

Are You Optimizing Your Career Potential?

While the impact of the global pandemic on the economy is causing many to worry about the security of their jobs, the truth is that this is an ideal moment to step back and consider whether you're optimizing your career potential.



Throughout my career, I supervised and employed hundreds of people. I've also interviewed hundreds of high school seniors for college scholarships and have followed them through college and their early careers. What I've discovered is that altogether too many people under-optimize their career potential. They let others make their job decisions, are too slow in changing positions, and don't align their strengths and motivating values with their career paths.

How can you take charge of your career success? The keys are to excel at your current job, prioritize learning and personal growth, and use solid judgment when it's time for a change.

Jobs vs. Careers

It is important to note that jobs and careers are two different things. A job can be doing anything for any length of time and may or may not lead anywhere. But a career is a series of individual jobs that progressively build on each other, creating more knowledge, experience, and value in the individual.

With a twenty-year career, you can get twenty years of experience. But with a twenty-year series of disconnected jobs, you can get one year of experience twenty times, which is not very valuable for anyone.

The Value of Workplace Experience

The most important lessons that prepare you for success are learned in the real world through work experience. Whether it's flipping burgers, waiting tables, or sweeping houses — as I did after earning my MBA — these experiences help you learn how things really work, how to get things done, and how to work with others.

There is no such thing as starting too low. Waiters, window washers, janitors—sure, these can be humbling jobs, but you learn how things really

work. The fact that I had spent six months working as a laborer at the beginning of my career gave me a lot of knowledge and credibility as a manager, especially with the guys in the trades. Performing—and performing well—on the lowest rungs of any business earns you the respect of people throughout the company. When your boss has done your job and understands your problems, you have a lot more respect for them. As the saying goes, “the troops are the happiest when the general is in the trenches.”

Optimizing Your Career

A few basics will help you keep your job and advance in responsibility and compensation. As the owner of a company for twenty years and employer of about 100 people at any one time, I can assure you that good bosses pay attention to how different people perform. The executive team spends a lot of time discussing this because, well, performance matters.

The six general rules for excelling at your job are pretty clear:

1. Put in the expected amount of time and effort, plus about twenty percent.
2. Exceed expectations. Get things done. Hustle.
3. Do what you say you will do when you say you will do it.
4. Get along with your boss. Adapt to his or her style.
5. Figure out the culture and adapt to it.
6. Add value to your employer in excess of your compensation.

But there’s also such a thing as staying in a job too long. Chances are, you’ll need to change jobs to optimize your career. Indeed, deciding to leave your job for another, hopefully better opportunity, is the toughest and most critical part of managing a successful career.

Sit back and take a hard look at where you are in your career, what you’ve learned so far, and what experiences or responsibilities you need to get to the next level. Then, set some clear goals for what you want from your next job, and take the personal initiative to find it.

Because the average mid-career job will last three to five years, it is important for you to exercise good judgment when selecting your new company, and especially your new boss. And remember to always emphasize the opportunity to learn and grow when evaluating your options.

A two-year tenure is a good rule for your first couple of jobs, and your stays in subsequent jobs should ideally be closer to three to five years. But keep

moving, work with different people, have different responsibilities, and you will build a valuable set of experiences. And equally important, always leave your current employer on good terms, and don't ever burn any bridges. It is common for the people you have worked with in the past to be instrumental in your future career. You might even have the opportunity to work with them again, and your reputation will always follow you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.W. LEWIS is the founder of T.W. Lewis Company, an award-winning Scottsdale, Arizona based real estate and investment company known for its quality and outstanding customer service. He is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and received his MBA from the University of North Carolina. Lewis received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Professional Builder Magazine and was the first inductee into the National Housing Quality Hall of Fame. In 2002, Lewis and his wife Jan formed T.W. Lewis Foundation to support higher education, children and families in need, youth character education and a variety of local and national non-profits that strengthen Americas' civil society.