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HOW ABOUT TAKING A TEST?

Taking a test sounds like a weird topic for a column on Small Business, but think about it.

The dislocations going on in the economy will cause massive corporate layoffs. We can anticipate that many good and capable people who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own will do one of three things:

- Start a small business
- Work for a small business
- Go back to school

Going back to school is a counter-cyclical industry. Typically when the economy goes sour, the number and quality of school applicants goes up.

Conversely, when the economy is going great guns, the last thing folks want to do is sign up for school—they're making money, creating opportunities, and generally cashing in on the American Dream.

Back to this Taking A Test idea. The kind of a test I have in mind is a work-related certification—a piece of paper hanging on the wall that says, "I Can Do This."

Once you have that paper, maintain it—take the update courses, renew the license, and do whatever the issuing body requires keeping that paper in good standing.

I have known MD's who would forget birthdays and anniversaries, but would never, ever forget their medical license renewal date.

Why is this important? Because whatever else happens, they can't take it away from you!

You can lose your job. Today, that's no big disgrace. Most of us lose our job at some point.

But if you've passed the test somewhere along the line, and if you've kept your license, certification, or credential in good standing, you've still got the piece of paper on the wall that says "I Can Do This."

If you're competing for a new job, and the other candidate doesn't have the Piece of Paper, guess who has the inside track?

Or if you're on the other side of the desk—you own the business, or you just started the business—

Or if you're on the other side of the desk—you own the business, or you just started the business—you're going to find lots of folks with Pieces of Paper. I was told today of a Charlotte company with 1100 applicants for 100 positions.

LIFETIME LEARNING

IRS even has a tax credit of this name that you can use every year, no matter how old you are.

I think the concept of lifetime learning is more important than the tax credit, though. Whoever you are, and whatever you do, odds are your success pattern will go up if you embrace this lifetime learning idea.

Whatever you were doing 20 years ago, I'll bet you couldn't do it the same way today. For so many of us, that job is gone, and we've had to learn new skills.

I'm suggesting that as you add new skills which you must do anyway, to add them in a way that brings a Piece of Paper as well.

In The Good Old Days, that Piece of Paper was called a college diploma. No more. We now face a bewildering—but extremely stimulating—array of new and interesting things to learn that could lead to all kinds of exciting and worthwhile lives.

Finding these new things to learn has never been easier. Your local Community College is an excellent place to start. I'm not necessarily talking about the Associates (two-year) degree necessarily. Just look in the Adult Education (non-degree) part of the catalog and lead your dreams soar.

I have taught courses ranging from Graduate School to Technical School to Community College, and can tell you that Community College learning is the best education value in America today.

My world of Tax Preparation has just come through an interesting year. Tax Preparation is one of the few fields in America that does not require entry-level certification of technical competence.

In plain English, anyone can hang out a sign and say they are

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in business to professionally prepare corporate, partnership, and personal tax returns. No training, no proof of competence, no licensure is required.

A bill to require an IRS-administered test for minimum practice was narrowly turned back last fall, so that situation still exists today.

But let me tell you, a lot of people in my field have been busy gaining various levels of certification and accreditation!

Here is opportunity knocking! Even though credentials will not required this year, guess which tax preparers will be more attractive—someone with 15 years experience and no credentials, or someone with 10 years and credentials!

And that credential, once earned, cannot be taken from you