

Should You Go Back to School? Seven Ideas for Increasing Your Skill Set

At this point in time, anyone who has school age children has settled into this year's routine of classes and homework. The adults in their lives have settled back into their routine of work, supervising homework, and getting all the rest of the household management done. Perhaps it is time consider the question, "Should *I* go back to school?"

The answer to that is: it depends. Pick up any magazine, newspaper, or tune into your favorite news station and you will see how we are fast becoming a global economy. Are you prepared? How will it impact your skill set? Computers have changed everything in the way we work, no matter what our jobs, in just a few short decades. The worldwide web combined with cloud computing is going to change the way we handle, store and retrieve information even more in the years to come. Employers are demanding complex thinkers, fresh ideas, and a variety of skill sets from employees that will help navigate this global economy.

So, what should *you* do? **Ask yourself:** What do you see yourself doing in your work life if there were no perceived obstacles in your way? Give yourself the freedom to brainstorm without editing your thoughts. Do not allow yourself to play the "yes, but" game, giving the reasons you cannot do something before you even try it.

Here are seven ideas to prime the pump:

1) Learn a new language

Because English is so widely spoken, it has often been referred to as the *lingua franca* of the modern era. Worldwide, approximately 375 million people speak English as their first language and 96% of Americans speak English. Linguistics professor David Crystal of Bangor University in Wales calculates that non-native speakers now outnumber native speakers by a ratio of 3 to 1 (2005). However, with 1, 213,000,000 speakers, Madarin Chinese is actually the most widely spoken language in the world, followed by Spanish with 329,000,000 speakers worldwide. English ranks third for number of speakers, followed by Arabic, followed by Hindi. So, learn one of those languages if you already speak English.

2) Keep up your computer skills

Even if it's just learning to operate a new program that you haven't used before, from Powerpoint to Quickbooks, give it a shot. Learn what it takes to keep a website updated. Figure out how to blog and use your social networks. 95% of all hiring employers now look at a Linked In profile before they decide whether or not to make even an interview offer.

3) Read the latest books and trade magazines

Check out the New York Times Book Review for hot non-fiction sellers. Be aware of trendsetting ideas to see the big picture, and figure out your place in it. Read some biographies of people you admire, whether an historical person like Abigail Adams, or a current mogul like Warren Buffett. Check out websites that relate to your area of expertise, and have fun looking at sites like Big Think <http://bigthink.com/> or TED <http://www.ted.com/>. You are bound to get some insights you can incorporate into your own learning.

4) Keep your resume updated, even if you are not currently looking for a job.

You just never know when someone is going to come along who finds you interesting and capable. Be ready to show them exactly what you have done, and how you have kept your skills updated. Look at the jobs being advertised in your field. How are they changing from the time you were offered the job you now have? Could you still get that job if you interviewed today?

5) Go back to school

Whether you decide to pursue an actual degree, or just to take a course with a topic that interests you, challenge your brain to expand. Common wisdom once opined our brains were fully formed by about age 20, and would not change. Through MRI brain scanning, we now know that the brain is capable of creating new pathways, firing new neuron connections, and make unexpected connections. The neuroplasticity of your brain can keep you on a path of life long learning.

6) Teach What You Don't Know

There is no better way to learn something new than to teach it to someone else. If you have an interest in a particular topic, or a skill you want to learn, go ahead and offer to teach it. You will be staying 1-2 steps ahead of your students, but as long as you are ahead, that's fine. The trick with this is knowing the main points about the topic that the students should know when they finish, and not going off onto too many interesting tangents.

7) Work with a career coach

If you're feeling like you need a change or change happens to you (for instance, a good friend of mine unexpectedly found his entire IT department outsourced to India), start working with a career coach to plan your future. A good coach will help you a) describe what you want; b) explore your options; c) create and implement your action plan and d) celebrate with you when you get exactly what you want for an exciting and fulfilling career.

As the slogan of the US Army between 1980 and 2001 declared, are you ready to "be all that you can be?" Take some action today that feels risky by learning something new, whether you go back to school to do it or not.

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