

# Planning and Managing Your Career

By Jerry Kanter

Three recent articles concerning career path changes of senior executives caught my attention. The Wall Street Journal wrote of one of the highest ranking women in corporate America, a PepsiCo veteran of 22 years. She openly stated that she wanted to spend more time with her husband and children, ages seven, eight and ten. The Pepsi management tried to talk her into staying, but she pointed to years of hectic travel, dinner meetings, and living in different cities from her husband. It was time to go home.

Another Wall Street Journal story is that of the CEO of USG Corporation, a \$2.5 billion building products maker, who lost his wife to cancer. Countering the accepted work ethic of keeping your personal affairs to one's self and to grieve alone, this executive talked and discussed his grief openly to business associates. He halved his travel and cut his office hours to spend time with his daughters aged two, eleven and thirteen. He spent evenings reading and talking with his children. Today some two years after his wife's death, he still maintains his openness and his reduced schedule to preserve time for his family which has grown stronger during this period.

The Harvard Business School Bulletin related how, three years ago, a prominent business executive was named president of Xerox engineering systems. But the death of her mother and close friend and the serious illness of her father and husband caused her to seek a scaled down position at Xerox. She states that she misses the people and pace of her old job, but appreciates the opportunity to think and spend more time with her family which is the pride of her life. She still ponders her future, satisfied she made the right decision now, not dwelling on the past but thinking that there may be another career ahead.

These experiences caused me to do some thinking about careers in general and to look back at my career, analyzing what I think I did right and what I know I was wrong about. Now in the education field I am asked for advice by a good number of students either just beginning their careers or in the early stages.

In reviewing one's own career, I run the risk of getting too personal and self centered, but I figure I'm allowed at least one shot at the soft side after devoting all my published thoughts to the hard side. In so doing, I recall the feeling of the Australians who associate many Americans with what they term "the tall poppy syndrome." They point out that when introduced to an American, the American gets quite personal about his or her life, with subtlety or not, in the latter mode expounding on their background and accomplishments whether they are asked or not. The Australian then tries to cut down the tall poppy, bring him or her back to the world of living mortals. I realize this is a lead-in to a bit of personal "tall poppying," but I hope the picture provides a balanced view.

## Personal Reflections on a Business Career: Elements of Chance

It is interesting to reflect on one's career looking at the factors that influenced the path one followed. In my case it was not a well planned course. In fact there was a great deal of chance involved. Upon graduating from Harvard College, I applied only to two schools, the Harvard Business School and to my home town law school, the University of Cincinnati. I was accepted to the latter but placed on the waiting list at Harvard. This was the time of the Korean draft, and to be exempted one had to pass a national test and be accepted and enroll at a graduate school. Because I was on the waiting list I was told to leave a postcard provided by the draft board when I went home for the summer so the school could

notify the Board. In my case I wasn't accepted, but the Harvard Business School made a mistake and notified the Draft board that I was. They didn't realize this until a month or so later and wired me that I would be admitted because of their mistake. So instead of becoming a lawyer, I took the first step to a business career.

The next element of chance took place after I had graduated from the Harvard Business School and was ready to leave the Navy where I had spent three years as a Supply Corps Officer. I was interested at the time in a career in Education Administration and had applied to Brandeis where they had advertised an interesting opening. The only other position I had applied for was an accounting job with the large grocery chain, the Kroger Company, in Cincinnati. The influence of my roots shows up again. I had been interviewed by Brandeis, but they didn't get back to me until the week I was to leave the Navy. By that time I had accepted the Kroger job and didn't think it proper to change my mind. So career chance two; instead of education I entered the accounting field.

Working up the ranks I learned how to balance books and became the Chief Accountant at Kroger's processed foods division. Then an opening as bakery controller arose and I competed with another accountant for the job managing the finances of 14 bakeries across the country. They couldn't make up their mind internally and had an organizational consultant interview both candidates in depth. I really wasn't that interested in an accounting career but I guess the competitive spirit kept me going. At any rate I wasn't selected but did get the next opportunity which was to lead a feasibility study for installing a company-wide computer system; career chance number three. This is what led to my ultimate career in information systems, Kroger for five years, and Honeywell Information Systems for 25 years.

Many years later, I was on a plane with a good friend and business colleague who told me he was just offered a job of heading up a new Information Technology research center at Babson College. He had been most interested, but they delayed the decision for a year and in that time he had started a successful consulting practice in Information Systems. I listened and concluded that this position was made for me. It was just what I was looking for. The Honeywell Computer Division had merged first with the General Electric Computer Group and then with the French company, Bull. I could see a long transition struggle and was thinking it was time to start looking. The discussion on the plane was career chance number four and put me in an educational job that probably should have been job one.

### **Selecting a Career: Employing Critical Success Factors**

I would plan a career a bit differently than I did, and would advise others as well based on the above experience. Chance is a factor, but I think it advisable to employ more positive means to achieve a satisfying career. Also, career planning includes much more than the business dimension. The three vignettes that opened this report dearly bring this out.

The foundation of career planning is of course to know yourself. Know whether you tend to be left brained, the logical arithmetic type who likes formal structured activities, or the right brained who are more intuitive and rely more on the feel and overall sense of a situation. This all has a good deal to do with the type of company or organization you will be more comfortable with. Early on, I knew I was not suited for a hierarchical command and control type of environment. I didn't like someone looking over my shoulder, but would rather work by myself or in a small group to accomplish the task at hand. One must know when it is possible to adapt your personality to the situation or when to conclude that there is just too much to change and it is time to seek other opportunities in a different culture.

One of my business positions during my career was to head up a special business/product strategy team to develop a future company vision and strategy and the products and services that would enable the company to accomplish that vision. This gave me the opportunity to explore many different planning techniques and frameworks. One such framework I liked mainly because of its simplicity was the concept of Critical Success Factors (CSFs). I also came to the

revelation that we apply all kinds of planning methodologies to our company, but do very little in systematically reviewing our own career.

I think the concept of critical success factors can be effective in looking at one's career. CSFs are a straightforward way to state the overall objectives of a company or institution. In other words, a way to define success and to then determine the four to six activities that are crucial to achieving those objectives. There are many more sophisticated methods, but when you study the approach it usually can fit in the CSF model. The key to CSFs is not to draft a list of 25 to 30 factors, but to really think it through and derive the ultimate four to six; amazingly, that is usually what it boils down to. We use the concept for a business, but not for one's self. As that individual, I think we would feel as important as the company for whom we work.

My belief which I have followed is that CSFs can be used to map out one's career and to serve as a barometer to see periodically if one is going in the right direction. After allowing chance to be my guiding principle for a number of years, I now employ and have for some 15 years the CSF principle. I have my list and review it periodically to assess how I am doing and to see if any changes should be made. My CSFs were on my mind that day on the plane when the Babson opportunity was mentioned. To that point, I considered myself a "closet academic", as I had taught evening courses at local universities for some 10 years, and had written articles and six books on Information Technology.

Babson's President Bill Glavin expressed his management philosophy in seven principles he used as a base point in his career. I was fortunate to hear him relate this philosophy to a management group. One of his principles ties into the CSF concept and that is to "step back and watch yourself go by." Do you like what you see? Using the CSF approach fits in nicely with the Glavin concept. First, establish your personal CSFs and then periodically watch yourself go by, assess how you are doing, and make the necessary changes to your actions or to your CSFs. And don't wait until the latter part of your career to do it as in my case. Do it up front, and then watch yourself go by.

### **Developing Your Critical Success Factors**

One should start by knowing one's self. Assess your personality, what you're comfortable with and not comfortable with, what you're good at, your individual values, and personal likes and dislikes. Understand what elements in these traits you can overcome, which are deeply embedded in your temperament, and which are almost impossible to change.

The first step is to explore in depth what constitutes success. The elements that must be considered in addition to business success and money are family, society, community, friends and just plain having fun. Then, focus on the elements under each major heading, listing those elements that are crucial to attaining success.

The poet, Robert Frost, said in one of his poems that to join vocation with avocation is one of the most satisfying things in life. In the terms used here, I would say that is the ultimate in CSFs. One has to have a job where there is an income flow, but often that gets in the way of focusing on your other CSFs. If the drive is so strong, one can sacrifice the financial needs and, for example, take a job in a non-profit organization. I think my CSFs were satisfied when I finally took a job running an Information Research organization within a college. It is a position where personal contact and helping others have high priorities. My only concern may be that I didn't do it sooner. Maybe it's because I made my CSF list too late. At least it's something to think about.

[View Jerry's Personal Critical Success Factors Here](#)

In my case, I placed a good deal of weight on factors outside the job. I didn't aspire to be the President or CEO of an organization. While I didn't consider myself lazy, I was not going to work 12 hour days or weekends, but rather wanted a change in routine and to spend time with family and do things in the community. Consulting or a job that would require excessive travel would not fit with my CSFs. Also, achieving substantial wealth was not high on my list, and tradeoffs would favor the nature of the job and its personal fulfillment rather than a heavy emphasis on current and future salary.

I credit my CSFs with the position I finally took in the education world. My CSF list was made at a time when my company was going through its second major merger, this time with an international company. I heard the classical opening statement at merger time—business will go on as usual and there will be no personal changes or downsizing. My experience was that after “the urge to merge” comes “the urge to purge.” I think it was because of my recent review of my CSFs, that I needed a change and the education community would be a good avenue for me if I could find the opportunity. The chance meeting and discussion referred to earlier on the airplane of the Research Center job at Babson fit in with my thinking and plans. I was able to act quickly and take a job that has been a great opportunity, and continues to fit my stated Critical Success Factors.

### **Why CSFs are More Important than Ever**

It is obvious that the business environment and culture have changed. Twenty years ago a business career consisted of working for two or three companies. In many cases an individual worked his or her entire business career with a single institution. That has changed. Today, it is common to work for 6 or 8 companies in the first 15 years of your career. There is no such thing as company loyalty. The alliance, merger, acquisition mode is commonplace and with it has come cut backs, lay-offs and downsizing. There is limited career planning or assistance on the part of employers. An individual is literally on his or her own to participate in training and management development. The phrase is no longer “employment”, it is “employability”. Workers are taking a more selfish outlook because their employer doesn't seem interested.

In this kind of environment, career planning on the part of the individual becomes all the more important. The concept of Critical Success Factors is a powerful way to stay in touch with yourself and provides a useful framework for keeping what's important in mind rather than being swept along by external business conditions. The Bill Glavin philosophy of “stepping back and watching yourself go by” takes on new meaning and the use of individual CSFs can materially aid the process.