

Ignite Your Career

By Amanda DeCook

Build relationships, find balance and seize opportunities to advance your growing skills in supply chain management.

In his 1941 science fiction short story, “By His Bootstraps,” author Robert A. Heinlein tells the tale of Bob Wilson, a graduate student working on time travel. As the story progresses, Bob meets future versions of himself who give him advice he’s not prepared to understand. It’s not until later in life, when he is old and white-haired, that he is able to put together past events and finally understand all that has happened — and the paradox within which he has been living.

Your own career is quite similar to the problems faced by Heinlein’s protagonist. At the start, the rules of career success are vague and difficult to grasp. With experience and time, your interpretation of the past and lessons learned from the challenges you’ve endured become more obvious. The good news is you have the inherent ability to identify situations and respond appropriately, which will lead you to a prosperous career path.

Strike Off on Your Path

Sadly, time travel is not yet a viable option, so our future-selves cannot travel to our present-selves and offer career advice. A.T. Kearney’s recent study opted for the next best thing: We surveyed experienced professionals, the majority with a supply management background, and asked them what individuals starting out can do to ignite their careers. We also surveyed recent hires to identify any disparities between them and the more experienced vice presidents, directors and managers.

Surprisingly, the responses revealed numerous similarities. Newer hires had an

inkling of what actions they should take, while established individuals were able to support those actions with experience and proven examples. Overall, the path to success is not rocket science, but it is hard work.

Survey respondents were asked five questions:

- 1) What was the best thing you did when you started your career?
- 2) Can you describe something you wish you would have done differently when you started your career?
- 3) What practices do you see successful people doing that you are trying to emulate?
- 4) What practices do you think should be on the "don'ts" list for starting a career?
- 5) What one piece of advice would you give to someone starting their career?

responses to relationship-building include:

- "Be sure to display interest, smile and say thank-you any time you talk to people. They may not remember the details of what you said, but they will remember you."
- "At the start of my career, finding the right mentor was the single best thing that I did."
- "When I first start a new role, I like to talk to people with varying levels of experience within the organization or group. I compare how they view the organization or group so I can get a sense of the culture. In addition, I seek a buddy who I can ask questions about the organization."

Obtain balance. Balance, which came in second, slightly ahead of seize opportunity, encompasses a

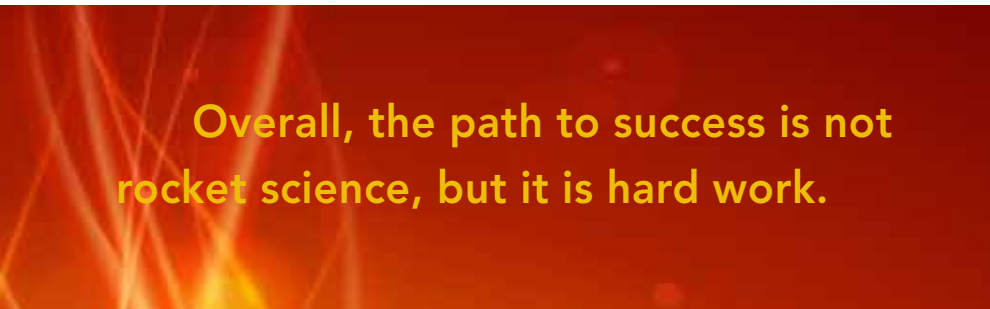
Seize opportunities. Taking risks and taking advantage of opportunities are an integral part of life. Even if your risks don't pay off, the experiences you gain are priceless. Moving out of your comfort zone and taking those big steps can move your career forward by leaps and bounds, especially in the beginning. Advice about seizing opportunities includes:

- "Saying yes to doing things without knowing whether you are actually capable of doing it. (If not, work your butt off to learn how.)"
- "Don't limit yourself or set constraints on where or what you want to do."
- "Always push the limits of your comfort zone, try new things, and be open to new experiences and opportunities."

Exceed expectations. Doing good work gives you a competitive advantage. Exceeding expectations is your lead directive in starting a career or new role. Here are three ways to meet this objective:

- "Fill the gap. Don't try to be your boss; fill in his or her holes and gaps. Be flexible, ask for more, sponge up everything you can."
- "Be a hardworking, positive, helpful team player and your team will love you for it. Prove that you're capable and dependable to gain your colleagues' trust."
- "You're either 'all-in' or 'out.' Take your opportunities and work hard. You can't be 50 percent interested."

Lose the entitlement mindset. Leave professional classism and superiority at the door. Treat everyone in the organization, senior-level or junior-level, with respect. Understand what it means to "pay your dues." Sample



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We analyzed and grouped their responses into eight actions or pieces of advice, based on how often each was suggested (see the chart on page 7). No single one should take precedence — you need to be well-rounded and able to incorporate all of them. However, each one plays a unique role in your successful career path.

Build relationships. Relationship-building was the most common suggestion given as the best way to begin your career. Your ability to bond with people within and outside an organization is pivotal for long-term success. Some

breadth of areas from work-life balance, to long-term and short-term goals, to knowing when to move forward. The ability to know how hard to push and when to do so is crucial for a sustainable career. A few words of wisdom on obtaining balance:

- "I tried to do too much when I should have focused on my primary responsibilities."
- "Never lose sight of the big picture."
- "Don't be short-sighted ... think longer-term: 'How does this career get me to where I want to be?'"

answers about losing an entitlement mind-set include:

- “[Don’t think] that just because you’re smart that you deserve something. You must earn it.”
- “Don’t act like you own the place; it really puts people off, and you don’t know as much as you think you do. Don’t expect to change everything right away. It’s not possible, and you’ll just end up discouraged.”
- “Never underestimate anyone. Treat everyone with respect and work together to accomplish common goals.”

Ask questions. Mastering the art of asking questions is crucial for your long-term success. Good questions demonstrate your desire to learn, which is a great way to get noticed for the right reasons. Use questions to build critical thinking — a highly sought-after skill set by employers. In time, the questions you ask will help drive conversations, promote progressive teamwork and deliver actionable results. A few tips about asking questions include:

- “Never be afraid to ask questions. No one expects you to know everything.”
- “Don’t be afraid to ask for help — it is not a sign of weakness.”
- “Ask for feedback early on from people you trust.”

Display confidence. Being confident should equate to being comfortable with learning and problem-solving. There’s a fine line between confidence and arrogance, so be careful not to step over it. Your self-confidence allows others to have faith in you, your work and ability. Examples of displaying confidence include:

- “Playing a more vocal role in your first few projects — do not use your lack of experience,

knowledge or network as an excuse to stay quiet.”

- “Staying calm and collected under pressure.”
- “Smiling at people when you talk with people and get them to feel comfortable.”

Give back. It’s often forgotten, but it’s important to give back to colleagues and the community. This was the popular response to the question of which actions of successful people you should emulate. Those who volunteer, mentor or donate have a strong sense of accomplishment and make a positive impact. Giving back comes in a variety of forms:

- “Promote the careers of junior employees.”
- “Doing things for other people and not thinking, ‘What’s in it for me?’”
- “Extend your hand to anyone who might need your help. One small gesture can go a long way.”

Fan Your Flames of Greatness

Without the benefit of a future-

you to advise yourself (as happened in Heinlein’s story), the common-sense insights shared by A.T. Kearney survey participants provide a useful, and hopefully memorable, framework for your career success. More important, they’re behaviors you can easily incorporate into your daily practices.

Most are obvious — good relationships equate to being known; smart questions lead to richer learning experiences; a good work/life balance makes you happier.

Others, such as exceeding expectations, having confidence, losing any sense of entitlement and giving back to the community, require a bit more effort.

When you apply such advice appropriately, a spark will ignite your career path and shine a light on exciting and unique experiences. **ISM**

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Eight Areas of Focus

Build Relationships

Obtain Balance

Seize Opportunities

Exceed Expectations

Forget Entitlement

Ask Questions

Display Confidence

Give Back

An A.T. Kearney survey of experienced and emerging supply chain practitioners identified these eight areas that will help spark your future success in the field.