

Getting Credit for Continuing Education

By Donald Asher

One of the greatest strengths of the American economy is the ability of its workers to retool as needed to meet the changing needs of employers and their own circumstances. In many parts of the world, education is a one-shot opportunity. Fail to score above a certain mark on an entrance exam while still a teenager, and you are out of contention for advanced education in Korea, Japan, and even Europe. In the U.S., however, there are second, third, and fourth chances for everyone.

Dr. Ruby Ausbrooks thinks of herself as a poster child for continuing education. At age 33 this award-winning educator found herself unemployed and virtually skill-less after a divorce. With three children and no job prospects, she made the tough decision to go to college for the first time. Her prior employment career consisted of a hodgepodge of temporary office assignments, certainly nothing that was going to allow her to support her family. But after completing her college degree and a teaching credential, she became a teacher in Bentonville, Arkansas. A master's degree and even a doctorate followed, allowing her to rise to the rank of head teacher and curriculum designer. She also served as part-time college professor at two local colleges before retiring. Now living in Nevada, her first novel was just released to positive reviews. "Everything I have done has been based on that decision to go back to school," she says.

But how do you get credit for your continuing education? How do you make sure you're not typecast as a support person in spite of obtaining new credentials or advanced degrees? Dr. Ausbrooks says the secret is to sell the education in your resume. "I made almost no mention of my old office jobs. My resume featured the fact I had actually taught a college class, and my positive reviews for my student teaching. You have to feature the education if you want people to see you as a professional."

Russ Coughenour, director of career services for the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, agrees. "You have to reinvent yourself on paper," he says. "Accentuate the positive, and downplay the things that aren't so flattering. Use an objective statement so that people know what you want to do. That sets a foundation and a tone for what follows. Then tout the new education, new degrees, or new certifications. So that's what hits the reader next. You can list actual classes, to create even more focus on these new skills. Then, after the education, you need to zero in on the transferable skills from your prior employment. Even if only 10% of your old duties are relevant to your new career direction, you put that 10% in blinking lights, and you deemphasize the 90% of duties that may not be as relevant. If no part of your old job is relevant, take your education apart, and talk about senior capstone projects, or team projects, that show you have some practical experience, even if that was all part of the educational process. Always tell the truth, but that's how you reinvent yourself."

Coughenour has a hot tip for returning students. “A good career services office can help you look like you want to look, more like the professional you want to be.” So you don’t have to do this on your own.

What about careerists who are employed the whole time they pursue continuing education? How can they best get that employer to see past their old status as a support person? Henry J. Suerth, director of executive education at the Krannert School of Management at Purdue University, suggests that you get your employer involved long before completing a new credential. “As part of your annual review process, build career path planning into your annual reviews. Let them know of your progress toward the degree or credential. Every time you complete a milestone, send in your transcripts and write a letter to human resources and ask that it be placed in your personnel file. You may need to involve more than your immediate boss. Let human resources know of your broadening interests and skillset. You have every right to discuss broader opportunities within the company. You can’t allow yourself to be pigeonholed by any one individual.”

That’s what worked for Louis Voccia, who works for the City & County of San Francisco. He was 45 years old and stuck in a support role when he got the education bug. “I had a conversation with my boss, and I asked her ‘What do I need to do to get ahead here?’ She told me that everyone liked me, but the only thing I could do to advance was to finish my degree.” Voccia got his boss and human resources to approve of his education plan. He put in 23 months of night school to finish his bachelor’s degree. “I got an instant reward in terms of a new job, my first professional track position. I was 45 and I had a degree and it made me feel so good. I remember that application like it was yesterday.” Voccia went on to complete a master’s degree, and has been promoted twice more in six years.

His advice: “I definitely think it is worthwhile. Certification is very important, education is very important. You’re never too old, and it’s never too late. Stop reading this article and register for something now! That’s my recommendation.”

900 words

Sidebar:

The Experts’ Advice for Selling Continuing Education

1. Get your current employer to back your plan.
2. Let human resources know of your ongoing progress.
3. Use an objective on your resume to show your goal.
4. Feature your new education ahead of old experience.
5. Highlight your transferable skills.
6. It’s never too late to improve your career credentials!

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Asher’s Bible of Executive Resumes*, *How to*

Get Any Job with Any Major, and Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why. His web page is www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.