

---

## Differentiation in a Nontraditional Career

It seemed like a daunting prospect. Respond to a request for a proposal to provide career services at multiple locations around the country for a large organization with many thousands of employees and the resources to purchase such services from any provider, including sophisticated, multinational corporations. How could we, small and emerging, possibly be considered for such a contract, given the likely competition? As it turned out, after a competitive evaluation process, we were awarded the contract. I am so thankful for this, and for being able to deliver services for many years. We were buoyed as a team by the knowledge that we were helping people make better lives each day. How did this fledgling operation of ours take on giants successfully? Why were we selected? We learned afterwards that our proposal best met our customer's service needs and was more cost effective. We were able to differentiate our offering.

Success in a nontraditional career is based on creating a differentiated approach with specialized, distinctive products or services. This is central both to an effective initial career launch and for ongoing sustainability. It is a major reason why a customer will make a purchase and it is the basis for a viable financial position. Moreover, sustainable differentiation means that a customer would incur significant switching costs moving away from your product or service. Differentiation is grounded in the concept of abundance, since a differentiated offering creates its own market space rather than operating in an arena of scarcity, where an increase in demand for one person's offering leads to a decrease in demand for others. This also reframes the concept of competition from a tug-of-war over finite opportunities to the creation of new opportunities. It doesn't mean that competing products or services are absent; it just means that offerings are distinct in customers' eyes. An understanding of competition is necessary to create and sustain differentiation. Competition can come from other organizations or individuals with similar offerings, it can come from customers considering backward integration, it can come from new developments that might render products or services obsolete, and it can come from new geographic regions with, for example, a lower cost structure.

Sometimes differentiation is subtle. An analogy is our perception and communication of our own skills. Sometimes individual clients I work with are unaware of their special and distinct capabilities, the uniqueness that they bring and that we all possess. This realization of distinctiveness can surface with a process of exploration and discussion. An analogy on an organizational level is organizational culture, which may seem easy to replicate but is actually difficult to copy. Southwest Airlines, for example, has a culture focused on integrity and on valuing employees and customers, built on many small reinforcing actions each day. Specialized and distinctive organizational presence is hard to duplicate, as are the subtle and special attributes we each bring to a nontraditional career.

When components in a nontraditional career are linked by a common thread, we can seek differentiation through this core connecting thread. In addition, differentiation is accessible through the specific attributes of individual career components. When there is little or no linkage among the career components, differentiation needs to be considered separately for each component, since each competes in a separate arena. Knowing that sources of differentiation may be addressed differently according to whether components in our nontraditional career are

linked or not, we can identify a number of potential sources. We examine the following ten sources of differentiation in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*:

- Distinct product or service offering
- Operational excellence
- Focused, passionate engagement and commitment
- Team capability
- Nature, depth, and longevity of customer relationships
- Ability to tailor to customer needs
- Flexibility
- Speed
- Cost
- Component linkages

How can we protect and sustain such differentiation? Let me suggest the following:

- Establish and integrate more than one source of differentiation.
  - The more sources of differentiation, and the more complex their interaction, the more difficult it will be for others to imitate. Combining distinctive product or service offerings with cost advantages, speed of response, and deep customer relationships will be stronger and longer lasting than any one of these separately.
- Emphasize continuous development and innovation as a means of revitalizing sources of differentiation.
  - Invest time and resources into continuously identifying new areas of client interest and into creating new content with offerings tailored accordingly.
- Use measurement to inform and refine service or product delivery.
  - Gather and aggregate regular feedback from clients receiving services or products about their experiences and their resulting actions. This provides ongoing learning and a basis for strengthening and refining service or product delivery.
- Emphasize frequent communication of value contribution to customers to underline the nature, extent, and attributes of differentiated products or services.
  - Create a reporting framework for customers that offers insights into the reception of delivered services or products and their value contribution.

Taking such steps helps ensure that differentiation isn't a fleeting concept, rather that it becomes embedded in a nontraditional career, constantly revitalizing both the career path and the client and customer relationships that help sustain its vitality.

Parts of this article are extracted from *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption*, by Ron Elsdon (Praeger, 2014).