

How to Pick a Career... or Two

Zura Kakushadze^{1,2*}

¹Quantigic® Solutions LLC, 1127 High Ridge Road, #135, Stamford, CT 06905, USA

²Free University of Tbilisi, Business School and School of Physics, 240, David Aghmashenebeli Alley, Tbilisi, 0159, Georgia

Abstract

I give my two cents about some important considerations in making career choices. When asked for advice on this ages-old subject, I find myself repeating essentially the same 3 simple principles every time. I spell them out and add color using my experiences.

Why?

Students and others frequently ping me for advice on how to pick a career. While I am humbled by their choice for seeking advice, I share with them my two cents on this subject. I find myself repeating essentially the same 3 simple principles over and over again. So, I have figured, why not write it up? While I might not say anything conceptually new on this ancient subject, I hope the way I put it is at least interesting, if not useful. Otherwise, my apologies...

This is Tricky...

Me giving advice on a career choice is a bit tricky. This is because most people would argue that I have changed my career more than once... I got my PhD in theoretical physics from Cornell. My PhD thesis was in string theory. I did a postdoc (Harvard), then until 2002, I was a professor at the C.N. Yang Institute for Theoretical Physics (Stony Brook). In 2001 I decided that spending a lifetime as a physics professor would be too limiting. I felt that I had already made sufficiently valuable contribution to physics so I could diversify and expand my horizons.

I knew almost nothing about finance. Cornell physics PhD students who trickled into finance said they applied problem solving skills acquired in physics to real-life problems in finance. I found that appealing. So I ended up on Wall St. Among many other things, I did statistical arbitrage, a kind of automated trading. I was a quantitative trader (plus other things). When I was at Cornell, I had this yellow pad where I wrote down various ideas for new products and services or how to improve the existing ones. In early 2008 I decided to pursue my entrepreneurial dreams. I resigned from my managing director position at a hedge fund and started working on various business projects. Some worked, some didn't. I didn't know much about business, so I had to learn a lot of things, accounting, legalese, taxes, etc. In 2014 I started writing papers in quantitative finance. I have published quite a few. I had written many physics papers before, but not finance papers. So, this is yet another twist.

Why do I do what I do?

i) I know what I love to do, which - broadly speaking - is achieving results;

ii) I know what I am good at, e.g., formulating (inventing) new problems and solving them;

iii) I am not afraid to take risks and cherish what one may call experiential diversity - this is a personality trait, and understanding this is invaluable.

What Helps Me Achieve My Goals?

I will make this one short and sweet. One word. Discipline.

What about Networking?

"Networking" means different things to different people. I think it is important to have mentors. It is difficult to do it all on your own, with no help from others. This doesn't mean anyone is entitled to get help. It must be earned. I would not have accomplished the things I've accomplished had it not been for the right people helping me at the right junctures in my life. I came to the U.S. at the age of 18 all by myself, with no bachelor's degree, no family or friends here, no money, etc. By some token (a long story...) I ended up hanging out at Williams College, where I met the Chair of Physics Department, Prof. C. Ballard Pierce. I told him my story and he said I should go to graduate school. I asked him: "How is this possible, I don't even have a bachelor's?" He replied - and I will not forget these words for as long as I live - "This is America, anything is possible here." He made some phone calls, including to the Chairman of Physics Department at Cornell University Prof. Kurt Gottfried, who arranged two days of in-person interviews for me at Cornell. In a few days thereafter I was enrolled in a PhD program at Cornell, thanks to Prof. Peirce's and Prof. Gottfried's help, for which I'm eternally grateful.

So, What's the Upshot?

- Life is short. Do what you love. Do what gets you up every morning.
- But it's tricky. You can love doing many things. Figure out what you are good at. Find things that you both love doing and are good at.
- Take your personality traits into account. E.g., some people like to work alone, others prefer working in groups; some are detail oriented, others prefer broader brush strokes; some are risk takers, others prefer stability; etc. If need be, have others

*Corresponding author: Zura Kakushadze, Quantigic® Solutions LLC, 1127 High Ridge Road, #135, Stamford, CT 06905, USA, E-mail: zura@quantigic.com

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help you be objective with your personality traits. In fact, an important role of a mentor is to help you sort this out...

Don't Overcomplicate Things...

Arguably, in the grand scheme of things what you pick as your

career or do in your life is like a drop in a vast ocean. The universe has been around for 14 billion years and will be around for trillions of years longer, to help put things in perspective... So, don't overcomplicate things, enjoy life and what you do, including the process of achieving your goals, not just setting them!