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The Top 10 Tools For 21st Century Career Success

[By Linda Lopeke]

Career success isn't rocket science—it's a simple, three-step process. (1) Know what you want to achieve. (2) Define what success looks like (how will you know you achieved it?) and (3) take action. The more you do, the faster you'll get there.

Circumstances do not make or break success. It's determined by believing you can achieve your goals; by adopting specific, more-useful patterns of thinking; and by preparing yourself mentally and physically to develop the habits of success. Success may be an "inside job," but it still requires a lot of work! Here are 10 tools to help you more easily make your mark.

TOOL #1: A contact relationship management (CRM) system

Everyone is a job seeker. Some are active job seekers; others are passive ones. Passive job seekers become active job seekers every three to five years. If you are a student now, the U.S. Department of Labor estimates that you will have 10-14 jobs by age 38!

Looking for work can be grueling. Don't spend valuable job-search time trying to invent an organizational system. Get yourself a great contact relationship management (CRM) tool called JibberJobber instead. It's free and lets you track all of the critical information you collect during a job hunt and when networking.

Track companies you apply to or think you'd like to work for someday. Track each job you go after and log the status (date of first interview, thank you letter sent, etc.).

JibberJobber has great reporting tools and offers excellent advice, too. Setting up a CRM puts all your critical information in one place where you'll have access to it for your entire career!

TOOL #2: A professional online presence (your website, MySpace, and LinkedIn pages)

Employers are now using the Internet to find and qualify new hires. At the very least, you should have your own name reserved as a website domain name where you can post an online version of your resume and other pertinent career information.

Many domain registrars have low sign-up and hosting fees and offer tools for building websites that require no technical expertise. For example, my website, lindalopeke.com, was built in a single weekend using only the service provider's web page templates. It costs just \$0.35 per day to make up-to-date information about my career and my resume instantly available to anyone. No more mailing or photocopying expenses!

Having an online presence makes you stand out from your competition. Start by reserving your domain name. If you have a common name, like John Smith, and the domain is not available, try a variation such as MrJohnSmith.com or MsJaneDoe.com. If that doesn't work, try adding your initials,

profession, or city (e.g., JSmithArchitect.com or JaneDoeMiami.com).

Create free MySpace and LinkedIn pages designed to market yourself professionally, not socially (and don't forget to screen your "social" pages for career-killing content).

Check your "Google factor" periodically. Search for your own name and see what comes up! As you grow in your career, so too will your online presence. However, always remember, "What goes on the net stays on the net!" so keep that in mind when posting on favorite blogs and forums.

Video resumes are becoming increasingly popular but can work against you if you aren't careful in what you do and say in them. If you decide to do one, get professional help with it (services are available for <\$200). Some who have created video resumes on their own crashed and burned, and few examples posted on YouTube are good models to follow.

TOOL #3: A good headshot

You need a professional headshot (not a "glamour" shot) when you are promoted to the higher ranks. Investing in one now will have you moving up even faster. Have a good black-and-white and a color digital photograph created in both high-resolution



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(300 dpi) and low-resolution (72 dpi) files available at all times.

Update your headshot every two to three years. Initially, you'll use it on your resume and business card (the ones you create for yourself). Eventually, you'll use it in other places where you are building your success brand. For example, to show next to articles you write for your company newsletter. Always control your image where you can.

TOOL #4: An hourglass (the ultimate uncomplicated personal-productivity tool)

Time easily slips away. An hourglass quietly reminds you of this. Displaying a classy hourglass (or collection) is guaranteed to get you noticed and remembered for being conscientious about personal productivity!

Self-imposed time limits help you focus better and produce more. And to get the most out of the workday, you must stop wasting time. This simple tool has an amazingly powerful impact on your productivity when used to help you be more aware of passing time.

Hourglasses come in sizes from three minutes (egg timer) to 90 minutes. In SmartStart, we use a three-minute timer to limit time spent on phone calls and answering routine email. And we use a longer one for tasks requiring more time and concentration.

TOOL #5: A chess set (secret weapon of the world's best team builders)

Forget about candy dishes and donuts for in-office networking and team building. Display a great-looking chess set instead! Put it in an open spot near your work area. Use a picture frame to display a sign that says, "Get in the game!" and lists a few simple

rules for players passing by. The only rules you need to post are:

- Anyone can play.
- After making a move, please turn over the black/white card so the next passerby knows which color chess piece to move. (Then, have a card next to the chessboard that says, "White goes next" on one side and "Black goes next" on the other.)

You'll be amazed how many people participate in this open match. You'll give yourself and your department or team a good name throughout the entire company. Plus, everyone who plays will be sharpening strategic thinking and problem-solving skills! This promotes team harmony and reinforces that everyone is on the SAME team while advancing your success!

TOOL #6: A networking kit (containing breath mints, your goal card, a business-card case and cards, an image-enhancing pen and small notepad, and "signature" stationery)

Networking is not something you do when looking for work or favors. It's something you do every day. And your network is not all the folks whose business cards you have or whom you've entered in your CRM tool—your network is the people who would take and/or return your phone calls! It is going to take some effort and advance preparation to grow your network. That's what your "networking kit" is for.

Don't take a chance on leaving a bad first impression because your breath is stale or offensive. Pop a subtle breath mint before making social rounds.

Before attending networking events, set three goals. Write them down and review

them before launching yourself onto the scene. The first goal could be how many strangers you plan to meet, the second how many things to learn about each new connection, and the third might be how many connections/reconnections to follow up on before leaving.

You need a great business card, even if you have to get it made yourself. Most business cards (90%) are thrown away. Yours will be kept if you make it, the conversation, and the card exchange more memorable.

Use both hands to present your card to someone you've just met (it makes the gesture feel special and you more memorable). Always speak in good taste when exchanging cards (pass along a compliment and avoid making boorish comments or using bad language). Never write on a business card you receive in the person's presence (it's rude); leave the room or immediate area before putting your memory-jogging facts on the back.

Carrying around your business cards without a protective case is like throwing your laptop into the car naked. You need a case to keep your business cards safe, neat, clean, and handy. Talking with strangers can be nerve-racking; however, when you have an unusual business-card case, it can be a handy conversation starter. I carry two; one for my own cards and one reserved for business cards I collect.

Discipline yourself to follow up. Exchanging business cards is not networking; developing relationships with those you meet is. Use your image-enhancing pen (which does not need to be expensive) to make notes to help you follow up in a meaningful way, then send personal handwritten cards to those you want to stay connected to over time.



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TOOL #7: "Signature" stationery

Fine stationery enhances your professional image and is a wise investment. It takes little effort to develop your "signature" style. Before selecting affordable items at local retailers, get familiar with the options offered by a specialist in high-end stationery.

If you study the "Executive" offerings at The Stationery Studio, you'll see many designs that support your desired professional image without sacrificing personal style. Use their virtual tool to experiment with different lettering styles, ink colors, design motifs, and envelopes with tissue linings. When you've found something you like, print it off and go shopping. Look for similar items to purchase at lower cost. Once you've chosen your "signature" stationery, use it consistently to keep in touch with those in your network. It becomes your trademark.

TOOL #8: A success library and toy box

Successful people read. A lot. Carry your books around in audio files on your iPod or set aside a special bookcase at home, but do create your own library of personal-development materials. (A minimum of 10% of your workweek should be spent in "learning" mode.)

A well-stocked personal-success library includes biographies and autobiographies of people you admire, collections of inspirational quotations that appeal to you, foundational texts that shape your thinking, reference texts that build your skills in specific areas (language and communication, technology, other key areas of professional interest), and other books of personal interest (both classics and current bestsellers).

In your "toy box," you can have any number of cool items such as Brain Age (an electronic

game), puzzles (crosswords, sudoku, and brainteasers), ThinkerToys, brainstorming and mind-mapping aids, and other tools for sharpening your mental reflexes. These make for great entertainment when you just don't feel like reading on your commuter train or while waiting around in airports, traveling on business, or being stuck in dreary hotel rooms.

TOOL #9: A membership in Toastmasters

Toastmasters is not exaggerating when they say, "Your success in business is based on how effective you are." The higher you go, the more your communication skills are on display. By participating in Toastmasters programs, people from all backgrounds develop and enhance their vocal powers.

Start preparing now in the arts of speaking, listening, and thinking! These vital skills promote self-actualization, develop confidence and self-esteem, enhance your relationships with others, and position you for making significant contributions to your employer and the world. A membership in Toastmasters is a personal-growth experience you won't regret.

TOOL #10: A personal stylist

Your image is part of personal branding. The world is full of people with good degrees who are completely lacking senses of style. You get only one chance to make a great first impression, and doing so is a necessity for winning in the competitive business world.

Investing in the services of a personal stylist costs less than you might think, pays big dividends, and is of great benefit when you:

- are about to make your "debut" in the corporate world
- want to change careers and work in a different industry or sector

- want to move from a technical role to an operational one
- perform well and have excellent reviews but just aren't getting ahead
- want to strategically position yourself for a higher rank
- are faced with a life-changing transition (pregnancy, divorce, etc.)
- are about to begin working in a country or with a culture you weren't born into

Professional stylists are objective about what really suits your coloring, body shape, and the business image you must project. You do not need to spend a fortune to look great; it is possible to spend a fortune on garments that only hold you back from getting ahead.

Working with an expert to develop your style is empowering. Taking time out to develop or refresh your style and update your professional look can reenergize a flagging sense of self and kick start a stalled career. When you know you look your absolute best, you carry yourself differently, with more confidence. People feel that energy and perceive you as even more capable. The medium is the message; never second-guess your style!

While these are all excellent and highly recommended tools, the one tool that tops them all is a personal mentor.

THE TOOL THAT TOPS ALL: A personal mentor

Sometimes, what you can't see keeps you from achieving your goals. Having a mentor gives you access to information otherwise not available to you. A coach may tell you what to do, but a mentor will also tell you why. That makes a good mentor priceless!



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Even the best university education can leave you unprepared for handling the substantial emotion and cultural politics that exist in all organizations. Everyone needs a “safe harbor” when self-doubt and fear are rocking the boat and a steady, experienced hand to guide them at the wheel when negotiating foreign waters.

A mentor shares personal experiences and helps you create new learning opportunities. She or he can also connect you to other resources that will help advance your goals or serve your needs if they are beyond the mentor’s expertise.

Many business rules you’ll be judged by are unspoken or require translation to be fully understood and usefully applied. Often, only

a mentor will tell you the truth or rise to your defense in a sticky situation. If you’re lucky, you’ll have more than one in your lifetime. Cherish them all and honor them well for shortcutting learning and helping you succeed.

All of these tools are readily available and anyone can use them. The question is, how many will you put to work for you?



About the Author

Internationally renowned business strategist, über-mentor, and MBA Professor Linda M. Lopeke is the creator of SmartStart virtual mentoring programs—the fastest, easiest way to super-size your career success. Visit smartstartcoach.com to take the \$1,000 cash-for-college challenge and test your office smarts.

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