

PAPER
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Life and career planning

Bob Dick (1983) *Life and career planning: a workbook exercise*. Brisbane: Department of Psychology, University of Queensland.

A workbook for class use.

Introduction

The following exercise is to help you to analyse your present life and work. It will help you decide how satisfying it is for you. You will then be given a chance to consider what changes (if any) you may desire.

The intention of a life and career planning exercise is to provide you with time for reflection, so that you can identify important aspects of your life and work. You are then provided with an opportunity to consider other approaches to life and work which may better meet your needs.

The exercise involves mainly individual work, and discussion in pairs. There is no requirement that you discuss more than you want to. The important part is the individual work. Pair discussion merely makes it easier for most people to consider the issues more deeply.

It is usually more effective to work with someone in whose company you feel comfortable. It does not matter all that much how well you know your partner within the pair. There are small advantages in working with someone who knows you well. They may be able to give you useful information about yourself. But this is by no means necessary. If working with a near-stranger, you may wish to take a little time at the beginning to get to know each other.

The most effective way of doing this exercise is as part of a larger group. The size does not matter all that much, though between 12 and 24 is easily manageable. You don't really need the larger group after step 1. If you have ample time (the workbook is presently intended to occupy about half a day) you may decide to compare notes during some of the later stages too. This can be an advantage, as people can learn from each others' ideas and experience.

Suggestions to trainers

The more people know about themselves, the easier the workbook will be. It can therefore be preceded with experiential exercises for self-awareness, or which provide feedback from others.

Exercises using relevant self-scored instruments also fits in well. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or shorter versions of it are useful. If you are focussing on work roles, so is Belbin's Team Roles Questionnaire. So is any test of vocational interest.

As it was first written for near-graduates in a university class, the exercise presently concludes with a focus on career planning. It ends by asking participants to write a curriculum vitae. It can usefully be developed into a job application. If so, you could follow it with practice interviews, using your colleague as interviewer.

With other groups you may wish to emphasise life planning rather than career planning. If so, step 10 can be omitted, or replaced by some other form of exercise which gives more emphasis to personal development.

Suggestions to users

The workbook is self-explanatory. Most people should find it usable without outside help. It can be used by individuals, though some find it more difficult (and less interesting) to work on it without company.

Step 1(d) is included on the assumption that you are working as a member of a larger group. If you are working alone, omit it, or read any of the numerous books on the likely future. If you find the other parts of step one too difficult on your own you may prefer to omit them too. They are there for a reason, however. It is an advantage to include them if you can.

If you do omit step 1, bear in mind that most people pay relatively little attention to the likely future of work and culture when they are planning their own future. Yet if the future changes at all rapidly, it is likely to have important implications for many of you. There is a further advantage in planning a future that can cope with changes in the larger world. It is more likely to be a response to your talents and needs, and not just more of your life until now.

For best results in step 1, give your imagination free rein. Then try to retain the same state of mind in the later steps.

Copying this material

You are welcome to copy this material in modest quantities. When you are doing so, the worksheets are best kept single-sided. Then, if you fold earlier pages down the middle, you will be able to refer to them while you work on later steps. The material is best stapled or otherwise bound (for example with spiral binding) close to the left hand edge.

Note: This is intended to be used as a workbook. The spaces provided are for you use as worksheets. It will work much better if each person has an individual copy, and is encouraged to write in it. If you think participants will be reluctant to write in it (if they are themselves trainers or teachers, for example) give everyone two copies.

The workbook

Step 1: Identifying changes in the world

1(a) Current trends

What are the current trends in society and work which seem most likely to bring about future changes?

List the trends on the right. Prepare as long a list as you can in the time available. Don't censor your ideas, no matter how outlandish they may be. Use this as a chance to stretch your imagination

1(b) Choosing important trends

Look back over your list of present trends. Mark the most important of them, for example by underlining or starring (*) them. (If you fold the previous page down the centre, you will be able to see the list and work on this page at the same time.)

1(c) Describing the future

Use the trends you have chosen as most important to help you to imagine what the future may be like

Imagine you could see ten or fifteen years into the future. In the light of current trends, identify what you would expect to be the most important changes

List them in the space on the right

1(d) Comparing notes in large group

On large sheets of newsprint, record the various prediction that people make about the future. You will find that on occasion, one person will predict the opposite of what another person foresees. This is quite usual. It bears witness to the difficulty of predicting the future. The inherent unpredictability of the future is one of the features you may wish to take into account as you plan your own future.

If you wish to record any of the whole-group material, you can use the rest of this page for that purpose.

Step 2: Preferences

2(a) Experiences

Working individually, list on the right the important experiences of your life and work. Start with the present and work backwards

Include the important experiences in family and social activities as well as in your work

2(b) Enjoyable experiences

Working individually, look back over your list

Use it to help you to recall the aspects of your experience that you most enjoyed

List the enjoyable aspects in the space on the right

2(c) Preferences

You can use these activities to define your interests and preferences. Consider the enjoyable activities one at a time. For each, try to identify what it was about the activity that made it enjoyable

As you identify what made each activity enjoyable, list the reasons for the enjoyment on the right

(You will later use this list to check that your plans are likely to be sufficiently enjoyable)

2(d) Discussion

Compare your preferences with those of a friend of your choosing, preferably one who knows you, and whom you like. Briefly explore the reasons for the similarities and differences.

Step 3: Strengths and talents

3(a) Identifying strengths

Working individually, refer back to the list at step 2(a)

(You can again fold the previous pages down the centre so that you can see your lists)

Identify the strengths and talents you have developed as the result of your experience

List the strengths and talents on the right

3(b) Successes

Look back over your list of experiences, giving particular attention to the most recent decade or two

Identify the achievements that stand out in your memory as successes

List them on the right

3(c) Revising strengths and talents

What strengths and talents do those achievements imply?

Add them to your list developed at step 3(a)

3(d) Choosing most important strengths

Look back over your list of strengths. Mark them in order of priority -- which do you think are most important in planning your future?

3(e) Discussion

If there is time, compare your list of strengths with those of your partner. Briefly explore the reasons for the similarities and differences.

Step 4: Limitations

4(a) Least successful activities

Working individually, look back over your list of activities

Identify the activities over the last decade or so have been least successful

List them on the right

4(b) Identifying limitations

There are some activities you wouldn't expect to do well because of personal limitations, for instance through lack of experience

Use the list of less successful experiences to make a list of your important limitations

4(c) Choosing important limitations

Now rank these in order of importance. Which of them, do you expect, is it most important for you to take into account in planning your future.

4(d) Discussion

Compare your list of limitations with those of your partner. Include strengths also if you omitted step 3(e) above. Briefly explore the reasons for the similarities and differences.

Step 5: Review strengths and limitations

This part of the exercise will help you to decide what you wish to do to make use of the strengths and limitations

5(a) Individual preparation

Working individually, consider your lists of relative strengths and relative limitations

Identify the limitations would you most like to eliminate

Write them at the right of this page, towards the top

Which strengths would you give up, if you had to, in return for removing those limitations

Write them at the right of this page, towards the bottom

5(b) “Trading” strengths and weaknesses

Work in pairs to help each other refine your lists. You will take it in turns to be devil's advocate. Your task then will be to ensure that the strength your partner offers to surrender is a sufficient payment for eliminating the limitation. For example, if your partner wishes to eliminate the most important limitation, you might reasonably ask her/him to give up the most important strength in repayment. (Please note -- this isn't a competition!)

The previous part of the exercise may have elicited what your partner thinks are the important strengths and limitations. Having to make a choice may clarify for her/him the real priorities. As you play the role of devil's advocate, you will help your partner most if you help her/him to recognise the real priorities.

Sometimes, what appears to be a limitation is the other side of the coin to some of the strengths. For example, an intolerance for uncertainty (an apparent limitation) is perhaps the same characteristic as decisiveness (an apparent strength). Again, it is useful if you can help your partner discover which strengths and limitations are part of the same “package”.

Step 6: The “no change” scenario

6(a) Developing your individual future

Return now to your earlier list of work and life experience. If you did nothing to change your life and career, what would you expect to be doing in 10 or 15 years time? In the space below, write a job and life description. Include all aspect of your life: family, self-development, social activities, relaxation, work. Write in note form. Work only on the left hand side of the page -- you may need the other half later.

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6(b) Discussion

Compare your description with that of your partner. Briefly explore the reasons for the similarities and differences.

6(c) Revising your individual future

Most people who look at the present state of the world expect dramatic changes in the future. Most people plan their individual future as if the world were going to stand still. Is the description you have just prepared consistent with the changes that are likely to take place elsewhere? If not, change the description. Use the space you left previously. (If you included step 1 of this workbook, the information you compiled there will help you with this step.)

Step 7: Describing your ideal future

7(a) Allowing for preferences

Working individually, identify how well the (possibly changed) description satisfies the preferences you listed earlier

List on the right any preferences which are unlikely to be satisfied by it

7(b) Allowing for strengths and limitations

Consider how well the description fits in with your strengths and limitations

List on the right any strengths which it does not utilise or any limitations which place it at risk

7(c) Defining the ideal

What for you is the ideal work and life situation? To decide this, work in pairs. Help each other to put together a different description which would better fit in with the preferences and strengths and limitations. Don't worry about how realistic it is -- only about how well it meets your partner's characteristics. Use the space below to develop your ideal.

Step 8: Reality check

8(a) Identifying what is realisable

If you followed the instructions, the ideal you have just prepared probably isn't entirely realisable

Without being unduly pessimistic, try to identify the more realistic parts of it

Decide what you could do to achieve any aspects of this ideal description

List possible activities which would move you towards the ideal

8(b) A realistic but optimistic future

Your task now is to put together a more realistic description, using whatever aspects of your ideal description you can. But be optimistic.

8(c) Implications for action

Work in pairs. Look back to the predicted future, and your ideal and realistic descriptions. Are there any decisions you wish to make about the future of your life and work? Is there any information you wish to pursue to identify other options? Are there any activities you think you may wish to take up? Without worrying too much about their realism, put together as long a list of possibilities as you can.

Step 9: Forward planning

9(a) Identifying realisable changes

Look over the items on the previous list. Are there any things there that you really wish to do? If so, identify those that are most important to you in the long term. Mark them with an “L”. Are there any you might consider doing something about in the short term. Mark them with an “S”.

9(b) Consequent changes

Look back over your “S” and “L” items. Check each of them for two conditions. Firstly, would anyone else be affected if you were to act on it? If so, you may wish to add a note to that effect. Secondly, is there anything else you would have to do first? If so, you may wish to add that to your list.

9(c) Discussion

Compare your list of possible changes with a partner. Help each other to explore the advantages and disadvantages of them, and perhaps alternative ways of accomplishing them. While you do this, you may wish to use this page as a worksheet, to note down any comments you have about your own plans.

Step 10 Writing a curriculum vitae

First work individually to jot down a few ideas. Then work in pairs to help each other

10(a) Job and personal characteristics

List on the right (with ample space between each item) the characteristics of a job you can realistically aspire to

Below each characteristic list in a different colour the strengths and talents you have relevant to that job characteristic

10(b) Your qualifications and experience

Fold the previous page down the centre. Below, opposite the relevant item, list the qualifications and experience and other evidence you could use to persuade an employer

10(c) Curriculum vitae

Now gather the information together into a draft curriculum vitae. It is typical for a c.v. (or resume, as it is sometimes called) to include some or all of the following.

1. Full name
 2. Date of birth
 3. Marital status
 4. Health
 5. Education (from most recent to least recent)
 6. Work experience (from most recent to least recent). This may be quite detailed.
 7. Experience outside work, where this is relevant to the job you are applying for.
 8. Honours and awards.
 9. Interests and hobbies.
 10. Names and addresses of referees.
 11. Summary statement, setting out the major advantages you offer.
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10(d) Final check

Now look back over the c.v. Imagine that you were a personnel officer faced with a heap of 100 c.v.'s. Would the one now in front of you stand out above the rest? -- If not, it would be discarded! Therefore --

1. It makes sense to choose a company where your talents will stand out without your c.v. telling lies (or concealing truths).
 2. Your c.v. is more likely to stay out of the reject pile if you tailor it to the company's requirements rather than send them your standard draft.
 3. To do this, you really have to research the company well to find out what they are looking for.
 4. It also helps to remember that a superb c.v. may get you an interview. The interview may get you the job.
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Further reading

Apart from obvious things such as the situations vacant columns, here's some useful reading.

Donaho, Melvin W. and Meyer, John L. *How to get the job you want*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1976.

A sort of standard text on job hunting. A good way to find out what people expect you to do.

Bolles, Richard Nelson. *What color is your parachute?* Berkeley, Ca.: Ten Speed Press, any edition.

A refreshing look at the whole lottery of job hunting, and a useful corrective to the usual books on the topic.
