

CAREER ADVICE YOU DIDN'T GET AT SCHOOL

JOHANNESBURG: After more than a decade of advising retired people on their investments I have always been surprised at how dissimilar the successful people are and how difficult it would have been to predict their success at the start of their careers. People who never finished school have retired comfortably at 55 after a great career while there are many retirees who would be expected to succeed (e.g. doctors or lawyers) but have retired relatively poor and dissatisfied. Given my constant exposure to retirees, I have been privileged to gain some insight into how people have achieved success over extended careers.

THE SECRET TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IS SIMPLY COMPLICATED

Here are some of the ingredients that contribute to a successful career. In this instance “career” really refers to your entire working life and includes business owners as well as employees. There is no particular order of importance to these ingredients nor will all these ingredients suit every person - you should look at this as a menu not a six point plan.

Specialisation

A notable characteristic of successful people is their ability to develop a craft of their own. Most people who have had a long and successful career have developed a certain set of skills and expertise that they honed over a lifetime. Very few generalists retire successfully. A good example is a middle manager in a large corporation – what is the manager’s craft? What skill set does this manager have that makes him or her valuable and unique? People working in large corporations often strive to move into management positions but is this a wise ambition? Whilst the fancy titles and potentially higher salaries may seem attractive, one needs to realise that a manager is essentially a generalist position. This makes it difficult to quantify how good you really are and it is difficult to really hone your craft when you don’t have one.

If you meet people who have worked as high-level managers a few years after the retire, one gets a sense of dissatisfaction with their careers and relief that they are no longer in the rat race. Many of them struggle to quantify what they actually accomplished after all those years of work and have no idea whether they really made a difference.

Perhaps it would be better to develop the necessary skills and experience in an area of specialisation that will make you valuable to employers or clients. An experienced engineer is generally more marketable than the general manager who manages firm. This is not always recognised by the salaries paid to these people but it is generally the managers that are fired first in mergers or during bad times. It is also important not to specialise too much because you can specialise yourself out of a career. Think of all those experts on VHS recorders – what are they doing now that DVD’s are the standard?

Be a revenue generator

In bad times, companies very rarely get rid of the people who actually bring in the revenue. As a revenue generator, you have a high degree of control over your own destiny. To a large extent your income will be determined by what you can produce for your employer. Revenue generators are usually in sales – not the career that most parents would wish for their children. Professions such as law and medicine are perceived to be more prestigious. Ironically, it is often the salespeople who have the better lifestyle because sales cannot be done 18 hours a day and good salespeople earn great incomes.

Leverage yourself – don't sell your time

There are many wealthy people who have made fortunes by selling their time. The most obvious examples are lawyers, advocates and accountants but these careers all share one drawback. In order to be successful they had to sell many, many hours in order to become wealthy. The extra hours they sold came at a high cost, because it meant that other parts of their lives suffered. They sacrificed family time, exercise, social activities and outside interests. By the time these people retire, they are socially isolated (often divorced) and suffering from poor health - this cannot be the epitome of a successful career!

If you can leverage your time, you have the ability to earn an income even when you are not working. This means you can cater for the other important aspects of life. Writers, musicians, actors, asset managers, software developers, financial planners and academics are examples of vocations that are not solely driven by selling time.

Don't work in a job that you hate

By definition, work is not meant to be 100% fun. If it was fun all the time it would not be called work. It is not feasible to have a career where you only do what you love. However, this does not mean that you should do something you hate. Many young people are advised by their parents to study accounts, law or medicine because these are perceived to be good careers. This may be good advice if the person concerned is interested in those fields. Sadly these professions are filled with people who were pushed into these careers at a young age and are desperately unhappy later in life. This is not a good ingredient for success. Whilst you don't have to love your work 100% of the time to be successful, you are unlikely to be good at it for many years if you loath it.

Don't only aim to get rich – strive for a bigger goal

When you think of many of the world's most successful people: Roger Federer, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, Richard Branson – none of them started out with the primary aim of becoming rich. They all wanted to achieve something special and their resultant wealth was a by-product of their success. History is not filled with financial giants whose sole aim was to be rich. Chasing money as a primary goal often makes you focus on the wrong objectives and leads to failure. Many of the big corporate frauds were a result of such short term thinking. These criminals did not start out to defraud people, they were simply looking for the quickest way to become rich and took too many short cuts. There is a reason why Warren Buffett is not linked to corporate scams – he has a broader objective than simply becoming rich.

Perseverance creates luck

It is noticeable that many successful people claim that luck had a role to play. This is certainly true but they had to keep working and practicing in order to benefit when their good fortune presented itself.

Conclusion

It is not possible to create a single road map for a successful career that everyone can use. Obviously your success will be a result of your own hard work but you can learn from others in order to make the right decisions. Hard work alone will not get you there. The key is to observe and question those who have a long track record of success to find out what worked for them. Don't rely on any single source you need to gather as much information as possible to figure out your own recipe. Don't be afraid to ask the right people for advice, very few people are reluctant to talk about themselves and their success.