

Long-range Career Planning During Turbulent Times

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The old method of career planning has become obsolete. The ten-step process outlined here can help us plan for the twenty-first century.

Change is our constant companion. Jobs undergo technical change, sometimes to the extent that current employees can no longer handle them. Entire organizations spring into being to deliver new products or penetrate previously untapped markets. Other companies downsize dramatically and quickly for a great

variety of reasons. "Job security" has become an oxymoron at all levels, and long-range career planning may appear futile.

We believe, however, that a new model of career planning is emerging. It is developmental and takes a long-term view while laying a foundation for short-term survival. In this approach, "success" has been enlarged to include spiritual and emotional dimensions as well as traditional economic measures of "making it." From this perspective, finding personal meaning in work is important, and the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" receives attention throughout one's life. Finding meaning requires attending to "being" goals that go beyond "What do you want to do?" "Being" goals involve the answers to "What is worth doing?" and "What is my purpose in life?" They derive from meditating on ideals for living completely. Answering these questions can be highly motivating; ignoring them leads either to eventual burnout or to a joyless "drivenness."

To understand our emerging twenty-first century career planning model, it helps to contrast it with the prevalent but obsolete model that many career counselors label the trait-factor ap-

proach. This model's classical expression typically involved the five steps depicted in **Figure 1**. First came self-assessment of "traits" (aptitudes, interests, abilities, personality), perhaps with the help of a career counselor. Second, people assessed career options, which involved determining the market demand for "good" jobs and studying their physical, emotional, intellectual, and skill requirements. Third, people rationally tried to match personal traits, market demands, and job requirements, ideally without undue pressure from family or friends. Then they identified career goals and undertook the preparation and other actions necessary for attaining them.

Realistic people knew the match would never be perfect. They knew that some changes were to be anticipated in themselves, the nature of work, and the economy. For them, career planning was an ongoing process, not a once-for-life decision.

The most common approach to career planning, however, has been to do nothing, to drift until there is a crisis. This stance is similar to the motto of many managers: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." For many people in a wide variety of situations, this approach has actually worked. Somehow things have eventually fallen into place. More recently, however, with corporate mergers, changing political winds, and economic upheavals, many people are beginning to feel the need to plan to avoid disaster. They see too many employees being displaced after 20 or more years of loyal service to one organization. Most people are realizing that we cannot predict what options will be available even a few years from now.

Given this new situation of turbulent times and uncertain potential career paths, how does one engage in effective career planning? We follow the nonlinear model depicted in **Figure 2**. It is a very brief synthesis of some current career literature and emerging practices.

What do we do when we follow this model, and how does it work in practice? Anecdotal

examples can illustrate how various people, including the authors, have applied the model with some success. The suggested readings at the end of this article will allow further exploration of the process.

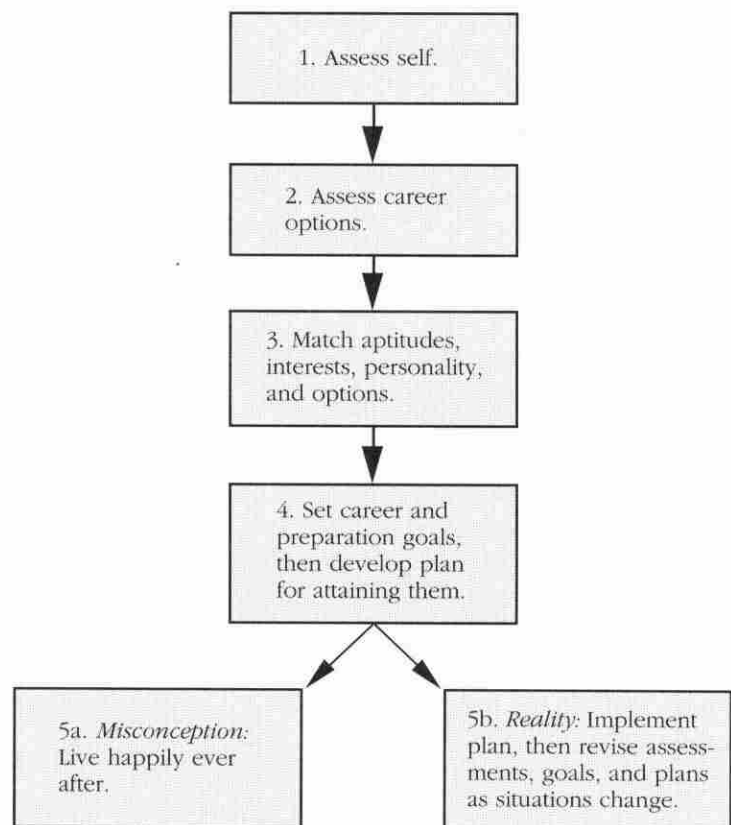
Make each day a quest for learning and personal development. We seek vitality and joy in living by following our own spiritual or emotional path. We find ways to become aware of our deepest wisdom while planning for a career, family, and other aspects of our lives. In the authors' experiences with their own careers, as well as among career counseling clients they have seen and executives they have known, anything less profound frequently results in a feeling of something missing in life. This void may not claim one's attention until mid-life or even later.

Most people in our culture are, in varying degrees, unaware of their deepest feelings and desires. In one sense it is "normal" to be that way. It happens because as children and young people we concentrate on learning to adapt to the adult world; we lose our childlike spontaneity. We usually do not realize we have lost touch with who we are until that vague feeling that something is wrong hits hard. Typically that feeling surfaces at mid-life. Unfortunately, it frequently takes a major life event such as the disruption of family or career to make us attend to these fundamental, soul-searching issues. Many of us never truly "find ourselves," either because we do not know how to do it or because it is too hard emotionally.

Practices that have helped many become somewhat more aware of the deep parts of themselves include such things as art, music, crafts, therapy, meditation, dream analysis, active imagination exercises, articulating and developing one's personal mythology, walking alone on a beach or in the wilderness, and many other activities. The key seems to be taking the time to allow a voice or vision to emerge from within, not looking to an outside person to give an "answer." Also, we must seek wholeness, not perfection. Reading books such as those listed at the end of this article provide some starting points. Career plans then gradually begin to shift. Seldom is radical change required to begin to be more true to yourself. More often it is an evolutionary process. It begins by approaching your current job differently and looking for personal growth opportunities.

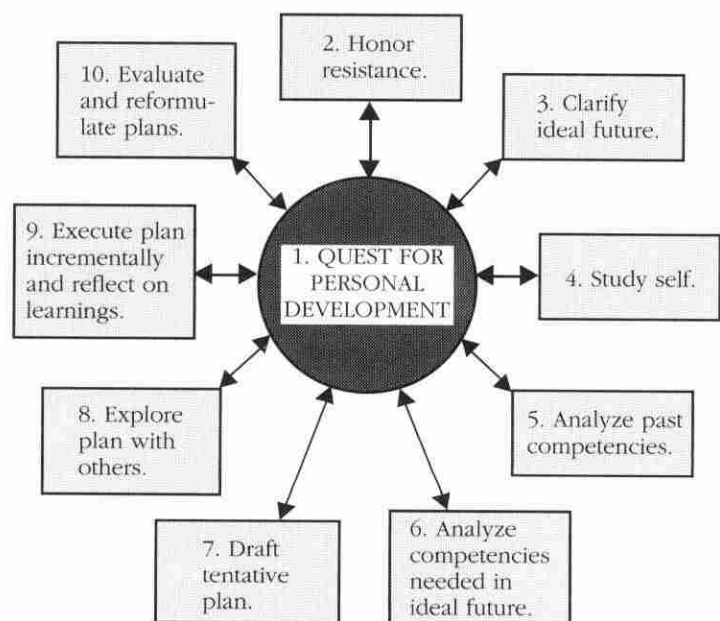
An acquaintance of one of the authors was, by all traditional measures, a highly successful executive. He managed a sizable budget, directed large numbers of people, and was given ample "perks," such as unlimited use of the company's private jet. From the outside looking in, everything seemed to be going well for this man; however, on the inside, he was hurting badly. After

Figure 1
Twentieth Century Career Planning Model



Adapted from Parsons (1910) in keeping with Super (1942)

Figure 2
Twenty-first Century Career Planning Model



several months of going through some substantial emotional turmoil, he was finally able to admit to himself that the job no longer provided enough meaning, challenge, or fun for him. It took another three months of sleepless nights to embrace the idea that it would be up to him, not his employer, to do something about his situation.

As you seek to grow, clarify and honor your resistance. We are all imperfect. We "get stuck" and fail to work on our personal quest at times. Often blaming ourselves, we say we are lazy or lacking in willpower. High achievers are

especially susceptible to this type of judgmental self-talk. A more useful and healthier approach is to try to understand the source of our resistance so we can learn from attending to it instead of fighting against it. If we encounter resistance, we can give ourselves credit for looking at important issues and for recognizing that

"stuckness," "confusion," or "laziness" typically signal conflicting needs and desires. We can identify its source with help from friends or a counselor. We can try to determine why we say one thing and do another or nothing at all. Some part of ourselves is probably trying to tell us something. We need to honor that part and listen to it. It, too, wants expression. Incorporating it into our career dream is an important part of becoming what we want to be.

"Stuckness" may also signal an intuitive realization that plans are inappropriate in light of vaguely understood external circumstances. We always have at least two options when the plan is not working. We can revise the plan in light of internal or external barriers or we can try to overcome the barriers.

The executive depicted above felt stuck. The more he felt dissatisfied with his job, the more critical he became of himself. Conflicting internal dialogues such as the following became more frequent:

"I'm not happy."

"But you should be grateful you have such a good job."

"I think I may want to do something else for the rest of my life."

"You shouldn't leave the company now because you have an obligation to your family. Stop being so self-centered."

So he stayed stuck until he embraced and validated both sides of the dialogue. Trying to

repress or discount one of them did not eradicate the problem. On the contrary, it later surfaced with greater potency. A breakthrough occurred when he was able to accept that it was all right for him to be confused, to have dreams, and to have some doubts about their feasibility and his own self-worth.

Dream of the future; clarify an ideal future vividly, in detail. In the twenty-first century approach to career management, our dream of what we want to be can take two forms, neither of which is a job title. One approach is to forget reality and daydream ourselves into an ideal role for five to 15 years in the future. We can describe in graphic detail what a typical day, week, or month would be like. Then we summarize our fantasy into a statement such as, "I want to lead a team that solves problems creatively for users of new technology." Such a statement opens countless options, many not yet imagined. Both of the authors have worked in several jobs that did not exist until they assisted in creating them.

The future ideal can also be a metaphor. In one workshop, several career counselors were asked to draw pictures of what they wanted to be when they grew up. Only one person complained that he was already grown. The rest understood that growth opportunities continue throughout life. One person drew a rose. The drawing was spontaneous and free of "reality" considerations. Yet it allowed for a discussion that clarified what that person valued as qualities to be developed. It created a foundation for planning based upon the question, "What career moves, either in my present or a future job, will allow me to grow toward this ideal?"

We can benefit from creating not just one dream but a number of visions, ranging from the relatively easily attainable as a next step to the clearly visionary for the distant future—dreams A, B, C, and so on. They are useful as a basis for making decisions.

For many years, one of the authors has been teaching adult graduate students who attend college part-time. Typically these students are already established in careers but want a change. For them, time and again, clarifying a dream has provided the motivation for carrying out the other steps of this model. Using the total model has led to successful and satisfying work transitions.

The other author, an established consultant with a proven track record, wanted a career change but could not readily articulate what his ideal future would look like. He then envisioned a typical day in the year 2000 and many graphic images came to mind—author, professor, consultant, and stand-up comedian, among several others. As he clarified what a typical day felt like doing these different things, he became more

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inspired to look deeper into himself—to really see his wants, fears, doubts, and aspirations.

Study yourself; seek self-understanding.

There are many ways to seek an understanding of oneself, ranging from the simple and rational to the highly complex, “deeper” approaches. A great variety of personal characteristics can be examined, but we must avoid trying to be overly objective about ourselves—seeing ourselves merely as a collection of “traits.” We are meaning-making creatures. We must ask, “What do I consider worth becoming? What gives me joy?” Asking anything less, whatever the excuse, leads to selling ourselves short.

Some study methods require the aid of a counselor, therapist, or spiritual guide. Others are self-managed. We may use one or more of the following common techniques, listed from shortest and easiest to most personally demanding:

- Get a psychological assessment from a psychologist or counselor with recommendations on career issues that need attention and direction (not specific occupations). These recommendations should be compatible with our personality, life situation, and willingness to invest and risk.

- Analyze and learn from past experience. Think back to life transitions; think of the phases between those transitions. Analyze the most rewarding and most dreaded activities in each of the past phases of your life. Or list things you have really enjoyed doing, and look for patterns. Were they indoor or out? Solitary or with people? If with people, in what role? Mainly physical or mental? You can think of many such questions to ask. Put self-assessments on paper; seek feedback from trusted friends and professional associates on the thoroughness and accuracy of the work. Guided exercises are provided by many authors. Those in Richard Bolles’s book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* are among the best known and most widely used. Howard Figler also provides a good set of self-assessment skills in *The Complete Job Search Handbook* (1988).

- Dig deeper into potential sources of joy in a career through exercises that recall early childhood. In her book *Wishcraft* (1979), Barbara Sher provides directions for working in this area. She also has excellent ideas for bringing career dreams into reality.

- Use symbolic exercises that assist in uncovering deeper unconscious motivations. One set that seems to have promise has been developed and described by Hilda Lee Dail in her book *The Lotus and the Pool* (1989).

- Use dream analysis and active imagination. Robert A. Johnson has provided a lay person’s guide in *Inner Work* (1986). You can become involved in these activities without the guidance of a therapist if you follow Johnson’s instructions about how to keep from becoming overwhelmed

by some of the emotions that may be brought to the surface.

- Uncover your personal myth. One excellent guide in this area is *Personal Mythology*, by David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner (1988).

There is a reference at the very end of the book indicating how to order audio tapes to use as guides through the exercises that are involved.

We have observed many people using each of these approaches to self-understanding. A combination of the techniques seems to work best. Psychological testing is helpful, but by itself it does not very often get the deep emotional involvement that is necessary for undertaking change. It may become a way of avoiding personal soul searching.

By contrast, one author has found the personal mythology work to be intensely involving and personally transformative. In combination with active imagination and dream analysis, it has led to personal growth that allowed risking moving toward retirement with very flexible plans.

Analyze competencies used in the past.

Examine the capabilities involved in each previous phase of your life. Books such as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* have exercises that help with this activity, too. Such analysis provides a list of skills and abilities to use in preparing a resumé and getting a job, should that be necessary. It may include surprises, because we frequently develop more competencies than we realize, and we learn skills not just at work but also in avocational pursuits.

One of the authors looks back on college student organization leadership as a major source of “people skills development.” These competencies have been used in professional organization leadership roles and have been invaluable in supporting

an academic and consulting career. Business executives the authors have known have had similar experiences that enabled them to become excellent team leaders, facilitators, consultants, and entrepreneurs.

Analyze competencies depicted in our “ideal future.” We also need to have a list of competencies required in our future so we can identify and pursue learning goals. Analyze the competencies in your ideal future by getting skill lists from books such as *Parachute* or by asking friends what competencies they hear in your future story. Identify the ones you do not already have and decide which you want to learn first.

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For example, one graduate student who wanted to move into human resource development in a corporation identified a deficit in the area of understanding business in a practical way. This led to finding an internship to gain "hands on" experience. A happy ending came, too. A consultant noticed the highly competent intern and recommended him to a friend who was forming a new HRD unit; he's still there, thoroughly enjoying the chance to live out his dream.

Draft a tentative plan for a next step toward the ideal future. This includes writing down a goal (our next learning step), listing steps toward that goal, figuring out the resources and amount of time needed, and other material. You may need to study the planning process if you have never done systematic planning.

Explore this plan with others you trust. It helps to share the results of the steps above with trusted people who know us well. This should be done before launching the proposed plan. Using these people as sounding boards and sources of information makes our dreams, analyses, and plans more detailed and vivid. We can then appropriately revise these dreams, analyses, and plans in light of the feedback we receive.

Sharing the revised plan with many people of all types is valuable too. Forming a "network" of people who have a mutual commitment to help one another can prove invaluable in making career moves when the time comes. Such a network frequently spots opportunities for you even before you become anxious for a job change. The authors have had this experience, as have many of the most successful people they have known. Yet other highly competent people are "out on the street" because they did not build a network or share their development goals, fears, or aspirations with others who could help.

Execute one learning step at a time, reflectively. Realizing that the future vision will change with experience, execute the plan and take the next step in your career. As you do that, it helps to follow three guidelines:

- Work on developing competencies that are involved in the vision. Choose those that are either fun to undertake or are critical to the next step and can be embraced wholeheartedly.
- Make career choices that are consistent with the visions, or at least not inconsistent. Dreams A, B, and C will probably have a pattern to them that can serve as a basis for decision making.
- Take time to reflect or meditate upon feelings generated by these activities and what is being learned about yourself and the world. Become more aware. Make developing awareness through experience a major goal.

Rethink; recycle. Think over all of this periodically—at least annually—even if it seems to be

going well. Do this also whenever problems arise. Block out time to write down reflections. Make a commitment to discuss the results with trusted friends. When we reflect, write it down, and discuss it, we are much clearer, have more confidence, and are more likely to have flexible plans instead of having either no plans or rigid ones. We tend to be more satisfied with ourselves. Reflecting, writing, and sharing help keep the process moving. Otherwise, we tend to procrastinate and shirk from networking, and we do not develop awareness of what we are learning and feeling.

It is easier to just drift. Thinking about the future and taking a long-range, developmental approach to living and working is harder than waiting for a crisis. The type of psychological pain is different too.

Drifting, though, also has its costs. There are no easy answers, but we can become better equipped to survive and prosper when we put forth the effort to plan, grow, and change. □

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