
Negotiate Your Way to Career Flexibility



By Horacio Falcao , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Decision Sciences

We're familiar with the idea of negotiating a salary, but negotiating for greater time and task diversity may be just as important for our emotional and professional fulfillment.

Not long ago, a successful executive—let's call him Dr. DK—sought my advice on an issue of major life import. Approaching the age of 50, he found that his job as head of HR for a large European multinational had lost some of its savour. “I don't know if I'm excited by this anymore,” he told me. “I do make money, but I cannot do another 20 years of this.” Dr. DK was considering abandoning his long-time company for a new love—executive coaching, for which he had just obtained certification. He had even picked up a few high-profile clients from his extensive personal network.

After hearing him out, I thought for a few seconds. Then I said, “You're crazy.”

“But, Horacio,” Dr. DK replied, “isn't happiness worth everything?”

“Right now, you have a good social standing, and you have enough money, but not enough savings to go the next 20 years without making the kind of money you’re used to,” I said. “Do you need to do *only* what you love? How about you *also* do what you love?”

Making “also” work

It’s important that we professionals move beyond the zero-sum thinking that underlies conventional career paths. Assuming that financial and emotional fulfilment are opposing concepts causes a kind of schizophrenia. We end up getting less than we should of both. In addition, the standard linear career path of our parents no longer offers the security it once did, while the risks of striking out on our own—as Dr. DK wanted to—are in most cases higher.

We need more flexible, adaptable career options. That’s why I’ve been exploring a [new career strategy](#) based on the concept of “barbell investing”. The idea is that professionals can maximise money and happiness, while minimising risk, by investing a small slice (not more than ten percent) of their time in a speculative project, or “Specbell”, without letting go of their steady paycheck, or “Safebell”. At the very least, they’ll add a pinch of spice to their lives; at most, it might be a safer way to start transitioning to a whole new career phase.

The importance of negotiating

To make my point, I challenged Dr. DK to go out and find four more clients. I knew that his first few, attracted by his standing and reputation, came without much effort. We’d see whether he had the taste for the high-stakes, constant selling that being a full-time executive coach demands. Sure enough, Dr. DK discovered that chasing clients and managing a business didn’t suit his personality.

So the next step was to negotiate with his company to achieve the barbell arrangement. My advice to him was to be as transparent as possible with his boss, laying out all the potential implications (both positive and negative). Dr. DK’s proposal was to spend four to eight hours a week on coaching, some of that during work hours. At the same time, he emphasised that the firm would always be his top priority and that his deliverables would not suffer.

Dr. DK’s boss replied that the proposed arrangement wouldn’t work with Dr. DK in his current role – but if he were willing to make a lateral move and

head up another related department...

It was the best of both worlds: Dr. DK ended up breaking out of a job that was becoming confining, staying at the same salary, and making more room for coaching in his life. Eventually, the arrangement proved so successful that Dr. DK increased his coaching time to ten hours a week (including preparation and logistics). He capped it there, as he felt he had found the right balance.

An unlikely advantage

In the case of Ms. IN, a high-flying London-based lawyer, she was devastated after being told she would not make partner. After years of putting everything she had into the firm, she was exhausted and ready to quit and become a yoga instructor. I counselled her to look for something fulfilling she could do that drew upon her valuable legal talents. We researched together and found an NGO in the legal space that was looking for lawyers to work pro bono.

Not making partner turned out to be advantageous for Ms. IN in negotiating with her company, in that it helped her better understand what she truly wanted. For her bosses' part, they were loath to let such a good lawyer go, especially since she was one of the firm's only senior women and diversity was an important issue they were promoting internally. She told the partners, "I don't need to leave, but I want to start doing more pro bono work." They hammered out an arrangement whereby Ms. IN would work eight months per year for the firm, commit to mentor younger female attorneys, take a month's vacation, and spend the remaining three months working for the NGO in Tanzania on her company's behalf, receiving her full salary, while promoting the firm's pro bono agenda.

When "Specbells" pay off

For Dr. DK and Ms. IN, getting a Specbell was more about avoiding a sense of career stagnation than starting a second career. Others I know, however, have a Specbell that could one day become a Safebell. Mr. BR is a banker whose dream was to start an inexpensive urban bed-and-breakfast designed to help new arrivals adjust to life in his city. The idea is taking off, and he now owns four B&Bs in São Paulo, Brazil and is currently planning on expanding the model to other cities in Brazil.

Tips to remember

Barbell careers aren't for everyone. If your goal is eventually to become CEO at your current firm or a company like it, you may need to put all your energy into that climb. By the same token, if the Specbell you have in mind is the next Google, you should jump in with both feet.

There are also transition costs involved. Having a Specbell allows you to learn and grow by taking contained risks and perhaps making small, "right" mistakes, but you need to invest in those mistakes. That means a certain amount of lost time and potentially lost resources.

If you do decide to negotiate a barbell arrangement with your employer, here are some things to keep in mind:

Conflict of interest. Think about any potential areas or scenarios where your proposed Specbell could compromise your company down the line. Are you putting yourself in a position where you could one day potentially poach clients, or jeopardise company IP? Even if your boss doesn't anticipate these situations, you should, in order to prevent future unpleasantness.

Look for synergies. Specbells can yield knowledge or special skills that would benefit your employer. In Ms. IN's case, her Specbell played into her law firm's pro bono agenda. The win-win aspect can be a compelling selling point in the negotiation.

Be open to experiment. The negotiation can be a great tool if you don't have a definite Specbell in mind. Perhaps your boss can recommend you to his or her counterpart in another department, who could use your help. Your Specbell may be much closer than you think.

My research into this new career path is ongoing. If you have negotiated a similar arrangement with an employer, I'd love to hear about [how it went](#).

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