



Book Great Work, Great Career

How to Create Your Ultimate Job and Make an Extraordinary Contribution

Stephen R. Covey and Jennifer Colosimo
FranklinCovey Publishing, 2009
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Recommendation

What might sound like a series of clichés coming from a typical business writer could, out of reverence, be called “tapping into the zeitgeist” when it is presented by a bona fide guru. In a quick 156 pages (including a Frequently Asked Questions section), Stephen R. Covey and co-author Jennifer Colosimo work to overturn the ordinary ways people seek and acquire jobs. Like the authors of a diet book, Covey and Colosimo ask you to make healthy choices to shape your work’s waistline. Choose a meaningful career, not a job. Think of yourself as a “volunteer,” not an employee. Adapt to the “Knowledge Age” and leave behind the “Industrial Age.” Use a job interview as a “research opportunity,” and see a résumé cover letter as a chance to define yourself as the solution to an employer’s problem. Granted, if you don’t want to be told to change your paradigm, or to invent your own job if you can’t find one, you might want to invest your dimes elsewhere. Then again, if you’re tired of the patterns in your professional path, Covey and Colosimo’s new career-seeking terminology might be just the jolt you need. Old habits die hard – maybe it’s time for some new ones. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to job seekers, bootstrappers, service industry personnel, Covey fanatics and all workers in a rut.

Take-Aways

- A great career pivots on “contribution, loyalty” and “trust.”
- Embrace the “Knowledge Age” to free yourself to use your talents for fulfilling work.
- If you have an attitude of “abundance” and a solution-oriented mind-set, you’ll see possibilities where others see hopelessness.
- To maintain your passion and your employment, approach your job as a “volunteer.”
- To be vital to the workforce, today and tomorrow, become a tenacious problem solver.
- Your résumé should not dwell on you, but on what you can accomplish for an employer.
- Write a “Contribution Statement” to explain how you can use your abilities and strengths to get to the bottom of an employer’s problems.
- Your contribution statement should mentally take the place of your job description.
- Don’t let the negative people in your “Circle of Concern” stop you, but do let the supporters in your “Circle of Influence” help you.
- To become indispensable at work, find a problem and commit yourself fully to fixing it.

Summary

A Great Career Requires a Different Mind-Set

A job that puts food on the family table is different from a career that leaves a legacy for your grandchildren to marvel at around that same table. Yes, you need to pay the bills now. But if you’re not working toward a great career, you’ll pay a larger, more existential price later. As the saying goes, you can get straight A’s in school and

still flunk life. Likewise, you can have the right job, the right paycheck – and still flunk your career. A great vocation is not the sole domain of the rich and famous, the people you hear or read about, the people others envy. You can have a great career regardless of the number of zeroes in your bank account.

“Anybody can have a great career. It doesn’t matter what your line of work is.”

How? You have to rethink most of what you know about having a job, keeping a job, getting a job or inventing a job. A great career pivots on three personal characteristics that are far simpler and more elemental than power or influence: “contribution, loyalty” and “trust.” Your contribution, which is made up of your “talents, passion, conscience” and “need,” is unique. Trust and loyalty are “the fruit of your character and your conscience.”

“A great career is all about solving great problems, meeting great challenges and making great contributions.”

By seeking a professional life based on contribution, loyalty and trust, you are reviving the very notion of a great career. Anybody can have one, not just the driven workaholics, strivers, corporate-ladder climbers or backstabbers. Instead of being a matter of constant sacrifice for a bigger salary or a better tomorrow, your career can be “deeply satisfying” every day. Bringing your best self to a job that genuinely requires your maximum contribution is the finest way to work. The surprise is that even your current job will reward you for bringing your truest self to bear. The work of a lifetime awaits you. But you must put in an intense effort to get all the fulfillment that meaningful work can bring.

Clearing the Ground

The 1988 fire at Yellowstone National Park is a perfect symbol for what a great careerist can do with the vicissitudes of the job market. That fire seemed to have destroyed everything worth preserving. But nature had another plan: After the fire, the park came back stronger than ever. New growth, given room to flourish, replaced the devastation.

“A great career requires...the desire and skill to contribute, and a character worthy of trust and loyalty.”

When the economy shifts from the joy of the party to the misery of the hangover – or the job landscape presents new problems and demands – you have a choice. Will you see desolation or opportunity, “scarcity” or “abundance”? Fit these words to your life and your career. Are you the type of person who dwells on the gaps and laments what’s not there? Or, can you appreciate what is there and try to find a way to make the parts add up to something greater? Is your glass half empty or half full? To move forward in your career, you need optimism – and that means envisioning a half-full glass. Tune in to a mind-set of abundance, and consider how you might use it to hurdle adversity. Ask yourself how you can solve the problems that confront your career and your company. Think of ways to express the parts of yourself – your talents and personality – that belong only to you. The answer is a single, simple verb: “contribute.”

“The landscape has never been greener. The volatile, burned-over economy of the new century provides opportunities no one ever dreamed of.”

Try to see your daily work as your contribution, so you can make the mental shift from being an “employee” to acting as if you are a “volunteer.” This transition is the way to forge a great career. A volunteer approaches a task with the clarity and sense of purpose that flows from willingness and from the passionate insistence on helping a great cause. If you contribute the right way at work, you will become indispensable and you’ll reap many rewards, including the gratification of doing work that matters to you.

“People who are only looking for a job have résumés. People who are looking to make a great career have Contribution Statements.”

The best way to find a job – or to love the job you’ve got – is to stop using the word “job.” The “Knowledge Age” has changed the whole meaning of work. Choose, instead, to focus on a significant problem, one you can sink your best self into solving, so you can benefit from a more perfect union between your life and your career.

The Solution Contribution

To achieve the absolutely critical frame of mind for a great career, accompany your attitude of abundance with a “solution mind-set.” Companies don’t necessarily need to add more people or to retain everyone they already have on staff. But they always need more problem solvers, particularly among “knowledge workers.”

“Unless you are invested as a whole person in your career, you will always find yourself underemployed, frustrated and perhaps burdened with guilt.”

Today’s knowledge workers are not interchangeable like the production workers of an earlier era. They contribute on a unique, individual basis to help companies deal with a “wild, complicated new world,” where addressing problems is a survival skill. To become or remain part of an organization, you have to know its issues. If you stockpile enough of that kind of “knowledge capital,” your career resources will never expire. Follow the logic of abundance and solutions, and some of the old job-hunting standbys start to shape-shift as well. Getting your foot in the door doesn’t look like it once did. Neither does interviewing. But don’t worry about those changes: Your overall goal is a career as well as a paycheck – not just a paycheck.

“One difference between a great career and a mediocre career is finding a cause you can volunteer to serve.”

If you have a chance to meet with the top brass in a company, don’t just settle for a routine interview. If are trying to gain a post by selling yourself as a product, you need to shed the “job seeker paradigm” and take on the “contributor paradigm.” That means selling your skills as a solution to a firm’s problems and showing the company that you fit its requirements. Offer a “need-opportunity presentation.”

“You don’t need to have the most thrilling, high-profile job in order to make a great contribution and to love your work.”

Imagine the surprise of a prospective boss if you – the interviewee, the lowest supplicant on the corporate ladder – walk into a meeting and demonstrate fluency about what that boss needs most. Pinpoint the ways your particular strengths align with the organization’s wants. Make your presentation without sounding like you don’t respect what the company has already done or what it will do in the future. The boss would be remiss to let you leave the office without making you an offer. And once you land a job (or use this approach to hold onto a job), maintain your problem-solving capacity, and keep updating and fulfilling your needs assessment.

“No company wants to hire just for the sake of hiring, but they all want to solve problems. They need your contribution like a thirsty man in the desert needs water.”

Practice offering everything you can, everything that flows naturally from you. Then you are ready to write the most important document of your working life – your “Contribution Statement.”

The Nuts and Bolts of the Contribution Statement

Writing a contribution statement will help you perceive, understand, articulate and explain “the high purpose you want to serve.” It connects your strengths to the cause you intend to work on and the problems you aim to solve. More importantly, it operates as your eulogy for your old job.

“Your career success depends not only on yourself, but also on the people around you. In the workplace, you never achieve anything worthwhile alone.”

Your contribution statement should mentally take the place of your job description. Once you craft an authentic contribution statement, your job will always be more than just a gauntlet you walk through, fists raised, to pay your bills. Your work will be filled with meaning. The contribution statement will force you to concentrate on “producing solid value.”

“The best way to learn from this book is to teach the content to someone else.”

Follow these six steps to write your contribution statement:

1. **“Write a homage to an influential person”** – To focus your quest and to make a lasting contribution, distill the essence of “the most effective, influential” figure who personally affected your life, and explain how he or she inspired you.
2. **“Write tributes you would like to receive”** – What approbation would you most like to obtain from those around you? Write the very best things they could say.
3. **“Review your strengths”** – To come closer to the career you want and move further away from work you do not want (even if it is your current job), remind yourself of the contribution that is inherent to your being. Concentrate on your passions and the input you could make to provide solutions to your firm, colleagues and clients.
4. **“Examine your cause”** – Double-check that you are pursuing a career in the right industry. Re-examine the position, problems, relationships and solutions. Are you on the right path to engagement?
5. **“Draft your contribution statement”** – Perfect clarity is the point here, not perfect writing. Make sure that you are responding to a compelling problem.
6. **“Share”** – Your completed contribution statement is a tool you can use with your résumé to get a job or as part of a conversation with your employer to keep a job. It is a powerful boost because it explains how you are unique and what you can do. Most people present “bland, self-serving” objectives on their résumés, but the contribution statement lets you present a real problem-solving commitment to your employers, current or future.

“You are not a job description with legs.”

For example, an accounting manager applying for a mining company job might say that he or she seeks “a fulfilling position” for using his or her “communication and negotiation skills.” How much more powerful it would be, instead, for that manager to outline a contribution that solves a specific problem: “The cost of equipment rental threatens healthy cash flow at Forge Mountain. Drawing on my experience in lease management, I believe I can cut rental outlay between 10% and 20% the first year by renegotiating contracts.”

Claim What You Deserve

Even when you are interviewing for a given opening, involve yourself in the process of creating the job you want, the job that taps into your talents and experiences. Sometimes, you will come up empty and feel like you’re going nowhere. That’s fine. Persevere and make sure you’re working within the right circles.

Overcome the factors in your “Circle of Concern,” the roadblocks that prevent you from getting what you want. They push you off track. If you dwell on these insecurities and pitfalls, you won’t progress. Instead, focus on your “Circle of Influence,” the “people, knowledge, tools and capital” that can help you become the type of worker you want to be.

Throw your energy at forces you can control and “give up being helpless.” Your circle of influence has an auxiliary benefit as well. By thinking outside of yourself, you will understand that you can’t “go it alone,” which is a fundamental discipline of success.

The greatest contributors are people who help others. Think of your collection of valuable contacts – genuine connections, not just the names on every business card you’ve ever collected – as a “village.” Treat your village and its “villagers” with care and concern. They are not rungs on a ladder you step on to scramble to the top. They are individuals who receive and endorse your contribution. A village can’t survive without mutual giving and taking, borrowing, and replacing.

Harnessing the World Wide Web for Your Career

Nurture and harvest your presence on the internet. Carve out a little web real estate for yourself. Start a blog to expand upon your possible contributions, your competencies, the reasons you deserve loyalty and trust. “More and more, your online presence will make the big difference in building your great career.”

Overturning a Few Final Concepts

So what can you do right now? Well, if you’re writing a résumé or cover letter, be aware of this important contradiction: Make sure your documents are not all about you. They should be as much about the need you hope to fill or the problem you hope to solve, as they are about your core competencies. Job seekers need to look into themselves and into the company they hope to join.

Introspection matched with in-depth research will do the trick. In the same light, think of your first interview as a “research opportunity,” a way to learn more about the prospective employer’s issue that you hope to fix with your contribution. That way, if the conversation (that is, the interview process) continues, you will have more information about the needs of the firm and more ways to tie your unique talents to the organization’s future.

About the Authors

Stephen R. Covey has written several leadership books, including the perennial bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. He is co-founder and vice chairman of FranklinCovey, where executive coach **Jennifer Colosimo** is chief learning officer.
