
Why You Should Build a Portfolio Career



By Pan Pan , Founder and Managing Partner of Pantèra Ventures

Many describe career paths as an upward trajectory, but moving sideways is becoming more popular and sensible.

When Tidjane Thiam, former CEO of Prudential (and an INSEAD alum) became the CEO of Credit Suisse, he was asked if he was equipped to do a good job since he had never worked in investment banking before. He replied, “I’ve studied physics and maths...there is nothing that I don’t understand in investment banking”.

Thiam embodies the often winding paths professionals are increasingly taking in their careers. As we move toward a sharing and on-demand economy in an already globalised world, the idea of lifetime employment with fixed skillsets is rapidly evaporating.

Until recently, people tended to stay in one job or industry for many years, if not most of their careers and employers looked for and valued employees with strong sector expertise much more than people with broad eclectic backgrounds and cross-sector experience, even if their overall profile could make them a better fit.

Now it is becoming more common for people to switch employers and industries frequently and change paths as they progress in their careers, building a “portfolio career”.

What do you want to be?

Some people are lucky enough to know what they are passionate about and want to do from an early age and can pursue it single-mindedly. But even they may have to entertain other options once their professional careers are over or they fail to achieve their ambitions.

Building a core set of skills and some sector expertise so that one does not become a “jack of all trades and master of none” is a good approach, especially as you progress through your career. However, I have found that often the knowledge and learning I have acquired from one job or industry become equally useful and applicable in a new job in a seemingly unrelated sector. Steve Jobs said what inspired him most in the design of the transformational Apple “iProducts” was the knowledge he gained from a calligraphy class he took in college.

More importantly, the essential soft skills (and often unlearnable and uncontrollable politics) that ultimately determine one’s success in his or her job such as people management (both upward and down), maturity and how to handle uncertainty and disruptions can be gained from multiple jobs and sectors and only with time and experience – there are no shortcuts.

Evolving business models and career models

In terms of holding multiple or “a portfolio” of jobs, most people throughout history had to do it just to make ends meet. Under communism, many had to look outside their “official” job in the underground economy to earn money and access rationed or prohibited goods. It is only with industrialisation and the rise of the corporation that many have been able to pursue and become accustomed to long-term jobs in business.

However, with the “internet of things” and sharing economy, which has drastically reduced the cost of information and outsourcing, business models and thus workers need to adapt. We are forced to move to the portfolio approach with jobs and careers. One’s skills can become irrelevant or obsolete quickly and companies are less loyal than ever to their employees. Even if companies implement policies to retain talented workers, one can be

fired any time due to a restructuring, especially as one moves up the corporate ladder, where there are fewer chances to dodge sideways in times of difficulty. The higher up the rungs and older you get, the harder it is to find a similar job in level and pay once you leave a job or get laid off – especially if your skills can be easily replaced or outsourced to younger, cheaper workers.

The new-economy requires people to not just learn new skills as they age, but to monitor the market for new opportunities. With the rise of project- and contract-based work enabled by technology platforms that cater to independent consultants and freelancers, more and more people are able and likely to be self-employed, offering services to a wide range of customers and managing their own company - taking on activities like sales, marketing and accounting which are delegated to specialists in a corporation.

All this means less stability and employment protection, although many self-employed people grow to value the autonomy, flexibility and variety in their work so much that they are willing to trade security for independence. They are also more likely to build and nurture professional networks that last. And because they have to be more sensitive to the winds of the market and continuously adapt to their clients, they also hedge themselves from becoming entirely irrelevant and unemployed. Research suggests that countries and companies with more flexible work cultures are more innovative and creative. The career path should also adapt to this new world order. Only the innovative will survive.

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