

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU MANAGE YOUR CAREER

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Jobs for life are dead, we are told. We are all now *portfolio people*, like it or not. The safe, old style, jobs-for-life story where you climbed the greasy pole from the tea boy to CEO is no more.

Career progression and development are now, and for ever, in your own hands. With regards to your career, you are now captain of your ship and mistress of your own fate. You and you alone are responsible. Not your boss. Not your organisation – YOU. So you had better think about how to do it.

And this is no longer something you do after leaving school or university. Indeed career planning is something you need to do more as you get older. It is those big “0 years” (30, 40, 50, 60 years) that offer a sobering, if not frightening, time to reflect, re-evaluate and plan.

But how to do it? Do you need an expensive business coach? How about comprehensive 360° evaluation with personal feedback? A fishing trip or spa weekend with a few old friends who will give you brutally honest feedback? Perhaps. But as a starter for seven why not consider the following simple questions in this order. Answer these seven questions properly and you will be well on the way to planning and managing your career.

1. WHAT ARE YOUR DREAMS ABOUT YOUR CAREER & FUTURE AT WORK?

OK, goals will do. Where would you like to be ideally? Given your knowledge, and experience of the world what sort of job / work would provide you with that ideal combination of satisfaction and reward? Think outside the box. Be radical. But be prepared to justify your choice with some data. Ponder, dream, but end up with a highly specific short-list of jobs, or goals, or dreams. Do you really know what they will entail? Have you thought about all the implications? After you have clarified your dream, reflect if it really excites you. If not, then it's not your real dream – and you will need to rethink.

2. DESCRIBE YOUR VALUES AND LIFESTYLE PREFERENCES?

No flim-flam now. No political correctness. What really is important? You are allowed to say money, fame and power...if you really mean it. You don't have to say family, giving something back to the community and all that stuff you do at interviews. But do some serious introspection. What is important to you? For what are you prepared to die? Or at least make major sacrifices? Have you experienced for any period of time, the life style you say you want? The grass often looks

greener where you inspect superficially others' life styles. Be clear about your energy, involvement and activities that *really* bring satisfaction.

3. WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE TALENTS?

There is all the difference in the world between desire and motivation on the one hand and talent on the other. The journey and the destination requires more than determination, though that should never be under-estimated. The older we get the more we get to "try out" various activities, jobs and tasks and hopefully, we get feedback on whether we can really do them or not. It is as dangerous to under- as to over-estimate abilities. Some people do excessive (and often false) modesty, while others do very unattractive arrogant hubris.

Find your top three strengths: your real talents, the things that make you stand out from others. Don't under-estimate them, don't brag about them. Some require constant practice. But if something's come to you more easily than other things and you enjoy exercising these abilities build your career around them.

Think of them as special gifts, for that is what they are. Check out if someone who knows you well agrees. If not you may have to re-evaluate your strengths – or find friends who know you!

4. HOW WILL YOU DEVELOP THE TALENTS RAEQUIRED TO ACHIEVE YOUR CAREER GOALS?

Sure, there is natural talent, high ability, giftedness. But it often needs to be nurtured, strengthened and practiced. More importantly perhaps is the exploration of other (perhaps hidden) talents, and the development of new skills and new insights.

As one gets greyer, wiser and wrinklier, more rigid and often more threatened by the energy and enthusiasm of youth, it is easy to retreat into a quiet, calm world that tries to resist change. Development is a threatening word. Take that attitude and you are somebody with a fine career *behind you*. Do an audit of your abilities. Work on those you have neglected. It's pointless wasting high amounts of effort on things you don't do well. But practice, improve, update, and be realistic about whether you have the potential to develop the few key skills necessary to make your dream job a reality.

5. WHAT EMPLOYMENT & JOB ROLE OPTIONS MAKE BEST SENSE FOR YOU TO ACHIEVE YOUR CAREER GOALS?

There may be more than one way to get from A to B. Some leave their organisations quite deliberately so that they can return later. Some favour an educational sabbatical. Some like the idea of a coach. Some great jobs take years of hard slog before you can be considered.

The question is what experience may be gained fruitfully or opportunistically by different moves. The Japanese model used to be to move people around the whole organisation systematically (from HR to Finance to Planning) to help them gain both a full understanding of the organisation and the skills, values and preferences of people in different parts of it.

Different paths have different hurdles. Some have pretty impermeable blockages; others seem the long route. The journey has lessons, it provides opportunities. It may have reverses. But there are different routes. You need a “sat-nav”. Yet it is important to remember that though there may be a preferred route, others should be considered.

6. ARE YOU WILLING TO LET GO OF PERSONAL BAGGAGE?

Almost all of us carry invisible backpacks of personal stuff. Call them hang-ups, or memories, or self-limiting beliefs, or complexes; it’s all the same. It’s often the job of counsellors and therapists to help us reframe our views healthily.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is all the rage at present. The idea is an old one and is simple. The way in which we think about ourselves, others and the world, impacts on how we behave. If we have distorted, dysfunctional or daft cognitions we under-perform. The past is another country: they do things differently there. But they are difficult to let go of. It’s easy to talk about disposing of personal baggage, but it is essential.

Many things can hold us back. Things that happened a long time ago. Things that negatively influence our whole career development. The dark shadows, the murmuring voices, the near phobic reactions. They need to be confronted head on. The invisible backpack can get heavier and heavier. A millstone and then a tombstone. Let them go and the journey to your dream may suddenly become a real possibility!

7. IDENTIFY THOSE WHO CAN HELP YOUR CAREER JOURNEY?

We all need encouragement and support. We need emotional, intellectual, moral and social support constantly. We might even benefit from technical and financial support.

Many people help us on the journey. Bosses that give us a chance. Partners that take the burden at crucial times. Friends who listen. There are also professional people who can make all the difference. They might be a cost, but are best seen as an investment. One needs to enlist experts and support staff for the journey. This is a practical not a cynical exercise. People help in different ways and at different times. Think about who and what you need. No man is an island....and all that.

We put the seven questions to a Chief Executive a couple of months ago. He found them spot on, and commented that it made him realise that going forward he wants his lifestyle to be more important than it had up to now.

No one gets to the top without ability, planning, determination and support. Yes, maybe luck does play a small part, but as all successful people know, you make your luck. It never too late to get down, dust off and re-consider your career plan. Answer the seven questions and make your own luck.

This article was written by Professor Arian Furnham and Michael Wellin following our experience of designing and leading a top management development programme for the most senior 300 people in one of the largest UK corporates.

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