# Chapter 1

## Career Decision Making: A Lifelong Process

## "The Question"

For many people, career decisions are among their most recurrent and problematic decisions. The question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" confronts us early, and vestiges of it sometimes haunt us into adolescence, early adulthood, and beyond. We sometimes hear "the question" aloud, directed by those familiar and those scarcely known to us. At other times, it emanates from our psyche.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" is a question that evokes a range of emotions and responses. It can intimidate or motivate us, embarrass us or evoke pride. Sometimes it causes us to behave defensively or boastfully. Whatever our response, "the question" is usually provocative and occasionally touches a nerve.

Variations of "What do you want to be when you grow up?" include "When are you going to start making a decent living?", "How long are you going to continue in a job in which you are unhappy and underachieving your potential?", "When are you going to settle down and find a real job?", and "Are your claimed problems really so severe that they cause you not to progress with your career development?" Again, these questions are sometimes stated explicitly; at other times, they are veiled or come from our unconscious.

Focusing on "the question" provokes insight on how these simple 10 words can affect us so profoundly. Consider the following points:

- The "what," as in "*What* do you want to be . . . " implies that the individual to whom the question is directed has a choice. This is not always the case, and sometimes discerning available career options is overwhelming.

- Because "the question" incorporates a future component, it connotes that career potential has yet to be fully harnessed or converted, which can be unsettling to those less than satisfied with their career progress.

- Depending on the circumstances in which "the question" is presented, it can imply that the intended respondent is somehow deficient because his or her career objectives are not apparent, or artifacts of career success (e.g., goal-directed activities, impressive job title, material possessions) are not readily evident.

- Failing to have a stellar answer to "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is, to many, an admission of weaknesses that include indecisiveness and lack of focus. After all, our society values those with vision and self-assuredness. Anything less than a direct, well-outlined response, many feel will cause them to be judged askance by the individual who posed the question – interestingly, someone who often asks "the question" from a position of personal career turmoil. Being labeled as an underachiever – whether self-imposed or by others – is an anathema few want.

- Since we usually first hear "the question" when we are children and then repeatedly through youth and adulthood, it often conjures memories of career objectives we previously held. To many, memories of prior career happenings that have been less successful than hoped evoke distress.

- The " . . . when you grow up?" part of "the question" can suggest that you are in a less than mature state – something that can instinctively trigger a defensive reaction.

- There is no end point to one's career development, as implied in the words "to be" that appear in "What do you want *to be* . . ." The workplace in which our career develops is dynamic, as are our personal situations, career interests, and work values. That is, career decision making and planning is a lifelong process rather than a discrete event.

Many wrestle with "the question" or variations of it throughout their career development. I have found that among those most preoccupied with "the question" are people you would least suspect – those who appear focused, accomplished, and satisfied. I have also found that it is not a matter of chance that the status of their career development appears in good order. Their preoccupation with "the question," appreciation of its complexities, and the skills they have developed to make prudent career decisions and associated career plans often enable them to make the most out of their options.

Career decisions and "the question" in its various forms confront us throughout our career development and sometimes recur when we least expect. Choosing a high school curriculum . . . determining whether to pursue a trade, college, or enter the job market . . . selecting a college major . . . deciding whether to apply for a job or promotion . . . contemplating whether developing new skills through retraining is in order . . . assessing the feasibility of self-employment . . . evaluating career satisfaction during mid-career or another point . . . opting for a career change . . . reassessing career options after experiencing a layoff or downsizing . . . reentering the world of work after a major personal event such as a divorce and absence from the workplace, or after acquiring disabling problems . . . wrestling with retirement . . . and even feeling disappointment with retirement and contemplating a return to work . . . these are but a few events we encounter over our life span that prompt career decision making.

At times, others have forewarned us of the career decisions we confront. At other times, career dilemmas occur unexpectedly.

## Career Decision Making and Life Satisfaction

Of course, career decisions are constantly encountered during our lives. The consequences of poor or less than optimal decisions can include strain in relationships, financial hardship, dissatisfaction with both self and work, and psychological maladjustment.

Some experts estimate that half of our waking hours for up to two-thirds of our lives (between the time we enter school and the time we leave the workplace) are consumed with work-related activities – namely, education/training, and employment. After all, most of us prepare for or sleep up to one third – 8 hours – of the day. During 8 of the remaining 16 hours, we typically pursue career-related activities. This does not include the time we spend in activities such as working overtime, preparing for work, or traveling to and from work.

Simply put, work and its related activities consume a major portion of our life. Given how much time we spend in these activities and the impact of our career development on our existence – including our self-esteem, financial well being, and lifestyle – common sense dictates that being less than satisfied with your career development can compromise your life satisfaction.

Despite the strong correlation between career fulfillment and life satisfaction, few people attempt to manage their careers. Many adopt a reactive rather than a proactive approach. That is, rather than establishing clear objectives, creating and seeking opportunities that promise to further goals, and pursuing, evaluating, and developing career opportunities in concert with preestablished objectives, they passively react to situations they encounter.

A reactive approach to career development invites submission and subordination of personal objectives. Examples include waiting for events to impact you rather than attempting to mold events; relinquishing control of your career to the likes of family members, supervisors, or business partners – despite how well intentioned they may be; and making decisions about your career after experiencing negative events such as downsizing, pay cut, or demotion. Of course, these latter events are sometimes unavoidable. My point is, however, that the state of your career development is more likely to be in an advantaged position if you have invested quality effort in career decision making and planning, rather than reacting from a damage control perspective – especially when unforeseen and uncontrollable setbacks occur.

Career management involves a proactive approach that includes reflection, analysis, systematic decision making and planning, and purposeful activity. The concept assumes you can enhance your chances for career success and, correspondingly, life satisfaction. It requires discipline, perseverance, calculated risk taking, and ongoing reassessment and refinement of previously established objectives and plans.

Curiously, many people spend more time planning their annual vacations than planning and managing their career development. Many neglect tending to the status of their careers. They sometimes get comfortable in a job, though they are less than content with it. As time passes they often become more complacent and rationalize: "It's not that bad," "A job's a job," and "I don't want to start all over again." More time passes, and they become even less inclined to change jobs after realizing pay increases, employee benefits, and personal considerations – such as financial and family obligations – that further distract focus from their career dissatisfaction. Later, they may feel trapped in their less than satisfied career state: they second guess the value of their skills in the workplace, they doubt their ability to negotiate a transition to a more positive state of career development successfully and, sadly, they passively accept their fate. These people often view their jobs as "work" in a negative sense, synonymous with labor, toil, and lack of choice, all mutually exclusive of the positive connotations of the word – an activity that allows one to realize personal fulfillment.

As a career counselor, I have often thought of how unfortunate it is that so many people passively accept career dissatisfaction. Not liking your employer, supervisor, or coworkers; feeling unchallenged or unappreciated in your job; disliking the activities you undertake from day to day; looking ahead with dread to going to work – these are symptoms of career dissatisfaction. If you do not feel good about your job, it will quite likely aversely affect your personal life.

I am not advocating that going to work should be the highlight of your day or the center of your being – although I have met many people for whom this is true; some appear well adjusted, others do not. Few people lying in their death bed are likely to include among their last thoughts, "I wish I spent more time at work." What I am encouraging you to do, however, is to objectively review your career development to date, assess your satisfaction with it, and develop a plan to help guide you in a direction compatible with your desires.

Effective career decision making and planning skills are among the most important life survival skills you can develop. These skills can dictate how well you live and how happy you are with

your life. Success in your career is not purely a matter of being gifted intellectually, being in the right place at the right time, or even being born into circumstances where attractive career options are available with little effort on your part. More often than not, those who realize their potential and enjoy fulfilling careers have done so through means well beyond raw talent and chance.

A career management philosophy includes establishing firm objectives and purposefully initiating activities that promise to bring predetermined objectives to fruition. Assessing presenting opportunities, honing skills necessary to enhance competitiveness, and strategically approaching and developing sought-out opportunities are among the tactics those who manage their career development employ. Inherent in this approach is forethought, intent, and purpose.

A motivational speaker I once heard conveyed a strong message about the importance of career management through a theater analogy. In contrast to actors who play assigned roles and have opportunities for dress rehearsals, repeat performances, and parts in other productions, career development in the contemporary workplace does not offer opportunities of this sort. We have but one career – without opportunities to practice or to do it over. Your career development deserves careful attention.

Before you go to the next chapter, I recommend that you ponder the following questions:

1. Have you recently encountered the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" either directly or in an alternate form? If so, how was it presented? What reaction did "the question" evoke in you? Why do you believe "the question" was posed to you?

2. Looking back at your career, have you adopted a proactive or reactive approach to your career development? Cite examples.

3. What ideas do you have for better managing your career development?