



Developing A Flexible Career

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If you think of the word flexible, what kinds of images come to mind?

Perhaps you visualise rubber bands, yoga practitioners, or Gumby? How many of you would add careers to that list? Traditionally we’ve viewed our “career” as something that unfolds on a straightforward path. That view is changing. A recent article published in The Times (London) said in the near future, we will all enjoy two or three careers in one working life. We will have “zigzag careers.” The article went on to quote a research team from Girton College, Cambridge who predicted this would become the prevalent work pattern in the 21st century.

They say, “People will move in and out of shorter career cycles, using experience gained from work, life and continual study to leapfrog to the next opportunity. More of us will take advantage of improving health to work into our sixties and seventies. Longer work life cycles will give us the opportunity to rethink the way we work, and in principle mothers and fathers might work less while their children are young, and more when they are not. Time off for sabbaticals or personal interests will be more possible. Jobs for life will be the exception rather than the rule.”

For the expatriate partner, the future is now. More and more dual career couples are accepting overseas assignments with global organizations, the diplomatic service or the military. Often these people will relocate to not just one foreign destination, but several. That’s why it is important to develop one or

more flexible careers that can bend and change as you move. Being able to zig and zag gives a relocating partner the greatest opportunities for self-fulfilment and work- life balance.

How do you go about building a flexible career as well as a zigzag strategy? Before you can determine where you are going you must first know who you are. Take some time to explore and write down the answers to the following questions. What do I do best? What are the skills that I have learned and developed? What are my natural aptitudes? What do I like to do – my interests? What work functions have I enjoyed? Disliked? What activities am I drawn to outside of work? What are my personal characteristics?

Then based on that information, start to develop and clarify your goals. What career goals would you like to pursue? Do you want to make a career change? Is your objective realistic? Unrealistic expectations can be one of the greatest stumbling blocks. It is important to research the culture and the job market and talk to people already living and working in your new destination before you go.

Once you’re clear on your abilities and goals then you can put together your own strategy. It is always a good idea to create more than one option. Here is an example of a plan for three options to explore in your new country. The first option could be to carry on in your current field or something very similar. Are there any differences in qualification or certification requirements? If

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so, what kind of additional training would be available to bring you up to speed and how long would that take to complete? Do your current or past employers have any contacts or connections in your new post?

Your second option could then be looking for a way of conducting the same work you currently do long distance. This won't be possible for some types of work, but many jobs today can be done with the aid of technology – e-mail, fax, tele and video conferencing – from any location. Have you explored this possibility with the company you work for, others in the same field or other companies who might value your abilities along with the benefit of you being located in a different part of the world with access to local information?

Lastly you may consider creating a totally different career. Using the information you know about yourself, how can you flex your skills and experience into something completely different? Consider both the different possibilities of work that interest you as well as what is in demand in the local economy of where you will be living.

Other alternatives to filling in any gaps on your resume/CV include: continuing your education with an additional degree or by taking a specialist class, pursuing a hobby that may later evolve into a “business”, or becoming self employed. Volunteering is another possibility which allows you not only can to gain valuable experience and skills, but also once you are known

by the organisation, they may very well offer you a paid position too.

By approaching an international assignment with a specific plan focused on a variety of employment options it allows the partner a greater chance of success. “Flexibility is power” and flexing your career is a skill that can make your transition overseas easier.

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