

Taking a Journey down the Career Path

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As one travels the path of their career many opportunities and decisions are required. The first decision is one of whether or not a person is dealing with a job or a career and the implication of that decision. A job is work for hire. It is something that is to be done in order to pay the bills and move through the day-to-day trials of life. Career however is something entirely different. While it has aspects of a job, i.e. one hopes to be paid as part of a career and hopes that career pursuits allow one to manage those day-to-day aspects of life. A career is much, much more.

A career is a profession. It is something that one is passionate about. It is something that sustains you in more than just a financial way. If you pursue a career, you are putting more time and effort into those activities associated with the career, than one would do for a job. A career is mentally challenging and stimulating. A career is motivating. A career gives purpose.

So, let's think about what goes into a career. First it is passion. Passion is a very important and probably fundamental to a career choice. Passion gives you the drive and the energy to pursue the day-to-day trials and tribulations. Passion gives you the incentive to deal with those aspects of a job that cause frustration and to challenge the barriers that may be put in front of you. Passion gives you the strength that is needed to learn, modify and challenge. Passion gives a career purpose. Thus, passion is that unspoken drive and guidance that allows you to move forward and keeps you going.

The first litmus test of any decision is measured by one's passion. Am I willing to make the sacrifices required? Am I going to be able to sustain the effort that is needed? Am I going to be able to require the skills that are necessary? If one has passion – the answer to these questions are yes. Timing, however, may be an entirely different story.

Once you have determined the underlying passion – then one starts to think about the overall mechanics of a career. Think for a moment about the aspects that come to mind when someone is thinking ahead with regard to a career. Three things typically come to mind – 1) the job for hire portion, 2) a ladder view, i.e. progression through the position, and 3) what does it mean to be successful. Let's break these items down.

The Job for Hire

The job for hire has many aspects: salary, hours, work environment, specific deliverables, skills, politics, etc. These are the frame work around which we operate. And a person has to make some fundamental choices. The first is the work environment. For those of us in chemical engineering – we have to make that initial choice of academe, industry, or government. Each has its pros, and cons; the advantages and disadvantages. This initial choice impacts the other aspects of the job – the overall work environment, the specific deliverables, the hours, and ultimately the salary. Your passion will help you decide which path you want to take.

How do you know which of the roads to take? Take the time to make an initial self assessment:

1. Can you identify your passion? (Can you at least identify your desire and goal?)
2. What drives you? New and exciting research, dollars, new problems, a deeper understanding of a single complex problem, teaching, etc? See if you can identify these aspects?
3. How important is your free time?
4. How will this job choice impact other aspects of my life? Do I have other aspects of my life?

All of these questions will help to identify if the job portion is going to match your current needs and situations. I am sure several of you are thinking that this is great for when I was just coming out of school or making some of those initial choices, but how relevant is it now. I would argue that you are always making job decisions and you are always balancing the needs of your current situation to that of your career. So these questions are very relevant and are import to assess on a routine basis. If you loose your passion about what you do – you will become miserable and ultimately are not valuable to yourself, your employer or to those around you.

The Career Ladder

Think for a moment, what does a career progression look like? Is it a career ladder or something else? Think of all those self-help and coaching books out there. Think of all those mentor conversations and those published career paths. Is it really a ladder or is it something else entirely. I would argue that we talk of career paths in terms of ladders because one thinks of a steady progression – i.e. instructor, assistance professor, associate professor and ultimately professor or bench chemist, research chemist, associate researcher, and ultimately research fellow. But when one stops to consider, how a person actually moves through these stages is it a ladder?

Brownian motion may be more of an apt description. A journey may be a better one. Or one can consider it to be fate, chance or luck. But for the sake of argument let's describe it as a journey, and look at this in a bit more detail in a moment.

What does it mean to be successful?

If we think of a career as a journey – it is a journey to what or where? You can't begin (or you can if you believe in the fates) unless you have some idea of where you are going. What does it mean to be successful?

For everyone the definition of success is something very personal and one must be able to identify it? Is it positional, i.e. to become a full professor, vice president of research, chief executive officer, chairman of the board? Is it associated with something – discover of xyz, inventor of xyz or marketing sales leader? Is it intellectual freedom – i.e. to pursue a certain project or program? Or is it something else.

In today's environment it is very important to think about your self definition of success. Organizations are changing – some a flatter than what we historically have dealt. Teamwork is a consideration – i.e. the emphasis may or may not be on the individual. The organization that you are in today may not be that which will be there tomorrow. So, when do you reach the prize or is there a prize to be achieved? This constant change impacts how we view ourselves, and it impacts the direction in which we may be proceeding.

Let, me put this into perspective. My definition of success is not positional. I would argue that the position may not be there in 3 years much less 10. Hence, to say I want to be a senior researcher or business unit manager may be entirely impractical. So, what is the prize that I am trying to achieve – influence. My definition of success is to influence the business decisions of my organization such that I can help the organization achieve its goals. I am not tied to a specific science, nor am I tied to a specific department or aspect of the business. This is because for me learning is a top priority and driver – I am constantly looking for new challenges and opportunities, hence my journey is a quest for knowledge.

The Journey

Once you have some idea of where you are headed, we can look at the aspects of the journey. People take trips – but when was the last time you thought about taking a journey. What is the difference between a journey and a trip? Well a trip is general of a short duration. It has a definite time period – 3 days, two weeks a month. A trip has a pretty well defined path and milestones. One can probably equate a trip with a job. A journey is something very different.

When people moved west on the wagon trains – they were taking a journey. There was a goal – to get to Oregon for a new and better life – but the outcome was far from certain. The general path may have been defined but the individual trails were far from definite. They weren't expecting to make a return trip. The process of the journey was just as important as the overall goal. Hence, a journey is something one must take with utmost care and preparation.

So, let us look at the career journey. There is the planning stage and the traveling stage. The major difference between the wagon train and a career journey is that one may never really reach the end of the journey – there may be always something over the horizon. With the wagon train – there was an ultimate destination or you would run into the Pacific Ocean.

What goes into the planning stage? This is pretty much what you would expect – developing the skills needed (packing the bags so to speak with the tools that will be required). Developing the initial maps – working with mentors, supervisors, coaches, and gurus to give you some ideas as to the hazards or trials one might anticipate on the trail or path. Learning the soft skills – getting the genetic code of the organization, learning to read the politics of the organization, teamwork, etc. - required of you to make the journey.

Traveling the path is probably something that we don't give much consideration. But, going back to our western pioneer example – you can see that traveling the path was as important as the planning stage. Each day those pioneers were making assessments and decisions. Did they go out and gather more supplies because of the area they were in? The career corollary would be – are you going out and getting new skills, are you pursuing continuing education goals?

Were they reading the trail? Had the trail changed? Can you continue to follow the original path? The career corollary is of course – what is happening in the environment. Has the organization changed? Has the field changed? Is the terrain as you anticipated it to be? What information is coming to you that will allow you to make a good decision? All of these things must be considered. The trail is constantly changing – and you may have various path choices that need to be taken into account. These are those influences such as health, family, location, desires, etc.

You also have to use your resources – on the path west people had to gather the water when they found it, also they had to stock up on their meat supplies as well as choices of fuels. Similarly, you will have resource issues here as well – your professional societies, your mentors, cynics, etc.

And sometimes you will have to make your own trail. No one but you is going to be able to make these decisions. You will have to go with your gut instinct and style. You will have to know yourself. Hence, you will have to make sure you have what you need.

Tips & Tricks of the Trade

First – it is your passion. This gives you the strength and the courage you will need to deal with the hardships and sacrifices. If you are passionate – the journey is worth it and is more valuable than reaching the ultimate prize.

Packing your bag – continue to develop the skills and learn how to find the resources. You are always packing your bag because the journey is constantly changing.

Enjoy the journey – the journey is the fun part. Think of all the things you will learn and the people you will meet. Think of all the challenges and growth opportunities. You live each day and the objective is not to look backward and say I did it – it is to enjoy the things in between. Recall – life is what happens while you are waiting for the big event.