

Career development is to answer “When I grow up, what will I be?”



“When I grow up, what will I be?” is one of few expressions that I remember from my middle school English class in South Korea.

In fourth grade, I once thought of becoming a bicycle racer. But from age four until middle school, I had a dream of becoming an Air Force four-star General. I dreamt of flying in the sky, protecting my country and people, serving as a leader, and being a highly competent man. Sadly, I had to give up my fantasy after I discovered that I have a red-green color weakness. I also realised I could not become a doctor, an architect or engineer. As alternatives, I considered and tested out becoming a producer, a business consultant, a CEO, a social activist, and an international salesman.

Now, 20 years later, I feel I’ve fulfilled my dream of becoming a General through my primary job as a university professor in Morocco, where I carry out roles including trainer, consultant, researcher, and writer. I often fly from one country to another contributing to the development of individuals, future leaders and communities.

I recognised that I could help individuals and organisations to develop and achieve their hopes and dreams about 14 years ago using my professional competencies. Since then, I have held about 12 different jobs—my career self-identity by definition—that tell who I am. These days, a job or an occupational title is too limited to describe what I am now; or what you will be “when you grow up”.

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U.S. baby boomers, who participated in a 31-year longitudinal study, were found to have held 11.2 jobs on average between aged 18 and 46¹. Considering our increased life expectancy² it is highly likely that we will have more than 20 jobs throughout our lifetime. In order to lead a fulfilling life, career needs to be a representation of, who you are, not just a series of job related experiences. The environment is changing at a dizzying pace which may mean we experience different jobs from both voluntary and involuntary shifts. Yes amongst the change, there is the unchanging core of one’s identity.

According to Douglas Hall³ there are two career meta-competencies required for managing one’s career in the work environment: *identity* and *adaptability*.

At an individual level, living in ever changing environments, we are blessed. Our highly boundary-less society allows us to try out different ventures and test-out what fits our ‘identity’. In order not to be dragged by the change however, but to enjoy the liberation, we need to take advantage of the opportunity by weaving ‘identity’ into our career. At the same time, we need to adapt to new environments without altering our core self-identity. It means effectively managing what we do in a meaningful way and Bandura’s⁴ human agency theory can help.

Typically, the career development process involves the following four elements that, with practice, strengthen career identity, regardless of how many job titles are held:

1. clearly define what your life purpose is, who you are, and what you value (self-reflection)
2. envision your future events and think about their consequences (forethought)
3. set goals and plans, and live with intentions (intentionality); and
4. implement, monitor, and adapt the goals and plans (self-reactiveness)⁵

HR professionals and policy makers can and must play an important role in facilitating the process of answering the question, “When people grow up, what will they be?”

By effectively matching organisational and individual needs, HR professionals engage employees in jobs that result in their high performance. But it also means organisations to adopt practices such as succession planning, career pathing, internal job postings, job rotation, mentoring, coaching, training and development, and individualised compensation and benefit packages.

Policy makers too, must find ways to better facilitate the process of matching citizen identities and opportunities. Some ideas include training for all who work in career activities, providing specific career development programs and supporting life transitions, and developing effective labour market information systems. Done well, we will have satisfied and determined individual identities, and a healthier society.

“When I grow up, what will I be?” is a question about one’s identity with multiple job experiences; we should not stop asking this throughout our lifetime because new opportunities may await.

We don’t need to fear change but rather, we must actively seek out ways to answer “When I grow up, what will I be?” regardless of age, and no matter whether you are an individual, HR practitioner, or a policy maker.

1 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012, July 25). Number of jobs held, labor market activity, and earnings growth among the youngest baby boomers: Results from a longitudinal study. [News release] Retrieved from www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012 January). Life Expectancy. Retrieved from www.abs.gov.au Cat: 4125

3 Hall, D. T. (1996). Protean careers of the 21st century. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 10(4), 8–16.

4 Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1

5 Yoon, H. J. & Hutchison, B. (2012, June). Fostering human agency: Working with students in South Korea. *Career Convergence*. Retrieved from http://associationdatabase.com/aws/NCDA/pt/sp/career_convergence