Thriving by developing in our professional and personal lives

General Features



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Our attitudes and perspectives can impact our professional and personal lives. We consider how to reinvent ourselves and expand what we believe we can do.

As we launch our small group workshops as part of our Returners 2 Work programme, we thought this would be a good time for us all to reflect upon our approach to work and life – the importance of what we want to achieve, how we develop the mindset that will get us there, and how we all have the potential to grow and learn…

The concept of ‘genius’

The concept of ‘genius’ didn’t start out as its popular usage today would have us believe – which would be something like ‘exceptional intellectual or creative power

or other natural ability'. This suggests that genius is a quality reserved for the lucky few who naturally excel at something, while the rest of us are destined for mediocrity.

In fact, the word's Roman origins suggest that a genius is a guiding spirit whose job it is to help us progress through life – and we each have one. You can read more about this in Myles Downey's book Enabling genius: a mindset for success in the 21st century. But, in summary, he invites us to take the limits off our performance by understanding that genius is available to all and that we can each develop a unique individual genius in any discipline, craft or skill.

We build our genius through the principles of desire, mindset and identity, with learning at the centre of them all.

Desire: We are happier, more motivated and more productive when we have desire, or what might also be called drive. This is fuelled when our work is in service of a higher purpose, we have autonomy over it, what we are doing is inherently good or satisfying, and our progress and impact is visible.

Mindset: This is about aiming for, and believing, that we can achieve more, as well as eliminating things that diminish our performance and enjoyment. Those with a 'growth mindset' both seek and thrive on challenge, and we are at our most productive and satisfied when we are in what is called 'flow'. In a 'flow' state, we become absorbed, we lose self-consciousness and the worry of failing, and we may even lose track of time! Of course, we may still fail along the way so our mindset needs to accommodate the challenges, change and complexity we face in a way that we are enhanced, not diminished, by our experiences.

Identity: Assuming that with our 'growth mindset' we want to continue to grow and learn, then our identity will also be coming along for the ride. Just as our current identity has been built from the selection and interpretation of our experiences so far, we can continue to develop and edit our identity as we go. Rather than saying 'I am what I am', we can shape and reshape the things that make up who we are based on our situation, aspirations and intentions. If we see ourselves as works in progress, we can remove our own self-imposed limits to progression.

When referring to developing 'genius' in any skill, Myles Downey gives the example of a consultant developing their skill as a salesperson. This is hugely relevant to tax

professionals, many of whom work in practice. Your progression as an adviser may well be stifled if, in addition to being great at tax, you are not able to sell your service. Too often, the belief that ‘I can’t sell’ limits efforts to develop this skill and engage in the activities that drive sales success.

Learning

Our ability to learn is fundamental to achieving our potential – and the path to genius! Reflecting a mindset where we seek and thrive on challenge, we learn the most when we are attempting things that are harder than others are doing. We must practice them purposefully, with focus and clarity on the particular skill we are trying to refine, and do it in a way where we can get feedback.

What does this look like for increasing your success in generating new tax engagements? These may seem obvious but here are just some of the ways you can achieve your desires, strengthen your mindset and develop your identity:

- Pick up the phone more often, and attend networking events where your clients and potential clients may be. If you feel uncomfortable, it’s because you are challenging yourself to learn something new. You might need to remind yourself of the things that feel second nature to you now but which you used to find hard.
- Observe others who do this well and ask them how they developed this skill.
- Look for courses to help you work on your skills and where you can receive immediate feedback on specific areas; for example, working a room, communicating your proposition, negotiating and closing a deal.

These are simply examples of how you can consider and reframe your identity. I invite you to think of your own ‘I can’t…’ phrases and challenge your assumptions about what you can achieve.

An ongoing journey…

If you have already thought of a few areas where your ‘identity’ could be reshaped and your ‘genius’ developed, that’s brilliant. Of course, this is not a one-off exercise but an ongoing journey of evolution, evaluation and reshaping. That said, natural

points for reflection often arise after a major event or change outside of work, a change of role or job, or after some time spent away from work. Embracing genius and reframing your identity is even more important at these points.

That’s why these frameworks will feature in the upcoming Returners 2 Work: Small Group Workshop Programme for members of the ATT and CIOT, which I’ll be supporting (see the box for further details). The programme is aimed at those who are returning, or who have recently returned, to their role in tax following a period of absence (which could be as little as a few months or as long as a few years) for reasons that might include parental leave, caring, secondment or health.

For anyone in this position, there is likely to be a lot to consider around your career (on top of everything else you have going on). First of all, what about your capabilities? There may be some rust there but with your ability to learn, and a bit of time and grace from colleagues, you will get back up to speed. But you will also have acquired new insights and perspectives that will enhance your capabilities, and you may have forgotten about some of the things you’re great at that you take for granted. And perhaps your views of what you want and what you term a success have also developed since you were last in work. I encourage you to set aside some time to reflect on this. And please do join us at the Returners 2 Work programme if you think you would benefit from support in your own return to work.

The Returners 2 Work: Small Group Workshop Programme 2025

This is a six-month programme, combining in-person and online group sessions, group and peer coaching, and the support of a community of fellow returners, for those who want to rebuild their momentum and their mojo after a period away from their role in tax.

Returning to a role after a period of absence can be challenging and disorientating. Far too many returners find it difficult to regather momentum or recalibrate their direction and can often lose their confidence in the process. But this does not need to be their experience.

Whilst the organisations in which these people work have a responsibility to address these challenges, there is also room for external support: through access to a community of individuals with shared experience, career and personal development

content and tools focused on returning to work in tax, and coaching.

The ATT and CIOT are stepping into this space through launching this new programme, which is part of the wider Returners 2 Work programme, an initiative launched by the Joint CIOT/ATT Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.
You can register your interest at: https://forms.office.com/e/jA6tg90UFmthat

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See www.tax.org.uk/returners-2-work-small-group-workshops-2025 for an outline of the Returners 2 Work programme. If you would like more information, please contact Ruth Punter or Emma Barklamb at ebarklamb@ciot.org.uk.

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