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My Turn

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Temps have a lot to offer

"Give it to the temp to do" is a phrase that echoes through the halls of corporate America everyday. But in this economy, the temp might be anyone – it might even be you.



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Numbered among the 40-odd temps who work for one company are professionals of varied backgrounds. One woman was a store manager. Another was a purchasing manager for a company that went out of business. Another has a master's degree and was previously in training and development. I was a marketing director for a graphic design firm in another city before relocating to Boston, just in time for the transformation from economic "Miracle" to "Mirage." In previous lives, many of us had our own offices – now we just sit outside your door and answer your phone.

For many of us in a tough job market, we see temporary work as a means of paying the rent and of getting a leg up on the competition. Whether an agency temp, who rotates around to different companies, or an "in-house" temp, who works for one company, we all have one goal: to make contacts, learn about potential employers from the inside, prove that we're hard workers, and hopefully be rewarded with the next opening in our fields.

I worked a two-week assignment as a receptionist in a company where the vice president's rule was to not order pens for the office (she was concerned employees might try to steal them – so I brought my own from home and ended up supplying her office with pens).

One of the hardest assignments I had was working in the personnel office of a company. My task: throwing away applicants' resumes. With each toss I imagined my own resume. I had to fight back the urge to call each and every one to wish them good luck!

It really is a test of self-esteem to perform

temporary work. We all know that temps are often given the worst assignments, but we do our jobs and we do them to the best of our ability. At least we're working, we tell ourselves. At least we are in an office environment, at least we have a paycheck. So we dress up and go off to "work" every day, all the while telling ourselves that we are the lucky ones.

Whatever happened to paying your dues? After learning the ropes, getting to know who's who in the company (and trying to get them to know us), and even demonstrating our skills, instead of being viewed as potential full-time employees (who would not have to be trained), we are typecast by whatever function we perform in our "temporary" work.

According to this logic, a good secretary cannot also be a good marketing specialist, training and development coordinator, or manager. (Why did I ever learn to type 60 words per minute, anyway?) In one company, an experienced "in-house" temp was even told that someone who worked as a temp, and whose image was of the same, would not be considered for a "professional" position – even though the temp was more qualified for several openings than many of the applicants and had the advantage of being "in-house." Image often does matter more than substance.

Instead of slamming doors in our faces, company managers and human resource specialists ought to view temps as potential assets – permanent assets. Remember that the person who's there in your office, for either a day, a month, or a year, may be more than "just a temp." If you scratch beneath the surface of your office temp, you may even be surprised to find a real professional!

► Cheryl Somers Aubin, a former marketing director for a Washington-based graphic design firm, worked as a temp in Boston for nearly two years. She recently returned to the Washington area where she is working as a marketing consultant.