

How to Avoid Becoming Obsolete on the Job

By
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Millions of us wake up one morning to the haunting realization that we're losing the battle to avoid becoming obsolete on the job. It affects those in their 20s, while others don't see the darkness descend until they're much older. Some are high school dropouts, others are college graduates, or successful professionals. It can strike anyone.

Oxford researchers Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne, according to a *USA Today* article, estimate that "47% of American jobs are at high risk of automation by the mid 2030s."

Some may run faster or be in denial, but Steve Tobak got it right on CBS Radio when he said, "*Nobody* wants to believe *they're* the problem, that they're in over their head." In other words, that they're obsolete. It can happen to anyone at any age and at any point in their work life.

If you want to avoid becoming an obsolete worker, here are a few ideas to consider:

1. Don't try to pass the passionate test

Those speaking passionately about their passion for their job may have a credibility problem. Anyone committed to their work doesn't need to broadcast it. Their performance speaks more eloquently than anything they might say.

In fact, being passionate about one's work is not all it's cracked up to be, at least that's what researchers at the University of Quebec at Montreal discovered. They found that being passionate about work leads to burnout, not success.

However, a colleague of mine cracked the code. At the end of every meeting, he wrote down a list of tasks that were discussed. He then announced, "Who's going to do what to whom and when?" In other words, who's going to get the job done? Believing we should be passionate about our work is naïve, while making a commitment to do our best work is a measurable objective.

2. Don't expect work-life balance

The promise of a work-life balance isn't new, but it got a boost as technology eroded the wall between the two.

Even so, trying to achieve work-life equilibrium may be dangerous. “The idea of balance is an unattainable standard that results in an almost constant feeling of failure,” says Jessica Lutz in *Forbes*. Or, as Olga Khazan put it in *The Atlantic*, “Despite the pressure to have it all, many workers still feel they are failing both in the office and at home.”

We may not like getting a text message at 2:11 am that requires an immediate response or our vacation interrupted with a crisis that demands attention. Like it or not, work demands upset the balance, just as can family needs and other personal issues. An imperfect work-life balance is the new normal.

3. Save the dreams for another day

Arguably, commencement speeches are less than memorable, even though schools may pay speakers who exhort their listeners to follow their dreams or go change the world. But dreams soon fade as life and jobs (or lack of them) take us far from what we studied in school.

Everyone would be better served if someone said, “Hey, look! The chances are your chosen career will be obsolete sooner rather than later. Start planning for it now. Your permanent job is getting ready for the next one.”

4. Embrace the inevitable as opportunity

Don't let yourself get blindsided! It happens to those who ignore where their employer is going and who assume that “doing a good job is the best security.”

Kevin is someone who didn't let it happen to him. For many years, he worked for a printing company handling prepress responsibilities, a job requiring skill and technical expertise. Then, seeing the future, he knew his job would be automated. When it happened, he was prepared.

Kevin and his family lived in an iconic South Boston “triple-deckers,” where he became skilled at taking care of the property. The word got around to “Call Kevin” if you needed a terrific handyman. To up his income, he was also on call at the Boston Convention Center, where he earned a reputation as being available when needed and doing a top-notch job. Then it happened. His boss landed a management position at the new \$2.5 billion Encore Boston Harbor Resort and Casino—and he chose Kevin to go with him. A big win for Kevin!

Not everyone can be like Kevin, but we can train ourselves to anticipate trends, get ourselves ready for change by sharpening our marketable skills, and have a plan in place so we're always ready to make a move.

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