

A suitable marriage: Careers and identities at work

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About the author

Sakshi has an MSc in Work and Organisational Psychology from University of Nottingham, UK. At the age of 19 years Sakshi became the founder of Project LEAP, a social service project where her volunteers provide free education to over 1600 under-privileged families in India. Sakshi works as a full-time Psychometric Consultant in London (UK) and provides pro-bono skill-based training to youth volunteers. A young entrepreneur herself, she supports various young start-ups by providing strategy and brand advise. Since being awarded the UNESCO Kindness Leader (in 2018) she has spoken on various platforms on ideas of change, kindness, leadership, and volunteering.

Abstract

This paper aims to facilitate a shift in thought for professionals of all ages who have experienced, or are experiencing, a dilemma surrounding their career choice. The paper explores why multiple career roles can lead to ineffectiveness, burnout, and division in self-perception. I will illustrate a few important questions that can lead to a meaningful congruence between different career roles and ideas of self, a state that promotes clarity, collaboration, and well-being. This exploration will assist professionals to engage proactively in career crafting and seeking ways to merge their various careers into one meaningful whole.

Keywords: Career crafting, congruence, collaboration, self-perception, well-being

Introduction

A career journey is often marked by different milestones. Each milestone presents a unique opportunity to pause and reflect on the learning we have accumulated over the years and to chalk out our future direction. Since I started my career journey at the age of 17 years, I have had some time to reflect. My journey has always been unusual. I started by selling cakes on Facebook to establish a social service project to educate under-privileged families in India (project LEAP). While I was doing this, I studied psychology, interned as a social-media trainee, and joined a start-up to sell Artificial Intelligence based products.

The motivation behind each one of these activities has also been unique. I engaged in different careers for the pleasure, or to pay the bills or for the legacy. Since each of these motivations were powerful for me, I never let go of any of the career paths and instead, just kept adding to them. Today, I work as a Psychometric Consultant in London with the various other parts of me working as trainer, volunteer, facilitator, and advisor in the roles I love. The following paragraphs will explore why these additions to my career led to a division in my perception of self. I will end by illustrating some questions that I am constantly asking myself to carve a career for me which is wholesome, fulfilling, and practical.

The journey

In total honesty I will admit that the early years of my career were daunting. My career journey looked like a big puzzle to me with different pieces that I was trying to put together. While some pieces I could see fitting into the big picture, like my goals, expectations, and skills; most of the pieces were vague, hidden, and hard to find a fit for. These included parts like career growth, personal limitations, and parallel interests. Over the years, it has taken a lot of resources, patience, and mistakes to figure out the puzzle, piece by piece.

Since all of this began in school, a trip down the memory lane can provide useful context. I was very young when I realised the things I never wanted to do. A lot of them included any kind of sports, mathematics, and science. Since I was 'left' with the only option of psychology, I chose to embrace it and continued studying it in college at University of Delhi, India. While in college I came across various social-service groups. I distinctively remember telling my friend I was not a charitable kind of person and was unlikely to enjoy volunteering my time in these groups. But, as tradition has it, I joined the group because my friend joined it. I quickly realised that these groups had a lot to do with leadership, management and problem-solving; some of the areas that really interest me.

After two years of voluntary working with Rotary International I realised there were some gaps that were preventing my fellow volunteers from maximising their impact. These gaps existed because although the organization had ample guidelines on what causes to care about and what issues we need to solve, there was a lack of awareness in the volunteers on what exactly they need to do. Most of the volunteers went into the field with passion in their hearts, surrounded by hundreds of students who were eager to learn from them but they themselves were clueless on where and how to begin. This either led

to a lot of volunteers using trial-and-error methods that impacted the quality of their teaching, or, led to a lot of volunteers exiting the group leaving the children lacking consistency of approach.

This is when I started Project LEAP (Literacy, Empowerment, Ability and Participation). The word LEAP encompassed all the things I cared about, and the project aimed to provide guidance for the volunteers when they went into the community to teach under-privileged children. My mission was simple. I developed a project that provides ample resources to volunteers to help them become aware of their own stereotypes, their body language, develop teaching skills, learn about project management, and develop kindness. This in-turn would help them not only to teach under-privileged children but entire families within an area. Within a month, I had 300 volunteers joining my mission. The volunteers were divided in various small groups based on their geographic location and proximity. Once the volunteers had identified an area in their vicinity where they would teach, I would work closely with the volunteer group to develop guidelines for their work, what they would do and how they would conduct themselves. We worked with all the innovative ideas that the volunteers suggested (like using cinema for teaching important values) and incorporated them into the project. Project LEAP ended up providing education to over 1600 families in the year of 2017.

At the same time, I was attending lectures on social psychology in college; and I fell in love with the subject. Once again, by the order of elimination (I did not like counselling and clinical psychology), I was left with 'Organizational Psychology' and I chose to embrace it with both hands and moved to the UK to do further study in an area that I had not yet fully understood.

Choices

At each of the stages I have described, there were choices to be made. A choice on how to spend my time and what to spend it on. With the multiple interests and inability to say 'no', I was landed with a lot of work ranging from studying psychology, managing over 300 volunteers, volunteering for families, working with a start-up, interning in a social media role; and trying to have a social life. Each avenue created multiple and markedly distinct opportunities making it harder to choose between starting a psychology career in the UK and doing social work with Project LEAP. Again, I chose to do both these things!

Puzzle of multiple identities

Reflecting on this time my work and career seemed like a puzzle because I was unsure of how the big picture would look. There was no image on the box I could refer to; and no example of people doing this before me. When I turned to the obvious next step of networking to learn from people who had done something similar, I realised that there was a clear lack of Indian-origin women who had ‘made it’ in the relatively-niche (if not non-existent) field of social work or work and organizational psychology in my network. In these circumstances, networking with people who did not face the same issues, dilemmas, and choices as I was doing would not take me any further than where I already was. Hence, I began my college years with a markedly different sense of direction than most of my peers, who went onto more well-known forms of psychology while I wanted to do something different. I did not fully understand what this ‘something different’ was and in those years and I never for once considered that practicing psychology and social work in a single job would ever be possible, let alone something I would be doing in the coming years.

For the initial part of my education and career, I led a dual life. To avoid losing either of my interests, my 17-year-old-self decided to train as an occupational psychologist in the UK (this is similar to the work and organizational psychology role in Europe); while in parallel working on my social-service project LEAP. This did not change after university. Following a similar pattern to the start of my career at the age of 23 years, my days looked like a 9-5 full-time role as a psychometric consultant with the nights and weekend reserved for Project LEAP. This is exactly how my LinkedIn profile described me; and reflected my biggest issue. This mere division in my thoughts between the two career paths split me into two halves. I stopped seeing myself as one human being with a clear set of skills and congruent personality who is trying to build her legacy but instead, I saw myself as Consultant Sakshi on weekdays and Social Entrepreneur Sakshi on the weekends.

Traditionally, sociologists focused on the draining aspects of human energy when multiple roles create an overload of demands and often led to scarcity or lack of energy in a person. Shah, Mullainathan and Shafir (2012) also mention that all human beings have a limited ‘mental bandwidth’, or brainpower, which restricts how much they can focus on at any one time. They further explain that when multiple constraints are presented to an individual, they can impact the individual’s ability to make decisions, influence their general well-being (often increasing anxiety) and lead to role conflict (Barnet &

Baruch, 1985). These theories therefore focus on the difficulty of managing multiple roles and in some cases conclude that since different obligations are overdemanding, some compromises must be made (Goode, 1960). A slightly different perspective comes from Marks (1977) who explains the 'expansion' theory of energy where he states that individuals have an unlimited fund of energy which can be produced more and more through social interactions. He also explains that the varying level of commitment of an individual to multiple roles will be responsible for whether they feel strained, or not, by the number of roles they manage. This line of thinking suggests that perhaps multiple roles can create an expansion of energy. Although there are individuals who feel fatigue, drained, or strained by these multiple roles, there is a certain energy that these roles create for us to further ourselves, especially during social interactions (Durkheim, 1974).

Coming back to my two roles, my consulting role was largely based on the content of the master's degree I had completed at the University of Nottingham. This course allowed me to see the diverse nature of the study of psychology of work. When I was in India, I looked at the field with a narrow lens thinking all roads lead to Human Resources (HR) roles. However, it was during my master's programme that I realised how we could brand, market and apply ourselves to the world of business. According to Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern (2006, p. 3) Social Entrepreneurship is an "*Innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the non-profit, business or government sectors*". This is exactly what I was doing or helping others to do given my experience of establishing Project LEAP and in interactions with several charities, not-for-profit organizations, and volunteers from around the world.

The costs

In reality, both my selves were just trying to stay afloat. This is simply because all my energy, time and goals are divided into two. Maintaining this level of activity since I was 17 years of age takes excellent, but extreme time management, priority setting and boundary creation.

One of the first things I did was to learn about my own style. I understood that I came from a strategy building mindset rather than an attention-to-detail style; and thus, I quickly learned how to delegate. I delegated all tasks, wherever possible so I could spend as much time as needed to create vision, direction, and hope. Delegation meant trust and inspiration - a type of leadership that I had to observe and learn as it did not come naturally. This meant I spent hours listening to Indra Nooyi's interviews (Stanford

Graduate School of Businesses, 2016), more hours reflecting on how people feel around me and a lot of time trying to understand what motivates people (something I had learned in my psychology classes).

To do all this, I had to learn how to find pockets of time. Thus, whenever I was doing a repetitive task (cooking rice, doing the laundry, walking); I was multi-tasking by listening, reading, or reflecting. Since it took some practice and a lot of burned rice on the way, I call it the 'Burn the Rice' technique. Interestingly, I also realised I had to keep reminding myself of why I do what I do and when the motivation was not natural, I found talking to other people helped. Networking with strangers and discussing my work always gave me fresh perspectives, new direction, unexplored avenues and perhaps some validation that my work is meaningful. Finally, it took a lot of rest-days where I would just go solo-travelling in the mountains without one single minute spent on work. In hindsight, time alone was one of the best ways to keep me energised, motivated and happy.

However, after years of doing this, the result is exhaustion, serious feelings of imposter syndrome and losing track of what impact I was creating, if any. Imposter syndrome is characterised by chronic feelings of self-doubt and fear of being discovered as an intellectual fraud when despite evidence of abilities, those suffering from imposter syndrome are unable to internalise a sense of accomplishment, competence, or skill (Maqsood et al., 2018). On lighter days, these feelings led to confusion, tiredness and missed meals and on tougher days, it looked like burnout, exertion, and lack of clarity of my career heading. The very practice of creating two partitions of my interests and careers meant at any given point, I was only generating half of the impact that I could in both the fields of work. Moreover, it barely left me any time to create, innovate and collaborate freely as my mind was singularly focused on getting tasks done. When I had just enough of this madness and decided to talk about it to a colleague, something no less than magic happened.

The wedding

Amongst this madness and search for a fuller identity at work, a breakthrough occurred during a phone call with Professor Stuart Carr (from Massey University, New Zealand) and Ingrid Covington (Occupational Psychologist at Creating Psychological Capital), two people who I have never met but simply connected with me via LinkedIn. Although the call was about my plans to move to New Zealand, we stumbled upon the topic of merging

careers and roles. This is when I experienced a eureka moment. The solution was simple yet extraordinary; exploring the field of *Humanitarian Psychology* would hold my two passions of psychology and social work together!

According to Carr, McAuliffe and MacLachlan (2014) humanitarian psychology focuses on using work and organizational psychology to pay close attention to humanitarian concerns, such as promoting safe work conditions and decent wages across all sectors. This is reflected in Stuart Carr's work on sustainable livelihood, decent work, and poverty (Carr, 2013). While traditionally psychology has focused more on personalities in poverty, Carr's work focuses on the contexts for poverty reduction (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). His book titled *Anti-Poverty Psychology* (2013) highlights and builds on the roles of businesses, aid agencies, government civil services, community groups and educational institutions on reducing poverty.

For me, the field of humanitarian psychology would allow me to marry both my work identities fully and beautifully; providing indications of how my career and life could look like in the future. Finally, I had found an arena where I could apply fully myself without creating partitions or barriers to contain the various areas of my work. I had failed to discover this sooner simply because my mind could not fathom how these two professions could work together. I had never tried to google psychology + social work (social psychology) before! This newfound knowledge that there is a place where I can put both my careers in one place felt like I had finally put all the pieces of the puzzle together, like I was whole again. It felt like a huge wave of relief and warmth had taken over me but at the same time I was excited at the possibility to exploring a new field, a new life, and a new career for myself. There was finally a field that provided knowledge, allowed ample space, and gave me the much-needed validation of putting these two fields together. The mere existence of the field challenged the notion that work and personal selves are separate which a lot of organizations continue to believe is true. It also challenged a notion I had held as a child that careers and interests are meant to be different since interests like dance, social work or art cannot lead to successful careers.

The marriage

The task of marrying work and social psychology together in my mind allowed me to see the bigger picture of my life and career. Slowly, I was making connections between both of my perceived separate careers that were otherwise unexplored. These connections

allowed me to enjoy the benefits that two mature people enjoy when they marry and form an alliance together.

There are two major benefits of this practice. First was the ability to innovate in both the fields by bringing in a perspective which uses the dual expertise and creates holistic solutions. I furthered Project LEAP by not only providing a 'first-if-its-kind' training to 300 volunteers but by developing a model for this training which we now deliver to youth volunteers involved in supporting various Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Africa, and the UK. This required me to bring in my expertise as a psychologist and my experience from working with Rotary International. The second benefit of finding a common field was to be able to create a unique identity for myself which helped me to start building my legacy. It was important to me to understand my legacy. What I want to be known for, what people should remember me for, what my colleagues should contact me about. While this seemed muddled and unclear before, my legacy was taking shape slowly and I realised I wanted to be known for innovating and changing the world using psychology as the key tool. An identity that is whole instead of many pieces, that is easier to market and work with, and one that understands the far-reaching impact it can have on not just volunteers in India but for volunteers around the world. This brought immense satisfaction and clarity to my career. It was easier to put together a puzzle when I could imagine what the result could look like.

Subtle differences and challenges

For those who might find this idea similar to the concept of work-life balance (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018), or the ability to manage time to hustle two careers, there is a nuance that needs to be understood. History provides an apt metaphor here. When powerful rulers wanted to conquer another empire, they would often develop strategies to divide the empire by breaking it up in smaller pieces. This strategy has led to countless invasions and the breaking up of huge empires. Learning from our ancestors, the idea here is to marry our careers into one single, powerful whole. This allows us to apply our entire selves towards creating an impactful career. Once we achieve a full sense of self in our work, it becomes difficult for outside forces to disempower us. Indeed, it is proven that to break apart a whole body (stones, humans, and dynasties) is much harder than those which has holes in it (cracks, incongruencies and traitors). Just like this, a marriage of my two careers allows me to create a stronger and empowered career which will have ample clarity, direction, sense of self, and will be much harder to crumble in face of change, uncertainty, and doubt.

For those who might still argue about the worth of secondary jobs and multiple revenue streams, there is no way I am trying to say that these are not important. In fact, I did it for years. This concept is what comes after years of side-hustles. It is the idea of marrying our different jobs, dimensions, skills, and parts together in a union. This concept will allow us to craft our careers into a thriving, strong and fuller self; after the years of side-hustling that will burn and wear us out. While some people are good at ending one part of their chapters and moving on to the other, this idea will save us from shutting down a part of us that we like. It will allow us to transfer our skills to increase our impact, to see ourselves as one human being with a wide skill set, rather than just looking at different jobs in our life that are separate from each other.

Like all good things in life, this marriage did not come easy. The professional maturity of combining my greatest assets required a lot of careful strategising and bold changes. This required mindful observation of my daily tasks in both fields and understanding how they could be aligned together. An instance comes to mind where I sat down with ten different objects in my room, each of which reflected a different project that I was involved in. I then grouped them together based on their focal point: psychology versus social work. I then started shuffling the objects in these two groups thinking which key people from each project I could introduce to each other and how that would benefit the goal of both projects. This simple exercise revealed to me that a lot of my colleagues in field of psychology could help me understand the motivation that propels volunteers; which would then help me find out how to help them better. It required finding out where the opportunities to network and grow lie and where the gaps are. Finally, I had to go an extra step and say 'no' to anything that did not contribute to building my legacy. While my career remains a work in progress, I have been told that this maturity is an experience that people find much later in their lives. The very fact that I felt the compelling need to find it so early in my career highlights how fast paced, competitive and overwhelming careers have become and how devoted my generation is to be the best version of themselves (Chiu, 2021).

An exercise to investigate identities

With the clear benefits of a holistic career in mind, I bring forth the concept of marrying multiple passions, interests, and careers together. So, as individuals, we might want to rethink our identities at work. This exercise can begin by asking ourselves some questions:

- Are there pieces of our puzzle that we have lost, hidden away, or forgotten?
- Do we feel whole, or do we feel divided?
- What makes us feel divided?
- What practices are we adopting in our careers that continuously divide our time, attention, energy and thinking?
- How can we bring our full selves to work?
- What are the benefits we see from it?
- How can we systemically collaborate with people who will benefit from the marriage of our different career paths?
- What will make us whole again?

Concluding remarks: Moving forward, together

Over the past months, I have shared the idea of marrying our careers globally and have collated revolutionising anecdotes where this concept could work. Currently, I am working on an equation. A simple equation that allows us the flexibility and the direction to find our two moving parts, how they add to one another and what the result can look like. Once I have that equation ready, I will share it as far and widely as possible. Who knows, this simple equation might allow individuals, teams, organizations, and governments to finally apply their fuller self and create their legacies.

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