

## The Most Valuable Work Is Work That Repeats Itself

By *Harrison Barnes*

When I was 18 years old, I once responded to an advertisement in the paper that stated a company looking for janitors was offering \$15.00 an hour (which now would probably be the equivalent of at least \$25.00 an hour). Back then, 20+ years ago, that was pretty good money for a janitor in Detroit. I could not believe my luck in seeing such an advertisement and I called up the number on the advertisement. The person on the other end of the line told me to "come right over!" The location of the janitor job was around an hour away from my house but I did not care. For that kind of money, I was willing to drive that far, to and from work at any hour.

I pulled up into a plaza of industrial buildings and noticed the parking lot next to my destination address was completely full. In fact, there was a long line of people that came clear on out the front door. I got in line and stood there with probably about 100 other people who were all applying for the same job. Some came from 2+ hours away, and every single one of them was incredibly enthusiastic about working as a janitor for \$15.00 an hour. I wondered how with so many people in line I possibly stood a chance of [getting the job](#). I was wearing a pair of khakis and a tie and wondered if I was overdressed.

The line was moving quite slowly; however, after around 45 minutes I snaked my way to a reception desk and was handed a standard employment application. The receptionist told me to go into a room and fill it out. Since I did not have a lot of experience, this was quite easy. I then was told to go to another room and wait. I went into the waiting room and sat there with around 10 other people. Every few minutes, one of us was taken into an "interview room". I remember wondering to myself at that time, what the company really did. There was only a suite number on the door and there were no signs of any business apart from the interviews that were going on. It was a very unusual set up, and I found myself wondering what the company actually did.

After 20 minutes or so I was taken into the interview room. It was a sparsely furnished office that had what looked like a new cheap leather couch, and some other pieces of furniture that looked more like they belonged in a bachelor's apartment. Inside the interview room was a guy who looked like he was in his early to mid 20s, who had a big smile on his face. He remained seated at his desk, while on a chair off to the side, was a girl who appeared to be his girlfriend, in tight jeans, smiling and looking pretty bored.

"Hi. I'm Jerry! We filled the janitor job already!" the young man said. "But I have got something for you!"

Jerry started to explain something about selling knives door to door and selling other knickknacks and how I could earn hundreds of dollars a day. I did not really understand it but I agreed to be there the next morning. From what little I understood, there was a "commission" offered.

I had a strange sense of excitement but I was also disappointed walking out of the office. On the one hand I was excited to have landed a job that theoretically could pay hundreds of dollars a day; however, on the other hand, I knew that I had been suckered with an [advertisement for a job](#) that really did not exist. The place of business I had visited had only consisted of three small offices, and there was no way that the company could have needed a janitor, let alone a janitor for \$15.00 an hour.

The next day I got up for work and proceeded to navigate my Yugo through the rush hour Detroit traffic. I arrived at the office around 25 minutes late because I was not prepared for the sluggish drive. When I got there everyone was hopping into their cars and so forth with a bunch of various merchandise (cheap sets of knives and all sorts of ridiculous knickknacks) to go out and sell. I found Jerry, who shook my hand and told me that I would be partnering up for my first couple of days with another sales guy, Dave. I met Dave, who looked like a farmer, and helped him with a couple of boxes that we put in the back of his pickup truck.

The few of the company's offices I had seen were somehow all connected to a warehouse that was filled with all sorts of stuff that looked like it had fallen out of a plane from China. There was cheap clothing, small carpets, kitchen utensils, really bad electronics with strange names on them and more. It did not take a brain surgeon, nor a lot of business experience in this case, to figure out that this guy was (1) importing knickknacks from China for next to nothing, (2) putting ads in the paper for janitors paying more than a janitor was worth, (3) attracting guys desperate for a good job like me, and (4) setting guys like me loose on the street with his shoddy merchandise to try and sell it for a commission.

Dave was a farmer, or used to be. He lived with his mother on a sugar beet farm around 90 minutes from the office/warehouse. Something had happened that made that particular line of work no longer good for Dave, who was in his late 20s.

He had been selling these items for a few weeks, and as we got into the car he told me that I had missed "a great morning" and should never arrive at work late again. At the time, in the late 1980s, Japanese management was really in vogue and Jerry led everyone in Japanese-style exercises inside a warehouse each morning, which is what the Japanese companies did with their employees, Dave told me. For 20 minutes or so each morning Jerry would lead a group of 50+ men in various stretches and cheer about the company to get everyone excited about the day ahead. Then he would give them a pep talk and hand out \$20 bills as "bonuses" to the people who had done the best with sales the day before.

"Jerry handed out over \$200 this morning!" Dave exclaimed.

"This is an incredible opportunity!" Dave produced a brochure that looked like it had been done on a typewriter, which promised earnings of over \$100,000 a year if someone excelled at selling products on the street for six months. Dave told me he was one of the top salesmen and would be definitely earning over \$100,000 a year within six months. I noticed the brochure had a few typos.

Dave could not stop talking about what a great opportunity this was.

He told me that we were going to Downtown Detroit to sell the knives and stuff he had brought along with him that day. I did not ask about the logic of this plan, but within an hour or so we were downtown and walking along a dangerous looking section of Gratiot Avenue. Dave had brought a blanket that looked like his mother had knitted it. He made me take all of our wares out of the truck bed and put them in the front seat, covering them up with the blanket. He told me that he knew other salesmen who had been robbed.

We walked down Gratiot Avenue with our collection of knives, etc., and would stop to talk with people at bus stops, others standing on street corners, and any other people who just happened to be walking down the street. We were working in a really bad neighborhood and everyone we approached seemed amused, and willing to give us a little time of our day. Additionally, we were the only white people. The site of a white farmer with his unique "farmer-like" accent, plus an 18 year old kid in a tie carrying knives must have looked entertaining.

Detroit has been undergoing a massive collapse for decades. At the time, the street we were walking down had mostly boarded up stores. However, despite all of the boarded up stores, there was the occasional liquor store, rent to own store, pawn shop, or other shops that seemed like a good prospect. Our one and only sale of the day came in a liquor store.

We walked into the liquor store and a young Arabic man and his sister were standing behind a bullet proof glass. When we tried to talk to them about purchasing our cheap tiny radios and knives they could not hear us through the glass. I remember they made us stand out of the way while they helped several customers purchasing beer and other essentials in the middle of the afternoon, and after a few minutes the guy came out of the cage, leaving his sister behind the glass.

The man was really interested in the knife set and radios and agreed to buy five or six of each item. Dave was ecstatic. However, as the man went back behind the bullet proof glass to get the money his sister started yelling at him, telling him that he was spending money recklessly and so forth. One look behind the glass revealed to us that he had made this mistake before. I remember he had a bunch of tee shirts that he was selling, and one of them was a confederate flag. Not a good idea in this neighborhood. For several minutes the brother and sister fought in Arabic and eventually she reached for a cordless phone and started calling someone whom I assumed might be their father, to protest the pending purchase. The guy opened the cash register and handed us the money for the knives and the radio and we got out of there and went down the street to a fast food restaurant for lunch.

Dave treated me to lunch and talked very enthusiastically about the job. He said that this work was going to make him very wealthy, and it was clearly the best job he had ever had. He told me that I was very lucky to have been hired. Deep inside though, I could not help but think that everyone who showed up for work had been hired. It was more a question of how many people actually made the leap and came in for work.

By the end of my first day of work we had made a grand total of \$28 in commissions for our cash sales. Dave and I split the money. After lunch and gas expenses I was not left with very much money for the work I had done, maybe a dollar or two. And I was not even the one who made the sale! When we got back to the office I remember I went in to talk with Jerry. He was sitting on that chintzy couch with his girlfriend, who was smoking cigarettes and looked very happy.

"This job does not make a lot of sense," I told him.

"Of course it does!" he said beaming with enthusiasm.

"No it does not," I said. "I made \$14.00 today and we went all over Detroit and walked the streets the entire day. It makes no sense."

"Here, things will be better tomorrow," Jerry said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a giant wad of bills that was at least three inches thick. It looked like his take from the day. He handed me a \$5 bill. I took the money and walked out of the office.

I did not go back to the job the next day. I will always be grateful that somehow I got a job delivering pizzas for Domino's a few days later. That was a job. Each night I would pull up to a house and get paid \$1.00 for delivering the pizza--plus minimum wages, plus tips. In addition, I got to eat free pizza all day. Every single day I went to my job delivering pizzas, I made money. I did not have to worry about commissions and if I was going to make the next sale. I always had something to rely on, something steady. I did this job with every ounce of enthusiasm that I had because I valued it. I actually never felt like quitting because compared to the job I had had before, it was the greatest job I could imagine.

There was a huge problem with the job I had been working for Jerry, and it was this: I did not have any repeat work. There was repeat work in the sense that I could have gone out every single day and attempted to sell knives and cheap radios from China. The job was certainly repetitive. But the sort of stuff I was selling was not the stuff that people would buy more than once. The quality was cheap and people would not buy the same junk twice. After all, no one needs more than one set of Ginsu knives. I was selling stuff that could not possibly give me repeat customers or any sort of repeat work. And without any sort of repeat work, a job is useless.

The reason companies fail and people fail is due to the fact they are not getting "repeat work". If a company is not building good cars then after the car breaks down several times people will choose a different car for their next car. The failure to build a car people want to buy over and over again is one reason companies like General Motors have failed. If someone does bad work, then he or she will not get any new work or *repeat work*. If someone offers you a contract rather than a full time position, this means they are offering you a job without the promise of any *repeat work*. There are plenty of jobs out there that offer temporary or one-time-job type work, but there are very few jobs that truly offer good *repeat work*. When it comes to judging the ultimate value of any job, there is nothing more important than the possibility of generating *repeat work*.

One of my very first employees was a relative of mine, who I moved out to Los Angeles from Oklahoma and allowed to live in my house. I paid her \$35,000 a year to do various clerical duties for me. It was more than she deserved for such work but her father had been very nice to me when I was young. Her father had died flying a helicopter ambulance and I had always wanted to help her when she got older and graduated from college. Once my business started getting off the ground, I called her and told her that I had a job for her, and offered her the chance to move to Los Angeles.

When I started, I was in a very small office (ok, I was in my garage), and I sat right next to the FAX machine. This girl was very attractive and had been a model for local department store newspaper inserts and so forth around the small Midwestern town where she had grown up. After she had been working for me for a few weeks, I started to see transmissions come over the FAX machine every few hours from various modeling agencies. She would rush in a few minutes after the FAX had arrived and grab it off the FAX machine. She then started going on various tryouts for [modeling jobs](#) during the day and then

started missing at least a couple of days a week while going out on tryouts. She then started to get the occasional modeling job here or there. I was angry about this, but at the same time I thought this woman was young, and probably very excited to be getting this work.

Then she asked me for a raise.

She told me that she was paid up to \$75.00 an hour to do modeling and therefore was "worth more" on the market.

"How many hours do you model for?" I asked her.

"Usually around one," she said.

"And you need to drive there, drive back and wait around the whole day until they decide to take your picture, right? And this is all for \$75.00 for one hour's worth of work?"

"Yes," she said.

"Do they pay your health insurance and could you be doing this job in 20 years? Will they give you work every single day of the week?" I asked.

We went back and forth a little bit and she kept saying, "But they pay me \$75.00 an hour when I am working and that is at least 5 times what you are paying me!"

She became very resentful about the job I had given her and eventually decided that I was not paying her enough. She started creating all sorts of problems, and I eventually had to let her go. She moved out of my house and I have not seen her since. I feel incredibly bad about this. In fact, it is one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. I remember at the time, I had decided to take a self-improvement class called Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, so I could hopefully influence this woman to come to appreciate what I was doing for her. I am still saddened that I had to let her go, because it ended up destroying the relationship. However, the greatest lesson I got out of this, was that it is important to *always* have *repeat work*, over and above those handsome one-offs.

The boss or company that has a job waiting for you there every single day of the week has given you a gift. This is no different than having a large sum of money in the bank. All you need to do is show up to claim the interest on this money.

When I was a senior at the University of Chicago, I took an economics class from a very famous economist. If I recall correctly, I had to participate in an auction or something in order to get into the class. I do not remember too many specifics; however, I do remember, one day he lectured the class about his job and what it took for the school to make someone like him a tenured professor. He stated that he made \$150,000 a year and that in order for the school to offer someone like him a tenure (a lifetime job), they need to have at least \$3,000,000 in endowment, which translates into \$3,000,000 earning roughly 5% interest per year. He said that based on the fact that he would have the job for the rest of his life, there was really no difference between him and a guy who has \$3,000,000 in the bank. In fact, due to his tenure and the amount of money the school needed to set aside in order to pay him, the economist believed that he was better off than lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and so forth--most of whom never have \$3,000,000 in the bank. Based on the way he looked at it, he said, he was a multimillionaire.

What is tenure in a university? Tenure is *repeat work* and a lifetime's supply of work. It is almost impossible to take someone's tenure away in a university once he or she has earned it. Federal judges are appointed for life, and receive salaries for their entire lives. Having secure, *repeat work*, is no different from tenure. It can make you rich, very rich, if you look at it the same way as the famous economist did at the University of Chicago.

There is a great quote in Jim Collins's new book, *How the Mighty Fall*:

In researching the final stages of decline, looking at capitulation of once-towering companies, I kept thinking about how Professor Bill Lazier began his course on small business management at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He'd walk into class and begin cold-calling students.

"What's the central issue in this case?" he'd push.

Students who had worked at large companies, consulting firms, and investment banks gave answers like "their strategic choices" or "identifying their value chain" or "developing a brand" or any number of other smart-sounding MBA answers.

Unsatisfied by vacuous buzzwords, Lazier would keep pressing, pacing back and forth across the classroom. "No! Think!"

Finally, some student would venture forth, "Well, I don't know if this is what you're looking for, but they can't make payroll next week. The company is going to run out of cash."

Lazier would stop pacing, walk over to the blank chalkboard, and write in giant letters (and I mean giant, at least two feet high) one word: **CASH**.

"Never forget," Lazier would say. "You pay your bills with cash..."

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While editing this piece I was pondering a stunning news story: "General Motors, the Monumental Symbol of American Corporate Power, Seeks Salvation from the Government...." GM--running out of cash. Even while considering a company that once was the largest corporation in the world, Lazier's lesson can demonstrate full force: You pay your bills in cash.

The most important thing for you in your job is to have access to cash as well as, *cash that flows*. Companies fail because they do not have access to cash. People also fail and flounder because they do not have access to cash. Work that repeats itself means access to cash, which is something you should never take for granted. Having longer term access to cash can make or break your career and your life.

You cannot get a mortgage in most cases unless you can prove that you have access to *work that repeats itself*. Banks do not want to take the risk that you will not be able to pay them over the long term. They will generally only give you a mortgage these days when you prove you have access to steady cash flow. Work that repeats itself is liberating because it gives you more options and control over your life and the things you can do. Regardless of whether you are working for Domino's Pizza, or some other big corporation, you need to find *work that repeats itself*.

Going for the quick buck can often be at the expense of your long term career. I remember during the "Dot Com" explosion of 1999 and 2000, many people left law firms for what they thought were going to be jobs of limitless opportunities. Many of these jobs for Internet startups had very little salaries with all sorts of stock options and so forth, which ultimately turned out to be worthless. When these people tried to go back to the [law firms](#) most of them were not hired again. Many of them then spent years meandering around from job to job, never finding a steady income--certainly not anything as good as the jobs

they had left inside of law firms. Thousands of people also left banks and other corporations to take jobs and work that did not *repeat itself*.

There are always going to be numerous temptations out there for various types of jobs and work that does not repeat itself. Work that does not repeat itself, however, is the most dangerous sort of work there is, because there is no long term fulfillment in it. Seek and cherish work that does repeat itself. Even a much lower salary and work that does not on the surface look appealing can be a very worthwhile job if it offers work that repeats itself.

### **THE LESSON**

Repeat work is always more valuable to you than one-offs, however well-paid they may be. Companies succeed or fail depending on their ability to generate repeat business. Repeat work grants you more options and control over your life and actions. Even work with a lower salary, which might not initially seem appealing, can be beneficial if it promises repeat jobs.

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