

Working at True Value

My first job seemed to fall into my lap. A simple conversation with the dad of a friend of mine turned into a job offer for the best job I have ever had. His dad owned a True Value hardware store. I had been looking for a job for a while, inquiring at places in my hometown of Ridgecrest, California in January of 2019. I hardly thought the conversation I struck up that day would turn into an interview of sorts, but I learned that sometimes you just have to ask for what you want. I joked that I saw a worker there at the hardware store that looked as young as I was and asked if True Value hired teenagers. A week later I got a job offer to work at that store. I was working as a yardman: filling propane tanks, renting out moving trucks, and loading concrete and other building materials for customers. It was the best job I've ever had because it was my first foray into the kind of independence that makes you grow, work hard, and learn things about yourself, others, and how to make your way in the world. The tasks and projects were interesting and the newness of it all felt like the first day of school every single day. I never quite knew what I would be asked to do on a given day, but it wasn't long before I realized every day would be a growth experience. Most of all, True Value taught me about a lot of truly valuable things. I left on my last day wiser, stronger, and more hard-working than I arrived on my first day.

The rewards weren't all character-based; I also made 11 dollars an hour. Being a teenager at his first job, I was excited to work at such a great wage. I was determined to be worth every penny they were paying me. When I started, my boss did not know where to fit me into the schedule, so he positioned me wherever he could. This flexibility suited me just fine, especially since it meant that I bounced around from role to role, learning how to do nearly every job in the store. Even if I wasn't sure what I was doing, I worked hard. I helped customers find products, got their equipment rentals ready, and loaded their vehicles. Whenever somebody ordered

cement or spackle, I would take their loading ticket and find what they needed in the side bay. Loading cement bags was like hefting a 50-pound baby. It had to be carried gently. Dropped cement bags exploded into clouds of powder that could never be recovered. I worked fast and hard and got strong. The days flew by. Soon, I was on the schedule more and more often. The harder I worked, the more they seemed to need me. Hard work was the first valuable lesson I learned there. It paid off by making the days fly by and creating smiling faces on my boss, coworkers, and customers. Best of all, it generated that satisfaction you get when you know you've done an exceptional job.

Two of my favorite tasks were the two things that made me the most uncomfortable when I first began - filling propane tanks and renting out moving trucks. Filling propane tanks involved putting on safety gloves and goggles to prevent the liquid propane from touching my skin or eyes. From the safety briefing I knew this job was risky. Customers were not supposed to smoke anywhere in our parking lot, but the rule was especially enforced next to the propane tank. Getting a source of ignition anywhere near where we filled the tanks could cause a deadly explosion. The same thing could happen if a person left their gas on inside a camper van that needed to be refilled. Accidentally ignited gas would cause an explosion, and if the ignited gas was headed for a heater or stove, it could blow up the entire van and anybody near it. I learned this the hard way after filling somebody's camper with a running heater. Luckily for us, the wind was blowing enough that day to avoid the heater. If this risky job wasn't enough, I was also assigned to rent out moving trucks. The customer would come to the store to fill out a form for the truck, and I would go to the back lot and get their truck. Before I turned 16, my family was temporarily living in Maryland. I was eligible to get my driver's permit there, but Maryland driving hours did not count towards a California driver's license so my parents waited until we

got to California to start my permit process. That meant that driving those moving trucks was the first driving experience I had ever had. Instead of starting out in a little compact car with a person next to me with an emergency brake, I was driving 26-foot trucks with nobody to help me through the lot. Stressful doesn't even begin to describe the feelings that coursed through me. The dangers involved with propane and moving trucks made me keenly aware that I needed to be careful, trustworthy, and more responsible than my normal self. They say "fake it 'til you make it" and that's what I did. I acted the part of a responsible, experienced person and, in the process, became one.

The big responsibilities just kept getting bigger. In one of our bays, we had a towering machine that we used to crush boxes. The industrial giant could crush an entire stack of boxes like they were made of popsicle sticks. I took the crushed boxes and tied them up so they could be recycled. When I started working at True Value, there were two forklifts - one that had a dead battery and one that had to be started by jumping the battery to the ignition. I was given the job of figuring out a faster way to jump the forklift without having to lift the engine cover. I connected two wires to the ignition and battery and hooked them up to a button I mounted on the dashboard. After I assembled the starter assembly, I pressed the button and the engine turned over and started running. Fixing the ignition gave me a deeper knowledge of how engines work and the task also taught me that you don't always have to know how to do something to try. As soon as they knew I was a problem-solver, I was called on to solve all kinds of problems that came up. My biggest project was setting up the music system. I had to place speakers around the store, a difficult task since every speaker needed its own lead wire in order to work. Electrical work turned out to be in my wheelhouse too. I finished the music system on my last day of work

at True Value. As soon as I plugged in the last speaker and the music played, my shift was over and it was time for me to go home after working at that store for six months.

Over the course of the six months I worked at True Value, I learned a good many values. I learned how important it is to ask for what you want and then to work hard to prove yourself. I learned strength is a product of heavy lifting, both physically and mentally. What's more, I discovered that strength coupled with gentleness is stronger than strength alone. I learned the value of money. I worked hard for that 11 dollars an hour and it gives me a little more pause when I want to spend it. Bringing smiles to peoples' faces was an easy lesson, one that I discovered comes from caring more about the other person than you care about yourself. One of the greatest lessons I learned is that responsibility comes from living up to a higher standard than you previously had for yourself. Being willing to try things you've never done and solve problems that feel beyond your abilities breeds a level of confidence that can't be gained through shortcuts and passing off the job to someone else. Working at True Value was the best job I ever had because I value the lessons that came with it. Albert Einstein famously said, "Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value." My first job taught me why that quote is so true. When you live that way, you are a success, even if you are still only making 11 dollars an hour.