

“THE CAREER PUZZLE”

by Gary Neat

Imagine if you could look into a crystal ball and see where your career would be in 20 years time. Would you be professionally stimulated, earning what your skills warranted and most important of all – happy ?

Of course, there's no guarantee that it would be a pretty picture in which case it's possible that your future predicament was your own fault. Put simply – there were actions you could have taken, but didn't. Sure, you'd worked hard, but the direction was ill-advised. Luck can also play a role, but it's illuminating how the lucky one's are those who take the risks, follow their heart and objectively assess their strengths. Or, perhaps you blindly and selfishly pursued a pathway that delivered success, but at the cost of relationships and happiness? It's no accident that today's workplaces are often an emotional wasteland.

The simple truth is that to achieve your ambition you must aspire above your ability. To cope with the setbacks that will undoubtedly confront you at some time along your career pathway you'll need resilience and insight into your own personality.

Perhaps good Queen Bess best summed it up back in the 16th century when she told explorer Sir Walter Raleigh – *“If thy heart fails thee, climb not at all.”* Given that Sir Walter eventually lost his head to an executioner's axe, it wasn't his heart which failed him.

Career-wise, we spend considerable time striving to convince our betters that it's in their own best interest to promote or reward us. Most, however, shy away from publicly expressing ambition rather than appear overly competitive or self-absorbed. Lesson one is don't be embarrassed about being ambitious. Ninety-nine percent of your contemporaries are essentially asking themselves the same question i.e. *“How do I achieve fulfillment”*.

The answer doesn't come packaged up in a degree. Start your career turnaround journey by being brutally honest with yourself and by using others as sounding-boards – particularly if their opinions differ from yours.

Of course, there are the well meaning parents who naively cajole and direct their teenager into choosing a career pathway which often better reflects the parent's

aspirations than those of their offspring. Career happiness for the young is too often sacrificed on the altar of parental ego and ignorance.

It doesn't take great insight to realise that ambition and individual aspirations are on a rocky road to nowhere if you've chosen the wrong tertiary course and then perpetuate this error in judgement by embarking on an even more inappropriate career.

Can you rectify that error at 25 or even 35 ? Most definitely yes – many of us have had several career changes - but be aware that it will probably mean short term financial and personal angst. Still, you can give me happiness over a 40 year career of drudgery any day !

A Conundrum called "Experience"

Recognise firstly that knowledge is an organisation's most vital strategic asset. By knowing how to acquire, scan and apply that knowledge is called experience. Even poor execution of the task, perhaps failure, is experience.

***"Experience is an odd beast, it can't be bought
it can't be studied and you can't steal it."***

And yes, most of us have at one time or another been junior to someone who didn't pull their weight. It's poor solace, but one day you'll look back and realize you left them behind anyway. Perhaps you saw risk as an opportunity whereas they saw it as a threat. Or just maybe their chronic sycophancy delivered only a short term advantage - that's usually its fate.

Along the way you'll make mistakes, feel antagonism – even create it yourself. Sometimes you'll be baffled why your tongue and brain didn't align during a crucial meeting. It's funny how it happens less as you get older.

When I assess someone for a role I look not only for their technical expertise but equally for what their life experiences have moulded vis a vis their people skills, willingness to learn, behaviour under pressure and that quintessential workplace tool – judgment.

Creating Career Luck.

Some people land the perfect job from day one of their working life. So are they smart or just plain lucky ?

How many of us have been given misleading career advice ? How many have no-one to blame but themselves for a wrong career move ?

For most, the opportunity to find that dream job is becoming harder. Gone are the days when people could work their way up the corporate ladder of their chosen company and possibly end up retiring in the same organisation around the age of 60. Clearly, however, such career inertia is not the attractive proposition it might once have been for our grandparents. Diversity and flexibility are now essential requisites of a good career pathway.

Whether you're 20 or 40, it's never too late to change – to turn things around and get a real buzz from what you do. In order to succeed, often you must first be zapped by the pain of failure. It's all part of the learning journey.

Essentially, a successful career is built from knowledge acquisition, relationship skills, identifying your niche, tapping into a good mentor and that most quintessential input called "luck". And, remember that impatience is as much the enemy of career advancement as is reticence.

Communication at Work

Your career will be marked by exposure to an extraordinary range of personalities – some good and some just plain appalling. It's not unusual to fret over the actions of the bullies, the liars and the sycophants, but it's irresponsible of you and career threatening if you don't strategise how to communicate with these people.

It's ironic in today's career marketplace how so much emphasis is placed on the crucial ability to articulate your case, yet the reverse side of the communication equation – *listening* – is paid little heed. On a scale of 1-10 for rating a good communicator, I'd allocate 7 points for talking and 3 for listening. The hard, cold truth for most of you is that you forfeit the listening score because you're too preoccupied with what you're going to utter next. Sound familiar ?

Not being a good listener diminishes other's opinion of you. For example, think of someone who does not listen to you. It's irritating and doesn't create a value-adding dimension to team dynamics or one-on-one communication.

On the other hand, think of someone who does listen to you. You feel intellectually nourished, you're energized and more co-operative – and you probably learn more as well ! If you're not a good listener – and the odds are that you're not – then you must practice just like you would to acquire any other skill.

Poor listeners lack self discipline and because they don't engage the other person via questions and acknowledgement—cues, they generally fail to achieve the very thing they've originally set out to do i.e. create a good impression.

Love What You Do.

Ask yourself one simple question – “*what type of work do I most love doing*”?

- Firstly, if you don't have an answer – then the real problem is you !
- Secondly, if you do have an answer but your current job is not giving you what you want – then urgently review your career.
- Thirdly, if you do have an answer and your current job is giving you what you want, then leverage that knowledge into something even more fulfilling.

The skills crisis now confronting developed nations puts you in the box seat. You now have little excuse for slipping into career inertia. Real success at work is nowadays better reflected by the worker who leads the more professionally fulfilled life – and there's no reason why it can't be you !

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