Metaphors of Occupation

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A Message from the Academic Chair: Metaphors of Occupation

Résumés and portfolios are histories reflecting one’s career path. They involve the cataloging of one’s moments of achievement in order to provide a snapshot of his or her value as a professional based on acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). Within the concept of the résumé or portfolio are two metaphors that drive how one thinks about them. The first metaphor is “career as a building” and the other is “career as a journey”. This analysis draws on the work of cognitive psychologists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) regarding how people use real world things and events in metaphors to describe mental events like thoughts, concepts, and ideas.

When one enters the fire service as a career, he or she starts thinking about how a career might be built beginning with basic training. Learning and achieving the fundamental KSAs and social orders (such as rank, role, and decorum) are vital to one’s acceptance in the fire service community. Failure for one to demonstrate competence and fitness within the context of the fire station will likely result in his or her failure to pass probation or the candidate’s self-selection out of the job. However, once one has successfully acquired the requisite credentials and learned to navigate the emergency services culture, how one builds his or her career can be accomplished through more of the same: credentials acquisition. The credentials in the fire service have been identified as training, experience, and education. These three are evidenced by certificates, diplomas, and acknowledgements. One of the most basic acknowledgements of experience, for example, is the years-of-service stars over one’s name tag (at least by tradition). The presumption of the years-of-service credential is that the person has experienced some typical kinds of activities involving fires, medicals, and other official activities; therefore, there is a career path assumed to have been built. Likewise, the résumé or portfolio is a physically documented historical work. It essentially takes one’s career path and places it into a tangible and limited package. So a résumé or portfolio is indeed “built” and supports our metaphor of the “career that I have built”.

When we consider a fire career as a journey, we start seeing the training, education, and experiences as landmarks along a path. Each experience, starting with the hiring process or academy, is a kind of stop along the way. Like psychologist William James (2001) describes life-experience, it is like a bird’s flight. We mark a bird’s flight by the perch places and not really the flying between them. In other words, we go from one place to another and yet another. So we go from academy to acceptance, from
assignment to assignment, or promotion and end at retirement. There is a distinct “path” or journey by which we all travel. The importance of this metaphor for the individual “building a career” is that he or she must understand it as a journey unto retirement. In other words, it is the life-long learner that continues to grow and transform himself or herself from sense of professionalism to the next. The one who wants to care and keep his or her career has stopped at a point to only look back on what has been accomplished. There is no more deliberate pursuit of growth and transformation, but rather a focus on keeping things static and concrete. What might one do when he or she has become static but the fire service continues to change and transform? Like the world, it will continue to spin through the universe with or without our consent.

Certificates, awards, and diplomas are the symbols that some formal experience for a person has occurred and been socially verified. But we all know that Firefighter I certification merely means that one has successfully acquired the minimally required KSAs of firefighting. It takes a lot of fieldwork and practice to really become a firefighter. A college degree is a starting point that offers a new horizon in one’s career. It is not a terminal point, unless the recipient decides to sit back and bask in his or her own glory. Once one’s will is no longer directed forward, what one has “built” is all he or she has and it is subject to decay over time. One must take what was learned in college, the academy, and in the field, and continue to seek opportunities to apply those abilities. Application shapes, changes, and increases one’s professional efficacy. Otherwise, “if you don’t use it, you lose it” will become “your truth”.

At Utah Valley University (UVU), we offer various opportunities for the fire service professional to grow. From the basics at the associate degree level to the more advanced levels of the bachelor’s degree, we provide learning opportunities through course work and degree programs. But we also provide students with internship opportunities at all levels. Some of our traditional (aspiring) and non-traditional (professionals who have returned for more education) students are performing vital services for communities under the tutelage of our faculty. They work on emergency planning, budgeting, prevention education, and other projects that cities and counties may have had to set aside due to budget constraints. The students gain real-world experience, get educational credit, and the communities are benefited by their work. This is one part of the possible educational path one might take at UVU.

Other pathways involve helping businesses and companies with this kind of work, allowing the student to forge relationships with people who he or she may otherwise not have done. There are also opportunities to be involved in university clubs and events giving emergency services professionals opportunities to mentor traditional students and contribute to the building of their careers by “showing them the ropes”.

Universities are tasked by society to pass on knowledge and skills to the upcoming generation. But they are also tasked to generate and synthesize new knowledge and skills through research and innovation. It is this latter aspect that non-traditional students might find most fulfilling in their coming back to get a degree. Whether one comes to UVU to embark in an emergency services career or one returns to continue his or her professional career path, there are opportunities and events to help one along the way. Education is a pathway to personal and professional growth. This pathway involves engaging in verbal and written dialogues, individual and team projects, and collective celebrations of academic achievements. While each achievement is one leg of the journey completed, it is also the opening of a new horizon to pursue. Being a lifelong learner keeps one on the journey, but also maintains one’s competence and relevance in his or her agency.

References:

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