
How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path

It looked cold out there. After all why wear face masks otherwise? This was our first taste of a Chicago winter, looking out of the plane window as it taxied across O'Hare airport. We had come from London one January day to live in Chicago. Airport staff were walking around outside the plane, wisely wearing face masks. Then several winters later, I found myself one night in Joliet, Illinois, not far from Chicago, seconded from working in research to the firm's chemical plant there. I was alternately in the sheltered control room and then outside climbing towering equipment for samples in searing cold with snow and ice glistening and wisps of steam wafting through starkly lit facilities. For me this was a brief encounter at the plant repeated sporadically over about a year and a half. For many working at the chemical plant, just as with the airport staff, this was permanent. In winter the job meant working outside in biting cold much of the time. It was hard, relentless work. It required resolute courage to get up each day and do it. Why do it? Well, at that time it offered reasonable compensation and some stability. It may have been the least, worst option. Is it possible to create other, better options? Our book *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption* explores what such options might look like and how to find them.

What does a nontraditional career path mean? Broadly it can be anything that does not just involve conventional employment with one organization. In conventional employment someone else frequently defines the responsibilities of the position and the longevity of the relationship. Our focus in the book, on the other hand, is on a nontraditional career path that is tailored to each person's individual needs and consists of more than one source of income.

The book is designed for those seeking to inspire their work life through an alternative to conventional employment. It can be helpful at any career stage, whether entry, mid-career or at a mature stage. It speaks to the aspirations of those entering the workforce wishing to take charge of their career path, the aspirations of those in mid-career or at later stages seeking work/life transformation, or those whose previous career paths have been disrupted by an external event such as job loss. We hope that our book will also be useful to institutions equipping people to enter or re-enter the workforce, such as college career centers, public sector agencies, and outplacement organizations. Furthermore, it will likely be valuable to professionals in the career field, such as career counselors, and can complement educational curricula in that discipline.

Our book is a guide to understanding what a nontraditional career path looks like and the benefits and challenges that it presents. We connect the approach with personal meaning and values, and examine strategic issues to help in assessing whether and how such a path might fit and unfold. Some strategic issues are content related, such as what career components should be included and to what extent should they be connected; some are timing related, for example what is an appropriate pace of entry. Other strategic issues are introspective such as understanding skills

and attributes needed for success, either developed individually or acquired through partnering. Some aspects that we explore are practical, nuts and bolts implementation issues such as what form of business structure to use at different stages of development, what forms of employment relationship to consider when engaging others, and how to handle infrastructure issues like accounting and payroll practices. We include key questions to consider at various stages when developing a nontraditional approach. In exploring this subject we seek to blend thoughts and feelings about personal purpose and meaning, with analysis of the world of business and organizations, and considerations of our contributions to a broader community.

The book is structured as follow:

- Part I builds a foundation for a nontraditional career, the what and why, the benefits and challenges, including examples of people describing their nontraditional careers.
- Part II addresses six key strategic issues
 - Whether or not to connect the components, finding differentiation, balancing the components, pace of entry, building needed skills, and partnering
- Part III examines practical steps, such as the nuts and bolts of creating an infrastructure, and the path forward, including key questions to address.

As a result of reading this book we hope that the reader will be able to:

- Describe what a nontraditional career with more than one source of income looks like
- Understand how such a career fits into a world of work where disruption is the norm
- Understand how such an approach can work well at different life stages
- Assess the benefits and drawbacks of a nontraditional career
- Learn how to craft a successful career in this form
- Know the key strategic factors to consider and how to address them
- Understand what the start-up process looks like and how to pace entry
- Know what skills are needed to be successful
- Create a fulfilling path forward

It has been a pleasure speaking about this topic to many groups in recent years. I am grateful to participants in these sessions. These participants provided continued affirmation through many examples, of how nontraditional careers are alive and well, and how they are meeting individual needs, sometimes in unexpected ways. These connections caused me to reflect again on the beauty, creativity and ingenuity that we bring to our work. The approaches in our book are offered as options to stimulate thinking about new possibilities. It is my hope that this will help readers discern if a nontraditional career path is the right path, and, if so, how to take that path.

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