

Become a

**21<sup>st</sup>**

**Century  
Executive**

Breaking Away  
from the **Pack**



by

**NIGEL**



**DESSAU**

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Disclaimer: In all but one case, the names of the people in the case studies in this book are made up, as are their roles. The titles and roles of the people do not match the original situations described. If anyone I know can see themselves in these stories, it is purely coincidental.

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## ONE

# PLANNING A CAREER



*"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"*

*"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.*

*"I don't much care where –" said Alice.*

*"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.*

*"– so long as I get SOMEWHERE," Alice added as an explanation.*

*"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."*

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Unlike Alice, I have had a pretty good idea during my twenty-five-year career of what I wanted to accomplish and where I wanted to end up. Certainly, I have taken detours and done things that I had not considered early on. However, the basic trajectory went pretty much as I had planned. I attribute that to always having the end goal in sight.

But not everyone does this. In early 2012, I conducted a survey of more than one thousand professionals. The survey focused on where people were in their career compared to where they thought they would be. The results are interesting: only 18 percent of the respondents felt that they were ahead of where they wanted to be; 38 percent indicated that they were behind

where they thought they would be; and approximately one in ten had never considered the question.

A key professional challenge is knowing how to plan a career. Without a career plan, it is easy to become stuck in the middle.

When I began my own career, I identified the major milestones for my career and roughly when I wanted to retire. In order to make sure I was heading in the right direction, I needed to know my final destination. I needed to decide whether those milestones and directions would be driven by money, some overarching goal like starting my own business, or achieving certain levels in a corporate environment.

In the end, I decided to pursue a career in marketing by working in large high-technology firms. I set an overall goal of being a chief marketing officer by the time I retired. For that to happen, I needed interim goals and a timeframe for achieving them. For example, by age twenty-five, I needed to be a manager of some sort. By age thirty-five, I wanted to rise to the senior director level. And so on.

When setting these goals, I wanted to make sure that (1) they would help me achieve my overall aspiration of becoming a chief marketing officer, and (2) that the goals were realistic and achievable within the stated timeframe. It was important not to set myself up for failure or frustration by having goals that I could not realistically achieve.

Having a plan in place, at least in my own mind, allowed me to focus my career decisions on moves that would help me accumulate and build the skills and experience necessary to move to the next level and closer to my ultimate goal of becoming chief marketing officer. This plan also helped me to understand the types of contacts and network I would need in order to achieve this goal.

*No matter what your ultimate career goal is or how definitive that goal may be, it is worth taking the time to create a plan to achieve it. Without a plan, you will find it difficult to know if you are going in the right direction or staying on course. Without a timeline, even if you need to expand or contract it at different points, you will not have a realistic chance to achieve your objectives.*

### FOCUS ON THREE KEY QUESTIONS

The hardest thing about any career planning process is articulating where you want to end up. It is also the most important thing to do, *because stating the end goal will drive you through that process.* Effective career planning focuses on answering three key questions:

- 1. Where do you want to go?**
- 2. Where are you today?**
- 3. How quickly do you want to get from here to there?**

Answering these questions may seem difficult, but doing so is essential to effective career planning.

**1. Where do you want to go?** It is never too early in your career to consider this question. You need to decide what success will look like for you at the end of your career. You need to articulate what matters to you and where you want to end up.

The answer to this question can certainly change over time, but it is the starting point for any career plan. Depending on what you ultimately want to achieve, this goal could be money, career status, social position, or anything else that could drive you to be successful.

Remember, this is about what *you* want, not what others expect from you. Your goal can help you define what is important to you, and where you think you are going to be when you retire.

**2. Where are you today?** Once you have articulated where you want to go in your career, it is time to assess where you are today relative to that goal. To determine where you are today, you can use the same process that you used to determine where you want to go.

If your goal focuses on money, take the time to review your current financial situation and determine where you are today moneywise compared to where you want to be. If your goal focuses on career position, define your current role, including your responsibilities and experience.

Where you are today is your starting point. Be honest about where that is, because it will help you determine the best way to achieve your ultimate goal.

**3. How quickly do you want to get from here to there?** The final step in this career planning process is drawing the line that will connect where you are today with where you are headed. How will you get from here to there?

To make this process easier, divide your timeframe into manageable chunks. If you want to own your own business or become a senior executive of a company in twenty years, divide that twenty years into smaller time frames of four or five years each. Do not make these intervals too short, or you may be setting yourself up for repeated failure. It is better to overachieve some steps by going faster than anticipated than to miss all of them because you did not give yourself enough time to achieve each level.

*What can you do in the next five years to move yourself closer to your goal?* If you want to become a chief financial officer within twenty years, you will need to take on a series of positions with progressively more responsibility within finance. In the current business climate, it also helps to gain experience in other areas

of company operations. *What is the next role or position that you should attain on your journey?*

Take time to think about the steps you will need to take and how they fit in your chosen timeframe. Consider how you will move from your current position to, say, a director, and then on to vice president and so on.

Seek out and nurture strong relationships with mentors. This will be an important part of the process. A good mentor can help you identify gaps in your skills and guide you in developing a plan to address and close those gaps. See Chapter 11 for more on finding the right mentor.

For example, if you are currently a manager, you may need more advanced skills in engineering, finance, or some other area in order to be promoted to director. Because you are unlikely to move from one role to the next in one leap, you should plan your career moves to focus on positions where you can gain the needed knowledge and experience to help you advance.

Career progression usually requires a lateral move or two. Time spent in those lateral positions is likely to help you in the longer term. The key is to make sure every move you make adds something—skills, experience, knowledge, content, network—to help you succeed at the next level and move closer to your ultimate goal.



### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

- » Without a plan, you don't know if you are going in the right direction or staying on course.



## NEXT STEPS

1. *End it:* write down where you want to be when you retire, and when you expect it to occur. Include whatever means the most to you – your net worth, your level, your location, or whatever else is important.
2. *Backtrack:* assess where you are now and what skills and experiences you will need to meet your retirement level and date.
3. *Plot it:* take steps in five-year increments to get you from where you are today to where you want to be.
4. *Talk about it:* show your partner, a close friend, or a relative your plan. See if this significant person in your life can offer further suggestion on how best to achieve your goal.
5. *Take it:* make the first step towards your goal.

## TWO

# JUDGING TALENT AND OPPORTUNITY



One of the most frustrating elements for people who get stuck in the middle of the pack at work is the lack of guidance they receive on the best way to evaluate talent and opportunity – their own, and that of others.

If you know how to judge talent and opportunity, you can make better decisions about your own career. You can also provide more and better performance and development discussions to your people by going beyond whether or not someone achieved his or her objectives.

People want feedback about how they are doing their jobs and how they are performing on their current projects and tasks. They want a sounding board for evaluating and making career decisions. They want advice on how to move up to a specific role. In this age of 360-degree feedback, people may need help in reviewing the performance of more senior people, their peers, and their subordinates.

In my own management experience, I have found that many HR- developed performance review and management systems do not support this type of in-depth coaching. Although there are many HR tools and processes that tell you what to do, there is little information about how to do it. The end result is that these tools tend to focus solely on whether people achieve their objectives and not how they have done so.

Good coaching and development focus on how individuals achieve their objectives and how they use what they know in doing so. Most traditional performance review and management tools do not provide simple models to help you look at those issues.

### **A MODEL FOR JUDGING TALENT AND OPPORTUNITY**

To address this gap and to help you overcome these issues, I developed a model for judging talent. I generated this model during my first role as a director for a major corporation.

Almost as soon as I settled into my office, one of my team members told me that he wanted to move to a team he had worked on previously in order to take on the role of team leader. In this company, a team leader directs the work of the team but does not manage the people on the team. This team member expected this move to position him to become a manager more quickly than he would if he stayed on my team.

Unfortunately, his expectations were too optimistic. The move had the opposite effect. The team member's new role did not offer any opportunities to develop new and better content in the form of knowledge, skills, habits, understanding, or even an expanded network. Quite simply, he was taking on a job he had already done. As a result, his rise to manager, although it did happen eventually, was delayed considerably.

To help others avoid this type of result, my model focuses on three elements that go into developing a career: content, approach, and network. If my colleague had access to this model, I believe he would have been able to evaluate the team leader move more clearly and may have made a better decision instead of choosing a role where he got stuck quite some time. Instead, he went back to a job where he was not able to build his content knowledge, learn new skills and approaches, or

expand his network. He was thinking too short-term, and he was not evaluating his whole career.

You can use this model to *stop struggling and making improper choices* when making your own career decisions, evaluating potential hires, and organizing reviews and performance discussions. I continued using this process throughout my career to help myself and others identify new ways to contribute and develop. Each element is discussed in more detail in its own chapter as noted below.

**1. Content.** *Content* focuses on what the person brings to the workplace—knowledge, skills, and understanding. Many people get jobs and opportunities because of their specific knowledge, information, and context, not because they understand processes.

Until the last few years, career advice led people to develop content that focused too much on processes rather than adding value to a team and a company. When someone hires you, he or she is hiring your cumulative knowledge and talents. Therefore, when you evaluate career decisions and opportunities, *focus on what level and type of content these opportunities allow you to develop.*

If you are doing the hiring, you need to evaluate each candidate's content: *what content does each one need to have for the role?* When you are coaching someone, the focus will be on what additional content that person should add to the portfolio to increase his or her value and improve marketability.

See Chapter 3 for more details on Content.

**2. Approach.** *Approach* focuses on your ability to use what you know. It does not matter how smart you are if you are unable to use that knowledge effectively in a given role. That means being able to lead, delegate, drive a project to its next level, and display other capabilities necessary for success.

Approach should also factor into your choice for your next role. When you make a career move, make sure that the new role provides enough of an opportunity for you to put your knowledge into action and hone your approach.

When hiring someone, ask yourself, *What types of situations will this candidate encounter and need to manage?* If the candidate does not have the approach necessary to manage and deal with these situations, he or she would likely struggle and get stuck in the middle of the pack. When coaching someone, think about what that individual should be able to demonstrate in terms of leadership skills given his or her current level, as well as what he or she needs to add to reach more senior positions in the organization.

See Chapter 4 for more details on Approach.

**3. Network.** Your *network* is whom you know. A strong network is an essential tool when developing a career. You need to know people who can help you to move up and grow in your career, along with individuals who can help you to do your job well. If you know industry analysts, journalists, customers, and emerging talents, bring those resources to bear when doing your job. A strong network is an important safeguard against struggling and failing to lead because you can use that network to be effective in your job and to learn and grow.

Any employer or potential employer is as interested in your internal network within the company and your external network as it is in you. *Whom can you bring to the party? Whom can you influence?*

You need to build a strong network. And you need to know how to use that network effectively. Any new role should provide opportunities to develop and nurture your network.

When hiring someone, be sure to assess his or her internal and external networks. Consider what connections someone in that

role will need. If you are coaching, ask your client to develop a picture of his or her network, including who is in it and who are the best and strongest connections. Using this visual, the individual can then build a plan to address missing links and strengthen weak bonds.

See Chapter 5 for more details on Network.



### THE BOTTOM LINE

- » Base your career growth and development on what you know (content), how you use what you know (approach), and whom you know (network).



### NEXT STEPS

1. Objectively audit your content, approach, and network. Identify the critical gaps in each area, then set a three-step improvement plan into play.
2. Work on the three career growth elements as you move through your career. Use each of them to evaluate different opportunities, thereby improving your chances for professional success.

Finally, a practical guide to helping middle managers not only survive, but thrive in today's complex workplace. *Become a 21st Century Executive* provides sage advice that helps its readers assess their strengths and weaknesses and offers sensible recommendations to address a wide range of workplace situations. I had the pleasure of working for Nigel while we were both at IBM and have seen him drive exceptional results by practicing what he preaches.

~Joe Labriola,  
*Vice President of Product Marketing at PGI*

**Nigel Dessau**, with whom I worked closely at IBM for years, has written a very interesting book on a long neglected subject: how do you succeed in middle management? CEOs and other senior executives deal with big issues—leadership, strategy, transformation, survival—and lots of books have been written to help them succeed at these big tasks. The reason that CEOs can focus on the big issues is that they delegate the mundane, everyday ones to their middle managers. And while not as weighty or sexy, the myriad everyday decisions that middle managers make are key factors in the success or failure of their companies, their teams, and their own careers. In the end, how well we [move] through these middle management decisions will often determine whether we get to make bigger ones.

*Become a 21st Century Executive: Breaking Away from the Pack* was written for the middle manager, especially those aiming to successfully move up or on. This long-neglected, often derided segment finally has a book of its own.

**Irving Wladawsky-Berger**,  
*Former IBM Executive and Visiting Lecturer, MIT*

"The book contains very sage advice that I really believe will be a helpful guide for people trying to grow to the next step. Even long-time managers who find themselves in marketplaces that are changing rapidly around them will benefit from the discussions."

~Lois Paul, Founder,  
*President and CEO of Lois Paul and Partners*