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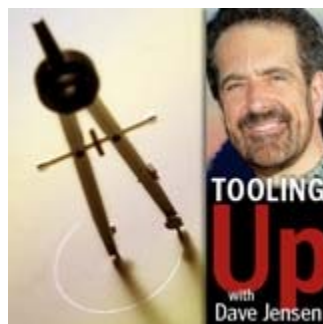
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## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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### Tooling Up: Review Your Career

David G. Jensen  
United States  
18 July 2008

In my last serious career review 3 years ago, I came across an idea for a side business that later became a major source of income. But lately, the general rush to complete my daily to-do list has left me with no time to strategize on career issues. Because of this, I may have short-circuited any similar, interesting avenues that could have been important to me over the past few years.

"If you feel that you have a nice, stable career in front of you, then you're the ideal candidate for a career review. That's because there is no such thing as career stability. There is only career growth or career decay."

Strategic career reviews--basically, time spent looking deeply into your feelings about your career, exploring what you like to do most, and deciding what you can do about it--can be enlightening and profitable for the experienced person. They can help you break out of a comfort zone and move more directly toward your goals. But how can a strategic career review benefit an early-career scientist?

The fact that you are still so close to the starting gate makes it critical that you get a clear picture of your prospects, especially when there are so many crossroads approaching, such as deciding between academia or industry, a career in the lab or a career elsewhere, taking a job in a new location or close to family, and so on. Course changes early in a career are likely to have a much greater effect on where you end up than course changes later in your life.

On the other hand, if you successfully manage your career, you'll have opportunities to correct your course a few years hence, so there's no need to feel like changes now are irrevocable. One advantage of a strategic career review is that it reinforces the idea that change is possible, now and in the future. In fact, it's unavoidable.

If you feel that you have a nice, stable career in front of you, then you're the ideal candidate for a career review. That's because there is no such thing as career stability. There is only career growth or career decay.

### PLATO AND ARISTOTLE'S DISCUSSION

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Years ago I heard a story from Steven Vollaro, a Tucson-based seminar leader, that illustrates this point: Legend tells us of an argument between Plato and Aristotle about how matter goes through cycles of growth, stability, and decay. Plato pointed to a table and told his student that the matter that made up the table originated in a period of rapid growth and then entered a period of stability. In the future, it would begin to decay and then go back to the dust that it came from.

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Plato said that as a student, Aristotle was going through a cycle of rapid growth. He taught that Aristotle would someday enter a period of stability until he later began to decay. But Aristotle disagreed, arguing that there is no such thing as stability. Plato was shocked.

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"Matter does not remain in a stable state," he said. "There is only growth and decay, nothing else. All that matters to us as human beings is that we grow as long as we can before we begin to decay. For that table in front of us, once it was crafted and the hands that made it set it aside, it began to decay. It sits in front of us decaying right now as we watch." Ceremoniously, Aristotle reached forward and flicked a small piece of tile off the top of the table that had loosened with time.

When I heard this story, I immediately thought of my career and the people I work with as a recruiter. There are lots of parallels between this story and the actual career philosophies of scientists.

### CAREER STABILITY OR A PERIOD OF CAREER DECAY?

Headhunters present two types of candidates to our client companies. One seeks the excitement--and perhaps even the turbulence--of a career in a start-up company. That person's goal may be to build something new and then lie back and enjoy the career stability they've earned.

The other type of candidate, no less valuable, is one who seeks stability right out of the chute and who may be in the job market to find something to settle into for a while. He or she may focus on jobs at larger companies in the hope that this "stable" atmosphere can benefit quality of life.

This more conservative stance seeks stability with (it is hoped) simultaneous growth, whereas the start-up person may be postponing stability until after some initial period of risk. I believe both types of candidates need to keep a close eye on how they are affected by this drive for career stability because, as Aristotle might say, *If your career is not growing, it is decaying.*

The postdoc who decides to add yet another postdoctoral position to his curriculum vitae without considering whether that path would lead to a more competitive career believes that he is in a relatively stable position. *Wrong.* Another easy-to-land but unnecessary postdoc could be considered a period of career decay if it doesn't open doors or lead more directly to one's goals.

The Ph.D. scientist who takes an industry job as a research associate believes that this B.S./M.S.-level job has given her a shot at a company future, and that underemployment, while temporarily uncomfortable, at least offers career stability. *Wrong.* That research associate position leads her straight into the long period of decay that began when she undervalued herself and allowed someone else to profit from it.

### MY SUGGESTED CAREER REVIEW

No one intentionally seeks stagnation. However, each of us needs to do a reality check on a regular basis to ensure that we are making progress and constantly moving toward our goals. As you sit down with a notepad or a laptop, put yourself into a contemplative mood and be prepared to do some creative thinking.

I use the following four sets of questions to help guide me in the process:

1. If you were suddenly rich with unlimited time and resources, what career would you be in?

Are you on that path now? Is there anything that you can do to get closer to that career path with your currently limited resources?

2. Which of your work activities seem to be of greatest value to your current boss? Compare those activities with the work you most deeply enjoy doing. It's great if they are aligned, but don't worry if they aren't. Activities that provide value to the people you work for and that also provide job satisfaction and bankable learning experiences are critical for your continued growth.
3. Go back through your past conversations with mentors, bosses, family, and friends. What strengths did they recognize in you? Are you using these to the fullest?
4. Finally, how could you improve your work to remake what you are doing now into a better springboard for your next career move? What do you see yourself doing to fully utilize all of your unique skills and abilities while heading off any naturally occurring career decay?

### ARE YOU IN A CAREER COMFORT ZONE?

Bill Linton, a successful entrepreneur and founder of [Promega](#), once told me that the most important trait he looks for in a new hire is "a desire for lifelong learning." But Linton would be the first to admit that it's possible to experience career decay even while learning. Take the example of the person who earns one degree after another. She may be always learning something new, but she's stuck in an educational comfort zone.

Linton's solution is to do whatever he can to move people out of comfort zones. At Promega, you might be a scientist today, but if you had the desire, you could be working in product management and marketing tomorrow. Although good career management doesn't always require this kind of not-so-subtle shakeup, the strategic career review I suggest is your chance to think about whether you've been lulled into a comfort zone yourself.

After finding myself recently on the Plato side of the growth-stability-decay argument--a "stable" period of several years of decent income and productivity--I made a commitment to never again let years go by between career strategy sessions. My career deserves--and requires--some critical attention now and again.

<p>A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, Dave Jensen is the founder and managing director of <a href="#">CareerTrax Inc.</a>, a biotechnology and pharmaceutical consulting firm in Sedona, Arizona.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback <a href="#">to our editor</a>.</p>
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