

Gradline aims to inform and entertain early-career microbiologists. If you have any news or stories, or would like to see any topics featured, contact **Jane Westwell** (e j.westwell@sgm.ac.uk).



Planned happenstance: an alternative approach to career development

A common approach to career planning is to identify your 'ideal job' and work out a route to get there. However, for many of us, life can get in the way of the grand plan. Maybe you are forced to move by a partner's career change or perhaps you have family commitments that restrict your job mobility. Sometimes, people are indecisive about their careers and don't really have any long-term aims. A traditional, fairly rigid approach to career-planning can make it difficult to respond to imposed changes. Also, people who are racked by indecision can feel overwhelmed when faced with the task of identifying their perfect job.

As a researcher, there are likely to be several factors (professional and personal) influencing your career decision-making:

- Difficulties in finding a suitable postdoc or academic position
- Dilemma over leaving academic research – is it the right time? Would it be judged a sign of failure? What job can I actually do outside the lab?
- Family commitments
- Financial concerns.

Planned happenstance – an approach to career development based on chaos theory – has gained popularity in recent years. It recognizes that people can be indecisive or that outside factors influence our work and it offers a different perspective to the more traditional approach. It abandons the idea of mapping-out a perfect career and instead views a career as something that will gradually unfold and encourages you to make the most of opportunities as they arise.

Table 1. Planned happenstance vs the traditional approach to career planning

Traditional approach	Planned happenstance
Makes clear decisions	Embraces indecision
Process is logical and systematic	Recognizes that the future is unpredictable and uncertain
Identifies an ideal job	Unexpected events offer opportunities
Matches skills and interests to job	Curiosity-driven
Narrows down choices	Adopts a flexible attitude to changes in circumstances

Planned happenstance means following your curiosity or 'tuning into' those activities that you feel naturally drawn to. The happenstance part is all about noticing situations that you could not have anticipated and recognizing the potential opportunities they might offer. The planned part is about being prepared to take advantage of the situations – knowing what your interests are, being receptive to unfolding events and being ready to act on them.

Planned happenstance in action

At a recent workshop I attended, almost every participant was in their current job due to chance events. Take my own career for instance. As a PhD student I was ambivalent about research. At the end of my studentship I was looking for postdoc positions and administrative posts with an equal lack of success (probably due to a very unfocused CV). However, fate took me to Reading where my partner had recently been appointed to a lectureship. I was resigned to doing temporary shop-work until a second chance event led to a part-time junior technician post at the university. It was not the most exciting job, but it was a 1 year contract so I took it. The job put me in the right position to apply successfully for a research administration position (again part-time) at the end of the year. So much for the 'happenstance', now for the

'planned' part. Whilst working in the department I had the opportunity to get involved with outreach activities. I discovered that I really enjoyed communicating science and organizing events, and gave up quite a lot of my free time to help run open days and hands-on exhibitions. It was this experience combined with the administrative work that gave me the skills needed to obtain an interesting post in the External Relations Office at SGM.

Equip yourself to embrace change

There are things you can do to take advantage of the opportunities brought by chance events:

- Become more self-aware – think about what interests you and follow up on it
- Don't dismiss apparently off-the-wall jobs – are they really that crazy? Consider how you might be able to develop them
- Be positive and don't dismiss an idea before you have had a chance to think about it
- If things don't go to plan, look for new opportunities as they crop up
- Make good contacts and network as widely as possible
- Don't be afraid to approach people for advice
- Look for opportunities to learn and develop new skills
- Don't be held back by stereotypical

views of how things should happen – there is often not a right way (or a direct route) into a job

- Follow up on your curiosity. Don't worry about whether you will be successful or where it will lead – if you don't try new ideas you'll never know where they might have led.

Which approach is best?

On the face of it, the traditional approach to career planning and planned happenstance seem poles apart. The former is fairly structured and systematic, and works well if you know what you want to do. Planned happenstance allows for indecision and unpredictability (Table 1).

Most people are likely to use a mixture of both approaches in their working lifetime. Whatever approach you adopt in your next career step, to ensure success there are several key features common to both: learning and developing new skills, networking, being proactive. Not to mention an excellent CV!

Further information

career.berkeley.edu/Article/040910a-dm.stm
Career development via planned happenstance
www.careers.salford.ac.uk/students/phd/blog/?p=105
Why you should leave your career plans to luck? by Fiona Christie
career.berkeley.edu/Article/020809a.stm
Serendipity and the job search

Myers–Briggs Type Indicator: personality at work

It is not the purpose of a psychological typology to classify human beings into categories – this in itself would be pretty pointless – Carl Jung

At the recent SGM Harrogate Meeting, a group of early-career microbiologists enjoyed a fascinating and interactive workshop led by Sarah Blackford, an experienced careers advisor and qualified MBTI practitioner.

Sarah outlined how the MBTI (Myers–Briggs Type Indicator) classifies personality in terms of an individual's preferred way of gathering information and making decisions. The scheme measures only preferences, not abilities, values or skills. She stressed that there is no right or wrong way to be and made comparison to left or right handedness – you have a preferred hand, but with a lot of effort you can write with the other. However by recognizing your MBTI personality type you gain self-awareness and understanding of others.

In an entertaining presentation, Sarah encouraged delegates to consider how they derive their energy (e.g. by thinking things through or talking it over with others); take in information (e.g. concentrating on the factual or seeing concepts), how they make decisions (e.g. thinking with the head or feeling with the heart), how they organize their lifestyles (e.g. using lists and filing systems or taking a less structured approach).

Combining all these preferences leads to 16 personality types made up of a combination of 4 binary dimensions:

- Extroversion (E) or Introversion (I) – where you derive your energy
- Sensing (S) or Intuition (N) – how you take in information
- Thinking (T) or Feeling (F) – how you make decisions
- Judging (J) or Perceiving (P) – how you organize your life

ISTJ Systematic	ISFJ Sympathetic	INFJ Insightful	INTJ Visionary
ISTP Pragmatic	ISFP Considerate	INFP Idealistic	INTP Logical
ESTP Action-oriented	ESFP Friendly	ENFP Enthusiastic	ENTP Innovative
ESTJ Decisive	ESFJ Helpful	ENFJ Appreciative	ENTJ Enterprising

By the end of the session most delegates had a feel for what their preferences were and could probably recognize features of friends, colleagues and family members. Although the workshop could only

give a taste of MBTI (an accurate profile requires completion of a questionnaire and a discussion with a qualified practitioner), delegates had an understanding of how personality can play a part in making career choices and in their interactions with other people at work and at home.

Further information

www.myersbriggs.org
The Myers & Briggs Foundation

www.personalitypathways.com/type_inventory.html
Quick informal MBTI quiz

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator

www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/whatamilike/index.shtml
Quick informal quiz

