

## **From Squint to Craftsman**

*Short thoughts on starting out as an analyst*

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The work of an analyst is too stressful, underappreciated, underpaid, and misunderstood for anyone to achieve success at it as a job. In his recent book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, University of Virginia Professor and motorcycle mechanic Matthew Crawford breaks down the egalitarian myths surrounding the “information economy” we’ve inherited in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Instead, he rightfully argues of a societal journey toward mediocrity and incompetence, influenced directly by our collective transition away from manual trades.

If we choose to look at ourselves as, valuing our credentials and education above our actual interest in the chosen field, we easily run the risk of creating a future of professional displeasure and lack of personal fulfillment. Becoming a great analyst takes the same internal character prevalent with any notable master: a “craftsman”-like approach where the individual passionately transforms into an independent thinker who finds objective, personal satisfaction in the quality and result of their work.

Most of us in Generations “X” or “Y” know very little about the mindset required to develop oneself from an apprentice (or in this case of analysts, a “Squint”) into a Craftsman. Here are some suggestions, built upon years of personal experience and observations of others that might provide some benefit:

- **Don’t waste your time!**

If budgeting or financial analysis does not strike a personal cord with your natural abilities or interests, please move on! First off, you will become miserable very quickly with the nature of the work. Second, your performance will not be satisfactory enough to facilitate the “advancement” you thought you could count on by using budgeting to “get your foot in the door” of local government management. If you are passionate about a given area, department, or service, focus on a job there and dedicate yourself to its mastery.

- **Learn Aggressively!**

If a supervisor has to tell you to read or study something, realize that you probably should have been the one (9 times out of 10) who should have told them about it first. Be prepared to invest yourself (even financially) in becoming as strong as possible in your chosen skill sets. Initiative towards your career and passions outside of work is far more valuable than the benefits you gain within.

- **Work, practice, and work some more!**  
Malcolm Gladwell's "10,000 hour rule" separates the merely talented from the masters. When you think of what it takes for a tradesman (electrical, plumbing, masonry, etc.) to achieve an honorable reputation, it becomes quickly apparent that simply having an MPA or MBA without substantial, focused experience is pitifully inadequate. Think about it: as a full-time employee, you need FIVE YEARS of personal commitment and dedication to your work and its assorted skills and duties. You may not necessarily have it with the same employer, and promotional opportunities may present themselves, but if you do not make the commitment in time, the career path will fade out quickly.
- **Share! Contribute! Educate!**  
Despite the schism between professional administration and academics, becoming a master in either domain shares common commitments to learning and contributing to the development of others. In government finance, we have an obligation to pass along our knowledge, ideas, and absolutes to employees, elected leaders, citizens, and fellow practitioners. Opportunities are endless, from creating workshops and offering to speak to school groups, to writing articles and even dabbling into academic-level research. Naturally, the greatest benefit we receive is
- **You may know more, but you will never know better!**  
The most experienced and accomplished are quick to let results speak for themselves when it comes to the values of their arguments. They are also quick to know that not everything they know is absolute. As passionate as a craftsman can be about his or her work, humility cannot be undervalued. This is especially true when we, despite our knowledge and skills, cannot guarantee the results or externalities (positive and negative) of our collective decisions.

Dedicating oneself to the field of analysis as a craft, rather than a rest stop on the way to a desired "career" in upper management, does not mean we are condemned to the cubicle or boiler room for all eternity. Often times, the passionate and committed find themselves advancing faster, whether or not they stay in "budgeting." While we may say that our motives in our careers are as selfless as "saving the world" or greedy as "making a fortune," the only outcome proven to fulfill our spirits in an honest fashion is the personal satisfaction in a job well done. That is the definition of happiness for a Craftsman.