

HOW TO BUILD A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

Interview with *Evgeniya Beba*

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Abstract:

The purpose of this interview is to inspire ENERPO journal readers – particularly the young professionals at the start of their careers – to approach their professional development strategically, choose their path mindfully, and be happy at work.

Keywords: career, education

Как построить успешную карьеру

Аннотация: Цель данного интервью – вдохновить читателей журнала ENERPO, особенно молодых специалистов, которые находятся в начале своей карьеры, на то, чтобы они стратегически подходили к своему профессиональному развитию, осознанно выбрали свой путь и были счастливыми на работе.

Ключевые слова: карьера, образование

ENERPO: *Evgeniya Beba is a career consultant working in Germany, but she has extensive experience in different countries and regions, including Russia, China and Italy. She shares her views on some very difficult questions that young professionals face. The first question that I have is about professional orientation. Our ENERPO program – Energy Politics and Energy Transition in Eurasia – is a program of additional professional education in the field of international relations at the master's degree level. We have a mix of students – one part is those who have gained their BA degree and are continuing the educational track to gain MA level, but there is a consistently growing number of more, I would say, 'adult' students, who already have professional experience. However, all of them very often have a question of how to understand what you want to become professionally. How would you advise them on approaching this task? What I get from my experience as a teacher (as well as the one thinking of my own career path), simply choosing a field is not enough.*

EVGENIYA: Let me start with a little comment on what you've said about the ENERPO program. You mentioned that master's students are not only those who have just graduated from bachelor's degree, but there are increasingly more people with professional experience. The whole Bologna system is about that: you have separate educational bricks from which you can build, put one on top of another. This system allows you to have your own path, to learn something that you need. I think people who decided to go for educa-

tion after they have gained some experience are in a more favourable position, because they know what kind of skills and knowledge they are missing, and they have higher chances of actually getting it.

For example, I completed my MA straight after BA. It seemed like a very logical step. I didn't even think about doing something different – I was studying regional studies for BA and went for international security during MA. Back then, I thought that I was making a very smart move, since international security was a different field after all. But actually, it wasn't that smart. I didn't really ask myself the question: "Why am I doing this"? And this is a very common mistake – people do something just because this something happens to them. Somebody asked them to do it, somebody said "oh there is a cool opportunity, come to us". They applied to several places and one of them worked out. The moves happened not because we have planned them, but because we re-acted on something from outside. This is not bad per se, but there's one more option: to act strategically, knowing where we go. And even if the path we chose was not the best one, we still can change it as it is not cut in stone. The difference is that we have an opportunity to invest in the direction we believe in rather than following the flow.

The most important question that you can ask yourself is: What do you want in your life? Based on the answer, you will build your career path. Realizing that you have a particular

skills' gap in order to achieve a goal, you may choose the right education. It can be an MA, an MBA, a PhD, or probably just a module, some six-month educational program, or on-line courses at Coursera. There is no one size fits all. **Because sometimes, based on you end goal, you need the knowledge, sometimes you need the network, sometimes you need the diploma. So, the next educational step will depend on what is required.**

See, what you said in the beginning that to choose the field is not enough, that's true. You need to understand what you want to be, and this is probably the most asked question in the world, and the most unanswered. Everybody is sick and tired of it, but nobody takes time to think about it: How do you see yourself in ten years? And this is not a formal question of an HR professional, it is the basis for the choice of your next step.

Do you want to be a corporate professional?
Do you want to be self-employed?
Do you want to be a blogger?
Do you want to be a motivational speaker?

Depending on the answers to those questions, it becomes easier to choose the direction when you are at a crossroad. If I want to be a motivational speaker, I shouldn't apply for work at a corporation, because it is a waste of my time. If I want to go into the corporate world, there is no sense in writing posts on Instagram because, well, why would I spend my time on something that doesn't bring me closer to my goal?

And in these regards, the choice is not only what you are going for, but also what you are *not* going for. There are a lot of exciting opportunities all around: one day you speak to a scientist, and you get excited about science, next day you meet your friend who deals with international relations by working at the UN, and then there is this inspiring businessman or businesswoman. You become excited by their example and try everything, but at the end of the day, you get nowhere. You are just standing in the same place.

But if you did answer that question "What do I want to be in ten years"? then today you will start making the necessary steps. Probably they are wrong ones, probably they are small ones, but they *are* in that direction. To get the direction, you need to know your goal.

ENERPO: *I see, but how to understand what is your goal?*

EVGENIYA: Imagine this is a magical moment in your life and you can do anything. Try to switch your perspective from "I don't know for sure what I will be in ten years" to "What if anything was possible"? What will it be? Politics? NGO? International organization? Business? Don't focus on problems, but on your imagination. Take your time. Sometimes it really takes a lot of effort. When you keep coming back to thinking that you don't know, remind yourself that nobody knows! In my practice, and I have been doing this for 5 years full-time, and some years before that as a manager, I found out that no one actually knows this for sure. But even if you

are 45 and you are a solid professional, there are still things that you could change. If you know that you are going in a *certain direction*, it is much easier.

A few more important points: firstly, that vision of ten years from now is not cut in stone. **Secondly, it's OK to make mistakes, but it is important to leave it at the very moment you realise it was a mistake.**

When you have a goal, you will be capable of making your tactics and your strategy of how to get there. The way most probably won't be easy, but it will be very straightforward, and you will have a clear picture and a road map of what to do.

ENERPO: *So, when does the career consultant enter the scene?*

EVGENIYA: On this journey, you might need some help. It should be a person whom you trust and with whom you can speak without judgment. It could be a coach, a mentor, a supervisor or tutor at your university, or a friend. You need a conversation and some feedback from someone you trust. A mentor is someone who has walked that way. A coach is someone who probably does not have the experience but can help you in a non-judgemental way to think it through. If it's your friend, it should be a person who can listen, not just give his or her perspective.

In fact, there are a whole bunch of situations when people should not go to a career consultant, and most commonly this can be described as the situation when you can Google it.

What are the trends in biology, nanobiology medicine? Google it.
What are the visa requirements for Germany? Google it.
What kind of template to use for a CV? Google it.

Before going to a professional, Google. Make that list of questions which you can't find the answer to, or you hesitate about the answers. And when you have worked through that list yourself, and you still have a question, come to the career consultant. Most probably at that point it will not be about the knowledge (the facts), but it will be about what to do with those facts in your particular case.

ENERPO: *When you are choosing this path and you are dreaming, very often it happens that you start treating the alternatives negatively (devaluing). On the one hand there is dreaming, and on the other there is doing. Imagining what you want to be is not enough to get you there. Obviously, you then have to write up a strategy and develop certain missing skills – soft or hard – that you need to get there. Could you comment on these two problems in the process of 'getting to your goal' – devaluing the alternatives and dreaming instead of doing?*

EVGENIYA: Hmm, negative thinking, that's a good question. Usually, we do what we believe to be the best option. Sometimes we do it because we should – our parents told us to

do so, or everyone is doing that. And then we explain it to ourselves as being the best option, leaving other options as 'stupid'. But the trick here is to understand that every option is equally possible and equally good.

Two people can graduate from the same program at the same university but travel two completely different professional paths. But neither of those two careers is better or worse than the other. They are just different – because those are two different people who have different values and attitudes in life. So, devaluing one of those paths is essentially failing to appreciate what another person is.

It works the other way around too: some people say, "I'm such a loser and she's such a cool professional". This probably means that they are not satisfied with what they have now, so they are looking for something better. There are no 'bad' emotions in your life. Envy – and this is the name of the emotion which we are talking about – is not bad. If you have this emotion towards another person, or any other positive or negative emotion, use it. Use it not only as an energy source, but as a thinking anchor. What am I missing if a certain picture brings out my envy? Maybe I missed that I wanted to build a family, maybe I missed that I wanted to build a career. Sometimes we imagine something that doesn't exist. We look at perfect pictures on social media, magazines or TV shows, and we see only the perfect, beautiful outside which in most of the cases does not match the reality. So, when you realise that missing part, you can go to that person you envy and ask:

What do you like about your life?
 What is your career?
 What is special about your field?
 What do you enjoy about your work as a practicing professional in this field?
 What is cool about that? What is difficult?
 What do you think is the most challenging in being a teacher/business owner/career consultant/mother of five?

When you get the answers to those questions, you will get a real picture of what it is to be in that position. And your next question is for yourself:

Do I want to have it?

This is a good networking exercise as well. If you ask one person, you will have one truth, but if you ask many people in that field, you will get that insight into what it is to be a professional in that field. The most valuable part in it is that you can now decide whether that would work for you, or not; whether that is something you are really looking for. You can discover that this path is not something that you want. It may look nice because everybody is speaking about it, but it's not yours. But luckily you spent, let's say, one week researching the topic and now you know it's not yours.

So, my tip is to do this research straight away! Don't wait till you are done with your studies, don't wait till you have learned the language to a particular level, just do it right now!

Through this research you can also decide to incorporate elements of those careers into your path. For example, if you like teaching, but after speaking with university professors you decide that a pure academic career is not for you, you can still incorporate teaching in your professional activities. You will start building your own unique puzzle.

This is a good match for the second part of the question: how to create the roadmap, to move from vision to actions? I will repeat myself in saying that it's better if your vision is ten years, well maybe five years, but not one year. You know now what you want to be doing, what that person you want to be is doing. What does he or she have as a *skill set*? Make a "picture"! And then you compare this picture with yours and find the skills that are missing. It can be a degree, a language, some teaching experience or international experience, some set of hard skills or soft skills. Now you have a roadmap of what to learn.

ENERPO: What about work-life balance? Does it have to be included in that picture?

EVGENIYA: I'd say be realistic, and think of it as "What am I ready to sacrifice to get it"? In the end, you can get anything you want, it's just a matter of price. But you can't have one hundred percent of everything because there's only *one* hundred percent and you need to somehow distribute it between different aspects of life. Either you want to spend time with your family, and you sacrifice some of your job, or you say, "No, I'm traveling eighty percent of the time and thus don't see my family a lot and I'm OK with that". And you are more successful in your job obviously. If you think, "I want it, and I'm ready for the consequences" – you do it! Or you think, "Well, I want it but I'm not ready for the sacrifice" – accept it. But be clear about your choice.

Now a lot of people say it's all about your heart. You don't need to work a lot, you will be successful with two hours a day... I truly believe it is not true. I do believe that you should work smarter not harder, but it's still about *work*.

ENERPO: OK, that's an important takeaway for me, and hopefully for the readers as well! We have already talked about various professions, but I guess they also can be fit in certain career types. Could you also talk a bit more about career types? Can different career types be combined – for example, corporate and academic? And is there any balance that you can find between various types of careers?

EVGENIYA: We need to come back to the definition of what 'career' is. And 'career' is a translation from Latin, it means a path. There is no one particular type of career, which is better than others. They are all different.

There is a classic understanding of a career which is a *hierarchical vertical path* when you have been a junior, and then middle, and senior, and then you become director. But it's not the only way, because not everybody wants and not everybody can be a manager. It's a very specific path. Managing people is a skill set that is not universal. So, if you don't like

your manager's way of working with people, it can be he or she chose the wrong career path.

The second type is a *horizontal career*. It means following several paths at the same time. For example, combining corporate and teaching careers – it is at the same hierarchical level, but it differs in terms of what you do specifically.

The third type of career is *diagonal*. It's when you have both the change of the acumen of your work, and also the change of your hierarchical level.

You can also choose what you want; there is a career which doesn't have any specific form. It's very common in today's world and hasn't happened before – people just change different things (different roles in different industries, sometimes down- or upgrading in terms of level).

We are coming back to the core question of what you want. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to career. So really think about yourself, and never compare yourself to others, because this feeling of success is not universal. For me, it was one of the most important insights in my life when I realized that success is not achieving the picture that somebody around me has. Success is to achieve what I want for myself. If I believe I want to work two hours a day and I want to be a full-time mom... Or I want to be child-free and work hard... It's my right and it's up to me to follow this vision. The worst thing that can happen to you is when you follow someone else's dreams and someone else's pictures of what good and bad is. And then when you achieve this milestone you feel empty.

ENERPO: *Because it's not your achievement, it's someone else's?*

EVGENIYA: Yes. See, there's no perfect path. You just need to know there are different ways.

And what is also important: many people say, "But you know, it pays better". It's not true. It can be paid equally well if you are good at what you are doing. Every one of us knows, again, great professors who earn tons of money even if they're working in a governmental university because they just have the expertise that everybody's coming to them for. We all know businessmen who don't earn anything because they are failing at what they do. In the big picture, money is not about your title – money is not about the profession itself. Money is about the value that you bring, and that people are ready to pay for it. And most of the time, anyone can earn whatever they want if they are doing the right thing backed up by their strength and not by what is asked on the market in the first place.

ENERPO: *Would 'downshifting' be an example of a diagonal career?*

EVGENIYA: The question is why you're doing that. Sometimes you're burnt out and you don't want to do it further. Or you have enough money and decided that you want to live in

Thailand. And some other times it's because you've realized you don't want to be a manager any longer and you come back to the individual contributor role.

For example, I had a client some time ago, he had this career path in front of him: he thought he wanted to be a manager and he was a high achiever. Finally, he got his promotion and from an individual contributor he became the manager... and it was the worst year of his life. He hated every single day of it, and in the end, he was honest with himself and his management. He said, "I don't want to be a manager any longer and I want to be an individual contributor", and he instantly became much happier. It takes courage to do such a thing, right? You need to be that brave to say "I know what I want, and this 'what' is not managing people. I don't want to be a bad manager; I want to be a good professional". In this case it would be a diagonal shift.

Another client of mine was thinking about making a vertical step, and every time she was close to it, she was really burnt out. At some point she confirmed, "Well, I'm an expert. I want to be an expert". She changed her job, and she even got a promotion in terms of salary as an expert. When she talked to me as a result, she said "It was the best decision in my life because now I know who I am, and I'm paid well for that. And I don't need to pursue these dreams of others".

These two examples can be labelled as downshifting, but you see, downshifting per se is not bad, it's not because you're weak, it's because you are brave to say what you want. I think we perceive the downshifting as something negative. If we stop judging ourselves and people around us in terms of 'successful' and 'not successful', but think about whether we are happy in what we're doing, genuinely trust that people can be happy in a different way than we are, the world would be different. I like this metaphor: we all have different shoe sizes. Imagine somebody says: "I've tried everything besides my size 40, it's not comfortable. If it's smaller, it hurts, and if it's larger, I can't walk. So, size 40 is the best size, and everybody should wear this size". We would laugh! But that is what we are doing with our lives. And if it's good for you, it doesn't mean it's good for me! This is the most important question: What is good for you personally?

ENERPO: *We have hard skills and soft skills as two basic bricks at the foundation of whatever you do. And now there is a discussion that soft skills are shifting to the background a bit in the current situation, especially with the changed geopolitics, where a lot of people relocated. They find it easier to use their hard skills, as opposed to soft skills. There is a certain balance between them which can change. Are there any differences in the combination of hard and soft skills when you are looking at different international directions?*

EVGENIYA: The combination is not about geography; I think it's about the level of your position. When you are a junior, you don't really have hard skills yet. You will learn everything on the job. At this stage, it is more important to have the right soft skill set, and in these regards it's more about being ready to learn new things, being curious, open, and so forth.

When you're a professional, it is more important that you get the job done, so you need to have hard skills specific to your profession. And then when you're going higher again, you become a manager, it's about your soft skills once again: how you work with your team, how you motivate people, whether you're a leader or a manager. So, in the end, throughout your career you need both hard and soft skills. There are different aspects of what is more important for your particular job.

On the other hand, you should also define your strengths and your weaknesses, and to decide where you want to go, because usually it is much more efficient and much easier to develop your strengths rather than develop your weaknesses.

I would recommend investing your time in what you think is important and build your skills in accordance with what you want to be. And not because it's just popular, like the popular soft skill nowadays of public speaking. It's useful to be good in public speaking but not every single profession needs that and if it's not yours, it is also OK.

ENERPO: *The concept of 'lifelong education' is very well in line with what we've been discussing today, because if you have this path, you have a roadmap, you obviously have a list of things that you would like to develop. And most often we cannot just take a two-year break altogether from our life for an educational re-fit. So, it would be one skill at a time, and more or less permanently. I guess, continuous education is a sign of our time. You have to catch up, and lifelong education is just a term to frame it.*

EVGENIYA: We live in a brittle world – everything is changing so fast. The concept of lifelong learning is super important. Every time you realize you need extra knowledge, you can get it by reading a book, by going to a seminar, by getting some certification or taking an extra educational program. But the question is whether you need to have higher education every single time you miss something. My answer is: in most cases, no. You will need to take some course to understand how it works, and this will be your 'lifelong learning'.

There are some skills that you must have in order to be 'in this era'. In other words, you can't be successful in any area if you don't have the skills. Today, these skills include digital literacy and English language. Even for these essential skills, let alone others, most of the time you don't need to have a formal education, but you need to identify the gaps. If you meet with people in your industry, get to know leaders in your industry, if you read the latest books, and you really know what's going on there, it's also education.

When learning, focus on the skill, not the facts. **If you just learn the facts, then probably it doesn't make sense because you can easily find them on the internet. But if you learn to interpret the facts, if you learn how to work with data, if you learn how to pose right questions, how to look for data, then that is the skill.**

When you're coming to your educational program and you're doing your masters, it's not about your teacher, it's about you.

The teacher just gives you, at the end of the day, a list of literature that you need to read. And if you're not ready, if you're not prepared, if you haven't read the material, you won't get the concept! The best teachers in my life never explained to me the details of the things. They discussed with me what I read, what I thought about it, and how I can use this information. Education is not about the facts. Obviously, you need to know the facts. But learning how to interpret the facts, learning how to work with the data, what kind of questions you may ask about that data – this is essential, and this is what you need to learn for the whole of your life!

About Evgeniya Beba

Evgeniya Beba is a career consultant focusing on helping international professionals building their career, based on values and personal strength and thus reach their highest potential on the international labour market. Evgeniya started as a PR and Communications Manager at Microsoft within a high-potential program, moved to Strategic Business Development in the energy sector at Enel and was finally responsible for Business Development at an electrical engineering company in China. After moving to Germany, she worked in recruitment. She later started her own career consultancy MyGermanJob.de.

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