

## CHAPTER 1

**Are You a Follower or a Leader?**

History is the greatest teacher of all. If you want answers to a problem, just look back in history and you'll see that someone else has faced a similar problem. For better or worse, we're all products of our history, and our education is perhaps the most significant part of our historical baggage!

Education has taught us to listen, and we've learned this lesson well. A major thesis of this digital Short Cut is that listening is no longer the central pillar of learning and thriving. Change has become such a huge part of modern life that the combined acts of doing and selective learning are now the only way of keeping your head above water. With so much information in the air, listening has almost become synonymous with forgetting! I think you now have to *do* to learn, and you must reinforce this with a disciplined reading program.

Increasingly, I doubt that our educational system can help given the massive proliferation of information. Education is just a foundation for the ongoing learning process. We now have information coming at us from all angles: the Internet, television, mobile phones, newspapers, and so on. All these media channels compete for precious minutes of our attention. Of all these channels, the Internet has presented a big opportunity and a big challenge: How can you get ahead with all this information coming at you? Or put another way: How can you just hold your position in this sea of information?

Traditional wisdom teaches that if you study hard you can get a job and enjoy secure employment for life. It's axiomatic to say that the world has changed so much that this approach simply no longer works. And yet, how many people are still clinging to this outdated notion? Look at the

people you know: How many of them are sufficiently skilled that if their job disappeared tomorrow, they could quickly find a replacement? Are they followers or leaders?

## **The Transience of *Permanent* Jobs**

Listen to the news or pick up a newspaper and you'll likely see some organization closing down an operation and letting hundreds of its workers go. Often, there's an outcry when this happens, but then the stock price of the company rises, and laid-off workers are left to pick up the pieces of their lives.

Sometimes, the jobs in question are eliminated; in many cases, the jobs are just shifted to another less-costly location.

British Telecom (BT) recently announced a one billion dollar outsourcing contract awarded to a company in India. This is part of BT's ongoing commitment to increasing organizational efficiency. One interesting aspect of this deal is that BT has a substantial stake in the Indian company concerned. In effect, BT is investing in itself as it diversifies its interests out of the increasingly less lucrative telecom sector and into corporate services.

Such diversification and reinvention is how corporations survive and prosper in the twenty-first century. I want to show you that you can begin to operate (on a smaller scale) in a fashion similar to such formidable organizations. In other words, you can organize your work and career along the lines of a business. As you'll see, the demands of most jobs militate against taking such an approach—apparently, there simply isn't the time. But, there are ways to take the initiative in this area and quietly move up the value chain. In this way, you can strengthen your skill set and knowledge base and proactively prepare yourself for any possible future downsizing.

The reality of outsourcing and offshoring is that organizations now operate globally in a highly dynamic environment. Nimbleness is a key requirement for survival in this relatively new environment. At the time of this writing, price was a major driver for such operational decisions as relocating. It's entirely likely that at some stage in the coming years, the current emphasis on price will be replaced by more interest in quality. But, for the moment at least, we as consumers demand lower prices, so organizations must structure their operations to supply goods and services at ever-lower prices.

The flip side of the coin is that to an extent, we are also partly responsible for creating the highly competitive backdrop against which we all now work. We want the cheap goods and services, so suppliers focus their best minds on producing them. Of course, we live in a fragile world with limited resources, and China (a veritable behemoth of cheap goods production) is already facing a pollution crisis.

It is relatively easy for corporations and service providers to move some or all of their operations into the most remote countries. These moves produce cost efficiencies and provide access to skilled labor along the way. So, just being good at your job or very conscientious is no longer a passport to continued employment and increasing income.

Even being in a genuinely permanent job (for example, a government position) isn't what it once was. In the post 9/11 world, the emerging pattern is for bigger government. Ultimately, this is probably a bad thing. Here in Ireland, we have a hugely successful economy that for the moment is not overly dependent on the increasingly creaking infrastructure. Our roads, water supply, transport services, health care, telecom networks, broadband availability, flood defenses, and electricity supply are all in a somewhat dire state! This condition results in greater pressure on politicians and ultimately on permanent government workers to improve infrastructure and services.

## **Let's Talk About Your Job**

The first thing I want to do is determine whether you're a follower or a leader. To do this, let's take a look at your job. Be assured that my goal here is to determine your position in the value chain. This is not to suggest that you need to change your job. That choice is yours. My intention is to help you see that you can make a number of small changes to help yourself move up the value chain. This might mean that you get promoted or eventually start your own company, or it might just mean that you become super-efficient and remain in your current job. The first benefit you get when you move up the value chain is choice.

## **Examining Your Current Situation**

To assess your job, I ask you to do the work. Instead of me pontificating about your work (which you know better than I do), I want to engage you in a fact-finding mission. To this end, I pose a range of questions that will allow you to see your job from a different perspective. This perspective is similar to the way you might look at your current job when you're interviewing for a new position.

I've always been struck by something when I move from one organization to another. Like anyone else, I typically update my resumé, attend interviews, and so on. But, one thing always hits me when I summarize my work in a given job: Is that all I did on that job? This isn't to suggest that I didn't work hard. It merely points to the fact that most jobs are defined in quite a narrow way. I return to this point later, but for now I note that when you take on an employee role, you might be inadvertently surrendering access to a wide range of activities. By not being involved in those activities (because they're other peoples' jobs), you forego many associated learning opportunities.

## **Jobs and Narrow Contexts**

Even organizations that seek to train staff on an ongoing basis still have to define job content in a relatively narrow context. Otherwise, in many cases, we wouldn't be able to leave the office in the evening—our jobs would be too interesting and challenging! The key point here is that an employee is NOT a businessperson.

I return to this topic later, but to illustrate, let's look at a few simple cases. If you work in customer support, do you ever get to learn much about the culture and language of the people you support? Do you ever get a chance to talk to the corporate-compliance people? If you work in some design capacity (for instance, software development), what kind of contact do you have with the users of your work? How much do you know about the finances of your organization? Most likely, you don't have a lot of contact with nonrelated areas. Very few organizations define roles in a broad way. Many organizations increasingly define roles in an extremely narrow fashion. The thinking is that this allows for reduced organizational dependency on any one individual. The flipside is that employees may feel less relevant to the organization. Later on in this chapter, you'll see how to determine if this type of organizational thinking was used to define your job.

I've been discussing some trends in large organizations. If on the other hand you work in a small organization, you likely see a lot more of what goes on. In some ways, working in smaller organizations can be a very useful experience. However, even small organizations typically define roles in a narrow fashion and in many cases this brings us back to the same problem as before! So, we know that huge numbers of people work in large organizations, and this tends to mean that they operate in silos. These silos are almost like mini companies and very often there is little day-to-day scope for expanding your skills and knowledge.