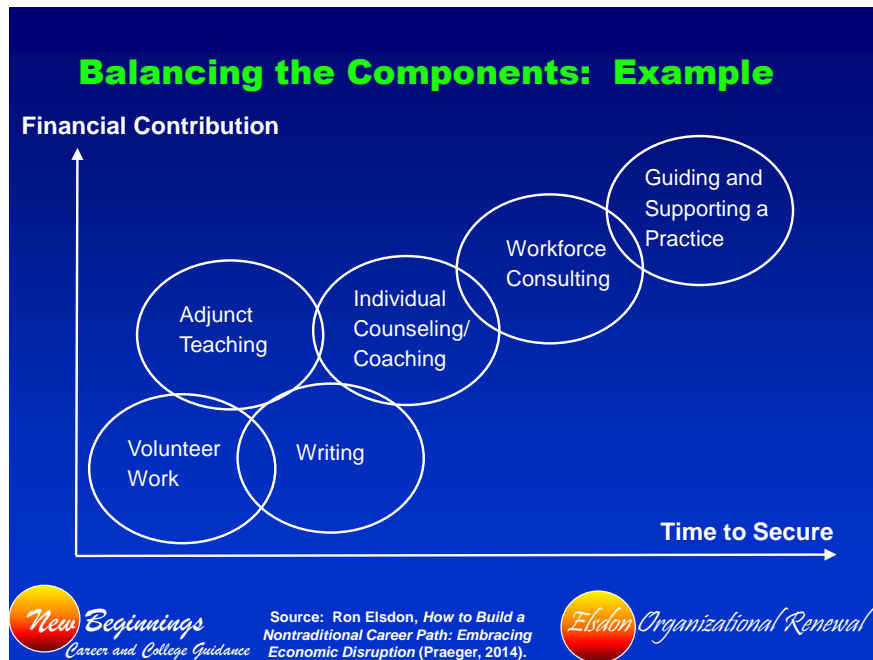

Sustaining a Nontraditional Career Path

Let us take two extreme cases of career components in a nontraditional career. (As pointed out in our last newsletter, by a nontraditional career we mean one that is tailored to our individual needs and contains more than one source of income.) In one case, each career component provides only a small income but starts quickly. In the other case, each component provides major income but takes a long time to launch. What are the implications of each case? In the first case, significant time is spent in marketing and sales to constantly replenish projects or engagements, and income is low. However, there is likely continuous activity with an income base that starts quickly. In the second case, time is spent in relationship building and creating a foundation for the major projects. Preparation takes many months or years during which time there is no income.

Each of these two cases presents major problems. The first case never reaches the required income level, and the second case has such a long gestation time that it never launches. So both cases fail. However, a combination of career components from each of these two cases can provide the firm foundation needed for success. This is balance and it creates a foundation of sustainability for a nontraditional career path.

A parallel situation is that of a portfolio of research projects in an organization. Here, similar issues surface: some projects offer rapid but low financial contribution with a relatively high likelihood of success while other projects offer a major financial contribution but with a lengthy research time and much uncertainty about ultimate success. Here, too, creating a balanced combination of both types of projects leads to a sustainable blend that is superior to either extreme. Another parallel is in the financial area, where a combination of investments that balance profitability and variability offers significant advantages for long-term performance.

What does balance look like in a nontraditional career? Let us consider it from the two dimensions we have introduced, financial contribution and time to secure, illustrating this with my own nontraditional career components as shown in the following figure:



There are six career components shown in the figure. Volunteer work shown in the lower left, made no direct financial contribution and started quickly. In addition to the value contributed to organizations by volunteering, it brings personal benefits of fulfillment, skill building and relationship building. Moving to the right along the time axis, we come next to adjunct teaching. It made some, though limited, financial contribution. This fit well as it was in a core area of interest and expertise and was an opportunity to contribute to students and the career development profession. It took a relatively short time to begin this work and was quite stable. On the time scale we come next to writing. In addition to being personally fulfilling writing also offered the opportunity to provide a forum for the voices of others through edited volumes and it helped build professional credibility. While those with celebrity or notoriety (or both) may generate substantial income from writing, it has been my experience that this contributes more intrinsically and to credibility rather than financially.

Moving further along the time scale, we come next to working with individuals through career counseling and coaching. As with the other components, this was meaningful and fulfilling work. It did make a financial contribution, though it would not have been sufficient to sustain us. The next item on the time line is workforce consulting. Here, credibility generated through the earlier writing component was helpful. For the first time this included engaging others on a contract basis. Projects in this component took longer to secure, now measured in months to years, but made a significantly greater financial contribution. It was also personally meaningful. At this point the nontraditional career was financially self-sustaining. The final component, guiding and supporting a practice, was also fulfilling. This entailed establishing a corporation and engaging a team of people employed by the organization. It was several years before the time was right for this. The financial contribution from this component was the largest and quite stable.

We can see how all of these components fit into a balanced whole that included smaller financial contributions secured more rapidly and larger financial contributions established over longer time periods. This portfolio proved to be enduring, sustainable, and fulfilling partly because of

the balance that is inherent in it. Its strength in terms of the framework in the figure is the broad distribution of components. They are not all collected together, so the overall launch time is acceptable and the overall financial contribution is strong. Another aspect that is inherent in the component map is the ending of activities that are part of these components. Endings can range from completion of a career counseling or coaching engagement with an individual, which has a relatively small effect on the overall profile, to completion of a large workforce consulting project or completion of a book. Such project completions have significant time and resource implications. They speak to the importance of continuing to revitalize career components by introducing new projects that are differentiated as described in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* and mentioned in our last newsletter.

In *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* we review dimensions of balance both practical and intrinsic. Practical aspects include financial contribution and time to secure that we have just mentioned, as well as resource commitments. Intrinsic aspects include skills, interests, and life and work integration considerations. In the book we explore how to implement concepts of balance including selecting career components using criteria such as a weighted index of well-being. We underline the importance of on-going assessment, and adjusting and refining the components to maintain the health and vitality of a nontraditional career path. We look at questions related to balance that can help in creating a nontraditional path that meets personal needs and honors the perspectives of significant others. Addressing balance in this way helps lay the foundation for sustaining a nontraditional career path that is fulfilling, and that continuously unfolds and develops.

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