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LIFESTYLE CAREERS ESSAY

'Follow Your Dreams' and Other Terrible Career Advice

Want to make a strong professional start? Be open to every opportunity and embrace the lowliest tasks.

By Bonnie Hammer | Illustrations by John W. Tomac

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Ever since the last millennials and the first Gen-Zs entered the workplace, those of us from earlier generations have been warned that we need to remake the modern work world to keep our younger workers happy, engaged and on the job. The Gallup organization has even identified 12 key elements of young employee engagement, which include “feeling cared about by someone at work” and “feeling that their opinions count.”

Having worked in most facets of the entertainment industry since 1974, from a bottom-rung production assistant to the top of NBCUniversal’s headquarters at 30 Rock, I agree that the problems in today’s workplace are real. But I also think many management experts have identified the wrong problem. The real problem is that too many of us, young and not so young, have been told too many lies about what it takes to succeed at work—and not nearly enough truths. All those bright, shiny aphorisms that are spoon-fed to young employees, like “follow your dreams” and “know your worth” and many more? Well, the truth is that they don’t really work at work.

“Follow your dreams” is the exhortation of many college commencement speeches, but it is nightmare job advice. Americans are already raised on a diet high in dreams, from fairy tales to superheroes. My own TV networks have been highly successful in selling dreams—but ask any lawyer logging billable hours on a time sheet how much their work life resembles the legal drama “Suits.”

The larger truth is that professional dreams can be incredibly limiting, particularly at the start of our work lives. When we enter the workplace convinced that we already know what

we want to do in a specific field and are committed to it at all costs, we're saying, in essence, that there is very little left for us to learn, discover or be curious about. That nothing else could make us happy or fulfilled. But we can't dream what we don't know, and the world of "I don't know" is expanding. According to the World Economic Forum, roughly a quarter of all jobs may be "disrupted" in the next five years. This level of change requires us (at any career stage) to be more open to new options, not less. Even the so-called safe routes may not be all that safe.



For years, tech company leaders have told students that one economically resilient thing they can learn is how to code. There's been a push to make coding a high-school graduation requirement. But last February, the CEO of the AI giant Nvidia said that programming and coding are no longer vital skills, AI will handle it, and humans should focus on developing expertise in areas like biology, education, manufacturing and farming.

Think that's an overreaction? Consider Blockbuster. Once valued at \$3 billion, the now-vanished video rental chain dominated the marketplace and employed 84,000 people in the late 1990s. Blockbuster was right that Americans wanted to watch movies from the comfort of their couch; it just failed to see that they wanted the movies delivered there too. So here's a new truth: Rather than follow your dreams, follow the opportunities. Early in my own career in television, I said yes to two roles in which I had zero interest: managing the budget for a documentary series and learning the "new" technology of CDs. The first one taught me about the economics of getting a show on the air, the second about the quick changes technology visits on entertainment.

By developing my knowledge and appreciation for all aspects of getting quality productions on the air, I came to value each department responsible for a show's success—not just the more glamorous ones. When I moved up in management, eventually running multiple cable

TV networks, I was better prepared than some of my peers, who had a more limited portfolio of experiences. Yes, we all benefit from goals and dreams, but the key is knowing the difference between possessing dreams versus allowing dreams to possess us. Following opportunities is more likely to lead us to new skills, connections and people. Even when the opportunity doesn't pan out exactly as we intended, we learn from it. And along the way, opportunities allow us to develop new and better ideas of what our more mature professional dreams might look like. After all, how many of our early dreams are really ours, as opposed to other peoples' dreams grafted onto us? This truth about "follow your dreams" highlights a companion lie and truth: We may be told "know your worth," but the truth is you need to "work on your worth." The mantra of many life coaches, "know your worth," says you should never settle for anything less than you deserve. But while we deserve good friends, partners and even unclogged shower drains in our first apartments, as young people early on in our careers, most of us are somewhat worthless, and we should expect to be treated that way.

Indeed, the blanket statement "know your worth" conflates our personal and professional worth. I've watched many entry-level and early-career employees trip up when their otherwise enviable self-worth manifests as entitlement. Instead of wanting to be treated with decency and fairness, they expect to rapidly ascend to higher positions and salaries. My generation certainly deserves some of the blame. We created participation trophies for kids, which turned success and failure into synonyms. As these kids grew up, we offered college deferrals and wait-lists to postpone delivering bad news, as well as trigger warnings and safe spaces, even though we know that the real world is often both uncomfortable and offensive—and bad news usually travels faster than good.

So it's no wonder that when young people start working, too many feel betrayed—or at least bored—by tasks that don't inspire or obviously benefit them. They were told they could do anything, and now they're being told to schedule zoom calls or get three iced lattes.



Hammer at her second job on a children's TV show, 'Zoom,' in 1976. Working on a previous kids' show, she had charge of a sheepdog. PHOTO: WGBH



Hammer with fellow jurors at a 2022 program celebrating emerging women filmmakers in New York City. PHOTO: NINA WESTERVELT/VARIETY/GETTY IMAGES

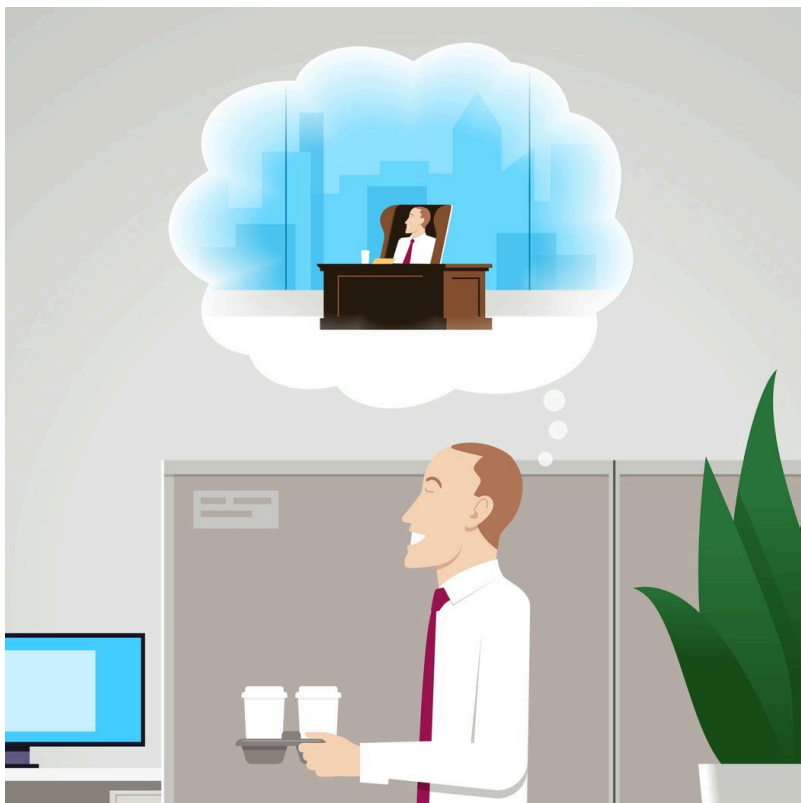
But here's the truth: While we are all born with personal worth, we have to earn our professional worth. No matter your academic record, the summer internships you've held or even your last job, when we step into a new workplace, we start fresh. And when our careers are beginning, that often means doing the menial labor, the unsexy assignments and the mindless tasks we might feel are beneath us. But someone has to do them. Why wouldn't it be us? On the job, people will only know our worth once they know our work. That takes time, effort and consistency. It's not based on potential or promise but on results.

I learned my "workplace worth" fresh out of graduate school when I was hired as a production assistant on a kids' TV show in Boston. Each PA was assigned a cast member, and as the most junior employee, my cast member was Winston, an English sheepdog. My primary

responsibility was to follow him around the set carrying a pooper scooper. I had two university degrees. Winston, on the other hand, was a true nepo-baby, the precious, unhouse-trained pet of one of the show's producers. Plus, as an on-camera star, Winston out-earned me.

But while many days I felt like working for Winston was beneath me, I never showed it. I acted like I was pursuing an honors degree in pet sitting, and each poop pickup was an extra-credit opportunity. The work and the attitude paid off. When an associate producer position opened, I was promoted. I pursued a similar strategy for much of my early career: If I wanted to be a valuable asset to my colleagues and bosses, I knew I needed to add concrete value to their days by showing up, staying late and doing whatever needed to be done. So maybe we need to set aside the current myth that remaking the workplace will somehow unleash a wave of professional success. Instead, it might be time for a healthy dose of truth. For young employees who want to feel "engaged" at work, the truth is, you need to engage with your work first. On the job, our worth is determined not by how we feel but by what we do.

If you want someone to care about you at work, care about them first. The best way to have your opinions heard? Prove by your actions and accomplishments that you are someone worth listening to. Looking back, I was only able to work my way up to the top because I started at the very, very bottom. Not only did this starting point allow me the opportunity to really understand the TV and entertainment world, but I also had real empathy and appreciation for the people now doing the work I once did.



Whether you are starting out or starting over in your professional life, letting go of workplace clichés and learning a few genuine and underappreciated truths might ultimately land you a dream job well beyond any of your wildest, 20-something fantasies.

Bonnie Hammer is vice chair at NBCUniversal. This essay is adapted from her new book, “15 Lies Women Are Told at Work: and the Truth We Need to Succeed,” which will be published by Simon & Schuster on May 7.

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