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### Career Plans Are Dangerous

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"Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Despite the tendency to slip in some of the questions Google asks when interviewing people (such as, what is the next number in this sequence: 10, 9, 60, 90, 70, 66..?), this remains a fairly popular question when you are looking a job.

It's usually an extremely silly question (although you are not supposed to say that in your response.) You know most of the reasons why the question is so bad: It begs a lame joke ("When, Ms. Manager, do you think you will be moving on?"), or brown-nosing ("I hope to be well along my career within this fine company") and it assumes that you are going to indeed like working at "this fine company" and that they are going to enjoy having you.

But there is a bigger reason the question is awful. It assumes the world is going to remain constant between now and then. That is never a good idea.

If in 2007 you asked people who worked in the mortgage banking or real estate business, or in journalism or at Blockbuster what they were expecting to be doing in 2012, we guarantee you their answer isn't what they are doing now.

If you don't know what the world is going to look like five years from now, there is not a lot of sense trying to predict potential external factors planning your career based on that dubious prediction. ("Let's see, it's 2007 and I am associate store manager of a Blockbuster store. The world is always going to want to make it a "Blockbuster" night, so I am going to plan on being a regional manager. Yes, two promotions in five years. That feels right. So, that's my plan.")

**So are we saying career planning is waste of time? Yes, much of the time it is, at least as it is typically taught.**

Let's deal with the exceptions first. If you want to work in an industry where the industry is fairly predictable — say nursing — then plan away. The courses you need to take to gain an entry position are well known and so is the career path and the things you need to do to advance. So, simply figure out where you actually want to be in five years, and work backwards, just like all the career planning manuals tell you.

But increasingly, the world is not this predictable. And it is in settings of high uncertainty where traditional career planning is both a waste of time and potentially dangerous. A career plan can lead you into a false sense of confidence, where you fail to see opportunities as they arise and miss taking smart steps you otherwise hadn't planned for.

You need an alternative. Let us suggest one.

Instead of formulating the logically perfect ending job and the optimal path to get there, begin with a *direction*, based on a real desire, and complement that with a *strategy* to discover and create opportunities consistent with that desire.

In an uncertain world you can't even come close to saying what a specific job might be, but you can say what's valuable and important to you. Who are you? What matters to you? Is it working in a specific industry? Managing people or not? The answers will point you in productive directions.

Having considered that, what are your means at hand, your talents and skills, who you know, what you know? And how do you get started on concrete actions that are consistent with these desires? Some of those will take the form of looking for a job, but others might simultaneously entail starting something of your own. As you act, different opportunities will present themselves.

So, the process looks like this:

1. Determine your desire
2. Take a step toward it
3. Incorporate what you learn from taking that step
4. Take another step
5. Learn from that one
6. Repeat until you have a job, your own business, or have achieved your goal

It's not career planning. It's acting your way into a future you want.

(Oh, by the way. Still curious about that Google question? The numbers in the list are in ascending order, based on the number of letters in the spelled-out numbers, as the Wall Street Journal pointed out (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204552304577113003705089744.html>) . "A correct response will have nine letters: 96, for instance. A cleverer answer is "one googol." That's the huge number that can be written as a "1" with a hundred zeros after it. Google, the company's name, was originally a misspelling of 'googol.'")

*This post is part of the special series [The New Rules for Getting a Job](http://hbr.org/special-collections/insight/the-new-rules-for-getting-a-job) (<http://hbr.org/special-collections/insight/the-new-rules-for-getting-a-job>) , and an adapted version of it is included in the [HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job](http://hbr.org/product/hbr-guide-to-getting-the-right-job/an/11737-SBC-ENG) (<http://hbr.org/product/hbr-guide-to-getting-the-right-job/an/11737-SBC-ENG>) .*