

By Andy Andrews



# Portfolio Careers

At a recent CriticalEYE Discussion Group business leaders explored some of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and limitations that surround the development of an effective Portfolio Career. This article draws on the richness of the discussion that took place and builds on wider experience gained in supporting top executives in different aspects of career transition.

Inspired by

CriticalEYE DISCUSSION GROUP: Progressing a Portfolio Career [www.criticaleye.net/event/discussiongroup](http://www.criticaleye.net/event/discussiongroup)

### So what is a 'Portfolio Career'?

When Charles Handy introduced the concept of 'Portfolio Careers'<sup>1</sup> in the late 1980s, he could look back on the great monolithic, and often paternalistic, 'cradle to grave' organisations that were then in decline in terms of the numbers of staff they employed, and could already see an evolution towards the 'lean and mean' businesses of the 1990s and beyond. He questioned the traditional career notion that one should invest all one's efforts into a single organisation, and, in return, earn all one's different rewards: money, status, challenge, affiliation and so on, from the same source. His suggestion, the 'Portfolio Career', was based on the idea that a person might contribute to several 'careers' at the same time and probably derive different kinds of reward from each.

In summary, a person might spend a proportion of their working time doing something highly intensive, probably based on existing experience and skills (and therefore not unduly stretching, and possibly well-paid), a further proportion doing something rather less well paid but infinitely more engaging, and the balance possibly pro bono and socially worthwhile to create a powerful sense of 'giving something back' to the community. Such a person might reflect upon a week gone by and feel great personal satisfaction, having achieved an overall balance of effort, reward, learning and variety that their previous, traditional career might seldom have offered. It is easy to imagine that the sense of enervation experienced might lead to more exciting and varied use of family and leisure time (a further dimension of a person's portfolio?), and thereby the creation of a virtuous circle.

So what might qualify as a portfolio career? Certainly, a situation in which an individual had two or more non-executive directorships or 'NED-ships' would meet the criteria, as would

a situation in which someone pursued some consulting assignments, a NED-ship and an element of lecturing at a university or business school. A purist might argue that the latter example is intrinsically the more diverse, probably generating a greater range of financial rewards, and is therefore closer to the 'classical' definition of a portfolio. Clearly, a portfolio can contain many different components, and it is now appropriate to look at the various possibilities in more detail.

### What are the possible components of a 'Portfolio Career'?

The list set out below (Figure 1.) is certainly not exhaustive but does give a reasonable overview of the huge diversity of activities known to have formed the basis of a portfolio.

One omission from the list is Interim Management. This is because Interim Management is best considered as a single career in its own right. Further, interim assignments tend to be of significant duration (e.g. 6 months or more), intensive and often remote from home. In consequence, it generally proves difficult to maintain momentum on the other components of a portfolio. Moreover, both the interim agency and the hiring company generally want their interim executives to be single-minded about the assignment at hand and minimally distracted by other pressures.

### How can a portfolio be best achieved?

The full range of routes to market involved in achieving a portfolio based on the above examples is outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, certain guiding principles apply.

Some roles will be publicly advertised. For these, conventional job application activity will apply, namely, a potent CV that reflects not only your skills and achievements but is also aligned

## Figure 1 Possible Components of a 'Portfolio Career'

- Non-executive directorships
- Franchising
- Part-time employment
- Coaching and mentoring
- Expert witness
- Charity / 'not-for-profit' activity
- Technical risk assessor or advisor
- Writing, or other media-related activities
- Magistrate
- Business angel
- Own business / consultancy
- Managing an investment portfolio
- Property management
- Political, NGO or governmental activities
- Education (e.g. lecturing)
- Sports coach
- Thought leadership
- Community activities / societies
- Public speaking
- Industry bodies / trade associations



to the needs of the job. For example, as a CEO or senior executive your career to date and, hence, your achievements are likely to have focused on strong leadership and 'being in charge'. Fine, but if the role in question is NED/advisory in character, or concerned with coaching and people development, then it will be necessary to bring out evidence that supports those areas as well. Other parts of the selection process, especially interviews, will need similar repositioning.

Many roles will become apparent only through careful networking; this is an often misunderstood activity that takes time and practice to do well, but can produce the most extraordinary results. Bear in mind that networking is primarily about relationship building and the exchange of information as part of a professional business process. It is not primarily about asking for jobs or leads to people with vacancies. People who think in this way find networking stressful to undertake while limited in its effectiveness.

It is also the case that good networkers tend to be better informed, more lively and more engaging than those who are not. It is not surprising, therefore, that good networkers also make the best candidates in conventional recruitment processes.

Some roles clearly represent a significant change in direction for an individual and a degree of training or preparation will be either highly desirable (as in the case of personal coaching in a business context) or a prerequisite (as in the case of becoming a sports coach). In passing, it is interesting to reflect that currently someone who coaches young cricketers is required to be qualified, while someone who coaches the board of a £multi-billion concern employing thousands does not.

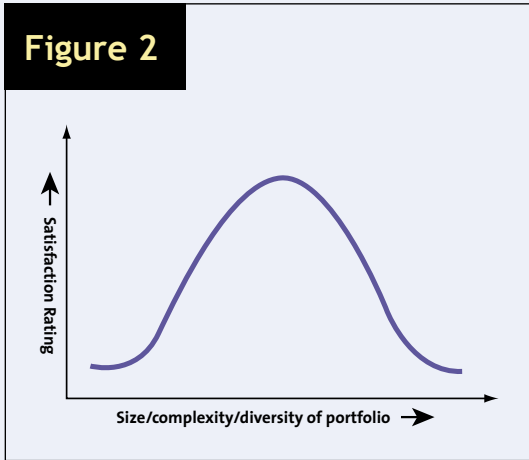
Many individuals look towards some form of consultancy as part of their portfolio and, of those who do, many will be successful and enjoy the experience. However, few companies would allow their chosen Firm of Consultants to field individual consultants or project leaders who had never worked on or managed an assignment before. So, even if you are an acknowledged expert in your field, it is important to recognise that there will be expectations on how you conduct yourself as a consultant. Consequently, you will need to gain the requisite additional skills as quickly as you can. The latter is especially important for would-be sole traders who will lack the access to the collegueship and professional guidance that would be available to associates of established firms. Another facet of this option derives from the three main components of running a small consultancy: the need to generate the work,

the need to deliver the work, and the need to account for and manage the work that is done (eg, billing, maintaining records, dealing with tax and VAT). It is often said that the only really hard part of consultancy is winning the job in the first place because, in practice, finding competent resource to assist you (assuming you cannot deliver it all yourself) is seldom the limiting factor. Certainly, most would-be consultants underestimate the time and energy that have to be allocated to the generation of a steady stream of interesting and rewarding assignments.

In other cases, there may be no formal barriers to entry, but the expression "caveat emptor" is nevertheless appropriate. Most people can think of at least one friend or colleague who has taken a leap into something alien to all their previous experience and then found that the personal realignment that was necessary was beyond their capability. One case involved a very capable finance director from a well-run, hi-tech company who decided to combine some NED and advisory work with running a small hotel (the creation of a family business). Longer term, he would have wanted to add an interest in local politics to his portfolio. In fact, the hotel became quite successful and won some awards but, alas, his Achilles Heel was to utterly underestimate the 24/7 demands of customers and, cuckoo-like, the hotel first squeezed out the other parts of the portfolio and then, in effect, made the family its prisoners.

In virtually all the examples outlined in this section, there is one aspect that has not yet been addressed. Much of the key planning and preparation for a portfolio can and should be done anything up to several years in advance of leaving conventional employment. Some examples are obvious; it is generally much easier to get an NED position while you are currently employed as a board member or senior executive than once you have left. Further, one is much more likely to be seen to be a good candidate for an NED position with an NHS Trust if one has gained some relevant experience over the previous few years - such as mentoring a hospital's CEO - an activity requiring perhaps two hours per month of one's time. In short, those carrying out the selection processes for many portfolio options will look for at least some evidence that you have been prepared to invest your time and energy in becoming involved in and committed to their chosen sector or field.

Finally, a portfolio is not a static option; once one is in place, even partially, it is much easier to change emphasis and pace, as needs and interests evolve, than an equivalent conventional career.



**Is a Portfolio Career right for me? - the pros and cons**

At their best, portfolios provide variety, interest, challenge, recognition, appropriate financial reward, personal learning and growth, a sense of well-being through making a wider contribution and more besides. In addition, those engaged in a portfolio career talk about the benefits of having greater autonomy and being delightfully free of organisational politics. Within reason, there is also the prospect of having much greater control over one's own time and of time-shifting through the day or week, so as to optimise the balance of personal, family, social and working time.


This rose-tinted view might suggest that there are no downsides to taking the portfolio route, but this is not the case. In practice the 'perfect' portfolio is notoriously difficult to achieve. Figure 2. indicates why this might be the case.

When the portfolio is in its infancy, satisfaction with it is likely to be low but, as it begins to develop, satisfaction quickly increases. Eventually, however, the conflicting demands of the various elements can become increasingly difficult to manage, increasingly stressful and consequently less satisfying. It may be thought that simply trying to juggle many balls at the same time

is little different from traditional corporate life but there is at least one significant difference; in a corporate environment everyone (well, hopefully everyone) is working to the same overall objectives, and there is a hierarchy and culture that is available to resolve conflicting priorities. Moreover, there are usually colleagues or subordinates who can share the pressure, when the need arises. In the case of the portfolio manager, none of these moderators is available, and the organisations for which one is working have no incentive to accommodate each other's needs. Being very disciplined and single-minded about what tasks you accept (and over matters such as your diary management) is a critical requirement for anyone pursuing this path.

One other, perhaps, obvious facet of the portfolio approach is that the individual is necessarily not a fully integrated member of any of the teams with whom he or she works; one is always something of an outsider. Given that one of the reasons why people like to work is their need for affiliation, this sense of isolation can be a significant downside for those with a compelling need to be an ongoing part of a team. Similarly, the broad emphasis of portfolio roles tends to be on the advisory or strategic; those executives with a clear preference for 'hands-on' involvement and operational detail will derive less satisfaction from this kind of career than those who do not.

**Conclusion**

One of the aims of this article has been to provide a candid appraisal of what a Portfolio Career entails, with an overview of the issues involved in achieving one. Like anything in life, a portfolio can have frustrations and downsides, and requires strong self-discipline to obtain the best results. However, for those who persevere, the outstanding rewards of variety, challenge, autonomy and personal well-being are almost impossible to match. 

*'Charles Handy "The Age of Unreason" (1989)*



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