

THE PATH UNPLANNED

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I was always a little out of step in my working-class Upstate New York town. As the eldest daughter in a gaggle of eight kids growing up during the 1960s and '70s, my liberal, anti-war, pro-civil rights, pro-union Irish-Catholic mother from Berkeley, California, pretty much guaranteed that. She was passionate about current events of that era—Vietnam War, Civil Rights, poverty, Watergate—and expected that you could discuss them knowledgeably around the dinner table and out in the world. I was often in hot water after expressing some of those dinner-table opinions at my small Catholic school. Apparently unaware of my mother's goal of raising opinionated rabble-rousers, Sister Alicia Marie sent a note home during the sixth grade, complaining of my negativity, after I stated publicly that I opposed the Vietnam War.

Being a member of this family also meant that you needed to get involved; to do work that benefited humanity in some way and made a difference in the world. In my imagined future, I would go to law school, and then work in some area of social justice. I took a different, unplanned path, however; one that ultimately birthed a passion for the ways we humans work, earn our living, and express our deepest talents in the world. The places my life took me shaped a vision of a world where everyone, regardless of background, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, has access to work that pays a living wage; where education and training provide each of us with the knowledge,

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skills, and foundational learning blocks to continuously learn and adapt in a rapidly changing workplace.

I didn't arrive there immediately or easily. Along with my strong opinions and deeply held beliefs, there wasn't much grounding me in how to actually implement that passion and vision in tangible ways, either in my life and out in the world. A big worldview, combined with a lack of practical skills for how to actually accomplish something, did not make for a successful life plan.

This meant that I wasn't ready for college, and I left after a disastrous year. I had a child not too long after that, and found myself a young single mother, with little education and few identifiable skills, not unlike far too many young people today.

Fortunately, I also never let what I didn't know stand in my way for very long. A natural curiosity and doggedness helped me learn what I needed in order to navigate through a much more circuitous path than the one in the original vision of my life. I needed skills and tools and methods, as well as knowledge, to express that deep longing to make a difference in the world. I needed recognition of the skills I already possessed, with a clear, attainable path for how to develop those that were missing.

Our earning potential and ultimate socioeconomic place in the world is largely determined by the work we do and the salary we can earn. Equally important, it also resolves whether or not the world gets to benefit from our talents and skills. Too many of us never show up on an employer's radar if we don't fit the traditional model for hiring qualified people. An invisible workforce often lives at the fringes, possessed of immeasurable potential, talent, skills, and energy, and yet, never making it past the Human Resources screening process.

As a young woman with no degree, and minimal experience, I certainly didn't look very promising on paper. In my limited understanding of the workplace and my own worth there, all I really qualified for where I could make enough money to support my child was restaurant work, waiting tables. It meant working nights, when the tips were better but child care was more of a challenge. I learned so many important skills in restaurants, though: how to motivate others,

how to organize my time, how to multitask; plus, of course, customer service and communication. All of these are critical workplace skills and ones highly valued by employers.

Mostly though, I was just a smart young woman with tons of raw, unpolished energy, but still largely invisible to potential employers in other fields. There are far too many young people out there like that today, as well as many adults already in the workforce.

I saw this quagmire clearly. I knew I needed a different starting place; an entry-level job that would help me expand my skills, work my way up the career ladder, and build a résumé with increasingly responsible positions. Having a child so young taught me the value of just doing the next possible thing, breaking down what seems to be an insurmountable mountain to climb one step at a time, always moving forward.

I took a rather large pay cut to accept an entry-level human services position. I learned everything I could on the job. I took on extra responsibilities, read books and research papers in my field, and made it clear to my employers that I was willing to work hard and that I was hungry for more. I was promoted several times, took lateral moves to similar positions in different organizations, and eventually worked my way up to founding and directing my own not-for-profit workforce organization, and then scaling further to work on national workforce strategies and policy.

Like many working adults, I returned to college and completed a degree while working full-time. I truly enjoyed the intellectual experience, but at that stage, with a child and responsibilities, mostly returned to earn the credential. The degree would allow me far greater latitude in my work and open many more opportunities. Incidentally, but not coincidentally, I was now an excellent student, because of the skills I had absorbed and incorporated through work.

The truth is that, as a “consumer” of higher education, I was in many ways the norm, not the exception. College has been promoted as an important rite of passage for young people, as well as the ticket to the American dream of a successful career. The residential four-year-college experience, however, is inaccessible for many today,

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with its four-year requirement of money and time. In fact, less than a third of all undergraduates are “traditional” college students: that is, full-time, standard college age, and enrolled in a four-year public or private college. Many more commute, are enrolled in community colleges, work while taking classes, and attend only part-time, as finances and time allow.

My sister graduated from high school and attended a small liberal arts college, graduating successfully after four years. She is the model of what we think of as a traditional college student, and around which many institutions base their educational model. I, however, as a young, single parent, working while taking classes, first at the community college, then at a four-year university, stopping when I ran out of money and starting again when I could, was obviously not. It took me 10 years to complete my degree, which is, again, not uncommon. Based on the data, I, and the many others like me, are the norm, yet the vast majority of post-secondary educational programs are not designed with us in mind.

On the hiring side of the equation, more than half of employers are unable to fill positions in their companies. They complain that many candidates, including many college-educated young people, lack the fundamental skills necessary in a contemporary workplace. The skill sets needed in the workforce tripled between 2009 and 2012. Our current education and workforce development systems were not designed with this rate of technological and information change in mind. We are often unable to prepare workers for the continuous, career-long learning now required. Referred to as the “Learn to Learn” skills, the ability to continuously receive and absorb new information and knowledge is critical for today’s workers to stay competitive.

This need to always learn new things was a lot more challenging in my earlier years. I went to the library, sought out someone who could teach me, or just tinkered with it until it worked. I discovered the amazing resource of trained reference librarians. Today, if you want to learn how to start a business, or develop cash projections, or create an app, you can read about it on the Internet, watch a YouTube

video, or take a free MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) from Stanford or MIT. If your math skills are weak, you can go online to the Khan Academy's numerous and excellent programs. There is a world of knowledge and learning media for today's workforce to choose from. This is not, nor should it be, solely the domain of the educated and the elite. Providing each of us with the access to learning in an accessible, flexible way; on our own schedule; from home if we want it, can provide the keys to the kingdom to all.

It is sometimes seen as anti-education to talk about workplace skills as a critical and much-needed outcome of our education system. Sometimes this makes for tricky conversations with family members (including my now-grown son) who are educators. As the country searches for ways to improve outcomes for our young people and current workforce, teachers and public schools justifiably feel under siege and unfairly blamed for factors out of their control, including massive changes in our economy and industry. Yet, some educators do reject the notion that schools should also prepare students for work, fearing that students will be "tracked" into low-expectation "vocational" programs, an antiquated term that carries a huge historical weight for many working-class people and students of color.

Yet, there are a lot of jobs, more than half, in New York State right now that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree, referred to as "middle skills." Too few of our state's workers have the education and/or training to qualify for these positions. Many of these jobs pay higher wages and allow workers to learn new skills, earn additional credentials, and earn degrees as they progress on the job, much as my own self-designed career and education path proceeded. This is referred to as "stacking credentials," and also reflects the reality of today's workplace, where technology changes require continuous learning and skill development. Those of us who worked while studying, and incrementally accumulated skills and credentials and degrees, know that this has always been an option: it is now time to better articulate, and simplify, the path for those trying to navigate toward a successful career.

I've now worked in the field of workforce development for

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many years and have approached the issues from multiple perspectives: helping disadvantaged women and youth successfully enter or re-enter the workforce, to raising the quality of state and local government-funded workforce programs, and supporting business and industry in successful hiring practices. This work has always been informed by the notion that we need to do something now. Long-term systemic change is ideal, but in the meantime, large numbers of young people are leaving our high schools and colleges unprepared for further education or a career, and many adults are finding a deep mismatch between the expectations of today's workplace and the skills which had previously kept them employed. The problems are even more acute among African-American and Hispanic youth, who are being left behind in truly unconscionable numbers.

Something needs to be done. We clearly need a new value proposition to address these issues.

We need a game changer.

Like me, many people must work while learning, so they need a combination of career and educational opportunities that allow them to develop these skills on the job or through a myriad of self-learning options. Innovators in the field of higher education and hiring are seeking ways to measure underlying cognitive skills. "Learn to Learn" skills allow us to rapidly attain new skills in a rapidly changing technological world. Many of us possess skills, having self-taught or learned them on the job, and we're finding ways to measure and credential them so that those skills can be demonstrated to employers.

These cognitive skills assessments do a far better job predicting on-the-job performance than education and experience. They are also an excellent way to provide a snapshot of where skills are lacking, allowing for more customized education and training that address what you actually need to learn.

This is revolutionary—a way to illuminate our invisible workforce and shine a spotlight on young people and older workers alike who possess real, substantive skills that any smart employer would be happy to get. The method they used to achieve those skills,

whether from classroom learning, MOOCs, or on the job, should be immaterial. What they know and how they can demonstrate that mastery is the heart of the matter. Ultimately what is most important to employers is whether you have the skills to do the job.

I was fortunate to be both desperate and resourceful as a young woman. This led me to find the tools and mentors I needed to forge my own career ladder. While I never underestimate the privilege that my mother bestowed on me with her insistence on thinking and acting toward a better world, I also know how difficult it is to pull yourself out of poverty and create a life full of opportunity and possibilities for yourself and your children.

Finding new ways for people to learn and achieve credentials and degrees, and for employers to identify new pools of highly qualified candidates, has the potential to blast open the hiring doors for the far too many who have been barred from successful participation in both education and the workforce. This is a game changer.

I am my mother's daughter. She passed along her vision of fairness and justice. Life has enriched that big worldview in me with practical knowledge of how to make change in the world. Most of what I bring to my work these days is deeply informed by those earlier experiences.

Sometimes, and probably more often than not, the path we didn't expect to take in life takes us exactly where we're supposed to be.