

# 1

## And so we begin ...

### **What do you want to be when you grow up?**

---

We love asking our kids this question. Yet really, how do we expect them to know the answer? In truth, lots of us are still trying to answer this question for ourselves, as big old adults! An estimated 70 per cent<sup>1</sup> are thinking about or are on the hunt for a new job, and 85 per cent<sup>2</sup> actively dislike the work they do. So, Houston, we definitely have a problem.

I first noticed that this was the case in 2000. I was a bit of a swot, so when I graduated, I returned to my school to let my headmistress know that I had accepted a job in the Civil Service Fast Stream graduate scheme. While she was pleased for me, she had a slightly perplexed look. When I asked her why, she shared that she thought I 'might have done something more creative'. I was gutted. If she had seen that creativity in me early on and thought that there was work that would suit my character, why had she not told me in the seven years I had spent at the school? Were there other choices that I could have made?

I had taken what I thought was the 'right and sensible' route and this is where I had ended up. Somewhere I had picked up that I could not allow work to be fun and adventurous and suit my character. I needed to do 'serious' work and have a 'proper' job, and so I made my way into government. Yet the truth was that as I left her office, I already had an inkling that even though my new role was impressive, it might not be the right fit for me.

As a social historian, I've always been very interested in why we all do what we do and how this is influenced by the beliefs, norms and needs of society, family and economy. It strikes me that there is no greater risk or opportunity than how we spend our time. Our lifetime. Psychology tells us that we want this time to matter and have meaning. We want to feel good about what we do. And successful at it. Yet we all define success in very different ways, so how do we measure these obscure ideas of success, fulfilment and meaning?

I began this work because I wanted an answer to this big question – for myself, as an individual who had struggled to make a good decision about her

---

1 <https://www.mhanational.org/sites/default/files/Mind%20the%20Workplace%20-%20MHA%20Workplace%20Health%20Survey%202017%20FINAL.PDF>

2 <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/171632/gallup-releases-new-insights-state-global-workplace.aspx>

career path – more of my story later – for others, so that they might thrash about for less time than I did, and lastly, for the client organizations that my company serves so that, in helping their people find direction and make good choices, they could compete for and keep the very best talent.

For the most part, this book is about using a practical model to bridge the careers gap. Somewhere between formal education and careers advice, there arose a gulf. Young people struggled to acquire the self-knowledge about who they were and what they were good at and apply this to the world of work. Even older people, who had more understanding of who they were and a wider base of experience of the world of work, often doubted whether they were in the right role, or compromised what they wanted in order to ‘make do’ and have a job of some kind. Too often, people fell into careers that were mismatched with their unique, personal design. This can occur because of peer pressure or expectation from our families to follow in the footsteps – ‘All us Smiths are doctors’. Or perhaps there is an expectation to do better than the previous generation and ‘professionalise’. Or even a lack of awareness of the roles that are out there that are a good fit with our character and interests.

There’s an underlying question here: whose job is it to help you find your right career? Is it your parents’? Teachers’? Manager’s or coach’s? The reality is that this work is often a little about retrofitting. We’re working with adults to address a gap that should be a continuous dialogue from childhood. And because we are working with organizations, we need to work within the structure – making internal coaches, external coaches that are subcontracted in and the manager population the go-to audience for this work. Whoever is tasked with the job, there is real value in a method to realign a person’s core skills and talents with the right role in the business, or even outside of it.

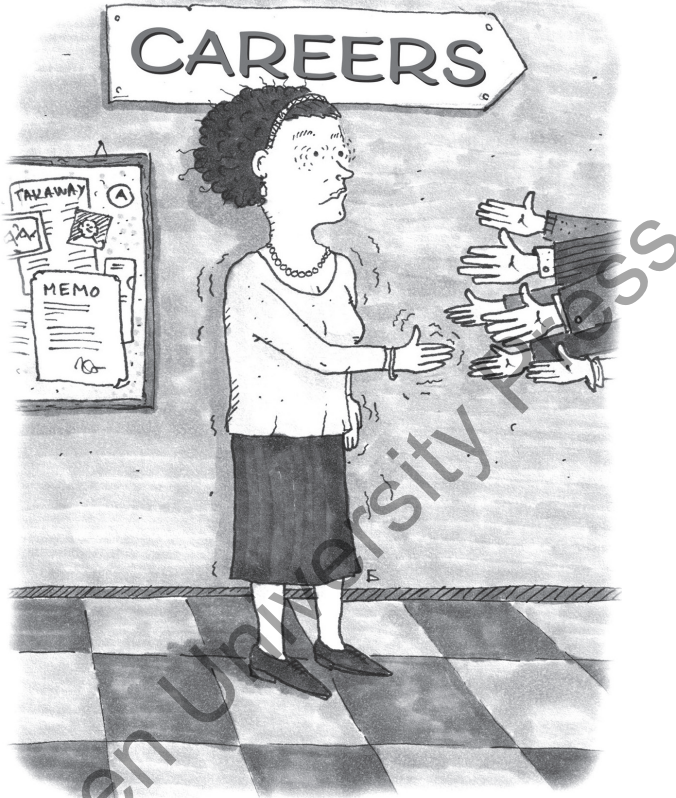
Misalignment between someone’s key gifts and the job at hand might, at best, mean they were distracted from giving their all to the job and, at worst, result in burnout, depression, frustration and truly dire performance. In short, a lose/lose for everyone.

Thus, over my working life, I’ve taken my investigations into what makes for a fulfilling career choice and made this my specialism, so that I might help other humans solve this problem.

This book offers a solution.

In my many years as a career coach, I began to notice that there were a huge number of worries, concerns and criteria impacting career decision making. It was almost as if people were overwhelmed by choices. This, combined with their emotional reaction to change, or burnout, or a career mismatch, made the conversation loaded and complex. I wanted to create a simple model to streamline this conversation and bring clarity to the issues at hand – a model that would work for any industry, stage of life, working pattern or level of seniority. To accomplish this, I started to focus on what the key ‘buckets’ of decision-making variables were. The patterns that I noticed were distilled into what is now known as the Career Equation®.

**Figure 1.1** Too many choices lead to paralysis



Too many choices lead to paralysis

Illustration by Bojan Spasic, bojanspasic.com

## Why this book matters to you

The thing is, we spend an awful lot of time at work. Up to 80,000 hours in fact.<sup>3</sup> And yet, at least here in the UK, we have very little in the form of a definitive approach to helping young people and adults find or rediscover their ideal career direction. Most of us fell into our careers rather than chose them. Too many choices can lead to paralysis. This rather haphazard approach to deciding how to spend these 80,000 hours tends to continue into adulthood. And even those adults

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/british-people-work-days-lifetime-overtime-quit-job-survey-study-a8556146.html>

who began with a career that excited them and suited them, may still find themselves at choice points in their lives where they want to step into something new and yet have no methodology to be able to confidently assess their options.

This is the gap I've made it my business to solve.

### Who is this book for?

---

This book is addressed to anyone working in an advisory role concerning the careers of others and who wants to improve their toolkit to do so. I've written it mostly with those working in an organization in mind: for those of you who are in-house talent, learning or performance professionals. Yet it will also be valuable to teachers, careers advisers, independent coaches and mentors who want to help their clients make the most of their careers and achieve maximum personal satisfaction from their work.

#### Thought experiment

Are you off on holiday this year? What kind of research have you done to prepare? How many conversations have there been about what you and your holiday partners want out of the break? Have you compared costs and shopped around for a deal? Perhaps you identified a shortlist of locations or places to stay based on a set of criteria that matter to you, if you are going solo, or to you and your travel companions. Now consider the amount of time you have put into planning your career. I'm willing to bet it's less time than you have spent on your two-week break in the South of France.

Interesting, right?

I called my company Career Matters because, well, it does! Career and the work we do is inextricably linked with our sense of self. A fulfilling career can give us fantastic learning, a great network, super opportunities to travel or try new things, financial stability and a strong identity. Conversely, the wrong role can cost us emotionally and physically, lead to burnout, lost productivity and poor health, and crush our self-esteem. Yet careers are loaded – we may be under pressure to fulfil our parents' hopes and dreams, or just overwhelmed by choice or under pressure to bring in the money, regardless of our fit, by going with the first role that is offered.

### The current context

---

The twenty-first century is the time of the fourth industrial revolution. This revolution is transforming the way we work, where we work, when we work

and whether we work at all! The first part of this book will set out the challenges of this evolving environment in more detail, but let's take a quick look at the headlines.

When individuals come to our programmes or 121 consultations, they present the following kinds of problems. See how many ring a bell for your talent.

- I sort of landed in this role and don't really know what suits me.
- I've outgrown this role but don't know who to talk to.
- The job sort of fits me but I wonder if I might prefer to do something completely different.
- I love this work. Is there room for me to grow and what is the next step?
- How do I choose the right role for me?
- If I don't want my boss's job, what else could I do?
- I've lost my career mojo but not sure why.
- I'm worried I have left it too late to do what I really love.
- My profession is undergoing major upheaval and I'm not sure I want to stay in it.
- I have so much more to give but have no idea who to talk to about it or how to say it.
- My job is no longer relevant/needed in existence.
- I've been pigeonholed and want to show others I have more to offer.

These seem like a diverse range of problems and questions. Yet the answer to all of them comes down to one simple thing. To make a confident choice about their next steps, the questioner needs to be able to articulate what matters most to them when it comes to their job.

We spend very little time explicitly exploring this. Yet we all want to talk to someone about our careers. And if your talent are not talking to you, then they are likely talking to head-hunters and the competition.

## Career conversations

'But hang on ... if we talk to them about their careers, won't we just be coaching them to leave?'

This is probably the most common objection we hear when introducing career conversations and the Career Equation® to a new client organization. I get it. It seems counter-intuitive to explore a person's next career move while they are comfortably delivering well in a role they may only recently have acquired. Why open Pandora's box and risk that you might talk them out of the company? Ok, it could lead to finding them new opportunities in the business, but what if that move takes them outside the firm?

Yet here is the thing. People want to talk about their careers. They want a sounding board. They need to have a sense of where their skills and interests

could take them and make informed decisions about their next steps. So, they will seek out someone to talk to.

Surely, it's better that the person they have that conversation with is you. If the appropriate talent managers are privy to their needs and concerns, you are more likely to be able to help them see that their future is with you. Might their horizons stretch further than your firm? Of course. Yet again, when we consider it rationally, isn't it better to know this in advance, to have been able to make handover plans and to have exhausted all the internal options together than to receive a surprise, last-minute resignation and then have to scramble to replace them?

Other worries that make managers and coaches reluctant to talk careers with their talent include being short of time, being afraid that they will have to say yes to any request made or not feeling confident they have the skills and the structure to have the right kind of conversation at the right time. This book will address all of these concerns and provide you with practical actions and agendas on which to hang a high-quality conversation.

### What's in it for my firm?

---

Most of our client organizations have some major pain points around careers. I'll be taking you to meet a number of key individuals and share how we used the Career Equation® to troubleshoot in their firms, so let's drop in and hear some of their concerns.

Companies present with the following issues:

Everyone knows our grad scheme is the best in class. It wins awards year after year. So, the competition wait till our graduates qualify and then they circle in and try to poach them. We'd like to get better at career conversations with this population so that they have a plan for a future with us and aren't tempted by an offer from one of our competitors that may be enticing in the short term but would actually take them away from the best brand in the business.

Director and Head of Learning and  
Development, international property company

We need our high potentials to feel in charge of their own destiny and be able to forge their own path. They need to own their careers and plan their next moves to get to senior leadership. Having a plan for their next strategic moves gives them a continued incentive to grow with us.

Krissie Haigh, global talent expert and  
business psychologist

We need our talent to specialise early. As we have grown through acquisition, they often feel like they haven't really got their heads round the brands and opportunities before they make this decision. Result? They leave to join another firm where the choices may be more narrowly defined. They are

simply overwhelmed by choice. We need to act as career coaches, helping them to define what they want and then as recruiters, finding the roles in the company that are a good match with what interests and motivates them.

HR POP and Grad Scheme Designer,  
Dassault Systèmes

We definitely want our managers to be discussing careers and future opportunities in our company. Yet they don't always feel comfortable to initiate the conversation.

Director of Talent Development, international  
technology company

It's too easy for us as a leadership team to make assumptions about what our talent want. We end up being more of a hindrance than a help by taking development decisions without direct input from them. This can also lead to claims of favouritism. We want to make decisions about who to offer our special projects to, based on their interests and desires. But how do we find these out?

Chief Financial Officer, financial company

People are very proud to work here and in the social mission more generally. As a consequence, people tend to have longer than average tenure and turnover is historically low. But growth and mobility – sideways and upwards – within the university has been limited at times by siloed and hierarchical constraints.

Our ambition – in parallel to streamlining our talent and resourcing practices – was to instil new confidence in our people, liberating them from some of their own limiting beliefs and building skills to help them take charge of their career. Ultimately, it's our belief that the only way we create the dynamic and inclusive culture required to support our students transform their own lives, is to make sure that our staff are empowered to realise their own potential.

Head of Talent and Development,  
The Open University

For real results, both the employer and employee, or coach and coachee, need to be having a discussion using the same model. We need to be sure that we are talking about the same things and understand one another fully.

If we don't unearth some of the assumptions we are making around careers, we can make mistakes. I believe that I have found a way to eliminate this, without us falling into some of the common pitfalls that make managers fearful of these kinds of conversations (more on this later).

In this book, I will provide you with a new understanding of what a career is, how we measure satisfaction in your career and how a simple word equation can be deployed to achieve a wide range of positive results.

I will give you the context on how and why this matters, and offer the business case both for the individual and for the organization to get good at having insightful, personalised career conversations. I will break down and share our potent process for career navigation, and together we will analyse how this model can be used to identify the core gifts and capabilities of your talent.



Through this process you will gain important insight into the drivers that really matter to your people and will be able to guide them to use this insight in a simple way to identify the right opportunities and career paths for them.

When you do this, you will not only enable them to do remarkable things. Both you and your organization will be recognised as exemplary developers of people, able to unlock performance, satisfaction and retention.

Used well, a career conversation can become a true lever for an intimate understanding of the person in front of you. It can transform the quality of your relationship. It can help them achieve real clarity about what they want out of their career and identify where they can do their best work. For organizations, this leads to phenomenal retention and engagement. For independent coaching professionals, it leads to a string of referrals and lots of fantastic case studies. Excited? Me too! Let's dive in. Let's start with the big picture as it stands in 2021?

© Open University Press