

Career Builders

By Kathleen Proper

Lifelong Learning

I am sure we have all heard the phrase “knowledge is power.” What does that really mean? What kind of powers are we talking about? I bet that if we were talking “superpowers”, more of us would have done our homework! On a serious note, knowledge gives us the power to open any doors we want in life, and to be anything we wish.

So, where do we get this knowledge? We need to keep learning!

Growing up, I always knew I would be going to college after high school, and I did. After finishing my Bachelor’s degree, though, I found that the job market was not what I expected. I wound up taking a job as a data entry clerk at a bank, just for a paycheck. Since this was not how I saw my life going, I found another job at Taconic Farms in Germantown as a receptionist. At Taconic, I found that there were many more opportunities for me than I had at the bank. I began thinking about where I hoped to see myself in the years to come. Shortly after beginning work, I moved into a job working for the Safety Manager, and discovered that the Human Resources Department is where I wanted to be.

I also realized that to increase my chances of success, I needed to get myself some more power, by way of returning to school. Fortunately, I was able to utilize Taconic’s Tuition Reimbursement Program to pay for nearly all of my education. I enrolled in an online Master’s Degree program, knowing that it would be difficult enough completing the degree without adding time commuting to class. It was a little strange never actually meeting my professors or classmates, but between the video lectures and the online discussion boards, I still felt like I was in a classroom, except no one but me knew if I was “at school” in my pajamas. The biggest challenge to a program like this is that there is no classroom structure. It is completely up to the student to set a schedule for completing all of the work by the deadlines. If you like to procrastinate, an online degree program is probably not for you.

Besides the financial support from Taconic, I also had the support (or sympathy) from my manager and co-workers. I spent the next year of my life attached to my laptop, typing papers during every lunch break. As I am sure many of you understand, there is never enough time at home to accomplish what you want, but all of the long hours paid off. I can now add the letters “MBA” after my name. I gained a ton of valuable skills that have helped me be better at my job, which is really what I was going for in the first place.

Of course, not everyone is in a position where they would benefit from enrolling in a degree program to further their lives and careers. There are a number of things to consider in your quest for lifelong learning.

First, what kind of education do you currently have, and how would more education impact your desired career path? If you already have a graduate degree, enrolling in another advanced program may not provide you with any more of an edge in your career. On the other hand, if you have never been to

college, regardless of your career, I would encourage you to take a class or two, even if you do not feel you are ready to commit to a degree program.

Second, you need to determine how you will finance your education. Many employers offer tuition reimbursement, so you should check there first to see what they will or will not cover. If you are not currently employed, or if you are not eligible for tuition reimbursement, there are Federal and State tuition assistance programs, as well as many loan programs that can assist you.

Finally, how much time do you have available to spend on education? Do not overextend yourself just to take a bigger course load. You then run the risk of becoming overwhelmed and burned out.

Whether you decide that formal education is the right idea for you, learning does not stop at school. I always say “you learn something new every day,” and I try to make that true for myself. How do I do that? I ask a ton of questions, and I read everything I can get my hands on. Give it a try! Find someone at work that you admire (or whose job you want) and ask them about something you do not understand. If you have to take your car in for repairs, ask the mechanic what you can do to prevent the issue in the future. Read the magazines in your doctor’s office, or in the break room at work. Visit your local library and see what they have available. Even the back of your cereal box can teach you a thing or two.

Whatever you choose to do just remember that learning really is a lifelong process. All you have to do is ask yourself where you want to be, and then start gathering the knowledge that will take you there!

A representative from Taconic has served on the Columbia Greene Workforce Investment Board since 2000. Visit the website at www.columbiagreeneetworks.org, or call 828-4181 ext. 5510.