

Advice For Recent Graduates: Work Harder — AND Smarter If You Really Want To Succeed

I always chuckle when I hear people say, “Work smarter, not harder.” I’m all in favor of finding ways to work more efficiently, but why pretend as if you have a choice? The people who use this catchphrase sound like they’re trying to find a shortcut when, in fact, there are none. Anyone who has ever really succeeded will tell you it takes both.



That’s also how jobs are. Going to work from nine to five is like just going to class in high school or college. If that is all you do, you’ll do okay but probably not great. I’ve seen many people, including some with some great natural talent, go through life with a forty-hour-a-week mentality, and they always plateau early in their careers. Talent carries you only so far: if you lack that drive, you’re probably going to stall.

Hard workers, by contrast, set themselves up for success. When times are good, they get promotions. And when times get tough, and an organization needs to reduce its staff, who do you think gets laid off? Those who just show up and do the minimum, that’s who.

HARD WORK LEADS TO SELF-WORTH

There are many benefits when you work hard. You not only meet your goals, but hard work also offers a sense of real dignity. Knowing you’ve put in your best effort day after day helps dramatically elevate your self-esteem.

Self-esteem begins in our childhood and grows or withers based on the feedback we receive from our parents, friends, teachers, and, most importantly, ourselves. Hard work can even overcome years of bad programming. The best way to characterize self-esteem is as the tone you use when you talk to yourself.

So ask yourself: are you building your self-esteem each day or tearing it down? Self-esteem isn’t something others can give you through praise,

compliments, or attaboys. In fact, unearned praise or flattery is pretty easy to see through and can even reinforce low self-esteem.

Deep down, you know whether you've done your best or not. When you delay gratification and do something estimable or worthy, your self-esteem increases. Once we take the time to turn this practice into a habit, higher esteem and self-confidence inevitably follow.

HARD WORK LEADS TO COMPETENCE

Many times, when we see successful people in sports, business, medicine, or anywhere, we wrongly conclude their talent or their brilliance is a gift. Sometimes we even envy them and wish we were so talented. Yet, very few of these people see their success as a gift. Instead, they will credit the hard work, sacrifice, preparation, and determination that preceded their success and made it possible.

Michael Jordan is a perfect example. Sure, he had all the natural gifts. He was six foot six, had long arms, was both quick and fast, and could jump out of the gym. But his real secret was that he outworked everyone on his team and was committed to constant improvement. As a high school kid in rural North Carolina, he was cut from the basketball team but kept practicing. He took his natural gifts and relentlessly improved them, becoming one of the best basketball players of all time.

EMBRACE THE STRUGGLE

The big takeaway here is that you can't avoid the struggle. Nothing worth doing comes easily, so you should expect and be prepared for a struggle of some kind. This struggle will always require more hard work, persistence, and resilience than you expect. Only if you are conditioned for the hard work, have practiced persistence, and built up your resilience muscles will you survive the struggle phase and complete the journey of your dreams.

DON'T BE INVOLVED, BE COMMITTED

Success begins with commitment, one of those fundamental concepts people often overlook. It's easy to stand by a goal when it's new, and your will hasn't been tested, but can you continue to do so day in and day out? Even when you're tired and discouraged? That's the difference between those who succeed and those who don't.

Commitment means there's no turning back. You can't quit, because you're in it for the long haul. Many good things begin to happen once you're committed—things that would never have happened otherwise. Once you're fully committed, you have to find solutions to the difficulties you will face. It's an attitude that fuels your persistence and strengthens your resiliency, making success possible.

PERSISTENCE AND RESILIENCE

Delaying gratification can be quite a challenge in a world that expects and encourages instant gratification. It creates discomfort, especially when you're not used to telling yourself *no*. But it's all part of growing up—or it should be. After all, when babies are uncomfortable, they cry. Adults, however, should learn to get comfortable being uncomfortable. Self-discipline may not sound like fun, but it's essential for success. If you get your way all the time, you will never need to persist. Not getting your way creates the need for persistence and allows you to build this skill.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING

Once you are out of school, no matter your field, you will compete with people close to you in age. The ones who start early, work hard, and stay late will get way ahead and keep progressing. If you start late, you will probably never catch up. And if you postpone the struggle, you're postponing your success. That's why your twenties are so important.

It's in early adulthood that you have the time and opportunity to develop your skills, work toward self-improvement, and learn from failures. These timely investments in your success will certainly pay off later. The clock is ticking.

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