

The New Rules of the Game (For Job Seekers)

Peter Weddle

For decades, working men and women have counted on a simple rule of thumb in the job market. If you matched the advertised requirements and responsibilities for a job, you were qualified, and if you were qualified, you would be hired. The rule made sense and it worked, so a lot of people came to count on it.

Over the years, however, “qualified” evolved into “good enough.” If a person was good enough to do a job, they were good enough to be hired. That approach produced a “normal” distribution in the workforce. Employers discovered that only a few of those good enough workers would be superior performers; most would be middle of the road contributors, and a few would turn out to be below average or worse on-the-job.

Prior to the Great Recession, such a normal distribution was good enough for employers. Today, it isn't. Today, the threat from global competition and the unrelenting demands of consumers and shareholders are forcing employers to look for people who are better than good enough. They need to hire a workforce that isn't normal, but is extraordinary instead.

Nobody told those in job market about this change. Employers didn't announce it in the media or advertise it on their corporate Web-sites. They just started hiring differently, and millions of people have been caught off guard. The rules of the game changed, but most job seekers are still playing by the old rules. And, of course, sticking to what's out-of-date is the surest way to lose out.

How can you protect yourself?

To achieve success in today's job market, you have to transform yourself from being good enough to being better than that. You must look so good to employers that they feel they have to hire you. You need to convince them that you do extraordinary work and will, therefore, make a greater than normal contribution on-the-job.

How can you accomplish that transformation? The following steps will get you started.

Step 1. Be honest with yourself.

Surveys show that we humans seriously overrate how good we really are. Most people, for example, rank themselves far higher than their supervisors do in their annual performance review. Now granted, many managers aren't especially good at making such evaluations either, but that doesn't mean that we're right and they're wrong.

How can you get an accurate assessment of just how good you are (or aren't)? Ask one or both of two kinds of people:

- a former boss with whom you have stayed in contact
- or
- a former colleague who was also a very good friend.

Your goal in this interaction is to identify gaps in your qualifications (i.e., your performance, experience or capabilities) that make you look no better than good enough to employers. So, prepare yourself to listen without getting defensive and to learn from what you hear.

Step 2. Do something about what you learn.

Historically, the most successful people in any field have seen themselves as a work-in-progress. The all stars in professional sports, for example, never stop practicing their game. They are always trying to improve. And that's exactly what you should do, as well. The only way to be better than qualified is to be getting better all of the time.

Continuous self-improvement doesn't work, however, if it's treated like a New Year's resolution. It can't be something that you start with the best of intentions and then set aside in the press of dealing with other requirements—like a full time job or a job search. If you're going to be better than qualified and appear that way to employers, you have to:

- stick with it, so you truly are a work-in-progress and
- stick it in your resume, so employers will see your progress.

The new rules of the game are different, to be sure, and like anything else you're doing for the first time, they will probably take some getting used to. Once you're past that initial discomfort, however, those changes will become second nature. And when that happens, you'll find yourself always being better than you were and more than qualified for the job you want.

Thanks for reading,

Peter

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