

Charting Your Course

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Not sure what's in the stars for your career? There's no better time than now to adjust your route and discover what's right for you.

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Don't be a passive victim of your career. Instead, take a look at where you are now, where you want to go (if you don't know yet, that's OK), and what you need to do to get there. Some expert advice shows you how to take control.

Twelve-hour workdays. A constant sense of urgency. Always saying "good enough"; never saying "that's great." Lots of ideas but no time to begin implementing them. No time to enjoy what matters most to you. Feeling like your career is managing you and that you're stuck in a rut. What's an association executive to do? Three words: take back control.

"Too often, many of us just kind of let things happen when it comes to our career and follow the course that was serendipity," says Gale S. Wood, CAE, CCC, president of COMET Consulting & Coaching and a former association executive. "Association executives have to be aware that they can take control of their careers."

Here's some expert advice on how to put yourself back in charge--and uncover what you may want next for your career.

Assessing Yourself Accurately

One of the first things to do when you start to think about your career and what you want out of it is to do a bit of self-reflection and look at your skills and competencies. "It is really important to start by asking, 'What's the skill set that I have that when using it makes me feel good?'" says Wood. "You need to find out what gives you energy and what makes you excited to get out of bed in the morning to go to work." If you discover that you're not using that skill set, it may be time to reassess.

Wood suggests keeping a journal as part of the self-reflection process. Lay out goals for yourself for the next six months, year, five years--even 10 years. Write down what you most enjoy and dislike about your current position and what you would like to change. "It allows you to learn about yourself, and once you do it as a matter of practice, evaluating yourself and your career becomes much easier," she says. "It also is something you can constantly refer back to. You will see consistent themes coming up over and over again."

Pegotty Cooper, MBA, a certified career coach, agrees that learning about yourself and your work habits is priority number one. "If you don't know what you are hardwired for, then underused aptitudes lead to dissatisfaction," she says. "Having your aptitudes tested at any age will point you to your highest aptitudes--the development of which you should incorporate into the job you [decide to] focus on."

Cooper once had a client who, as a director, focused on the numbers and delegated the marketing development to others in the department. The strongest skill this individual had--the ability to generate a flow of ideas--was being underutilized. As a result, the director felt a great deal of dissatisfaction with the job. After recognizing the source of the problem, he reassigned the number crunching to someone else in the department and concentrated on program development instead--putting his strongest aptitude to use. "The dissatisfaction with the job was turned into satisfaction, and a whole new perspective on the organization and what was possible took hold," Cooper says.

While it's important to assess the skills you have to offer, it's equally important to evaluate what you can improve. Cooper suggests that we develop habits based on both our values and our experiences, causing us to respond in a very automatic--unconscious--way and to operate in our blind spots. "[These habits] may outgrow their usefulness and don't serve us as well as they used to," says Cooper. "In fact, these attitudes and habits may be responsible for sabotaging our success and ability to reach our goals and achieve our dreams."

For instance, if your early experiences teach you that you can't count on other people, then you develop the ability to function very well on your own. While this can be good, it may also interfere with your ability to delegate and be part of a collaborative team. "By learning more about yourself and seeing where there may be blind spots or areas where you don't know what you don't know, you can begin to make different choices--and therefore get different results," says Cooper.

If you don't think you can fully assess your strengths and weaknesses on your own, you may find that working with someone else may help. "A career coach can help keep you accountable," says Daniel Martinage, CAE, a professional coach and former executive director of the International Coach Federation. "The bottom line is that coaches supply ongoing, critical support for managing strengths and weaknesses. They can help you to plot out your career's strategic direction and your next steps."

Whether you are looking to switch jobs, change careers completely, or just be more successful in your current position, a coach will help keep you on track. "People can get caught up in a career track where they are just swept

along," says Martinage. "The association environment is a challenging one for people. A coach can help an association executive navigate the political circumstances, keep them accountable, and serve as a confidant."

Putting Yourself to Work

Once you've evaluated the skills you already have and those you need to gain or improve, you can begin to think about what's next. "If you know what makes you curious and what you like to do, you can start exploring the marketplace and asking yourself, 'How can I be better in my career?'" says Wood. "It comes down to a bit of purposeful networking." There are a number of ways you can put yourself back in the driver's seat--and on the road to career success.

Informational interviews and site visits. Seek out someone whose skills you admire or whose job you aspire to eventually have--inside or outside your current organization, or perhaps even outside your current field. Once you find this person, make contact. Ask if he or she would be willing to sit down with you and talk about the job and the skills it takes. Remember that it's just informational--don't go in with the mindset that you will get a job out of it.

If you don't have an individual in mind, perhaps you have an association or other organization that you really believe in or one that you would like your own association to model itself after. Set up a time to tour the association and meet with some of its key players. These visits allow you to learn things in direct ways that training and reading don't.

Professional development. In order to gain the skills you may be lacking to get that promotion or job you always wanted, you need to be constantly learning and bettering yourself. You need these experiences: They will help you both inside and outside your organization. Focus on developing the competencies that any employer will require of you. Know the trends, issues, and challenges affecting your field. Read anything and everything you can on the topic.

"If you're not learning, you are essentially stagnating," says Kathleen Edwards, CAE, president and chief navigator of CompassPoints, a firm specializing in effective learning, and a former association executive. "Plus, whether it's professional development for your career or for anything else, learning something new is fun."

Edwards says that when charting your career goals, you should be developing learning goals at the same time. By asking yourself what success looks like and comparing that to where you are now, you most likely will discover a gap. "The gap is where you put in the learning," Edwards says.

"And learning doesn't have to be a huge, massive thing. Having lunch with colleagues periodically can prove to be a learning opportunity."

While traditional learning methods are important, also look at other ways to gain knowledge, such as working with or as a mentor, or volunteering at a community organization. "Don't discount some of the volunteer work that you do," says Edwards. "There is a tremendous opportunity there to build your leadership skills."

Many association executives will benchmark their professional development by earning a professional certification. "Certification allows association professionals to expand their knowledge of a specific field," says Lenora G. Knapp, Ph.D., president of Knapp & Associates International, Inc., a certification consulting firm. She also says that it allows association execs to gain increased credibility in their current workplace--and wherever they may move in the future (see sidebar "Is the Time Right?" for more information).

Networking. You will naturally come into contact with people who are interested in the same things as you, but it's even more important to continuously build and cultivate your network. Martinage says everyone should maintain their "center of influence." This is the professional network of contacts and people who can help you to evaluate your direction or point you to others who they believe can. Diversifying your network will open you up to people and possibilities you hadn't thought of previously.

A study in the January 2007 issue of *Harvard Business Review* looked at 30 emerging leaders and outlined three types of networks that a leader needs to have for success: operational, personal, and strategic. Operational networking helps you do tasks more effectively by building better relationships with colleagues. Personal networking involves people from outside your organization helping you to learn and to find opportunities for your advancement. The authors suggest that industry associations provide formal environments for personal networking. The third--strategic networking--is the level where you create the kind of network that will help you to capitalize on and uncover new opportunities for your organization. The authors suggest that moving to this type of networking is a sign of successful leadership.

An open mind. Career experts agree that the only way to find that next best opportunity out there for you is to have an open mind. "Ask questions that start with 'What if ...' or 'I wonder if ...' You always need to have your antennae up and have an open, curious mind," says Edwards.

And keeping an open mind may mean readjusting your course at times. While planning is important, Martinage cautions that if you are constantly internalized, looking only at yourself and the career path you planned, you

will miss out on the opportunities that will undoubtedly come your way. "The most successful association executives are those who not only think about their career path, but those who also refer back to it and adjust it when they find it needs to be," he says. "Your career plan cannot be static."

It's often said that real estate is all about location. When it comes to your career, experts say it may be all about planning, suggesting that the more proactive--instead of reactive--you are, the better. "It is easy to find yourself in an environment where you are no longer in control," says Martinage. "Evaluate your current direction and ask yourself if it's where you want to be headed. If it isn't, it's not too late to readjust--and take charge of your career. Taking a few steps can make a huge difference."

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