

MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

'I'm Still Under Construction'; Six Tales of Lifelong Learning

Pressure grows in competitive market for workers to figure out future career paths on their own time and dime



ILLUSTRATION: INGO FAST

By Lauren Weber

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Lifelong learning has become a mantra in American corporations as employees face pressure to stay relevant in a rapidly evolving workplace.

Employers, politicians and educators are hammering the message that people need to continuously upgrade their skills because of advancing technologies. Even companies that invest in employee training expect workers to figure out their future career path, and some want workers to retrain themselves on their own time and dime.

“We’ve put huge emphasis on shifting responsibility to the individual,” said Tim Munden, who oversees employee training as chief learning officer at Unilever PLC, which provides employees with resources such as online classes. “There’s no way on earth we can send people to enough training courses to make the shift we need to adapt to the world around us. People need to take that on themselves.”

Employers say the self-starter model offers better odds that people will take initiative to keep themselves employable by absorbing skills they're actually interested in. But self-directed learning can be a heavy lift for workers in an economy where the signals are difficult even for experts to parse, said Andy Van Kleunen, chief executive of the National Skills Coalition.

"We're asking people to negotiate an increasingly complicated labor market on their own," he said. It can be especially tough to make education and training choices when automation is making it unclear what the jobs of the future will look like.

"The idea that skills go obsolete is probably exaggerated, but the idea that skills evolve is real," said Todd Tauber, vice president of product marketing at Degreed, one of a crop of companies offering software programs designed to help employers offer more education tools to their employees.

We asked a variety of workers how they think about their careers and keep their skills fresh. Here are six of their stories.

Yonnas Getahun



Yonnas Getahun PHOTO: KRISTA WELCH

Seattle-based Yonnas Getahun joined Zillow Group eight years ago, working his way up from selling ads to real-estate agents to coaching clients on how to use more of Zillow's premium features.

Mr. Getahun, 38 years old, wanted to show that he's constantly evolving professionally, so he picked up around 20 certifications in topics like delegating tasks and online

marketing using the company's subscription to LinkedIn Learning.

He has spent up to 15 hours a week of his otherwise free time on career development over the past 18 months—more than 800 hours total. He also paid more than \$5,000 for webinars and weekend workshops in product design and management. Mr. Getahun has a bachelor's degree from the University of Washington and previously worked in mortgage sales.

A mentor told him early on that being at a company for a while "doesn't mean you're entitled to a career where there's a lot of competition," he said. "It was a little direct, but it was what I needed to hear."

There have been mistakes along the way, including \$2,200 spent on a course about Agile work processes, a project-management philosophy based on adapting constantly as ideas succeed or fail, Mr. Getahun said. It would have been more worthwhile to put off those classes until he got closer to certain career goals, he said.

“My thing recently has been, what can I take that I can apply immediately so I absorb it?” he said.

Jeremy Maffei

Jeremy Maffei wants a job in digital marketing—a big switch for somebody who has spent more than 10 years as a driver for FedEx and other companies.

To try to break into the digital economy, in December he completed a \$1,000 certificate program from Udacity.com that taught him how to track the effectiveness of ads on social media platforms, among other things.

Mr. Maffei, a high school graduate, also has spent time in sales for AT&T and selling ads for a newspaper. Making deliveries sharpened his customer service skills, he said. If he can marry those experiences with a better understanding of social media and marketing, he said he could have a new career.

Money pushed him to pursue the switch, along with a desire to find a more interesting and durable profession. Mr. Maffei has never earned more than \$37,000 a year. With child-support payments and other expenses, there's not much left at the end of the month.

“I know I have skills inside me that deserve a little bit more,” the Tampa resident said.

Mr. Maffei has submitted applications for around 15 jobs; he's had a few interviews but so far none has yielded an offer.

“I think they say, ‘Oh, you were just a driver,’ and they're not seeing what I did during that 10 years—what knowledge I built—that's relevant to this other career,” he said.

Meng Li-Buxton

Meng Li-Buxton has big goals, and she blocks out most mornings between 6:30 a.m. and 8 a.m. to get there.

The finance manager in Unilever's Englewood Cliffs, N.J., office is a certified public accountant, recently earned an M.B.A. from New York University, manages investment property for her family, runs a dog-sitting business with her mother and, in December, passed the test for her real-estate sales license.



Meng Li-Buxton PHOTO: ORON BELL

M.B.A. aside, she considers a \$20 online speed-reading class to be one of her best educational investments.

“The more I read, the more I feel like I’m falling behind because all books mention other ones,” said Ms. Li-Buxton, 36. “After you read a book, maybe three more turn up on your reading list.”

She said her husband wishes she had more free time, but her morning professional-development sessions are a priority.

“You need to communicate your goals clearly with your family,” she said, adding that she occasionally feels guilty when he wants to spend time together because she doesn’t see him most of the day.

At Unilever, employees have access to Degreed. Mr. Munden, Unilever’s chief learning officer,

said, “We want people to do this because they want to, not because they’re being made to.”

Tim Salau

It was the hundreds of certifications on Tim Salau’s LinkedIn profile that caught the eye of a vice president at Microsoft Corp. and helped him land a job there in August as a program manager.

“It’s huge now for a professional to show you’re curious and not stagnant,” Mr. Salau said, adding that he also fielded job offers last year from Alphabet Inc.’s Google and Facebook Inc. “I think it shows a level of hunger and desire.”



Tim Salau PHOTO: YOLISSMA VANCE

Mr. Salau, 25, now works on software that will help Microsoft customers create and deploy bots for customer-service tasks.

When he graduated from college, Mr. Salau said he felt unprepared to go straight into the workforce, so he pursued a master's in information science at the University of Texas. His goal: getting into user experience design and product work.

By the time he finished grad school in 2018, he had completed dozens of microcertifications, mostly taken online from LinkedIn Learning, which offers thousands of video classes for a monthly fee. Most of the credentials are for professional-development webinars that ran for less than an hour on topics like workplace habits and personal branding. Mr. Salau said he's fond of the instant gratification when he finishes a course and posts it to his LinkedIn profile.

“Critical thinking, collaboration and leadership will be really important in three to five years’ time when there’s a lot of automation,” he said. “I’ve been focused on grooming myself to be a leader.”

Justin Finkelstein



Justin Finkelstein PHOTO: MIA JANG

Justin Finkelstein, 43, said his midlife career crisis came last year.

“I had a moment where I felt like I had peaked,” he said, describing the fear of being phased out. “Then the second after, I was like, ‘OK, we’ll ride this out for a while.’”

Mr. Finkelstein stumbled into his role at Citibank as a senior vice president of data analytics five years ago. He had been working in the internal audit department at another financial-services firm, but a friend took over Citibank’s analytics team and asked him to help run it. He loves

the job, but his recent career panic spurred him to start taking new risks.

In July, he performed in a stand-up comedy show and began training in Brazilian jujitsu. The comedy routine bombed, but in a public critique of his performance by experienced comedians, Mr. Finkelstein’s responses roused laughs.

“When they interviewed me, I was myself. And when I was myself, people laughed. When I did my routine, I wasn’t being authentic,” he said.

For Mr. Finkelstein, lifelong learning is about trying out new interests and finding some way to transfer that passion to the workplace, becoming a guide for others. It may be a losing proposition to try to stay at the forefront based on technical skills alone, he warns.

“I was seeing how quickly people that I’m working with were learning what I’m actually doing —catching up to where I was,” he said of his office job. “My prediction is that to stay relevant or even employed, people will need to learn how to learn and to reskill quickly. The people who will

have influence are the people who can do that themselves and create pathways for other people to do it.”

Isabel Lemus

Originally from the Canary Islands, Isabel Lemus completed high school and married at 23. She didn't go back to work until her mid-30s.

She worked as an office assistant in a small mental-health practice and, in 2014, took a job in guest services in the Baptist Health South Florida system, helping patients and their families navigate Miami's Baptist Hospital. Whether directing people to the oncology department or helping them find the cafeteria, she saw herself as a front-line ambassador for those in the middle of life's most fragile moments. The concierge work was fulfilling, but she wanted a bigger paycheck and more responsibility.

Ms. Lemus, now 51, began visiting the hospital's library after clocking out, spending an hour or more on courses that the health system offered free through online learning platforms. She racked up certificates in managing conflict, customer service and business sustainability. When Zika became a serious threat, she took a short course in understanding the virus. Most classes were five or six hours. To accommodate her schedule, she embraced the slow cooker to help put dinner on the table each night.

“You have to look at what's got to be done in order to have your family happy and fed, and then you get to go to school,” she said. “It takes tremendous effort to be in the game.”

In 2017, Ms. Lemus was promoted to be the executive assistant to two of the hospital's top managers, earning a significant pay increase. She's in the market to learn more management skills so she can level up again.

“I'm still under construction,” she said.

Write to Lauren Weber at lauren.weber@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications

Andy Van Kleunen is the chief executive officer of the National Skills Coalition. An earlier version of this story referred to him as the director of the organization. (Feb. 27, 2019)

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