Rising to the Occasion and Making Some Bread—
Getting That Job, Keeping That Job, and Growing That Job

One thing always holds true during difficult economic times—a baker’s family never goes hungry. There is always bread to eat.

As the economic recovery continues, people are slowly getting called back to work, and unemployment is going down, but questions remain. In tough economic times how do you get a job and hold a job? How do you avoid getting laid off and stay out of the unemployment line? If you find yourself in the unemployment line, how do you stand above others who are also looking for employment? In short, what makes a good employee and where can they be found?

In the United States, there are 3–4 million jobs out there right now waiting to be filled. In their search for qualified workers, businesses are even trying to get immigration laws changed to allow more specialized workers into the country to fill these empty jobs, which raises more questions. Why are these jobs unfilled and how do you get hired to fill one of these job openings? When I was just starting out 30 plus years ago, the baking industry was fretting about the declining number of bakers, and they still are today.

I am just full of questions. In this column, I provide some thoughts on answers to these questions.

Getting That Job

How do you get that job? An obvious answer is get the right education to fit the need. The question is, do students or those looking for jobs know what areas are looking for help? It would seem that in the age of the information superhighway, the age in which today’s young students have grown up, they must know.

The worker shortage in the baking industry is not a new phenomenon. How long has the baking industry been calling for more bakers? The word has to be out there in high schools and on college campuses that certain job areas are begging for qualified workers. Either students or those looking for jobs are choosing not to go into these areas of study or opportunity or they are missing the point, the value, of the job. If they aren’t choosing areas where opportunities abound, who is to blame when they are unable to get a job? Who knows why students and those looking for jobs aren’t choosing these areas of opportunity. Either they don’t think they will like the work or aren’t hungry enough. Life is what you make out of it, as is a job. There is value in every job—you just have to be open to seeing it.

The lessons of the Great Depression and of our grandparents (for baby boomers) are being forgotten. Those who survived the Great Depression leapt at any opportunity to make money to feed their families. We all need to appreciate, take advantage of, and understand the value of whatever job or opportunity comes our way to provide for ourselves and our families.

Americans are members of an affluent society, and we must remember how we achieved this. More Americans are becoming less affluent and hungrier, pinching pennies tighter and tighter. However, they don’t seem to realize what they need to do to satisfy their appetite and make ends meet. This brings me to the U.S. Affordable Care Act of 2010—just kidding, but there is definitely a social policy side to this whole discussion. It all can be and is being debated. Who is responsible for getting that job or not getting that job and how much government assistance should there be?

Interviewing for That Job

Be positive, not just during an interview, but in life as well—smile. Be available to work when they need you; show them you are willing to go the extra mile. Express a desire to do what they need done. If you don’t know exactly what to do, be honest but don’t sell yourself short—if you think you can figure it out go for it. At the end of the interview when asked if you have any questions, always have one ready.

Keeping That Job

Working well with people, being personable, opens doors. You can be smart and have a fistful of degrees, but if you don’t work well with others or aren’t friendly, you won’t get the job. If you do get the job, you won’t keep it or be happy at it. When I was just starting out in my work life, it was said that 95% of all job dismissals were due to the inability of the employee to work with those around them, not to their inability to do the job. Having a positive attitude about people and looking for the good we all have inside can help you keep your job and excel in life.

Another helpful attitude is being open-minded. You need a strong desire to learn and be open to new experiences and perspectives. Taking a deeper look at the tasks at hand, the essence of the work, and questioning the mechanics of the skill will increase your success at whatever you attempt. Asking why and being open to all the possible answers will help you stand out in the crowd. To this point, is this what isn’t being taught in colleges today? Is this why we are increasingly hearing questions about the value of a college education versus the return on the investment and debt students and their families are incurring to obtain a college diploma? Has the process for obtaining a degree become too much of a “cookie cutter” process? Here are the mechanics of the field.

A degree is not needed to master the mechanics of a job—a degree is needed to know where to question the norms and
explore the unknowns. It could be argued that learning something on the job versus in a classroom is more advantageous because you don't learn only about the common beliefs or understanding of the technology from a single teacher or department. On the job you must tackle the essence of the task at hand because there is often no one there to teach you, and invariably, things occur on the job or during the process that aren't and can't be taught in the classroom because they are the product of unforeseeable combinations of variables happening at one time. These circumstances force you to try and come up with an explanation or theory of why they happened. This is when it is good to have someone around with book smarts or more experience than you to bounce your theory off of. You are free to ask the less than obvious questions (the questions born out of ignorance so to speak) or test an idea that preconceived logic might otherwise dismiss.

Asking these questions, forming theories, and exploring different areas demonstrates that you are thinking about and looking for different ways to get the job done better. Even if you fail, you will succeed in learning what doesn't work and showing your co-workers that you are thinking about the process. This shows you are willing to take risks to bring value to the organization. These are the people organizations hang on to, and this is how you stay off the list of employees to be laid off. It is the thinkers who keep their jobs.

How to Grow the Job, Your Career, and Yourself

In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the highest level is self-actualization, reaching your full potential. Ideally you want your job to help you reach your full potential or to be a part of the process. After all, a full-time job will take up at least half of your waking hours in life. Doing more of what was discussed in the previous section can help with this process: ask “why,” take risks, and ask questions.

I once conducted an informal poll of some business leaders in my community. Among other things, I asked them what they looked for in an employee. There were three answers. They all said they looked for a willingness to go the extra mile. I interpret this to mean work smarter, not harder; put in the time to get the job done but also figure out a better way to get the job done. The other two responses varied a bit. They were having good communication skills and thinking outside the box or being creative and solving problems. I see these as helping yourself to reach your full potential—growing yourself and in the process growing your job and the company and making yourself more valuable to the company.

In the process of growing yourself, you are hopefully having fun because you need to have fun. This is an aspect of jobs that is often overlooked. If you don't like your work, it is hard to be passionate about your job or, to a certain extent, happy with your life, since work typically takes up at least half of your waking hours. Companies that keep having fun in mind and alive in their culture are often among the more vital, growing businesses (e.g., Apple and Southwest Airlines). Although you want to be passionate about your work, you don't want to take the job too seriously or for it to be all-consuming. Having an outside interest can help keep things in perspective. After all, we are just making breads, doughnuts, cakes, or cookies, not necessarily dealing with life and death situations. Other interests can help remind us of this. I guess this is what they call finding a work–life balance—a balance that is sometimes hard for the passionate worker to maintain.