

Career Management Skills/(CLHAHSPPCMS-08-9SH)

Career Theories and Self.

Background: I am forty-seven years old and have spent my entire working life in the IT industry. Having left college with one 'A'-level at eighteen, I've worked in three separate organisations, always in a technical capacity. In 2003 I began a part-time philosophy degree at the University of Reading; I shall complete the degree in 2009.

1) Critically analyse the theories and the relevance to your own career story

My working career began when I left college at eighteen, to work as a trainee programmer for a local college. Four years later, having reached the position of senior programmer, I left for a job at a large computer company, where I remained for seventeen years, working in a variety of roles, from technical support to software engineering. I was made redundant, and enrolled on my degree course at Reading, completing the first year more or less as a full-time student, then switching to part-time as I began work at my current company, where I work as a technical team-lead.

Three of the four theories have something in them which I can apply to my own career history. I developed an interest in computers when I was at school and from a very early age had wanted to work in that field: the skills I employed when using computers as a hobby turned out, fortunately for me, to be the same skills which were in demand at the time when I was first looking for work.

So a theory like Holland's ("person-environment fit") has appeal in that I can see how my innate aptitude and inclinations do correspond with the career choices I've made; the rapid growth in the reliance on computers in all aspects of life has meant that the needs of the labour market have provided me with the opportunity to work in a field I enjoy and excel at: I appreciate only too well how fortunate I have been to have entered the labour market at a time when skills such as mine were in demand ("structural").

I do not think I have ever made any conscious "long-term career plans". Transitions have occurred largely as a result of my exploiting, or dealing with, a situation when it arose ("happenstance"), rather than because I was seeking change as part of a strategy to advance my career. I've applied for new jobs that seemed interesting at the time: in some cases (partly as a result of the industry I work in) these were jobs in fields that had not long existed, and so they were not part of any long-term plan.

While in retrospect, it might be possible to tell the story of my career in way that fits the "life-span" theory, it doesn't have great resonance for me, and certainly little or no practical value: I cannot think that it would have ever been a helpful way for me to think about how I should plan a career.

Speaking for myself, I think that there are two things that have made my working life successful (if it is successful):

- I did something I enjoyed

- I was fortunate to enjoy doing something that the world needed

What I have *not* done is to focus on status, "career" or rewards for working other than the work itself. As it happens, the field I'm involved with is comparatively well-paid; perhaps if that were not so then I would have had to be more concerned with other considerations.

My own feeling is that the most important thing to look for in a career is enjoyment of the work itself: the rest - salary, career progression, prestige - is fluff: nice fluff perhaps, but not essential.

2) What factors do you feel could impact on your career decisions?

As I've said, I believe the main factor that should be considered in making career decisions is to make sure that the work is something I enjoy. As it happens I have been fortunate in that I've nearly always had work that I've enjoyed. However, for a short period of time I did find myself in a job that I found very difficult, and that was the one period of my working life when I experienced what it was like to look forward to Friday, and to dread Monday mornings.

Having had a small taste of what it can be like to be unhappy at work, I regard work enjoyment as something that's almost essential, not just a "nice to have". In other words, citing it as the main factor is not something I do lightly: I mean it.

I understand that situations can change; I have been made redundant in the past and

presumably the same may happen in future. Perhaps there may come a time when I need to find work and cannot afford to worry about whether it's something I'm going to enjoy doing; I'll worry about that when it comes ("happenstance" again).

For the moment though, there obviously are other considerations and constraints to be taken into account, especially as I have a family, whose needs are as important as mine. For that reason, any career decision I make is going to be influenced by the effect it may have on my family: a job that involved a move is probably out of the question at the moment, as is one that involves travelling away from home. Perhaps, in the future, these factors will become less of an issue.

There are some non-negotiables though: certain work would be ruled out as a result of my religious and political beliefs - I am a Christian and a vegetarian, and so no matter how interesting or well-paid the job, I'm not going to work in a Mosque or an abattoir.

3) Have you considered the longer term consequences of studying your degree and its impact on your future?

My reasons for starting this degree course were largely based on the enjoyment I expected to derive from undergraduate study: from having the opportunity to be taught people knowledgeable in their field, and to be able to participate in discussion and debate with

other students. I had no particular considerations regarding the longer term consequences of studying, seeing it as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

However, as the course progressed, it became clear that there were some effects of studying, aside from gaining knowledge of the course's ostensible subject matter, that are likely to be useful and persist outside the scope of the course.

Firstly, while the specific details of the subjects that have been covered in my philosophy course (such as, for example, Descartes' arguments for dualism) may not appear to have much utility in my normal working life, the *study* of these subjects has helped to develop ways of thinking which are not limited to philosophical subjects. Having to discuss Descartes' ideas in a classroom, or to argue against them in an essay, requires that one be careful and clear in one's thinking, and over a period of several years, I feel that I have definitely become more reflective and considered when listening, or contributing to, arguments and discussions generally.

More tangibly, perhaps, the habits that I have developed while working on essays that are assessed as part of the course have influenced the way I approach written work (reports etc.) in my working and personal life. I am more conscious now of what is required of a good piece of written work, which means that not only is my own work better, but also that I am better able to review other's work critically.

Secondly, I think that having been able to stick with the course has taught me about myself: I did not attend university when I was younger, and had always wondered whether I had the ability to complete a degree. The fact that I have done this, while also working full-time in a fairly stressful job, and supporting a family, has increased my self-confidence; I have a better idea now of my own abilities, and while this is something that is perhaps a little difficult to quantify, I feel that it's a not inconsiderable benefit.

So, having nearly completed the course, I feel that there are longer term consequences, in terms of the above benefits, which will affect me both in my working and non-working life, and I have found myself increasingly inclined to encourage others to consider this type of study for these reasons.