



Three Approaches to Planning Your Career

I am often asked to join careers panels. And one of the things that always happens is the discussion of your career path. How you got to where you are now. These stories are always presented as if we were moving forward. But the reality is we can only see the connecting threads as we look back.

For example, I can see now how my PhD led to my first job. I can see how that led to me setting up my own business. I can see how the different things that I have done have altered the clients I work with and the work that I do.

But, none of that was visible looking forward. I could not see what skills from my PhD would be useful in my first job after it. I could not see how the skills in my first job would be useful in setting up my own business. I could not see how the things people wanted me to help them with would change with time.

Thus, any career planning activity you do needs to take that into consideration. That is, it is impossible to prescribe a set of skills or activities that will lead you to your next role or job. You can make lists. You can do things that push you in a particular direction. You can focus on stuff that increases your chances of getting certain roles.

With that in mind here are three activities you can do to put your career aspirations into a framework that could help get your next job.

1. The 10 year back-cast

In this approach, you map your goals ten years from now. It is a particularly useful approach for people who like planning. Looking ten years ahead might seem a bit pie in the sky, but it is about getting to where you want to be. It is a bit like planning a long trip. This approach starts with the end in mind.

So, start with the kind of place you'd like to be living in. Then, think about the city or cities that place would be situated in. Then look at the places in that city you could or would work. Think about things such as your partner, your children, your lifestyle. Now, think about the pay and conditions of the job you'd like. And then perform the sense test. That is, does it all make sense. Is it possible to have all of these things? If not, readjust the scenario until you reach a point that you're happy with what your notional life looks like in ten years AND it makes sense that it would be that way. But, we're not talking about making sense in terms of getting to that point, we're talking about making sense in its own right. For example, does it make sense to have a lifestyle that costs \$100,000 but a job that only pays \$90,000? Does it make sense to live in a city that is known for biotechnology, but want to work as a historian? Does it make sense to want to work for a large corporation, but choose to live in a small rural town?

Once you've settled on your ten year life, you need to work backwards. You'll need to do a series of if this then that's. Where you say if my goal is [this], then I need [that]. So, if you want to manage a large team in ten years, then in five you'll need to be managing a small team. If you want to retire in ten years, then you'll need to be making large contributions to your retirement fund in five years. If you want to be a solo researcher in ten years, then you'll need to have written your own grants and research papers in five. In total, this will give you your five year plan.

And, now it is a matter of working back to three years from now. Doing the same thing.

Finally, you'll be looking at a year from now. And that will give you an immediate idea of the things you should be doing today, tomorrow, next week, and next month in order to put you on a path to your ten year goal(s).

Repeat as necessary (maybe once a year).

2. Skills forecast

If such long term planning is not your thing, you can focus on the short term. This approach looks more at skills of the future. Except the future is a few years from now, rather than ten, and we're not thinking about our specific job or lifestyle but broadly across society. A web-search for "skills of the future" will reveal many lists produced by reputable and non-reputable sources. Reputable sources are those backed by governments, and large corporations. Or even governments and large corporations themselves. Employers, employer groups, and job sites might also have useful lists. Not so reputable sources tend to be individuals writing personal thoughts in their personal blogs....

Pick a list, and timeframe that suits you. Now go down that list and give yourself a score for each skill. A simple three point scale will suffice – absent; needs improvement; have. Now, pick the skills from the absent or needs improvement list that you most want to work on. And work on developing or getting those skills in whatever way you see fit.

Repeat as necessary (maybe once per year). Keep note of the location of the list of skills you use, as the producers might change.

3. Something I love

My parents' generation tended to work to live. Now, the trend is to live to work. Basically, we're all looking to turn our passion into our job or career. And, if that's really what you want to do then this career planning approach is for you!

Step 1 is to list all of the things you are good at.

Step 2 is to list all of the things you would be happy to do for work.

Step 3 is to list all of the things people would pay you to do, focusing on the things where the pay you get is sufficient for the lifestyle you want.

Step 4 is to highlight those items on all four lists. And boom! That's the career for you. Go out and look for training, experience or actual paid work in those areas.

Now, if there are no overlapping things, then you'll need to rethink the previous three steps. Maybe there are things that are on the list that you are not yet skilled or experienced enough in to earn a living from. In that case, start learning and/or seeking experience (in my opinion experience trumps education every time, so focus on learning only after you've not been able to gain experience). Of course, if you've looked at the list and there's still no way you can see any overlaps, then you'll need to rethink the idea of working to live versus living to work.

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