



Finding Meaning in Your Career



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

Working backwards from where you want to be can give you purpose.

Most people are not working in a job they are passionate about all of the time. In fact, according to a recent [Financial Times column](#) by Lucy Kellaway, having passion for one's job can be dangerous. One should at best care about and enjoy one's job. But even the best jobs can get mundane and routine and it is up to the individual to make his/her career continuously challenging, interesting and fulfilling.

In today's world, stable career paths are disappearing; there is the added challenge of how to manage one's career to keep one's self relevant and competitive in the job market – while trying to find meaning on that often chaotic, bumpy path.

Keeping your goals in mind

One way to approach this is to work backwards. In fact, two of my favourite professors^[1] recommend this approach. You look towards the end of your career and life and think about the “end game”. Where do you personally want to be and what do you want to have? What would you like to have accomplished? What kind of impact would you like to have made? What legacy, however small, would you like to leave behind?

Instead of thinking only about your current job and the next moves, focus on the big picture and think about your values and what is important to you – especially in terms of contribution you would like to make – and to whom and why.

Perhaps it is important to you that you can tell your grandchildren you have run or started companies and those companies have made a difference in their respective industries and impacted people’s lives. Or perhaps all you want to do is retire on a farm in New Zealand with your partner and fix vintage cars in your garage. The jobs you have are merely stepping-stones to that ultimate dream.

Of course this method requires asking some core questions, especially about one’s self. And that is part of what life is about - to search for the answers to these questions as we continue on the journey of life.

Your goals might change

For some of us at least, it may take a long time to find the answer to your life’s purpose and I suspect for the majority of us, the answers will change and evolve over time. I thought my "purpose" in life was to be a pianist since I was five until I changed careers.

Nevertheless, it is important that as we progress in our career, we think about the big picture and ask ourselves why we are doing what we are doing. Not only would this give us a stronger sense of direction and purpose, but also more motivation and resilience in the face of short-term setbacks. I think too many people are so busy doing what they are doing without questioning the purpose or real meaning behind it that even when they eventually reach their goals, they feel unsatisfied with a sense of anti-climax and immediately pursue another goal.

This is reflected in Tolstoy's search for meaning of life when he turned 50, after he'd written his greatest works. Despite his celebrity, having a large estate and family, good health for his age and promise of eternal literary fame, Tolstoy succumbed to a spiritual crisis and needed to find meaning beyond being a great writer. This avalanched his search, which he felt was "the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man", yet at the same time paralyingly profound.

Prioritise

Once you have some ideas as to what is important to you, including but not limited to the contributions and impact you would like to make ultimately, then you can come up with a strategy, not a specific plan, to fill the gap between where you are now and where you want to end up. There will be multiple ways and paths of getting there but at least you will know which general direction you prefer to pursue even if the path will need to be revised at times.

As we search for meaning in our careers and lives, a good guide to use is to face and accept reality, use Occam's razor and simplify. Einstein told us to make things as simple as possible, but not simpler. We cannot change who we are and what we are given nor can we change the past. But we can always act and live in the present to shape our future.

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[1] Prof. Phil Anderson, INSEAD Alumni Fund Chaired Professor of Entrepreneurship, who I would like to thank especially for his recent input and ideas on this topic; and Professor Ingemar Dierickx who mentioned this approach to me 11 years ago.

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