

The ABCs of Work: Novelty

Career Development



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Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

Today's topic is all about using **Novelty** to keep you from burning out.

Last time we talked about why you should find Motivation to stay engaged at work. Today we explore

why novelty is important and how you can foster novelty in an often otherwise unchanging environment.

Novelty implies change for change’s sake

For many lawyers, novelty is a dirty word. We live for precedent, for examples. We never want to be the first ones to try something. We find comfort in the idea that many people have safely gone before us.

As a result, a great deal of in-house work is repetitive. This is our standard contract and this is how we negotiate contracts. Now go do it 1,000 times until it becomes second nature. And then do it 10,000 times more.

Repetition can lead to boredom, which leads to carelessness. Repetition causes us to question our motivation, which leads to stress and burnout. Successful long-term performance thus requires us to learn to not just tolerate recurring work but thrive upon it.

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Repetitive work can lead to burn out and boredom as an in-house counsel. Azat Valeev / *Shutterstock.com*

One way to thrive when involved in repetitive work is to find novelty. Let’s look both at repetitive work itself, and in the broader scope of in-house responsibilities.

Repetitive work is probably not identical work

Every year for 20 years I prepared for the annual shareholders' meeting. Time consuming and detail oriented yet largely the same tasks each year. How did we keep it fresh? For one, we rigorously applied continuous improvement principles. From the smallest information gathering task, to compiling and checking data in the proxy statement, to preparing for shareholder questions, we asked these questions: What went well, what didn't go so well, and what can we do better next time?

That kept us focused and diligent every year when we might have been tempted to zone out and go through the motions. Did the small process improvements justify the effort? Perhaps not, although our meetings were marvels of efficiency. The benefit came in keeping genuinely motivated to work well on the annual meeting each year.



Continuous improvement principles keeps team members focused and aware of the efficiency of their efforts. VectorMine / *Shutterstock.com*

> When every contract is a potential experiment in process improvement, suddenly your task is much less boring.

Same thing with your contracts, or any other repetitive work you face. Want it to be less burdensome? Start by taking it even more seriously and seeking to improve it. Make your form better. Find a way to negotiate the same points less often. Really explore the risks you are minimizing and ask if there are other ways to accomplish your task. When every contract is a potential experiment in process improvement, suddenly your task is much less boring.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

Some work is genuinely novel

Ironically, it took getting one too many oddball questions to make me really appreciate “boring” work that I could do with little effort. Each morning I would check emails and voicemails with mixed anticipation and dread. “What new trouble could the organization have cooked up somewhere in the world overnight?”

This was novelty in its true form. I really never knew what the day’s challenges would contain. I relished the novelty, but I realized that having only new legal questions would be incredibly stressful. So I came to appreciate a healthy mix: a generous amount of routine work I knew I could do well, leavened with interesting nuggets that broke up the routine and challenged me.

When is the tried and true best?

You must not change for the sake of change, i.e., without a specific improvement in mind. You also must not seek changes just because a process is imperfect. They’re all imperfect. Before messing with existing systems, you must understand in great detail why they were established the way they were. See Career Path: Identifying Solutions That Will Work.

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Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as novelty. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and all the more so because we’ve kept things simple. Here, to finish, are some honorable mention tips to serve as food for thought:

Negative — This is your reminder not to be negative. Or to put it positively, be optimistic. Especially when times are tough people appreciate lawyers who keep a level head and can focus on the silver lining. Read more at Career Path: Keep Your Cool.

Never — You should keep a private list on which you describe *things you’ll never do*. Maybe your list says you’ll never compromise your values for money, or you’ll never answer a colleague with a flat “no,” instead of “no, but…” Your list is personal to you and will develop as your career develops and you find yourself in more novel situations.

Be well.

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Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.