
A New Year and New Opportunities -- Are You Ready?

Date : January 4, 2016

KWHS columnist Zina Kumok talks resolutions, priorities and some practical ways to kick off 2016 as you prepare for your future.

Winter break is a coveted time in the life of a high school student. I remember the awesome days of sleeping in, binging on holiday cookies with sprinkles and seeing blockbuster movies with my friends. Sound familiar? I also remember lots of talk in my household about resolutions for the new year, something that as a teen, I didn't think applied to me.

But it should! As the calendar turns to 2016, now is the time to start taking critical actions to prepare for your future. Goal setting is a great first step. Goals are powerful tools in helping us figure out our priorities and think through the steps that will help us get to where we want to be. In a recent KWHS article (*see Motivational Intelligence link in 'Related KWHS Stories'*), Wharton professor Maurice Schweitzer said, "Across every domain, people who set specific, challenging goals outperform people who go out and just aim to do their best."

Check out that article for some specific strategies on how to identify and follow through on your goals. In the meantime, here are some practical ideas that may well prepare you for success in 2016 and beyond.

Apply for Scholarships

One of the best personal goals you can set for your future self is to find ways to lower your college loan burden. If you've already received grant and work-study information from schools, then now's the time to apply for scholarships.

Nowadays, you can find scholarships for your hobbies, career aspirations and even related to where you live. Some schools give out specialized scholarships if you're from a low-income area or are planning to major in a specific degree. Double check to make sure you have sifted through all those opportunities. You can contact the financial aid office of the college you hope to attend to see if you've missed any.

You can also check online for scholarships not affiliated with a particular school. Websites like GoodCall and FastWeb have access to scholarship listings, while the federal government also has advice on finding aid.

Set Up Informational Meetings

If you want to learn about a place that you hope to end up someday on your pathway to success, then take time to hear about the day-to-day from a first-hand source. Think about the careers that interest you or the colleges you hope to attend. Do you know someone local who can tell it like it is, without the glossy marketing materials or online promos that often overlook or avoid important nuances? Set up informational meetings with someone who attended your dream college, a manager at a highly prized internship or a professional you admire. When I was in high school, I would spend my breaks and even some weekends shadowing reporters and learning how to write articles and develop journalism skills.

You can ask to shadow someone on the job for a day or pick someone's brain about his or her college experiences. Before you attend these meetings, make a list of questions. Remember, you're asking busy people to give you their time. And make sure you are truly finding out what you want to know – not just the general comments about how they like something or why they chose a specific school or career, but other more detailed insights. Possible questions might include: I've heard lots of positives about this job, but what does a really bad day look like for you?; What types of

articles have made front-page news of late in the campus newspaper?; Did you change your major or stay on a straight course through college?; What is the biggest mistake you have made thus far in your career journey and what advice can you pass along as a result of it?

Be respectful, buy your information sources coffee and send thank you notes within a week of your meeting. Notice, I said note and not email. Personal snail mail is so rare nowadays that it tends to make more of an impact. One former boss said he hired me over another candidate because I sent him a thank-you note after our interview. Don't discount the power of the written word – good, old-fashioned pen on paper.

Earn Extra Cash

Feeling cash-poor after all that gift-giving and holiday cheer? It's a great time to give some special attention to your wallet and your bank account as the new year begins. Building your savings account is a confidence booster and a personal-finance achievement. What's more, part-time jobs provide paychecks, experience, and they help you develop valuable work ethics and soft skills, such as punctuality, professionalism, team communications and perseverance.

To find a job, bring a résumé that includes your most recent work and school accomplishments. Even if you're looking for a job in the mall or at a restaurant, dress professionally. Managers will notice who comes in ready to work and who just wants to score a nice discount.

Consider these job suggestions: tutor, restaurant employee, landscaper, clothing retailer, dog walker or intern for a local office. You may not get paid much for the internship, but it is one of the best ways to learn real-world business skills.

Embrace the Power of Innovation

Businesses today want to hire innovative thinkers and problem-solvers. They want employees who understand the value of thinking in new and inspiring ways. Rob Shelton, the global innovation strategy lead at PwC, explains it like this: "The world constantly presents us with new problems or problems that don't yield themselves to solutions coming from the standard approach. [Innovation] is both a case of critical thinking about what is, as well as critical thinking and execution about what could be."

Now's the time to find ways to become more innovative. Experimentation is fundamental to developing this skill. Don't get caught up in always seeking a right or wrong answer — you've got to play a little and ponder a lot. Saikat Chaudhuri, executive director of the Mack Institute for Innovation Management at Wharton, says that when it comes to innovation, "We have this notion of the eureka moment from a lone inventor. That's not what innovation is in practicality and reality. It is setting up a bunch of conditions, whether they're processes or organizations, that allow people to come up with novel ways of thinking about certain problems. The best way to [assess innovation] is to give them problems to solve and see how well they fare, both in terms of the [process and the end results]."

Take a Risk — or Two!

Look, nobody loves the comfort zone more than I do. I get it. Everything feels great, so why bother rippling the peaceful waters? The main reason is that it will help you grow in so many ways. Learn a new skill, take a totally unexpected class, tackle an out-there hobby, and push yourself to new limits by doing something that absolutely terrifies you. Trust me, you will be better and stronger for it. Happy New Year!