



The Best Path to Success is Your Own

If you're wondering what to do next in your career, you're hardly alone. The debate about where and how we may best feed our hunger for mastery, service, prestige, approval, safety, achievement — whatever we're after — is fiercer than ever.

Do you go after, or hold on to, a corporate job or strike out on your own? Daniel Gulati and Lucy Kellaway recently offered contrasting views. There is less need to join prominent institutions today to demonstrate our worth, argued Gulati, an entrepreneur, [here on HBR](#). Social networks offer more accurate ways to signal our ability and potential to add value.

That is a crazy thought, rebutted Kellaway from her [column in the Financial Times](#), where she has worked for a quarter of a century. How can a Twitter stream trump a business card with the logo of a venerable institution emblazoned above your name, especially when such institutions are so hard to get into and stay at?

The two perspectives make for an informative debate on the changing sources of prestige, and on the best strategy for the ambitious to gain recognition in this day and age — be it from employers, local and virtual communities, or inner critics. They are also the latest installment of an ongoing generational controversy.

Take these two New York Times essays, arguing that young Americans are too [complacent to hit the road to find work](#), and have the [passionless and eager-to-please attitude of salespeople](#). Then read these responses, on [HBR](#) and [Techcrunch](#), articulating the widespread disillusionment with all establishments and the sense of unfairness and betrayal that are fueling a groundswell of entrepreneurship.

Such things have long sparked heated discussion. Each time a new generation stakes claim to culture and power, previous ones respond with disconcert and skepticism of the new group's motives, aspirations, and habits.

But something feels different this time around.

Members of generations whose defining experiences were of commitment and rebellion struggle to make sense of a generation whose members' defining experiences are of uncertainty and flux. In the past, talented new people were keen to wrestle institutional conductors for the wheel of

the bus. These days, many cannot wait to get off the bus. They are not just looking for a change of direction. They are aiming to invent new institutions and new ways of working to bring us all forward. This generational transition could be less of a handover or a takeover, and more of a walkout. But this is not, ultimately, about generations.

It is a clash of workplace civilizations.

This clash is between collectively prescribed and individually crafted paths to success and fulfillment. Advocates of both sides exist among all age groups. It is a clash happening between us, and let's face it, within us — as we ponder the best way to craft our work lives in uncertain times, as we look for ways to assuage our concerns, pursue our aspirations and keep our hopes alive.

When I started teaching MBAs, for example, my students used to queue at consulting firms, investment banks and elite corporations' doors for internships and jobs. They still do. Equally cool these days, however, is working on a start-up.

I asked two fledging entrepreneurs how their MBA classmates viewed their choice of spending the summer on their venture — and giving up the potential experience, connections (and salary) of a posh corporate internship. "We hardly hear that's foolish. Most people tell us, 'I wish I was doing that.'" They harbored no illusion that their choice was safe. But corporate life seemed to offer neither more safety nor more status among their peers. Therefore, the choice was easier.

This what makes the clash more intense than ever and brings it out in the open. Established institutions are still powerful but have proven less reliable. Entrepreneurial ventures are still risky but they are increasingly seen as the best way to tackle economic and social problems. Neither option is safe. Both involve uncertainty and signal prestige.

Hence many are taking either route, for different reasons — to follow their passion, to prove themselves, to serve others, to gain recognition. Not everyone is a conformist who joins a big firm. Not all

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Zuckerberg wannabes are following their bliss. It's not the choice of workplace that matters most. It's why we make it, and what we do with it.

Here is my view. Let us welcome the clash of workplace civilizations. It has potential to be good for us. We need talented stewards to reinvent our ailing institutions as much as we need gifted entrepreneurs to build new ones. Let each of us take both sides.

Whether you're betting on the staying power of established institutions or in the promise of start-ups, you must keep the clash alive within yourself. Being successful and fulfilled in a large organization, in the long run, will require carving your space, innovating, making your mark. In a new venture, it will require staying connected to, influencing, and maybe one day becoming, the mainstream.

Individuals and societies are full of tensions. We are living contradictions. What will we need to do for this one to fuel creative breakthroughs rather than bitter conflicts? I'd love to hear your views.

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