

Planning your career in times of trouble: an assessment

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Abstract

After the 2008 crisis, the labor market changed substantially, providing less opportunities and a more aggressive environment to prospective candidates for job positions. We discuss some of the facts that are currently shaping the market and suggest strategies that could provide a focus to the difficult task of repositioning oneself.

Keywords: career advancement, crisis, labor market, technology.

1 Introduction

Many professionals are facing hard times. Since the 2008 crisis the labor market is offering less opportunities. Evolving in the career requires an added effort to train, to accept challenges, to compete for better positions. Even in economies that face full employment, like Brazilian's, the quality of the working environment, the level of salaries, and the availability of new opportunities for progressing in the career are shrinking.

The working environment is becoming more aggressive. For someone that applies for a position, it is important to understand what the employers are seeking, what are the consequences of technological evolution, in what new ways the workplace is being organized. These are important elements to consider in planning one's career.

But it is also important to examine the values, the principles, and the emotions that drive each one in their personal choices. A job consumes at least one third of the daily available time and is the main source of wealth for most people. Moreover, we evolve in knowledge, experience and wisdom through the opportunities offered by working.

So, it is not just a matter of paying the bills.

In this text some of these elements are discussed, taking the global crisis as a background. In the next section, the requirements of the contemporaneous working environment are examined, and some hints on preparing a CV accordingly are briefly commented. Section 3 highlights the expectations of the candidates regarding their earnings, and some of the options that may be pursued by prospective workers are pointed out. Then, in the following section, the problem of losing one's job and the arduous task of returning to the labor market are looked over. Section 5 is dedicated to the situation of elder

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professionals, focusing on high-end specialists. Finally, some concluding remarks are presented.

2 What are employers seeking in their employees

The obvious lesson from capitalism is that firms need profits to survive and thrive in a competitive world. In times of crisis, the search for revenues and the reduction of costs are more aggressively pursued, putting added pressure on the workforce. There is a trend towards reduced wages, less job opportunities and a more tense relationship between employers and employees. Economist Patrick Artus suggests that the figures vary significantly from one country to the other but, for example, “in Spain, the reduction of real wages, when compared to the levels before the crisis, amounts to 50%”. In Italy, according to him, it is around 18%. In France, it goes about just 2% [2].

Given this state of things, searching for a position will require the candidate to be better qualified, to apply to more selection processes and to be willing to accept not so good offers.

Companies wish to obtain a surplus from their workers. This surplus will be a result of the personal qualities and the productivity of each professional. as well as the firm’s capital assets, technology, and management practices. And usually, there are a number of abilities and qualifications that are valued by prospective employers that exceed the obvious requirement of being able to do a task properly. For descriptive purposes, they were grouped here in four grand sets: resilience, knowledge, competence and flexibility.

Resilience

Resilience is the most traditional value sought by employers. It is, generally speaking, the ability to stay put when faced with difficult situations. Usually, three different talents are required. The first one is loyalty to the firm, to managers and colleagues. Second to it, an ethical adherence to personal, professional and corporate principles. And finally, a willingness to confront sacrifices with added effort to overcome unexpected challenges.

Evidence from research suggests that most firms are having a hard time finding people that are resilient. Most young professionals have nowadays a critical attitude towards managers and colleagues. They tend to search continuously for new job positions and they expose themselves intensely in social networks. They tend, moreover, to overreact when pressed. This so-called Generation Y, born in the eighties, is technically wise and is aware of marketing and internal communications strategies. And, according to a research conducted in 2010 by Paul Harvey, a professor at the University of New Hampshire, its members are “more entitlement-minded than older workers”. According to Harvey [1]:

“Managers have reported a lot of problems associated with this – primarily that these employees have unrealistic expectations and a strong resistance toward accepting negative feedback. Basically entitlement involves having an inflated view of oneself, and managers are finding that

younger employees are often very resistant to anything that doesn't involve praise and rewards".

Also, in these days, entrepreneurship is overvalued among young people. A diffused impression that opening one's own business can be a somewhat comfortable option prevails. But, in fact, this is a path that, albeit rewarding, requires focus, smartness and really hard working. This kind of feeling, however, provides, in the end of the day, the illusion of a backdoor exit. It will prevent people from doing an extra effort when it is required by the employer, or from accepting harsh criticism or psychological pressure.

Knowledge

The higher the requirements for a job, the more valued is the second set of talents pointed out: knowledge. It can be thought of as the formal and practical information the worker has gathered and is able to manage during his/her activity. There are three ways to assess knowledge: through evidence presented by the candidate in the form of titles, formal studies and certification, through testing, and through experience. Most selection techniques, such as CV analysis, written tests, practical exercises and interviews, focus on this set of talents. Résumés and CVs also focus on providing evidence of knowledge.

There are a few ways to increase one's personal knowledge base. The first and most common one is vertical formal specialization. The person goes from high school, to college, to graduate studies. It is a track that provides a refined competence in dealing with a narrow set of problems. This approach relates to a focused vision of the labor market and has two additional advantages: it qualifies for more advanced job positions and reveals an ability to study hard and to improve one's skills.

A second way to increase knowledge is horizontal formal studies. The individual decides to work on a new degree with about the same level, such as a second technical course or a second bachelor degree, or an additional major. It adds flexibility to the professional description and increases dramatically the general and technical culture of the student. Usually it is related to an effort to change the area of activity, but does not necessarily provide a path to more advanced job positions.

A third option is to complement one's basic qualifications with additional studies through specific training. There are three main ways to do that. The first one, to attend short academic courses, free courses and certificate courses. The second one, to participate in seminars, congresses or meetings. These opportunities provide two important values: being up to date with technology and market vision, and networking with colleagues and researchers. They are important for professionals of all levels. Operational and technical workers can benefit from pre or post-conference training sessions, certification testing sessions and specific presentations. Academic personnel, managers and executives can present papers and participate in panels and debates. A third approach is on-the-job training. It can be formal and certified, providing evidence of compliance with a set of skills, or a mere result of practice, being related to internship and to previous job positions.

In any case, the importance of reading, self-study and writing has to be assessed. A good professional never quits studying, as many interesting novelties will become part of their jobs before arriving to the academy or to the in-company training sessions. And high-level professionals also have to be able to engage in social life as a part of their duties and must have a proper cultural background to be up to the task. Understanding culture and politics, appreciate theater, dance and music, be able to discuss cinema, literature or the arts may be as important as having technical skills and a sophisticated technical knowledge.

Competence

Competence is a third set of talents being discussed in this section. It can be thought of as the ability to perform consistently, with a high productivity track. Competence requires the combination of precision, compliance to quality standards, and problem solving skills. Competent workers have to be able to work in teams and therefore to manage interpersonal communication effectively.

Competence is not easy to assess, and most firms rely on an initial trial period to test the worker and realize if he/she is competent. Nowadays it is fashionable to include in the CV references to results achieved in previous jobs as an evidence of competence. This information, however, is usually received by prospective employers *cum grano salis*. Most of them are conscious that an interesting candidate, with an attractive CV, a proper professional story, and a seductive approach, can reveal himself to be a less-than-adequate worker, when competence is at stake.

Interpersonal communication has become an increasingly important part of the job qualification. Current work organization techniques rely heavily on teams as a way to increase both productivity and flexibility in accomplishing complex tasks. Thus, workers are required to interact frequently, in order to organize the activity, share responsibilities and engage in problem solving sessions.

One must keep in mind, also, that modern life requires people to spend most of their useful daily hours in the workplace. In many cases, colleagues spend more time within themselves than in family. So, being friendly and proactive is a highly desirable attitude, in order to avoid unnecessary tension in the firm.

Flexibility

Finally, there is flexibility. It is the general ability to adapt to a changing environment and develop new ways to improve the working and business processes. It involves the willingness and talent to acquire new knowledge and skills. Moreover, it also implies competence in dealing with uncertainty. So it requires a combination of risk assessing abilities, strategic thinking, interdisciplinary thinking, and a talent to reevaluate approaches and assets.

In technical areas flexibility is a must. Information technology, for instance, has a very short time span between each generation of products, requiring an almost continuous effort to be up-to-date and to acquire knowledge about new techniques. But management is another activity that is increasingly becoming volatile and puts a pressure on the ability to adjust to new realities. Managers

are continuously demanded to create new ways to conceive products, improve processes, interact with people and solve market issues [3].

The Internet is the environment that poses the most complex questions to management at this moment. Social networks are a phenomenon that grew in relevance during this century, and their capillarity proposes challenges in all management dimensions. They are a source of market opportunities but are also a risk to the corporate image. They increase job productivity as well as they interfere in workplace relations. They promote networking, but are at the same time a source of distraction. To fully understand these Internet resources and to grasp the potential benefits they can provide, new ways of thinking marketing and management are a must.

Compliance strategies

It is hard to anticipate the contents of selection tests or to realize what will be asked in a job interview. Classic testing techniques, such as IQ testing or focus group meetings are still used. Most employers, however, do realize that candidates are nowadays trained in these kinds of tests and experiments. Thus, they are being increasingly applied as an initial step in the process, usually online. So, ability in navigating through menus and routines is a must for any candidate.

The candidate should also be aware that an investigation may be conducted on the public production of comments and texts posted in social networks, blogs and discussion lists. Academic and professional production could also be screened, sometimes including undergraduate papers, exercises and tests. In times of big data, the prospective worker's previous life is unavoidably going public and an overall precautious attitude is usually a plus. Being politically sound and clearly separating personal and professional activities are also adequate lifelong strategies.

Most firms have a website that clearly states their philosophy, corporate culture and working habits. It is interesting to study this material and get to know the company. During the interview, the candidate can point out that this task has been done. Most employers will be happy to confirm the interest of the prospective worker in the details of corporate life.

A manager or a consultant that examines a reasonable number of candidates usually conducts the interviews. So, he/she is experienced and it is hard and risky to cheat on him/her. Be yourself. Being completely honest and transparent is a clear recommendation. It is better for both sides when an eventual inadequacy becomes evident during the interview. To be fired a few months later, in a much more disgusting situation, is obviously worse.

The proper CV

There are dozens of adequate CV examples, readily available on the Internet. It is also easy to select excellent on-line recommendations regarding how to write a proper one. However, reviewing some rules on how to use a CV can be rewarding:

- A CV or résumé is just a presentation. It does not ensure that you will be considered as a candidate. To send CVs at random is not a suitable strategy.
- A CV is a marketing piece. It has to be tailored to the position you are applying to. Do not put all your life in the text, but only the information that is relevant to the job description. Additional information can be provided during the interviews.
- The text has to be short. Three or four pages is OK, five pages is a limit. Longer CVs usually have useless information. Do not fill a short CV with unimportant data just to make it longer.
- Focus on your previous professional life, indicating employments, activities and achievements. Be extremely honest. For example, do not use consultancy as a euphemism to cover unemployment, or ABD as a description for an unfinished course.
- Education and training are obviously relevant. Be precise on your education level and provide data only on the courses that have been completed and that have something to do with the job you are applying to.
- Be careful with productivity information. Do not disclose private information regarding previous employers or clients. Limit yourself to publicly available data and provide sources or evidence.
- Limit yourself to objective facts that can be observed and verified. Whenever asked, evidence has to be offered for all data provided: certificates, transcripts, proof of attendance such as badges, copies of published or presented papers, patents, published interviews or articles on projects and activities, contracts, and so on.

A summary

The 2008 crisis has changed the labor market landscape, at least at a microeconomic level. There is an evident shortage of job opportunities and wages have generally decreased. Candidates' qualification is less homogeneous, due to two counteracting forces. On the one hand, some people that had difficulties in finding a job right after the crisis peak invested in increasing their qualifications with additional studies. And, on the other hand, reduced credit compromised the possibility of getting a degree for many others. A structural change in the channels used to match supply and demand result also in a shorter time span from the announcement of a position to its fulfillment. So, candidates have to be able to efficiently monitor these new channels, such as social networks, electronic ads and online news and messages.

In summarizing this section's discussion, I point out that:

- Evidence of experience, training and education are central to a CV. However, they are not the only issues examined by the prospective employer when screening through candidates. Other abilities are at stake and are introduced in the process. The candidate has to be prepared to discuss them and present some evidence of compliance.
- Corporations do not end the selection process when the new worker is hired. The professional will be under scrutiny for a certain time to assess

the presence of qualities related to resilience, competence and flexibility that are required in the current working environment.

- The 2008 crisis did change the labor market landscape. Relations between employers and employees may involve requirements of added effort from the workforce without additional compensation. Selection processes will possibly reflect this new relationship.
- The Internet increasingly offers opportunities and threats to most firms and individuals. Being creative in dealing with it and wise to do it properly is a must.

3 Do employees make money?

In a more general framework, we should be discussing now what are employees expecting from their employers. There is a very wide spectrum of interests when choosing a firm to work in. Recall the old-fashioned five-level hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow in 1943: employees may be fulfilling physical survival needs; safety needs; love and caring needs; esteem needs; and self-actualization needs. It is hard to focus on a higher level need if a lower one is not fulfilled [7].

In current times, basic needs are fully provided in the workplace, at least in developed OECD countries. But higher level needs are seen nowadays as a duty of the employee, not the employer. Therefore, people tend to monetize the opportunities of getting additional need fulfillment. In other words, a combination of wage, time availability and fringe benefits is offered to the worker, and it is his responsibility to manage these assets in order to achieve his needs. It is up to the employee to comply with personal ambition and with corporate expectations regarding the evolution of his career.

So, employees would need a net income to invest on themselves, in order to provide for a continuing growth in their career. They are also willing to acquire assets that will prove important for their retirement and for family needs, such as the education of their children.

Thus, employees are in search of employers that provide high pay, time management flexibility, and plenty of resources to manage their careers. Before the 2008 crisis, firms did engage in a kind of competition to offer these advantages and therefore attract the best-of-the-breed professionals. Many of these practices are still in place in spite of the crisis. So, a priority in providing a wealthy and positive-minded working environment still pervades corporate culture in many companies. But, the level of in-firm investment in human capital has decreased dramatically, although requirements over potential candidates are still on the high side. And, in general, fringe benefits have shrunk.

But do employees really make money? It is a weird question. In general, white-collar professions do not provide a high level of wealth. For example, according to data published in *Wired* magazine, sales and service jobs currently get an average salary of around 25 thousand dollars a year in the US, compared to 35 thousand for manufacturing and administrative positions, and 50 thousand for engineers and scientists. But, as the story points out, "high-skill jobs in engineering and technology are the best-paid around, but as a share of the workforce their numbers have barely grown – from 4 percent at the dawn of

computer age to a measly 7 percent today” [5]. Data provided also reveal that the real wages remained remarkably stable in the last 30 years in the US, but decreased since 9/11. More recently, a loss of around 5 percent on average is noticeable since the beginning of the 2008 crisis. According to consultant Roger Martin [6]:

“Real wages for production and non-supervisory workers have declined since the mid-1970s. The share of jobs that are unionized has plummeted back almost to the level it was before 1935 when the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) facilitated a huge increase in unionization. High unemployment has persisted in the jobless recovery. For those fortunate enough to have full time employment, job security is down, and pension and health benefits are shrinking. No trend for labor is positive.”

Given the situation, workers may be tempted to pursue alternative paths. The market usually provides three potentially successful options: variable compensation, an executive career, and entrepreneurship.

Payment plans and risk assessment

Most firms have a menu of payment alternatives they can offer their employees. They are usually a combination of a fixed salary, plus benefits bound to productivity results, plus a commission on sales or discounts obtained by the employee. Risk-averse employees tend to prefer a higher fixed wage and a smaller variable pay. But those who are attracted to risk, or rely on their own effort, prefer to gamble on a higher overall pay, thanks to a higher variable compensation.

Some of these contract menus are applied mostly to certain activities, like sales or procurement. In many firms, technical and clerical workers may not have access to them. So, in a firm with that kind of culture, a shift to commercial or managerial positions may be a requisite to have access to a higher pay.

There are also other reasons beyond increased earnings to consider a career shift. Younger professionals tend to value the pleasure of technical challenges and problem solving. Older people become more and more involved with the human side of their jobs and may prefer to deal with people.

Also, the knowledge acquired during professional life qualifies a person to deal with more complex situations, involving technical, human and economic aspects. So, you become prepared to manage these variables and learn from new problems and challenges. In other words, managing can be as rewarding in personal terms as in monetary terms.

The path to an executive career

Executives represent owners and investors inside the company. They have to provide for the administration of the firm, combining knowledge of operations and accounting, understanding of market trends and preferences, proper contracting practices, and negotiating capability.

A good manager also has to be able to administrate fairness and justice in the workplace and provide for the most efficient distribution of resources. Leadership thus requires moral stature, communication skills and consistency in the decisions taken. He/she also has to balance short and long-term vision, with a proper adjustment between strategic action and operational action.

An executive has to understand the corporate culture and to shape it to the benefit of the company. Teams under his/her supervision have to perform effectively and achieve the operational and financial targets previously stated by the shareholders.

Executives are not born with all these values and talents. They are built by experience, by training and by deliberation on the results achieved along a career. This is the reason why most firms have formal or informal programs to identify people that have some potential to become executives. They have to be prepared for the role.

Executives are chosen and trained with an eye on their personal abilities, regardless of their previous positions. But there is a general prejudice regarding the evolution of certain professionals. For example, a national survey by the American Society for Quality – ASQ reveals “only 9% of respondents said engineers would make the best chief executive officers, behind people from other fields including operations, finance, marketing, academia and sales”. But a brief look at the most important corporations shows otherwise. There is a number of CEOs that come from the technical field. And many mid-career engineers supervise small teams of up to ten colleagues or technicians, being therefore involved in management to a certain degree [10].

More than discussing if a technical, marketing, or managerial background better fits a potential executive, it is important to assess that professionals of all these and other areas will, at some moment, be offered an opportunity to change his/her career track. And eventually climb the executive ladder. The path to an executive position is usually in-company. This is an important reason to stay longer in a job.

Owning your own business

Another trendy option is to open one’s business. To succeed, a mix of talents is required, combining personal abilities and knowledge not easily replicated or mocked by others. These abilities may include technology ownership, design and marketing capabilities, managerial skills to overlook teams and negotiate with clients, general understanding of legislation and rules regarding businesses, financial awareness, and so on. Freelancing or small firm ownership also represents a life style: you choose not to have managers or rules limiting your decisions, and accept the uncertainties that come along. No fixed salaries, no insurance coverage, no retirement plan, and so on. You want it, you will have to contract it at your own expense.

Contrary to popular belief, a business owner has to work much more than an employee, and has to be able to face higher risks. If things go wrong, bankruptcy is always a shadow that pervades the picture. You won’t be just unemployed. You will have debts to pay and all your assets may be at stake.

So, it is not surprising that many such initiatives won't endure the challenges they face. OECD statistics showed in 2003 an annual death rate of 4.3% of small firms in Australia, 6.8% in Finland, 7.4% in Italy, 10.4% in the US. In Brazil, where this index was 11.4%, only 10 percent of small firms survive ten years, and only three percent arrive to twenty years [8].

So, given these adversities, why is entrepreneurship so pervasive? In most countries, small firms are more than 95 percent of the total. And provide at least a half of the job positions offered in the labor market. Well, there are many reasons and a few texts discuss them widely (for example, [8]). What I want to point out is that the winners may conquer a level of wealth that is not available to employees. A number of millionaires in the US are small business owners that made it gradually along the years. And most of them have simple businesses, such as commercial stores or service providers.

But another reason to run one's own business is excitement. It is the willingness to take risks, to fight in the market, to be involved with investment, with market share, with competition. Eventually, the compelling sensation of being a winner. If you are made for fighting, this is for you.

Does love have to be misery?

When Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, God condemned them to obtain their bread with their sweat (Genesis 3: 19). This traditional register from the Bible is evidence that a relationship between work and sacrifice has been recognized since the dawn of mankind.

Today, working hard is not meant to be so. The complexity of the labor market provides a wide spectrum of specialized activities, and it is possible to recognize areas that suit to one's preferences. In other words, professional life can provide huge satisfaction. Working hard can be emotionally rewarding. But success and satisfaction arrive only if you invest in your career:

- Be ambitious. There is nothing wrong with ambition, provided that you behave in a fair, honest and elegant way. There are different types of ambition: the ambition to be wealthy, to be recognized, to be powerful, to be competent, or simply to win in the market.
- Be ready to work hard and sacrifice other dimensions of your life to grow in your career. But do know your limits. It makes sense to invest in a career path if you love what you do, if you are qualified to do it, or if you can have recognition or wealth thanks to it. Otherwise, look for an alternative. In simple words, suffering is an unreasonable option, except for idealistic reasons.
- Respect money. It is the fair compensation for labor. Working for free or for too small a compensation is unfair to yourself, unless you do it for humanitarian reasons or as a voluntary activity.
- Be aware of your relationship with risk. Are you willing to take it or are you risk-averse? Consider carefully the professional situation you are living and the options you have in hand. Examine if they match your risk perception and risk tolerance.

- Plan your career. Prepare a long-term plan answering simple questions: where I am, where I want to be in two, five and ten years, what is the path I envision to grow to this desired situation, what are my strengths and weaknesses, what I need to do in order to improve. At this point, you may even consider options to work less, make less money, and focus on the quality of personal life, a trend known as *downshifting*.
- Invest in training by yourself, for an evolving path in your career. Do not trust only on opportunities offered by your employer. They are closely related to cost management and to resource availability. The timing of the firm may be different from yours.

But, most of all, try to be happy. Cherish the moments of satisfaction with the results achieved, the good relation with colleagues and clients, the problems solved, the experience acquired, the fights for a market chunk, and so on. Love your professional life; it is at least one third of your life. And avoid unnecessary suffering. If the profession is a constant source of pain, consider a change. Love is not meant to be misery.

4 I have been fired: now, what?

Losing a job during a crisis is a pervasive possibility and may happen to anyone. When faced with diminishing profits, the first reaction of a firm is to reduce costs. And the fastest way to do it is by reducing the workforce.

Also, a long crisis may induce a decrease in operational activity and, eventually, an increase in stocks. So, for some industries, personnel dismissal may become more of a permanent reality than a temporary reaction to a market situation. New jobs will have to be looked for elsewhere.

In practice, when you lose your post in such a circumstance, you face three problems. The first one is that your specialty and competence loses value in the labor market. In harsh words, you are not as needed anymore, or you are offered a lower pay. The second one is that you don't have access to plenty of resources to finance a change in your profile. The third one is that you will be emotionally affected by your situation and may not have the energy to keep going. These are three traps to be avoided: inadequacy, lack of resources, and dismay.

Inadequacy

The first question to be addressed is the reason of the layoff. Why, and why you. An honest examination is due, to provide the basis for further action. There are a few usual reasons:

- There is a crisis, and the employer is choosing whom to let go following a rule of thumb. This is a common reaction in firms. To choose at first the workers hired later, or the ones that can apply for retirement. Or lay off people in branches at first and in the headquarters later. Or eventually letting go unmarried people before married ones. And so the rules go on. They are mostly arbitrary or dictated by convenience, and it happens that you fall in one of them.

- You are on a temporary duty. With a difficult financial situation, it is unlikely that a permanent position will be available for you.
- You are overpaid. In other words, there are people available to do a comparable task for a lower salary, to the point that it pays off to let you go and hire someone else.
- You are underproductive. It may happen for different reasons. The most usual one is that everyone was in a comfort zone before the crisis knocked at the door. You simply had not been asked to increase your production in any way, and you didn't. Another common reason is that you became involved in so many clerical activities that your dedication to end activities was insufficient. But eventually technology evolves, or job requirements evolve, and you find yourself unable to cope with new targets.
- You don't fit the requirements of the job position or the values and practices of the firm's culture. A crisis is an opportunity to fire you. This is unlikely, but is usually how most employees feel they are treated when they are laid off. Reactions can become so emotional (with all rights) that some employers call security to follow the dismissed person out of the door.
- The employer goes out of business and you are left in the rain, dazzled and confused. Or you are self-employed and you go out of business. You find yourself lost in the rain, dazzled and confused.

It is important to have these questions answered because they will reveal if your dismissal was incidental or not. In the first case, it was just a matter of the moment. You can hope to be still qualified to your recently lost position and to find a similar job. In the second case, you need to reinvent yourself to a certain degree. If you don't, you will be imprisoned in the inadequacy trap.

What are usually the options to survive while you reinvent yourself? In few words, teaching, consulting, commerce, or a government position. You will make less money and maybe feel a lack of nobility in your new function, but this is temporary. Find your niche and begin nurturing yourself for a rebirth.

Lack of resources

The most immediate path to a job shift is education. But it has to be done efficiently and at a low cost, or at least at a cost that fits your budget. Some academic courses may be out of reach. To find a suitable path, a proper investigation on alternatives is a must: public colleges, grants, short courses, maybe a certificate diploma. Avoid making debts and applying for loans. If don't do this homework, you may be trapped in the lack of resources ambush.

A second option to a formal degree is self-study. It is worth when one wants to remain in the same career area and needs to be up-to-date with technology. Certifications can provide evidence of one's advancement, and are significantly less expensive than following a formal course. In some areas (software support, specialized engineering) they are well accepted by the market. Another way to provide evidence of knowledge is given by teaching records.

One general note most people do not pay attention to is the fact that certain skills are more relevant to certain job positions and can be counterproductive to compete for others. Firms tend to resist contracting overqualified workers. So, continuing education makes sense as long as the worker reinforces his present skills or prepares for new positions. But investing in general education to earn more in the same position may be a risky bet.

Dismay

This is a third trap for the unemployed. The dismissal process itself can be painful to the point that the worker is emotionally affected and faces a breakdown. Eventually, depression and a permanent sensation of injustice may jeopardize the efforts to find a new placement.

It is difficult to realize that oneself is facing suffering and despair. The consciousness about this process usually comes when it is advanced. At this stage, it may have involved family, friends and contacts, making it more difficult to find a proper job. The solution involves a complex combination of clinical and psychological support, acceptance of a new line of job search and a huge personal effort to overcome the situation.

Strategy as an asset

Anyway, searching for a job is hard work to be pursued with tenacity. The effort has to be consistent with the working potential of the candidate. In few words, if you work nine to five when employed, you should work nine to five to find a job.

Build a strategy and execute it properly – for a while. Strategy provides you with an organized approach to a job search, but it may reveal itself to be flawed. Do not desparate. Examine the results so far, correct the strategy and execute it properly once again. Do it in an organized fashion, following a PDCA (plan, do, check, and act) cycle, until you arrive to the job position you desire. Consider temporary positions to provide cash. You will be able to invest in continuing education and training. And they keep you employed, therefore avoiding the traps mentioned before.

Consultant Daniel Roberts reviewed the progress of a number of successful young entrepreneurs [9]. Among the elements he selected to explain their achievements, a few can be adapted to our study, such as:

- Do your research: understand your strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and challenges you face, the market situation; decide on facts whenever you can have access to them.
- Differentiate: have some personal flavor that ensures you some advantage; it could be knowledge, experience, skills; or maybe a unique expertise or the ability to create and provide a specialized service; or even personal talents.
- Network: friends and colleagues can be an important asset to have access to a post or to keep a position; to redeem relationships can be a way to surround yourself with smart and reliable people, but most of all try to be

nice and generous; networking may not open opportunities at all, but at least will enrich your personal life.

- Rely on the new: looking at the past can prevent you from taking the proper steps into the future; fresh ideas and innovative knowledge are strong drivers for one's career.
- Rely on yourself: invest on training and on acquiring or improving your skills, but also balance responsibility with courage; be ready to take risks, think big, trust your intuition.
- Focus on fun: try to be happy and to be faithful to your values and dreams; rely on your feelings on family, friends, colleagues; let your obsessions drive you to an added investment in your career.
- Pursue growth and learning: to study has to be a continuous investment, an investment for life; gain in-depth expertise that can differentiate you in the market.
- Speak the truth: be transparent, honest, and reliable; it is nice to have a compelling story to tell, as long as it is a true one.
- Keep your focus: choose a strategy and stick to it; correct it whenever needed, but execute it properly.
- Bond to a mentor: a personal analysis is usually biased by preferences and by limitations; count on an experienced mentor that can provide you with sound advice and emotional support.

5 Aging and professional maturity

Each activity has a typical maturity gap, in which the professional will be providing his/her most valuable results. Sometimes this gap may match a certain age span. Great mathematicians, for instance, tend to be mostly young people and to provide their best results in their early thirties, or even before. But good lawyers, for example, are usually more aged: they have to know the law, the relevant cases that can support a theory, the behavior of each prosecutor and each judge, the subtleties of the courts' day-by-day. In this arena, experience counts, and is quite unusual to find a recognized lawyer with less than a dozen of years of hard working.

In other cases, the labor market adopts rules of thumb that may result in similar trends. Higher managing positions, for instance, are available to workers in their middle or last thirties, up to their middle forties. Generally speaking, it is considered counterproductive to hoist a young professional in his/her twenties to the upper management. But someone that never had this opportunity until his fifties will find to be very difficult to climb the ladder. In the eyes of the employer, ambition arrived too late, and the anticipation of his eventual willingness to retire in a few years will sterilize his efforts.

Common sense suggests that elder people have to leave the market to open some space for new generations of workers and managers, and to provide society with an opportunity to renew values and standards. Retirement is compensation that society rewards to people that made a contribution to its advancement. It provides the elders with time to transmit knowledge and wisdom to family and to the community. But, it is also a way to clear the path for new generations. In the corporate philosophy, the contribution of experience and vision that come

with age represent a reference. But, is to be offered through advice, consulting and training, not in operational or executive stances.

Unfortunately, the crisis corroded this logic because it destroyed valuable assets that would provide protection to people that was leaving the market. Mortgage plans, retirement plans, grants, compensations, were all affected by the crisis. Also, as life expectation steadily increased in the last century, new visions of career became prevalent. People in their mid sixties or even later still expect to pursue professional success, in an age that their parents or grandparents would prefer to grow flowers in their gardens and help educate their grandchildren.

There are outstanding examples of professionals that kept working with great success for their whole lives. Supreme Court's Associate Justice Ruth B. Ginsburg is 81-years old and has been serving the Court for 21 years, since 1993.

Businessman and quality guru Joseph M. Juran retired at 99 as an outstanding consultant and teacher, and died at 103. Investor and philanthropist George Soros is 84 and still presides his own fund management company. In Brazil, lawyer and human rights activist Sobral Pinto died at 98 and never quit practicing law. In 1983, at 90, he delivered a well-known speech against the military dictatorship in front of one million people in Rio de Janeiro.

These examples, however, are depicting persons that grew steadily in their careers and did not need to search for a job or to reinvent themselves in an advanced age. They are just examples of how competent and productive a good professional can be at any age. But someone that has to reposition the career or face a layoff after a certain age faces a completely different situation. What are the advantages and disadvantages when compared to younger professionals? What are the fears to overcome? What are the habits or attitudes that help or mine the efforts to find a new placement? The candidate has to address these questions and provide personal views on them, in order to design a path to a new employment. But, in general, the comments of the previous section will apply, with the proper adjustments to the particular case.

One especially efficient way to pave the road back to a professional career in an advanced age is to build on an outstanding role, a role that can be recognized by prospective employers or contractors. I discuss five of these roles that combine assets accumulated during a previous career, intellectual efforts, image building efforts and networking efforts. They are: the background advisor, the negotiator, the intellectual, the champion of a cause and the VIP. These are kind of high-end designs that fit specialized and notorious people.

The background advisor

For the elder, a decision-making post is somehow out of question. Put in crude words, and older person has an increased probability of facing a breakdown, getting ill, or even dying. Therefore it is better for the company to invest in younger professionals, less prone to these extreme risks. But an experienced manager or executive is always valuable, and a position as an advisor is welcome. Large corporations do it in all levels, from specific consulting positions on strategies and contracts, up to an advisory board of trustees that overviews the whole business.

To qualify to such positions, a large investment has to be done on public image and networking. The professional will have to combine a solid past career with communication skills and analytical proficiency. Being able to write on general issues, for example holding a magazine or a newspaper column, will do. Websites with good reputation will also do. Twitter activity was a good option in the first years of this prestigious social network, but nowadays it is a crowded space and it is hard to conquer evidence using it. But it can be a nice auxiliary tool.

Once in charge, the professional may be asked to reduce these parallel activities and decrease exposition. Background advisors do not have prominent presence. It is a sort of a more circumspect profile, in a way. Relying on a network of colleagues and keeping a continuous activity of mutual support will probably be the best options for a longstanding career.

The negotiator

This is a specialized and, in a way, a more sophisticated background role. Although the comments on the previous role apply, a stronger and more focused career path will be required. The person has to be recognized by peers as a qualified interlocutor.

There are a few different areas for negotiators: lobbying, business negotiation, and covert problem solving. In some cases they will be intertwined, but usually each one requires a specific approach and a different set of values and ethics. The prospective candidate has to be sure that they apply to his personal ideology.

Lobbying is the most visible kind of negotiation. There are a variety of approaches, from informative activity to explicit pressure. They go from reporting the clients' demands to the public to finding ways to convince decision makers on the convenience of taking the clients' side.

If lobbying has a public face, business negotiations are mostly private. They involve all kinds of commercial and financial operations that require some sort of agreement. Negotiators tend to specialize in certain areas, as they have to be savvy regarding the strategic use of regulation and of the market situation.

Negotiators have to rely strongly on qualified knowledge and privileged information. Covert problem solving is probably the area that requires the most sophisticated information gathering techniques and the most able contact strategies. However, it will also require a very specific set of values, focused on the client's interest, on confidence, and on a pragmatic choice of resources and lines of action. Not for everyone, though.

The intellectual

This is a role for people that developed a consistent academic background, a successful professional career, and a public exposure in discussions of facts or issues that are relevant for the public. An iconic example of an intellectual is former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. He is a scholar, he has been an outstanding civil employee, and is also nowadays a successful writer. Moreover,

he got personally involved in shaping contemporary American foreign policy, so he has something to say.

There are many other examples of outstanding intellectuals in recent history, from French writer Simone de Beauvoir to American photographer Gordon Parks. They may have very different origins and experiences, but they were notorious, respected, and involved in the public discussion of problems.

There is no way to build an intellectual image from one day to another, as it has to be founded on a consistent personal history.

The champion of a cause

The champion puts his/her energy in embracing a cause and work for its relevance to be recognized by public opinion or by a group of decision makers. He/she can act publicly, or within a specific group of people, or in a company. Such an action can be taken personally or through some NGO or other formal institution.

To champion a cause is a somewhat cynical strategy. You will not be involved in day-by-day hard working to make the cause thrive. Live it to the idealists. Your role is to convince people, to make the cause public, to gather support and resources to it, to involve the media. And to get a personal profit on that. Championing is voluntary work, but it pays off putting you in evidence.

But be aware that there is no free lunch. Good causes are easy to defend, but they hurt interests. You should be prepared to gather enemies. The good news is that you don't need to be notorious to become a successful champion. You just need to make an effort, to establish contacts, to lobby.

The VIP

Being a VIP requires you to be part of an elite and be publicly recognized at the same time. But beware: although the elite is not formed just by traditional family names anymore, this still is a valuable asset. If you don't have it, things may get overwhelmingly hard.

There are three paths to become part of the elite: fashion, money, and relationships. They don't need an explanation, but it is obvious that they have to be built much in advance and are strongly conditioned by chance. The VIP path, therefore, is for a very few.

Hiring a spin-doctor is a must. Being a VIP is expensive and requires a continuous effort to be in evidence, if not to the public, at least to the ones that count.

A final word: these roles have advantages and drawbacks; they open some doors as well as they close other ones. So, handle with care. And they apply to very few people. In general, being laid off in the late fifties and on is painful. Finding a new position requires patience and skills. A recent cover story of Brazilian newspaper "O Globo" reveals that, in Brazil, around 8% of men from 50 to 69 years old, totaling 1.3 million, do not have any kind of revenues, such as a wage or a pension. According to the article, most of them lack a proper education to have

access to a new job position. Thirteen percent live on their wives' salaries, nine percent on their parents' pension. These data are a result of a study of IPEA, a local economic research institute [3].

6 Conclusions

Surviving the labor market is no easy task. Building a competitive CV, with a professional story to tell and evidence of knowledge and accomplishments, is just a first step to be successful in finding and keeping a job. Career advancement relies on the ability to identify opportunities and to make the best of them. But the quality of the personal relations and the professional network that one is able to build also counts. An added effort to pursue training, to improve personal skills, to gather favorable exposure in the market is also a plus. And, at last but not least, a proper amount of luck and opportunity is required.

This assessment provides a quite thorough panorama of the options available to the prospective candidate to a job position. Some of the various situations that abound in the market are examined: the professional that wants to invest on his/her career, the mid-career worker that faces a dismissal, the elder that would like to pursue an extended professional experience. Recommendations provided by other authors were discussed, in order to build a picture that may help in planning a career. A wise combination of some of these recommendations can be a stimulus and a source of trust to those that are willing to face the labor market in this turbulent moment.

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