

Title:

Career Path Divergence - Navigating The Ten-Year Fork In The Road

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Summary:

After working with engineers and IT professionals for over ten years, I have noticed a consistent pattern in career paths of these types of professionals. The career paths are generally similar in that the first three years are spent breaking into their career fields, learning skills, gaining additional training, and establishing their professional reputations. Between three and seven years, they begin taking on supervisory roles such as team lead, group leader, or functional...

Keywords:

Article Body:

After working with engineers and IT professionals for over ten years, I have noticed a consistent pattern in career paths of these types of professionals. The career paths are generally similar in that the first three years are spent breaking into their career fields, learning skills, gaining additional training, and establishing their professional reputations. Between three and seven years, they begin taking on supervisory roles such as team lead, group leader, or functional supervisor. From seven years to around ten years (often as late as twelve years) into one specific career path, engineering/IT professionals have established their skills, and are honing their leadership skills.

Somewhere around the ten-year mark, however, they face a choice that seems to be consistent across industries. These professionals often face a choice between the skills-based side of their professions or taking the management track. This time of choice can be a very difficult period for professionals since the decision they make will directly impact the rest of their careers.

Each track offers different benefits and opportunities. The professional who chooses to take the skills-based career path would expect to advance his/her skills to the specialist/expert level. Engineers or IT professionals who take this path might eventually gain patents in their work, earn a reputation as a national expert in a particular skill or hone in on a special direction of their skills that requires advanced education. Many times, professionals who choose

this track become consultants who provide special knowledge in specific skill areas.

Benefits of selecting the skills-based career path are more inwardly focused than the management track. Rewards for choosing this path include opportunities to work on the cutting edge of technology and emerging trends; opportunities to delve deeply into development of new technology; and study/research opportunities that are available only to high experts in a specific niche. Many return to academia to gain a PhD in their particular area of interest. Monetary rewards vary but are greatest in the consulting arena where specialist command very high rates for their expertise.

A good example of an engineer who chose the skills-based track is a former client of mine who designed elevators. He was an expert in elevator design, held several patents and was known well throughout the small industry of elevator companies. One of his early accomplishments included design work on the visitor center elevators of the Hoover Dam. When he came to me for services, he was transitioning from design leader to consultant in order to maximize his earning potential. He was also ready to start thinking of partial retirement and wanted to work less while still pulling in equal income.

This particular client had faced the decision around the twelve-year mark in his career to continue on the skills-based track or go toward management with one of the large elevator manufacturers. His true love was design and not managing people, so he selected the skills-based track.

The management-based career track offers different rewards and a more traditional career path. Professionals who select the management track find they move away from the day-to-day use of development skills and spend more of their time managing tasks, teams, and business operations. They lose touch with the particular skills of their industry and concentrate on bigger picture tasks. Professionals who choose this career direction often decide to obtain an MBA around the ten-year mark in order to boost their travel up the management ladder, a ladder that ends at the top of the corporate structure as CEO, CIO, or President.

The rewards of the management track are more capitalistic in that the salaries are progressively larger, the benefit packages riper, and the obtuse status positions are more obvious on the management track. Individuals who select this track tend to be less interested in "how things work" than in "winning". The management track is the most traditional and well-known, thus often is what is selected by professionals regardless of whether they have the abilities or desire to be managers.

Professionals facing this fork in the career path often experience feelings of confusion and anxiety without really knowing why. Career coaching can be very valuable at this point to professionals who are facing a change in direction and are not sure which path to select. Professionals who work with a career coach will come away with a clear view of their personal career style, their goals, and can be confident in any decision made concerning the direction of their career.

Life is full of decisions. Many have to be made on the fly, by the seat of the pants, and with fingers crossed. Career choices generally carry the luxury of advance timing and the opportunity to consider all options completely. Are you facing a fork in your career road? Take your time and consider all your options. Make your decision based on what is best for your career, your personality, and your life.