or better job. Try and do that in the 21st Century, and you're likely to find yourself pushed around and even knocked down by bullying employers. In today's world of work, only the fit will survive, and the only way to get fit is to be a career activist.

Thanks for reading,
Peter

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