

# Why most lawyers think their careers to death

When you consider the time we all spend wondering about the ‘what ifs’ of our careers, what Edwin Trevor-Roberts has to say makes an alarming amount of sense.

**H**ave you ever wondered what you’re going to do when you grow up? I’ve been asked this question by people of all ages, and finding an answer has become increasingly difficult as changes in society and the legal profession have made the obvious markers of career progress less visible.

Career ladders, for instance, have fewer rungs than the days of old and there is increased competition at each level. This causes disillusionment, especially in young lawyers who were sold the “dream” of partnership all through their studies only to find that it takes longer to get there and the journey isn’t quite as enjoyable as they’d expected.

Here are three major issues that professionals have in constructing their career.

## Finding direction

Career planning is a misnomer. The vast majority of people don’t plan their careers and instead react to unexpected opportunities that come their way. The most successful professionals, however, take the time to identify their preferred career directions. These are the possible future states where you can see yourself. And you’ll have more than one.

Let me share David’s story. I met David at a seminar I was running for postgraduate students at the University of Queensland Faculty of Business, Economics and Law. I asked him what his preferred career directions were.

“First, I want to be a successful economist,” came the reply. A worthwhile goal, I thought, to excel in his chosen profession.

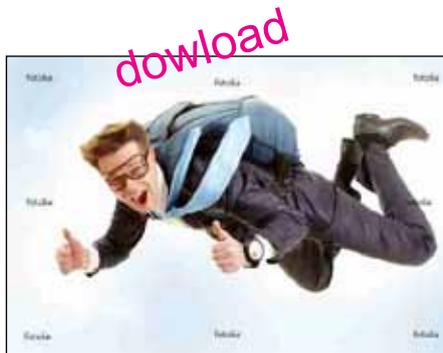
“Second, I want to be an expert in developmental economics,” David then said. A specialisation in developing economies, fair enough.

“Finally, I want to turn around a nation,” he concluded.

Wow.

“David”, I asked, “where are you from?”

“East Timor,” he replied. “We’re a mess. But look at Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia – they all turned around their nation in the space of one



generation. I believe we can do the same.” There is no doubt in my mind that David will make a significant contribution to his country. He doesn’t have an exact career plan of how he is going to do this, but identifying his three preferred career directions opens up a myriad of different paths. As he travels down these paths, opportunities will arise and he’ll be able to make clear decisions as to whether or not the opportunity will help him reach his future goals. I guarantee you that his path will not be straight. Or smooth. It will be a rocky, meandering path called life, but will always be heading in the right direction for him.

## Defining success

You cannot derive all your career satisfaction from one job. Society tells us that once we get admitted, or become a senior associate or partner, then we will feel successful. Most often, it’s an anti-climax. Positions, salary, status are objective measures of success and are important, but are only half the story.

Lasting career success comes from your sense of identity, the meaning you derive from work and the values you hold. This is called your subjective career. Success, then, is whatever you define it, but the problem is that most people don’t take the time to stop and clarify exactly what is important to them. Here are some questions to guide your thinking:

- Think about a day when you were “in the flow” and felt energised by what you were doing. What made this day so good compared to other days?
- If a good friend introduced you to someone at a BBQ, how would you like them to describe you?

- The Dalai Lama says “measure your success by what you had to give up in order to achieve it”. What would you not give up?

## Taking action

The single biggest issue I see in professional’s careers is that they think their career to death. In other words, they think about what they should do, who they should meet, what they should learn ... but never take action. You can cruise through your career with no conscious action and you’ll be okay. But if you want to be in the 90th percentile of success and enjoyment, then you have to take action.

By taking action I mean those little seemingly innocuous steps that add up over time. Make that call to setup a coffee with an informal mentor. Sign up for that course you’ve always wanted to do. Be courageous and have a conversation with your manager about a secondment overseas. Start organising your three-month sabbatical for next year.

Momentum begets momentum, so just start.

Ultimately your career is your responsibility. The best organisations I’ve seen provide a supportive environment and the framework within which individuals can take control of their career. Such environments are obvious, as you’ll see more committed, productive, and engaged employees.

Building a successful professional career can be complex and daunting, but the important thing is that you take control. Start by committing to one action this month, whether it be taking an hour out of your day to just stop and brainstorm the future or having a coffee with someone to talk. Be proactive and start. It is actually possible to really enjoy your work at every stage in your career.

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