

# **Take Charge!**

## **A Practical Guide To Designing Your Career**

By

Tan Meng Chai  
&  
Saqib Sheikh

## Table of Contents

***Foreword***

***Introduction***

***The 10 biggest career questions***

***The four phases of your career***

***Why you should design your career***

***Principles of Career Design***

Principle 1: Your Career is Your Business

Principle 2: You Are Your Biggest Investment

Principle 3: Always Think Bigger

Principle 4: Create Alignment

Principle 5: Be Adaptable

Principle 6: Hard Work and Talent are Not Enough

Principle 7: Attain Mastery

***Career Design Strategies***

*Professional Development*

Design Strategy 1: Decide Your Own Pay

Design Strategy 2: Have a Skill Not Related to Work

Design Strategy 3: You're Only as Good as Your Last Game!

Design Strategy 4: Get a Coach or Mentor

Design Strategy 5: Know Your Numbers!

*Employer/Company*

Design Strategy 6: Interview! Interview! Interview!

Design Strategy 7: Be Selective

Design Strategy 8: Remember, Nobody is Indispensable

Design Strategy 9: When to Quit

Design Strategy 10: Be Wary of Promises

*Work Relationships*

Design Strategy 11: The Four Important Relationships

Design Strategy 12: Be Visible

Design Strategy 13: Do Not Gossip

Design Strategy 14: Get Everyone Addicted to You!

*Bosses*

Design Strategy 15: Bosses are People, Not God

Design Strategy 16: Is Your Boss a Good Role Model?

Design Strategy 17: Get That Testimonial!

*Work-life*

Design Strategy 18: Get Your House in Order

Design Strategy 19: Aim for Life Balance, Not Work-life Balance

*Personal Finances*

Design Strategy 20: Set Clear Financial Goals

Design Strategy 21: Develop Multiple Sources of Income

***Epilogue***

## Foreword

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to extend my heartiest congratulations to Mr. Tan Meng Chai and Mr. Saqib Sheikh who have published the book entitled "Take Charge! A Practical Guide to Designing Your Career".

This is an achievement that resulted from more than six years of intense effort. The authors have during that long spell made their own observations and conducted a lot of research and studies on career employees whose challenges and struggles were brought sharply into focus when Mr. Tan was conducting corporate workshops for mid and senior level leaders. They have also undoubtedly dug deep into their own first hand experiences as well as put in a lot of their personal thoughts to complete the book and ultimately get it through the printing press. Well done!

Mr. Tan is a good friend and college mate and fellow TARCian. He is an established human resources management and development consultant who is very knowledgeable and possesses extensive experience in this field.

In response to a job market that is demanding and challenging, fast evolving and therefore full of opportunities, this book is cleverly structured to cover all the essential dynamics involving the pursuit of a rewarding career path. It also highlights the basic fundamentals surrounding the question of how to make the best out of a career through employment.

In essence, it is about how one can actually "design a career" and be successful with it; also how to exact the highest level of reward and satisfaction from it.

It is an interesting book that will serve as a shining guide to those who seek to establish a sound future career through employment as opposed to running their own business operations. This book will be most helpful not only to the first time job seekers but also those who are already employed but not really exacting the most out of their current positions. To those who are already retired, this book can guide them to a second wind. Industry players and influencers like human resource trainers, the teaching fraternity and even employers will find it most informative.

Finally, I believe it will be a good reference book on human resources for institutions of learning, trade organizations and business entities generally.

Excellent work and congratulations again.

Tan Sri Dato' Lau Yin Pin  
PSM, DPMT, JP.  
TARC Dip. Comm. (Dist),  
GradCGI, FCCA (UK), C.A (M'sia).

## Introduction

On average, between one fourth to one third of your lifespan will be spent working. The more you reflect on this sobering fact, the more staggering it would seem. Discourse on the 'need to work' in order to live rather than 'work to live' misses a rather obvious point -- your work will be an integral part of your life. Even if you do not believe your work reflects who you are, it will consume a big chunk of your waking hours, whether you like it or not.

Your career is the path on which your work is focused but every path we tread may be different. Most of us would think of a career path as one that is straight, narrow and inclined but when the rubber hits the road, our paths can be winding or even take us in different directions. All too commonly, we may end up on a straight path but it is one that is plateauing, or worse, actually on a decline. Some of us may end up on a path that leads us back to where we began.

Often, we only realize that we are on the wrong path when we begin to experience deep dissatisfaction with our work. You could reach the breaking point due to a number of factors: an unreasonable supervisor, a prolonged period of boredom, unmet financial expectations, or a yearning to realize your uncovered talents. You may realize though that your current dissatisfaction may be a consequence of the decisions you have made earlier in your career that may have led you in a direction you never intended.

This book is meant to empower those who wish to take charge of their own career path. It is a guide for those who wish to design a career on their own terms rather than be at the mercy of forces beyond their control, be it their bosses or employers.

This book's key idea is that careers should be *designed*, not managed. A career that is designed is one focused on the pursuit of clear goals with purpose and intention, whereas a managed career is focused on completing work tasks and responsibilities without a sense of direction, similar to being on autopilot.

You can begin to design your career at any phase of your working life. The process should be well thought out and targeted to achieve the best results to match the original intent as closely as possible.

To this end, this book's *Principles of Career Design* and *Design Strategies* embody the dynamics of careers by design which you can employ during the course of your career. The objective of this book is to equip professionals with the necessary framework to confidently direct their career path forward.

Many of these ideas may contradict conventional wisdom on career development but this is no accident. Much of what is considered traditional career advisory tends to be subtly or overtly skewed towards employers' desire for compliant staff rather than an individual's career path.

Ultimately, it is not your boss or your organization that is responsible for your career success, but you. Career design is the first but perhaps most important step towards reaping your rewards later in life.

## ***The 10 biggest career questions***



*Question Number 1: How do I get the job I want?*

*Question Number 2: How do I know I'm working in the right company?*

*Question Number 3: How do I know I'm working for the right boss?*

*Question Number 4: How do I earn a higher pay?*

*Question Number 5: How do I get my next promotion?*

*Question Number 6: How do I get my boss to appreciate me?*

*Question Number 7: How do I get my colleagues to listen to me?*

*Question Number 8: How do I get my staff to follow me?*

*Question Number 9: How do I know when it is the best time to quit?*

*Question Number 10: How do I know when it is a good time to retire?*

Few things are universal when it comes to the diversity of the human species. Yet you can wager that across cultures, from Scandinavia to Africa to Southeast Asia, the questions above are being asked by millions as you read this.

The above questions are not the Ten Commandments. They are not Newton's Three Laws of Motion. They are simply the questions almost anyone who has embarked on this special journey called a 'career' has certainly asked at some point in their life, including you. You may not have said them out loud or used the precise word, but the sentiment is pretty much the same.

The purpose of this book is to answer these questions, and more specifically, to equip you with the mindset and the tools that will put you on the path of a self-empowered career.

## ***What is a career?***

Many of us pursue what we think is a 'career' which in reality is just a series of jobs that we hop on to from one to the next. Our guiding logic for switching positions to other companies is invariably context-dependent. In other words, if one job loses its utility, pays inadequately or makes you plain bored, that is usually the cue to look for something new.

The most obvious problem with this notion of a career is that it is self-limiting. We concede our most precious asset, our freedom to choose, to forces that are beyond our control. These forces, be it your company, your boss or your colleagues, determine your choices for you. And over the course of years and decades, as your career trajectory begins to plateau, you remain in a perpetual state of frustration, blaming these external agents who did not meet your basic expectations.

This book considers your career to be your professional growth path. It is a path that is, first and foremost, self-directed. You are the architect of your career. You are in the driving seat, the front seat, and the back seat.

A career is a solo journey that's entirely on *you*. This not only means that you are responsible for your own growth, but it also confers you the freedom to pursue a career of lofty ambitions and fulfilment without hinging your success on others.

If you are ready and willing to take on the reins of your own career and pursue your work with strategic boldness, please read on.

## ***The four phases of your career***

Does a perfect career exist? No. Every career is measured relative to the individual who is on the path. It is up to you, as the one who is committed to his or her own professional growth, to decide what your goals are and ultimately, what success should look like.

This doesn't mean that we cannot take inspiration from the careers of others and adopt them as useful models. But we must always recognize that the journey is a deeply subjective one that is dependent on your own context and personality. The same set of circumstances can be highly satisfying to one professional as it may be underwhelming for you.

While everyone's career journey is unique, it is important to take note of the primary patterns that exist within careers. Once you notice these patterns within your own career, you can begin to place where you are at in your journey.

At any point in time, you will likely be engaged in at least one of these four 'phases' of your career. These phases prioritize the commitment of your mental and physical resources to your work. The phase you are in is what your career is asking of your time.

We may be spending years in one phase without realizing it. What can be especially problematic is believing that we belong in one phase without acknowledging the existence of others.

Careers don't have to progress in a straight line. Depending on what your own career expectations are, it may not be necessary to graduate from one phase to another phase. There is no set duration for how long you may spend in one phase versus the next; that judgment is entirely up to you.

You may even be engaged in several phases simultaneously, although one phase may typically predominate the others. However, keep in mind that identifying what phase you are in, will frame your expectations of the needs of the moment and give you clarity.

### ***Learning***

Every career has a learning phase during which you explore the boundaries of possibilities. And once you identify the possibility that is most worthy of your attention, you will need to dedicate the required hours to learning the ropes -- understanding the tools, the techniques, the processes, the roles, the responsibilities and all the major and minor details that come with fresh experience.

Society often regards a learning phase as 'education', particularly higher education, which is meant to be a breeding ground for young recruits. Truly, this is just the beginning of the learning phase, as learning only takes place once the work begins (whether colleges and universities are actually preparing graduates for a competitive job landscape is a separate question).

The learning phase is defined by friction and unease. You are venturing into the unknown and can and should be expected to make mistakes. However, the same mistake which may prove



costly later on could be the golden key to future progress right now. You may not be as fixated with achieving results at that point as with understanding what you are actually doing and gaining the experience, thus laying the foundation of your progress in developing your career.

### ***Applying***

The applying phase is about grounding your career game. Once you have the years and tasks under your belt, you will be able to view the work processes and roles holistically. You have a firmer grasp of the ins and outs of your industry and differentiate yourself.

The cost in terms of time and energy to achieve results have reduced significantly as you hone your skills and knowledge. As you apply your hard-learned lessons directly in the field, the results will begin to come quicker and your impact felt more deeply.

At this stage, you have distinguished yourself. Your work will reflect your unique flavor and less of the freshness of a newbie. You will assume greater responsibilities and will be leading others in a team or group in a particular direction.

### ***Growing***

The growth phase represents the peak of your productive prowess. It is the stage where you have mastered all the processes and discharged the necessary responsibilities, and have embarked on the large task of boosting the results to new horizons. You have achieved that harmony of energy and experience, providing the launchpad for expansion.

Growth does not necessarily mean an end to learning and application. Rather, these processes are channeled into a funnel which maximizes their results and expands your opportunities.

In this phase, you may no longer be satisfied with the good and are looking for the outstanding. You no longer need to prove yourself or your abilities, only what you can be capable of.

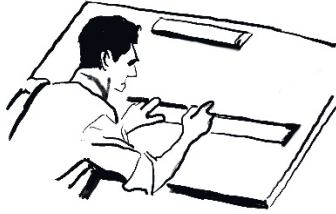
### ***Giving***

In the giving phase, you are concerned with the sustainability of what you have achieved in your career. You wish to see its impact translate into a proud legacy that will outlast you once you have decided to hang up your boots and call it a day.

Giving may or may not appear as an altruistic endeavor but it is the logical step towards ensuring the efforts of a career leave an indelible mark. Financial reward typically becomes less of a motivational factor in this phase, and time is considered an essential and irreplaceable asset given sparingly and selectively.

The giving phase is less about a business or organization but more of leaving an impact that reverberates across an entire industry or discipline.

## **Why you should design your career**



*Jon, a recent graduate, isn't quite sure what to do next. He received his final marks, attended his convocation, and should now technically be on the job hunt. But he is hesitating. He has visited his university's career services, listened to advice from his parent(s), but he is still hesitant.*

*Part of it is due to his nervousness about having to do a 'proper job' for the first time and part is due to being unsure what job he wants to do. One day, he takes a walk to a cafe, orders a beverage, and then takes a seat with the intention of not getting up until he has gained an insight or two. He takes out a sheet of blank paper and stares at it. He asks himself, "What do I want?"*

### **Design now, progress later**

Why do we need to design our career?

The difference between a career of your own choosing and one where the choices are made for you lies in the intention. *Design is the intentional purpose and structure you choose to invest in to achieve your desired outcomes.* It gives us the needed clarity to pierce through the fog of uncertainty that you will inevitably face. It is the global positioning system (GPS) of your career.

Prior to the invention of GPS, you would have needed to keep a sharp eye out for road signs and explore shortcuts before knowing the best way to get to an unfamiliar destination. Using a GPS has now become the go-to option to navigate a long-distance drive simply because it saves us effort, and especially time.

Many of us are in such a rush to join the career grind that we fail to ask what we want out of it. Midway through our journey we often feel a sense of unease, realizing at some point that our unstated expectations were not being met.

So how do you avoid this inevitable disappointment?

### ***Good luck, bad luck and no luck***

At some point in your career journey, you may begin to lose your nerve. On a rainy Thursday afternoon, you may feel like you have had enough and ask, 'Why me?' Why, in this infinitely complex and intricate universe, have events somehow put you at a distinct disadvantage? Is it just rotten luck?

You feel unlucky having ended up in the company you are working in. Furthermore, your fellow classmates of far less distinction have ended up with far more impressive outfits.

You feel that you've had no luck with your boss. Once you hand in your report, your existence seems officially 'deregistered'. You almost wish he hated you; it would at least be a step up from this indifference.

You also feel unlucky with the colleagues whom fate has chosen for you, who drain your energy like parasites the minute they enter the room.

You feel unlucky with the staff that somehow unwittingly ended up under your wing. Slow and often insubordinate, they tend to always move in the opposite direction.

You are also feeling unlucky with the choice of clients you are servicing. Excessively fussy with orders and frugal with payments, they make any job twice as energy consuming.

It is tempting to believe that fate is against you. You may believe you have followed all the rules but still didn't get your due. But there is a sobering reality you have to confront. Blaming bad luck in your career is really blaming yourself.

This is not to say that external circumstances don't create unique opportunities or serious challenges. Oftentimes, they are beyond your control. But over the span of your career, you will naturally encounter the tough as well as the terrific. What is important is to realize that your circumstances are chiefly determined by the conscious choices you have made earlier.

When it comes to the long road of a career, there is no good luck or bad luck. There is no grand conspiracy against you. You are the prime architect of your own failure or success. Let that sink in, and once you embrace it, you are ready to confront your career choices.

### ***Design your career like a game***

Career design need not be some intricate process that requires five-dimensional thinking and planning for every single conceivable contingency. Instead, it may be best to consider your career as a single-player game. In this game, you face no competitor, and your sole aim is to achieve your targets.

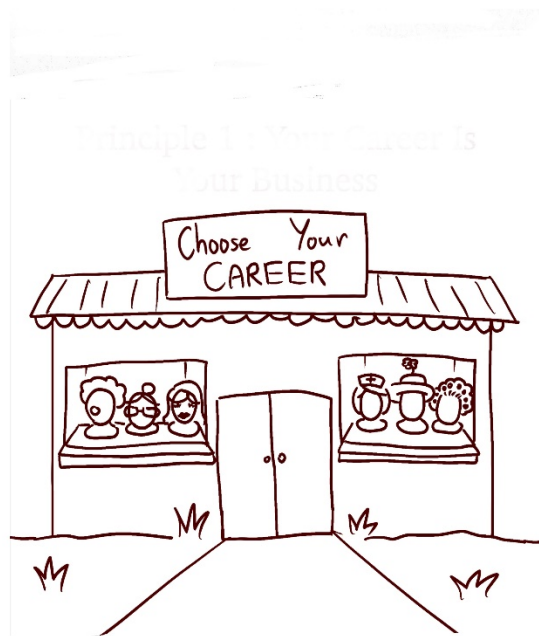
Once you achieve one target, your next prize gains more value. Unlike most games, you don't have a set time limit. Each new level has its own challenges and difficulties, and you can be afforded sufficient opportunities to make course corrections along the way.

Conceived this way, your career will become more straightforward. You are in the driving seat at all times and there is no co-pilot. It is a position that comes with tremendous freedom but also heavy responsibility.

Of course, life is anything but a game where the stakes are always high. So why see your career as a form of sport? In doing so, you will understand immediately that the objective is never to serve your boss or demonstrate loyalty to your organization. You are always serving the game, and everything you encounter on this path is either to accelerate your progress or hinder it. Gamers don't play for others, they play for themselves.

# **PRINCIPLES OF CAREER DESIGN**

## Principle 1 - Your Career is Your Business



We begin with the fundamentals. The inscription, 'Know Thyself', etched in The Temple of Apollo at Delphi thousands of years ago, still echoes through the ages. Translated into career terms, it simply means 'Know Thy Role'. During the ebbs and flows of your career, the one constant is yourself, your skills, your experience, your uniqueness. A true understanding of what your role is will give clarity to all your professional relationships moving forward with your colleagues, boss and company.

This book centers on your role in charting your own destiny. To achieve this, you must begin to believe that your career is *your* business. A business not in the sense of a Microsoft, Nike or McDonald's. A business in the sense that you are a self-made enterprise. You offer your services on a time-value basis to those who need them. You set the targets for your income and goals for your growth. You are the CEO, HR, and Accounts departments all rolled into one. And as you develop professionally, your business expands.

### ***Your company is your client***

Before we can even consider embarking on this marvelous and perilous journey called a career, we must first shed the myths inherited by collective social consciousness. These prescriptions give us a predetermined path that seems all too easy. Once you finish your

education, you interview. Once selected, you get a job. Once you get a job, you work hard and try to make your boss happy. Once you do that long enough, you get a raise and maybe a promotion. If your job is not making you satisfied anymore, you interview again and then wash, rinse and repeat.

It's a familiar pattern, sure enough, but highly misleading. For while it seemingly places you at the center, the reality is that you only remain in the orbit of the organizations we work for. You have inadvertently surrendered the power dynamic between your employer and yourself. It is your employer who will determine the standards of your pay and promotion, of your success and satisfaction. The hidden, and mistaken, assumption is that since your employer hired you, he or she calls the shots.

The reality is that this is simply the lens that you view the situation through. Consider then a different frame of reference. Your employer is your client, and you are a service provider. Your client/employer has particular needs which require your expertise, be it as a financial analyst or a graphic designer. You (the personal business of yourself) are engaged in an exchange of your time for whatever value they provide you. Your goal is meeting and possibly exceeding client expectations.

Yes, being under the employ of an organization is a more fixed arrangement than being hired by a client, to be fair. But at the heart of both relationships is an agreed upon time-value exchange. You are not, or should ever be, subservient to a client, so long as you are committed to fulfilling your end of the bargain. You are as selective of your client as they may be of your service. Also, you have that cherished freedom to decide switching clients whenever you find an arrangement that better fits your goals.

### ***Accept your responsibility***

The key to the client relationship is that the onus is on you to be accountable for the quality of your service. Your desired income and position must be clearly justified by the compelling evidence of the skills you display and the results you bring. If they speak for themselves, you often do not need to negotiate with your client/employer. Your price tag of your service will be seen as a good bargain, assuming that the client has communicated their own expectations for your service standards beforehand.

If it all sounds so straight-forward, why don't most of us in the work grind adopt this same attitude? Because treating your employer like your client subtly reduces our dependency. And not everyone is ready for that.

It can be a hard switch for you at the start of your career, when your employer is an all-dominating presence as you are getting your feet wet in a new work environment. It can be an even harder switch midway or late into your career, when your work pattern may already be literally cast in stone. However, this mindset change lies at the heart of your pursuit of an empowered career.

The sobering reality is that many of us shy away from the immense responsibility of taking control of our affairs. Relinquishing control to another party is a temptation and it is difficult to

not succumb to. Should this happen, that party -- your boss or employer -- will become the target of your frustration and the scapegoat for your own lack of success.

At some point though, you will realize that there is only so much blame you can attribute to these blame agents, because once they are out of the picture, it is only you who is left behind. In fact, it's you, only you, who have always been the heart of your career. You are responsible for your own growth and momentum. You must push it forward from day one. Accept your responsibility, unconditionally.

### ***Solve problems or work harder?***

How satisfying would it be if our employers cherished all our hard work, plus the sweat and tears and toil that we pour into getting things done on time? But the truth is, your hard work will always be secondary to your ability to produce results. This is not a dismissal of all the rock-solid workers out there. Your hard work is an extension of your commitment and deserves respect, but it is not the essential ingredient to a successful career, as unsettling as that may sound.

Your employer may not say it aloud, but you have been hired to solve problems. In fact, if there were no problems to solve at the company, you wouldn't be there and your position wouldn't exist. These problems may be mundane, like keeping an office tidy, or more weighty ones like making key strategic decisions that will dictate the course of the company for the next decade. But the fact is, the company has brought you onboard to tackle these issues.

Every company has hard workers who put in the required hours and elbow grease. But companies treasure the precious few known problem solvers who are usually the center of activity, and who have a reputation for uncovering unorthodox answers to pressing concerns in deadline-crunching fashion. Colleagues and bosses will gravitate to these individuals in times of dire need. A problem-solving approach takes precedence over a task-list of duties and hones in on the key company priorities that need to be speedily addressed.

### ***Key Questions***

Problem-solving, like most life skills, can be nurtured and practiced, but it begins with a proactive instinct to life, rather than waiting behind a desk to finish a delegated duty. To begin this process of becoming that central fixer at work, spend some time deliberating over the following key questions:

*What are the outcomes that are important to my company?* This will determine where you should direct your focus.

*What problems are preventing the success of those outcomes?* You can identify the barriers to your company's growth before they become molehills that everyone is aware of.

*What role do I play in solving these problems?* In other words, how are you strategically positioned to contribute without stepping on others' toes.



*What skills are needed in solving these problems and how can I acquire them?* Find those skills that may not even be part of your job set. Identify the resources in and outside your company that you can employ to cultivate those skills.

*How do I know I am making progress in solving these problems?* Outside of the company's key performance indicators (KPIs), you may need some external feedback to find out if you are on the right track.

# **CAREER DESIGN STRATEGIES**

## Design Strategy 2

### Use Skills to Build Connections Outside Work

*You took up golf a year ago when your friend literally dragged you onto the green to initiate you. But you proved to be a natural. Within a short time, your skill at the game had progressed exponentially, and you began to visit the course once or twice a week to refine your game. Word quickly spread at work of your newfound passion, but only a few of your peers who played the sport are willing to join you.*

*One day, your company director, whom you rarely saw outside of his office except when he was making a dash to the restroom, approached you. He had got word of your exploits at golf, and lacking a worthy challenger on the green, invited you to join him that weekend at his local Golf Club. Flattered by the offer, you readily agree. You reflected on the fact that you had been working in the company for years, yet the first time the director had initiated a conversation with you was over a matter that has nothing to do with the job.*

#### **Level the playing field**

Few of us are so one-dimensional that we lack any hobbies, interests or possess skills outside our 9-to-5 jobs. In many ways, these activities are a sincere reflection of what is close to our hearts since we are not being paid for the time we commit to them. But they can also potentially open up pathways that could not be available otherwise.

In most work environments, there exists a hierarchy -- from entry-level workers to mid-managers to upper management and up to the top leadership. This hierarchy may be more rigid in some organizations than others, but generally staff at different levels tend to form cliques among themselves.

Possessing a skill outside of the confines of your work can offer you a shortcut to mingle with and build connections with those on the higher rung of the ladder. These can be your supervisors, your company leadership or even high-profile clients. Your skill does not necessarily have to be associated with the industry in which you work. Perhaps it may be more advantageous if it is not.

When people higher in the hierarchy approach you concerning matters outside work, they are inevitably speaking on an equal footing and disregarding the difference in your status at the workplace. They may be seeking advice or wanting to engage with you outside of the office. This could plant the seed of a longer relationship. These connections not only raise your visibility but offer you access to opportunities that would have been beyond your attention.

It is commonly thought that you are the average of the five people you spend the most time with. This logic certainly bears weight when it comes to your career. Being seen among the circles of senior staff, leaders and decision-makers sets you apart as someone who is qualified to join such exclusive company in the near future. You do not know the unexplored opportunities that await when you open these doors.

### ***Action steps***

Locate your skills: Take stock of your own hobbies and interests, and identify two or three skills which have practical application, which could range from gardening to squash or investing in cryptocurrency.

Leverage on your skills: Your skill needs to reflect a specific level of proficiency based on time and results. Without this proficiency, there would be little reason for the higher-ups to engage with you in the first place. Your skill is a leverage on their time.

You do not have to broadcast your skills to flatter yourself, but do share or make known this aspect of yourself to your peers. Being seen as wearing different hats can be a demonstration of how well-rounded you are and your potential to play a role as a positive member of a team.

## Design Strategy 6

### Interview! Interview! Interview!

*You didn't plan it this way. You have settled comfortably into your new teaching role at the university. You got along well with your colleagues, your supervisor was more of a mentor than a boss, and your pay was beyond your expectations. What reason is there, then, to consider change when the status quo is so befitting?*

*Perhaps the online advert of a prestigious foreign university seeking to hire a professor in the same discipline as yours did pique your interest, but not sufficiently to drive you to action. You mentioned it to your friend, who cajoled you into considering the possibility of applying. Her logic, simple and appealing as it was, was that there was no harm and you have only to gain by knocking on new doors. You decide to apply just to indulge her, not expecting to get a call back.*

*But call back they did. And as you opened up during the interview, you were pleasantly surprised to find it more like a conversation than an inquisition of your capabilities. While it was clear by the end that you were not the best fit for their department, the chat went so amicably that both parties decided to keep in touch. And that same possible employer turned out to later be a research collaborator with your department, thanks to your initiative.*

### **Keep knocking and opportunities will emerge**

You attend a job interview when you do not have a job, or when you find that the one you are in is no longer suitable. When you bring the dynamic of being in need into an interview room, it immediately gives your prospective employer leverage over you, possibly making it appear as if he is doing you a favor by calling you in.

Rather than wait until the need to interview becomes inescapable, it is wiser to take a more proactive approach. Make interviewing for jobs a matter of course for how you proceed in your career. Regard it as your way of approaching other companies, even competitors, and as part of your interest to explore other avenues.

There are several immediate advantages to this approach, which is often called informational interviewing. The first is that it is you who is interviewing the organization as much as it is assessing you. As you are determining your suitability to the opposing party, you enter the room with as much leverage as the organization conducting the interview.

This is why such interviews should be nerve-free affairs as there is less concern over whether you click with the interviewer or if you made an impression. If anything, such interviews are the best chance for you to practice on your posture, composure and hone your self-confidence. Then you will become familiar with the line of questioning and get more comfortable speaking about yourself and your performance, which can be a sensitive subject.

Interviewing on a rolling basis allows you to understand the latest expectations of the market for someone of your position, and whether you can fully measure up or if there is more work

to be done. In leaving the bubble of your own company, you will know more about the industry you operate in as well as the outsider's perceptions of your own organization and work.

And should you by chance receive an offer, you will have the liberty to accept or reject it. You may consider it a product of your good go-getter luck and accept it, or you can always gracefully say no. But don't be surprised if you stayed on their radar years after that interview, and that they may call you again when they have something more promising to present to you.

### ***Action steps***

**Keeping abreast of industry opportunities:** Make it a regular practice to keep tabs on job sites and placement listings even if you have settled into your own position and a new job is not in your plans. Keeping this habit will allow you to stay sharp and ahead of the curve for when you ever do decide to look for one.

**Informally interview:** While you may respond to solicited positions, do contact companies on your own initiative to seek informational interviews with the purpose of just knowing more about an organization. Make this intention clear from the start. You may choose to either contact their human resource department (HR) directly or target a particular staff member who can provide useful information on the organization.

**Make friends with recruiters:** You may engage a recruiter to locate an ideal job position for you, but do not lose contact with that individual post-placement. Instead, maintaining a relationship with your recruiter will incentivize that person to be your eyes and ears for possibly more rewarding future placements with you in mind. They can functionally be your marketing agent, which is why recruiters should be part of your extended professional network of contacts.

## Design Strategy 11

### The Four Important Work Relationships

*You feel out of place. You had begun this new sales position with fresh optimism, keen to impress your boss and get along with your colleagues. You found the work engaging but far from difficult. As you become more accustomed to your position, you soon realize that the challenges you are facing do not arise from discharging your duties, but in clicking with those around you. You had gotten off to a rocky start.*

*Your boss is aloof with you, rarely engaging in any sort of small talk, and only offering curt responses to your inquiries on work matters. Your association with him has been quite formal.*

*Your colleagues are a hyper competitive bunch, each busy in scoring their own points and lacking team spirit. Your engagement with them is largely superficial.*

*Your clients seem to treat you as an errand boy, keeping in touch to only bring up complaints and irregularities. Hence your communication with them is defensive.*

*Your intern under your supervision is a fairly distracted individual, often slow to discharge his duties and lacking basic professional courtesies. Your direction of his work is a labor in itself.*

*You realize that unless you reset your relationships with those in your work circles quickly, the quality of your own performance will inevitably be affected.*

#### **Grow with the people around you**

As with our social relationships, there are some people you will naturally connect with more easily than others, based on your individual personalities or the chemistry between the two of you. These factors affect the quality of your work relationships. There is no shame in having a relationship in which your personalities don't jive so long as there is mutual respect and professionalism.

There are four relationships critical to maintaining healthy rapport at the workplace: your boss or supervisor, your colleagues or peers, your clients or customers, and your subordinates or staff under your leadership. Each of these relationships is characterized by its own dynamics as well as differences in levels of authority or responsibility.

Your relationship with your supervisor should ideally resemble that of a mentor who takes you under his or her wing. The supervisor may recognize your potential and seek to groom you, deriving a sense of personal investment in your progress. The key ingredients here are respect and openness.

The relationship with your colleagues should ideally be one between collaborators and partners in the same enterprise, rather than as competitors. Colleagues should embrace team spirit and professional cooperation. The key ingredients here are teamwork, congeniality and if possible, friendship.

The relationship with clients and customers should ideally be centered on mutual gains by both parties you represent. Even though you are serving the client and seek their satisfaction, you do not need to be servile or obedient. Instead, emphasize that you take their concerns relating to their transactions seriously. In time, they should be ready to endorse your services to others. The key ingredients here are mutual confidence and respect.

Your relationship with your subordinates should ideally resemble that with your boss, but with you in the supervisory role. Your goal is to mentor your staff and guide them along their professional journey while strategically placing pressure on them at times to coax them into giving their best performance. You do not want to be a tyrant or seem indifferent to their work activities. The key ingredients here are patience and empathy.

### ***Action steps***

**Get feedback:** Do not expect the social and communication skills that are necessary for building professional connections to come naturally. It takes time, reflection and potentially seeking assistance through skills-based training to make genuine improvement. Assess the status of your own work relationships periodically and seek informal feedback from work peers you trust on the gaps and weaknesses in the way you conduct yourself with others.

**Recognize that much of the time, it takes two to tango, so despite your best efforts, a relationship may still be rocky based on how the other person responds. So be forgiving on yourself if such relationships do suffer over time.**

**Be wary of toxicity:** In the case of a toxic work relationship in which there is a persistent display of negative emotions towards you such as pettiness, anger and jealousy, try and establish clear professional boundaries. If it crosses the line into being abusive or emotionally damaging, consider informing an authoritative figure who can intervene, or be prepared if possible to consider switching your workplace.



## Design Strategy 16

### Is Your Boss a Good Role Model?

*You have heard enough.*

*Your boss had called a staff-wide meeting to discuss an upcoming project. There were murmurs around the office that he was feeling especially pressured of late as the Board had expressed their disappointment with the company's quarterly figures, and had asked for a strategic review of the current direction.*

*In the meeting, he unveiled his new grand vision for a top-down company rebranding campaign. The campaign aims to revitalize the company's image dramatically by changing the company name, its operational style and target markets. It took the staff by complete surprise, and the initial reaction was one of shock.*

*Over the next month, the shock eventually gave way to a creeping skepticism as to whether a rebranding was necessary or pointless. This mood shift didn't go unnoticed by the boss, who responded by pushing the staff even harder to execute the campaign.*

*One day, his frustration finally boiled over. Responding to a query by a member of the staff concerning whether the new campaign slogan is confusing, he gave that staff member a lashing in front of her peers. His criticism turned into personal insults and once he had said his fill, he retreated into his office and wasn't seen for the rest of the day. After witnessing the mess, you would never see the boss the same way again.*

#### **Follow the leader?**

Expecting those in authority to be exemplary individuals is an ideal that often doesn't materialize. As the boss sets the tempo and steers the ship, it is usually impossible for a team, no matter how talented and capable, to be consistently productive if the leader doesn't command their respect.

When we are new in a company, we may see the boss as a sort of template for how we would want to develop as professionals, assuming his or her progression in the organization has been based on merit. Eventually we may chart our own path but having the boss as a role model in terms of work routine and executive style can help us in our own professional development.

A boss who consistently shows poor manners, lackluster management, miscommunication and other similar weaknesses will compromise his or her ability to lead. Such a boss will end up demotivating his or her own staff, who may be unlikely to take up new responsibilities or even promotions on seeing how the position itself can reduce someone to becoming a subpar professional.

Since time is the most valuable and limited asset in your career, you may be squandering it by staying in a company in which your own growth is limited due to the person at the top. You

can never expect a flawless angel or a hyper-efficient robot to be in charge, but if their failings are taking the company backwards, that is a sign that you may be better placed somewhere else.

### **Action steps**

Know your boss: Pay attention to your boss' own personal quirks, working style and communicative behavior. You may not have the time or luxury to create a detailed psychological analysis of your boss, but the least you may do is understand him or her based on your best personal and professional assessment. Over time, the strengths and weaknesses become more apparent, especially in reaction to challenging scenarios.

Look at the boss' team: Also, be aware of what sort of professionals your boss can attract. A crucial ability of a leader is being able to build a strong team. Ask yourself, is your boss able to gather the brightest and most positive staff? If the answer is no, or if such staff do not stick around for long, this speaks a lot about the boss' leadership abilities.

## Design Strategy 18

### Get Your House in Order

*You have reached your limit.*

*Your company would be hosting its annual overseas conference which will be attended by all the bigwigs of the industry. It would present an ideal opportunity for you not just to sharpen your skills in event management, but also to network with specialists and decision-makers whom you were keen to impress.*

*The conference is several months away and you have been selected to lead the organizing committee. You oversee the marketing campaign, registration, venue selection and the agenda for the event. It involves a great deal of toil, but you feel delight in even the more mundane tasks as you imagine the event would be a rocking success.*

*As engaged as you are at work, matters at home are not as appealing. Long hours at the office meant you would come home late. Lacking the motivation and energy to cook, you ended up ordering fast food on almost a daily basis. Your sleep routine is constantly disrupted by late night tasks.*

*Whereas you had previously made it a point to contact your parents almost every second day, you had not even called to check in on them in weeks. Your friends have drifted to the periphery of your attention, and you would frequently forget to respond to their messages.*

*Within a few months, you have gained nearly 10 kilos, have dark bags around your eyes and look like a completely different person. Outside work, you are consistently on edge and your moods alternated between lethargy and indulgence.*

*It was no wonder then, that two days before the conference, your body gave in. What started as a fever became fits of coughing and shivers. Your doctor ruled out any possibility of a quick recovery, effectively shutting you out of the conference that you had so meticulously planned. You would now have to rest at home to recuperate from the damage you have inflicted on yourself in the past few months.*

#### **Fix your life and then the company**

It is very difficult to compartmentalize your life but one aspect of it will inevitably spill over and affect the other, no matter how effectively we try to segment them from each other. Your personal and professional domains may or may not interact much, but what is common in both is you. Therefore, it is *you* that you must take care of.

Look at things holistically. You should want every aspect of your life to work in harmony and create a sense of satisfaction. Hinging your satisfaction on your work performance alone while ignoring family, friends and your own living arrangements will not be sustainable. As you are not a robot, you will inevitably feel the wear and tear of a troubled personal life, which will creep into your work performance as well. Quite often, we may not notice these effects, but our supervisor or colleagues who interact with us will ask the key question, "Are you all right?"

Your career may be important, but having a 100% focus on it may be to the detriment of your home life and also bring about disastrous consequences for you in the long term. You are under no obligation to your company to sacrifice your personal and familial well-being to ensure that it grows -- your ultimate obligation is to yourself and ensuring that other facets of your life also get their due attention.

### ***Action steps***

**Chart your life:** Take the time to list the various aspects of your life; from your work, your family life, your close and social relationships, your financial situation, your physical and mental health and your intellectual growth. Frankly assess each area and try to come up with some metrics of how you would track your own progress in these domains.

**Have some accountability:** Ensure you have external methods of monitoring as well. It can be a close family member, spouse or even a therapist or coach. Regularly share your experiences on how you are doing within the big picture. Look out for warning signs such as over-exertion and neglect before situations spiral out of control. If necessary, take time off from work to put your personal affairs in order rather than let them fester.

## Epilogue

This book is by no means the last word on the subject of designing your own career. Attempting to cover every single nuance and detail of one's career path could entail writing a tome far more comprehensive than the entire series of Encyclopedia Britannica.

Instead, this book gives you a quick overview of the forces which shape your professional advancement, setting out the principles which can guide you towards pursuing a self-directed path, as opposed to following one not of your own design.

We also recommended several strategies that you can employ in a practical way based on the potential situations you will face in your journey.

Many who enter the workforce complain that the system is skewed against them, and that they are consistently given the shorter end of the stick as a select few are profiting at their expense. This book only seeks to help professionals to level the playing field somewhat by empowering them to take whatever initiative they can in their respective zones of control in order to prosper.

As with any design process, it takes practice, and more than that, a willingness to experiment for yourself. As there are many paths to success, be willing to try the one which suits you best while accepting that failures are a necessary part of the journey.

Not every lesson relating to your career can be learned by reading a book. A good portion of it must be learnt the old-fashioned way: through exhilarating, sometimes tiring but often mundane experience.

As your career is a vital part of your life journey, preplanning every single aspect is virtually impossible; and were it not, it would still make it far less rewarding. You must have the fortitude to experience the trials and payoffs along this journey on your own.