
Choices

“Right is right, even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it” William Penn observed. This thoughtful quote is relevant to the choices we face in our work lives, whether on a nontraditional, entrepreneurial path or in conventional employment. Here is an example. I was once confronted with a situation when employees of one customer demanded that my organization provide confidential client information about individuals to whom we were providing career counseling services. Confidentiality is fundamental to the career counseling relationship, and is central to the ethical principles of professional practice. Every other customer organization with which I have worked respected and honored this, as had this organization previously. Here was a direct choice, violate confidentiality and continue with the customer, or maintain confidentiality and lose the customer. The right path was clear. We maintained confidentiality, honoring the individuals we served and the principles of professional practice, while our work with this customer ceased. Encounters such as this are hopefully rare; they illustrate the importance of choice in fashioning our work lives. This particular choice was related to ethical and operational practice. Other choices affect the direction of our career paths. Let us look at how we can approach such career related choices.

We can identify internal preferences that affect how we approach decisions. This is illustrated by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), an assessment that characterizes our personality along four dimensions. One of these four dimensions, thinking and feeling, focuses on how we prefer to make decisions. Those of us with a stronger thinking preference make decisions based more on objective logic, and those of us with a stronger feeling preference make decisions based more on subjective values. Attributes such as being analytical or objective tend to be associated with thinking, and attributes such as being empathetic or compassionate tend to be associated with feeling. By understanding our preferred approach to decision making we can highlight our natural strengths in decision making, and gaps we may choose to fill. For example, choosing to incorporate additional information and data when approaching a decision from a feeling orientation, or explicitly considering the effect of a decision on others when approaching a decision from a thinking orientation.

We can also adopt different external, ethical frameworks to guide our decisions. As pointed out by Marc Saner, overarching ethical frameworks can build on a values-based approach, a compliance-based approach, or a combination of the two. The values-based approach emphasizes important goals, the means to achieve those goals, and motivations. Such an approach provides broad guidance for decision making, is flexible, and can be used in situations that were not anticipated when the foundation principles were created. The U.S. Bill of Rights is an example of such an approach. The compliance-based approach, on the other hand, emphasizes rules and limits that need to be respected, and is based on compliance with a set of agreed-upon standards. Features are clarity and specificity. Unfortunately, a compliance-based approach can rapidly become encyclopedic in size and still not be sufficiently comprehensive. An example of a compliance-based approach is the U.S. tax code. As we consider approaching individual career decisions the values-based approach, which is more aligned with the MBTI feeling preference, draws on fundamental principles we hold dear. The compliance-based approach, which is more aligned with the MBTI thinking preference, uses objective aspects such as those expressed in numerical grids of decision criteria. We can choose to incorporate aspects of both the values- and

compliance-based approaches into our decision making, and also integrate perspectives from spiritual traditions that inform our values.

Having looked at some of the factors that affect how we approach decisions, now let us look at a career-related example, namely the decision to embark on a nontraditional career path. As pointed out in previous newsletters, by a nontraditional career path we mean a career path that is tailored to our individual needs and contains more than one source of income. In examining this decision, and in highlighting questions to consider, we implicitly include our internal, decision-making preferences and our preferred external, ethical framework.

We will look at four aspects and associated questions related to this initial entry decision:

- Critical mass of skills and attributes
- Work/life purpose
- Components to include
- Relationship strength

Critical mass of skills and attributes. Do I have what is needed to succeed in a nontraditional path? This question looms large at the start. Some suggest that only a few are cut out to be their own boss, while others suggest that it's a fallacy that only a few can take this path successfully. As we show in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*, there are many different paths to a nontraditional career that people have successfully negotiated and there are many options to tailor a path to individual needs. Indeed, there is historical precedent that what appears nontraditional today is closer to our natural relationship with work than that of employment in large organizations, which has come to dominate our thinking since the early 1900s. Our view about what constitutes traditional work is an artifact of this more recent past. Given this, given the flexibility to tailor a nontraditional path to individual needs, and given a changing work environment that is moving to favoring the nontraditional route, a nontraditional path is likely broadly accessible to many. Addressing the following skills and attributes questions can help in deciding whether to pursue a nontraditional path:

- What content expertise do I possess or could I develop that would have value to customers?
- What strengths do I have in business management, time management, interpersonal skills, and customer-facing and support service management areas? What strengths do I bring to the personal characteristics of integrity, tenacity, self-awareness, empathy, and comfort with ambiguity? What gaps do I see and what development plan would be appropriate to provide the foundation of skills and personal characteristics I need?
- What skill areas could I enhance through partnering? What partnering opportunities would I consider?

Work/life purpose. Fundamental to successful engagement in a nontraditional career path is strong alignment with personal work/life purpose and support from those connected to us. Here are some questions to consider that can help in reflecting on this area:

- What are my aspirations and what do they mean for a nontraditional career path?

- What values do I hold dear and what do they mean for a nontraditional career path?
- How is my time spent today in areas of life that are significant to me and how would I like this to be in three to five years? What might this mean for a nontraditional career path?
- What priorities of family and those close to me, and others connected to me, would I include when evaluating a nontraditional career path? Whose support is important to me and what form of support do I anticipate needing? What might this mean for a nontraditional career path?

Components to include. A key area to address when considering whether to proceed on a nontraditional path is identifying what career components to include and how they might be differentiated for customers. Here are some questions to consider when making a decision about components to include in a nontraditional path and whether to proceed with that path:

- What excites me in my work and interests and what might this suggest for nontraditional career components I could develop?
- How might these components be valuable to others and what approaches could I use to create differentiation?
- How might I combine more than one component to create additional value?

Relationship strength. Relationships are a cornerstone of a nontraditional career. They include customer and client relationships that initially inform the path forward and then lead to project engagements. They can include partnering relationships that broaden the scope of activities or enhance skills. They can include supplier relationships that strengthen infrastructure or contribute to product or service offerings. They can also include mentoring relationships to assist in scoping opportunities, designing the launch process, and providing on-going support. Given the significance of relationships, the following questions are helpful when considering whether to take a nontraditional path:

- What relationships will I need in order to successfully launch a nontraditional career path in areas of interest to me?
- How strong are current relationships?
- How could I deepen those relationships and identify new connections?
- What insights can my current connections offer about my prospective nontraditional path?
- Who might provide mentoring support?

In exploring questions such as these in each of the four areas, we can incorporate our internal decision making preferences and our preferred external, ethical framework into decisions about whether and how to proceed with a nontraditional career path. We can adopt similar practices with other career related decisions. Our career path then becomes practical and inspiring, benefiting ourselves and our communities, and supporting our purpose and meaning. We move closer to these words from Irenaeus of Lyon “the glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

Parts of this article are drawn from *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption*, by Ron Elsdon (Praeger, 2014), *Business Behaving Well: Social*

Responsibility, from Learning to Doing, edited by Ron Elsdon (Potomac Books, Inc., 2013), and *Building Workforce Strength: Creating Value through Workforce and Career Development* edited by Ron Elsdon (Praeger, 2010).