
Skills for a Nontraditional Career Path

It was one of those cold, late winter days in Chicago in 1978. About twenty of us filed rather sheepishly into a hotel conference room. We were there for a three-day workshop on public speaking for engineers. A root canal paled in comparison to the prospect of this experience. My supervisor at the time encouraged me to go. He recognized the need, though probably not the extent of my fear about public speaking. That lack of confidence started many years earlier in elementary school in England and was reinforced by the English equivalent of high school. I had reached the erroneous conclusion by that winter day in Chicago that public speaking was a gift given to only a few at birth and the rest of us, particularly me, would never be able to do it. However, I was willing to give it one last, painful try. Three days later, after what was a transformative workshop experience, I was able, for the first time in my life, to approach the prospect of public speaking not with terror but with the knowledge that this was possible and might even be enjoyable. This transformation was no mean feat and a great credit to the workshop facilitator, Jeremiah Goldstein.

Since then I have given many presentations, and I may even have informed and moved some people in those audiences. Presentations have become energizing experiences for me, and while I am no Socrates reincarnated, it seems that these presentations have been enjoyable for most participants. This is good because public speaking has been an important part of my nontraditional career, whether in a workshop, classroom, or seminar, or during volunteer activities. It was central to launching and sustaining my nontraditional career path. And it is a good example of developing a skill needed for a nontraditional career that might have seemed out of reach but was actually close at hand. As described in our 3Q 2014 newsletter, by a nontraditional career we mean one that is tailored to our individual needs and that consists of more than one source of income.

In *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption* we examine the range of skills and personal characteristics needed for success in a nontraditional career. These skills and characteristics include a blend of content knowledge and consulting capability to deliver products or services meeting customer needs; sales, marketing, and business skills to reach prospective customers and ensure viability; personal attributes to relate well and communicate effectively with others; time management skills to balance service or operational needs with those of marketing and sales; and organizing skills to create infrastructure, such as information technology and human resource capabilities. In the book we explore the skills and characteristics needed and potential approaches to building them.

Skills and personal characteristics that form a strong foundation for a fulfilling nontraditional career path integrate elements of working well autonomously with organizational and small business leadership, because a nontraditional career includes all of these aspects. We distinguish broadly between skills, the things we do, and personal characteristics, who we are, recognizing that both are equally important and that they are intimately interwoven. Our values frame how we prioritize and approach skills and characteristics. Relevant skills are those things that we do well, that we like doing, and that make a difference in our work. Relevant characteristics are those attributes of who we are that infuse our work, bring meaning to it, and enable us to be most effective. Perhaps most important is acknowledging that we can develop both skills and

characteristics as we see fit according to the needs and direction of our nontraditional career path. Indeed, the brief discussion about learning public speaking skills, at the beginning, is an example of doing just that.

In *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* we examine individual skills and how to develop them in four broad categories: foundational, interpersonal, customer facing, and support service management.

- Foundational skills are fundamental to the creation and development of a nontraditional career. They include:
 - Content knowledge in a particular discipline or activity, business and financial acumen, and time management
- Interpersonal skills particularly relevant to a nontraditional career include:
 - Communication, negotiation, and networking and connecting
- Three important customer-facing skills are:
 - Marketing, consulting, and selling
- Skills in the area of support service management include:
 - Information technology, and human resources

With respect to personal characteristics, the following aspects are particularly significant:

- Integrity, tenacity, self-awareness, empathy, and comfort with ambiguity

We highlight identifying, for these skills and personal characteristics, those that are strengths, those that are development opportunities, and those where partnering may be appropriate. In some cases individual skills and personal characteristics may develop while in conventional employment as part of that employment or in parallel with it, through a combination of on-the-job experience and relevant learning activities. In other cases such development may be planned over time as part of a nontraditional career path. Addressing the following questions can help guide personal development for a nontraditional career path:

- What strengths do I bring to individual skills and personal characteristics? Which skills and characteristics would benefit from additional development and in what order of priority? Which skills might benefit from partnering?
- What development plan will provide the foundation of skills and personal characteristics that I need?

Developing such key skills and personal characteristics is an important part of the foundation for building a vibrant and sustainable nontraditional career path.

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