

21st Century Jobs: Getting the Job You Like and Can Do Best

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Chapter One: What's new about work in the 21st century?

What is new or different about work opportunities (careers, jobs and callings) in this century? Increasingly, people are looking for those opportunities that will allow them to claim a stake in the product they're creating or the service they're providing. The new economy teaches us to develop a new mindset, one that is willing to accept higher risk in our career path (with the hope of higher rewards in terms of personal participation and fulfillment).

Technology (especially the Internet, cell phones and PDA's) plays a large part in this new mindset, as these means of instant communication allow everyone to connect with the greater culture and to have a voice. This "democratization of influence" means that not only the rich and powerful have their say; anyone with an opinion can speak up on the world-wide web and have the ability to effect change in the decision-making process laterally, downward and upward.

In the world of work, this new ability to influence those in power means that the employee no longer feels at the mercy of some remote, distant "management" that controls all aspects of his or her job. Workers can share ideas, attitudes and insights through a variety of means, the Internet being only the most obvious.

Twittering, chat rooms, instant messaging, social network websites and text messaging on cell phones make it easy to keep in constant touch with your peers at work, exchanging information that affects your job and your entire workplace.

A change in information becomes a change in power

No longer does information flow down from above in a controlled, orderly manner. This is true for the entire culture—for example, soldiers can share "instant images" of battle as they are fighting through cell phones, blogs, on-line videos and email. Students can text message their friends and parents as their teachers speak, creating a virtual audience that interprets actions as they are happening. All of us can comment on situations as they happen, making the heretofore passive "observer" into an equally powerful "co-creator" of reality.

With the power to interpret and define reality so widely spread throughout the society, it's not surprising that the new worker wants and expects power in his or her job. The old "need to know" hierarchical structures are completely outdated: workers often simply ignore them and go around them, communicating information to each other as quickly as it is gained.

Obviously this new attitude toward work has implications for organizations. If the job-seeker is looking for more autonomy in his or her career, and is willing to trade the old promise of "job security" in a structured and organized environment for more creativity and "job ownership" in a less structured, more free-flowing organization, then companies and institutions must respond. Organizations need to provide jobs that are less set in stone and more able to adjust to changing circumstances. Jobs need to be less fixed and more fluid.

The best new job opportunities in the 21st century

The best new job opportunities in the 21st century, then, will be those that take into account these factors:

- Involve the employee in all aspects of his or her job, beginning with defining the job and then allowing enough flexibility for the job to evolve organically as circumstances change;
- Respect the ideas, values and knowledge of the employee, using not only those parts of the worker that fit management's idea of the job but also the bonus parts of the employee that management was fortunate enough to receive when they hired the employee—the parts that management didn't even know it was receiving!
- Trust the employee to sort out what can be done according to the organization's policies and traditions from what calls for an entirely new approach and set of guidelines;
- Reward the employee for showing ingenuity and initiative, even when the results are less than perfect, so as to encourage the employee to keep being active rather than passive in the organization.

Recent news articles stress the new values of the so-called "Gen Y," the generation that is taking over from the Baby Boomers. Whereas the baby boomers struggled to have it all—career, family, spiritual expression and personal growth, losing something in all areas in the process—Gen Y members are more flexible and realistic, leaving and re-entering the workplace on their own schedules to accommodate their changing interests and needs.

Gen Y members in their 20's and early 30's have also been notably deliberate in making the kinds of decisions that traditionally mark the transition to adulthood: establishing their own homes, marriage, having children and becoming tied to a particular career (finding a lifetime job).

Gen Y'ers return home, or don't leave home at all, as the situation develops. Marriage is postponed, while friendship takes on many of marriage's roles in terms of feeling connected, building strong emotional bonds and providing security in transitions. Gen Y members are not at all afraid to leave their jobs, even when there's no new job at hand. Informal networks of job seekers help each other, often recommending their friends to take over when they leave a job and even trading jobs if the change seems to make sense.

Keeping connected, staying in touch, exchanging information—these are the priorities of the new worker. Workers want to stay within the friendship/sports team/university communities they have built, and are most happy when working with people who share their experience and values. Some universities are recognizing the immense impact of these networks on the lives of their students, and developing community co-op education programs that put students into teams in their communities so they can see their ability to shape the community while working with friends.

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