Career self-management

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Career self-management

Career self-management involves making deliberate choices concerning current and future career prospects. We all influenced by internal and external factors which can impact on the quality of our thinking and clarity of purpose. There are a number of tools we can use to help us understand our motivations and career choices, to make better informed decisions.

Career decisions

Starting with an early career decision (such as what subjects to major on at school), map the most important transitions you have made. Where a transition was a logical progression from the previous one, draw a straight line. If it was not, draw a line tangential to the original. At each point, draw in lines to represent other choices that you could have followed, but didn't.

Now consider for each node (choice point):

- Do you think this was a good choice?
- Did it open up more future possibilities or narrow your future options?
- How well prepared were you for this transition?
- Who did you talk to about the choices open to you?
- What could you have done and who could you have talked to, to be better prepared?
- What is the next likely significant decision you are going to have to make in your career?
- How could you prepare for this more effectively, using lessons learned from reflecting on past transitions?

Capture three or four career highs and three or four career lows in two columns. For each of the highs and lows, identify as best you can:

- What was happening for you emotionally?
- What external conditions exerted an influence? (For example, a supportive or unsupportive boss; an opportunity to deputise; clearly defined responsibilities)
- What else strikes you as notable about this experience?

Working with a colleague, tease out the recurrent themes – especially ones that are present in the highs and not in the lows, or vice versa.

- How could you use the insights you gather, to manage your future career better?

Career motivations

In *Managing the new careerists*, C Brooklyn Derr, formerly Professor at Brigham Young University, identifies five types of career motivation:

- Achieving promotion / upward mobility
- Gaining security – i.e. working in an environment that is predictable and where loyalty is valued
- Freedom – being self-directed and autonomous
- Stimulation – work that is challenging and exciting
- Balance – achieving all the previous four, but in your own good time and with minimum conflict between demands of work and demands of family and other interests.

Most people find that their career motivations change as they grow older. For example, it is common to be very promotion focused in the late 20s, but more balance focused when you have a family.

Career anchors

Originally proposed by Ed Schein and Thomas de Long some four decades ago, career anchors are traits corresponding to situations and roles, where people feel most comfortable (i.e. that play to their strengths and interests). The main career anchors are:

- Technical or functional competence – most suited for people, who like to become experts. They seek to be challenged to demonstrate their expertise and to do a job "properly"
- Managerial competence – suited to people, who want responsibility, like to take charge, enjoy problem-solving and dealing with people. Emotional intelligence is an essential component (though also capability that some people, who have other aspects of managerial competence, lack –making them less effective in management roles)
- Autonomy or independence – working best in situations, where they set their own standards, work pace and routines, and can get on with tasks without "interference" from others
- Security / stability – people, who avoid risk, resist change and seek continuity
- Entrepreneurial creativity – like opportunities to innovate, start up new products or businesses, engage with others, who can help them make things happen, and often see success in terms of personal financial return
- Dedication to a cause – motivated by being able to help others
- Pure challenge – easily bored and often restless, these people seek constant challenge and novelty; they welcome stretch tasks
- Lifestyle – aiming to integrate work and life, people with this trait may take large chunks of time to pursue non-work activities, such as sports or travel.

Sometimes criticised for lacking empirical support, psychometric tests based on career anchors nonetheless have a strong following and, in recent years, have been validated as a practical tool for exploring career aptitude (Steele & Francis-Smythe, -- Career Anchors: An empirical investigation, Proceedings of the British Psychological Society's Occupational Psychology Conference, 2007). However, as with most generic personality tests, they are best used as part of a portfolio of insights into individuals.

A good, straightforward description of career anchors can be found on the website:
http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/learn/assets/PDF/CPD/CPD-membership/person/Edgar%20Scheins%20Career%20Anchors.pdf