



Stanford eCorner

Avoid the Wrong Job

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Stan Christensen, Stanford instructor and a partner at [Arbor Advisors](#), outlines a few of the erroneous career assumptions that land workers in an ill-fitting career. Don't take a job simply to build your resume; follow your passions, rather than guessing what an employer will want. The fun should outweigh the drudgery - even in entry-level positions. Don't feel that by taking one job, you're committing to a career; people switch teams often. And remain a generalist, rather than specializing in a single pursuit, as this will retain your flexibility and keep your skills from becoming irrelevant.



Transcript

I think the people end up in the wrong careers often and I think part of that is that they make unhelpful assumptions and as we talk about the negotiation class, a lot of bad decisions come from making unnecessary assumptions. So I just wanted to write down a couple of these here that I think are key assumptions that people erroneously make that sometimes get them in trouble. The first one I've alluded to is about building your resume. So don't do things because you think it's what other people want you to do. You're not going to be able to outguess them. You will likely if you do things that you feel passionately about find similarly minded people or people who appreciate your experience and you will fit in somewhere. I think that trying to outguess what people want is a bad decision. I think that you get to tell your stories. So when I interview lots of people including students for jobs, and what I'm interested most in is what their story. Why did they make the choices they made.

And you get to craft that story. And so I don't think that focusing too much on how someone else is going to interpret or judge your story through a piece of paper is worth spending years doing something that you think is painful. Which relates to the second bullet point, people say, wow I'm just going to do this job for two or three years. I'm going to hate it but it's going to get me to the next level. I think the most important criteria when thinking about how to choose a job is pick something you think is fun that you're going to enjoy. You're going to prosper, do well in things that you're having fun with and so it isn't about sort of pain at work. You know there's a reason they call it work. There's a reason they pay you. It's not all fun. There's going to be some of it that's probably drudgery particularly in junior level jobs.

But I think that taking a job just so you can move forward and get to another job is generally, you know, the pain of that outweighs the gain. You have to choose a career now. So most of you will move around quite a bit. Your first job, you're likely to stay in for two or three years. If I look back at my experience, so there were 800 at Harvard Business School that graduated and they kept track of how long we stayed in our careers. So across 800 students, the average tenure in their first job out of business school was 11 months. OK. That was the average and I stayed ten years. So choosing a career or a job is not necessarily a long-term decision. There's plenty of time to try lots of different things.

You know I thought the whole world in career I think is even becoming irrelevant. I thought how do I title this something different. Is it negotiating jobs? Is it negotiating experiences? But you're not going to have most of you long-term careers where

you're at a company and you get a gold watch after, you know, 30 years of service. The world has changed. And so people think that the first job out of school is such a huge decision. And I don't think it is. We'll talk a little bit about how to make that choice. But just, if you could subtract that anxiety, you're more likely to end up in a position that's actually fun that you enjoy. Specialization is the best route to success. I think that's a faulty assumption.

I think that we live in a world where there's increased specialization pressure. People want you to specialize. But actually what you want is to be a generalist. And for a bunch of reasons. Number one it's more fun to have different projects. You don't want to be that person who knows the- let's say you go to an investment bank and everybody knows how to use the program Excel. Lots of you already know how to use Excel. You don't want to be the top person in Excel. There are diminishing returns to spending all your extra time being the best at PowerPoint, the best at Excel. It just doesn't matter.

I remember when I was doing spreadsheets we didn't have Excel. It was Lotus 1, 2, 3 and, you know, all of the skills that I learned at Lotus 1, 2, 3, I was great at Macros, I was really quick, I never do it anymore. I never use it. So special, one of the dangers of specialization is it's going to become irrelevant whatever you specialize in. And I think that what you want to do is put yourself in a position to take advantage of opportunities when they come up.