



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Your Flexibility to Take on New Challenges will Shape Your Career Opportunities

Much of what happens to you in your career is within your control. Many people, especially successful ones, already recognize this. Some people, especially those that are frustrated in their careers, have not always bought into this idea fully.

There are a number of areas where you can exert that control. An important one is in your flexibility to take on new challenges. There are certain times throughout your career when small decisions can end up influencing future opportunities. For instance, you may be asked to help out on a project that is in trouble. You may be asked to work late to help get a business application running again. You may be asked about your interest in working in a new area or picking up new responsibilities. You might find it interesting to think back over the past year, or even six months, to see how many times you had an opportunity for change or an opportunity to learn something new.

First, recognize when the opportunities occur

The problem with many people is that they do not recognize when opportunities are presented. Sometimes the events are obvious. For instance, let's say you are minding your own business when your boss comes in and offers you a great new position along with a promotion and a salary increase. You might think to yourself, "Hey, this is a pretty good deal. Maybe I'll take it."

Of course, the problem is that this event rarely takes place. In most instances, the requests are not that obvious and they are not so one-sidedly beneficial. Some of these "opportunities" include:

"Would you like to be a mentor to a new coop student from outside the US?"

"Would you like to be a member of our Vendor Management Committee?"

"Would you be able to manage another team of 8 people?"

"Can you take over the management of our branch recruiting staff?"

You might think that you don't really have a chance to accept or decline these types of opportunities, and sometimes you are right. Your manager might ask if you will do something, but the implication is that you don't really have a choice. However, look at some of the examples above. In fact, you do have a choice in most of these situations.

Second, think seriously before turning down an opportunity

It is important to consider the potential benefits of taking on a new position. For instance, say you are offered a new position within your organization that would require you to take on more responsibility without any additional salary. On the surface, this may not seem like a very good proposition. However, consider the consequences of your decision. Declining such an offer may send the message that you are not interested in taking on more responsibility, and it is likely you will not be offered such a chance again.



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Accepting the offer could give you a chance to be considered for position openings that you would not have been considered for before. Also, working in different areas will give you a broader range of knowledge, making you more valuable to the company.

Flexibility is important, but performance is still vital

In many cases, you have some control over how you respond to these potential career-building events. Most times they don't come with extra pay or extra perks. However, when you get involved in new areas, you have an opportunity to learn new things, pick up new skills and meet new people.

Of course, performance is still very important. If you volunteer to help in a new area or if you accept new responsibilities and then you don't do a good job, you are not going to get any credit. Unfortunately, this happens fairly often. If you accept an opportunity for more responsibility and don't follow through with the work, you will just frustrate your manager. It is important not to accept additional work that you know you do not have the time or will to complete – just explain the situation to your manager and let him/her know that you would like to be considered for such opportunities in the future.

You can negotiate before accepting new work

Of course, everyone is very busy. If you have the opportunity to contribute in a new area, sometimes you simply are not able to accept any additional time commitments. In that case, you may be able to negotiate your workload. For instance, you may tell your manager that you can help out in another area if you are allowed to stretch a current deadline out to a later date. You might also be able to pick up new responsibilities by negotiating with your manager to reassign some less important responsibilities you already have.

Summary

This advice might seem preachy to some people. It would also be presumptuous to think that this advice is right for everyone. Before you can respond to this advice, you must look at your goals and what you want to get out of your career. Many people are happy to apply their expertise in a narrow window, and they are not interested in moving much outside of that window. These people typically put limits on what they want to do, and they do this in a conscious and proactive manner. All of us know people like this, and there is nothing wrong with it.

The problem, however, is when there is a gap between a person's perception of where he/she wants his/her career to go and his/her actions. This can lead to frustration and despair. Remember the old physical law of cause and effect. If you decline new opportunities, they may not be offered again. If you tell people you are too busy to work on a committee or help to plan an event, then people may get the perception that you are not interested in working in areas outside the basic expectations of your job.

On the other hand, if you are flexible enough to accept new opportunities when they are offered, you will typically get more opportunities in the future. If you are involved in a lot of things, a lot of people get to know you and your capabilities. If you help out others



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when they need you, they will remember you when other opportunities arrive. Additional responsibilities tend to gravitate to people who are flexible in what they will do and have shown that they can take on additional responsibility successfully.

Match your expectations with your actions. If you want new opportunities, especially in the management ranks, you need to be flexible in the work you will do, and you need to accept new challenges when they are presented to you.