
Beginnings

There was a time when joining a large organization meant a honeymoon period, followed by the organization working on you for the next 40 years so you would fit the corporate mold. There was one beginning and one ending. Today our work world is different with many beginnings and many endings, which may include short term projects, longer term contract engagements, and various employment relationships. Our work lives become a series of beginnings. What does it take to navigate such waters? Let me offer some suggestions:

- **Be clear about personal purpose and stay true to personal values.** As quoted in *Affiliation in the Workplace*, Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan describe our search for purpose, “the spirit within us, found in the core of our own Selves ... slowly and painfully weaves its way through anxiety, confusion, tension and conflict to hear the rhythm of our own personal tune made up of choices and values that are truly our own. This becomes our great contribution to the world.” This speaks to aligning who we are with what we do. Finding that sweet spot at the intersection of our passions/interests, skills, and external needs. It means understanding our values and how they are expressed in our work. For example, with inclusion as a core value, it could mean joining or creating organizations that embrace differences. With ethical practice as a core value, it could mean delivering counseling services only to organizations that honor maintaining client confidentiality.
- **Embrace both planning and serendipity.** “Awaken the music sleeping on the strings,” these words from the Roman poet Horace, quoted in *Affiliation in the Workplace*, capture the essence of expressing who we are. It is important to embrace both the composition we create for our work lives and serendipitous events. For example, this may mean completing educational programs, such as a degree or a certification, while also being open to new opportunities that may unexpectedly surface from colleagues in those programs. This is one way of creating the fertile soil that supports our development and growth. It is one way of building valued portable knowledge and skills that may include diagnostic, practical, analytical, strategic, and interpersonal skills.
- **Expect unexpected supporters and barriers, and nurture relationships.** There will be many who are supportive along the way and some who erect barriers. Thank those who are supportive and forgive those who aren’t. Relationships are the lifeblood of an enterprise if it is part of a nontraditional, entrepreneurial career path, and important for success in a traditional, large organizational setting. It has been a pleasure for me recalling kindnesses from many people in the acknowledgements section of books I have written or edited. Those kindnesses were instrumental in each of my beginnings and inspired me to give back to others on their journeys.
- **Do good.** *Business Behaving Well* outlines why it is important to recognize that business is in service to our society, not the other way round; to recognize that social responsibility is central to the purpose of business; and to recognize that our economic system is sustainable only when it creates better lives for all of us. From the 1930s with President Roosevelt’s administration, through the 1970s, we established a legacy of broad-based prosperity for future generations from which many of us benefitted. How different this has looked since the 1980s. The earlier foundation is being dismantled, threatening the

economic and social fabric of our society. During the past recession, our economy almost collapsed in part because of rising inequality and a move to take from the many, including future generations, to benefit a few wealthy individuals. Unfortunately, we now have an administration that will make this worse. Particularly in these challenging times, our personal path needs to include social responsibility as a central component. This may include volunteering, it will include honoring business practices that support those around us. For example, this has meant supporting employment continuity for team members to move from my organization into customer organizations as projects shifted from contract delivery to in-house delivery.

- **Persevere, welcoming change and transition.** As observed in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*, in entrepreneurial endeavors, while projects sometimes materialize quickly and the path from initial proposal to implementation is measured in days or weeks, those projects with broad ramifications and significant scope can take much longer to materialize. During that time there may be periods of quiet and other periods of active discussion. There may also be a time of heightened activity when rapid response is critical to meet a timing deadline that surfaces. Holding fast through this process, staying tenacious, is essential. Rarely will a customer's time frame follow a predictable path, patience and perseverance are needed to stay the course. A benefit of extended project preparation time is the opportunity this affords for strengthening and further building relationships. It also provides time to refine and develop a project approach, and to gain support from others. In a conventional, large organization, guiding organizational change based on flexibility and openness is frequently necessary to anticipate and respond to an ever-changing external world. Guiding change and transition requires sensitivity and skill as described in *Building Workforce Strength*.
- **Enjoy the journey.** There is only one!

These suggestions support a series of beginnings in our work lives that unfold from daily small decisions shaping the form of our path, and less frequent major decisions shaping its course. Through many such beginnings, we honor the idea expressed in Rumi's wise words, "Let the beauty we love be what we do."

Parts of this article are extracted from, or based on concepts from: *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* (Praeger, 2014), *Business Behaving Well* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2013), *Building Workforce Strength* (Praeger, 2010), and *Affiliation in the Workplace* (Praeger, 2003).