The Pursuit of Early Career Success

Perla Villarreal
ThoughtWorks
pvillarr@thoughtworks.com

ABSTRACT
Can the pursuit of success become a stimulus for failure? As a student a likely first career goal is education, whether that may be self-learning, college, or a programming bootcamp. But what comes next? Join me in recovering that initial clarity and unraveling a method for tackling what comes post graduation. We’ll consider the power of an index card, explore the value of trade-offs and say no.

AUDIENCE
This talk is intended for students and early career professionals; no technical expertise is necessary.

INTRODUCTION
In considering acceptance to an educational program or institution as a first career goal, one’s dedication is typically blind, directed and distraction-free; every self-led project, extracurricular activity and late night studying provided a noteworthy skill to accent the application. Still, with the acceptance, the first career success, comes a range of new opportunities; opportunities that when taken blindly, detract from the needed dedication to the achieve the next career goal.

A Clear Intent
As graduation approaches, understanding the next career goal is not trivial. The journey to meaningful early career success requires a clear understanding of what the original intent is - what is the next career goal worth pursuing.

In order to begin piecing together what clear intent looks like we first need to understand what it’s not. “Changing the world,” “making an impact” are common threads tying those of us early in their careers and although genuine and heartfelt these goals do not demonstrate clear intent. How can one be expected to ever confidently cross off “Change the World” in our to-do list. As a part of the conversation, we’ll discuss what a concrete & inspirational intent looks like by introducing a matrix (the aforementioned goals falling within the quadrant of general & inspirational).

| “What do you ultimately want out of your career over the next five years?” |
Answering the question, even once we understand what the answer should look like, can be difficult. The journey begins with self-discovery - I’ll introduce the audience to a quick exercise on what my colleague Angela Ferguson has coined “Decision Drive Career Development.” Using an index card and maintaining daily discipline for a few weeks, the exercise will provide student’s enough data to build a small set of criteria that can be used to assess opportunities as they come up.

**Importance of Trade-offs**
As the next career goal, the what, begins to become more clear, an understanding of the how is the natural next step. In my experience as a consultant, one of the first exercises we walk our clients through is the understanding of trade-offs and prioritization. We speak of [1] quality, [2] scope, and [3] time and explain the need to pick two to prioritize. A promise for quality and completion of a defined scope may push the timeline further, quality and a defined timeline may mean the predisposed scope of the work may need to decrease, and furthermore if the project’s scope and timeline are not negotiable the quality of the work is likely to deter.

A trade-off by definition requires some opportunities to be turned down. However, a strong and determined acceptance to one opportunity may result in significant progress in the right direction. As a talking point, I’ll introduce the airline industry as a case study - Southwest Airlines’ business model evolved from the idea of being a “low-cost” airline. This entailed several trade-offs that at the time were unheard of in the airline industry - no meals, limited destinations, and no assigned seats. Today, Southwest Airlines continues to be profitable and is ranked among the largest domestic carriers in the US; a trade-off between [1] price and [2] available amenities.

**Learning How to Say “No”**
Continuing to consider the airline case study, Southwest Airlines chose to prioritize a low price over a range of amenities for their customers. In theory, what would happen if Southwest Airlines is provided the opportunity to fly across the Pacific Ocean - would they readjust their business plan or say no?

Learning how to say no is a skill that although not new to career planning, leadership and success, continues to be hard to master. Saying no means missing out on an opportunity, burning a bridge, disappointing someone or more so upsetting them. But, saying yes means taking an opportunity that will deter your attention from a more meaningful opportunity. The idea that we can accomplish it all and should accomplish it all leaves us moving in a multitude of directions at once, making minimal progress in each.

At this point I’ll introduce the audience with a variety of ways to approach the task (each approach will be labeled on index cards and we’ll discuss the concept in more detail as needed/requested by the group),
- “Let me check my calendar and get back to you”
- “Yes, what should I de-prioritize?”
- “I can’t, but X may be interested.”

**OUTCOMES/CONCLUSION**
The audience should walk away with a new perspective on career management and a series of tools for navigating early career success.

**Key Takeaways:**
1. Matrix for understanding the value of particular career goal statements
2. Exercise for identifying the skills and tasks that make us both happy & fruitful
3. Understanding of the importance of trade-offs & three core components worth considering
4. Methods for saying “no” eloquently
PARTICIPATION STATEMENT
I, Perla, commit to attending the conference if my presentation is accepted.

BIO
Perla is a Software Developer and Consultant within ThoughtWorks. She graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Computer Science & Engineering with a concentration in Psychology. As a first-generation Latina college graduate, her career path has taken shape from failing fast and finding mentors along the way. Although early in her career, she believes that mentorship and sharing of experiences is key in personal success and a conversation can go a long way.

REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY
Ferguson, Angela. Decision-Driven Career Development