

# How should I think about my next job?

Most conversations about new jobs start by addressing questions about external factors. What's the role? The comp? How does it set me up for the future? I'll tackle these below, but the more impactful question is simpler: "What do you want?"

Such a simple question, yet such a complex answer. In my experience, answering this question unlocks the potential that job seekers are seeking better than anything else. If you understand yourself and what you want, the decision is more about alignment than achievement. Careers are long, and the skills you want to develop today will stay with you as you grow. If you accept that you're making the best choice with the information you have, the fear of looking backward with regret washes away. In short, the answer is inside you, and you already have enough information to make the right choice.

## Adding more tools to your belt

"Life has a way of making all your previous experiences make sense after the fact."

—Chong Ki Kim [paraphrased from Korean]

Making a career decision is not staring at a fork in the road but rather deciding what tools to pick up and add to your belt.

Chong Ki Kim had just lost both of his parents when the Korean War started in 1950. He had been living with extended family on a farm near what is now the border with North Korea and to escape the fierce fighting around the 38th parallel, he fled south with friends.

After the deaths of his friends through air raids, seventeen-year-old Chong Ki was alone moving from shelter to shelter to find food as the country deteriorated. As things improved, he would go searching for his sisters who were living with other extended family members in what is now North Korea. Sadly, he discovered that his younger sister had died tragically from hardship. He still hasn't been able to locate his other sister. Chong Ki's Korean War stories are mostly about survival and heartbreak, but this one is about how luck and a little ingenuity led him to become a successful entrepreneur when he moved his family to the United States.



Chong Ki Kim (1954) in the South Korean Army

While running for his life and looking for his sisters, Chong Ki eventually started working with the US Army's logistics team in Korea. He mostly worked backbreaking jobs on the front lines, but over time he would learn English and find more

sustainable work. When Chong Ki was conscripted into the Korean Army, an officer advised him to learn a useful skill, and Chong Ki worked toward becoming a driver. This required learning how to drive, but he also learned how to fix engines, transmissions, and anything else related to operating a vehicle. Korea was a war-torn country in the 1950s and only mechanics could drive in the Army. There was no AAA to call when the car broke down and you couldn't abandon your vehicle in the field.



Chong Ki and Ok Hee Kim (1974) in Seoul, South Korea

After 20 years of working in a white-collar job, Chong Ki and his wife Ok Hee Kim moved their family to Los Angeles in 1974 with dreams of providing better opportunities for their five children. They supported the family like many immigrants at the time, providing manual labor and gardening services for families in the neighborhood. To make extra money, Chong Ki would go to the Flea Market to buy broken lawnmowers and repair them for resale.

“I could fix a four-cylinder engine on trucks back in Korea so a one-cylinder engine was easy,” he says.

This little lawnmower repair business eventually became Lomita Lawnmower Shop, and Chong Ki and Ok Hee were able to provide a college education for all five of their kids through that business. Today, they rent out their shop and the land it's on to cover their monthly expenses.



Chong Ki and Ok Hee Kim at Lomita Lawnmower Shop

I first heard these stories of my grandparents Chong Ki and Ok Hee at Christmas in 2015. My grandpa loves to remind us that every job to be done is an opportunity to learn something that could serve us in the future and he knows this from experience. After twenty years of dormancy, a skill he learned in a different country under different circumstances, became the spark of an idea that he built an entire business around. I've thought about careers differently ever since.

What might we be learning today that will change our opportunities ten years from now?

### **Seeking alignment over achievement**

“People naturally resist focus because they can’t decide what is important. Therein lies a problem: people can typically tell you after some deliberation what their top three priorities are, but they struggle to decide on just one.”

— Frank Slotman, CEO of Snowflake in [Amp It Up!](#) (LinkedIn)

When I graduated from college in 2009, my career prospects were not good. In May of that year, the Wall Street Journal published an article titled, [The Curse of the Class of 2009: For College Grads Lucky Enough to Get Work This Year, Low Wages are Likely to Haunt Them for a Decade or More.](#)

Nice.

Like many of my peers, it took time to recover from this fate. I navigated a post-college career that started as a telemarketer cold-calling 150 people daily out of a four-pound phone book. On the path to becoming a venture capital investor, I worked on a trading floor, flailed at a startup that never got off the ground, and sold designer eyewear online. I can't say things have always gone well, but I have learned that there are many factors that go into a job and it's impossible to optimize for all of them.

My guess is the last time you thought about changing jobs your pros and cons list had a number of things that could fit into these buckets. I'm here to tell you that there's no way to analyze your way to the right answer. What's most important to you today is going to be different than what's important to you in the future. The single most important thing is that you know what you're optimizing for at the moment and that it reflects who you are and what you want at that time.

Despite knowing this, a common tendency for high-achieving optimizers is to try to maximize every attribute. A rare few accomplish this, but most people would benefit from having clarity on the single attribute that is most important right now. Finding an opportunity that is disproportionately amazing on that one thing can motivate you for years.

So, before you grab a sheet of scratch paper and start scribbling down the good and bad of the next opportunity, grab your journal and start writing about what matters most to you and why. Knowing who you are, what you want, and what you're optimizing for will make any decision easier. You'll focus on finding alignment instead of the next achievement.

## **Make the choice that's right in front of you**

"We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror."

- Marshall McLuhan

I once had a coaching client (we'll call her Jane) who was in the middle of a career transition and unclear on her options. Jane was critical of herself for all of the twists and turns of her career and struggled with how to position her past work.

Jane started her career making a lot of money in commercial real estate sales before getting off the gravy train to pursue her dream of becoming an actor. Along the way, she became a sought-after fitness instructor and eventually moved into tech. Now, she wanted to make more money and find ways to earn more performance-based comp.

As Jane looked around at the high earners in her network she saw people with certain backgrounds that she didn't have. She was frustrated, and I sensed that she was critical of herself and the decisions she had made earlier in her life.

I interjected, "Go back to who you were at that time. Think about who you spent time with, what you cared about, and how you made the choice to pivot careers. Knowing what you know now, would you have done anything differently back then?"

Her answer was a straightforward, "no." She loves the people she met as a spin instructor and some of them are her closest friends. She is proud of herself for giving it a shot as an actor and she even has a lucrative side gig doing voiceover to this day. When she thinks back to who she was, she knows she made the best decision she could with the information she had.

Our values and priorities change, and we adapt. Today, Jane has a job marrying the skills she developed in real estate sales with the product management skills she learned in tech. I'm certain the career stops in fitness and showbiz were not detours that took her off her path but rather tools she picked up along the way to help her build a career for years to come.

For Chong Ki and for Jane, the opportunities came from within. They couldn't have known at the time how fixing engines or selling real estate would help them today, but the answers were revealed to them, sometimes even a decade or more later. That's why it's important not to look at your next career move as one that could change the trajectory of your life forever. You will not be sent down some path that has already been paved by others.

I took a job cold-calling people out of a phonebook after college and at that point, none of the paths available to me would have included venture capital investing. That was also true after I joined a large bank working on the foreign exchange and interest rates desks. Now, in VC I find myself cold emailing more than I have since I worked as a telemarketer, and my experiences on a trading desk through the Great Recession help me understand the capital markets for startups today.

So, instead of worrying about taking the perfect path forward, think about how what you're exploring adds to your tool kit. Instead of looking externally at what's available to you, spend more time looking internally at what you want. And finally, you can only connect the dots looking backward. Make the choice that's right for you today. Future you may have done it differently, but the current you is all you have. And you are good enough to make the right decision and good enough to get the most out of it when you're there.

### **What's in a job?**

These are some of the things you might consider for your current and next job, in no particular order. The priority of each is different for everyone and will likely change over time.

## Relationships

- People – who you work with at the company. Do they share your values? Do you enjoy spending time with them? Do they give you energy and inspire you? Are you collaborating with the people that you want to collaborate with?
- Managers and direct reports – your reporting lines. Will you get mentorship from the people you report to and who report to you? Do you have complementary working styles? Are your manager and senior management invested in you and your career?
- Customers – consumers, enterprises, healthcare providers, financial institutions, governments, etc. The type of customer you work with can impact the types of problems you solve and how you solve those problems.

## Personal

- Role – what you work on day-to-day. Is it below, above, or at your level of competence? Is this something you enjoy doing? Are you making an impact that makes you proud?
- Location – where you physically spend your time. Is your office in the city and neighborhood you want? Does the remote or in-office culture suit you? Is there travel? How do you feel about the travel?
- Learning opportunity – how you will change as a result of this job. Early career professionals might invest in learning new skills (technical, relationship-building, professionalism, etc.) and more experienced people might pivot into a new industry or add new roles (brand marketer adds performance marketing).

## Financial

- Compensation – salary, variable/incentive pay, and long-term upside. Salary should pay the bills and make you feel valued for your contributions. Variable compensation should entice you to do more that helps the company on the key metrics that matter. Long-term upside can come in the form of equity (options, stock, carried interest, etc.) or in the form of future earnings potential at this company or another one.
- Stage – the company's position in its [life cycle](#). Is it an early-stage or a growth-stage company? Is it growing and taking market share or more mature and exploring new avenues of growth?
- Capital structure – ownership and rights to profits. Is it private or public? Who are the investors in the business? Is there debt that might put the company at risk?

## Market

- Industry – the companies and people you work with outside the company. What does the company do and what role does it play in the broader industry? Does it suit your interests? Are there perks to working in it?
- Brand – how people perceive the company. Is it known to be high-quality and do the people who leave have better or worse opportunities afterward? Is there a vision that motivates you? Are you proud to say you work there?