



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Identify Career-Altering Events and Make Decisions Based on Your Preferences and Strengths

Everyone has known people who just seemed like they were in the wrong position. A classic example is a manager without good people skills, or perhaps a disorganized project manager. When you work with or interact with people like this, you start to shake your head and wonder how they ever got into the position they are in.

Of course, to be fair, you don't always end up working in your ideal position. Sometimes you become a project manager by default when the previous project manager quits. It used to also be common for companies to promote their best technical people into management positions. Of course, in many cases, those were not the best moves for the company or for the person involved.

You encounter many career altering events

Even though you may not have total control over every event in your career, you do have a lot of control over how you respond to circumstances you encounter. If you have been working for a number of years, you might look back and recognize some of them. These include events like the following:

- Transferring from one group to another
- Completing one project and starting another
- Receiving calls from recruiters
- Volunteering to help in areas where you could pick up new skills.
- Interviewing for new positions (internally or externally)

All of these events happen to you during your career. Some people stay in the same basic jobs for many years; however, even they have had chances for change. For instance, during performance reviews, some managers ask their employees if they are happy in their jobs or if they are ready for a change in the next three to six months. Each of these discussions is a potential career changing event. If an employee is happy with his/her current job, that's fine. However, that is a decision he/she is making.

Know thyself (as early as possible)

You may have heard this same basic philosophy expressed in many different ways. However, it all boils down to knowing what you are good at and what you enjoy. It is hard to answer this question when you are just starting your career, but as you gain experience, you usually gain more of an understanding of your strengths and preferences. To help you identify these traits, think about what you enjoy doing and what you are good at, in both your work environment and your personal life. If you need to, raise the level of abstraction until you can identify some traits that tell you something about yourself.



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For instance, you may enjoy playing tennis. Realistically, you are probably not going to get the opportunity to be a professional tennis player. However, think about why you enjoy tennis. Do you enjoy the competitive nature of the game? Do you enjoy the camaraderie associated with playing on a team? Do you enjoy meeting new people in tennis matches? Your answers tell you something about yourself.

Of course, there are also formal exercises and tools that can help you determine what your interests are. If you have taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® Exam, for instance, you should have received a lot of valuable information on your strengths and how your mind works.

Leverage what you do best when making career decisions

It is very important to know your strengths and what you enjoy, and also to be aware of the many career altering events that come up over time. If you know both, you can make the best long term decisions. Let's look at some examples.

Apply for something new. Let's say you work in the application support area and you specialize in client-server technology. A position opens up in your department for a person to help support a number of web applications. You consider your strengths and preferences. You love working on the web at home and have set up your own personal webpage. You are good at online processes. You also love to learn new things, and the client-server world is starting to get pretty comfortable. So what do you do? Sit back and hope they ask you to fill the position? No, this is a potentially career-altering event. So, go talk to your manager as well as the manager of the web group, and let them know you would like to transfer to the position.

Stay put. Let's say you are a project manager in a small company. You have been there 15 years. You are comfortable working on projects of less than \$500,000, and that is the typical type of project you are asked to manage. One day you get a call from a recruiter looking for a project manager for a Fortune 100 company. The compensation is better and there is a chance to work on much larger projects. You look at your situation. You like the smaller company environment. You like the people. You like project management, but you are not confident in your ability to manage much larger, high-pressure projects for a large company. Over time, you have come to realize that people and relationships matter more to you than money and power. This is a potential career altering event, but after looking at yourself, you decide to pass on further consideration.

Summary

Recognize that you will encounter many events that will shape your overall career. In some cases, you will make a proactive decision to try to move your career in a certain direction. In other cases, you will decline to pursue an opportunity, which is also a choice. These opportunities come up more often than you think. You just may not be identifying and reacting to them today.

As you mature, you should develop a sense for your strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. (If all you want to do is work hard for thirty years and retire, you have not reached the right level of maturity yet.)



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It is important to make conscious decisions in these career-altering events, based on recognizing your strengths and the areas that you want to improve. Be intellectually honest with yourself. You should make deliberate career decisions, at the right times, based on knowing what you are good at, what you enjoy and where you think you need to grow. If you do so, you will have much more control over the specific positions you work in, and much more control over your entire career.