

Soft Skills at Work: Initiative, adaptation key skills in workplace

By MARCIA HALL
Published 11/01/09

In my basement sits an old Silver Reed typewriter. It has certainly outlived its usefulness, but touching the keys every so often reminds me of how far the world has progressed since that invention.

Talking with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) students at North County and South River high schools in the past two months, I found that some had never used a typewriter. However, during our discussion, we considered what would have been missed if people had heeded the advice of Charles Duell, an official with the U.S. Patent office, who said in 1899:

"Everything that can be invented has been invented."

Fortunately, we have moved well beyond the typewriter. People have embraced learning, persevered, and adapted well to change to create such breakthroughs as the computer and cell phone.

Every employer wants workers who seek knowledge and are open to new procedures and technologies, as well. Linden Monaghan, branch manager and assistant vice president at The Bank of Glen Burnie in Severna Park, believes that learning has to be ongoing.

"Today you can't stagnate or rest on your laurels," she said. "You always have to be preparing for what's next. We all have to be versatile. Things keep changing."

Linden's background includes an education degree. She told me lifelong learning is one of the keys to success and it allows you to advance in your career. But some employees shy away from learning new things.

"Sameness is the easier road for some," Linden said. "They are afraid of change, wondering what it will do for them, or they are afraid there will be more work because of it."

She cited a new program the bank uses that quickly provides information to customers about the status of their checks, thus providing better customer service. Training was needed when the conversion was made, but as they used it, bank employees started to realize that the change was good.

"They feel more empowered now," Linden said. "It has also provided another avenue to serve the customer."

Anthony Clarke, co-owner of Galway Bay Group in Annapolis, feels the same about this attribute.

"You are always learning how to do things," Anthony said. "It (a skill) can be difficult at first, but then you can do it without thinking about it."

Anthony talked about an important component of continuous learning, which is being adaptable.

"In the restaurant business, you learn about people and what to look for," he said. "You become adaptable to change because customers are different. What you might learn with one can apply to similar situations in the future."

I asked both Linden and Anthony to compare and contrast employees who embrace learning and those who don't. What was the impact on their careers?

"I have a co-worker who loves the challenge, particularly with computer technology," Linden said. "She tests it, finds short cuts, and this brings positive recognition to her. Co-workers see that it is workable, and upper management loves it when we take on new things."

Linden then told me about employees who don't have this trait.

"If they don't want to learn, that stymies them," she said. "They are not given a chance to advance."

Anthony agreed with Linden, and went on to talk about how it affects co-workers.

"If employees don't want to learn, they may not advance to more responsibility," he said. "It affects team work and they are the weak link in your team. For example, three chefs are interdependent. If one forgets to do the fries, it can be a disastrous situation and can destroy the whole order. The customer is upset and it puts co-workers, such as the server, under pressure. This leads to a lack of morale."

But the reverse is true for employees who seek knowledge and skills.

"Acceleration of learning gives them a greater responsibility in my industry," Anthony said. "People who learn quickly get into management. Some people like to remain at the same level or go at a slower pace. It's a choice of how far they want to progress."

Choice is the key word here. People who embrace lifelong learning move forward. Those who don't may stall.

CONNECT! Coalition

After last month's column, I received requests to list additional qualities employers felt were lacking, yet important, in the workplace. Here are more results from the July CONNECT! survey:

- The ability to pitch in and assist wherever needed.
- Putting the job first, not doing personal things or errands on work time.
- Logical thinking skills.
- Innovation, thinking outside the box and commitment.
- Being a self-starter.
- Tolerance.
- Patience.
- Loving what you do.
- People need to feel less entitled and more invested in their workplace success.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

This column appeared in *The Capital* on November 1, 2009. It is a publication of the *Capital Gazette Newspapers* in Annapolis, Maryland. Marcia Hall writes the monthly column, *Soft Skills at Work*.