

1970 5
✓

Improving The Quality of Career Decisions

Consider the following testimony by a man who is now a highly successful writer:

I was close to forty when I discovered I was a failure. I had a job working at a resort hotel and was supposedly in charge of building a golf course. One day a man we all called "Mike the plumber" came up and began talking to me. Soon he asked "How old are you?" I said I was in my late thirties and he demanded "When are you going to do something, when will you get yours?"

At that instant I realized I was in many ways a failure. I know I had many abilities and a high I.Q.; I had a great wife and two wonderful children. Yet I had just drifted from one job to another - sixty in all and most of them awful. Then and there, talking to Mike the plumber, I vowed to myself "I'm going to do something about my life".

This anecdote underlines a penetrating point once made by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: A man's character is formed by his decisions.

Most of us realize that we make countless decisions every day. We also know that certain decisions - Which career do we choose? Which person do we take as a mate? Will we move from one part of the country to another? Will we take the risk in changing jobs? - are extremely important and will strongly effect the subsequent course of our lives.

Can the quality of our decisions be improved? Can we avoid certain mistakes in decision-making which many people make and which lead to poor rather than effective decisions? The answer to these questions is clearly "Yes!". In the rest of this column I will briefly outline some of the steps of effective decision making, especially with regard to deciding on a job or career. It is very important to keep in mind that a decision about a career is not a once-and-for-all-time decision. Many people, especially those just getting started, do have to try-out several different careers. And even later in life, as suggested by the anecdote above, a person may be changing from one career to another career and certainly from one job to another.

What are some of the mistakes commonly made by the individual who is attempting to decide on a career?

1. Just drifting along, taking whatever job comes one's way and failing to develop a successful career.
2. Failure to recognize and use one's own interests, abilities, potentials.
3. Choosing impulsively, taking the first opportunity that comes along and then getting stuck in a rut.
4. Relying too heavily on the advice of others and failing to make a decision for oneself.
5. Failure to get reliable information about the job market, especially trends and newly developing occupations.
6. Failure to secure professional guidance from such specialists as school counsellors, employment counsellors, private career counsellors.
7. Following the urging of friends, associates or even parents who may have good intentions but who are poorly informed about the labor market, occupations and the process of decision-making.
8. Being guided only by money considerations and failure to develop a career goal which will also aid one's personal development and lead to both job satisfaction and a desirable quality of life.

Having identified some of the common mistakes which are part of low quality decision making, now we can ask the reverse question: "What do ideal decision-makers do which enables them to arrive at good quality decisions?" It is important to keep in mind that the seven stages which I am going to outline are "ideal" and most people must be taught how to take some of the steps. From a great deal of research on the topic of decision-making, we can state that the individual who has learned to follow these steps is clearly more likely to make a decision which leads to satisfaction, whereas the person who omits one or several of the steps or who decides impulsively is more likely to experience regret and dissatisfaction.

To make a good quality and satisfying decision, then, the decision-maker (within the limits of ability) should:

1. look at a wide range of alternatives,
2. try to determine what values are associated with the choice being made,
3. examine the risks and both positive and negative consequences which might result from each possible course of action,
4. after looking at a wide range of alternatives and narrowing down the field of choice, then get new and more information on the remaining alternative(s),
5. listen to the advice and opinions of other people, at least those who have good information and first-hand experience with the choices being considered, and take the expert opinion into account even when it conflicts with the course of action which one prefers,
6. when making a final decision, review the pros and cons of all alternatives which one has considered, even those which have so far seemed unacceptable, and, finally,
7. make actual plans for carrying out the decision and taking action, including being prepared to meet the various risks or difficulties which are known beforehand and likely to arise.

Two more considerations are important. One, remember that one may always have to re-decide. Very little is absolutely certain in this world. Second, it is safe to assume that the more steps one omits in the process of making an important decision, the more likely one is to be dissatisfied and experience post-decisional regret and confusion.

In finishing, I wish to emphasize four points about career decision-making: First, decisions about careers are important, complicated, and stressful; second, there is a way to improve the quality of decision-making about careers; third, people, especially those making first or mid-career choices, can profit from guidance about decision-making.

In closing, I wish to emphasize that making a "good" decision about career or other important issues in life is stressful. I think that this point is well illustrated by the following unburdening to his friend by Warren G. Harding, who was President of the United States from 1921 to 1923.

He once remarked:

John, I can't make a damn thing out of this tax problem. I listen to one side and they seem right, and then God! I talk to the other side and they seem just as right, and there I am where I started. I know that somewhere there is a book that would give me the truth, but hell, I couldn't read the book. I know somewhere there is an economist who knows the truth, but I don't know where to find him and haven't the sense to know him and trust him when I did find him. God, what a job.

R. Vance Peavy, D.Ed.
Associate Professor
Department of Psychological
Foundations in Education
University of Victoria