

ROWAN MANAHAN



Free!

THE FUNDAMENTALS
OF STRATEGIC
CAREER MANAGEMENT

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Ignite Your Career:
The Fundamentals of
Strategic Career Management

Rowan Manahan

Career Management Basics

What is all the fuss about this concept of managing your career? Well, most of the work that I do is based around three pieces of ancient, pretty much clichéd, wisdom:

#1: Don't put all your eggs in one basket

This is good advice – really good advice – but unfortunately it's advice that very few of us can obey. Unless you have a fat trust fund, or you're poised to inherit the family castle, it is likely that you have only one source of income: your career. Therefore, like it or not, all of your eggs are in that career basket.

I spend my working life helping people to steer their way through their working lives, and to protect and enhance their career 'basket.' Which brings me to the second piece of ancient wisdom:

#2: It's not that people are against you, it's that they are for themselves

For the most part, my clients are not finding their working lives difficult because of malign, deliberate, targeted efforts by their bosses or colleagues; mostly it's because of indifference or selfishness. People are far too busy worrying about *their* careers to pay any real attention to *yours*. So start with the assumption that no-one else is going to look out for your job, do you a spontaneous favour, or think about the consequences of their actions upon your career. No-one.

#3: Chance favours the prepared mind

When you understand those first two things, and build your approach to your working life on that basis, you're pretty hard to beat. Now, let's minimise chance - think of top-class athletes. They have their innate talent for the game, combined with an ongoing level of training, honing and polishing of their skills. They equip themselves with the best tools and trainers and they live, sleep, eat and breathe their sport. On top of being game-ready pretty much all the time, they exert control in every aspect of the competition that they can – their diet, their sleep patterns, their overall health, their travel arrangements, their clothing, their level of distraction. In short they leave as little as they can to chance.

“Chance favours the prepared mind.” Louis Pasteur

By contrast, most people muddle along on a day-to-day basis in their careers, reacting to whatever is occurring around them. You expect a top-class sportsman to perform well and to win more often than they lose, because you know that they have assiduously thought and trained and prepared so they can achieve exactly that outcome.

So why would you trust to luck in your career? All of your eggs are in that basket ...

One, Three, Seven

If all your eggs are in one basket and you can't get ahead in your career by operating in a vacuum, then you need to do some simple things to optimise your chances for survival and success. I boil the various elements of career management down to:

- The **one resource** you can never have enough of,
- **Three strands** that are key to success, and
- The **seven behaviours** that really matter in your career.

One Resource

The resource is time, pure and simple. Logic tells us that a black belt, who has consistently trained four days a week for a decade, is going to prevail when he comes up against a belligerent amateur. Sure, the amateur could get in a lucky blow, but I'm certainly not going to bet the farm on that.

You have all your eggs in one basket. Spend time on protecting and securing those eggs. Time, unfortunately, is the one resource that all of us find hard to liberate. I have weeks where I feel like a stranger in my own house. A few hurried words with the kids in the morning, maybe a text message here and there as the day wears on. Passing my wife on the stairs with a brief hello and a kiss – we all have those days. The trick is to make time for the stuff that matters and your *career matters*.

“You will never find time for anything. If you want time, you must make it.” Charles Buxton

So start blocking out time in your diary for the activities we're going to talk about below. Here's why: Imagine a major opportunity comes up – it could be a promotion in your current company, or a great job in a company you've always wanted to work for. You scramble to get your CV in shape, do some digging and research on the factors that matter in the new role, think quite a bit in advance of the interview and, deep breath, step into the boardroom for the interview of your life. Let's say that you've managed to find 30 hours in total to get you ready for this once-in-a-lifetime moment.

Now, here's the bad news. On the shortlist, there are two other candidates. One has spent a bit longer preparing than you, say 45 hours. The other has been waiting for this opportunity to arise for the past 18 months and she has accumulated over 120 hours of focused prep for this moment. Now, that person might not 'click' with the interviewers, or she might overplay her hand

and come across as a creepy stalker-type, or be too robotic in her responses in the interview. But overall, who would you bet on?

Three Key Strands

1. A Plan

Jim Rohn, the great business thinker and philosopher, put it perfectly when he said:

“If you don't design your own life plan, chances are you'll fall into someone else's plan. And guess what they have planned for you?”

It's not that they are against you, it's just that they are for themselves. And this results in you having to accept jobs that don't excite you, projects that suit someone else's agenda, and responsibilities that you don't want.

None of these unfortunate outcomes are likely to occur if you are working to a plan. It doesn't have to be carved in stone, but you *need* to have a plan for your working life. People shy away from the concept of having a plan because (a) it's more work and to draw one up and (b) they feel that the world is so topsy-turvy that there's no point in having one.

Bullshit.

The most consistent answers that we hear from successful people about their success are “hard work” and that they were *working to a plan*. Get one.

2. Market Intelligence

You need to be a meerkat with your head up all the time, knowing what is going on. That's important externally, if you are considering moving job or sector; and it is vital internally, where you can glean who's star is rising, what constitutes a win for your boss (and your boss' boss!), what the organisation considers to be an unacceptable risk, or a failure. You need to know what is going on. Really know. Why?

Because the world is not a meritocracy.

People use sports analogies all the time when they are talking about the world of work – I do it myself on occasion. But sporting endeavours are not like working endeavours, because in sports, there's a scoreboard, and a simple way of keeping score and we all know who the winner is. It probably worked like this back in the caves, when we all deferred to Thag because he was the mightiest hunter and everyone knew it. But somewhere along the way, other factors have sidled

into place alongside simple ability. Relationship-building. Alliances. Diplomacy. Politicking. Brown-nosing. Call it what you like, but unless you are truly operating in some kind of vacuum, your success is going to be based, at least in part, on what other people think of you and whether it is in their interest to help you.

Nowadays in the vast majority of cases, being good at what you do, keeping your nose clean, and expecting your star to rise on that basis, is a fool's errand. Once again, it's not that people are against you, it's that they are for themselves ... (Although, in the case of career advancement, it's fair to say that there are *lots* of people against you. People who will subtly undermine your efforts, or denigrate your contributions, so that *their* star can rise.)

You need to know what is going on in your department, your company, your sector and in the wider economy. That way, you can make *informed moves* – join a rising company, leave a sinking one before its decline becomes obvious to others, ally yourself with the right people, position yourself for the next promotion, or avoid stepping on a political landmine in your next presentation.

"Genius is nothing but continued attention." Claude Adrien Helvetius

So start building your awareness and knowledge. If you do this well, it will make networking much easier for you, because you will be seen as both smart and well-informed. Who wouldn't want to be around someone like that? Who wouldn't want to exchange ideas with someone like that? Who wouldn't want to *help* someone like that?

3. A Buzzing Network

Ten years ago, when the earth cooled and dinosaurs roamed freely on this planet, you could find a job (a) privately and (b) passively. You would register with a few recruitment agencies, browse a few job sites and wait for your newspaper or trade magazine of choice to pop through the letterbox, chock-full of job adverts.

Now? Welcome to iceberg-country, where only a tiny proportion of all of the movement in the jobs market is happening above the waterline. That means you can't rely on the old passive/private approach to the market any more. You will need to build a wide-reaching, network that shares information, ideas and leads with you; and your relationship with this network needs to be symbiotic, not parasitic.

You will change companies voluntarily a number of times in your career and, like as not, involuntarily a few times too. For some time now, the knee-jerk reflex to reassure shareholders in the market has been to downsize staff – you simply cannot bank on avoiding this for your entire

career. It's probable that you may also need to shift career path along the way.

In the context of all of this all of this movement and uncertainty, a humming network is going to be an essential foundation to managing your career. There's lots of discussion about networking on my blog and it's always the topic that generates the most questions in my workshops and lectures. Think of this as preventative maintenance for your career. No-one enjoys doing maintenance and until you have a catastrophic equipment failure, most people don't see the value in it. Catastrophic equipment failure – now there's an ugly phrase. Let's make sure it's a phrase that never gets applied to your career.

Seven Behaviours that Matter

1. Get Positive

I hate to sound like Oprah, but on this point, she really is right. Society, companies, bosses and colleagues gravitate toward positive-minded people and, consciously or otherwise, shy away from downbeat individuals.

- If your natural inclination is to spot the pitfalls in a situation and play devil's advocate, learn to bite your tongue. The skill is hugely valuable, but don't let it become the behaviour that everyone spontaneously recalls about you ...
- Observe the sparkly, enthusiastic folks in your workplace. How do they respond to a "How are you" greeting? How do they point out difficulties and risks during meetings? How are they perceived?
- Cynicism was a Greek school of philosophy; just as relevant as Stoicism, Platonism and Scepticism. Cynics espoused seeing things as they were and eschewed taking the easy way out. Somehow, that school of thought has become a dirty word in the modern workplace. If you think that you are clear, realistic and even-handed in your assessment of work situations, chances are someone out there has labelled you a cynic. Be careful!
- Make a premeditated effort to be, and to be seen to be, upbeat and constructive.

2. Earn Trust, Respect and Credibility

No matter what it says in your Job Description, your real job is to (a) make your boss' life easier and (b) to make your boss look good. You need to be the person that your boss, or a colleague, hands something to and then *forgets about it*. That's how reliable you need to be.

- Never over-promise, and if you have to under-deliver due to circumstances that are out of your control, do not spring it as a surprise.
- Follow through on the simple things – do not say, "I'll get back to you on that" unless you

are going to get back to that person on that.

- As you ascend the corporate totem pole, you will be promoted, hired or headhunted on the basis of two things and two things only – (1) your recent accomplishments and (2) your reputation.
- The higher up the totem pole you get, the more important your reputation becomes.

3. Get Visible

You need to make sure you are noticed and when you are, pay heed to feedback, and spot where your work makes a difference. Look out for opportunities, small and large, to improve your visibility:

- Deliver an important presentation.
- Volunteer for a high-risk or high-profile project.
- Consciously stay late a little more often.
- Do anything short of wearing a t-shirt with “serious, committed member of the team” printed on it.
- Your organisational culture will determine your approach on this, but be assured, good things do not happen to ‘grey’ employees – it needs to be Dolby surround sound and Technicolor all the way...

4. Get Clear

You need to have clarity on what you want. So easy to say, so hard to do! Mapping the 3 Circles is a good starting point. Using the career development tools from *Where’s My Oasis?* will be a big step up on this. There is no silver bullet here, and it is likely that your aspirations will shift over time, so you really need to distil all this down – hence the 3 Strands.

- Who am I, what makes me really happy, what are my ‘fireworks’?
- What is this person I am talking to concerned with? What are their problems and can I alleviate those problems in some way?
- When people make bad moves and bad decisions, they tend to be on the basis of inadequate knowledge. If you have even a rudimentary plan, plus some solid groundwork done, your chances of a good making a good decision immeasurably increase.
- As a species, we’re very good at being busy, at wandering, and at grumbling; but not so good at asking ourselves the awkward questions that get us moving in a straight line. Clarity is a rarity. Get clear.

5. Set Expectations

If you want a promotion or a double-digit pay rise, there is no point in telling your boss you are not happy with the 2.5% you get next December. Nor is there any point in wandering into the boss's office in late October and telling him/her that you have had a great year and that you are expecting a 15% pay rise. By then, the budget for next year will have been agreed and your boss genuinely will not have the latitude to accede to your request, even if you deserve it.

- Start drip-feeding your expectations to your boss at the very beginning of the financial year.
- Have an unambiguous, matter-of-fact conversation in the following few weeks about your goals, your intended approach, and what you expect to happen as a result.
- If your boss is onside after that conversation, fine and dandy. Lock it down and schedule regular update meetings.
- If your boss is *not* rooting and cheerleading for you, you may need to check and see if your expectations are reasonable.

6. Be “Elevator-Ready”

This is less about being ready to take a call from a headhunter than it is about being concise and clear about the nature of your role and the level of your contribution and accomplishments. If you met your CEO in an elevator and he asked you what you are working on and how things are going for you, could you do an ‘elevator sales pitch?’

- Make a lifelong habit of notating all the good stuff that you do and that happens to you.
- Big wins, little inputs, nice compliments, constructive criticism – these are all worth remembering, so develop a method for capturing them.
- You never know when the day may come that you need to be able to confidently reel off your key contributions, quantify the value you have added, or similarly justify your professional existence.
- The world is not a meritocracy. Be ready and able to speak positively about yourself without sounding arrogant or like some delusional ass.

7. Write Well

Nothing bespeaks a lack of professionalism more than stilted writing or sloppy expression. Your writing has to speak for you. The reader forms a major part of their impression of you from those words and, if the reader has not yet met you, those words may be the *only* impression they have of you. Review your current approach and start projecting yourself into your reader's mind.

- Once again, this is a matter of paying attention. Whose writing do you admire?

- A journalist, columnist, boss, family member or colleague may have a way of expressing themselves on paper that really appeals to you. Start noticing and start collecting.
- Good writing is like good public speaking: it does not happen by accident. (Presenting is another highly career-enhancing skill to think about developing)
- Get yourself a really good dictionary, a thesaurus and a copy of Lynne Truss' *Eats, Shoots And Leaves*.
- Decide if you are going to write in English (UK) or English (US) and consistently stick to one or the other.
- Read those handy slim books on business writing; accumulate ideas and vocabulary from daily observation and practise, practise, practise.
- Eye trussed my spell chequer on my pea sea witch spots awl my miss takes – proofread and proofread again.
- Finally, when you are writing anything important, it is always a good idea to take a number of bites at the cherry. Do your early drafts and then put it away for a while, then complete your final draft by writing *with the reader in mind*.

“What is written is without effort is, in general, read without pleasure.” Samuel Johnson

Why do they call it Common Sense?

This is all just common sense, right? So basic. So simple. So *obvious*. So how come almost no-one does these things? Okay, you might see some of these elements coming into play from time to time when there's a key project on the line, or there's a promotion in the offing and people start jockeying for position. But people doing this kind of simple logical, stuff on a consistent basis?

Hardly ever.

The exceptions to this are sportspeople. Sportsmen and women understand the value of long-term, focused practice. When I explain to a serious player of rugby that practising his speech over and over is as vital to a good performance in an important presentation as ongoing training in ball-handling skills, he just nods his head and gets on with the rehearsals. When I say the same thing to a tennis player and compare it to practising her footwork around the 'T', she nods her head ... *and gets on with it*.

I've been doing this for over 20 years now and I'm sorry to have to tell you that there are no short-cuts. Smart, simple moves, yes; short-cuts, no.

So now it's over to you. The best of luck in your endeavours, I look forward to hearing how you get on.

Sincerely,

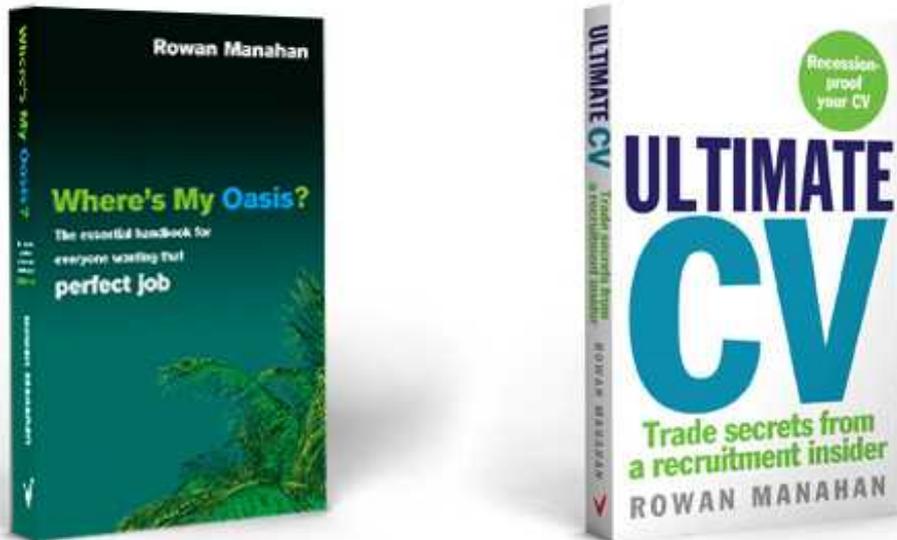


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"People always call it luck when you've acted more sensibly than they have." Anne Tyler

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