

How My Understanding of Employment Has Changed Since Eighteen



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

I think most of us are pretty naive about how the professional world works, initially. I once was arrogant and bull-headed about employment. I assumed for the longest time that all I would ever need to succeed is talent in one form or another and that sooner or later somebody would notice and seek to employ me gainfully because they somehow would intuit that what I had to offer was better than what most others could. Time and again, I had to be painfully proven wrong before I could accept this as true.

I’ve had more false starts than I care to remember at this point in my occupational development. Many times it was entirely my fault for rushing prematurely into ventures without giving due concern to the long term factors I would need to take care of to ensure success. Almost always, I carried with me a childish assumption that things would always turn out fine for me because... well, because they just would. Because I was me and things always worked out for me. End of story. Whatever invisible force controlled the universe and determined the outcome of chance favored me above the common folk, and it would certainly always ensure that things worked out in my favor.

It only took about a dozen major instances of slamming head first into different obstacles and failures to finally accept how flawed that kind of thinking was. I still see this tendency toward confirmation bias in so many other young people, and when I do I immediately know that such a person has obviously never experienced true failure or hardship. They will persist in delusion and self-inflation for as long as they can manage to without being forced to face the objective truth, which is usually as long as other people are always willing to bail them out of the mistakes they make and bestow charity upon them.

I eventually overcame arrogance and learned to do everything I could correctly. I showed up early. I stayed late. I under-promised and over-delivered. I went above and beyond my

duties to help the companies and bosses I worked under to succeed because I earnestly cared about their overall success. And I waited and waited for months for my efforts to be reflected back onto me by my superiors. I wasted years of my life because I entrusted myself to the care of people who didn't properly appreciate what I brought to the table. Even after finally maturing enough to realize what "a job well done" actually meant, I was still naive enough to assume that everyone else in the world understood as I did the logic and mutual benefit to rewarding people for their performance. Too many times I was left high and dry waiting in the wings for the people I was proud to say I worked for to put me to what I saw as my most productive use.

False starts are extremely discouraging to the young warrior so eagerly looking to break into the professional world. I felt as though I were a freight train packed, fueled, and ready to plow forward at full speed if only someone could come along and lay a track in front of me. Many gave me false hopes that they would in due time. I can't recall a single one who ever delivered to the magnitude they had set my expectations. I don't know whether they intentionally gave me false expectations in order to get me to work for them or they were just earnestly overconfident, but either way I suffered because of their errors.

So I learned a second very important lesson. It will never be enough simply to be capable of acting. I have to sufficiently demonstrate my potential to others and convince them that my abilities to act are useful to them. But more than that, I have to be so very careful to offer my abilities and time to those I can trust to actually follow through with a plan when they involve me in it. As it turns out, many of the people making the world move are still just as subject to the bull-headed arrogance and naivete that I once was. Only now, these people are running industries and employing others who depend upon their competency and communication. Some of these people will say whatever sounds most appealing in the moment to get others involved in their projects because at the time they believe it themselves and their misguided enthusiasm is infectious. It's essentially the same principle which enables most cults and burgeoning spiritual or religious movements to flourish. Emotional appeal makes far more converts than reason and analysis.

Eventually, these professional failures and repeated instances of broken trust lead to me to become heavily involved in self-employment in one form or another. I came to believe that the only person I could rely on was myself. Maybe I was just being arrogant again, but everywhere I looked it seemed that anyone who shared my level of professionalism and commitment to entrepreneurial success was already at the top of high-level companies which I had no chance of becoming a significant part of without enough official accreditation and a lengthy resume. Self-employment has worked for me for a long time to varying levels of success, but the most important thing I have gained from it is the confidence that I can actually do something worthwhile and that someone out there will appreciate it. I know my ability to perform is valid because in my manner of making money

I almost never have a guarantee that I will still have income tomorrow or next month- but in spite of this people almost always keep purchasing my services because they are overwhelmingly happy with what I deliver.

Because I know I can rely on myself to know to generate at least a basic level of income, I don't have the same sense of desperation that so many people do the moment they become unemployed, or their fear of losing their job or changing jobs. I still want, more than anything, to become heavily involved with a company whose mission statement and practices are synchronous with my own. I still want to get paid to hone my skills of choice in a high-demand and highly scrutinous professional environment in collaboration with a team which supports and strengthens me. I still want to become extremely financially wealthy from my productive efforts. But I've learned from my past errors to be extremely picky about who I align myself with professionally and where I expend my energy. I have enough luxury of comfort to be discerning when picking my employers, because I know that the right employer will be appropriately aware of results and efficiency while the wrong one will let my efforts go to waste and under-compensate and under-appreciate me.

So I'd like to think that I am no longer arrogant, but instead confident about my ability to deliver. I've replaced my naive arrogance with a healthy dose of pride in what I do (I don't use the word "pride" the same as "arrogance". Pride is earned; arrogance is phony). I hope too that in time the right employer and/or organization will recognize this confidence in me and see that I don't undertake any task without the assuredness in my ability to get it done on time, in the right manner, and with increasingly improving efficiency. I hope they recognize too that my motivation is not merely financially based, but more deeply rooted in my unstoppable need to improve my abilities and do something of worth with my time. It took all these failures and disappointments to harden myself to this point. To some, on the outside it may seem I've made almost no progress at all. But I'd much rather be where I am now with a psyche cut and molded through the last several years of repeated failures and real world experience than working a mediocre hourly job I hate or having stayed rose-tinted and inebriated beneath the protective dome of college life and "education".

It took me this long to realize the kind of person I am and what I'm looking for in life. It took me all those mistakes to learn how to talk to people the right way and how to present myself as a competent and professional person. I had to learn one shortcoming at a time what a business is in principle and why a successful one might have all the stringent policies it does regarding punctuality, customer service, quality control, and other aspects of professionalism. I had to see first hand how various economies have formed and how they have affected those living and working within them to obtain a principled grasp of the nature of production and compensation. I had to witness different aspects of supply lines, chains of production, and marketing to gain an integrated understanding of where "stuff" comes from and why it matters. It was only after seeing enough of the overall picture that I

had enough motivation to learn some of the skills I would need to be a larger contributor to the productive process.

I think for most people, until they achieve a similar larger and more integrated understanding of the creation and consumption of goods and services, having a job will remain just another thing one has to do to pass the time, earn a wage, and get along in modern society. For me, having a job means so very much more. It means someone or some group of people more successful than myself have put trust and responsibility in my life to accomplish specific worthwhile goals with the resources they make available to me. It means someone finds value in me, and that the power lies in my hands to make that value grow through collaboration with others working toward that common goal and through the leverage of great tools. If we want young people to break out of the rut of occupational mediocrity, there's nothing like a little perspective to stir the soup and get things moving.