
The Appeal of a Nontraditional Career Path

Many of us feel more comfortable and safe when driving a car rather than being a passenger. We know when we're driving that we have seen a car that may be coming up from behind, or we have seen children or animals playing at the side of a residential street and adjust our driving accordingly. We know that we'll brake when needed to slow for traffic lights or a stop sign ahead. Yet strangely when it comes to work we sometimes ascribe greater employment safety to being in a large organization where employment decisions are made by others, and not necessarily made in our best interests. This perspective is changing with the reality that one Standard and Poor's (S&P) 500 company in the United States is now being replaced about once every two weeks in the S&P 500 index, and the average tenure of an S&P 500 company in the index fell from 61 years in 1958 to 18 years in 2012. This is coupled with recognition that large corporations are oligarchies with power concentrated in the hands of a few. They are not democracies as Arie de Geus points out in *The Living Company*, "the governance structure gives ample opportunity to an almost medieval exercise of absolute power by management. It is no wonder that, under these conditions, companies can become like fiefdoms for the few, to be exploited like a machine." Not surprisingly we see people choosing to leave organizations as economic conditions improve. This push away from conventional employment is also encouraged by factors such as the following:

- Those at senior levels in large organizations receiving excessive compensation, for example CEO's of major corporations now earn several hundred times average worker pay
- High unemployment for those at early career stages, and challenges finding conventional employment for those at late career stages
- Reduced long term benefits in conventional employment, for example only 30% of U.S. Fortune 100 companies offered defined benefit pension plans to new salaried employees in mid-2012 down from 90% in 1998.

What alternatives are available other than conventional employment? One approach, which will be our focus in this article, and that has much appeal, is to create a nontraditional path from more than one component and more than one source of income. Charles Handy coined the term portfolio career for this in the late 1980s. This nontraditional path, which is tailored to individual needs offers much. Here's a quote from Rachel Nelken from an on-line source. She created a nontraditional career that includes working part-time as a relationship manager for an Arts Council, half a day each week leading a youth music program, working freelance for music funding organizations, and running action learning sessions, commenting "... it's not always a mellow existence. But it does make for an interesting one ... It has taken a while to feel like the sum of my working parts has made more than the whole ... relying on one organization to provide you with progression opportunities is unrealistic. You have to find your own instead ..."

The nontraditional approach has much to commend it, offering the following:

- Alignment with personal preferences, values, interests and skills
- Potentially lower risk and higher reward than conventional employment due to diversification and a focus on strengths

- The potential for career fulfillment and growth

Furthermore the emergence of readily accessible computing and communication tools is an advantage to small, nimble enterprises and individuals. Moreover implementation of the Affordable Care Act has removed the egregious U.S. insurance company practice of denying coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, and therefore made health insurance readily accessible for those in a nontraditional career.

It is not surprising to see studies showing satisfaction levels much higher for those taking a nontraditional career path than for those in conventional employment.

We can represent the comparison visually as follows:

Balance Favoring Nontraditional Career Path

- High satisfaction
- Growth
- Personal alignment

Nontraditional

Conventional

- Stagnant wages
- Growing pay inequity
- Reduced long term benefits
- Low levels of employee engagement

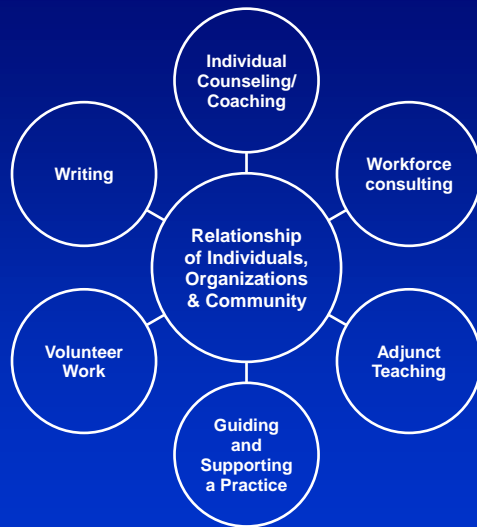
New Beginnings
Career and College Guidance

Source: Ron Elsdon, *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption* (Praeger, forthcoming 2014).

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What might a nontraditional career look like? Here is an example from my experience:

Example of a Nontraditional Career



Source: Ron Elsdon, *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption* (Praeger, forthcoming 2014).



There is a common connecting theme shown in the center circle as the relationship of individuals, organizations and community. There are a number of components shown in the surrounding circles. They include individual counseling/coaching shown at the top, and workforce consulting the circle at the upper right. Learning from this latter component transfers well into work with individuals and vice versa. The third item is adjunct teaching built on experience from the first two components and the fourth item, guiding and supporting a practice, is a natural outgrowth of workforce consulting. The next item volunteer work includes a number of activities over the years, while the final component is writing.

I remain mindful and appreciative of Annie Dillard's thoughtful perspective about writing, "When a struggling writer found unexpected success and wrote Dillard for advice, she got this reply: 'I have an urgent message for you. *Everyone* feels like a fraud ... Separate yourself from your work. A book you made isn't you any more than is a chair you made, or a soup. It's just something you made once. If you ever want to make another one, it, too, will be just another hat in the ring, another widow's mite, another broken offering which God has long understood is the best we humans can do – we're forgiven in advance.'" And perhaps those words apply to much of what we do, not just to writing.

This nontraditional career evolved over time as needs arose and according to my preferences. It has been fulfilling and sustainable due to the support of many people for which I am so grateful. These are some learnings I have taken away from the experience:

- Be clear about purpose
- Stay true to personal beliefs
- Expect unexpected supporters and barriers
- Be patient and start the different components when timing is right

- Develop needed skills before launching a nontraditional path and anticipate needing a broad range of skills
- Nurture relationships for they are the lifeblood of the enterprise
- Build knowledge and capabilities with commercial value that are portable
- Enjoy the journey - there's only one!

A nontraditional career path offers an opportunity to integrate the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and practical parts of who we are. It can be a journey with delightful surprises, with kindred fellow travelers, that brings personal fulfillment and community benefit. We explore this in depth, including strategic and practical aspects, in our forthcoming book *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption*. We will describe this in our next newsletter.

Parts of this article are extracted from *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption*, by Ron Elsdon currently scheduled to be published by Praeger in August 2014.