



If I Could Give My Younger Self One Piece of Career Advice, This Would Be It

AQUEEL UDDIN MOHAMMED

WYLIE, TEXAS, USA

Abstract: Career success is not just about working hard; it's about working smart. If I could go back and give my younger self career advice, it would be to focus on strategic growth rather than just technical expertise. Early in my career as a network engineer, I believed that dedication and technical skills alone would lead to success. However, I soon realized that professional advancement requires more than just long hours—it demands relationship-building, self-advocacy, and a willingness to take risks. This reflection highlights the crucial lessons I wish I had learned earlier: the importance of networking, the necessity of speaking up for one's career growth, and the value of embracing change. By adopting these principles, young professionals can accelerate their careers and navigate the corporate world more effectively.

Keywords: Career advice, networking, self-advocacy, professional growth, risk-taking, corporate success, career development, working smart

I. INTRODUCTION

If I could have a conversation with my younger self—the fresh-out-of-college version of me, eager to prove himself in the IT world—I know exactly what I'd say: "Work smart, not just hard."

When I started as a network engineer, I was convinced that sheer hard work would lead to success. I spent long hours troubleshooting complex technical issues, took on every task assigned to me, and prided myself on being the go-to person when things went wrong. At first, it seemed like this approach was paying off. My efforts were recognized, and I gained a reputation as someone who could handle challenging problems.

But over time, I noticed something unsettling. While I was stuck solving issues late into the night, others were moving ahead—not necessarily because they were working harder, but because they were working smarter. They were making strategic career moves, networking with influential people, and ensuring they were seen as valuable beyond just their technical skills.

That's when I realized that hard work alone wouldn't get me where I wanted to be. I needed a new approach.

II. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, NOT JUST TECHNICAL SKILLS

For the longest time, I believed my work would speak for itself. I assumed that if I was competent and reliable, promotions and opportunities would naturally follow. That was a huge mistake.

I later understood that in the professional world, who you know is just as important as what you know. The people who advanced quickly weren't necessarily the most technically skilled. They were the ones who had built strong professional relationships. They had mentors guiding them, colleagues advocating for them, and managers who saw them as valuable team players.

I wish I had started networking earlier—attending industry events, connecting with colleagues beyond my immediate team, and seeking out mentors who could help me navigate my career. Once I began to actively engage with people in my field, I found that doors opened more easily. Opportunities started coming my way, not because I had suddenly become more skilled, but because people knew me, trusted me, and wanted to work with me.

If I could go back, I would tell my younger self: "Don't just focus on your technical skills—build relationships. They will take you further than you ever imagined."

III. SPEAK UP AND ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF

Another major mistake I made early in my career was assuming that good work would automatically be recognized and rewarded. I believed that if I just kept my head down, did my job well, and stayed out of office politics, someone would eventually notice my contributions and reward me with promotions and salary increases.



That never happened.

In reality, managers and executives are busy. They aren't constantly thinking about who deserves a raise or a better position. If you don't make your career goals known, you'll get overlooked. I learned this the hard way. For years, I watched colleagues—some with less experience than me—get promoted simply because they knew how to advocate for themselves. They spoke up in meetings, made sure their contributions were visible, and weren't afraid to ask for what they deserved.

Eventually, a mentor gave me a piece of advice that changed my career trajectory: "If you don't ask for what you want, you won't get it." From that moment on, I started tracking my achievements, quantifying my contributions, and scheduling career discussions with my manager. When I finally asked for a raise and presented solid evidence of my impact, I got it. It wasn't because my work had suddenly improved—it was because I had learned to communicate my value.

Looking back, I wish I had developed this skill earlier. If I could advise my younger self, I'd say: "Don't be afraid to speak up. Your work is valuable, but if you don't advocate for yourself, no one else will."

IV. TAKE RISKS AND EMBRACE CHANGE

One of the biggest turning points in my career came when I took a leap into an unfamiliar role. Moving from a hands-on technical position to project management was terrifying. I questioned whether I had the right skills, whether I was ready, and whether I was making a mistake. But in hindsight, that risk was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Growth never happens in the comfort zone. Some of the best opportunities in my career came when I embraced change instead of resisting it. But I didn't always have this mindset. Earlier in my career, I hesitated too much. I stayed in roles longer than I should have, afraid of stepping into new territory. I let fear of failure hold me back from opportunities that could have accelerated my growth.

Looking back, I realize that the professionals who advance the fastest are the ones willing to take calculated risks. They volunteer for challenging projects, accept roles that stretch their abilities, and trust themselves to figure things out along the way.

If I could go back, I'd tell my younger self: "Take risks sooner. You'll never feel 100% ready, but that's okay. Growth comes from stepping into the unknown."

V. FINAL THOUGHTS: THE ADVICE I WISH I KNEW EARLIER

If I had to give my younger self just one piece of career advice, it would be this: Work smart, not just hard.

That means:

Build relationships – Your network will open more doors than your resume ever will.

Speak up – Don't assume your work will be recognized automatically; advocate for yourself.

Take risks – The biggest career growth happens when you step outside your comfort zone.

If I had understood these principles earlier, I could have accelerated my career much faster. But hindsight is 20/20, and the important thing is that I eventually learned these lessons. Now, I pass them on in hopes that others—especially those just starting their careers—can benefit from them.

So, to my younger self and anyone else at the beginning of their career journey: Work smart. Play the long game. And don't be afraid to take control of your own success.