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# COMMUNICATION

## What's Your Superpower?

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I listened to the book *Linchpin* by the outstanding branding and marketing expert Seth Godin. His basic premise is that you have a choice—you can be a factory worker or a linchpin. A factory worker focuses on doing repetitive tasks well. A linchpin applies unique skills, expertise or knowledge to add additional value and become indispensable.

If your focus is on those factory worker tasks, you will continually lose ground in your career. Your role becomes a commodity, and as soon as others are found who can do it cheaper or faster, your position is in danger. Your role can easily be outsourced or automated.

As actuaries, we like to think of ourselves as linchpins. After all, we studied very hard to achieve our professional designations, and are recognized as having unique skills. But are you a linchpin among other actuaries?

This is particularly apropos when you are in a career search. The most successful here are the “Career Search Linchpins” who figure out ways to distinguish themselves from everyone else and truly master niche marketing. Instead of worrying about their competition, they focus on what makes them unique to stand out in the crowd.

Toward the end of Seth’s book, he asks, “What’s Your Superpower?” Figuring out your superpower is the key to distinguishing yourself.

Seth drew the analogy to comic books, where the lesser known superheroes would always introduce themselves by describing their superpowers. This made them memorable.

So how do you introduce yourself to networking contacts, hiring managers and executives at your company? Do you present your superpowers? Do you even know what they are?

When you present a title, like “I’m a pricing actuary” or “I’m a project manager,” you aren’t presenting a superpower. You’re just telling the listener into what slot to place you, along with



all of the other people who are in that same slot. You’re making that listener less interested in even hearing about your superpower, and “tainting” it by whatever baggage that person attaches in their own mind to your opening statement. (*“Actuaries are boring and can’t communicate.” “Project managers are too process oriented.”*)<sup>1</sup>

When you tell someone “I can work in many industries,” “I can do lots of things,” or “I have transferrable skills,” any superpower you might have presented begins to decay. You are avoiding the laser-like focus that generates true engagement and raises your profile in your stated niche.

### WHAT IS A SUPERPOWER?

It’s the project manager who is able to take troubled multimillion dollar projects and deliver them on time and within budget.

It’s the pricing actuary who can design products that increase market share while still achieving profit objectives.

### SO WHAT’S YOUR SUPERPOWER?

This is the tough question for many. We’re not so comfortable taking a hard introspective look and coming up with those, much



less presenting them in public. But that's the essential component of marketing!

Particularly many job seekers get beaten down by the frustration of marketing themselves and not getting the recognition they feel they deserve. They haven't learned to present themselves in terms of their superpowers, and lack of success in their search begins to make them feel like they don't have any.

LET ME ASSURE YOU, YOU DO HAVE SUPERPOWERS! Your past bosses recognized them, and the colleagues who enjoyed working with you recognized them. It may just be that they came so easily to you that you didn't actually acknowledge them as superpowers. (For more on this, see *Do You Know How You're Doing?* at <http://www.JHACareers.com/KnowHowYoureDoing.htm>)

You just need to get deeply in touch with your own superpowers, so you can present them with confidence. That will truly engage people, and start the upward spiral that leads to interesting new opportunities. ■



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#### ENDNOTE

- 1 Note that I'm not saying that these are true statements, just that they are examples of common baggage listeners might attach to those opening "titles."