

IT careers

How to remain successful in a changing environment

Are most successful careers planned or accidental? On one end of the spectrum, we have those that deliberately set out their career goals then systematically work to achieve them. On the other end of the spectrum, we have those that take a more opportunistic view of openings as they present themselves. The question is, where do you see yourself on this career planning spectrum, and is yours a conscious decision? Another way of thinking about this is whether you see managing your career direction as an asset or a liability.

Career planning and IT almost seem to be a contradiction in terms, given that the half life of technologies, innovations and the conga-line of disruptive changes are typically measured in years, whereas careers are measured in decades.

In terms of planning, what's good for business should also be good for your career. If you are an employee, you are in fact already running your own businesses without realising it. As an employee, you have one client — your employer. You exchange salary or benefits for effort and the delivery of value in one form or another to your employer.

Successful organisations need a business plan to thrive in a continuously changing environment. Your career should be no different. The approaches you've used in the past to get your career to its current point aren't always guaranteed to work for the future, so it's important for you to invest some time and effort in assessing your own personal business plan. How to best to do this, obviously depends on your specific situation. Here are some of the fundamentals of developing your own personal business plan:

The short, medium and long term

Make sure that your career ladder is leaning on the right wall. You probably do not want to wait to the midpoint in your career to realise that you really dislike what you do and you really want to do something different. To calibrate your career, it's important to regularly stress test your marketability and intrinsic value proposition from time to time, as well as test some of your basic assumptions about what you do. Some of the short-, medium- and long-term questions you could ask yourself include: What options would I have if I left my current employer tomorrow? If most of my value and expertise is tied to my current employer, what is the best way for me to broaden my skills and experience to maximise future potential? What do I really want to be doing in five years' time?

The power asymmetry

In the conventional employer-employee relationship, there is generally an authority and power asymmetry. If you have a highly valued set of skills and offer much value to your employer or the open market, you are more likely to have greater control over your career choices. If, on the other hand, your skills and value are more of a commodity, you may be at the other end of the power and control scale — a slave to the market, frankly. This should be a conscious decision as to how you see yourself. Unless you are fortunate enough to have been left a large sum of wealth by a benevolent rich relative, your career is your main asset in your life as an employee. Continually invest in this asset.

The skill pyramid

The Egyptian pyramids have stood the tests of time, and one of the primary reasons for this is that they were built on a broad base. Not many ancient tall towers still stand today. This metaphor also applies to your career. If you are an über-specialist in a specific industry, technology or organisation, how will you manage your environment if it should change? Change is inevitable, so the wise IT executive or professional makes a deliberate decision to continually review both skill and experience inventory, and consciously seek out new learning opportunities, through formal education or working across roles, industries and/or environments.

Your personal business plan

Think of a personal business plan as one way of taking control over your whole career, not only now but through all stages of your career's evolution. A business plan has strong analogies with a business plan for an enterprise, but differs in a number of ways. If you end up running your own business, you soon realise the importance of a practical, sound and realistic business plan. **CIO**

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