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## **ARTICLE** **CAREER PLANNING**

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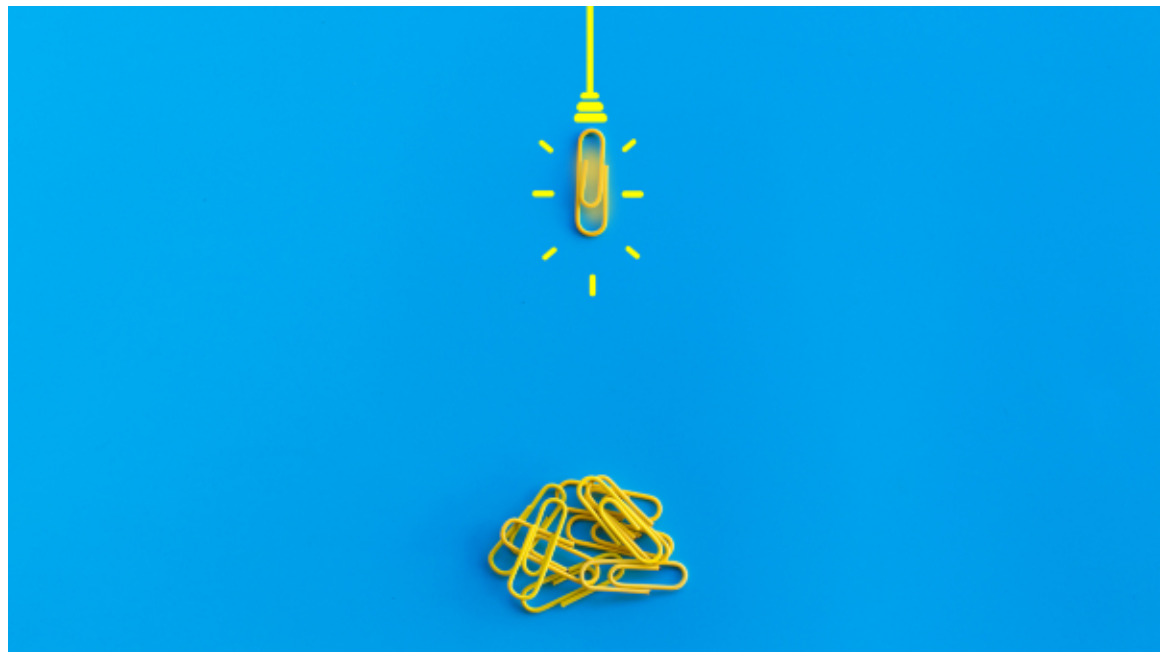
*by Marc Zao-Sanders and Catalina Schveninger*

CAREER PLANNING

# The Simple Joy of Learning on the Job

by Marc Zao-Sanders and Catalina Schveninger

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TASCHA RASSADORNYNIDEE/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES

Much of the joy has been snuffed out of learning. Schools, workplaces, and their associated compliance drills make a series of mandatory demands from near the start of our lives to near the end. Worse still, we associate those experiences with arbitrary pass/fail cut-offs and sinister, official consequences. And much of the \$359 million spent on corporate learning is [wasted](#). This is a sad situation.

Yet, we all know the thrill that learning can bring: teaching yourself a new skill via a YouTube video; enjoying your first joke in a foreign language; hearing a child read her first full sentence out loud; the

confidence that comes with a jujitsu brown belt; the youthful, infectious enthusiasm of a [90-year-old learner](#).

The spark of learning joy is real and useful. So how can we bring more of it into our professional lives?

### **Where is the joy?**

Let's take an important moment — amidst the [current gloom and grief](#) — to appreciate the joy of learning. In fact, there are several activities associated with learning that can spark such joy. We've drawn from some of Canadian educator [Allen Tough](#)'s work in the below.

First, there is that wonderful, ineffable feeling of learning itself. For many, a number of conscious experiences converge at the point of learning. There is an illumination of the unknown, as beams of light fall on hidden secrets and treasures. There's the awareness of a new capability and the freedom and independence that may bring — the power to deal better with the big, uncertain world. In our brains, we seek rewards via [dopaminergic pathways](#), while in our minds we enjoy a rush of [curiosity](#) or a feeling of [flow](#).

Second, learning often brings with it an immediate-term achievement. The rendering of your first line of Python code; your lifelike pencil drawing; your functioning, validated forecast model in Excel; picking up a handful of [Google search operators](#) to reap rewards every single day. Note that such hard, tangible results tend to be more difficult to find when it comes to learning soft skills.

Third, there's the opportunity to apply what you're learning in the real world. This is the living proof of your new power, when hopeful awareness becomes fruitful demonstration. Don't wait for the real world to present the perfect opportunity to apply your learning: bend your real-world working needs to what you've just learned and reduce the lag from learning something to applying it. Consider Deborah, the head of data science at a start-up in London. Her parents couldn't afford the university fees in her native South Africa so she taught herself everything from Visual Basic Programming and SQL back in 2000 to Python and Google Big Data Analytics more recently. She blocks four hours of study on Udemy every Sunday and applies, as a rule, at least some of her newly acquired skills on real-life projects at work the following week.

Fourth, you can find joy when you reflect on what you've learned. Reviewing what you've learned, how you've applied it, and how you might yet apply it, can bring a more subdued but longer-lasting kind of joy. This may be accompanied by the notion of enhanced status and a feeling of personal pride.

Finally, sharing your learning can bring great joy. As a social species, we do this naturally and prolifically: [38%](#) of content shared online is informational or educational.

So, be clear on what sparks learning joy for you. Develop the meta-cognitive skills and habits to notice when those sparks of joy occur. Which of the five activities described above do you get the most from? Dig deeper: What formats? Whose materials? Which situations?

Consider the case of Eduardo, a FutureLearn student and customer service rep working for a large telecommunications company in Spain. He learned on the job how to train chatbots and write scripts for the most common customer complaints. While the introduction of chatbots in call centers puts human jobs at risk, Eduardo found that learning a new skill kept him motivated and gave him hope for future career opportunities.

### **Harness joy for your career**

We all need to find ways to bring more joy into our work lives. Start by [taking back control of what you read](#). Have an open mind about what useful learning content even is. MOOCs aren't just about work skills; they also cover [life skills](#). This is true of TED talks too: just one of the [25 most popular TED talks](#) is business related. We'd encourage you to think more widely still, drawing your learning experiences from the rich tapestry of life: films, conversations, museums, advertising campaigns, speeches, even Twitter handles. Keep track of past and future learning with a [to-learn list](#).

Adaptable learners are in [high demand](#). The world's leading CEOs are publicly asserting the importance of learning and skills in a constantly evolving global economy. Satya Nadella, Microsoft's CEO, [said](#): "We want to be not a 'know-it-all' but a 'learn-it-all' organization." In a [recent annual letter to shareholders](#), Jeff Bezos emphasized high standards and teachable skills. Elon Musk has a well-developed idea of how to build knowledge: ensure that your basic, structural understanding is sound, so the information and knowledge you acquire has a firm basis and a good place to go.

Many of the hallmarks of modern working life point to an increased opportunity and [obligation to learn continuously](#). The phenomena of [remote and flexible work](#), [T-shaped careers](#) (combining breadth of knowledge and experience with world-class skill in one discipline), [lateral career moves](#) and [side hustles](#) have been growing rapidly for few years; they are all likely to be get a huge additional boost as working practices change in 2020 as a result of Covid-19.

Indeed, far-sighted employers enable employees (especially high-performers) to bend the job to a desired skill set, rather than the other way around. Unfortunately, corporate learning and development departments have not, for the most part, been designed to support this dynamic, multi-dimensional economy. Ultimately, the responsibility for filling these gaps therefore falls to you, and quite possibly to you alone.

Joyful learning is a precious gift in times of boom or bust. As adults and professionals we make too little use of it. While the joy is a worthwhile end in its own right, joyful learning can also be used to ignite individual careers and collective productivity. Sparking learning joy, earning flexibly, and contributing productively are timelessly valuable pursuits, and are being felt especially acutely now.

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