

What D'Ya Know?



LIFETIME LEARNING IN PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

■ Years ago, high school sweethearts Jack and Jill went off to different colleges after being named king and queen of the senior prom. Now they're both 45. He earns \$47,000 a year as an assistant shoe store manager; she makes \$154,000 as an advertising executive.

Jack got by without studying much in high school, making C's and the occasional D while captain of the football team. He quit college after two years and has hopped from one job to another ever since. Jack's always grumbled about his work. He finds his current job tedious and complains that it doesn't pay as much as the previous one. After work, he's either stretched out on the couch watching TV or hanging out with his buddies at

Mike's Sports Bar. He tells friends he's still waiting for his "big break."

Jill got A's and B's in high school by hitting the books and spending a few hours a day in the library. She continued her good study habits in college, where she earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and then an M.B.A. Every place she's worked, Jill's honed her skills, not only to do a better job but also to prepare for the next step up. After working out at the gym several nights a week, she and her husband sometimes join friends for dinner. Other evenings, Jill takes classes, plays piano or catches up on her work.

Most of us know people like Jack and Jill. No matter what their names, these

two archetypes provide object lessons in how to achieve the American Dream of opportunity, upward mobility and rising living standards.

The Jacks we know start as apathetic students, then treat their jobs casually. They want money and other rewards but put little effort into improving their skills. When work isn't satisfying, they bellyache about life not being fair.

The Jills do better in the workplace because they study hard in school, build their strengths on the job and take responsibility for personal development. Most important, they never stop learning.

Each of us chooses. We can be like Jack—neglect learning and settle for a

lifetime of complaining that holds us back. Or we can be like Jill—committed to the kind of lifetime learning that feeds success.

Jack and Jill started in the same place, at the same time. Their paths diverged because of different attitudes toward learning. Those attitudes go a long way toward explaining the gap in their paychecks.

You earn what you learn. Our parents, teachers and guidance counselors told us this fact of economic life. They encouraged us to get the most from school and always pursue new skills and knowledge. Many of us followed their advice, and America's free enterprise prosperity rests on one of the world's most educated, most highly skilled workforces.

In the future, learning will be even more important to the nation's economic success. We will live and work in an increasingly knowledge-based, global economy. Competition will intensify and the pace of change will quicken, requiring workers to continually upgrade their skills. Our jobs and living standards will depend on becoming even better at lifetime learning.

The challenge starts with improving our schools, so that they prepare us for the next generation of work. As important as education is, it won't be enough. On average, Americans spend just 4 percent of their lifetime waking hours in the classroom—too little to learn what they'll need for decades in a rapidly changing job market.

So we face a second challenge, one just as important as upgrading formal education. We need to put more effort into learning outside the classroom, so we'll be equipped to seize opportunities in a dynamic world. The economy can't create better jobs if America doesn't produce workers qualified to fill them.

What d'ya know?

We toss out this casual greeting all the time, not really inviting a serious response. When it comes to America's economic future, though, no question carries greater weight. How we answer it holds the key to good jobs and high pay.

What d'ya know?

Not enough.

We can never know enough in the modern workplace. A good education serves as the foundation for productive work. Job experience and training build on it. Lifetime learning offers a well-marked path to success. It's up to us to follow it.

