

Career Confidence

by Kevin Gaw

In addition to the requisite skills, experiences, and organizational match being sought for a position for which a candidate is applying, most employers screen for what I call “career confidence.”

Career confidence is not self-confidence, nor is it self-assurance of one’s capabilities that they can “do the job.” (Insider tip: An instant interview red flag is when a candidate comes off as entitled, overly confident, or egotistic.) Rather, career confidence involves passion, purpose, and a realistic career plan.

Employers want to know if you care about the position and the organization to which you are applying, if you will find meaning and direction in the work, and if you have carefully thought about how the opportunity fits onto your career path. They want to know if you think the opportunity is a match with your values and if you think you will grow in the position. Bringing new employees onboard is an expensive process, and employers want to make good hiring decisions. And, you want to be hired by the right people for the opportunity that matches you.

Passion and Purpose

This phrase is tossed around a lot. Is it important? Does it really mean anything? Indeed!

Without passion and purpose in what you do, there is no meaning. And without meaning, what’s the point of a career plan?

- You do want to enjoy your work, yes?
- You do want to gain satisfaction from your effort, yes?
- You do want to feel like you are contributing and making a difference, yes?

We have all met individuals who are full of passion and purpose; they stand out because they are easy to recognize—they’re happy, engaged, energetic, and “in the flow.” They have a zest for living and for engaging in their daily work. They have a vision for their future and they express a very real sense of purpose. To actualize their career plans, to express themselves, they know how and when, what and where, and (this is essential), why.

What Is “Passion?”

Consider the following ultra-brief descriptors. It is:

- An intense, deep, and emotionally compelling feeling or desire;
- A devotion that permeates everything; and/or
- A boundless enthusiasm that consumes you.

Most of us discover and experience passion during our academic studies, often during unique classes that get us excited about some aspect of the course content. We also experience passion when we discern and discuss new ideas that make sense to us and fill us with excitement and energy.

Recognize this? Passion is that exciting *internal* energy that ignites our intellect, our emotions, and our sense of purpose.

Often passion is defined in three progressive levels: interests, desires, and sacrifice. Interest-level passions are commonly options that attract your interest and your curiosities, but they are not essential and you could pass them up; they are simply interests.

Desire-level passions are interests and curiosities you could and do pursue and explore, given time and resources. You might explore these, but you may decide to put some on hold, because you have other, more pressing, passions.

The third and highest level is characterized by sacrifice. You are willing to put many important things aside to express these passions. Students passionate about medicine and helping others will make their medical studies their core priority, putting all else aside. Computer science students passionate about code will stay up late every night tackling coding problems. Engineering students passionate about the discipline engage with those insanely challenging and long work problems with relish. Passionate writing students write and re-write their stories, seeking the best way to express themselves and their characters. Performing arts students spend several months perfecting their roles, just for a three-night run. All of these students—and the list goes on and on—willingly give up or put aside many of their interests and desires to achieve their ultimate passions. These are the future leaders in their professions because they dive deep into their passions and have purpose.

What Is “Purpose?”

- It answers the “Why is this important to me?” question; and
- It is the meaningful goal to which you aspire, the goal that is awakened when you experience passion.

The crazy part of purpose is that it is elusive to many of us because it is hidden by external messages about what success might mean.

For example, many of us have been taught to value a high income over purpose as the marker of success, and in doing so, we sacrifice ourselves, our families, our friends, and our communities to an external measure, one we really do not control.

Did you know that research studies have shown happiness is positively correlated with salaries between \$50K and \$75K, and anything higher starts to erode that happiness? Yet many of us are still fooled by the money. Remember that very true saying: “Money doesn’t buy you love.”

Similarly, many of us have been taught to value certain professions over others, believing those professions are “better” and deliver a more fulfilling life. But what’s this? Most people change their careers several times over the course of their working lives; they are seeking an improvement when they make those changes. Have you ever experienced parental or family or community pressure “to become XYZ” when in your heart, you have always wanted to be “ABC?” Students in such situations know this predicament well. Pairing passion and purpose is essential for personal success, personal happiness, and finding the right career path that belongs to you.

Passion + Purpose + Career Plan = Career Confidence

By exploring and combining passion, purpose, and your career plan, you have created a powerful combination of career planning that make up “career confidence.”

Not only do you know what you want and how to achieve it, you also know the fundamental reasons why you want to achieve it.

Career confidence gives you the ability to adjust and tinker with your aspirations as you move forward with life. This is a great place to be when it comes to navigating your career adventure.

What's Your Career Confidence?

1. I don't feel confident with my career decisions and/or career plans. I feel lost and need help in deciding what to do with my major and my career.
2. I feel slightly confident of my career decisions and/or career plans. I feel confused between several options, and I need help in deciding what to do with my major and my career.
3. I feel confident of my career decisions and career plans. I know what I want to do, but I have questions about how to make it all happen. I could use some help.
4. I feel very confident of my career decisions and career plans. I know what I want to do and how to make it all happen. I may need some assistance with some skills to help me out.
5. I feel extremely confident of my career decisions and career plans. I know what I want to do and how to make it all happen. At this time, I don't feel like I need any assistance.

The Career Plan

The career plan is a dynamic tool, designed to fit your passions and purpose. It does not lock you into a specific path but instead helps you map out possible career paths and options.

Here is the basic career plan: Go ahead and make realistic and honest response notes to the questions below. Be sure to avoid those external messages and instead, rely on your internal compass.

What?

If external expectations and pressure about your career are removed, and time and resources are not an issue, what do you see yourself doing after college, or after graduate school? What sounds and feels exciting and makes sense to you? What do you aspire toward?

When?

In thinking about the above, what's the basic timeline to achieve your career goal? (Example: To become a licensed psychologist, one must complete an undergraduate degree, advanced degree—typically a Ph.D.—a post-doctoral supervised clinical experience, and sit for two state-level professional exams, all taking 10+ years.)

How?

What are the steps to achieve your career goal and how are they sequenced? What things do you want or will you need to do before achieving the goal? Does this career goal require internships? Does it require undergraduate and/or graduate research experience? Does this goal require an advanced graduate degree? (Example: An aspiring school teacher will need to be admitted into a teaching program, to complete student teaching, pass certification exams, and establish connections in school districts to find employment.)

Where?

There are many ways and places to express your aspirations. Where do you see yourself when you achieve your career goal? (Example: Engineers can work in corporations, government agencies, nonprofits, private practice, and so forth.)

Who?

Why does this career fit into your career identity and who you are? Why does it match your passion and your purpose? (Examples: Social worker – finds significant satisfaction and meaning in helping others in need. Medical researcher – experiences deep excitement exploring and answering health questions that will benefit humanity. Pastor – holds deep meaning in supporting others with their spiritual and community lives. Musician – expresses the connection with self and the environment when creating and playing music. Law enforcement officer – experiences purpose in being part of the community and as a person who supports the structure.

Courtesy of the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#).