
Those Unfulfilled Childhood Dreams? They May Still Be Driving You



By [Elizabeth Florent Treacy](#) , INSEAD

Summon your inner child before deciding on that new job.

Some call it advancing their careers, others say seeking purpose. A growing number of people across all age groups believe they should change jobs every few years for better pay, promotions or to develop new skills, according to a 2018 [survey](#) by Robert Half, a global recruitment firm. And it's far from a phenomenon dominated by millennials. Many older workers are leaving established careers to take the leap into new ones; one famous example is *Financial Times* columnist [Lucy Kellaway](#), who left behind three decades of journalism to become a teacher at the age of 57.

Change jobs too many times, though, and you risk becoming a flight risk in the eyes of employers.

The key, therefore, is to make each change count by analysing your motives and understanding what truly makes you tick. But analysing yourself may be more difficult than you think. Abraham Maslow, who formulated the famous

hierarchy of needs, clearly thought so. “It isn’t normal to know what we want,” he said. “It is a rare and difficult psychological achievement.”

Two graduates of INSEAD’s [Executive Master in Change](#) (EMC) programme found that the answer may lie deep in our childhood psyche rather than the rational decision-making process that academic literature focuses on. The unconscious needs and wishes we acquired as children may have a bigger influence on our adult professional lives than we thought, they write in [“The 7 Labours of HR Professionals”](#), the second volume of the *Annals of Psychodynamic-Systemic Practitioner Research*, published by INSEAD with funding from the Dutch Alumni Fellowship in Leadership, Diversity and Governance.

Are you really in the driver’s seat?

What did you wish to become when you were a child? How was your relationship with your parents and what were their expectations of you? Delving into childhood *phantasy* (not to be confused with “fantasy”) careers and the [core conflictual relationship theme \(CCRT\)](#) - concepts that work at the level of the sub-conscious - would help you figure out your career motivations better than pondering a job’s prospects and compensation, say the EMC graduates.

Phantasy refers to an unconscious process of imagination rather than the conscious one of fantasy, says [Paul Harvey](#), a leadership consultant with INSEAD Executive Coaching. Children often daydream about *fantasy* careers (“When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut/president/doctor”) that embody something that they long for or which is missing from their lives, he says. The *phantasy* career is a related concept that contain deeper desires or wishes at the unconscious level, he adds, citing Carl Jung: “We imagine that which we lack.”

CCRTs are general relationship patterns that begin taking shape early in life. They are rooted in our deepest wishes, needs and goals, and assert themselves throughout our lives. Among 15 C-level executives aged 35 to 51 interviewed by [Luis Giolo](#), an executive recruiter and leadership consultant, 12 named CCRT as the main driver for their career decisions.

One said that his parents had survived a war but struggled to ensure that their children would do better in life. His CCRT was marked by the pressure he felt to prove himself worthy of his parents’ aspirations and to fulfil their

dreams. Another, a CEO, admitted to being hung up about the remuneration and severance terms of potential new opportunities. He cried as he recounted how his father struggled to survive after he was laid off from his company after more than 25 years without severance. His CCRT was to avoid the fate his father had found himself trapped in.

Tapping into past you for future you

In another study, Harvey asked 16 mid-career professionals from diverse industries and job levels to identify their childhood phantasy career and examine the impact it may have had on their actual career choices and job satisfaction. Suresh (names have been changed) described how, as a child, he wanted to become a traditional dancer. He loved to perform for an audience and enjoyed “expressing myself not through words but through dance movements and expressions”. His current role as regional head of credit risk at a Fortune 500 bank was his most satisfying job to date. Unsurprisingly, upon reflection, Suresh said his position, like that of a traditional dancer, gave him the satisfaction of recognition and plaudits.

While Suresh had not pursued his childhood passion as a career because of financial reasons, Andy was living his as an international businessman. Like many other participants, Andy cited his parents as the source of inspiration – or discouragement – for his childhood phantasy career. He had looked up to his father, a lawyer and a director at one of Israel's largest corporations, and craved his approval. To young Andy, becoming an international businessman would create opportunities, help solve problems, enable him to work in diverse and multi-cultural settings and be in control. Andy reflected: “I can see that my top two satisfying careers had the most phantasy career attributes.”

All this is to say that, when it comes to career choices, drilling down to the desires and needs rooted deep in your formative years is no less important than identifying your observable skills, personality traits and current needs. The sweet spot is at the intersection of your long-dormant wishes and your skills and capabilities, the EMC graduates say. Rather than an analytical matrix of pros and cons, make deep self-analysis your first step in making an important career decision.

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About the author(s)

Elizabeth Florent Treacy is a Senior Lecturer and Thesis Director on the core faculty team of INSEAD's **Executive Master in Change** degree programme.