



Stanford eCorner

Do What You Like to Get Where You Want

John Melo, *Amyris Biotechnologies*

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John Melo, CEO of Amyris Biotechnologies, enjoyed building oscilloscopes, circuits and transistors - and yet he was a college dropout. In this clip, Melo comments on his non-linear career path and how his passion, personal interest, and sense of independence have propelled him from one episodic position to another. He states that he first looked for opportunities to do the things he loved to do, and then focused on the places he wanted to be.



Transcript

I'm sort of a strange case in that I dropped out. I wanted to be an electrical engineer, so I was pursuing an EE and well on my way and then I decided I like building oscilloscopes at a time when the world needed a different application for oscilloscopes which was using oscilloscopes to diagnose computers in cars, specifically. So I left school to go build oscilloscopes and then turned that into a career, and from that, did other things. I really started as a guy who loved transistors and liked to build circuits and liked to turn those circuits into funny lines on a screen. From there, evolved into business and other parts of life. How did you get into a field like biotechnology or molecules? It's just so chemistry intensive. Since you didn't have any expertise in that area, so why would you not go for a field that was closer to what you had a background in, something that was more relevant? It's a great question. I have to tell you, I only think about that when I find the days where I'm getting lost in all the verbiage. I say that because I can tell you throughout my career, it's never been linear. It has never been based on my studies and my experiences, here are the jobs I'm aiming from.

It has actually been much more about here are the things I love to do. It's funny. The other thing I want to be realistic about, early on, I don't think I had much choice. Reality is I probably did, but my confidence level was such that I didn't think of it as much choice. I thought of it as an interesting opportunity came around, it looked like interesting work, and I did it. The more I did that and started to accumulate a portfolio of different experiences, the more I started to develop this view of the things I like to do. They weren't jobs. They were attributes. I like to work with people. I like to inspire groups.

So I started to develop what it was that I liked to do, and then I became pretty selective in ending up in the places I like to be. I'll give you a perfect example. When I went into the oil industry, I had had quite an extensive experience in the automotive vertical. So I was recruited to Amoco Oil to turn around an automotive business they had. It was interesting. When I was recruited, the president of the oil company said to me, "You should feel good about coming to work for us. We'll take care of you." I'm like, "What do you mean you'll take care of me?" "Yes, we've got a pension and there's five years vesting." It was all completely foreign to me. The last thing I wanted to do was have any big corporation take care of me. I just wasn't wired that way. So then I get in.

Six months after being there, BP merges with Amoco, and at that point, I think, "This is good." My wife and I, we bought a house in Illinois. We're moving from the Bay Area to Illinois, and we literally had been in the house for two weeks when the merger got announced. I had no idea. It hit me on the left field. So my wife and I said, "So what do we do? Do we finish the house and sell it? What do we do?" I never imagined myself going from leading an automotive business inside of a big oil

company to leading the rebranding of BP. If I had fixated myself on all I do is this kind of thing, I can guarantee you, I never would have ended up in rebranding the company. I don't know. It just kind of happens.