How has the Small Business Resource Center helped you in planning or growing your business?

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Email your story to the business librarian or mail it to:

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111 Library St NE
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All submissions are subject to editing.

NEW BOOK SPOTLIGHT

Winter 2021

In this edition, we've got a profile of Goodwill of Greater Grand Rapids Achieve program Richard Pranger, a combined review of two amazing books that can help you live and learn effectively in the modern world, and of course our new book spotlight.

Remote Resume Review Service

One of our new tools created to better serve patrons through the pandemic is our Remote Resume Review Service. With it, any patron in Kent County can send in their resume and get professional feedback from staff.

As always, the Business Librarian is available for consultations in career services and is a Certified Career Services Professional with the National Career Development Association. Our consultations provide holistic help in the job seeking process, from research and writing to interview prep.

You can access the program through here. Please share with any interested jobseekers!

An Interview with Richard Pranger, Goodwill of Greater Grand Rapids Achieve Program

Interview by Steve Assarian

Steve: How did you get into working for Goodwill, and working with the Achieve Program?

Richard: Before working for Goodwill, I did pretty well in business-to-business sales, but didn't feel a connection or a real passion for what I was doing. I looked for volunteer opportunities, hoping they'd help, but I never found anything that filled the void I felt.

After a few years, my wife became pregnant and I pictured my life as a father. I didn't really like what I saw. I wanted to feel more connected to my community and my neighbors, and to show my family how to serve others; like my parents had shown me.
Fortunately, Goodwill had recently created the Achieve Program and was looking for a business specialist focused on building business relationships and job placement. They had been looking for over a year and had not found the right person, yet...

Steve: Tell me a little bit about Goodwill and your experience with Goodwill. In that same vein, what do you wish people knew about Goodwill that they don’t know?

Richard: Goodwill really demonstrates the interconnectedness of everything. Whether you're donating or buying, it's helping you, it's helping the store, it's helping Goodwill so that other people that are looking for help can get the help they need. Everywhere you look, needs are being met. It's something that's really unique.

Goodwill provides people the opportunity to connect with themselves. Our programs facilitate personal growth. When people are more competent, they’re more confident, and invariably they enjoy a more full life; they’re better brothers, sisters, husbands, parents because they have more dignity and self-respect. And it’s great to be a part of that.

Steve: I think one of the things that Goodwill has really taught me over the years is the value of reuse. It’s something we don’t think about, but it can have a huge impact.

Richard: In 2019, we diverted 12 million pounds into reuse and recycling markets. The things that don't get sold in our stores then go back to go to the outlet where we sell commodities by the pound, and that does very well. And then from there if it's not sold it goes to the commodities market and recycling. We divert so much from the landfill because there's still value there. Rest assured [with] Goodwill, if there is a penny, if there is a half-cent to be made, we are gonna milk every penny from that donation. We keep so much out of the landfill that way.

Steve: How many people are employed by Goodwill of Greater Grand Rapids?

Richard: Roughly 600. Well, we'd love it to be 600, but it’s probably about 500 right now. We need about 100 people for the stores. The administrative staff, you’ve not seen a more lean administrative staff for servicing 600 people, because the focus is on workforce development.

Steve: You personally work on the business and engagement side, is that right?

Richard: I work in the business engagement team and also do community engagement. Right now we'd like to serve more people, so I’m looking and talking to people about our programs. I'm presenting to Michigan Works Path Program Career Coaches to see if we can serve their participants, and that’s why we reached out to you and the library, and also DHHS, places where they have a quantity of people who hopefully are trying to connect with work.

Steve: Is the Achieve program part of a larger group of programs?

Richard: Yes. Right now, we have about 10 different programs serving different populations. Most of those have fundings sources from the state or federal governments.

Achieve is self-funded, so Achieve is the one program that’s open to anyone from the public. Achieve is open to any motivated job seeker, and that’s what differentiates it. It’s the flagship program of Goodwill: we wrote all the curriculum, we control what goes on and don’t have anyone telling us what to do, so we’re able to do a lot of wonderful things. The differentiation is that we have people in our classrooms, or now virtually, from 9 to 2 Monday through Friday, so we're able to really connect with the participants over a long period of time which gives us the ability to find out a lot about them and how to best serve them.

Steve: So you’re working with them 9 to 2, Monday through Friday. What kind of skills would you get as a student through the Achieve program?

Richard: The first part of the program is focused on helping people write their resumes, learning what’s important in a resume, the type of things that would be compelling to a business. [Then comes] help with cover letters, help with the things that have been prerequisites for finding employment, helping people develop and think about their references. We also help them with behavioral interviewing preparation because a lot of jobs have asked behavioral interview questions and a lot of people have no idea how to answer them, or what’s expected.

Steve: Give me an example of a really hairy behavioral interviewing question that people haven’t really dealt with.
Richard: Tell me a time you’ve been confronted with a dishonest coworker and how you handled it. Or a time you had an irate customer and you were unable to satisfy him or her, and how did you handle that?

If you hit them with the hard ones like that they’re like, “Ok, wow, I didn’t know it was gonna be like this!” And then they’re kind of inspired and stories start coming out. It gets people going, thinking about their past. If you can’t articulate your own history, it’s hard for people to believe that you’re going to come and hit the ground running.

Steve: It’s hard to draw on that unless you’re prepared to draw on it.

Richard: Preparation is the most crucial part of interviewing. When you’re able to handle those questions fluently without hesitation, you’ve got them. Nine times out of ten, your competition does not have that ability; they won’t be as prepared as you, if you follow our suggestions. It just sets the stage for the next step in your career; the interviewers are decision makers. You’re going to work there. Impress them.

Steve: Do you feel like that’s the hardest part of the stuff that you teach, or is it something else?

Richard: The hardest part is not the teaching. It’s that people need to latch on to the value of what is being discussed, and that’s your own individual perception. If you don’t fully see the value, it could look like a lot of hard work for people that haven’t thought about it at all and don’t have a lot of work experience. But that’s why we have coaches and instructors that help with brainstorming and are able to help people sort through their history to develop their stories.

Some people with little work [history] are able to create new stories, or talk about how they’ve acquired new skills by the work they’re doing. A little bit of everything to get them to the finish line on the interview questions.

Steve: How do people find out about Goodwill programs? Where do you see people coming and engaging with you?

Richard: For the Achieve program it’s a wide variety. We work with different agencies and organizations throughout the community and there are plenty of them in Grand Rapids. But with the rise in employment [before the pandemic] there’s not been as many participants in the program because people were able to find work fairly easily.

The problem that we’ve seen, the biggest challenge for people, is that they’ve not found jobs that they’ve really connected with, and then they find another job that they don’t connect with. People have been changing jobs quite a bit because it’s pretty easy to find different jobs, but that doesn’t provide security or stability.

What we pride ourselves on at Goodwill is job matches, helping people find employers and opportunities where they’ll feel as good as possible at work; they should fit into the culture and feel respected so that they’re able to do what they need to do to move forward to the next position if that’s not their end game.

Steve: Do you find that job matching and teaching has really changed a lot because of the pandemic, or do you feel like you’re doing the same work?

Richard: It’s the same work, the questions have changed though.

For me, one positive thing that has come from the pandemic is the undeniable fact that everybody has their individual perspective. You do not know what someone else thinks until you’ve talked to them about it. Is this real, is this not real, and any variation there within.

So we’re connecting with people we don’t know, we’re doing this virtually because we’re taking the health and safety of the community very seriously, but we don’t know what people’s feelings are and we don’t know what employer’s feelings are. Those are two things that we definitely get to the bottom of quickly, but it’s important to us to connect people with work where they’re going to feel safe.

So the questions have changed, we just have to drill down on what people are willing to do and not willing to do based on their safety and level of security.
Steve: As someone who operates in this space, where do you see the future of work going from here?

Richard: It’s really challenging to know because of the fact that there are so many low paying jobs that are open now, and people aren’t willing to do the work for that pay. We have to meet someone and get to know them in order to evaluate where they are, build a solid relationship with them, and reconcile the facts with how you’re going to fit in with the economy. How are you going to fit in with the job? What’s important to you? If it’s not money, let’s not focus on it. If it’s money and that’s it alone, of course there can be a bunch of variables, let’s take our time and figure this out.

We have to keep asking the question: what’s the most you can make for what you’re willing to do, and what’s the coolest place you can work doing that? We can’t just burn through jobs; we have to work through those questions. The ultimate goal is long-term stability. Goodwill and our programs offer the venue to help us help others with this.

You can find out more about Goodwill of Greater Grand Rapids here; to find out more about the Achieve Program and what it offers jobseekers, click here.

Review: Dark Horse: Achieving Success Through the Pursuit of Fulfillment and Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World

By Steven Assarian

I had begun reading two books - Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World by David Epstein and Dark Horse: Achieving Success Through the Pursuit of Fulfillment by Todd Rose and Ogi Ogas - planning on writing separate reviews about each.

But their arguments are two sides of the same coin, both getting at something important, because both argue against two common ideals of success: standardization and specialization.

The first idea, which Dark Horse describes as the ‘Standardization Mindset,’ is the implicit belief that career success comes from getting good grades, getting a high-flying college degree, and climbing the ladder of a large organization. Put simply, it’s the idea that there is a clear path to success and the best way to get to the top is to simply walk that path.

Range describes specialization, a companion to Standardization Mindset, which means the best way to succeed is to specialize drastically and early. The earlier we can start climbing in our specialty, the faster we can rise.

Tiger Woods is a common example of both these mindsets. He specialized early, when he was still a toddler, and spent thousands of hours developing the very specialized skill of playing golf. Bill Gates is another; he specialized early in computer programming, and spent thousands of hours developing that specific skill to become one of the world’s richest people. Warren Buffet did the same thing with investing; Henry Ford did so with engineering and manufacturing.

We need not cite examples like these to see how pervasive these ideas are. Everything from how we conceive of our education to what sorts of jobs we value are informed by them. And while we don’t expect to be the next Tiger Woods, we do expect our submission to these ideas to pay off in employment, resources, and status.
This is a problem, because for a lot of us, these ideas simply aren’t working.

Tons of career literature points to the lack of job security as a reason to give these ideas up. But their weakness goes deeper. Even if we had a 1950’s job market, standardization and specialization are rigid ideas built on non-negotiable timelines. They don’t recognize that we all thrive at different times, in different ways, and develop different skills. Further, and this is a central idea of *Range*, the very nature of specialization and standardization makes a person less likely to see solutions to problems that are right in front of their face.

As a counterpoint, instead of a standard ladder, these books contend that a worker should seek to take a more active role in finding work, with the understanding that their work will change. The idea of fit between worker and work is central here.

Fit is a big idea of *Range*, and an underrated benefit of the college experience, because it takes time and energy to develop different ideas about what a person would want to do for the rest of their lives. It also gives a worker a wider variety of mental tools that aren’t available to early specializers, especially information about their own strengths. Only by cultivating self-knowledge can we know where our talents really lie.

One of the best ideas in *Dark Horse* is that talent is not rare. People have all sorts of talents but oftentimes we limit the cultivation of those talents by artificially constraining access to training. We might have a hundred thousand, a million Charlie Parkers walking around the United States right now, but there are only, say, a thousand spots at Juilliard, for example.

But our hypothetical Charlie Parker also doesn’t need to be inspired by divine magic. They just need a little nudge in that direction, for example, liking how the notes sound, or the deftness that fingers move across a sax. *Dark Horse* calls this a micro-motive. The author Annie Dillard illustrated this idea perfectly when a student asked her if she should be a writer, and Annie Dillard responded: “Do you like sentences?”

Standardization and specialization posit everyone has a calling, that everyone should be imbued with a grand mission in life, that we climb the ladder with a grand end in mind. But a lot of people fall into satisfying lives. Micro-motives mean that we don’t need a lightning strike of inspiration to move. We can work with ideas that are much smaller, and grow into inspiration. We need not start with Charlie Parker or Annie Dillard to start making a good life for ourselves.

Like most business books, these titles both go in detail about the Charlie Parkers of the world, names you and I know. *Range* does this well, with lots of stories about different individuals from Kelper to Van Gogh. While *Dark Horse* also has some great, well known stories, Rose and Ogas do a fine job of highlighting people you and I have never heard of - tailors, astronomers, business-people - which points to the utility of their ideas for a wide audience thinking about their careers.

The biggest takeaway is that specialization and standardization often don’t lead to a satisfying life. We don’t understand that what we like doing at twenty might not be what we like doing when we’re fifty. We don’t understand that the targets we’re aiming for, in terms of careers, might not exist tomorrow. The jobs that our children will be doing simply don’t exist yet.

So how can you possibly prepare someone for an uncertain future?

You do it by encouraging them to experiment, to develop different skills, to spend time on work that won’t have an immediate pay-off. And most importantly, you do away with the idea that a career is a set path that comes from above. A career cannot, and should not, be a passive thing. It should be actively steered.

If these ideas were more widespread, we would have happier people, and more importantly, better lives.

I can’t recommend these books enough.
SBRC Services

The Small Business Resource Center has books, trade papers and magazines, pamphlets, and research databases you can use to help your business. But that's not all the SBRC can do for you! We have a number of services that can be useful to the entrepreneur, the non-profit grantseeker, and the job seeker as well!

Remote Reference – If you are looking to start a business, research is critical. A remote consultation with our Business Librarian can get you off on the right research foot. We will dig into market research to provide you with the information you can use to make your business successful.

Non-Profit Funding – Finding funding for your non-profit organization is a big task; the SBRC can make it a bit easier. We not only have books on fundraising for non-profits, but at the Main Library, you have access to the Foundation Directory Online Professional, where you can find the perfect funding source.

Resume Help – The resume can be a frustrating document. You can schedule a consultation with the Business Librarian and he will go over your resume. Whether you're starting with a blank document, or only need assistance with the finishing touches of your resume, the SBRC can help.

Cover Letter Help – Some people breeze through resume writing, but they freeze when they come to the cover letter. If you schedule a consultation with GRPL's Business Librarian, he'll sit down with you and give you useful feedback on your letter.

Call 616.988.5402 x5486 to schedule a consultation, or email businesslibrarian@grpl.org.

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How to Succeed by Creating Your Own Business
Richard Hall & Rachel Bell

Fearless Innovation
A No-Nonsense Guide
Going Beyond the Buzzword to Continuously Drive Growth, Improve the Bottom Line, and Enact Change
Alex Goryachev

Starting & Running a Food Truck Business
Everything You Need to Succeed with Your Kebab on Wheels
Alan Hafner

Bounce Back
How to Fail Fast and Be Resilient at Work