

Is there any point in thinking about your career in a recession?

Brian McIvor argues the case for keeping your eye on your career plans - even in a recessionary economy.

The career of the 21st century will be *protean*, a career that is driven by the person, not the organization, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change. (Douglas T Hall, 1996).

It may be considered a bit of a luxury to be talking about careers given current conditions - when survival is the watchword and redundancy is the fear. Here are four good reasons for focussing on your career plan:

- 1 You could be next:** if your job is potentially in danger you may have to move quickly. There is a difference between looking for a job in desperation because time and money have run out and weighing up your options with the time to research and find the current market - to find where the "green shoots" are.
- 2 Danger of being a misfit:** If you end up in a job that doesn't suit you you may be under pressure to produce much more for less in a role that you are not very good at. This could give you a short shelf-life and a very limited career path.
- 3 Time to retrain:** If you had spent a long period of time in your current job your skills and expertise could be out of date. You may need to evaluate your employability.
- 4 Career Change due anyway:** Over a working lifetime the focus of your career will change from being an operator to being a supervisor, to being a manager. If you work in the technology business expertise dates quickly and the system favours the younger graduate. Is it now time to see where you might better fit in?

Surviving in the current market means becoming a career detective: to make sense of where your career should be headed. If you don't actively manage your career the best you can hope for in the current marketplace is to hang on to a poorly paid pressurized job with little prospect for security or prospect for advancement.

Managing our careers seems to be a pure mystery for some. When we went to school it was impossible to get any meaningful picture on what we would be doing when we went into the world of work because we could not tell the future. I wrote the book *Career Detection* because it struck me that working out your career plan was one of life's biggest mysteries - like who would you marry and what would your family be like. The danger was in letting things happen! The mystery in career management is to make sense of a lot of ambiguous information and to make meaningful plans for the future. To be successful

you require a combination of some tough analytical thinking, intuition and a little bit of luck.

The difficulty in the current situation is that people expect to find a career or a job as easily as they did in the boom. A generation ago was the last time anybody had to go and look for work. In the meantime, standard of living was raised and peoples' expectations have risen – many people are reluctant to spend the amount of time needed to research opportunities, network, research and re-train.

In the last two years I have met hundreds of bewildered job seekers who are not properly prepared for the current situation and are in denial.

Prior to the recession people went into jobs that were available and paid well and didn't think whether the work suited them or not –because they could move on or travel the world if things didn't suit them. Like Mount Everest –jobs were there! Now the situation is different and many people are reluctant to climb the mountain.

Here's two situations typical of the current situation:

Case Study: Dee

Dee has been finding it difficult to get interviews nowadays since she got laid off from their well-paid high profile job. It has been practically impossible to get job interviews – let alone job offers. A number of intensive interviewing and chaotic selection processes with a number of start-up companies were inconclusive and energy-sapping. Dee is now in a desperate situation where the stress and lack of confidence are starting to show. She will try anything because she has bills to pay. Dee has used the scattergun approach and lacks proper focus.

She is not alone: In the current desperate situation many career changers and job-seekers are using the scattergun approach to send out unwelcome CVs to uninterested employers.

Some people though, have weathered the storm.

Case Study: Jonathan.

It took Jonathan just 18 months to land his dream job in Financial Services after his property-based business went into decline in the late noughties .His life style took a hit. However, he spent a lot of time focusing on his skills set, identifying expertise and using his contacts. Initially things were a rough and he had to make do with a job that just about paid the basic bills and no more. He is quite definite about the secret of his success: "I figured out how the company I am now working for needed me – my emphasis was on their current needs and how I could help them manage their business. I had to be incredibly focussed. A scattergun approach had got me nowhere."

HARD REALITIES in the NEW MARKETPLACE:

However good the Tiger economy was to all of us here are the current hard realities.

1. **You are not going to get your old job back.** Not only are you not going to be getting your old job the correct word nowadays is contract and not job.
2. **Your salary will reflect current market realities rather than your expectations.**
3. **From the minute you take up your new contract demands will change constantly because demands on the market will change constantly.**
4. **You will need to keep your skills sets and expertise up-to-date.**
5. **Change is constant:** Between graduation and retirement your career will undergo a number of major change – so that the discipline you graduated in will become increasingly irrelevant over time and you will have to work on your academic portfolio as well as your skills set.

CAREER DETECTION MEANS SOLVING THE MAJOR CAREER MYSTERIES

What are they?

1 What are you looking for in a career?

Money? Advancement? Opportunities to do interesting things, travel and meeting interesting people? People vary regarding their drivers: What are yours?

2 What have you got?

You need to be clear on your expertise, your skills and your contacts.

Most people are gloriously vague on this one. Almost to a man or a woman they claim that they are excellent communicators and peerless team members. Forget it, Bill Cullen didn't buy this sort of chat on the Apprentice and neither will any professional HR manager or recruiter. A leading HR recruiter looks for specific achievement – and not aspirational guff based on a sense of inflated self-importance!

3 Who's interested in you?

Remember, it is a human being who makes the decision to employ and not internet programmes. Find the human beings, find out what they want, decide if you are what they want and make contact. Sounds simple, but isn't. You will need to master the art of surviving in spite of constant rejection – much of it very hurtful. What is needed to combat all of this is Olympic persistence and a thick hide. Many people give up after the first few refusals – the real starts keep at it!

4 How do you find the opportunities?

Not around the first corner! The most common mistake is to apply for jobs, opportunities too early in the process.

CAREER DETECTION STAGES:

Nobody expects a murder mystery to be solved immediately there are stages in the process. Career Detection has its own stages:

- 1 Decide what you want and have to offer.** Be very clear both on your desired role (job title) and your desired field (area of interest). Be realistic about your aspirations. Be prepared to plug knowledge and skill gaps by further education, training and certification – if necessary. Don't be afraid to dream and do predictions a few years into the future. Visioning works because you constantly are reminding yourself of your vision and asking the question – what am I doing now to make this vision a reality?
- 2 Research, Research, Research (I) Find out what is happening in the market place** – what's in demand, who's who and what the medium-term predictions are. Spend a lot of time on this stage – days or even weeks. Read and network to get up to date; not just trends in the market place but product information, salary levels and cost.
- 3 Research, Research, Research (II) Find out how opportunities are arising** – what sort of contracts are on offer. The internet is not the only source you should tap.
- 4 Identify people who can help you by supplying information, names.** Set up exchanges with people so that you can help others – mutual interest is better than self-interest (the “what goes round comes round” principle). Remember, alumni associations (e.g. MBAs, Colleges, Schools) are very powerful in Ireland!
- 5 Be philanthropic: Find someone you can help** – without any expectation of reward – because it focuses you on somebody else's needs apart from your own. You will reap the rewards in confidence and well being. Your attitude to yourself and other people are critical – many are in a similar situation to your own.
- 6 Find people who can coach you:** Team up with people who can give you meaningful feedback, encouragement and useful information. What you need are both honesty and support. A reality check is important. Internationally, the most successful methods of job search are job clubs – because they operate in the groups mutual interests. Do this on a mutual basis so that it doesn't cost.
- 6 Thank people who have helped you.** Keep in contact with people, be proactive, don't expect the phone to ring. Have targets of people to call every day, every week.
- 7 Don't Rush Make the move only when the time is right:** Don't make the approach until you are completely ready and reasonably assured of success. With opportunities in such short supply nowadays you cannot afford to blow any chances. Be clear about the people you will be meeting, their level, their interests, their positions. The most common mistake is to apply for opportunities too early when you are unprepared. Jonathan's case proves that he was in the right place at the right time – after he had done the research in depth.
- 8 Think Critically at all stages:** Think of the questions that will drive your search: What will get you beyond loose talk and speculation? For example: A number of major

areas of businesses have done well out the current situation. Do you know what they are? Do you have any particular skills that are valued in this area? The challenge is to differentiate yourself by the quality of your analysis and strategies.

The Future is here : The Protean Career:

In 1996 Douglas T Hall pioneered the concept of the Protean Career – which was a career that you managed in partnership with your employer. Proteus was the Greek God who could change shape at will. The idea is very relevant because in 2010 you cannot guarantee that the company you joined will maintain its shape or identity for very long – because of the dangers of takeovers, mergers, constant reorganizations, rationalizations, leveraged buyouts and focus on bottom-line delivery for shareholders. To survive in this changing environment you take responsibility for your career to shape and manage it to your best advantage.

In 2010 Hall's future vision has been made flesh and your career is something too important to be left exclusively in the hands of strangers. Manage it well.

Brian McIvor
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