

## Six Ways to Grow Your Job

**In today's resource-constrained environment, many of us are delivering 120% on the current demands of our job—but devoting little time to developing ourselves further or positioning ourselves for a future move. As one of my executive MBA students recently told me, “I know that I have to carve out more time to think strategically about my business, but all my peers are executing to hilt and I don't want to fall behind.”**

But simply plugging along in our current roles is more dangerous than it might seem. The business environment changes quickly and sometimes unpredictably and, if we don't shift along with it, we risk becoming irrelevant.

If you're ambitious but your job offers you limited opportunities for exploration and growth, what can you do to develop new skills? Below are six tips that came out of a conversation with my executive MBAs:

### 1. Stay alert and attuned to your environment.

Those who want to develop themselves must create opportunities. That means coming to understand how your organization works, how it makes money, and who its key people are. This is an obvious prerequisite to figuring out how you might shift your own work in the direction of what really matters. We mostly don't do it because of habit and inertia. Tuning in to the outside is unstructured work—networking, walking the halls, going to lunch—we don't even know where to begin. Value it as much as the required meetings and email duty. The payoff will come in the longer run.

**2. Create slack in your schedule.** New ways of working require a precious and scarce resource—time. As the wonderful new book *Scarcity* points out, when we're stretched to hilt, it's hard to ask “Am I focusing on the right things?” Some companies have allowed employees up to 20% of their time to work on their own projects, but I know of no company that helps leaders free up their time to work on the frontier of their jobs. Instead, once people have leadership responsibilities, their calendar gets crammed with more and more meetings and trips. One of my students had a great piece of advice for her classmates. She said “We all managed to make time for our executive MBAs, while still doing our day jobs. When the program ends, don't let the day job reabsorb the learning time. Keep the time to evolve your work.”

**3. Sign up for a project outside your main area.** All companies have projects that cut across

lines of business, hierarchical levels and functional specialties. Find out what they are, and maybe more importantly, who's involved. Getting experience across business lines is a better choice than further deepening your skill base within a functional silo. The new skills, big-picture perspective, extra-group connections and ideas about future moves that projects can bring are well worth the investment. One of my students signed up for a project to re-think best leadership practices at his company. For him, the project was a shift from executing a pre-defined series of tasks to influencing an organization and helping them to overcome barriers. It helped him both discover an interest in consulting and move into an advisory position two years later.

**4. Make strategy your day job, no matter what your title is.** Most people would like to take a more strategic approach to their work but don't do so because they don't know what doing strategy really means. Planning (and executing) is about “how” you do what has been mandated. Strategy is about asking “what” we should be doing—figuring out what problems the company should be tackling, sensing what is happening in the world and learning how to apply it to your business. Find and follow the opinion leaders in your domain, read up on the classics, brush up on your Michael Porter. One of my students told me that she trains herself in strategic thinking by keeping up with business, economic or political events or trends and forcing herself to “think about what they mean to my business, company or industry, both now and in the future.” Spend less time solving problems and more time defining which problems the group should be solving.

**5. Expand your contribution from the outside in.** When a new project is simply not available, look for roles outside your group or organization that allow you to learn and practice new skills and raise your profile. Teach, speak or blog on topics relating to your interests. One of my students, for example, looks for opportunities to speak at conferences on topics related to his experience. He recently gave a talk at his company on life in Nigeria, showing a

movie about daily life in Lagos, followed by a Q&A session with potential candidates for expatriation. These activities have been even more worthwhile than he anticipated. He told me, “I found that building one’s personal brand increases chances to get proposals to join strategic initiatives and step out of your day-to-day job for a while.”

Go to professional gatherings and meet with people from different companies. And, if there isn’t something out there that meets your needs, create your own. For example, a sector manager for an internet commerce organization decided to stretch her skills by forming and leading a community of marketing experts from different organizations.

**6. Learn to delegate once and for all.** Managers who advance in their careers primarily by excelling at operational work go on doing operational work long after they could delegate those duties to other people. One of my students, a mid-sized company CFO, told me that every budget season he personally went through all the budgets to identify inefficiencies. After a discussion about freeing up time, he scheduled calls with his country CFOs and GMs, inviting them to find better efficiencies. As he noted, “This required some departure from my authentic behavior and also some risk but it worked, and cleared 20% of my day!”

Many of us try to position ourselves for the next assignment asking ourselves, “How can I do what I do better?” that we leave little time to ask, “What *else* might I do?” Only when we grow our jobs, do we stand a good chance to get the next one. I’d really like to hear from you about the ways that you have found to grow your job.

*This blog first appeared on hbr.org.*

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