

Today we're going to talk about how one goes beyond the basic education and college degree into the world of lifelong learning.

In the past, with a good education under your belt, you could hope that your employer would take responsibility for providing more training and ongoing education. But in today's world of work, there's less training that's provided by employers. So it's more important for individuals to think about what they need to do to take care of their lifelong learning needs.

That means you have to have a strategy. So let's start with those in high school. In high school the message that we emphasize is that it's important to stay in school, to work hard, to graduate in good standing. Nothing is more important than that.

If you can while you are in high school get internships, co-op jobs, part-time jobs in the summer or even during the school year if that's possible so that you can begin to see what the world of work is like. Maybe you can meet some people who are good role models in the workplace. Maybe you can test whether you are really interested in one kind of a job or another. Maybe you can get some technical skills that will help you identify what you really are good at.

Let me give you the advice of Dr. James Fico, an industrial psychologist who works with employers to match good, talented young people with the jobs that are available.

Dr. Fico says, "There are plenty of good jobs in my sectors-- manufacturing and law enforcement. Retirements are creating lots of opportunities. Employers expect much more of their employees today than at anytime in my memory. They want technical skills, and they want a much higher caliber of job readiness and character. Students' best bet is to find mentors for whom they can learn from over a longer period of time."

And employers want a great deal of the following. They want courage. They want integrity. They want a devotion to the job and a commitment to really doing a great job. They want a vision for the future of what the work might look like. They want a commitment to working in teams. And, yes, of course, they want technical competence.

The first four of these are the most desired and maybe the hardest to find, according to Dr. Fico, regardless of the age of the applicant.

But then he goes on to say that "I find that the most critical language of the workplace today is the language of math." A thorough knowledge of arithmetic, he says, yes, he means basic math-- algebra, geometry, basic adding and subtracting-- would do more for business success than any other single discipline outside of the character

features mentioned earlier. Remember that "the best mathematicians in the United States led us into this recession a few years ago because they didn't understand the numbers they were working with and how to really calculate risk."

What about those of you who are going to go on for technical degrees in community colleges after high school?

Well, here the key, from all kinds of research and evidence, is that the most important thing to do is to look for programs that are well-linked to the employers in your region and in the industry you want to work in. Employers working with community colleges and vocational schools, designing the curriculum together, providing advice and mentoring for students, and then helping to make sure that the skills that are being taught are the modern skills needed on the job.

The second feature is to make sure that these programs that you choose mix classroom experience in teaching with on-the-job opportunities to apply those skills and to see the relevance of the material that you are learning in the classroom first hand.

The third feature of a successful community college and vocational school is that they have success in placing graduates not only in that first job but with employers who have career pathways, that is job ladders that allow people to continue to learn and to advance over time and maybe to come back for refresher courses as needed.

How about college graduates and college students? Well, the thing to do here is to make sure again, like in high school, one gains experience while in school, looking for those summer internships or co-op placements in schools that provide that, so that you can really start to build your professional network while you're still in school. And again, test whether you are really well-suited for different kinds of jobs.

Then it's important to seek out mentors on your first job. The evidence is very clear that having a supervisor or a mentor from somewhere else in the organization that helps you learn the ropes and can then vouch for you for other jobs as they come along is really critical to your future success in that organization.

It's important that you pursue outside educational opportunities. Take advantage of all the universities, like MIT and other great schools, that are now providing online learning opportunities so that you can deepen your knowledge and broaden out your professional base over time.

It's also important that you maintain your professional networks and your contacts over time. Make sure that you are interacting with your peers. Ask your employers to make sure that you have opportunities to go to professional meetings and to stay current in what is going on and build those networks so that you have others who are sharing the same experiences, and you are learning together.

And then finally, it's always important to keep that resume up to date. Keep one foot in the external labor market because you never know when you will have to draw on it for looking for your next opportunity.

So I believe we are in a world where lifelong learning now becomes critical to long-term career success. Start by picking an occupation, a profession that is of interest to you. And then keep working on your career over time, testing yourself.

Am I staying current? Can I find a job in my profession outside of my current employer? And do I keep my network strong and up to date so that I can draw on the assistance of other people as needed?