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Pay Attention To Your Skills And Interests

Consider how your skills and interests can help you create a more fulfilling career and balanced life. Maybe you will uncover a couple of hidden gems

***By Anne Whitaker
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If you have been following this series, you know that a key to a satisfying and successful career is to have a Personal Vision for your career and your life. (See *TCL*, Volume 2 Number 1, Number 2, Number 3, and Number 4) However, creating your Personal Vision and examining the various areas of your life we call the Eight Critical Success Factors is not a quick fix and does not happen overnight. You have to slow down, take some time and ask yourself questions that are very different from the typical law-related issues you focus on every day. The process I have been talking about is really a journey, and it is well worth the effort. Creating a Personal Vision is perhaps the most important work you can do to make your life more fun, more productive and more meaningful. It helps you define what success means to you, achieve goals that really matter, and can help you overcome almost any obstacle. Gandhi, Churchill, and Benjamin Franklin all had Personal Visions.

Skills And Interests Help Give Your Personal Vision Substance And Structure

By now, I hope you have spent some time assessing the first two Critical Success Factors, which I covered in the previous two articles. If you have, in what Stage of Adult Development are you? Are you at a turning point or in a building stage, and how does that impact your decision making and stress cycle? Also, what are your Natural Abilities and talents and how are you hard-wired? Your abilities form the foundation of your Personal Vision so it's important you learn what they are.² If you haven't looked at these two areas of your life, focus some time this month on them. I suggest you start a Personal Vision Notebook, if you have not already done so. That will give you a central place in which you can record your thoughts and answers when you do the various exercises I recommend.

In this segment we move on to the third and fourth Critical Success Factors of your life—Skills and Interests. Just knowing your natural abilities is not enough; you need to be able to plug that information into your life so that you can use them all the time. Skills and Interests help you do this and give your Personal Vision substance and structure.

Your Skills Work Hand In Hand With Your Abilities

Let's start with Skills. Your skills are what you have learned in life through schools, on the job training, CLEs, etc. Unlike your natural abilities, which are set by the time you are about 14 years old and will not change, your skills are learned and can continue to be nurtured and developed. Your experiences have created an extremely valuable asset for you to take into the next stage of your career, and there are several reasons why you need to consider this asset when crafting your Personal Vision.

First, you need to know what your skills are because they work hand-in-hand with your abilities. What you are naturally talented at doing can be greatly enhanced with skills and experience. Also, your skills complement your natural abilities because what you are not naturally gifted to do can be compensated for with training. For some careers you need both skills and natural abilities to be successful. For example, a 14 year-old boy may have the natural abilities needed to be an excellent surgeon, but he will still need to get the education and skills to put it into practice.

So knowing what you do well and whether it is because of your abilities, skills or a combination of the two is a critical component in career planning. It allows you to understand why things are the way they are for you. A lawyer named Allen, for example, discovered that he did not have the natural abilities to be a litigator and that he had compensated for years by developing skills through education,

training and experience. It explained why so many aspects of litigation left him feeling drained. He also learned that he had both the natural talent and the skills needed to be a writer, which was why writing was something he did easily and well.

Evaluating your skills also helps you decide which ones you would like to continue using, which ones you need to develop further, and which ones you want to abandon completely. The mere fact that you have a skill does not mean you need to use it. You will enjoy your work more and do a much better job if you focus on those skills that you both enjoy doing and can do well. On the flip side, if there is a skills gap in your current position or you dislike the skills you are frequently employing, that is critical information. Either one of those things can be the source of great stress. With Allen, he realized that since he had become partner he was not getting to write as much as he used to and he missed it. He decided to focus on ways he could bring writing back into his life on a regular basis.

Transferable Skills Are Especially Important If You Are Considering A New Area Of Practice, A Different Kind Of Job, Or A New Career

Another reason to identify your skills is so you can evaluate current and future career opportunities in terms of the “transferable skills” you already have. Transferable skills are especially important if you are considering a new area of practice, a different kind of job, or a new career. Legal training is really quite broad, and many skills that you have developed as a lawyer can be transferred to other fields. For example, lawyers have developed good analytical skills, oral and written communication skills, and negotiation skills. The training starts with the first day of law school and is honed by the practice of law thereafter. Lawyers take those abilities for granted because peers in the profession have developed the same core skills. And even if that weren’t the case, most people are simply not aware of the richness of their own skills. We tend to take what we do well for granted, and so many times overlook our most powerful and effective skills because we have always used them so effectively. Our most significant skills don’t seem important because they are so easy for us. When asked to name their best skills, most of my clients will focus on something that was difficult for them to learn.

Remember Allen? His most important skills remained invisible to him until he took some time to learn more about them and uncovered a pattern that he was previously unaware of. He saw that some of the things he had done in high school and college were similar to what he did best as a lawyer, with writing being just one of them. The exercises he did gave him a fresh perspective about his skills and he suddenly saw how he could use them in many other fields.

An Exercise For Assessing Your Skills

The following exercise is a good one for assessing your skills. Make a list of at least twenty accomplishments—things that have happened in your life that you are proud of or feel good about. Include both on the job and off the job situations and cover the full range of your life, not just adulthood. It may be that you completed a project, created something, learned a new skill, won a difficult case, closed a deal, mentored a worker, or turned a difficult situation around. Write them in your Personal Vision Notebook and then answer the following questions:

- What skills appear in the stories? Note them beside each story.
- Are there themes? Do they fall into natural groups? How would you name them?
- Of those skills, which do you enjoy using?
- What skills have you consistently used? Which are underutilized?
- Are more of your stories work related or non-work related?
- Are there patterns?
- How do your skills enhance or build on your natural abilities? Which skills help you compensate or strengthen areas in which you are not naturally as gifted?

You can then expand your list:

- Identify other skills you have that weren't revealed in your list of accomplishments. Take a look at your calendar over the past couple of months to refresh your memory about your activities and then analyze the skills that you were using for each. You can then run them through the same questions above.
- Which skills do you want to build or acquire to help you in your current job? Or, which skills do you need to develop if you intend to expand your career?

When You Find Ways To Include Your Interests In Your Career, Your Life Changes Dramatically

Once you have a better understanding of your skills, it's time to examine your Interests, which are the people, places, things, and activities that grab your attention. They are what fascinate you, pull at you. There are varying degrees of interests, from things that you are most passionate about, which is usually a short list, to things that interest you. Your interests may be for either an activity, like playing golf, or a subject matter, like antiques. For example, you may be

passionate about baseball, the subject matter, but do not enjoy playing the game. You also may not enjoy the area of law in which you are practicing but really love taking depositions.

We often neglect this factor because we tend to assign our interests and passions to a box labeled “outside of work.” Instead of viewing interests as something you pursue once you leave the office, you can find ways to bring them into your career. They may or may not be a part of a career direction but can add “spice” to career choice and balance to the work world. Interests can sometimes give new energy to your career.

When I talk to people who have had full and satisfying lives and ask them how they found the career that suited them so well they all say some version of the same thing. “I always did what interested me.” When you pay attention to what you find personally interesting and fascinating and find ways to include it in your career, your life changes dramatically. Instead of keeping “interests” and “work” in two separate compartments of your life with no connection between them, you get to include this exciting component in your career. You can be more creative, happier and enthusiastic. Work doesn’t seem like work—you are engaged and enjoy what you do. The fact that somebody pays you to do it can seem like icing on the cake.

Are you surprised that interests can have something to do with your work? Most people, especially lawyers with billable hour requirements, are very surprised to learn this. Many feel resigned to their situations and have learned to ignore or push interests deep down in the name of “adulthood” or “responsibility.” They have turned off their interest radar and thought generator. If you have learned to ignore what really interests you because you are too tired, too busy, or too stuck in your job, you have a lot of company. The truth is, interests can give your life more richness, texture and substance. You can learn to take them more seriously and make a place for them in your life. Or even create a life in which they can play a regular role.

An Exercise For Assessing Your Interests

The first step is to get in touch with your interests. There are those you already know about and others that may be more hidden or forgotten. Start by answering the following questions, and don’t forget to record your answers.

- Who are the people that interest you the most?
- What places, ideas, and books interest you?
- What school subjects were the most interesting?
- What activities satisfy you the most?

- What do you do in your spare time for fun and relaxation? What do you wish you did?
- Write down 20 of the most enjoyable experiences of your life, drawing from all stages of life and include career and outside of work. Think about events that were fulfilling, fun, and so engaging that time seemed to fly by. Think about experiences that were easy and lifted your spirits. Now look at those experiences and identify what made them so enjoyable. Was it the subject matter or the activities you were doing, or both? What was it about them that interested you? Add those interests to your list.

Now that you have a list of interests and passions to work with, start to identify what part your interests play in adding balance to your life.

- Is there a common theme or pattern in your list of interests?
- Separate your list of interests into four categories:
 1. “Must haves” for your career. How can you begin to add these in?
 2. Good for a hobby. Are you finding time for them? If not, how can you?
 3. Need more research. Make a plan to get more information.
 4. Do not need to include at this time.

The goal is to identify what interests you want to include in your Personal Vision at this point in your life, and how you are going to do that. If you are staying in your current career, how can you restructure things so that your interests are a part of it? If you want to change careers, what part do you want interests to play? Is there a way to include the “must haves” you have identified?

Let’s go back to Allen one last time. As he continued to do work on his Personal Vision and identified his areas of interest, he rediscovered that he had a real love of writing that went beyond the legal writing he did as a lawyer. He had forgotten how much he had enjoyed writing for his high school newspaper years ago. The pressures of college, law school, being an associate, making partner, and having a family had caused him to push that interest deep down, and he realized that adding it back might give his life more joy. He decided to start writing articles for the Bar Journal and a few other lawyer magazines, and found he really enjoyed it. He then wrote a couple of short stories for a magazine, and found that to be even more invigorating. After attending a seminar on how to become a published novelist, he decided to try his hand at writing fiction, and is now working on his first book. He has found renewed creativity and energy in his days just by adding this interest back into his life.

In the next issue, we will take a look at the next two Critical Success Factors: Family of Origin and Values. In the meantime, consider your Skills and Interests and how they can help you create a more fulfilling career and balanced life. Maybe you will uncover a couple of hidden gems.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

1. McDonald, Bob, Ph.D., and Hutcheson, Don, E., Don't Waste Your Talent: The 8 Critical Steps to Discovering What You Do Best, The Highlands Company, 2005.

ASSESSMENTS

2. The Highlands Ability Battery—By means of objective, hands-on work samples, this assessment helps individuals to understand their natural talents and abilities.

This article can be found online at:

<http://atlanta.thecompletelawyer.com/volume2/issue5/article.php?ppaid=405>