


# The ABCs of Work: Utility

**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 we uncover why it's important to understand the **Utility** in your actions, or the value behind everything you do.

Last time we explored how working well with your Team will propel your career. Today we discuss how focusing on the Utility of your actions helps you avoid wasting time.

## Utility according to whom?

We all want to feel we're working on valuable things, i.e., that our work has utility. A few moments' reflection, however, makes clear just how hard it is to demonstrate our worth.

Isn't it second nature to downplay the difficulty and significance of what others do? In part that's because we don't see in any detail what lies behind the results they deliver. Nonexperts also underestimate the skill needed to perform complex tasks. And, ironically, the better we do our jobs, the less impressive our results seem to others. As Sun Tzu wrote:

*A clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease. Hence his victories bring him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage.*

To start, you must measure your own worth. You have two yardsticks: how well does your work advance your own strategy, and how well does it advance your company's strategy? The two should be well aligned, but there will still be differences.

## Recognize what is not utility

> The best results require hard work in the right direction on the right topics. Well-meaning and extraordinary effort on strategically irrelevant topics waste time and resources.

Here are two things that have no relation to utility: intention and effort. It doesn't matter that you mean well. Rather, you must mean well, but that's entirely insufficient on its own.

Similarly, how hard you work is irrelevant. The best results require hard work in the right direction on the right topics. Well-meaning and extraordinary effort on strategically irrelevant topics wastes time and resources. You get no gold star for trying hard and striking out.



Rewards await when you put effort into working hard on topics that are worthy and valuable rather than insignificant. rudall30 / *Shutterstock.com*

See Identifying Problems Worth Working On for help on picking valuable topics.

And see Identifying Solutions That Will Work for directing your efforts in the most fruitful ways.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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## Delivering utility makes you popular

> When you help other people accomplish their objectives, you gain a reputation as the most useful person to have around.

I said above that you must start by measuring your own worth. You will be rewarded for measuring well. People will start to notice your work if you pick the right topics. Especially when your own strategy is aligned with the company's strategy, you will work on topics that help advance other peoples' priorities. Trust me, they notice that.



When you assist your colleagues in reaching their goals, your good efforts will not go unnoticed and your respectability will skyrocket. treety / *Shutterstock.com*

It takes perspective and maturity to recognize when helping a colleague is the best way to invest your time. When you help other people accomplish their objectives, you gain a reputation as the most useful person to have around.

## Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as understanding the utility behind your actions. 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 mentions to serve as food for thought.

**Umbrella** — I sometimes visualized our Code of Conduct as an umbrella acting as a shield over the whole company, helping protect us from a hostile world. Umbrellas can be wide or narrow, but they're not going to help you weather every storm. You're wise to layer on multiple protections. For more on this, see Swiss Cheese Your Way to Safety.

**Uneasy** — We've all felt it: that queasy feeling in your stomach that something's not right. Listen to that feeling. Ignoring a good feeling may mean you miss an opportunity. Ignoring a lingering doubt may lead to lasting regrets.

**Urgent** — Urgency is the natural enemy of important things. Remember your strategic yardsticks, and measure every new request against how well it advances a valuable goal. If not, stick to your priorities, no matter how urgent the alternative demand.

Be well.

I hope you've found some helpful insights today. Let me know at James@klugne.com if you have additional ideas or suggestions for our success formula. I can't wait to hear your story.

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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.