

You Need to Be Relevant to Your Employer

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In the [mortgage industry](#), many jobs have disappeared. This has put tens of thousands of people out of work.

People who lose their jobs in the mortgage industry generally have a couple of options. Frequently, they look for a new job in the same industry, because it's the industry they know. They do their best to network, and email their resume out to every opening they can find in the mortgage industry.

"The job market is really tight," they will tell you.

They may get an occasional interview, but they do not [get the job](#) because the companies they are interviewing with realize they don't have the business to hire them. They may also realize there is someone out there who is more qualified. The criteria for these jobs has become much more stringent. Eventually, after weeks or months of [looking for a job](#), the person may say something like:

"I need to wait for the market to pick up. I simply cannot [find a job](#)."

To illustrate further the current state of the mortgage industry, the headquarters of Countrywide Mortgage is located in Hidden Hills, near Los Angeles. As you might imagine, there are acres of buildings for Countrywide and other mortgage companies around this area sitting practically empty. Not too long ago, these buildings were filled with thousands of people selling mortgages to [mortgage brokers](#) and others. Now, most of these people are out of jobs. All around this area, businesses are closing and people are desperate. In the early evenings, if you drive by these Countrywide buildings, you can see inside. There should be hundreds of people, however, in most cases you see no one.

Recently, I was playing golf with a friend who lives in Hidden Hills. When he arrived to play, he was very upset.

The night before, my friend had been invited to a small party at his friend's multimillion dollar house. The friend was an unemployed mortgage broker who'd purchased the house when he was employed and doing very well. He'd been told the party was a social occasion. Happy to go, he'd shown up wearing jeans. When he arrived he immediately realized something was wrong – his friend was wearing a suit, and everything seemed a little "too professional." A few minutes later, he was given a brochure about some Donald Trump condominium going up in Florida. His friend started showing a movie about the development and began telling everyone at the party if they "wanted in," he could immediately assist them with financing a condominium.

Everyone was astonished. A group of people who'd been invited to a party were suddenly being encouraged to buy and finance condominiums thousands of miles away they'd never even seen. My friend got up and left the party upset he'd been suckered into a sales presentation.

While I have nothing against aggressive sales practices, what this story represents to me is someone who is holding on to a paradigm that no longer exists. While people may have been speculating on condominiums sight unseen years ago, this is no longer the case. Here, the mortgage broker was doing everything he could to hold onto a profession and a life that no longer existed for him. This example is extremely important to understand because it has a lot to do with you, your career, and what could end up happening in your life.

From what I understand, the mortgage broker in this example was on his way to losing his house through foreclosure. His world was crumbling around him. Like the man in the store, he was making a fundamental error so many people make: he did not understand how to adapt to a new paradigm. Understanding your paradigm and what you do for a living is the most important thing you can possibly do with your career because paradigms are always changing. The sun does not shine on every *specific type of job* forever. We get comfortable with one specific [type of job](#) and believe we should always do this.

A couple of weeks ago, while shopping, I met a man who was working in the computer industry. He told me he had made over \$250,000 a year just two years ago writing software for mortgage companies. Now, he was working in a store selling sweaters and shirts to men for probably no more than \$12 an hour.

"There are no jobs for programmers in the mortgage industry," he told me.

The man who was trying to sell mortgages and Trump Condominiums in Florida was in the business of *sales*. If he realized this, he would likely not be having the problems he is having now. He could apply to every [sales job](#) available and probably easily get one.

The man I met selling sweaters in the store was also in a business: The business of programming. Instead of applying to every [programming job](#) available, he was stuck in believing he was a specialist in programming computers for mortgages and, for this reason, he could not find a job.

In everything you do, you need to understand what your basic business is. Far too many companies and individuals fail to understand this. They end up "going out of business." Some of the largest and most profitable companies in the United States used to be railroad companies. These were the "Internet moguls" and tycoons during their age. However, when trucks came along, none of these railroad companies entered the [trucking industry](#). Instead, they clung to the belief they were in the railroad business. If they had realized they were actually in the [transportation](#) business, they could have started offering trucking and other transportation services to their clients. Because of their belief they were in the railroad, and not the transportation, business many great railroad companies ended up going by the wayside.

In your career, it is essential you realize what business you are in. You should not be blinded by the specifics of what you do and, instead, should understand the generality of what your specific profession entails. This is the way to stay employed, and it is also the means to continual improvement.

W. Edward Deming gives an excellent example of a time when there were carburetors in all cars. The people who made

carburetors continued to improve their product. Soon, however, fuel injection was developed, and everyone stopped using carburetors. With very few exceptions, many very large companies that formerly made carburetors went out of business. They should have realized they were in the business of finding better ways of putting the correct mixture of fuel and air in the combustion chamber of engines.

Something similar happened to the makers of Swiss watches in Switzerland. The Swiss invented the quartz movement; however, they failed to realize the gigantic impact this would ultimately have on their business. The Swiss continued to make mechanical watches and market these even after inventing the quartz movement. Eventually, the number of people making watches in Switzerland went from 65,000 to around 10,000 in a decade. The Swiss failed to realize they were in the business of making watches and they did not take into account the needs of their market.

What you need to do in your career is the same thing companies need to do: understand your market. When you understand your market, you have the ability to provide your customers with products and services that meet their needs. You and your career are a product. You need to sell yourself to the correct audience and know where and how to market yourself in the best way possible. You need to know what your audience wants and requires.

In 2001, General Motors released the Pontiac Aztek. The car was voted the ugliest car in the world by the British newspaper, *The Telegraph*. The vehicle was criticized many times in Steve McConnell's book about software design, *Code Complete 2: The Pontiac Aztek and the Perils of Design by Committee*. According to another commentator, Dan Norman:

In the mid-1990s, then-General Motors Corp. Chairman John G. Smale decided to bring the world's biggest automaker a dose of the 'give-the-people-what-they-want' ethic that'd animated Smale's old company, Procter & Gamble Co. And what the people wanted was sexy, edgy, and a bit off-key – in short, a head-turner. General Motors' culture took over from there. Design would be by committee the focus group extensive. And production would have to stick to a tight budget, with all that sex appeal packed onto an existing minivan platform. The result rolled off the assembly line in 2000: the Pontiac Aztek, considered by many to be one of the ugliest cars produced in decades and a flop from Day One.

The Aztek represented all that is wrong with GM's design process, that official said. The concept car actually did something few GM designs do: arrive before a trend -- this time, the crossover SUV that combined the attributes of a truck and a passenger car. And GM had high hopes to sell 50,000 to 70,000 Azteks a year, putting Pontiac on the cutting edge.

Then came production, the executive said. The penny-pinchers demanded costs be kept low by putting the concept car on an existing minivan platform. That destroyed the original proportions and produced the vehicle's bizarre, pushed-up back end. But the designers kept telling themselves it was good enough. "By the time it was done, it came out as this horrible, least-common-denominator vehicle where everyone said, 'How could you put that on the road?'" the official said.

Sales never reached the 30,000 level needed to make money on the Aztek, so it abruptly went out of production. The tongue-in-cheek hosts of National Public Radio's "Car Talk" named it the ugliest car of 2005. "It looks the way Montezuma's revenge feels," one listener quipped. <http://www.codinghorror.com/blog/archives/000321.html>

In an oval office interview in January of 2006, President George Bush said he believed General Motors and Ford needed to produce "a product that's relevant." The idea of producing a relevant product is one of the most important things any manufacturer can do. Being a relevant product is essential for your success, as well. In a bad economic climate, one of the strangest things people do is try and continue being a 'product' that's no longer needed. This is nonsensical.

You need to be relevant and understand what skill you're offering. The worst thing you can do is not be relevant to the market you're serving. It's easy to be relevant when you understand what you're doing and what purpose you serve. Being relevant is about much more than just getting a job, however. Being relevant also relates to serving your employer with the skills they need. You need to understand your market and what your customers want.

One of the biggest failures in my career was due to not understanding my market. When I got out of [law school](#), I worked for a federal judge who had recently been appointed to the bench. My interest in this job was being brilliant and showing how smart I was, what a good writer I was, and how much detail I could put into opinions, and more. I did a very good job with the harder intellectual aspects of the work. The judge I worked for admired my intellectual abilities, but his biggest concern was for me to produce work that was completely error free. Because I was so interested in the intellectual aspects of the work, I did not always give him what he wanted in terms of error free work. This was upsetting to him. Because of my concern with the "meat" of what I was doing, and not the details, I ended up leaving this position after one year, when I'd been hired for two. Had I not left, I am pretty confident I would have lost my job. I was not giving my employer what he wanted and, instead, was making up my own rules.

The next [legal job](#) I held, I was sought out for my intellectual insight into legal issues. You need to know your audience.

When you think about your career, how often have you made up your own rules? You need to understand your audience. You need to know you are in the business of selling a product to people, and you need to give them what they want. You are a product, and your job is to give your audience exactly what it wants. This is the way to get--and keep--a job.

THE LESSON

Understanding what you do for a living is very important for your career. You should understand the generality of your specific profession. You and your career are a product. You need to know where and how to market yourself in the best way possible. You need to be relevant and understand the skills you are offering. Being a relevant product is essential for your success. It's easy to be relevant when you understand what you are doing and what purpose you serve. Being relevant is more than just getting a job. Being relevant also relates to serving the employers with the skills they need. You need to understand your market and what your customers want. This is the way to stay employed, and it is also the means to continual improvement.

Read More About You Are a Product:

- [Your Job Search is a Marketing Operations and You Are the Product](#)
- [The Dangers of Complacency](#)
- [Treating Your Career Like a Small Business](#)

Read More About Not Understanding the Company and What it Does (or Only Understanding it Superficially):

- [Production Assistants and Assessing Your Employer's Needs](#)

- See Look at Your Job (or the Job You Are Seeking) from Your Employer's Point of View

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