



EMPLOYMENT

Successful career has a plan and goals

By CAROLYN COHEN

There really are two basic approaches to managing a career. On the one end of the spectrum, there are those people who just let things happen; on the other end are those who carefully develop a career path, with steps and goals set out along the way.

The former path may seem easier, but it can make for a career that is less successful and, ultimately, less satisfying. At the end of the day, who is happier when other people make the choices that guide their life? Moreover, if a person isn't actively guiding their

own career, who is to say that their career path doesn't end up being influenced by other people, who don't necessarily know or care about that person's goals or best interests?

Planning a career path is not something that always comes easy or naturally. In the chartered accounting profession, for example, at the start of a career there is a tendency on the part of students to go with the flow. For the first two or three years of their career, a CA is not asked to make a lot of career choices or think too hard about what they want to do once they've achieved the designa-

tion. They've been told what courses to take, and that is followed by a set path of things that need to be done, including working for a certain type of organization to gain experience and taking a prescribed series of tests, culminating with the UFE.

The CA career path is a proven route to producing well-rounded professionals but, if a person is not careful, letting others make decisions can become a habit.

In public accounting, for example, there can be an unspoken assumption that, if a person just works hard enough, a partnership offer will come. In a good economy, that might happen without a lot of planning on the part of the CA. In a weaker economy, like the current one, there may actually be fewer promotions available, and that may not change when the economy turns around. People who work hard without planning out the steps needed to make partner may find they've lost out to others who had a clearer idea of what they wanted and how they were going to get it.

No matter where a person works, taking the lead in determining what's going to happen in their life means the chances of success and satisfaction are much greater. Being proactive helps a professional get the jobs they want, gain recognition and avoid being passed over.

Managing a career entails having goals. As with other careers, accounting professionals need to decide early on what they want to do and how to realistically go about accomplishing that.

It helps to sit down and analyze personal strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes. This process is not something done once at the beginning of a career by setting out a master plan. People don't think the same when they are 25 and 45. There are different stages throughout a person's life, where their needs and desires evolve in different directions.

The management process should be revisited periodically throughout a career because goals will almost certainly change over time, as will the profession and the economy.

A person who wants to look at their strengths and career goals should start that process alone. So many times people tell themselves they want something based on

As with other careers, accounting professionals need to decide early on what they want to do and how to realistically go about accomplishing that.

Carolyn Cohen, Just in Time Training and Consulting

what others expect, or as an attempt to make a positive impression on others. Career management requires honest evaluation and, at least at the initial stages, that's best done as a solo project.

Whether currently employed or unemployed, it's important to choose a job that meets the goals that have been identified, not just take one because it has been offered. Keeping in mind the adage of going 'from the frying pan to the fire' it's important to note that change for the sake of change can be self-defeating.

If a person is considering leaving a job, they should first ask themselves why. Was the position never a good fit or has something changed, either at work or personally? After doing something for awhile, people may find they don't love it anymore, or that the possibilities of personal growth or advancement are now absent or limited.

Those may be valid reasons for leaving but, before the exit is made, a careful evaluation should be done regarding whether the situation is salvageable, perhaps through a meeting with a manager, a request for new duties or a transfer within the current organization.

Finding a new job is not easy and there is no guarantee that it will be better than the current job. It helps to ask if the current job or organization will be able to provide interesting and rewarding work, not just now but, depending on the current career stage, for the next 10, 20 or even 30 years?

If the decision to make a change is justified, it's important to then nail down what that change should be. Resources are readily available for people researching new career paths, including numerous books and websites.

Sitting down and thinking about past jobs — the ones that were liked or disliked — and identifying what the differences were that made some experiences more valuable than others, can be a very important step. What are the things that make a person happy? Money, status, work-life balance and promotions are all factors, among many, that can affect an employee's happiness.

A good strategy is to make a list of what's really important, by order of priority, and evaluate what the current position provides, and what mix of priorities a new job

would have to provide to make it the right fit.

When contemplating a change, before even buffing up the resume or looking at ads, it helps to get out and talk to lots of people first. It doesn't necessarily have to be done in a way that makes it obvious that a change is coming, but it's important to gather information so an assessment of the new career path can be made on an informed basis.

Typically, a person leaves one job for another with the expectation that the new situation will be better than the current position. But is that always realistic? There is no way to know for sure, but the more information a person has when making the decision to move to a new position, the less likely they are to regret it later.

If it's possible, it's smart to talk to people in the various organizations or professions that are of interest. The job seeker should do some reading and see what the current and future prospects are with a particular organization or field. Only after a person has amassed information that provides a full picture of the up and down sides of making a career move should they actively begin looking for work in the chosen field.

Knowing what is required and limiting interviews to the types of organizations that can meet those needs usually means added enthusiasm during the application process, which is likely to help a person land that coveted position. On the other hand, taking a job and finding out it doesn't work for the new hire just wastes the time of everyone involved.

Managing a career is like managing anything else: without clear goals and a plan, it's impossible to plot a clear path or even properly measure success. An accountant would categorize a business without a business plan as unprofessional, poorly run and likely to fail. A financial professional without a career management plan is in exactly the same situation.

Carolyn Cohen, CA, CHRP runs a training and human resources consulting business Just in Time Training and Consulting, Inc. as well as teaching Managing Your Career (next session Dec. 15, 2009) for the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario. She can be reached at 416-256-2794 or at c.cohen@sympatico.ca.