



The career advice I wish I had at 25

In the future, when we turn 50, we will each be given a ticket to a time machine and, just once, we will be able to go back in time and talk to our 25-year-old selves.

Even then, time travel will be expensive and wreak havoc with frequent flyer programs. So there will only be one trip. So what if we could? What would we say? What advice would we give?

I often wish I could do this. Just once. So, just in case the time machine ever comes along, this is the career advice I would give my 25-year-old self.

1. A career is a marathon, not a sprint

Chill. When we are younger we tend to be impatient. As you get older you realise there is no real rush. Life, and the careers we pursue to fill it and pay the bills, needs

to be approached on a long-term basis. If you sprint you will wear out or start to resent work that you previously enjoyed. Allow yourself time to breath and grow. Things will come if you work hard and allow yourself time to get good at things. Always rushing only leaves you empty, and tired. It is fine to give yourself permission to take some time in the slow lane with the hat people. You will find yourself seeing things on the journey that you didn't realise were there.

2. Most success comes from repetition, not new things

I remember hairdressing legend Stefan Ackerie telling me this in 2003. I had never really thought about it before. A few years later Malcolm Gladwell's brilliant book *Outliers* was published, promoting the idea that you needed to spend 10,000 hours on something to become truly expert at it. This applied to the Beatles and their Hamburg gigs and Bill Gates who, through a series of fortuitous accidents, ended up spending more time than almost anyone else on a computer.

The lesson here is get good at things before you try to move to the next thing. Genuine expertise belongs to an elite few. They seldom have superpowers. They usually have endurance, patience and take a long-term view. They also love what they do. If your find that, don't let it go.

3. If work was really so great all the rich people would have the jobs

It is well established that almost nobody laments on their death bed that they didn't spend enough time at the office. This seems obvious. Yet still we let contrived circumstances and fairly trivial issues keep us from important events like school sport days and kids getting badges for picking up rubbish. I wish somebody had schooled me about these priorities at 25. I can remember every sport day and certificate presentation I missed. I can't remember any of the reasons I missed them.

4. Deprioritise your career when your kids are young

If you have skills, commitment and passion, careers tend to take care of themselves. Over the long haul, it really doesn't matter if you have a few years when your career is in canter mode while you prioritise young children. This should apply to men and women. I was watching some video of my kids when they were little last week and I realised, again, that the little people in that video don't exist in that form anymore. They have grown into pride-worthy adults but the tiny people with wonder in their eyes were just passing through. If you miss that time meeting deadlines and finishing reports, you never get it back. Childhood is fleeting. When it is in its formative stages, you get one chance.

You can also miss the chance to learn. Children teach you a lot more than you teach them. They give you a second chance to see the world for the first time through their eyes. And you will be astounded what you miss in the clutter of life. Hold onto those times while you can. As the nun sang in *The Sound of Music*, you can't keep a wave upon the sand. And you look kinda ridiculous trying.

5. In the workforce, always act like you are 35

A recruiter gave me this advice some years ago. It is quite inspired. What she meant was, when you are young in the workplace, don't act as a novice. If you are smart and competent, step up and do whatever you are capable of doing in a mature way. Similarly, when you are an older worker, don't act like it. Approach your day with youthful energy. To quote a famous Frank Sinatra song: "You're 35 and it's a very good year".

6. Management is about people, not things

It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that all people are equal, behave the same every day and have a generic capacity to perform. Humans are simply not made like that. Business guru Jack Welch says the workforce consists of 20 per cent of people who are high performers, 10 per cent that you should get rid of and 70 per cent who do okay. The problem is the 70 per cent. Most managers want everyone in the 20 per cent. We need to be careful not to believe that the 70 per cent are underperformers. Sometimes we need to celebrate the competence of the masses not the superpowers of the elite. As managers, we are not managing things, we are empowering people and making the best use of whatever it is they bring to the table.

7. Genuinely listen to others

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking we have all the answers as individuals. We don't. As a group we are far more powerful. We need to learn to genuinely collaborate and really listen to the opinions of others. And we need to ask our own people first. So many managers and firms fall into the trap of asking external consultants for answers and then trying to implement the recommendations over the top of tried-and-true employees. In almost every case, our own people already know the answers. We need to avoid letting familiarity blind us to the talent sitting around us.

8. Never work for horrible bastards

Life is way too short to tolerate really bad bosses. If you find yourself working for one, unless you are desperate or starving, start looking for a new job. Immediately. Then sack the bad boss. By leaving.

9. Recognise that staff are people with finite emotional capacity

This is one I really wish I had known earlier. It is clear to me now that humans have a finite emotional capacity. If there is something challenging happening in their

personal lives, they have limited capacity left to deal with issues at work. In nearly 100 per cent of cases I have dealt with of people suddenly under-performing at work, it has nothing to do with work. When good people have problems, managers and companies need to carry them. This should be a personal mission. If we learn to carry people when they most need it, we become a stronger community and we empower people in ways that we probably can't imagine when we are young. A re-invigorated broken employee is a corporation's most powerful force. They become a slightly better version of themselves without the need for a V energy drink.

10. Don't just network with people your own age

Beware the whiz kid syndrome. Smart, young people have a habit of forming communities of other smart young people and feeding off each other's energy. In the older world they are seen as "bright young things" that give confidence that the future is in good hands. Argghhhh. How many times have you heard that? Youth enclaves can actually be restrictive. Smart 20-somethings should make sure they network with older people too. In fact their networking should be about meeting useful mentors and career champions who can open doors and fast track careers. Similarly, older, successful people shouldn't just sit in musty clubs talking about the 1970s. They should be proactively seeking out smart, young people who can shake them out of their comfort zone and open their eyes to new ideas.

11. Celebrate cultural differences in the workplace

One of the big mistakes we make in Australia is failing to adequately recognise the value of overseas experience and people from a variety of cultures. Diversity brings a richness to our workplaces that benefits all of us. Overseas experience is real experience. We should take every opportunity to inject new thinking into our workplaces. It is where the magic begins.

12. Take the time to understand what your business does

I love the story of President J F Kennedy's visit to NASA during which he asked a cleaner what his job was. The cleaner replied that he sent rockets to the moon. All of us should feel part of what our organisations actually do. We should take the time to be part of the big picture and always feel connected with the true objectives of our workplace. Don't wait for someone to tell you or lament that internal communication is crap. Find out for yourself.

13. Don't put off working overseas

Geography is becoming less relevant. We are all citizens of the world. President Obama made the point during his University of Queensland speech that the world was becoming smaller and even the Pacific Ocean was now just a lake. If you get the chance to work overseas, and you aspire to do that, take it. There is never a right time. And we always regret the things we don't do far more than the things we do.

14. Work in an office where you have friends

You will spend a lot of time at work. You should work with people you like. I used to be a bit sceptical about a question in employment engagement surveys asking people if they had a "best friend" at work. I realise now that work is much better if you are among friends. The happiest people are those who do things they are passionate about with people they really like. Further to that, if you find you have taken on a job you hate, ditch it quickly. Your career can survive a few well-intentioned detours and mistaken pathways.

15. Never sacrifice personal ethics for a work reason

Crucial to workplace happiness is value alignment. If you work somewhere that compromises your personal ethics and values, get out of there as quickly as you can.

Good people will be unnerved by things that don't feel right. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. Bad things only manifest when good people don't take a stand.

16. Recognise that failure is learning

As bizarre as it might sound, failing is not failure. Researchers recognise that failure is just part of a process to eliminate unsuccessful options. To misquote Woody from Toy Story, when we make a few mistakes, we are not failing, just falling - with style. Even fairy-tale princesses recognise that you need to kiss a lot of toads before you find a handsome prince. Thomas Edison articulated this best: "I have not failed. I have just found 10,000 ways that don't work." If we fear failure we tend to take a minimalist approach to our jobs and the opportunities around us. Takes some risks. Sometimes failing spectacularly is the best evidence that we are alive, human and serious about aspiring to the extraordinary. There is no value in being ordinary when you have the capacity to be remarkable.

Now, to get started on that time machine...

Comments in these posts are personal. Shane Rodgers is a business executive, writer and marketer with a keen interest in social change and what makes people tick. He is the author of Tall People Don't Jump – the curious behaviour of human beings.

[Report this](#)