

Get More Out of Work

Donald W. Mitchell

What do you want to gain by working . . . beyond receiving a paycheck? People differ quite a lot today in how they answer that question.

At one time, most young people wanted to receive increased rewards, such as . . . lavish benefits, large raises, flattering recognition, frequent promotions, and unassailable prestige. Many young people would be more than satisfied now with security in today's job, wages, and benefits.

Many older people have long valued job security, well knowing how many on-the-job advantages can come with increased age, length of service, and seniority. Today, just having any job may be all that an older person can hope for. Benefits are continually being cut, and receiving enough retirement income can look pretty iffy.

Both realities are well captured by the famous observation of quality expert W. Edwards Deming: "Learning isn't compulsory . . . neither is survival."

Today, many people who feel insecure about their work situation are learning like never before in an attempt to increase their job security. Business schools and technical certification programs are busier than ever serving working adult students, despite reduced opportunities for general management careers and for promotions within the ranks of IT workers.

While many people assign all of the motivation for increased work-related learning to fear, I believe that there are other motivations at work as well, including avoiding boredom and a genuine desire to do a better job. For such people, Dr. Deming's aphorism might be rephrased as: "Learning isn't compulsory . . . neither is taking pride in and enjoying your work."

Let me share with you an example of what I mean. I worked in a large steel company's customer service department for one summer vacation while in college. The hundred or so people on our floor all reported directly to one person.

While the youngest people scrambled hard to be considered for that one supervisory job, a few older people opted to obtain, instead, the fewest, most easily satisfied customer accounts. These older representatives were essentially retired in entry-level jobs and chose to have little to do. The high points of their work days were lunch hour and coffee breaks.

These older reps had calendars on which they ostentatiously counted down each day the time left until retirement. I have no idea how they could feel good about themselves while trying to look busy . . . despite having virtually nothing to do for years. Today, those jobs would be eliminated in a heartbeat to save the company money.

Yet, many capable people who now want something challenging and interesting to do have been doing the same kind of work for so long that they can quickly and easily do it without breaking a sweat. Ironically, the very same tasks would overwhelm most newcomers. That observation is particularly true of those who are good at meeting people and establishing trust.

If they are not careful, people stuck in one type of work could easily become like the older steel company reps who didn't want to do any work. What can they do instead?

I believe that the answer for many such people is to see work as a place to experience joy from learning how to do new things and how to be more effective in accomplishing the same things. Let me share an example with you of my former student, Ad de Kok, DBA, to demonstrate what I mean by this alternative.

Dr. de Kok earned his doctorate from Rushmore University while in his fifties. He had enjoyed a long and successful career managing new product development for one of the world's most successful chemical companies.

Wanting to know more about this kind of work, he had earlier earned a distance MBA degree from another university. While he benefited from this learning experience, the program's inflexible curriculum required him to study subjects for which he had little need or interest.

He decided one day to learn about doctoral programs and was intrigued to discover that his courses could be totally customized to focus on just what he wanted to learn. Since he already enjoyed his work, it was an easy decision to focus on how to do this work still better . . . regardless of whether the learning led to practical advantages such as more security, raises, recognition, promotions, or prestige.

Dr. de Kok originally intended to earn a Ph.D. by writing a dissertation based on his research into technology management and human resource development. He knew that it wouldn't be easy to find the time to do all that research and writing in addition to keeping up with his demanding job.

He eventually realized that an online DBA program would permit him to work in just the disciplines that interested him and all the courses could be based on his regular work. A large time and psychological burden was lifted, and he began taking such work-related courses. In the process, he learned many interesting and satisfying perspectives that he profitably applied at work.

Despite having decided not to earn a Ph.D. degree, Dr. de Kok did some remarkable research and course work that could have taken him a long way down the path of developing an original contribution worthy of a dissertation. He also appreciated that much of what he learned could be applied to a potential second career as a consultant after retirement from his current job. The consulting possibilities opened up broader career horizons while potentially increasing income security.

In commenting about the learning experience, he noted:

“I don't think earning a DBA necessarily changed my career (I already had a decent career before I started these studies at age 52!), but it did allow me to develop the background knowledge and information to do my job well. I already had and further developed a broad technical, managerial, and people interest. That broad interest and knowledge increased my employability, which I think is essential in the fast changing world we live in.”

Looking ahead, Dr. de Kok observed:

“At this stage of my career, it is important that I can apply my knowledge and experience and/or pass it on to the next generation. The project I am working on now is ideally suited for that. I plan to retire in about 12 to 18 months. After that, I plan to take it a bit easier (60-hour weeks for 25 plus years do start to take their toll), but it is not unlikely that (after a couple of months’ break), I will pick up some part-time consulting, teaching, or project work as I believe it is important to remain intellectually challenged.”

It’s easy to imagine him happily applying what he learned during the DBA studies while continuing to apply his newly honed learning skills to acquire still more knowledge that will allow him to do his work even better . . . regardless of what it is.

What are you getting out of your work beyond a paycheck? Is your work satisfying to you? If not, consider how learning to do your work better could be valuable to you . . . regardless of what your employer, colleagues, family, friends, and neighbors have to say about it.

Even if you feel reasonably satisfied at work, could you enjoy your job even more? Dr. de Kok thinks so:

“If you want to broaden and deepen your knowledge (and yourself), online learning that can be applied to your work is a good choice.”

When do you plan to start getting more out of your work?

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