

Turning blind corners

Preparing yourself for the unknown



When we are young the future seems so daunting. A teenager has no idea what they will be doing or what they will be like when they are 25 let alone 40 years old. The idea that you will one day be a grandparent and 60 is utterly impossible to imagine. However, the overwhelming likelihood is that you will hit all those landmarks. Although it may seem to you a long time from now, when you are 40 (or 50 – or 70!) you will look back on your youth like it was yesterday. It's like looking through a telescope: looking backwards things seem so far away, but turn it around and they seem so close!

So what can an ambitious young person do now to ensure the best possible outcomes for their future? The truth is that detailed planning of your future is futile. The world is changing so rapidly that the vast majority of the youth today will end

up in careers and living lives they could never envisage today. Go on, ask any adult if they are living the life exactly as they expected when they were young! Better still, go on to youtube and put in “shift happens”. You will find a fascinating look at how fast the world is changing.

When I ask students and parents what careers they are planning for, I always get the same answer: “Doctor, Lawyer, Accountant or Engineer”, as if there are only four jobs in the world. Now, don't get me wrong, these professions are all noble career directions and I would never dissuade someone with real ability and desire

to pursue such careers. But, how many kids ever say they want to be “A Project Manager for Advanced Micro Devices” or “an Events Coordinator for Amgen” or “Head of Commercial, Non-Air products for Emirates Airlines”? The truth is, that is the sorts of jobs most ambitious young people end up in. The only thing is that you have never heard of them yet. Or, just as likely, you will end up having careers in industries that don't even exist yet. Do you think Eric Schmidt (Chairman of Google) planned to work at a search engine company when he was at school? We did not have the internet back then!

Do you think Iqbal Qadir (founder of Grameen phone) planned to run a mobile phone company when he was a student? How could he? Mobile phones did not even exist! So what industries will there be in the future? I have no idea – nor does anyone else. However, that does not mean that you can't start preparing yourself now.

The fact is that most students don't find a career – a career finds them. Never underestimate how much the world needs ambitious, well presented, talented – and above all – reliable young people. The world is shockingly full of let-down artists and

lazy people. In my whole career as both a Senior Vice President of a Global bank and now Principal of a College, it never ceases to amaze me how few people have the real character it takes for very successful careers. Oh sure, I come across all sorts of students who can do well in tests or can be superficially polite but companies around the world are looking for that right combination of talents – and they are rare.

What it takes

First and foremost, companies like to see academic achievement. In economics, we refer to academic

success as a “signal”. A signal is something that cannot be faked. Therefore, consistently good grades or a good degree is a signal to employers that you can solve complex problems, work under pressure, focus of difficult subjects, deliver on time and express yourself in an intelligent, persuasive manner. But if we drill a little further we find that big employers want more than just “swallowers” (those who can just memorize and regurgitate information).

What is required is those who can think creatively. Employers look for candidates with confidence, curiosity and a willingness to challenge the consensus (respectfully, of course!). They also want people who can collaborate well with others and be motivational. The ability to speak well in public and operate confidently in unfamiliar circumstances is also highly valued.

Above all, be polite and reliable!

While we cannot predict what the future holds we do know one thing. The future will have an insatiable appetite for those with curiosity and confidence who can express themselves well, are well presented, polite – and do what they say they are going to do when they say they are going to do it! You may or may not have the natural ability to get A*s in, say physics and/or economics. But are you unfailingly polite, well presented, confident ambitious, creative and reliable? If so, the future may be uncertain – but it sure is as bright as the sun.

William Westgate is the Principal of Regent College, Dhaka. Prior to his career in education, William worked for 20 years in London as Senior Vice President at HSBC.

WORDS: WILLIAM WESTGATE
ILLUSTRATION: CATNINJA



The importance of soft skills

It is often said 'People don't under-perform due to lack of technical skills but because of their lack of soft skills.' In my career, I have seen quite many guys not going up to the ladder although they had the required skill set relating to their field. This is really pathetic, isn't it?

It is first necessary to know the difference between hard and soft skills. When it comes to skills in employment, the first line of emphasis is typically towards

abilities, training and knowledge of specific skill sets. These are referred to as hard skills. For example, if you an accountant, accounting skills are your hard skills. Similarly, if you are a software engineer, your hard skills are your coding ability and knowledge relating to tools and technology relevant to your designation. On the other hand, soft skills include our ability to listen well, communicate effectively, be positive, handle

conflict, accept responsibility, show respect, build trust, work well with others, manage time effectively, accept criticism, work under pressure, be likable, and demonstrate good manners. Our personal qualities, habits, and attitudes influence how we interact and work with others. Companies value soft skills because they are often linked to job performance and career success. Soft skills may mean the difference between who

can do the job and who actually gets the job.

Now question is: why soft skills are so important? Well, you need it because you can't work alone. Either you are working in a team or with a team. You are reporting to your boss and you are dealing with your team members, subordinates and other teams. If you can't communicate well, you might not know what is expected from you and what you are expecting from

others. There are so many different types of people work within a company that you need to know how to deal with them to get the best possible outcome. You can't treat everyone the same way, so your personal qualities and attitudes are important.

Research shows that individuals with good interpersonal and self-management abilities have better career success and contribute far more to their organizations than people with only excellent technical skills. Top companies are best in the business simply because they put more emphasis on soft skills of their employees. Hard skills can be trained but if there is a serious gap regarding someone's soft skills; it's quite possible for him/her to progress in the career path smoothly enough. If career path is compared to water flow, bad soft skills are like stones that hinder the flow of water and make the progress slowed or stopped.

More often than not, the key to successfully hiring candidates is to evaluate how well they fit into the company and its culture. The way someone interacts and communicates with others can make or break the efficiency of work on the job. And even after hiring, continuous nurturing and

Soft skills include our ability to listen well, communicate effectively, be positive, handle conflict, accept responsibility, show respect, build trust, work well with others, manage time effectively, accept criticism, work under pressure, be likable, and demonstrate good manners.

polishing is required to make them contribute in the best possible way.

Finally, I would say that soft skills should not be termed as soft skills anymore - employers as well as employees should take these skills more seriously and should even prioritize them over the so called hard skills.

The writer is a motivational speaker & Corporate Coach. He's one of the co-founders of optiMA HR Solutions.

M MURSHED HAIDER



CONNECT TO NEXT STEP

Take your next step to connect to us. Email us if you have an interesting story to share related to career. Tell us if it has been a bumpy ride for your career or the exact opposite. Like us on facebook to stay updated. Mail us if you have any suggestions, feedback, and ideas.



facebook.com/
thedailystar.nextstep
Email: nextstep@thedailystar.net

Download
the PDF version
from our website.