



Nine Steps to Career Success

ACS DEPARTMENT OF CAREER SERVICES

IMPROVING YOUR CHANCES OF REMAINING EMPLOYED

According to mounting evidence, chemical professionals' work performance is a key factor in determining whether they retain their jobs during a downsizing. While there are no guarantees, they stand a better chance of surviving terminations, and achieving professional and personal rewards, if they learn a few new strategies to improve productivity and work performance. This article offers nine work habits to help them reach their goals.

Events That Reshaped the Chemical Workplace

The workplace is continuously changing, but a series of recent global events could affect chemical professionals' careers and their employment security for the foreseeable future. These pivotal events include the flattening of management tracks and an increasing role for teams, especially in the industrial sector. Also, growing employee diversity has become an important human resource issue.

Employers increasingly are competing globally. The demand for improved financial returns has spawned a flurry of downsizings, mergers, acquisitions and outsourcing of work, which has led to fundamental changes in the nature of employment security.

During this period, employers have been increasingly worried about boosting their employees' productivity and ensuring that they are effectively meeting their customers' needs. On top of these changes, many employers also have modified their paternalistic practices of guiding and developing the careers of their employees and have shifted the responsibility for career advancement to each individual employee. These events have set the stage for new employment security strategies and redefined the road to success for chemical professionals.

The Nature of Employment Security – Two Goals

Employment security for most chemical professionals is often no longer found in a lifetime of work with one employer. Security is now defined as the ability to locate another job when staying with your current organization is not an option. New chemical graduates to the workforce can expect to make about 10 job changes during the course of their working life. For experienced chemical professionals, the loss of lifetime employment security, coupled with anticipated frequent job changes, has required them to learn new techniques to cope with the changing job market.

Today, there are two seemingly contradictory goals that chemical professionals must manage simultaneously. The first goal is to remain in a marketable position to conduct a successful job search, should the need arise. This is known as **MAINTAINING YOUR EMPLOYABILITY**. It involves:

1. Monitoring trends to determine new knowledge and skills that may be needed and pursuing a plan of action to acquire them.
2. Maintaining an updated template of your résumé in a computer file so that easy adjustments can be made.
3. Developing a spreadsheet to record accomplishments and skills that can later be used to adjust résumés or



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review the night before an important interview to help you to project knowledgeable and articulate responses to questions.

4. Regularly revisiting values to determine if an organizational "fit" exists.
5. Networking with associates and friends to continuously expand these important connections.

The American Chemical Society (ACS) Department of Career Services sponsors job search and professional development workshops at many locations, including at ACS local, national and regional meetings and at colleges and universities. These workshops can provide the necessary information to help you maintain your employability. In addition, ACS Career Services produces publications, videos and Web-based products that can help in your career

development.

The second goal is **ENHANCING YOUR POTENTIAL TO REMAIN EMPLOYED**. This goal involves monitoring trends to determine actions that employers are taking that could affect your employment.

One such trend is the link between job performance and the ability to stay employed. A growing body of evidence indicates that job performance is becoming closely associated with decisions that employers make when downsizings are about to occur. Because the workplace is continuing to experience a number of mergers and downsizings, an important employment security strategy is to bring your performance up to its optimum level.

A recent article in *The Washington Post* newspaper reported the following information about the Exxon and Mobil merger and offers specific reference to the role that performance plays in a downsizing activity.

The article stated: "...X...can count off 18 years on the job at Mobil Corp. But he has another number now, something between a 1 and a 5, that will bear heavily on his future...[with]...the \$81 billion combination of Mobil and Exxon Corp....Exxon and Mobil executives and supervisors have rated the two companies' combined 120,000 employees worldwide placing them into five groups based on their performance."

The association between job performance and involuntary termination of employment is not a new concept in the workplace. It has often been used as a guideline for individual terminations. Indeed, it should not be surprising that chemical firms are using performance guidelines for terminations. They have made it very clear in employment interviews that they are seeking employees who can bring added value to their organizations, so when terminations take place they are simply applying these same guidelines. To enhance your ability to stay employed, you must act to improve your performance.

But employment security is among several reasons why chemical professionals should consider improvements in their performance. These reasons are professional and personal but, nonetheless, valuable as you manage your career in the 21st



century.

The Professional and Personal Rewards for Improving Performance

1. **STRONG MONETARY REWARDS.** It is a recognized fact that high performance yields high monetary rewards, even if you have reached your salary ceiling. Bonuses, perks and other rewards are common for high performers.
2. **CHALLENGING WORK ASSIGNMENTS.** Even though challenging work assignments may be open to average workers, when there is a choice between selecting an average worker or a high performer for an important task, the higher performer is usually the winner. Employers expect to obtain better results from top performers.
3. **PROFESSIONAL/PERSONAL SELF-ESTEEM.** Recognition of a professional's high performance by an organization and peers will boost the employee's confidence level and self-esteem. Feeling positive about yourself and your work can help you cope more effectively with work stress.

4. **EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES** are enhanced both internally and externally because your excellent work reputation becomes public knowledge.

5. **ABILITY TO ATTRACT RESOURCES.** Because high performers involve less risk to an organization, they are generally able to negotiate more successfully for increased staff, laboratory equipment, space and financial support for new or ongoing work activities. Furthermore, high performers attract many individuals who want to work for them due to their work reputation. Selecting high-quality employees then becomes much easier, leading to improved work production within the unit.

6. **MENTORING.** Employees seek out high performers for advice and guidance. If you like helping others, mentoring can provide a very satisfying activity and increase your self-esteem as well.

Nine Steps to Success – Techniques To Improve Performance

If you want to change your work performance level, this publication and a complementary ACS workshop can help you with some of the required start-up initiatives. Called "Nine Steps to Success," this program focuses on an interactive forum to help define the strategies and to implement them.

Some of this information is based on a 10-year study conducted by Dr. Robert E. Kelley of Carnegie Mellon University. Not all of the data gathered in this study is published in his book, *How to be a Star Performer at Work*,* but it is recommended as valuable reading. Kelley's research was carried out primarily at Bell Labs and 3M. In the course of his inquiry into the personal and professional characteristics of "star performers," he included many scientists and engineers. It offers excellent insights into the productivity and performance processes and provides information about the nine work habits.

*Kelley, Robert E., *How to be a Star Performer at Work*, Time Books, 1998,

1999.

Kelley's research revealed that "cognitive ability neither guarantees success nor differentiates 'stars' from the pack of average performers." In fact, the research showed that some average workers actually demonstrated cognitive ability similar to the top performers and brought to their jobs similar levels of technical expertise.

(Please Note: The term average worker does not equate solely to a satisfactory rating. Most employers generally have average performance levels that range from low average to very good, as was evidenced in the Exxon-Mobil downsizing.)

The difference in performance and productivity was due to work habit techniques that top performers used in their jobs on a consistent basis. Average workers with strong cognitive ability and technical expertise have an excellent shot at making the crossover into the top performance group, if they learn to use the work habits correctly and apply them consistently. This is good news for many average workers who may, at times, feel undercompensated and not adequately appreciated for their work efforts.

Another important finding of the study was that "stars are made, not born." It is important because it demonstrates that the nine work habits associated with increasing productivity and moving toward a higher level of performance can be learned. The work habits are not innate abilities possessed solely by the high performers. The high performers simply understand how to implement the work habits more successfully and avoid making some of the mistakes of average workers.

The Nine Work Habits

The nine work habits are: Initiative, Networking, Self-Management, Collaborative Work Efforts (teams, committees, task forces), Leadership, Supportership, Conceptual Thinking, Organizational Savvy and Presentation Ability.

Please note that some of Kelley's terminology associated with the work habits has been changed. These changes have been made either to clarify the concepts or to use terminology more commonly used in employee development.

Initiative

Of the nine work habits that are important to achieving a high level of

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work performance, initiative is one of three at the core of effecting change. Initiative is best described as stretching beyond the borders of your principal job accountabilities. Initiative goes beyond doing your day-to-day responsibilities and completing them competently. Unfortunately, the mistake that some average workers make is they assume that performing all of their job responsibilities in a highly effective manner entitles them to an outstanding performance rating. There is real disappointment when management views the work effort as "doing your job." Initiative is adding

value to an organizational objective, your working unit, or possibly collaborating with a co-worker to achieve a good outcome on an important undertaking. This type of initiative should not be solely intended to benefit you.

One of your first actions in developing this behavior is to determine how initiative is defined in your workplace, because any proposed initiatives must be consistent with the culture and mission of your organization.

Networking

Networking is closely related to the initiative work habit. It is the support system that provides data from professionals working in closely allied fields. The development of a network is intended to expand the knowledge of chemical professionals who need data from other sources to complete their work competently and then to reciprocate with providing knowledge to these sources when they require it. This is, in effect, the establishment of an informal type of partnership amongst a group of knowledgeable professionals who share information in connection with their work efforts. The most effective and rapid means to network is through one-on-one interactions and by telephone, although e-mail can be used.

Self-Management

The self-management work habits rely heavily on initiative and networking to change your performance level. Furthermore, self-management is closely tied to good management of your career, because strong performers have done sufficient self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses to be able to recognize a good job and organizational fit. They are, therefore, able to achieve a greater sense of personal fulfillment and work productivity. The right organizational fit forms the basis for your commitment to an organization and its mission. The right job fit permits you maximum use of your talents and enhances your possibility of achieving high-level work results. The strong focus on career management may seem unusual to average workers, who generally tend to believe that self-man-

agement is really another name for time management. While this work habit has a requirement of time management associated with its development, it is not solely directed at this process. The emphasis is on good career management; organization of work priorities to achieve strong work results, on time and within budget; and on demonstrating proactive approaches to work efforts.

Organizational Savvy

This skill is directed at understanding your organization well enough, so that you are able to identify competing interests inside the organization, deal with any current or potential conflicts in connection with them and accomplish your work efforts in spite of these circumstances. Development of conflict resolution skills and the ability to handle difficult conversations are important, because ultimately you must learn how to make allies out of possible enemies. These skills can be acquired and, when used in conjunction with mentoring support, good results can be achieved.

Collaborative Work Efforts (Teams, Committees, Task Forces)

Teams are most prevalent in the industrial work sector, but there are group collaboration issues that exist in every type of organization and every work sector. Group collaborative efforts in other work sectors may use terminology such as committees or task forces, but for the most part the same behaviors apply. In a collaborative process, it is important for individuals working in the group to each take “ownership” for goal setting, group commitments, work activities, scheduling and group accomplishments. A strong collaborative group worker is effective in conflict resolution, helps with solving group problems and assures other “team members” that they have important contributions to make.

Conceptual Thinking

This is an ability to understand how your work efforts support and relate to the outcome of a larger work effort. You must relate your work initiatives to the perspectives of others, such as your customers, your competitors, your co-workers and your managers. You must not

only understand their perspectives, but you must be able to evaluate them so that you can develop better products and services for your organization. These perspectives may seem simplistic to carry out, but there will be some individuals who will focus too much on small bits of technical information and lose perspective of the bigger picture. This is not an impossible situation to overcome. If you are not by habit a person who prefers dealing with broad conceptual issues, you may want to collaborate with someone whose natural work efforts move in this direction. Over time, you will begin to see a shift in your work style as you start to use new approaches to your work.

Presentation Ability

Presentation ability has two components: Delivering persuasively the right message and communicating to the right audience. For most chemical professionals, many of their presentations will be technical in nature and most probably will be directed toward co-workers, managers or customers. Critical considerations in acquiring this skill are the ability to focus your message on not more than three or four main points; to deliver it to a targeted audience in a persuasive manner to influence their think-

ing about the quality and importance of the data you are presenting; and to show an ability to handle negative or complex questions or comments by anticipating some of the issues that may be raised and preparing beforehand possible



responses to them.

Supportership

Most employees in the workplace are in supportive roles for managers. Too often “supporters” believe that they should not question management and work strictly within the boundaries of their principal job descriptions. Supporters must learn how to manage themselves and their work effectively. They must gather facts and analyze data before making recommendations to managers. They must show an ability to work within organizational guidelines to resolve any disagreements so that they will not lose their reputation for supporting the organization. They must be cognizant of the organization’s mission and philosophy and not suggest initiatives that are inconsistent with them. And, on occasion, they must be willing to take on the role of a “Challenger” when they believe that an initiative can add value to an organization. Good supporters have leadership ability, but it is a different kind of leadership. It is the ability to lead oneself.

Leadership

This is not necessarily a high-profile type of leadership. This is leadership based on ability to guide and influence others’ accomplishments by the leader’s own demonstrated technical expertise in the areas in which the group effort is focused. Within the industrial sector, this



person could very well be a project leader who has a small group of individuals working with him or her. This leader is expected to show good judgment in relation to the unit's goals. He or she must care about working with others and their goals to the extent that others will want to volunteer to work with the leader. When necessary, this leader must be willing to locate resources needed for the work effort and ensure that good end results are achieved.

It is very likely that your first observation about the nine work habits will be that they are not at all remarkable and provide no new information about needed new behaviors in the workplace. This is quite accurate. They are not new work



habits. They are work habits that you will have encountered in various phases of your career and will continue to encounter as long as you work.

In employment interviews, you probably have responded to questions about how you have demonstrated initiative, teamwork and leadership ability in your previous work. Or, in some work sectors, you may have been asked to present your research in a group forum to demonstrate knowledge of a specialty area as well as to show presentation ability. As an employee you most likely have encountered some or all of these work habits in discussions about your performance or in informal guidance ses-

sions. You are expected to demonstrate these work habits during the course of your employment.

But, even though you may use these work habits regularly, there is no assurance that you are using them in a manner that will help you to achieve the best work results. In fact, if only 10 to 15 percent of the employee population is known to be top performers and roughly 5 percent are marginal, then the remain-

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der fall somewhere in the average category. A majority of these average workers probably make some work habit implementation mistakes, which help to keep them in the average category of performance.

Perhaps what is even more revealing is that some of the managers who are expected to provide guidance to their employees about work behavior issues may themselves be unfamiliar with the implementation techniques and overlook important counseling tips. This suggests that chemical professionals themselves must take some responsibility for learning about and implementing these techniques. It does not, however, suggest that confronting a manager about lack of knowledge on work habits is an appropriate strategy. Chemical professionals will need to work cooperatively with management to gain their support for some of their initiatives. Finding a common ground of interest for undertaking the initiatives can turn out to be a win-win situation for chemical professionals, their management and the division in which they are working. This is an area in which interpersonal skill can be invaluable.

Important Assessments

Several initial assessments are important to implementation and these assessment instruments are introduced as part of the ACS workshop. These assessments include:

1. **A WORKPLACE AND DISCIPLINE ASSESSMENT.** Work habits should be ranked by priorities because they shift in relative importance due to field and specialty area as well as work sector (industry, academe, government or other factor). For example, a public relations specialist may rank presentation ability higher than a research scientist may, even though the work habit is an important factor for success to both professions. The work sectors will also reflect differences. For example, teams are more prevalent in industry than in government, academe and other types of organizations.
2. **A WORKPLACE "FIT" ASSESSMENT.** It is important to determine if a chemical professional has a good job and organizational "fit." Data shows that top performers all know that they are in the right organization, interested in the work they are doing and have good management supporting them. If the "fit" is not good, learning how to use the work habits successfully will not produce optimum performance results. Implementation of the work habits is not the way to correct a poor job "fit." Finding a new position, or new responsibilities within your current job, would be more effective in this case.
3. **ASSESSMENT OF YOUR SKILLS VS. SKILL NEEDS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION.** Important skills underpin the work habits. Some of these skills may need enhancement. For example, interpersonal, influencing/persuasion, presentation and conflict resolution skills support successful implementation of some of the work habits. Some chemical professionals may not have as much strength in these areas as they do with other important skills in the

process, such as problem solving, critical thinking and reasoning ability. Chemical professionals must assess their strengths in critical skills that must be demonstrated in their own workplace.

This assessment provides data for your developmental plan and helps you to determine how much time and effort may be required to achieve optimum results.

Other Personal Issues Related to Implementation

As with any new developmental program, the implementation of the techniques will take extra time and effort at start-up. This will probably cause some temporary modifications in your other commitments. When you contemplate whether you should undertake the effort, it is important to consider that all of us are balancing our commitments to family



and friends, to our work and to our own self-development activities. However, from time to time we make trade-offs on one or more of the commitments to concentrate more time and effort in one area. In doing this, we re-order our priorities

temporarily and usually we can expect that each of these commitments will have enough elasticity and “give” to bring back a desired balance amongst the three. As the workplace continues to evolve, these are important points to keep in mind. Most of us realize that change continually occurs in every aspect of our lives and we learn to adapt, practice flexibility and develop coping strategies to deal with the change.

How To Receive Information About ACS Career Services

For information about the “Nine Steps to Career Success” workshop or other ACS Career Services products, please call 1-800-227-5558 or e-mail: careers@acs.org.

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