

Before It's Too Late: Five Mistakes That Can Ruin Your Career

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If you want to be successful, here are the symptoms of widespread career afflictions to look out for.

As a former head of career counselling centre for Skolkovo, a leading Russian business school, I have come across many people who've seen their careers take a nosedive or encountered tactical challenges. I've noticed that many of these cases follow similar patterns, even though they may differ in some ways, and I've categorised them into five main career afflictions. Unless you spot and take care of them, these afflictions can be deadly.



1) Flip-flop careers

Non-systemic industry and title hopping in which each job change nullifies your previous experience.

Case study: A 30-year-old business school graduate gets a job as a VP at a construction company. He doesn't have any previous experience in construction, but the title was enticing, and he managed to establish a good relationship with the owner. The first two years were successful. The company

was so disorganised that he was quickly able to secure a few victories: putting an end to employee theft and optimising the procurement system. All that he had to do was pay attention and use his logical thinking. But then, he started running into problems typical for the construction industry, like major glitches in the project management system or compliance with quality standards. By this point, working in a new industry was no longer a novelty. The job kept getting more difficult and required a much better working knowledge of the industry. He ended up getting into a conflict with the owner and coming back to Moscow. His next job was with an IT startup. One year in the startup world was enough for the young man to see that he doesn't understand the digital world. There wasn't much he could do for the company aside from renting an office and hiring a secretary, so the investors ended up taking their money elsewhere. Now, because his resume is devoid of any real competencies that are applicable to specific industries, no company wants to hire him. Nobody needs a specialist with no concrete skills.

2) The wrong driver

Doing a job that's not key to success in the industry, but wanting to eventually become a CEO in this specific sphere.

Case study: A 36-year-old marketing director who works for an industrial company is worried that, in spite of his obvious achievements, he doesn't get paid enough and has been turned down for a raise. His company sells industrial equipment, and the marketing department is responsible for market research: estimating the depth of the market and setting the right prices. The marketing department, in this case, performs a supporting role and always loses to the sales department in arguments over "who brings in the cash." Let's think about the job titles that CEOs in companies like Coca-Cola usually hold prior to their promotions. They usually come from sales departments or financial departments, but almost never from manufacturing or logistics. So people in these departments don't have a chance of holding a job title that is more prestigious than a factory director. Together with the marketing director, we discovered that marketing is not a key department for an industrial company and that their CEO had previously worked in sales. In Russia, there aren't many well-paid people with expert careers and the ones who are well-paid work in consulting. So in order to make more money in the industrial company, this man would have to transfer to the sales department, which would open up more opportunities for him, or leave his place of employment and get a job with a consulting company.



3) The small and obscure company trap

This is one of my favourite topics, and it usually provokes a heated response from small and medium-sized business owners. Still, for managers, working for a company that isn't well-known discounts their value on the job market.

Case study: I was able to articulate my thoughts on obscure companies after a meeting with a professional and energetic woman who was a financial director. If I hadn't known where she worked, I would have said she's an excellent candidate for many big companies. But then I saw her resume. She was 40 years old and had only worked at small regional companies that were not well-known. Every time, her functions included putting out fires, developing new business processes, and implementing regular management. The last company on her resume was even relatively large and had a turnover of over 30 billion rubles, but, even as an experienced headhunter, I wasn't familiar with it. Of course, HR staff who come across her resume on Headhunter website wouldn't know about it either. This doesn't mean that you always need to work for a big name. But a professional resume needs to feature this kind of experience. It will serve a quality seal that indicates you have the right training, and it's best to get this experience at the start of your career before you turn 30.

4) Destructive patterns

Seemingly inconspicuous but recurring incidents that have a negative impact on someone's career. For example, frequent conflicts with management or an unwillingness to give up free time to build a career in a company where this is the norm.

Case study: My ambitious client wants to become a sales director at a major international company. My first question is why he hasn't secured this job title yet (he is 38) and is always stuck in a deputy role. His resume includes a lot of famous, "brand-name" companies, and in each case the man I'm talking to never made it past regional sales manager. He tells me that he met his sales goals every time and yielded profits for the company. He gave me five different reasons he hadn't been promoted, and all of them boiled down to the same issue — he always loses in the game of politics. He refused to study abroad at the company's expense (his wife had just given birth), or he refused to move to a different location for a promotion, or he was rude to management.

It's clear that the most productive people aren't always the ones who get promoted. The ability to form positive relationships with management and be at the right place at the right time play a much bigger role, which is why this man's career wasn't taking off as it should have. I could only give him one piece of advice: make it a goal to become a sales director at a medium-sized company, where politics don't matter as much, and sales figures matter more.

5) Someone else's path

Attempts to start your own business when you don't have an entrepreneurial streak or attempts to build an office career when you're an entrepreneur at heart.

Mature top managers over 40 often think that, since they have the funds and good management skills, they won't have much trouble starting their own business. But it doesn't work that way. It turns out that the majority of successful entrepreneurs have one thing in common — they have all been trying to start some kind of business from a very young age, often since high school. Even if it had been an internet cafe or a tire-mounting service, they had attempted to start a business several times. An entrepreneur is someone who simply can't sit still. They make several attempts to start a business

before finally succeeding, sometimes while working for someone else. If a person only thinks about starting their own business at age 45, after holding a corporate job for decades, it's often a sign that entrepreneurship will be disappointing for them. There are exceptions to this rule, but these are fairly rare. At the end of the day, entrepreneurship is not a guaranteed ticket to freedom and a lot of money. It's more like a lottery. A lot of top managers would be better off focusing on their current job and getting a hobby instead of entering the risky world of starting their own business with no entrepreneurial skills.