

Who's Missing Out!

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Abstract

Earning an education is supposed to help secure a better future however, this is not always the case. Circumstances in life often times intervene thus disrupting what should be an uneventful transition from the academic community to the workplace. When placed into perspective with regard to this disruption, the question become who really is missing out?

Introduction

As an adult, I still can recall my mother walking me to my first day of school: kindergarten. I held tight, my little hand in hers, as she explained I would learn so much and meet new friends at school. My mother was trying to comfort me. That day was a blur because I cried the entire time until I took my nap on my blanket that I had brought from home. That was the last time in my life that the idea of earning an education would be traumatic. As I moved through elementary school to high school, I began to understand the importance of an education and how it would help me secure a better future.

As an African American female student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I passed through middle and secondary education in a rural California farming community. My talent would have been squandered had my mother not worked hard to see that her four children completed high school and attended college. It was during these years that I recognized that inequities would serve as obstacles for me to clear while earning my degree. For example, I was not allowed to continue with learning a second language, Spanish. The majority of classes I took in high school were vocational education classes with few college-preparatory courses. Obstacles persisted throughout graduate school.

While in graduate school, I never once considered dropping out despite the loss of my support system, my entire family. During the years of earning my master's and doctoral degrees, the obstacles became more pronounced. For example, I never faltered when given only days to reformat the style of my master's thesis before my oral defense. Such experiences while working on my master's prepared me for the challenges that awaited me in earning my Doctor of Philosophy degree. One memorable experience that set the tone for what was to come while earning my Ph.D. occurred during my first meeting, when one professor greeted me by asking if I had come by stagecoach from the West Coast to the Midwest. I wanted to respond by stating surprise of surprises, some people have to work, but I remained silent and never forgot the hurtful greeting. I struggled to complete my terminal degree but eventually I earned it! Although many years would pass before I earned this degree, I had the opportunity to hold jobs that enhanced my work experience for my future career.

Before arriving in the Midwest to attend the university where I would earn my terminal degree, I worked for a state Department of Education on the West Coast. I also secured summer employment with the U.S. Department of Education early on in my doctoral program. I looked forward to returning to work in Washington, D.C., the following summer. To my surprise, my dream was cut short because I was told that I had to remain on campus during that summer to take a class that was not required for my degree. What I considered a good start in laying the foundation for my future career in working for two departments of education came to an abrupt halt. It thought that I was prepared for the challenges from the department of my declared major for my Ph.D. However, I was surprised that I was made to wait in limbo for years while incurring student loan debt to advance through the program. That was not fair. Unlike my peers, I had little to no support in helping get back on a career path, a path which my colleagues were well on their way.

Left Out

As a student in a master's and doctoral program, I was exposed to a diverse group of people who brought life and work experiences with them. This is supposed to be the time when camaraderie between classmates develops. While students advance through such programs, relationships evolve and hopefully extend to the workplace. This was not my case. What I brought to both academic programs was not considered significant enough to be included in class discussions. I was liked by many of my peers and tolerated by some; unfortunately, my voice fell on many a deaf ear that I encountered regarding contributing to the discussion.

Earning an education was never again traumatic after my first day of kindergarten. However, I was too young to understand during my early years in elementary school that isolation could be interpreted as traumatic. It was especially challenging to remain focused in earning my letters of Ph.D. because I had to work hard to maintain a sense of self. I resorted to survival mode with the hope that my hard work and the academy would be acknowledged when I did enter the workplace.

Remaining focused and intrinsically motivated empowered me to become a better person in the end. I understood and learned that negotiating rather than resisting would aid in accomplishing short- and long-term goals. To reach the job market and begin to give back to society, I needed to take a new approach.

Reinventing Myself

My concern was not a physical makeover; rather, it was a merging of life experiences and education to support the new me. I wanted to enhance my attributes, skills, and education to become marketable in areas outside my formal education training. I did not want to remake myself and change my ideologies to align with a profession from which I received no academic support. I was ready for and welcomed other career opportunities. However, I needed to make adjustments in my short-term and long-term goals and rethink my beliefs.

When confronted with the idea of making compromises with one's principles and self-esteem, I had to take some time to decide how much of me I wanted to alter to obtain my goal. I was concerned with how I would approach this decision and if I wanted to address it at all because of the possibility of having to deal with other emotions that might surface. I understood that a soul-searching journey was before me.

Relying on my life experiences in the service industry was where I wanted and needed to begin. Revisiting the circumstances of several of my previous jobs would provide the foundation needed to enhance my marketability in today's workplace. Of the many service jobs I held, two in particular left an impact on my life and continue to influence who I am today. The first position was serving as a domestic and international flight attendant. It was during the late 1970s when the profession was in high demand for young, career-oriented individuals. The strict job requirements in place during the time that I served have shifted and the requirements in place today reflect our stressed social climate.

Many of the responsibilities required of the position decades ago are present today, i.e., cabin crew working collaboratively to provide quality service to all passengers. Something that differed during my service as a flight attendant was the job task of providing meal service to passengers seated beyond the first-class cabin, an experience that prepared me to become more organized in every aspect of my life. Serving meals to passengers might seem to be a menial task; however, when placed in the context of the execution of the delivery of meals, the role of flight attendant would be more respected today. For example, during meal service a choice of entrees was offered. Flight attendants carried meals by hand from the galley and placed them on passengers' trays and then returned to every row to pick up the trays and dispose of them in the galley before landing. All flights had beverage service that consisted of the flight attendants offering passengers a variety of soft drinks and cocktails, some complimentary, some that could be purchased. It was always a challenge to get the correct change back to the passenger who purchased a beverage. Nonetheless, quality service was delivered and as flight attendants, we worked!

One flight I particularly remember was called the Kansas City Meal Run. The short flight was nonstop from Dallas Fort Worth International Airport (DFW) to Kansas City (MCI), with an immediate return to DFW. It was a commuter flight with approximately 150–189 passengers and always full out of DFW. This run is where I became proficient in attending to details, working closely to coordinate the service with my peers while getting the job done in a timely manner. But I never lost sight of the primary reason why I and other flight attendants were on aircrafts: to perform emergency procedures if the need should arise, a reason that continues today.

I enjoyed being a flight attendant because I was efficient in every aspect of the position. Unfortunately, this career was cut short due to the changing airline industry. Deregulation in the airline industry during the 1980s took me to a city that never sleeps, Las Vegas, Nevada. The lessons I learned in the restaurant industry there enhanced my life experiences and changed the path that I would travel in life.

As one of five women who worked as a wine hostess in a four-star restaurant, otherwise staffed by men, at Caesars Palace, I learned to conduct myself as a professional despite the image conveyed by the outfit I was required to wear and my job responsibilities. I wore a harem costume with a toga draped behind me for almost a decade. As a wine hostess, I was responsible for serving two house wines and a champagne and all imported wines and champagnes purchased during the meal service. In addition, I was required to offer the men dining in my station shoulder and temple massage, at the table, during dessert. When time allowed, I would peel and feed grapes to the customers, give them sips of champagne, or feed them petit fours.

There were countless days over the years that I went to work with no money but returned home at the end of my shift with a full wallet. The money was good but in reality, I knew that I could not wear the costume the rest of my life. Several years into my employment, I returned to college fulltime. At some point after working fulltime during the evenings and attending the university fulltime during the day, I walked away from Caesars Palace. I transferred to a California university to complete my first degree, a baccalaureate degree in history. Years later, I earned a secondary teaching credential in history and a master's degree in education. My terminal degree of Ph.D. in education was earned in the Midwest. I began yet another degree online just recently in math with a concentration in statistics, but have taken a leave of absence to recover from taking care of my husband, who lost his battle to pancreatic cancer. I took the advice from a dear friend employed at Caesars Palace, an executive in management, to return to school because I was too intelligent not to continue my education.

The adage "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" hasn't been true for me. I left with the memories of many stories from working at Caesars Palace but most importantly, my big takeaway was becoming more disciplined in my life. I became a better and stronger individual because of the lessons Caesars Palace held for me. I was more focused and approached tasks with confidence and proficiency.

As I mentioned earlier, to enter the job market and begin to give back to society, I needed to take a new approach. The service industry prepared me to reenter academia more serious in applying myself to my studies. Little did I know that I would spend 18 years at the post-secondary level after leaving Caesars Palace. I saw this move as investing in my future. The years spent in the service industry during my youth, together with the many years of undergraduate and graduate studies, have helped me embark on a new path. I am a new and improved me! The time has come for me to contribute to the discussion in the workplace in hopes of making a difference. It's exciting and I welcome this challenge!

Conclusion

I began this article with the intention of claiming that employers in the workplace are missing out by not employing people like myself. I have vast experience in the service industry and in research and have earned multiple academic degrees. I feel comfortable in stating that there are other people who have had similar experiences. I am not alone!

I must be forthcoming in admitting that as I began to reflect during my writing of this article, I realized that, with all due respect, everyone is missing out. Colleagues, peers, mentors, supervisors, and friends whose relationships have extended to the workplace are some who have missed out; equally important, so have I. What is at stake with this loss is the opportunity to experience the benefits found working with others, such as happiness, a level of financial security, becoming a healthy, engaged, and productive worker. It is not easy being the one missing out. I am not discouraged. I will continue to be active in my search for the opportunity to demonstrate that I can be an effective contributor in the workplace. Until then, I will continue to maintain a sense of self while persevering in finding my niche.