

Recipe for Jumpstarting a Career

...With Only a Pinch of Student Loan Debt

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There are many different recipes for baking a successful career. Before selecting the ingredients for your gourmet meal, first look at your “kitchen,” i.e. your societal environment and the utensils you have available. Your environment includes items such as family financial status and educational tendencies. The set of utensils may well be quite different for each individual and include such items as natural intelligence level (IQ), unique skill sets and personal preferences.

In general, personal preferences should be the number one consideration. Identify your true ‘passion of value’ and let that be your true north. Passion of value here may vary significantly from a pure passion. There is a popular school of thought that states you need to follow your passion when selecting a career path. While that sounds good, it’s oftentimes unrealistic. For instance, I have a passion for playing golf. Unfortunately, I was born with a depth perception problem and distinct hand-eye coordination difficulties. In spite of those challenges, I still mistakenly thought a career of a golfing pro might still be within reach, so I took a five-month sabbatical from my corporate gig and hit the golf course 5-6 days a week. By my fifth month with no paycheck, I still had not managed a single round of par golf. Lesson learned.

Passion without pay is only a hobby. If you are blessed with a high IQ but your passion is the performing arts, chances are you’ll be much better suited to the theatrical arena than the world of engineering or science. But, if you suck on stage, put that passion aside for awhile and look for a serious interest for which people are willing to pay actual money – and hopefully pay handsomely. If you can become passionate about that area of interest, you’re well on your way to making it your passion of value.

Education is Essential...Within Reason

If you come from a wealthy family that can easily afford the hefty tuitions of the elite universities, you are one of the fortunate few. But, don’t waste the opportunity. Even though a degree from Harvard or Yale may sound like the ultimate credential, it may not be the best solution, especially if your major field of study is something you’re not truly passionate about. If the career field that your chosen degree program is preparing you for is not one that will make you really happy, you’re most likely headed in the wrong direction.

So, let's get back to our baking recipe. Remember you're not just baking a meal, you're preparing yourself for a lifetime of appetizing and nutritional eating. So, as stated above, let your passion create your personal menu. I truly hate to use the term 'average' in this situation because each of you individual readers of this article will have a different set of circumstances when it comes to the very important determinants such as financial status, IQ, skill sets, preferences and such. Considering this, there is no 'one size fits all' solution for choosing the best jumping off point for embarking on a career.

Being a firm believer in the value of a solid education, my position is that getting educated is an essential component of a career plan. When I say solid education, I'm not saying such an education must come in the form of a four-year college degree. Simply having that coveted college diploma certainly does not mean one is genuinely educated. It only indicates they have been able to navigate through a required number of college classes with a passing grade on average. It's amazing how many college graduates cannot even string together a few cohesive sentences. What's worse is that they have taken on thousands of dollars of student loan debt for which they get no return.

What if You Can't "Show Me the Money?"

Many people do not have the financial wherewithal to get formal education beyond high school. Not to worry. This bare-bones starting position does not stop anyone from getting some degree of formal education. It simply may just be a matter of timing. I was in that unfortunate position upon high school graduation and still ended up being tremendously successful by going the self-education route. My own self-named SEB degree (Self-Educated Businessperson) was a combination of actual work experience, college courses as money and time permitted, self-study courses and lots of reading. In reality, almost everything taught in college is available for free at the library and the Internet – and free is a very good cost. All that's missing is that piece of parchment.

Here's a bit of my own personal story to prove my point. I dropped out of high school and struck out on my own at the age of 17 with only a few hundred dollars to my name. After breaking virtually all family ties, I had no safety net on which to rely. With a little bit of luck and a lot of effort, I did manage to enroll in a new high school within the same year and earn my diploma. After graduating, I still had no money and could only get minimum wage work. I'll cut the story short at this point but suffice it to say I was able to gradually get educated and became a highly successful and wealthy corporate executive. Don't worry, I won't hang you out to dry on this. I'll pick it back up before I finish this article.

So, without further ado, back to the 'average' recipe. Keep in mind this is only a strawman rendition. You'll need to make adjustments as you apply this conceptual model to your own particular life situation.

I base my average recipe for preparing for a successful career on what I call my 'learn while you earn' strategy. The fortunate few have wealthy families who can fund a decent college degree program or who qualify for a full-ride scholarship. For the rest of us mere mortals, who don't want to struggle with many years of suffocating student loan debt, we might want to consider a pay as you go strategy.

Here's how the strategy works in the real world. Start your educational program by getting a job or jobs and use the income to fund your education a step at a time. This probably means you'll only be able to attend college or other institute of learning on a part time basis. Apprenticeship programs or internships may make the process easier and less expensive, but only if circumstances permit. Other alternatives include technical schools, trade schools and such.

Probably the most important factor to consider before enrolling in college and essentially pre-paying for your education is to identify your preferred career path. Skipping this crucial step and jumping right into a college program after high school is courting disaster. It's virtually a surefire way to waste valuable time and money. There are a wide variety of tactics high school students have at their disposal to aid in career path selection.

One attractive option is signing up for Advanced Placement (AP) classes, which high school students can take starting in their junior year. About 60% of U.S. high schools offer AP classes. In addition to learning what is involved with certain career choices, AP classes expose students to the rigors of college life and the expectations included. As an added bonus, the completion of AP classes can earn students college credits while still in high school. This will mean spending a little less on college tuition. The program is run by a non-profit membership organization called the College Board.

Last Ditch Approach, the Gap Year

So, let's say none of that works so far. As much as your parents will hate this last ditch option, your best alternative may be to take a gap year between high school and your next educational endeavor, whether it be college or a trade school. The most important rule here is to hunker down and avoid wasting your gap year. It's not time to relax and play, it's time to get serious about making the career path decision.

During your gap year, make a list of the types of jobs you think you would enjoy and prioritize the list from most likely to least likely. Starting at the top of the list, perform as many of the four major activities listed below as you can. Keep a detailed journal to record what you have done, what you learned and pertinent comments of what you liked or didn't like.

Activity #1 – Personal Networking

Find people who are doing the jobs you listed and build a relationship with several people. Ask lots of questions and take thorough notes.

Activity #2 – Internet Research

Spend lots of time doing research on the Internet about jobs on your list. There are lots of job boards where current or past employees rate the jobs and provide commentary on them

Activity #3 – Take a Class or Two

If possible, take some classes that teach about the work that interests you. Get to know the instructors and seek their advice and ask to be introduced to people who work in your targeted jobs.

Activity #4 – Seek out Internships, Apprenticeships and Job Shadowing Opportunities

Internships and apprenticeships give you the opportunity to try various jobs on for size on a temporary basis with nominal commitment. Some offer pay as compensation for your time but don't get your hopes up about this and don't make it a personal requirement. Job Shadowing is a career exploration activity that offers an opportunity to spend time with a professional currently working in your career field of interest. It will give you a great taste of what it's like to work in a particular field.

So, by the end of your gap year, you need to reassess your situation. If you've studied diligently and worked tenaciously during the 365 days or so you've been through, you should be in a much better position to make a career path decision. Having said that, some people will still be undecided and that's OK. The gig economy that emerged a few years back provides a bit of a cushion. Look around for a job that's not on your 'I'll hate it' or 'I'll suck at it' lists and take your best shot. With the 'no harm, no foul' forgiving nature of the gig economy, you can easily bail out and move on to another job without the former black mark of being labeled a job hopper. The gig economy plays the convenient scape goat for this behavior. If possible, you might even want to try two part time gigs simultaneously.

Building a Better Resume

Most college graduates have a resume made up almost entirely of their academic credentials. They rely on that piece of parchment to tell potential employers they might be good at a career. If one's career preparation period includes a combination of formal

education and real-world accomplishments, that expanded 'resume' can be incredibly powerful. A short summary of your real-world accomplishments that augments your academic achievements makes a winning combination.

This scenario will have true power only if your working-world accomplishments are attention getters. Merely having held a job in a certain field is not enough. An action statement depicting the actual value you were able to produce in the commercial or scientific space is what is really needed to seal the deal.

End of My Story...Sort of (I'm not done yet)

As promised earlier, I'll tie up the loose ends of my own personal success story. I took a gap year after high school. Actually, due to circumstances beyond my control, it turned out to be more like two years and was the best decision of my life. I did a stint in the military. It was in the military that I stumbled into the IT (Information Technology) career field. Prior to that, I erroneously thought the computer field would have been beyond my capabilities. Fortunately, I couldn't have been more wrong. It turned out to be easily within my reach and it became my newfound passion.

After my discharge, I found an entry level job in the business world. Starting out as a data entry operator, I moved rapidly into computer operations and then software development. Simultaneous to that, I was cramming in as much formal education on the subject as I could. I became a shining star in the corporation with my dual knowledge skill set that combined information technology, business operations and accounting & finance. Within three years, I found myself as an internal IT consultant specializing in IT turnaround projects.

My high-profile projects involved a great deal of travel and periodic geographic transfers. This wreaked havoc with my quest to obtain a college degree. I ended up accumulating enough transferrable credits from seven colleges across the country to qualify as a third-year student. By that time, I had made so much money and taken on such a load of high-level responsibilities, I had to curtail my pursuit of a formal degree.

At the time, I looked in the mirror and asked myself if that mattered. The answer was absolutely NOT. I went on to be a highly successful corporate executive. My career continued upward as I became an independent consultant working internationally and doing lots of writing and public speaking. All of that resulted in a wealthy outcome.

Stay Focused, Just Not 100% Focused

Maintaining a solid focus on your goal and avoiding discouragement are the keys to making your career-building activities come to fruition. A word of caution though. A person who is 100% focused on a singular goal can miss some golden opportunities that appear

in one's peripheral vision. A little flexibility can go a long way. Who knows, something may pop up along the way that alters your original thought pattern. A two-pronged goal can be every bit as powerful as a single target. The upside is that a slight modification or secondary goal may make life more interesting and the rewards even more...well, rewarding.

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