

Career planning for the over 50s

Active steps to keep you ahead

Patrick Forsyth



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PATRICK FORSYTH

**CAREER PLANNING
FOR THE OVER 50s**
**ACTIVE STEPS TO
KEEP YOU AHEAD**

Career planning for the over 50s: Active steps to keep you ahead

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CONTENTS

	About the author	5
1	Introduction: The final Fronteer	6
2	Surviving and thriving: Ongoing development	10
3	Ten steps to being "Career fit"	18
4	Towards retirement: Systematic and positive approaches	26
5	Afterword	37

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!*, about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published recently.

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE FINAL FRONTIER

Hitch your wagon to a star; keep your nose to the grindstone; put your shoulder to the wheel; keep an ear to the ground and watch the writing on the wall.

– Herbert Prochnow

The world of work can be tough and demanding and, as the quotation above suggests, it demands an active approach if you are to survive and thrive. Thus active career planning is important at any stage of life, but the focus of what is written about it tends to focus to a degree on the early years. However, such planning has a particular importance later too, so here we look at the years after fifty and thus also the link between work and retirement.

Before going further let's look at the overall process, the assessment and analysis that can form the basis for the direction you want to go in, something you want to be as clear about at around fifty as at any other time.

Making a successful career happen

Warning: the old world of job security, jobs for life, prescribed ladders of promotion and gradually increasing success and rewards has gone, replaced by less attractive talk of downsizing, redundancy, condensed hours, teleworking, and portfolio careers. Such changes abound and the only thing one can be certain of is that the future will bring more change.

We are not in Kansas anymore and waiting for things to “get back to normal” is simply not an option. No one can guarantee themselves a successful career, but everyone can influence their prospects to some degree. Indeed it is something that you surely *want* to influence; especially given the time we spend working, which we surely want to make as enjoyable and rewarding as possible.

If you are approaching fifty or beyond you know something of this and a line in a John Lennon's song that runs: *Life is what happens while you are making other plans* probably also rings bells. It encapsulates a painful thought. There is perhaps no worse situation than to look back, saying to ourselves: “*if only ...*” Hence career planning should be always in mind throughout a career and there are certainly dangers in losing focus on this as one gets older.

So, in a competitive work environment, with no rigid, preordained career ladder to follow, careers need planning: but how? The bad news is that there is no magic formula. You can, however, make a difference by working at it. First you must know what you want, and this needs some serious and systematic self-analysis, as you start this book it may be worth reminding yourself of the basics of the thinking involved in such a review. As your circumstances change over time it is often worth occasionally revisiting this.

Deciding the way ahead

There are several useful stages of thinking:

- **Assess your skills:** at this stage of your career you may be surprised how many you have in, for example: communications, influencing, managing (people or projects), problem solving, creativity, social skills, numeracy, and other special skills (everything from languages to computer usage)
- **Assess your work values:** here you should consider factors such as having a: strong need to achieve, need for a high salary, high job satisfaction requirements, liking for doing something “worthwhile”, or a desire to be creative. Plus other factors from travel opportunities to being independent or part of a team
- **Assess your personal characteristics:** are you a risk taker, an innovator, or someone who can work under pressure? Consider what kind of person you are and how these characteristics affect your work situation.
- **Assess your non-work characteristics:** factors like family commitments, where you want to live and how much time you are happy to spend away from home
- **Match your analysis to the market demands:** in other words consider how well your overall capabilities and characteristics fit the market opportunities. This avoids you seeking out a route that is doomed before it starts. If anything to do with computers, say, throws you, then you either have to learn or avoid areas of work dependent on a high degree of computer literacy.

Note: try to anticipate how your feelings may change in future, for example travel may be something you are more prepared to do if a family has grown up and left home.

With such thinking clear, you can then set clear objectives; the old adage that if you do not know where you are going any road will do, is nowhere truer.

Then – always aim high. You can always trade down, but you may be more successful than you think. Certainly it is depressing to miss something not because it is unachievable, but because you do not try – or try hard enough - for it. Thereafter accept that what makes the active management of your career progress effective is in the details.

Perception is reality

Of course, progress at any time is significantly dependent on performance – on achievement of results. Unless you deliver, then you will have little chance of being judged able to cope with more, and promotion and new opportunities may – rightly – allude you. But there's more.

Consider an example: someone is asked to manage a project. It is important, multifaceted and has a great deal hanging on it. They may have all the necessary characteristics, they do the necessary groundwork, they are thorough - balancing all the various and probably conflicting criteria – and devise a sound plan. So far so good. Then they are asked to present it to the Board.

But presentation is not everyone's forte. They are nervous, unsure how to prepare, put it over well, or stick to the prescribed duration and what they do proves less than impressive. What happens? Do people say "*Never mind, it was a sound plan*"? No. Much more likely they take the view that the ideas themselves are suspect and perhaps act accordingly, putting the idea on hold or dismissing it. And what happens next time such a project needs allocating? The person concerned is never considered. The effect on their likely career is obvious enough.

This makes an important point. Many skills can rightly be described as *career skills* - not simply important in their own right to doing an effective job, but also to how people are seen and how they progress.

Career management – taking an initiative

Thus there is a long list of skills that should be regarded in this way. In many jobs they include:

- All aspects of managing people
- Presentation and business writing
- Numeracy and often, these days computer skills
- More general skills such as good time management and, of course, the specialist technical skills linked to specialist areas such as engineering.

Many such skills relate to aspects of communication, though the most important may vary and link to each individual job. Similarly, you need to focus on processes and aim - and organize - to get the most from such as job appraisal and development and training in all their many forms.

Additionally, there are many other factors that influence how you progress, for instance contacts and relationships. Some people seem especially well connected. But this does not just happen. They probably work at it: they network consciously and systematically. And it helps.

Maintaining an initiative

The active careerist does not rely on good luck (which is perhaps only to be relied on to explain the success of others!) though they will take advantage of any good fortune that does occur. And their planning and positive attitude to the process make it more likely that they can do so.

What is necessary to maximize ongoing career success is an all-embracing approach to what is essentially a life-long campaign. Those who – while perhaps not achieving everything they want – get closest to their ideal:

- Leave no stone unturned, and look at every detail of their work life in terms of its career implications
- Think through what they want to do, form clear objectives and work at career management systematically
- Regard the miscellany of actions that constitute active career management as an integral part of life.

This is true within one large organization and if you - realistically - see your job changing several times over time both within your current employer and beyond.

Most often successful careers do not happen; they are made. Recognize this, take action and see career success as something that is down primarily – to you. Above all keep at it – however successful you may have been to date you want your achievements to continue.

There is an assumption in the text in this review: that the reader has established a successful career and that now the job is to be sure it continues to be so and link seamlessly into whatever kind of retirement you envisage as attractive.

Just as the temptation may be to relax, wind down and coast into the final moments of a formal career there is actually a need to stay sharp and look ahead.

The need here is to keep up to date, add to and maintain skills, plan ahead and also think about emergencies and possible changes of direction. Thus, here things are taken in that order finishing with a short section that looks further ahead, right into retirement. This, it should be said, can be a shock: one day you are working full time, the next... nothing. That may be what you want and you may have an abundance of hobbies and the like to keep you busy; but if you want a more gradual transition or other activities (whether paid or not) to take you on over the next few years, achieving that may need some planning.

Given the pace of change in the world and the workplace, the first thing is perhaps to ensure that you stay on top of your current job and that you do not start to slide back because of any shortfall in skills.

2 SURVIVING AND THRIVING: ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

– John Wooden

As the quotation above makes clear there is never a time when any of us can say we have nothing more to learn and give up on development and rest on our laurels. We live in a fast changing world and the workplace is a prime example of this. You may need to:

- Learn new things (as most of us must in the area of technology)
- Maintain, extend and improve skills
- Adapt what you know to different circumstances.

You must never let the status quo make you hidebound. In the later stages of a career it is paramount to keep up to date and on top of an existing job and to continue to look at development, and do so now in light of longer term plans. You may need to adapt what you do in the light of changing circumstances. Say you write brilliant reports, you have done so throughout your career, but a new boss wants things encapsulated much more briefly or for the initial report to be made as a presentation. You need to fit to the new ways, yet still achieve excellence.

You need to think carefully about changes though, sometimes the change may actually reduce effectiveness. And any such instances must be worked around. An example is the ubiquitous PowerPoint now used almost universally for presentations. It is a wondrous thing and works very well, but my goodness it seems to have bred a generation of users many of whom now make presentations that are flawed or even lackluster. We can all conjure up visions of such presenters reading out massively over long text from a slide while facing away from the group. People read to themselves far faster than anyone can read out loud so spend half the time just waiting for the presenter to catch up. Just putting the whole message down in slide form, as much as a prompt to what to say as for the audience, is the wrong reflex. Sorry, I digress, but it makes the point about taking time to assess how adapting to new ways should be done.

Job appraisal relates very directly to development, though it is not the only prompt to making development take place. Be assured continued progress in your career means being fit for the job now and also in terms of whatever different things you may do in future.

Development is an ongoing process. It is possible to regard development as something that the organization, or your boss, does for you (occasionally). In that light it may sometimes be no great help, sometimes useful and sometimes spot on.

It is better to regard development as a personal responsibility, something that *you* make happen, rather than something that is wished on you; this is especially true if you want what is then done to assist your career short and long term rather than simply focus on your current role and responsibilities.

Thus self-development, as we might call it, implies a process directed at improvement: to assist you to work better now, but with an eye on the future too. In a job context this in turn implies the aim of improving specific job performance and thus incorporating or extending the skills that make that possible. Much that has already been said suggests why such a process is necessary, here we examine something of the detail of how it can be made to happen. It needs more than some kind of “good intention”. To be effective the process needs to be:

- Consciously entered into
- Well planned
- Systematically executed
- Focused on clear objectives and intended to make a real and tangible difference.

Having said that, it should be acknowledged immediately that alongside the specific objectives there are – should be – more personal and intangible ones. One result of good self-development is that it can make your job more interesting, satisfying and fun. And it can also help your longer-term career progress, your overall advancement and set the scene for the final stages of your career.

In a busy life an activity like self-development must not be a chore, especially not an impossible one, so approaches to it must make it manageable. Certainly in today's work environment spending time on self-development is not a nice option, something to do a little of if time permits: it is a necessity. Your current success and security and future prosperity depends on it; the only question is how much activity is necessary and what should this be?

The answer to this comes, in part, from an understanding and utilisation of the development process.

The nature of the development process

There is no magic formula, many different things can contribute to successful self-development and it is in deciding on the mix of what you do that you first influence your ultimate success.

Thinking about development

Remember that development can only ever do three things:

- *Impart knowledge:* so you can learn about whatever is necessary in your job from background knowledge to how your company's product works; both the span and depth of your knowledge matters
- *Develop skills:* introducing you to new skills, maintaining, improving or refining your abilities in everything from core techniques in something like negotiation to specialist computer skills you may need to deploy
- *Change attitudes:* study can change the way you think about things, although this may take longer than adopting some new skills. For example, something like managing your time effectively is as much a question of the attitude you take to it (and the habits this develops) as to slavishly following techniques.

Next, if your development is going to change anything, two other things are key:

- You have to set aside some *time* for self-development. This need not be excessive or unmanageable, but it needs to be there and it needs to be made available on a regular basis.
- *Application* is equally important. There is all the difference in the world between skimming through a book, to take a simple example, so that you can say that you have done so, and reading it carefully, studying it over a little longer period, making some notes and perhaps also resolving to take some action as a result.

In many jobs the evidence of results, whether good or bad, is clear. Though some development activity may stem from a more general “look ahead”, much of it will come from an examination of the current situation. Managers are charged with monitoring the performance of their staff, and the systematic way that they go about this can equally be applied to oneself.

Consider the formal process, (how your manager might approach it with you in mind); the following stages can be identified:

- *Examine job description:* this allows you to review the levels of knowledge and skills that a particular *job* demands, and the attitudes required of the person who does it. This states the ideal and the current position and is not, at this stage, linked to the individual currently doing the job
- *Examine the person:* this enables a look, alongside the ideal, at what the situation actually is currently. How do the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the individual stack up alongside what the job demands? This information comes from observation of the person, their performance and their results. Formal appraisal is a key part of this, as is other, less formal, evaluation
- *Look to the future:* before reaching any conclusions from the process described so far, it is necessary also to think ahead, again focusing on the job rather than the individual. What will the job demand in future that will be different from the current situation? What developments - in the organisation, in technology, in the market (affecting competition or the expectation of customers, for instance) and more - are coming? And how will they impact your plans? Specifically what new skills, knowledge or attitudes will be necessary, and how will existing ones need to change?
- *Defining the gap:* together two factors coming from the above may define a gap: the combination of any shortfall in current levels of competence plus the need to add to this for the future. This is the so-called *development (or training) gap* and describes the area towards which development must be directed with any individual.

Of course, the picture produced may be fine; no immediate action may be necessary. In so dynamic an environment, the reality at any particular moment however is most likely that some action – major or minor – is, in fact, necessary; the possibilities of (planned) change ahead make this more likely. If so a plan of action is needed to deal with implementation. Again viewing this systematically provides a simple checklist approach as to what you need to do:

- *List what needs to be addressed:* whatever is identified, from minor matters that need only a small input to the development of new skills that must be approached from square one
- *Rate the list in terms of priorities:* in most organisations resources, that is time (including yours), money and training resources and facilities, are finite. It is unlikely to be possible to do everything that might be desirable instantly, and impossible to select what comes first or should be postponed without some clear thinking through of priorities
- *Put some timing to it:* having established priorities you need to consider when things are to be done: what is urgent? What can be postponed without causing problems and what might be addressed in parts? (Perhaps with something being done early

on, but action also planned to follow up and complete the training task later – something that might make it easier to sell to a manager)

- *Consider the most suitable method:* this factor needs to relate quite closely to timing. With a list of desirable development activities and priorities set, the next thing is to consider exactly how something will be approached (a course, a project, whatever)
- *Calculate costs:* this is always an important issue, and realistically may involve some compromise and a balancing of different approaches; when you are initiating things the question of who is to pay needs considering – you or the organisation
- *Link to an action plan:* the net result of these deliberations needs to be documented, and turned into a rolling plan that sets out what will be done, in what way, when and who will be involved.

In this kind of way training and development activities can be considered, worked out and scheduled on a basis that makes sense. Such consideration must:

- Relate closely to operational matters
- Link and liaise as necessary with any appropriate central department or manager (e.g. a training manager) – not least to draw on their experience and expertise
- And, always too, relate to your thoughts on career progression stemming from the analysis suggested earlier.

Something like this may happen to you, indeed the better your manager the more likely it is to happen.

ACTION: *The personal implications are clear, whatever management may do, you need to think things through in a similar way and you need a written plan – one that you can roll forward and fine-tune over time. Starting from scratch this may take a moment, keeping it up to date and monitoring progress need not take long (the plan might well be one sheet of paper, though make sure what you write is sufficient to make sense of when looked at some months on). The process is manageable; certainly it is wholly worthwhile in terms of the results you will get from it.*

Development methods

Many ways of undertaking some self-development activity are possible. They range from reading a book (so, you are under way already!) to studying for a qualification. Here we first consider only the main approaches that you can take:

- *Activity that occurs:* a host of things go on day by day that are part of or link to the development process. These include regular activities such as liaison with your manager, meetings and various kinds of evaluation including the ubiquitous annual job appraisal already mentioned. They also include more ad hoc activity: for example, you may occasionally attend a formal course. Two things are important here:
 - First, that you get the most from what goes on and integrate this into the totality of your overall development
 - Secondly, you may want to take action to prompt your manager or organisation to take more such action, indeed to try to secure specific initiatives that you feel will help you now or in the future.
- *Your own activity:* this means activity that you instigate, personally and often privately. It might take advantage of company systems, say a library or resource centre, or it might utilise outside resources or simply be something you can do on your own or informally with others.

Note: it is useful to establish things here as a habit, perhaps setting yourself a target, say to read a business book every month.

The task is to produce the best mix of activities you can that line up behind your own objectives. Some of these will certainly come in some way via your employer (if not are they the right employer? Realistically, this is something you need to consider. Sometimes one needs to make a decision that your longer term future is not with your current employer, here asking what will best link to my goals towards and in retirement). Other activities will come only after some liaison or persuasion – deploying some of your communication skill internally – and more may be necessary on your own initiative. The reality will always be a mix of some sort. Certainly you should avoid your development being short of what is needed because your only approach is to accept and undertake what the organisation makes available. It is your career and ultimately the responsibility for it going well is with you.

Positive results

Whatever activities you may undertake, and however they may be instigated, you want them to be useful. Overall there are four main ways in which development can help you:

- *In your current job:* the first level of benefit is in your current job. Development can provide help, for example by strengthening or adding skills to your armoury, so that you can do it better. It can help you achieve better results – bearing in mind that even the best performance can be improved – and that in turn can be important to your future

- *In future jobs:* success in your current job can, of course, help you towards new ones; perhaps radically different. In addition, development may look ahead, focusing for example on skills that, while not essential in the short term, are a prerequisite for the future. Development helps fit you for promotion and puts you in a better position to make career changes or moves when you want
- *Increase your job rewards:* in some work (sales for example) rewards can be closely linked to success especially when success is not difficult to measure. In other jobs results may be more difficult to identify or tie down to an individual, though rewards may be linked to overall schemes such as profit sharing arrangements. Remuneration is always best viewed as a package: salary, commission, expenses, car, pension arrangements, and bonuses, share schemes and so on (what suits best in this mix may change as you approach retirement). Progress in your job, driven by development, helps secure you the returns you want both in your current job and on into the future. It is possible also that your later plans require investment and you may want to increase your earnings to allow you to retire with some sort of lump sum in hand
- *Enhance your profile:* the perception of you within an organisation is important. It may have intangible elements to it, but it is something real – are you seen as successful, as a high flyer, as someone having abilities beyond your current responsibilities? Or, at worst, as someone on a downward spiral at the end of their career. Because of what development can do, its results can improve the perception of you that exists within (and outside) the organisation. This is a not an insignificant benefit and one worth bearing in mind.

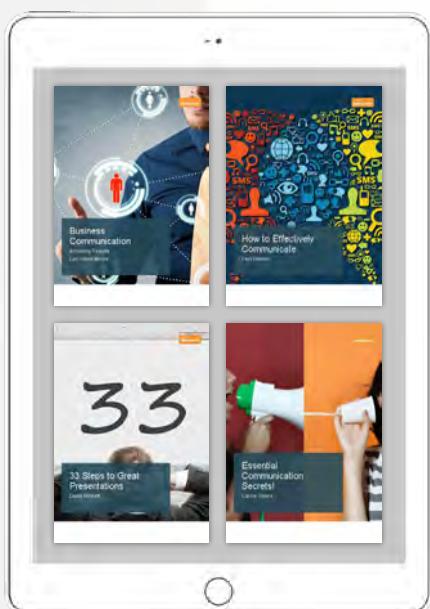
Note: appraisal is beyond the brief here, but appraisals remain important and are, or should be, a catalyst helping move you on towards your own goals as well as those of the organisation. Action to make them constructive may be necessary.

Job performance plus job satisfaction

In addition, and of influence across the whole of your work and career, development can influence job satisfaction. Whatever you want to do you probably want to enjoy it, to find it a challenge, to find it satisfying. However you define this for yourself, it is again worth bearing in mind. *You* make your career happen. Of course, many things influence it, but the job is to orchestrate the influences and make things go as far as possible the way you want. Aim high, and whatever else happens avoid being in a position where, if you pause to consider progress to date, your first comment begins, as I have said, with the words: *If only I had ...*

ACTION: If you are to maximise your job performance, secure a successful continuing career and make the progress you want, development, including that aspect of it on which you must be self-sufficient, is a vital activity. It is something to which you must take an active approach. It must reflect real life and it must reflect an objective view of things. You may have, or find you have, weaknesses that you need to work to correct. You may have particular skills that you must add to your capabilities for the future and certainly, like most of us, you probably have a continuing job to do just to keep up with the changing environment in which you work.

Remember the line, quoted earlier, from one of John Lennon's songs – *Life is what happens while you are making other plans*. Time slips by all too fast and good intentions can remain just that. Development is not an option; it is a necessity. But it is something you can address and make successful and something also about which you should liaise with management. It helps you go where you want to go. In the next chapter a broader view is expressed to highlight all the ways you can keep yourself “career fit” as the years go by.



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3 TEN STEPS TO BEING “CAREER FIT”

He who would leap high must take a long run.

– Traditional (Danish) proverb

One thing is clear: being fiftyish is not a time to slow up on career planning, rather it is a time to give it a specific focus. Given that you work, and are likely to go on working, in a dynamic environment. You have to actively plan and take action to stay secure and move ahead (and ultimately on into retirement). The word development, both in its general sense, and in its “training” sense is a key task here; and yes, it is a task. As Alvin Toffler, the futurologist, said, “The illiterate of the twenty first century will not be those that cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn”.

That said, remember development, while the initiative for some of it may come from the organisation, ultimately stands or falls on what *you* do. Therefore the attitude you take to it, and the action you take, dictate whether or not it will help you perform as you wish and achieve what you want now and in the future. The following does not attempt to be comprehensive, rather it encapsulates under a neat ten headings key things that can help you make a success of what you do in development.

The idea is to make sure that you:

- Stay well-equipped for your current job
- Acquire new skills that changes or progress beyond that job make necessary (and into retirement too)
- Do so in the context of continuing to make progress and fitting with your longer term aspirations (which might include a significant change in your work).

Note: everything here is apt to get less attention as one gets older and there is a need to recognise that looking ahead say ten years now is radically different from what it may have been in the past.

1. RESOLVE TO BE A REGULAR "SELF-DEVELOPER"

This may seem an obvious starting point, indeed it is, since most people would agree that development is a "good thing". In surveys about job satisfaction people regularly rate the fact that they want to be learning and moving forward in terms of their capabilities as a prime requirement of a satisfying job (the same sentiment is also applied to managers – *I want to work for someone who I learn from*). So far so good: development is desirable and to be taken advantage of wherever possible. But this is not sufficient.

Just taking up opportunities for development is not enough. Taking them up unthinkingly or without considering the development possibilities inherent in them is worse. For example, how many appraisals take place in organisations every day that are no more than going through the motions? They are neither constructive nor likely to lead positively to improved performance in the future. How many of these would be more useful if more thinking and preparation was done? Again now is a time when what you get from a good appraisal can be particularly valuable.

This is just one example, but it makes a point – you need to take an initiative with development, both with activities on offer, in order to get the best from them, and certainly with the self-development activity that you plan and implement personally. Doing so must become literally a lifelong habit if you are not to short change the process of career building or let matters go by default.

2. ANALYSE AND SET CLEAR OBJECTIVES

This needs a mention and is rightly high on this list of ten key areas promoting career success. The details (set out earlier) will not be repeated here. Suffice to say that given pressure of time, and perhaps money too, you must have a clear focus for all your career development activity and a clear direction to aim in too.

Without this time can be wasted doing things which, while generally sensible, do not address your specific development objectives sufficiently accurately to be as useful as alternative action. One of the first business maxims ever to become a well-known phrase was the saying: *if you don't know where you are going, any road will do* (the late Peter Drucker). It makes as much sense for an individual as for a business.

3. MAKE AND USE A PLAN

Plan the work and work the plan, so says the old adage. It is true, it is common sense; yet it is easy to overlook and to regard planning as a chore. A programme of self-development first needs some analysis and clear objectives. A plan – which means having something in writing – is actually a time saving device. It ensures that things are not overlooked, that each activity can be made to relate sensibly to all others and allows necessary fine-tuning along the way.

A plan should not be a strait jacket. It is more akin to a route map, something that allows you to plan an unfamiliar journey, yet also helps if things do not go to plan, for instance allowing rerouting to avoid road works or accident. The description “rolling plan” makes sense here. That is something that is clear in the short term, perhaps specifying one hundred percent what you intend to do, and which sets out a clear idea of the time beyond – to be filled in progressively as time goes by in the light of actual circumstances.

The rule here is simple: make a plan and put it in writing. The extent of it is actually less important. I know people who plan their career development scrupulously in this way and what results is a folder with just a few, perhaps only half a dozen, sheets of paper (or a file in a computer that they view on screen), though it can, of course, link to other things. It need not be onerous to create, or voluminous in extent; it is a foundation to what you subsequently do and very valuable in making things happen.

4. CREATE SUFFICIENT TIME

In the modern workplace there never seems to be time for anything. Pressure, stress, meetings, administration, travel and traffic and more (not least people: colleagues, customers, the boss - whoever) all seem to conspire to keep us on the run. Setting priorities clearly is a must. If you do not concentrate on the things that matter most, then you will never get the results that you want.

Every job is different and has its own priorities. Most of these are linked to actions geared to producing the results you are charged with achieving. But there are other priorities too and development is certainly one of them. We are all familiar with the maxim to work smarter, not harder. It is a valid comment. You need to see development, and particularly self-development, where you have to find the time yourself, as a means to an end. It is an investment. Time spent now helps make what you do in future more effective; it directly links to the results that you want to achieve. It also links to longer term aims, in that you may never gain the advancement you want if you are constantly failing to fit in actions that would constitute firm stepping stones along the way.

In some organisations development is specifically targeted in time terms. In the financial services area, for example, this is typical with many members of staff having to spend a set number of hours per year simply to keep their “product knowledge” up to date in what is a heavily regulated industry. So, it will help if you:

- Set yourself some sort of target
- Address separately the things you do entirely at your own behest, and those that management initiates and thus allows time for (even if you have help ensure that the initiative takes place)
- Develop and stick with appropriate habits so that some of your self-development becomes a useful routine (for example, dwelling on the lessons stemming from making a single presentation for a moment afterwards if making good ones is a definite career skill for you).

Time management is made effective largely through many details, there sadly being no magic formula that automatically produces excellent productivity; making sure that you do not short change your development intentions is key to your success.

5. LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

As the old proverb tells us: experience is the best teacher. Certainly it is true to say that at the core of self-development, separate from any methods, systems and processes is one key thing – you. The attitude you take, and the way in which you harness your experience so that it provides a basis for change and better opportunities for the future, is vital. You can make a real difference.

Looking at your own job you need a sound understanding of the way it works and what makes it successful, then you have a reference against which to view your own practice and experience. Doing so must become a habit. You need to:

- Be conscious of what you do, literally task by task, day by day
- Consider – analyse if you like – how particular things go, for instance looking at how you handled a particular project, management meeting or presentation
- Note areas of note. These may be things that went well that you want to repeat and build on or things that could be better and need consideration, experiment or change
- Act on this process, adjusting your future approaches to take lessons into account.

Realistically, of course, you are not going to indulge in lengthy contemplation after every hour of the day, but if you can get into the habit of pausing regularly to consider then this is literally invaluable. A similar approach can be brought to bear on every aspect of your job asking yourself questions like: was that course attendance (or appraisal or meeting) useful, how did I play it and are there ways in which I can make the next such experience work better?

Make experience work for you, effectively accelerate it and you have regular, pertinent learning on tap on an ongoing basis. This strengthens the effect of every other aspect of development to which you are exposed.

6. LEARN FROM OTHERS

Your career progress is sufficiently important to leave no stone unturned in looking for ways of giving it strength. There is no monopoly on knowledge or ability, so you need to be in touch with others who can act as a catalyst to your development process. They can help ensure that you maximise what you achieve and make it easier to do – and perhaps more fun - at the same time. Like so much else this needs some systematic action; it is not simply a matter of tapping any useful people you happen to know. You need to:

- Identify those people inside the organisation and out that might be able to help you (these include colleagues, management in functions such as HR, people doing similar jobs elsewhere)
- Make and maintain contact, have meetings, exchange e-mails and keep in contact on an ongoing basis
- Recognise that such networking must be two way to be self-sustaining, in other words other people must find their contact with you as useful as yours with them is – give as well as take
- Link ideas, suggestions and experience gained this way with other activities to maximise its effectiveness; for example use a particular contact as a sounding board to help prepare a contribution you have planned for a forthcoming meeting or project.

Interesting and valuable alliances are possible. Sometimes it can start with a particular swap: you want to pick brains on one subject and are able to help someone else with advice in another area. Ultimately this overlaps with the idea of mentoring (something which remains useful throughout your career). Incidentally, alliances could be valuable with others contemplating retirement; it is always useful to compare notes.

7. SPOT OPPORTUNITIES

There is a difference implied here between recognising opportunities, by which I mean you should see and take advantage of ongoing processes and events like your regular job appraisal, and spotting what one might call ad hoc opportunities. Something like a scheduled appraisal is difficult not to notice. The distinction makes the point that some opportunities are less obvious. Some things are unpredictable and you need the habit of being alert to any possibility that might assist your development and career plans.

Linked to the idea of keeping an eye out for opportunities should be that of experiment. As just one example, I have sat on various committees over the years and an immediate reaction is that it is not my favourite thing. However, it is something that is, on occasion, worth trying (you can always say that you will attend a few times before committing yourself more permanently) and I can think of more than one spell on committees that started somewhat reluctantly but from which I learnt a great deal and met people who were of further assistance.

This is another principle that needs consciously adhering to in the light of a busy life leaving no room to observe or explore anything but the most obvious.

8. UTILISE A MIX OF METHODS

There is more to heart surgery than reading a good book. So too with forging your career: you need to come at it in a number of different ways. First, recognise that there are two paths to development that you can influence:

- Taking advantage of things “in place” – from getting the most help from your manager to making appraisals a constructive process; here *self*-development adds to a process that would do something anyway and makes sure you obtain maximum benefit
- Taking an initiative and doing things yourself. Such things may be as simple as reading a book, or as comprehensive and ongoing as studying for a qualification.

Beyond that, there are a number of reasons to make sure that you undertake a mix of things:

- *Different things work in different ways*: a computer based training session of some sort may lead you through the facts about something whereas attending a course allows discussion, is an opportunity to interact with others and can allow you to test ideas
- *Sheer variety*: you are more likely to do more and do it more regularly if what you are doing contains some variety; if it is interesting you will be more likely to stick with it
- *Reinforcement*: repetition is one of the basic tenants of learning. If you are exposed to ideas, techniques whatever, in a variety of different ways then the key things are more likely to make sense and to stick. If you contrast very different methods, this reinforcement is clear – for instance, a factual description on page or screen can perhaps be reinforced by the humour of a training film on the same topic
- *Productivity*: realistically you have to mix methods to make an element of self-development possible; to make it fit in with a no doubt busy work schedule. As an example, a CD, podcast or whatever you can listen to in the car adds something to what you do with effectively no increase in “development time” (and the traffic may not seem so frustrating!)

In one area variety is helped by change; technology seems to offer new learning methods every day and some of these have been mentioned.

9. MONITOR PROGRESS

In describing the way in which staying career fit can help you the word systematic has been used a number of times. One element of the systematic approach is that of monitoring progress. The premise here is simple. What you do next should be based on progress to date so as to create a logical continuity of development and progress.

You want to know that progress is being made, and how that is best assisted. So, everything you do should be rated in terms of how it helps. If you go on a course consider if it was useful. Consider also why this was. Was it down to the person who conducted it, the nature or extent of participation or the way it related to your job? Whatever it was there may be things to note and that will affect your future actions – for example, avoiding a particular course leader or resolving to attend more courses using a certain style of approach that you find works well for you. This principle applies widely to the things you can do.

You need to monitor your progress too. If say you are trying to improve the quality of your written reports, then there are a variety of things you can do – but does your report writing change for the better as a result? You need to make, and get from others in many instances, judgements about this sort of progress. Self-development is not just a good thing in some academic sense, it is a means to an end and you always need to be sure that you are actually making suitable progress towards those ends; after all they may be a particular standard of excellence at which something begins to positively affect your career in a noticeable way.

Note: as time goes by you may need to judge progress in different ways if you are aiming to change the way you work in the last years.

10. AIM HIGH AND BE POSITIVE

There are many maxims about aiming high and “positive mental attitude” is not just a state of mind, it is an industry, certainly in the United States. All so obvious, but the dangers are equally real. It is very easy to form clear intentions, take some action but allow an initial lack of success and the ongoing pressure of work to let you side-line them and do little or nothing more. Sustaining a programme of career and self-development needs some commitment and some persistence.

If you aim high you may still not achieve the peak of success, but you are more likely to achieve more than you would with lower intentions. There are four manifestations of this:

- *Excellence*: in terms of everything you do and the professionalism with which you do it you should aim for excellence. Getting by is not enough, unless you are ahead of the game, unless you are constantly moving forward you are vulnerable to changing circumstances and what you do may no longer impress people as it should or indeed once did. In a dynamic environment the status quo is an enemy, as Henry Kaiser said: *You can't sit on the lid of progress. If you do, you will be blown to pieces*.
- *Challenge*: you should not rule things out too readily as being beyond you. Only by accepting a challenge do you have the chance to make progress, and in any case more job satisfaction comes from taking on and making a success of something genuinely challenging than from just "ticking over" and allowing a job to become repetitive
- *Advancement*: this applies to success in your current job and to success in terms of your longer-term (and perhaps different) career also. If you fail to take the necessary early steps then you may effectively block your progress and regret it later. It may seem like a heck of a jump to sales director or managing director, but each step on the way may well prove – or be able to be made - manageable
- *Skills and techniques*: to do a particular job you need to be able to do, and do well, the things that it necessitates. So you need to take on the challenge of developing new skills, perhaps especially those of whatever job you see as your next step. Such things often seem daunting. There was a stage in my career when the last thing I ever thought that I would do, or wanted to do or indeed thought I would be able to do, was public speaking. I hated the very idea. But circumstances led me towards it. I had to learn how to do it – and have in fact spent a major part of my subsequent career in training involving speaking to groups of all sizes; and indeed teaching others so to do. Such a change can come at any stage of a career. Again you must not rule out areas of development for the wrong reasons; and these include just having a distaste for them, or having a lack of confidence in your ability to do them. Aiming high includes embracing the acquisition of all the skills that will take you where you want to go.

Certainly all this demands a positive attitude. So, be positive about your work and your ability to meet expectations. Be positive about your ability to succeed and make progress: do the right things in the right way and your chances of success, and the level of success you can achieve, increase.

4 TOWARDS RETIREMENT: SYSTEMATIC AND POSITIVE APPROACHES

A change is as good as a rest

– Traditional proverb

If you are employed and if you do nothing then one day retirement will be an unstoppable and unalterable event. One day work. Next day not. Ditto earnings. Now you may be happy with that and either want to do nothing, perhaps unlikely with the sort of person who will read this, or have something long planned waiting in the wings. Such could vary enormously, say from spending major time looking after grandchildren to sailing round the world.

Otherwise, what you do may need some planning, indeed thinking about retirement ahead of time may influence what could be a major phase of your life for the good and make the difference between boredom, and perhaps financial struggle, and a unique, rewarding and satisfying period that promises considerable enjoyment. So what needs considering?

Let's mention one particular factor first. If you are self-employed or own and run your own business, then one appealing prospect can be to wind down as it were. You do not have to simply stop one day, but can reduce your commitment and steadily do less and less allowing time for other things as you go. This can be a very attractive route, though the danger is that circumstances seem to make it more difficult to wind down than you may initially think. Doing so may take some resolve and may be dependent on specific factors such as recruiting someone to take over. That said other factors still apply as they do to someone who is employed.

FUNDAMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

A number of background considerations perhaps come first.

Intention

The first step is to be clear about your intentions. Certainly about:

- *Earnings:* consider whether you want or need to continue earning and how much is needed, desirable and possible. Be specific, just saying “as much as possible” is not enough. A target of some sort can act directionally, pointing the way to other activities. Realistically you may need to be content to earn at a lower level than in the past. Consider too: this may be the time to give back in some way, for instance with something in the area of charity work (which can, of course, reflect your interests) for which payment is only in satisfaction.
Note: certain activities undertaken before retirement can be done to produce income after retirement. Examples of this include royalties from writing, fees from licensing arrangements and even financial schemes ranging from share options to profit sharing arrangements.
- *Activity:* consider how you want to spend your time and, not least, how your experience and skills fit you to do particular things, perhaps different from your current occupation. Continuity may be important here, equally you may want to do something completely different, from returning to education as a mature student to learning or taking up some new activity.

Convenience may be a factor here. If, for instance, you have commuted to work, you may want to take on activities that are in future more local (or the time may be ripe to undertake different sorts of travel). Clarity here about what you want to do and what proportion of your time you want to put into different things, helps many other decisions and makes it more likely that your portfolio of retirement activity will be right for you and provide satisfaction.

Timing

When will you retire? Is the date set? Can it be earlier or later and how does this fit with the plans you have for activity after that time? Discussions may be necessary with your employer in advance to achieve changes to the default route to retirement that work for both parties. A possibly attractive option after full time work ends is following that by continuing to work, for a while, on a part time (or consultative) basis; if so this needs prior organising.

Note: there could well be a link here to contractual matters so it may be worth looking at your contract of employment and also seeing if a word with H.R would be prudent at any stage. Details may be important here; for example, if you have a company car, can you buy it or what do you plan to do to remain mobile?

Clearly this option of varying your retirement date and circumstances is not possible unless you have a clear idea what will suit you. It also relates tightly to our next heading.

Finances

You need to consider getting your financial situation after retirement in order well ahead of the day. This is a complex area involving many things and will, of course, be different for different people. Three things however seem key:

- *Pension*: this likely needs professional advice, good sound professional advice, and its complexity is beyond most of us and affected year by year by such things as markets and legislation. Suffice to say you need to think about what income you will receive, when you will receive it and so on; there may be lump sums involved too. There is a strong link here with your attitude to any ongoing earnings you may want
- *Mortgage*: ideally it is good to retire with your mortgage paid off, certainly this is something else to think about and an area in which it may pay to start thinking sooner rather than later
- *Savings*: clearly the totality of your finances plays a part too
- *Tax*: like all the above bullet points this is something where you likely need to talk to a professional advisor, say an accountant.

One way to think about this is simply to be sure that you are not going to receive financial surprises on retirement, and it is also sensible to look at what new activities might involve and what that might mean financially to make it work. Again the range of possibilities here is legend: maybe you want a holiday home and to spend your winters in a warm climate, maybe you want to finance an educational course of some sort.

Research

If you are either not yet clear how you might want to spend your time in retirement, or what you want to do is something about which to some degree you need to know more, you may need to do some research, perhaps well ahead. Check out possibilities. Here all sorts of things may be useful from the ubiquitous internet to reading and networking.

Experiment may be involved here too. You could start a new activity in some small way ahead of retiring in order to check it out. An overlap is perhaps something to regard as desirable. After all you do not want to plan your retirement around a new activity that

appeals to you, but is unknown to you, and that find it does not suit. Something like scuba diving may be a lifetime dream, but you could find that you hate it.

So, focus any research (however informal) in ways that:

- Check out what might be available options, what you end up doing and enjoying may be something you did not originally even know about
- Check out the details of a short list of options and be practical. You do not just want to identify activity that seem attractive, but which are possible, playing to your experience and abilities and having a level of convenience that would make undertaking them straightforward
- If you want to go on earning you may need to check too about salaries or fees and keep up to date on going rates.

Another radical route is worth a word.

Start your own company

This may be a perfectly sensible route and does not imply starting a major activity; it could mean consultancy or a part time occupation, one that could be taken up in retirement (or just before). It is the route I have (ultimately) taken myself and is one that does appeal to a good many people, so it deserves some sensible comment.

First, the advantages: drawing on a recent survey of why people set up in business, the reasons listed were as follows, people wanted to:

- Achieve greater independence
- Make more money (and raise the ceiling)
- Change the nature of the work done
- Escape big company culture
- Have more free time
- Work from home

Interestingly, independence seems consistently to be rated more important than money, all the rest make sense (the last clearly only applies to a special minority) and they are not mutually exclusive; all may play a part. It is a seductive mix and many people are tempted towards it. But, with all superficially good things there is always a “but”: there are other factors to consider. Two in particular:

- You have to be prepared to take a risk (and likely make some financial investment). This is not something everybody can live with, and if you are not content unless there is a regular salary cheque coming in then it may not be for you on this ground alone
- You have to be able to run the business: all of it. Let me make that clearer: most of those who start up their own business have some entrepreneurial skills and more often they have specialised skills in one particular area. They may be a talented engineer or designer perhaps, and intend to work in an area that plays to this strength. So far so good: but if you are in overall charge the buck stops with you - on everything. You may need other skills, broadly based to include management skills, accounting skills and sales skills to name but three. There is a juggling to be done with all this and you also need considerable discipline.

This may well be a real career option for some, but unless your skills go across the board and are up to the task, you should consider very carefully before you hand in your notice and erect a sign outside your new office. A brief note about this here maybe provides encouragement, but note that there is a great deal to check out and it is not a route to be taken lightly.

Note: in the context of research and reviewing possibilities, the book "The Good Non-Retirement Guide" appears annually (published by Kogan Page). It is an excellent reference book for those on the verge of retirement or into it and wanting to remain busy and active. It provides information on a range of topics from health, property, investment, leisure activities, voluntary work, pensions, tax and more. It is at once informative, practical and inspirational. Highly recommended.

Realistically you may not be able to – or want to - survive in one organisation, or at least not be able to do so in the way that you want. Few people spend their entire career with one employer, and some of those few who do so are in large multinational entities where effectively they form a conglomeration of different companies. So you may well come to the point where changing jobs is the only way you see the possibility of continuing to develop your career. In that case corporate survival can be interpreted as just that. This book cannot include in its brief presenting a blueprint for changing jobs, but there are some issues here that fit our remit and there are certainly things about moving jobs you should have in mind well in advance before taking steps to do so.

As a final thought at this point it is worth making written notes, and perhaps having a retirement file, in the period leading up to retirement. You need to remember your intentions, ensure they continue to fit together as time goes by, and prompt action at various points on the way.

MOVING ON

With your mind set on the possibilities and intentions the actual moment of change will approach.

The right moment

Get the timing wrong and the funniest story will fall flat. Get it wrong in a career and similarly disaster may follow. Nowhere is this truer than on the verge of retirement. Consider: you may want to (or benefit from) having continuing contact with your employer. Alternatively you might want to change jobs, working in a different field or way for a period before retirement to involve you in something that will flow more easily into retirement.

If you have a plan, and if you did not before then by this stage of reading through this book you certainly should have one now, that is the place to start. Is it likely that a new position would better enable you to reach your retirement objectives than continued progress where you are now? You have to balance the “devil you know” against something inherently less known, but, quite possibly, no more difficult to predict. For many people the temptation to stay put and not, as they see it, take any risk is very great.

Several issues may form a part of the decision:

- *Predictability:* In some organisations formal planning is well spelt out. You know with reasonable certainty the kind of progress that you will likely make and you may have to balance this against something more unknown. Of course, the reverse may be the case - you have no idea what even the next year with your current employer will bring and have to put that alongside opportunities elsewhere
- *Speed of progression:* This needs assessing separately from predictability. If you want to have a variety of experiences, perhaps to build up competencies, before you retire, you need to consider whether that will happen in the last period of your work with an existing employer. Realistically future options are declining and you do not want to find that the last year or two becomes an unsatisfying chore adding nothing to your career experience or helping set things up for the future
- *Future opportunity:* One option may hold out better long-term prospects than another and such decisions should always look well ahead, so far as you are able to do so
- *Current prospect:* These need objective consideration. It is easy to underrate the situation with a current employer as you review other future (perhaps exciting) options.

It is no good having a reasonable job but later looking back and regretting not making changes that could have benefited you. You cannot wind the clock back – ever – and there is limited time to prepare for a different and important next stage.

Finally, another measure may be useful. It is said that if you are not going forward it is time for a change. Everyone wants a job in which they continue not just to survive, or even prosper, but also to learn and develop. If a job has ceased to provide this and is merely repetitive then it may be time to move on; even for a final year or three. If you have other

options (perhaps including offers) consider them carefully, and always remember in that case there are three options: staying, and progressing where you are, taking an offer that has arisen to go elsewhere or going out to find someone who will make you an offer. The latter could be harder work than taking something offered on a plate as it were, and the techniques of pure job seeking are beyond our brief here.

Be equipped to move on

As a general rule, if you stay too long with one organisation, you may be regarded as having limited experience (though what recruiters regard as “too long” varies a good deal). Conversely, if you have a C.V. that shows a career record of ceaseless change you may come to be regarded as an unstable “job-hopper” and judged as less attractive because of that. Certainly, it is quite possible that whatever your circumstance the time you spend with one employer lets your



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job hunting skills atrophy. Planning of the sort discussed here prior to retirement includes positive action to prevent this happening; you may need such skills for getting into all sorts of post-main job activity. Several things can be done, amongst them you should:

- *Keep your CV up-to-date:* Most job hunting necessitates having an up-to-date statement of your background, qualifications and experience, even someone approaching you may want this, and so will recruitment agencies and consultants. These quickly get out of date. It is not sufficient for them to say who you worked with and your job title, certainly for more recent jobs they should spend some of their limited space describing *achievements* and what you can do for someone else and how. So make notes, review the document regularly and update as necessary; it is easy to neglect this in the final few years of work and then find it's necessary for something new you want to get into. Further, I want to make an obvious statement: you need a well-constructed and well-written C.V. - it is a selling document and there can be no half measures. It is either good enough to play its part in getting you a new job/role or it is useless, just so much waste paper. This may be something to check out, especially if you have been in your existing job a while. Incidentally the covering letter that goes with a C.V. is also vital. In both cases, despite all the detailed published advice about them, the prevailing standards are not so high that you cannot score points and differentiate yourself by producing a really good one. Remember too that, while you may keep a standard document on file, you may need to adapt it for each and every individual application you make.
- *Keep your interview skills up-to-date:* This may be more difficult than editing your CV but anything you do infrequently tends to be more difficult than something you are able to practice. As a result, some would say it is worthwhile to apply for a job now and then, not because you intend to take it (or at least not on the evidence to hand), but just to give yourself interview practice. I am conscious of the horror this thought will engender in any recruiter reading this. It is difficult enough to undertake a selection campaign without the picture being clouded by a host of people practising interview techniques, so I will add that this is very much not something to be overdone; but it is a thought.

Once you decide to take action to move on you want to be sure you are in the best possible condition to do so. All this is really common sense. Though, as you look towards new activities or jobs that you will need to be appointed to, it is useful to try to put yourself in the position of someone attempting to fill a post. It can be a thankless and difficult task, yet there is much hanging on it, the costs of getting it wrong are certainly high. They expect you to be well turned out, they recognise that few recruitment campaigns result in the appointment of anyone who turns out to be much better than was thought, though quite a few transpire the other way round. Make it easy for them to see they are dealing

with someone who is professional, not least about the process, someone at some pains to help them make the right decision and your success rate is likely to be higher. If finding something ideal in this new phase of life is important, and it surely is, then the processes involved in getting it must be approached seriously. This is very obviously a key area, one of many details, and one where further reading or research is likely to be worthwhile.

However secure you feel you are, there are hazards along the way and if, for example, you are pressed into unwanted early retirement or redundancy then you want to be as well-equipped as possible to bounce back.

Leaving on good terms

Perhaps a seemingly small and simple point, this can prove invaluable later on - sometimes much later. No one's time in any organisation is entirely positive. You are unlikely to see eye to eye with the boss or with others over everything. There will be those people who always got right up your nose and others where minor niggles characterised your every dealing with them. Then you leave and move on. This is not the time to indulge yourself with righteous indignation, still less revenge - even a barbed remark in a final letter, final report or memo may be remembered and quoted later out of context.

Leave with good grace.

Say something about the good things, of which there were presumably some if you have opted to stay there a while, and do not make anything even remotely like an enemy as you take your leave.

If you ask why, and the temptation for at least some throw away jibe may be great, the reason is that you never know where your ex-colleagues (and ex-boss, for that matter) will end up. They may move on too. You may need a reference, or advice or information. All this is a two-way street, and it may be worth indicating to people you may find useful in future that you hope to keep in touch, and that should they think you can help them in future they should not hesitate to say so. There may be contacts that need active maintenance, people with whom you begin to network, and these need adding to any reminder system you use.

Of course, none of these should be taken as inferring that there are bound to be difficulties; there may be few or no problems as you move on, though there may be people with whom you will not easily and naturally keep up contact with on either a social or business basis. That is as it should be, but during the run up to a change, and certainly during the time the change is actually taking place, it is worth a little thought to smooth the path. Do

not be like an old friend of mine who landed an excellent new job and moved on. I asked him later if he had left on good terms. "Certainly," he said, "it was all fine right up to the drinks in the office on the day I left. I drank a little too much and poured a beer over the M.D's head!" You never know who will be useful in future, so never jeopardise a good relationship inadvertently or for no good reasons. Good contacts, and friendships, are too valuable to waste.

Do not underestimate the difficulty

Countries, economies and times vary but if you *have* to get another job (or part time assignment of any sort) - do not ever underestimate the time and effort that may be involved in obtaining it; certainly for the right new post. If the economy is strong, employment high and skilled and experienced people are in high demand, then there may well be little problem, even, dare I say for the older applicant. If not, if luck is against you, then you need to take the appropriate action and do so wisely and fast. A prolonged period of unemployment does not look good on your record and after a while, rightly or wrongly, it gets more difficult for you to interest new employers. They may, understandably, view the gap as suspicious and view other candidates more favourably.

So, what does not underestimating what needs to be done mean? An earlier point was made about all action taken needing to be done thoroughly and well. Here the point concerns quantity. It is wisely said that searching for a job can be a full time job in itself. Yet on retirement that may be the last thing you want. Make a real routine of your actions, set specific time aside each day (even 9 to 5) and work through all the things to be done, from checking out possibilities to actually applying for a new role.

You cannot really have too many applications out there prospecting for you, and it may be worth setting yourself some targets to make sure you do put enough bread on the waters. In part, this is simply a numbers game. Certainly you should never stop or slow other activities because you have your sights set optimistically on one particular job, even if you are sure things are going well. Organisations can take time - weeks, sometimes months - to make a decision. If you do wait and slow down other activities, and then the answer is negative, the result is simply that you have lost time.

A systematic search will stand the best chance of getting you into a new role promptly and, after all, there is no harm in receiving more than one offer; you can always choose the best. The danger here is certainly that too relaxed an attitude may mean a longer period to find what you are looking for, or even that the ideal new occupation alludes you.

One other way forward deserves a mention.

Expect the unexpected

What we have been reviewing here is a process that can be applied over a number of months or years, so the things that will happen, the twists and turns of fate that will occur during this time, the moments demanding your best survival skills and those too that offer opportunities, will be many and varied.

And you can never anticipate everything.

But you may well be able to take advantage of many things, provided you have your wits about you.

Many things will occur, I can think of career changes in my own life influenced by factors as varied as the death of a colleague, a chance conversation, a company hitting economic difficulty, the discovery of abilities or possibilities not just which I did not know, but which I had discounted, and unexpected overseas travel. Whatever stage you are at in your career you will no doubt be able to look back on some things which have similarly already had an influence and helped you survive and move ahead. There will, in all probability, be more to come, even in the last year or two before retirement. Be ready for them. Not specifically, you cannot know exactly what is round the corner, but if you develop the habit of looking for opportunity in everything – even adversity - then some of these random factors can be made to work for you: ensuring survival and moving you ahead. This, together with a real and ongoing final career plan, can take you forward and, however it may all go in future, can avoid you ever having to look back and say: *"If only I had done .."* To have to say something like that is perhaps the worst outcome of all.

A planned approach and a planned transition can, however, see you moving forward into what could be one of the most enjoyable, and satisfying periods of your life.

5 AFTERWORD

*Success is not the result of spontaneous combustion.
You must first set yourself on fire.*

– Fred Shero

As this book has made clear, you need to work at becoming and remaining career fit and do so in a considered and systematic way. Success does not just happen, but you can make it happen and doing so acts to forge success, achieve specific objectives and make disaster less likely. Your attitude to and action regarding career building is a key part of what allows you to do this. Not only will this approach serve you well in good, or everyday times, it will protect you in bad times. There is a special importance to all of this in the last years of a career, after all time is increasingly not on your side and there may be little, or insufficient, time to correct mistakes. Let's end with a few more brief points:



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- *Look the part:* in whatever way is appropriate; you are best to go for the high end of the prevailing style in your workplace with regard to dress for instance. Here incidentally I always reckon it is more difficult for women than men to make the right decision; men have a more limited choice. Remember too that appearance is much more than just how you look; what about your desk, office and more? Your manner contributes here too. One caveat: many extreme attempts at retain a youthful experience are, dare I say, less than successful (for instance no man wants to be the subject of an office 'spot the wig' competition)
- *Manage your time effectively:* Success demands good productivity and good time management is a skill you can acquire. Allied to this, you should deal with any stress rather than accept it and struggle with it
- *Behave:* the workplace can (should?) be fun and there are occasions when you can let your hair down (the department may go out for riotous drinks in celebration of business or personal achievement). However, do not let this get out of hand. You do not want the wrong kind of reputation and there are hazards, such as drink, that can quickly dilute your professional image. Most bosses would rather promote the office cat than someone with even a hint of a drink problem. Similarly do not be typecast as a rumour monger, a time waster or as possessing any other unsuitable characteristic
- *Don't burn your bridges:* this is a difficult one. There are issues that should be tackled (say bullying in the work place), but move heaven and earth to do so informally first if you want to retain your career fitness. It may not be right, but realistically you are not going to be seen as the asset you once were after dragging your employer through an industrial tribunal, nor will it necessarily enhance your CV
- *Cut your losses:* sometimes the best tactic is to walk away. An employer, or boss, that is just so difficult that they hamper your success may be changeable, but it usually pays to decide sooner rather than later if they cannot be changed – and make a change. You do not want to spend a long difficult period that ends with you feeling you should have moved on earlier; doing so affects your job satisfaction and your building experience, and a sterile period does your record no good
- *Be ready for emergencies:* even the most career fit person can be caught out sometimes (just think, banks used to be regarded as safe places to work). If you have to move on, it helps to be ready to do so
- *Achieve:* don't take your eye off the ball, remember that a significant part of what makes you attractive to an employer is your ability to achieve your targeted results, whatever they may be; so work and career development may need to march in parallel, but priorities are important
- *Check rewards and satisfaction:* there is a balance here and most people do not really want to maximise reward and lose all satisfaction. At the same time, especially after a while with one employer, it is easy to find you are being taken for granted and under rewarded.

Remember the old saying, originally attributed to Vidal Sassoon, and still worth noting – *The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary*. True enough; the trick is to recognise the fact and work at it, but also to make the work necessary as painless as possible. Well-chosen career development activity needs exactly this approach. Thereafter it is how you proceed next that matters. Remember what Kahil Gibran said: “A little knowledge that *acts* is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is *idle*”. You may never be able to say that you are guaranteed a lifetime of satisfactory employment, but by constant career management and development you may be able to guarantee maintaining lifetime employability and achieving most, if not all, of your ambitions. The same approaches may also see you avoiding disaster or surviving it better if it does strike.

While care and consideration is always sensible, you may also sometimes need to stick your neck out and take a chance (I would certainly never have enjoyed more than twenty years of self-employment without doing that). Opportunities, even when successfully spotted, are not always within arms-reach; sorry I’m mixing my metaphors now.

ACTION: *In a dynamic and unpredictable world success is still well worth striving for. It can be hard work, as Lord Thomson of Fleet said, "If one wants to be successful, one must think. One must think until it hurts. One must worry a problem in one's mind until it seems there cannot be another aspect of it that hasn't been considered". It is all too easy to allow things to go by default. Indeed I have heard a saying to the effect that a diary is something in which we aim to write one thing, but all too often must write something else. Plan what you want to do and plan too to take the necessary steps along the way.*

Forging a consistently successful career, maximising its success and making sure it allows you to achieve your ambitions and draw satisfaction from it, is manifestly not a matter of good luck, perhaps especially in later years. So I will not end by wishing you good luck (though a little of that certainly helps). But I wish you well with it. Success is, after all, down to you, but it is possible, go for it and who knows? You may surprise yourself.