



The MBA Career Path Less Travelled



By Pan Pan , Founder and Managing Partner, Pantèra Ventures (INSEAD MBA '03J)

For MBAs who haven't mapped out their entire career plan, the best path to fulfilment is found by stepping out of the HR waiting room.

All things considered, 2003 was not the greatest time to be leaving business school. It wasn't long after the internet bubble had burst. Times were tough and job opportunities scarce, even for top MBA graduates. Although many companies still came to campus to make presentations, they weren't actively hiring. For the few jobs available, competition was fierce and those with experience and sector expertise were favoured. For those looking to change industries as well as geography, the challenge was even bigger.

Over the last few years, I have seen many fellow MBA graduates, ex-colleagues and friends, looking for jobs. Some were laid off during the financial crisis and the subsequent bank restructurings. Some want to change industries or careers. Some are looking for more work/life balance or

meaning in their work and some are still trying to figure out what they want to do.

For many, especially in Europe, the job search has been more difficult than expected, due to slower overall economic growth, a lacklustre job market and increased competition from emerging markets. In today's globalised world, stable career paths are disappearing, - even for people with top MBAs - and managing one's career has become a lifelong process, accompanied by an uncertainty factor that is likely here to stay.

That uncertainty is exponentially worse for those who haven't decided on every rung of the ladder they want to reach for. It took me fifteen years to realise what I wanted to do and above all, what I didn't. In the ten years since I left INSEAD, I have changed jobs four times. Having now found my groove, I have learned some life changing lessons along the way.

Nurture your network

First, in any job search, leverage your network. The more senior you are, the more you will find that you get jobs via people, not job applications. Generally the people making key hiring decisions are not sitting in HR departments. HR merely does the screening, and often selects only the "perfect" candidates, those with all the boxes ticked. My very eclectic CV would never pass most HR assessments.

When I left INSEAD, after several unsuccessful interviews on campus and in London, I found myself a summer internship at a successful creative branding agency called StrawberryFrog in Amsterdam (by cold emailing the founder/CEO via their website). While in Amsterdam, I followed up with a contact at Unilever, who I hosted when the team came to campus, and got an interview for a position in their corporate strategy group which eventually led to a job offer in the fall.

For INSEAD graduates, you have an amazing global alumni network at your fingertips. Reach out to alumni in industries and sectors you are interested in. When you are looking for an opportunity, you are really looking for a person - a person who can help you and give you a chance. This means proactively reaching out and meeting people and following up once you do, which takes time and effort. But it is worth it - you only need one good opportunity to succeed.

Change the question

Second, focus on your competitive advantage. In today's rapidly changing world, competition is fierce and coming from every corner. Rather than asking questions like "what is my passion and how do I follow that in my career?" or "what is the most popular industry to go into right now?" ask yourself "what am I good at? What are my key skills and assets?" and "what do I enjoy doing?" Focusing on your strengths will not only make you a better candidate it will also make you happier in your job. More and more, studies are finding that traits that lead people to love their work are less about the job's specifics and more about the soft factors like a sense of autonomy, a feeling that you are good at what you do, having a positive relationship with one's boss and colleagues and making an impact. Of course, your assets need to meet the needs and environment of the employer. This could be something very practical and specific like a language you speak or a common background you share with your future boss. For my last job, one of the main reasons I got hired was because I spoke Chinese and my boss happened to be a trained pianist, just like me, which made us click right away. I had no sector expertise for the job itself but I was referred by an INSEAD alumnus.

Take the plunge

Finally, one of the most important things about a job search is to take calculated risks. This means to be open to opportunities, even if they are not "perfect" opportunities. I have come across many stories of people who want to change jobs but rarely seek opportunities because they generally believe they do not meet all the criteria or the jobs on offer don't meet all of theirs. Others are not willing to take a pay cut in order to change industries or careers.

The important thing is to act. Action leads to opportunities, not plans or aspirations. I took positions where I made less money but gained tremendously in learning about the sector or the craft.

Last year, I volunteered to work as an iCats Fellow with a social organisation of the LGT Venture Philanthropy investment portfolio because I wanted more first hand knowledge about impact investing and social entrepreneurship. Almost all iCats roles are based in emerging markets and the role I initially applied for was to be based in the USA. Although I knew I did not want to move from my home base in Geneva, I applied for the position anyway and

when I got the role, was able to negotiate with the organisation and LGT Venture Philanthropy to be based in Geneva and work with the Berlin and Zurich based teams for the fellowship.

In a constantly changing world, not taking risks could be the most risky thing one can do. Networking, persistence and taking risks do pay off. And of course being at the right place, at the right time - something called luck - always helps.

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