

Without Really Trying?

I haven't read any of the Harry Potter novels, or watched any of the movies. I have, however, watched Daniel Radcliffe sing and dance on the stage of the Ed Sullivan theatre, performing on David Letterman's show with most of the rest of the cast of "How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying." As I've written before, my father was a big fan of Broadway musicals, and "How To Succeed" was one of his favorites. I'm not sure how he would have reacted, though, to Harry Potter playing J. Pierrepont Finch.

Having said that, I think I do know how he felt about the issue of succeeding in business without really trying. "It happens," he told me once, "just often enough to prove that it's possible. But it's not very likely."

Primitive Process

My father was a salesman for most of his working life. In his early 50's, he became a partner in the company he worked for, a commercial office supplier based in Boston, but even though that added some management responsibilities, he was still a salesman at heart. He always had an office in the house, and my childhood memories include many evening hours of my dad working at his desk, writing up orders he'd taken during the day.

Thinking back on that now, it's kind of funny how primitive the process was. A typical order might involve 10-20 items, some of which his company would have in stock, but others which would have to be ordered from a local wholesaler or directly from a manufacturer. This was back in the 60's and 70's, so there was no computer at his desk and no internet at his fingertips. The whole process involved a lot of catalogs and individual purchase orders and tracking of acknowledgements which arrived in the mail while he was out making sales calls every day. About the only thing he didn't have to do was send out the invoices. He did sometimes have to go out to collect the money.

What's the point of all of this? It wasn't easy for an office products salesman to do his business and make a good living back then, just like it's not easy for a quick/digital/small commercial printer to do his/her business and make a good living now. And the chances that you can be successful "without really trying" are somewhere in that slim-to-none range.

Try This

So, here are a few things I suggest that you try. First, try to be more personally productive. If you're working 10-12 hours a day, try to make sure you get at least 8-10 hours' worth of important work done every day. If you're only doing 4-5 hours of important work during those 10-12 hours, you're just putting in time. If you only have 4-5 hours of important work to do, get it done in 8 hours rather than 12 and I'm pretty sure you'll feel better. Better still, try to get 6-7 hours of important work done in 8-9 hours. That would meet my definition of a productive and effective day.

A big part of the problem is most printers don't know where the time goes. So here's something else to try. Set your phone to sound an alarm every hour, on the hour. When the alarm goes off, stop for a minute and think about what you did during the last hour. Tweet yourself a summary of what you did, and then look at the day as a whole at the end of the day. I'm pretty sure you'll see some patterns of inefficiency and non-productivity, and seeing those patterns is the first step towards doing something about them.

And This

If you can cure some of your own lack of productivity, you'll have time to address everyone else's. It's been a while since I've heard the term, but I suspect that graphic design is still the "black hole" in many printing companies. OK, how about spending some time on that person/function. I suggest that you observe your designer for a solid hour, twice a day, for two full weeks. Break each hour into 6 x 10 minute segments, and assign a 1-10 scale productivity grade for each segment. Think about what a productive 10 minutes looks like, and what the opposite end of the scale looks like, and then you'll have some basis for changing this person's behavior. Again, this is a "don't know where the time goes" issue—in all probability, you don't know and your designer doesn't know either. Once you change that, you'll have taken a big step toward improving productivity.

Who else is a likely candidate for this sort of exercise? Probably everyone! But I think I can hear some of you thinking about the dangers of micro-management. I would address that concern in two ways.

First, if you start this process by improving your own productivity, you can present that as an example of what you're hoping to accomplish with an employee. "I micro-managed myself for a while, and I think it paid off. Let's see if I can help you to be more productive too." That's called leadership!

Second, let me ask you to do one of those 1-10 evaluations of each of your employees. I would consider 8 or better to be an acceptable score, although I really want 9's and 10's. I would consider 7 or lower to be an unacceptable score, which means something needs to be done. Your choices are *training/management* or *termination*. Very few people have died from micro-management. Quite a few people have been turned into better and more productive employees. If you've got problems—especially employee problems—do something about them!

And This

I was thinking about telling you to spend some time thinking about the direction of your business every day. I decided to take that one step further, though, and to tell you to *do something* about it every day. I have a couple of clients who are suffering from “analysis paralysis” right now, and I'm talking about issues that range from long-term direction (like the transition toward being a Marketing Services Provider) to much shorter-term direction (like assembling a “suspect” list). I spoke with one of them this morning, and she's spent the week since we last spoke trying to decide between focusing on medical offices or manufacturing companies. I'm afraid that I raised my voice when I told her that it doesn't matter which one she chooses. They're both good market targets for quick/digital/small commercial printers, and whichever one we start with, we're going to get to the other one eventually.

This is reflective of a bigger problem of course. She's been hoping to succeed in business —although in this case, *survive* would be a better term—without really trying. Unfortunately, that's not very likely!