

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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What Counts Is Not Your Experience, But Your Contribution

by Dr. Mike Armour

When I was a young intelligence officer, one of the first principles drilled into us was the difference between information and intelligence. Intelligence always begins with information, to be sure. But it entails much more.

For information to become intelligence, it must be tested against other information sources, evaluated for credibility, analyzed in terms of trends, patterns, or disruptions that it might indicate, and used to provide deeper insight into the significance or meaning of the information.

Information, we were told repeatedly, is nothing but data until you do something with it to convert it into intelligence. Intelligence was the "value add" which we brought to information.

We're All in the Intelligence Game

In a sense, the realities of our new age are turning us all into intelligence specialists. The workforce in the U.S. and other nations is increasingly comprised of knowledge workers. Fewer and fewer opportunities for employment are available to those who have only their hands and brawn to sell.

But what "knowledge workers" bring to the table is not simple information. They must bring some "value add" to the information that makes it more usable. More actionable. More valuable.

We are still trying to decide what to call this new age. Some refer to it as the Information Age. Others prefer the Knowledge Age. And other labels also vie for acceptance.

Whatever the name, it is abundantly clear that workers in the future will be compensated based on the value which they add to the pool of knowledge, the pool of data that engulfs the world.

This, then, has a telling impact on how workers market themselves going forward. In the past the resume was the corner piece of a job search. And the resume basically outlined experience, training, skills, and accomplishments.

These things are still important, to be sure, in opening the door. But they only serve as conversation starters. What companies are really asking of potential new hires today – what they are truly looking for in a "resume" – is not so much, "What can you do?" but "How can you contribute?"

Whether you call this new era the Information Age or the Knowledge Age, from one perspective it's the Contribution Age. Companies must market themselves less and less on the products or services that they provide and more and more on the ways in which they contribute to the success of their customers.

The Contributor's Mindset

In turn, leaders and workers must think of themselves first and foremost as contributors to the enterprise. When we envision ourselves as "contributors" rather than "workers," our self-expectations shift markedly.

- First, our focus will consistently be on the needs of those to whom we are contributing. What are their most pressing problems? Where are they feeling distress? What's no longer working for them? These questions are no less relevant when we ask them internally about the needs of our organization than they are when we ask them externally about the needs of a customer.
- Second, as contributors we anticipate that what we are contributing today will be obsolete tomorrow. We are therefore constantly retooling our knowledge and our skill sets in applying it. We must all perfect the life skill of learning how to learn and how to do it rapidly. Otherwise what we are able to contribute becomes as just as outdated and worthless as yesterday's manual skills.
- Third, we develop the habit of describing our daily activity in terms of what we contribute, not what we do. For example, a consultant quits thinking of himself as providing consulting services. Instead, when asked what he does, he responds, "I help troubled companies get back on track." When this kind of response becomes habitual, it signals that we have shifted from a "doing" self-image to a "contributing" self-image.

Not Every Contributor Is a Contributor

There is one caveat, however. The word "contributor" has already become so commonplace in American business that what I am saying here could be easily misunderstood.

Managers are often heard to speak of a particular employee as a contributor. When I press for what that means, I usually get a description of the worker as one who shows up dependably, perform reliably, and delivers on promises with minimal supervision.

But I suggest that someone could do all of these things and still not be a "contributor" in the sense that I've been using the word. A contributor is much more than a dependable performer. He or she is also distinguished by a mindset that constantly probes the surrounding environment to uncover opportunities to make a genuine and positive difference in the life of the organization or its customers.

If we have learned anything in the economic turmoil of recent years, it's that jobs – and therefore workers – are quickly expendable. But only the most desperately troubled company dismisses people who are genuine contributors.

Similarly, even companies that don't have any job openings always seem to find a place for someone who comes along and demonstrates a contributor's heart. There is a tremendous undersupply of contributors. Be one and make yourself invaluable.

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