

Janis Foord Kirk
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It's not about what you should be, but about who you are

The question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is an artifact from a bygone era, based on the assumption that for each one of us there is a specific occupation ideally suited to our individual dreams and aspirations.

Assumptions of this kind made sense during the Industrial Era when an informed, long-term occupational choice was a viable career goal. People could decide to become a lawyer, a bricklayer, an accountant or a secretary. They could focus their sights on this single occupation and use it as the incentive for their own career growth.

Building a successful career in the Knowledge/Information Era is far more complex. What's needed is "a shift in frame of mind," says Phillip Jarvis, vice-president of partnerships with the New Brunswick-based National Life/Work Centre.

Underpinning this new mindset is a great deal of learning. We need to learn to think of work and careers in a new way, for example. We need to learn a range of new skills.

"Occupations are constantly shifting and becoming different," Jarvis points out.

"By the time you do grow up, there'll be a whole bunch of new jobs out there and the jobs that were there will have changed radically."

Jarvis, if anyone, should know. He has been in the career management field for about 30 years, directly involved in the development and implementation of several key national and international initiatives.

He was the driving force behind CHOICES, for example, a computer-based career information system first developed in the 1970s, now used internationally.

More recently, he co-authored a comprehensive model to record in specific terms what solid career building actually looks like. Called the Blueprint For Life, it places the emphasis on the journey you take as you move through your working life rather than a destination such as a single occupation. (See today's Tip of the Week)

If you hope to build a successful career now you'll need to become acutely aware of your particular journey and its many nuances and implications.

"Increase your awareness of the 360 degrees around you," Jarvis advises. "Be aware of the

situations, the relationships, the community, the good stuff and the bad stuff. Don't be so fixated on the destination that you don't see the doors of opportunities that exist along the way."

This doesn't mean, he hastens to add, that there's little point in planning for the future you want. "You do need some kind of direction."

To find it, ask yourself some pointed questions. What's in your heart? What do you love to do, in any aspect of your life, not just a work context? Who are you? What are your special gifts and talents? And who needs them?

When it comes to the question, "Who needs my special gifts and talents, think totally out of the box," Jarvis adds.

To drive home the point, he tells of a friend who found his second career in this unusual way.

"He was an engineer who lost his job when the large engineering firm he worked for downsized," Jarvis recalls.

"He was in his late 40s, making a high salary. For months, he tried to find another engineering job that would pay as much...

"In the meantime, he was walking his dog every day. And when a neighbour asked him to walk his dog as well, he agreed. Later, at a party, he talked about how much he enjoyed walking these dogs, and the word spread. Before long, he was walking 20 to 30 dogs a day.

"It took nearly a year, but he finally listened to the voices that were barking all around him. He's now a full-time dog walker. He's fitter than he's ever been. He's happier than he's ever been. He's making plenty of money because these are people who feel guilty because they're not home to walk their dogs and don't mind paying to have it done.

"Who would have ever picked this as a career destination? What computer system would have said 'dog walker?' That's out-of-the-box career thinking," says Jarvis.

The career mindset needed today emphasizes the journey but also the abilities of the individual making the journey. And in many cases, building new skills will be essential.

"Skills like financial planning, relationship building and dealing with change, seeing change as something positive that brings opportunities," says Jarvis.

Skills such as these can be learned just as math, language or technical skills can be learned, he says.

"Once you acquire these skills, you can use them time and time again.

"Because change comes in waves," he explains. "We haven't seen the last big change in our lives, wherever we are in your lives. We need to learn how to take charge of our own destinies, how to become self-reliant, resilient."

Shifting your frame of mind is not particularly easy, even when the reward is a successful working life.

However, Jarvis' message is clear. Determining the scope and direction of your working life in the early 21st century is not a matter of deciding what you will "be," but shifting your thinking to realize who you really are and who needs what you have to offer.

Tip of the Week

For a comprehensive look at the rigours of career building in the Knowledge/Information Era visit www.blueprint4life.ca Take the link on the left side of the home page to "Blueprint Matrix."

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Individual Questions

1. Why is the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" considered an artifact from a bygone era?
2. Relate the terminology "journey" and "destination" to a career
3. The article mentions not to be fixated on the destination. It mentions that you need to increase your awareness of the 360 degrees around you. What did the writer mean by this?
4. What were some of the pointed questions the writer suggested people should ask themselves?
5. Why might building new skills be important?
6. What kind of skills might be easy to transfer from job to job?

Group Questions

1. How has/does this question (What do you want to be when you grow up) make you feel?
2. Can you rework this question to fit the model of career development discussed in the article?
3. Make a list of skills or qualities you feel would help people be more aware of the 360 degrees around them
4. As a group, compile a list of transferable skills you feel would be the best to acquire. Narrow your choice to 1. Why did you choose that one?