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LONG RUN CAREER PLANNING

By

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ABSTRACT

LONG RUN CAREER PLANNING

Leo C. Polopolus

Establishing lifetime career goals are extremely important. Those goals may be redirected over time as conditions and circumstances change. The first three years as a professional agricultural economist are most critical in establishing reputation and professional image.

Career development can be enhanced with a few carefully executed job changes. Various factors, however, restrict or constrain job mobility. Fellowships and sabbaticals are strongly recommended for career renewal and/or redirection. There are several preconditions for achieving success as an administrator.

There is a noticeable lack of flexibility in moving from positions in government and private industry to academia. However, there is some flexibility in moving from academia to government and industry. Inflexibility in movement from one type of employer to another is rooted in the performance standards of each type. Dual career households must expect added complexity to long range career planning.

Key Words: Career Planning, Career Goals, Career Paths, Changing Jobs, and Dual Careers.

LONG RUN CAREER PLANNING*

Leo C. Polopolus**

Introduction

Agricultural economists have expended considerable human capital over the past few decades in developing planning models for farms, industries, subsectors, national economies, and even government institutions. Our professionals have provided intellectual leadership in the empirical application of linear programming and other non-stochastic programming techniques for private firms and industries, as well as being among the early leaders of the planning, programming, and budgeting (PPB) techniques utilized by public institutions.

The irony of all of this is that agricultural economists have not utilized their considerable planning and programming skills for enhancing the long term welfare of agricultural economists. This follows from the well known axiom that professionals rarely utilize their expertise to solve their own personal problems.

This conference on Career Development for Agricultural Economists marks a refreshing beginning into an organized inquiry into the processes and factors involved with the planning and development of individuals in the profession of agricultural economics. We owe a great deal of gratitude to the Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics, particularly Tanya Roberts and Karen Bunch and members of the conference program committee, for giving

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our profession the opportunity to initiate dialogue about our own careers. Given the nature of our professional training, there is no reason why agricultural economists cannot contribute in the future to the body of literature on career planning and development of not only agricultural economists, but farmers, agribusinessmen, public decision makers, scientists, and other professionals in agriculture, public policy and natural resources.

At the outset, I must confess that I am not an expert on career planning and development. My remarks are based, however, upon twenty-six years of experience as an agricultural economist.

The Importance of Career Goals

Establishing goals at each phase of your professional career are extremely important. Over your lifespan, however, feel free to change those goals as conditions and circumstances change. Much like the process of driving an automobile, you need to be able to adjust your speed and direction in the event of a ten car pile-up a few hundred feet ahead. Industrial engineers refer to this process of adjusting to new information as information "feedback". You need to develop a new loop or route in light of new information or conditions in your life. For example, failing the Ph.D. Qualifying Examination for the third time will most likely create changes in your long term goals.

My critical career decision occurred as a senior in high school. I had been offered an \$11,000 per year scholarship in 1951 to study journalism at Pepperdine University (room, board, tuition, and laundry money, including a job as copy boy for the Sports Department of the Los Angeles Examiner). As the son of an immigrant small fruit and vegetable farmer in Southern California, eleven thousand dollars per year in 1951 for a seventeen year old seemed like a million dollars. But a lifetime career as a professional sports writer did not seem right for me. I had already been a professional

sports writer for two years for the daily Colton Courier. Moreover, through my 4-H Club work, I had conducted experiments on biological control of red scale in citrus (including a published paper while in high school), hydroponic production of tomatoes in a chemistry laboratory, seedless tomato production, and the use of growth hormones to increase green bean production. Given my concern about hunger and world food problems in the post World War II era, I had no difficulty in declining probably the biggest college scholarship in America at that time and enrolling in agronomy at the University of California at Davis in the Fall of 1951. My goal at that time was to become an agricultural scientist and help solve the world food problem.

I switched from agronomy to agricultural economics for two reasons: (1) I was fascinated by my first course in general economics; and (2) I was not particularly excited about inorganic chemistry lab work. Even though I switched majors from agronomy to agricultural economics in my sophomore year, I was still committed to a long term goal as a college professor with a Ph.D. degree. I completed the requirements of the Ph.D. in agricultural economics at the University of California at Berkeley at the age of 26.

Critical Phases of Your Career

Assuming that you have successfully completed the Ph.D. degree, your first three years as a professional are the most critical in establishing your reputation and professional image. I have always held the view that tenure and promotion decisions are fairly automatic if an individual is highly productive during the first three years following the Ph.D. degree. This is the period in your professional life when you are the best prepared to be productive. Hopefully, your dissertation is worthy of a journal article, an experiment station bulletin and/or other publications. Your methodological prowess should be at a peak to explore new applications.

Moreover, you are most likely interested and involved in only a few fairly narrow specializations. Another well known maxim in economics is that specialization of labor enhances efficiency of human resources. Capitalize upon your specialized expertise by developing educational programs, special courses, and/or published papers so as to become an expert at something.

There is a limit, of course, to specialization of esoteric topics. You are likely to become increasingly bored from conducting repetitive studies of say the demand for ice for Eskimos. More importantly, the Eskimos may not need or want revised information until major changes occur in either the demand for or supply of ice. Professional journals also become disinterested in minor variations of a previously published theme.

You will know when you have reached a "dead end" when your salary raises shrink to near zero. One way to monitor your progress is to pay close attention to your performance evaluations from your supervisor or from the annual percentage increases in your salary. If you are consistently below average, you need to make some changes in your modus operandi.

In my view, there is no time in your career when you should "drop out" of the profession and "go fishing" for extended periods. Nor should you attempt to make up for periods of laziness or inactivity by periods of intense work effort just before a tenure or promotion vote or the month before pay raises are decided. You need to have a steady rhythm of professional effort throughout your career. Included in professional effort is reading the works of other economists, participation in professional meetings, classroom teaching or other educational activities, and writing papers based upon your own work.

Just as professional effort should be continuous over time, it is strongly recommended that physical exercise and limited involvement with

hobbies be experienced on a regular basis. You need limited time away from your profession so as to permit maximum productivity when you are working as a professional. In my personal case, I spend a few hours each month as a musician (clarinet, saxophone, and flute) and as a weekend, part-time farmer. In earlier years, I played tennis regularly.

Career Paths

It is unlikely and not necessarily recommended that professional agricultural economists spend their entire career in one job or for one employer. Your career development will most likely be enhanced with a few carefully executed moves to new locations or with different administrative environments. Changes in job location and/or title, however, should serve to fulfill career goals and not merely to garner financial rewards.

Even though we live in a highly mobile society, our mobility is restricted due to a variety of factors. The first point to recognize is that the aggregate market for Ph.D. level agricultural economists is relatively small when compared with the aggregate market for general economists or engineers. The market for agricultural economists is also quite location specific. Changes in regional, national and international economic conditions can greatly affect the expansion or contraction of new openings for agricultural economists, and thus the opportunity for locational change. Mobility may also be restricted because both spouses are professionals in specialized areas.

The effective costs of moving your family from location A to location B may be another hindrance to professional mobility. If the net effect of moving is an increase in home mortgage costs in excess of the increase in salary, you will most likely decide not to make the move. Losses of retirement and other fringe benefits can become critical factors in impeding

locational change. Religious, cultural, and educational opportunities for family members also play important roles in determining locational preferences.

Overall, it appears to me that job switching has tended to decline over time, in part due to the reasons mentioned above. Part of the slow down in mobility of professional agricultural economists is also due to the reduced growth in demand by traditional university and federal government employers, e.g., Economic Research Service of USDA and the Land Grant Universities. Openings tend to be for replacement of previous job holders rather than for new positions.

For the highly productive and well trained members of our profession, there has always been more than adequate job choice. For the other job seekers, new entrants or veterans, the number of options seems to have narrowed over time, but the range of job titles has broadened. That is, each job seeker appears to have fewer offers, but the types of jobs offered has broadened considerably beyond positions of research and teaching at a Land Grant University or a research economist position with ERS. As I have noted elsewhere, the domestic market for research-oriented Ph.D. recipients has entered a zero growth phase, while the future demand for agricultural economists in the corporate world offers tremendous potential (Polopolus, 1982). Corporate demand for agricultural economists, however, has since been adversely affected by the dramatic downturn in the agribusiness cycle.

Fellowships and Sabbaticals

As one travels the career path, it is important to invest some time in renewal and redirection. Fellowships by various foundations and governments can provide support for this process of retreading. Most universities provide for sabbaticals and professional development leaves of absence. Our American Agricultural Economics Association is, for example, attempting to

provide leadership for a sabbatical program between business organizations and government/academic institutions.

Unfortunately, most professionals do not take advantage of the available opportunities for self renewal and redirection. The economic incentives are usually negative and the red tape is sufficiently substantial to deter participation.

Administration

Becoming an administrator is an alternative career goal. Among the various agriculturally related disciplines, agricultural economics provides a reasonably good basis for such a career move. Do not, however, seek to become a full time administrator until you have reached the level of full professor or comparable rank in government or industry. Premature entry into administration can limit your growth potential as an administrator, as well as retard progress toward full professor or equivalent if administrative work proves to be a mistake.

There is no secret formula for success as an administrator. Some of the preconditions appear to me to be as follows:

1. Above average professional as judged by peers;
2. Ability to gain respect of both subordinates and superiors;
3. Willingness and ability to work with people;
4. Interest in improving the productivity of subordinates;
5. Dedicated to improving effectiveness of your unit, as well as the larger administrative unit or agency;
6. Ability and willingness to respond expeditiously to commands from superiors; and
7. Extra special effort to maintain ties to your profession if your venture into the administrative world sours. The effort

should involve continuous writing and/or consulting in your specialized areas of expertise.

Even if you intend to remain in administrative work throughout your career, a change in organization or level of administrative work, at least every eight years, is advisable. As with professional agricultural economists, administrators need to fulfill goals and objectives for the organizational unit being administered. Success is measured in terms of satisfying the goals and objectives identified for the unit.

Trade-Offs in Choosing Career Paths

Life is a series of trade-offs between alternative decisions. Defining your goals and making decisions consistent with those goals will minimize the agony of a "bad" career decision. The globe is strewn with individuals who repeat every evening the phrase "if I had only" made a different decision X years ago, I would be successful today. My advice is to first count your blessings, because you could be in much worse shape than you are. Secondly, it is not too late to improve your situation. Be positive, but also be objective about your opportunities for finding that high road to success. Maybe the road you are on will lead you to an optimal resting place.

While talent varies among individuals, almost all successful people work very hard at their professions. This is true of agricultural economists, engineers, historians, and dress designers. What is usually sacrificed is time with spouses and children. In some cases, our workaholic propensities lead to overindulgence of food, drink, and cigarettes. This in turn can later adversely affect our physical health. Thus, success in one's profession may translate to less than optimum satisfaction with one's personal life and physical well being. You must determine if this is a

problem; and you must resolve any conflicts between professional and personal goals.

Changing Jobs Between Academic, Government, and Private Sectors

There really is not a great deal of flexibility in changing jobs between government and academic sectors or between private and academic sectors. Probably the best flexibility quotient is between Job A in academia and Job B in academia. Even here, Big League University X will not likely employ Professor Snarf from Bush League University Y. There is limited flexibility for professionals in their early to mid careers to shift from academia to government. The inverse shift from government positions to academic positions is quite limited in practice. In a similar vein, it is difficult to shift employment from the private sector to either government or academia, but much easier to shift from the academic market to the private sector. This lack of symmetry of moving from one employment category to the other and vice versa is puzzling but real.

Part of the inflexibility of movement from one type of employer to another is rooted in the performance standards required by each. The academic market places increasing emphasis upon publication in refereed journals. Journal article production is permitted by more government agencies, but not required for advancement. Private industry employers often discourage their employees from publication in scientific journals for fear of public dissemination of proprietary information. As time moves along, a private sector economist who has an outstanding record of performance for Company T may have no published record necessary to evaluate his or her likely performance as a faculty member in University F.

Dual Career Issues

When both spouses are trained as professionals in specialized fields, there are some added complications to career planning. If both spouses are

agricultural economists, the locations for employment become quite limited, but not impossible. The problem is compounded if both spouses are experts on say, marketing kumquats in Lower Slobovia, and not very flexible for employment on other subareas of the discipline.

The relaxation of previously tight nepotism regulations has broadened the opportunity for spouses to work in identical employer units, as long as one spouse does not supervise the other spouse. In general, however, dual career households tend to gravitate the family unit to either large university environments or relatively large metropolitan areas. These situations provide maximum opportunity for both professional spouses to obtain employment in jobs more closely aligned to training and experience, and with competitive salaries.

Women professionals who wish to temporarily drop out of the workforce to raise a family seem to be in a tough situation. Re-entry into the professional job market at a salary level that reflects experience and training may be a problem. If at all possible, it would appear desirable to maintain affiliation with the previous employer through maternity leave or approved leave of absence without pay.

Spouses of dual career households need to be broader in their training and interests than otherwise. They must also be more flexible in accepting employment outside their primary specialization. The combined welfare of the family unit may require some sacrifices from one or both partners.

Concluding Remarks

"It is not important whether you win or lose, but how you play the game". This old adage applies to career planning in the sense that if you plan your career in a manner that is consistent with your long run goals, and work diligently toward that end, you stand to enjoy the blessings that living on earth can provide on a daily basis. It is a mistake to blow one missed opportunity after another and then expect to reap a huge windfall at the tail end of your career. Self-fulfillment and a feeling of self-worth may be much more important criteria for career success than simple measurements of your net worth or the total number of papers published.

Reference

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