

Reflections on a Working Life

By

Martin Darke

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Email: info@a-new-career-direction.com

Web: www.a-new-career-direction.com

Foreword

In August, 2009 I was asked by Murdoch University in Perth to give a presentation to undergraduates and alumni as part of a series to ‘help them connect to new insights about a working life, how to get there in tough times, and understand the dynamics of career development’.

This presented a challenge, as it was a far cry from my usual material of résumés, selection criteria and interview skills which I had delivered before.

Over the years, though I stress that I have no regrets at all about the way my working life has evolved, I have often reflected on some of the decisions I’ve made, the things that have happened to me, and the people I’ve met along the way.

So I thought it would be a good idea to come up with a series of headings along these lines, to talk about my experiences and to introduce others to the possibility that the same things could happen to them, particularly people just embarking on their careers.

Some might say that they couldn’t match the diversity I have experienced, but that’s not true. My life has been interesting but, when I started my first job as a junior international banker in London with the exotically named The Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corporation, I envisaged a career as a banker. How wrong I was!

I could not possibly have anticipated the twists and turns that lay ahead, the changes in career, location, and fortune.

I have learnt a lot, especially about people and about myself, but that’s what life is all about.

Anyone who reads this book will experience some, if not all, of the topics I raise. Whether you benefit from the ‘wisdom’ of my reflections is impossible to predict, because we are all unique and we approach things differently according to our circumstances.

However, I like to think that there is something here for everyone and, looking back, I sometimes wish that I had had a compendium such as this on which to call.

If that had been the case who knows where I would have been by now?

But one thing I have learnt is that ‘tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift’, and living by this doctrine enables me to accept each day as it comes, to face the challenges that are presented, and to enjoy life as much as possible.

Each of us has a story to tell and one day you too might be writing a book such as this. I look forward to adding new chapters. This is only a beginning and, even at the age of 56 as I write, I know that I will have many more things on which to reflect and many more stories to tell.

Martin Darke
Perth, 2010

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Chapter 1

Falling in love

An unusual one to start.

It happens to most of us at some point but if it happens when the two of you are at university, and if you're both career-minded, then it can present a few issues.

I fell in love in my last year at school and had the most perfect relationship even though we went to different universities 120 miles apart. I spent most weekends commuting and probably didn't make the most of university life. My girlfriend was a medical student and was very ambitious.

When it came to my final year I had narrowed things down to three companies; Clarks (shoes), Mars and HSBC. I made the final group assessment stage for Clarks and Mars. Clarks rejected me and I almost made it with Mars. They gave me a very good debriefing and explained why I failed. The interview with HSBC was something else – did I play rugby? I fitted the mould and consequently was delighted when they offered me a job. Even better was it meant I was in London and my girlfriend was doing her hospital internship in London.

However, I had become an international officer, which meant transfer overseas, and after one year I was posted to Hong Kong for a period of three years with no leave. Since my girlfriend was working 24/7 as a hospital doctor for four years, I was naive enough to think our relationship would continue because our relationship was so special. In those days there was no email and overseas phone calls were very expensive. I saw her once more two years later when I was allowed to go back to the UK on a cricket tour, a rare event.

The point is that if you are both career-minded then there may well have to be compromises. It's fine if you are both offered jobs in the same city, say Perth, but if one of you is offered a job in Sydney, Melbourne or even overseas, then you're going to have to decide what's important to you both.

It's not an easy decision and it might lead to resentment later on, but it's something which demands serious consideration as you might regret the decision for the rest of your life. I didn't regret the decision I made, in the end, but I later came to realise that I had broken my girlfriend's heart by getting on that plane.

There was a sequel to the tale 30 years later, but that's another story.

Chapter 2

Careers

There was a time when people had only one career, but things have changed. Some of us can end up having more than five different careers. Even though you might spend the next 30 years being a doctor or a lawyer, there's no reason why you shouldn't do something completely different at the end of that period.

Here are a few examples of some of the people I've come across:

- a) a nurse who is now a barrister, having first ventured into becoming an immigration consultant.**
- b) a chap in Hong Kong who was an anaesthetist and who is now a lawyer. Funny how the law attracts a lot of people.**
- c) a teacher in Victoria (Australia) who went into adventure sports, and another teacher in Hong Kong who has an eco-tourism resort in Thailand.**
- d) a housewife who used to be an air stewardess and who is now a rape counsellor.**

How hard is it to change?

Sometimes you are forced into it and you make a decision based on where you think the jobs are. Sometimes you make a conscious decision that that's what you want to do.

It's very important to do your research. When I switched to information technology in 2000, my decision was based on the industry saying there were 30,000 vacancies which needed filling. It was not true and, when I qualified with my new diploma, I was considered too old at 47.

Of course it's nice if you have the money to do what you want to do, but again it's important to plan especially if you're setting up a new small business.

Anything is possible so don't be afraid to change careers.

Chapter 3

Find a mentor or coach

Throughout your life you'll be making a lot of decisions. You'll be confronted by situations in which there might be several options. How will you know which option to take? A lot depends on what type of person you are? Are you impulsive and make decisions quickly, going on your gut feeling, or do you relax, write things down, weigh up the pros and cons, consult people and then make a decision.

After my initial three years in Hong Kong, followed by long leave, I was posted by HSBC to Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman. It was a real culture shock tempered by the fact that there were some 15 international officers there, most of whom had spent time in Hong Kong and who were my friends.

Not long after arriving in Muscat I was told by the area manager that I was being sent to a branch called Ibri. The best way to describe Ibri is 'biblical'. It was 200 miles inland from Muscat, was a small town of mud huts, and the bank was the size of a small kitchen staffed by you, the manager, and two local staff. The nearest expatriate was 100 miles away and, with one day off per week, it was impossible to see any of my friends.

I was being posted to Ibri for 18 months which, to me, was a 'life sentence' in solitary confinement, particularly after three years in Hong Kong. So I caused a fuss with head office, and my 'sentence' was knocked down to six months or resignation. Being the stubborn so-and-so that I was in those days, I resigned. My mates supported me wholeheartedly. After all I had done them a favour by drawing attention to the hardship nature of Ibri.

My colleague who went instead to Ibri was a chap called Doug. I met Doug a couple of years later when he was in New York, still with HSBC, and I was on a business trip but based back in Hong Kong. Doug had 'done his time' in Ibri and had even bought a

parrot to keep him company. His HSBC career was intact. I wonder what happened to Doug?

I know what happened to me, and I have no regrets, but I wonder what decision I might have made had I had a mentor (my father had died some time before) to turn to, someone to give a young, stubborn bloke a bit of sensible advice. After all, six months is nothing in the great scheme of things.

I might have had my whole career in the bank and, by now, I would have retired and had a nice pension to live on. As it is, I barely have any pension and need to keep working.

But I'm happy, and I've had lots of experiences.

So consider finding yourself a mentor, someone you can trust, someone you can respect, someone who's available, someone who, preferably, comes at no cost (the big difference between hiring a coach).

You have nothing to lose but everything to gain. In the end, it's your decision anyway.

Chapter 4

Money

Some of you will make a lot of money, some of you will scrape by, some of you will always be comfortable. Some of you will have a lot of money, and then five years later will have not a lot. I've been through it. So, I'm not going to say a lot other than to give you a few maxims:

If you have a roof over your head, food and preferably a glass of wine on the table, and someone in your life who loves you and you love them, then you've got an awful lot more than probably half the people on earth at least.

Then there's a quote by Andrew Carnegie – 'the man who dies rich dies disgraced'.

Finally, one from Grace Johnston, in her book *Aligning your work and purpose*, 'if you're in a career or job purely for the money, then you're leading a living death'. This happened to me in 2007 when I accepted a job which offered a high salary. It took me six months to realise my mistake and I became so happy when I walked out the door.

Chapter 5

Behavioural interviewing and selection criteria

Behavioural interviewing has become more common in the past decade. Questions such as:

- **Describe how you participated in a team and the role you played**
- **Describe a time when you had a conflict in the workplace and how it was resolved**

In my opinion, these questions should be given to you in advance if you are to do yourselves justice. If you're applying for public service jobs then you'll be faced with this all the time in the form of selection criteria.

So what I recommend is that you keep a log book of all the things that happen to you in the context of such questions. Then it will be much easier to draw upon them when you have to put together an application, or if you're at an interview and you're faced with a tricky question. This is not something I was ever told to do but it could be very useful.

Chapter 6

Going overseas

I would recommend this to any young person. I don't know what it was that triggered my desire to look overseas. HSBC sounded very exotic when I saw the name in a careers book. I had never heard of it. Maybe it was because my Dad had travelled a bit or because my older brother moved overseas as a golfer.

Whatever, it changes your life.

You get to understand the world a great deal better, you get exposed to different cultures, you meet all sorts of people from different countries and backgrounds, some of whom will become lifelong friends. You will change as a person. Some don't like it, get homesick, and go straight back home. But if you have an open mind I honestly believe you will derive great benefit.

There is one drawback, and that's when your company might transfer you back to your home country, such as Australia, or if you decide to terminate your overseas career and return 'home' to find a job. You'll find that, quite often, you don't fit in. People might not want to employ you or colleagues resent your presence. After all they are the ones who stayed and who did the hard yards. You're the one who is perceived to have had a good time overseas, on a high salary, and then you come back and threaten their positions and their chance of rising up the ladder. So be wary and consider making your money overseas and then returning 'home' to run your own life under your own terms.

That's what a lot of young Australians do, making their money overseas and then returning home to start their own business or even retire.

Chapter 7

Relationships

I'm not talking here about being in love. This is about relationships in general.

Take an interest in people. Most people actually like talking about themselves. If you follow the teaching of Brian Tracy, as far as he is concerned, the quality of life depends upon the quality of our relationships. I believe he is right.

Think about all the relationships you have. First there are your parents and brothers and sisters, then your relatives. Then there are your friends, your schoolteachers, your lecturers, the person who serves you coffee very morning, the bus driver, the clubs and activities you're involved with, your church, your doctor, dentist, the receptionist. Then there are your work colleagues, from your boss, to peers, the cleaners, the staff in the canteen. Customers and suppliers, people in call centres. On and on

Now if you add these up there are hundreds of them. With every single person you have a relationship, even if you only say a couple of words to them every day. So all I can say is strive to make each of these relationships the best it can possibly be and you'll be amazed what you get back in return, in terms of friendship, respect, cooperation, and even love.

There's nothing like a smile to break down barriers. How many of you walk along the street, or go for your daily walk, and don't try and catch the eye of passers-by. You can make someone's day by smiling at them, and you can get more out of colleagues and subordinates by being nice to them. People will want to do things for you if they perceive you are a nice person. What's wrong with that?

Yes, some relationships will turn sour and then you have to decide how important that relationship is to you. If it is, then

work to get it back on an even keel. If you see that person every day, get it back. If they are not important and you'll never see them again, then forget about them and move on.

The quality of your life depends upon your relationships.

Chapter 8

Bosses

In my time, I've had a few, including:

- a) one who couldn't make a decision in HSBC but who went on to a very, very senior role**
- b) one who was a crook**
- c) one who was very suspicious of everybody and didn't trust anybody**
- d) one who was great and gave me a free hand to run my division as I wanted to**
- e) one who was a tyrant and a bully**
- f) one who was totally disorganised**
- g) one who didn't want to be friends with any of his staff**

Interestingly, two of the bad ones (c and e) had really good guys working alongside them who helped to make life bearable.

Australia is renowned for the poor quality of its bosses. We very rarely get the chance to 'try before you buy'. I can honestly say that, looking back, the most successful and enjoyable period I had when I was a boss, all the people working for me are my friends and we still keep in touch.

So is it due to being successful together that we became friends, or is it due to the fact that we respected each other and made an effort to work together that we became friends? Yes we did have our ups and downs but we set out to support each other and have fun, and that made so much difference.

What is a good boss? Someone who takes an interest in you, not just at work but outside work too. He/she shouldn't be standing in your way if you want to progress. Everyone is replaceable. He should know a bit about your family just in case there's a major

crisis and you need time off. A boss treats everybody equally, shows respect and is inclusive.

Australian bosses, I've found, seem to fear having good people around them. They see them as a threat to their own position. They don't realise that if you surround yourself with good people, then it reflects on you and everybody benefits. Good staff make you look good.

So expect a variety of bosses. It's down mainly to the fact that most bosses simply don't have a clue how to be a good boss. They are usually thrust into the position and sink or swim, or they happen to be the owner of the company and get too carried away with making as much money as possible.

One final word. Beware the family company. There's usually only one succession plan, and it will almost certainly not include you.

Chapter 9

Bullying

There was a recent study which found that 70 per cent of employees had been bullied at some stage in their lives.

I was bullied in a factory in Melbourne by the management, all because I was trying to get a better deal for my colleagues.

Back in the 90s my wife thought she had found a wonderful job in Hong Kong with a global financial services firm yet one of her colleagues turned it into a nightmare by making her life a misery. She almost had a nervous breakdown.

I was in a job in 2007 where the boss was a complete tyrant. I'm convinced that he contributed to the death of one of my colleagues, though I can't prove it.

So bullying exists. It's a series of actions towards one or more employees that's sometimes aggressive, at other times manipulative, but always causes distress and anxiety.

So if it happens to you then you should do something about it. One would hope that your workplace has some form of policy about bullying. However, you might still lose your job if the person doing the bullying is your boss and has been in the firm a long time.

Sometimes, because of the stress, it's best just to walk away and find a new job. Try not to dwell on things if it happens. Nip it in the bud if you can by seeking advice and taking action. It's your health that's at stake.

Chapter 10

Problems

On Boxing Day, 1999 my wife and I were looking forward to our first proper holiday in Australia, a boathouse on the Murray River to celebrate the millennium. Then I went up a ladder to chop a branch off a tree. I fell 15 feet on to solid concrete. The first thing I did was touch my feet and I could feel them so I knew I wasn't paralysed. The surgeon wanted to cut my arm off and said it was the worst upper limb injury he'd ever seen. My wife talked him out of it and asked him to do his best to put me back together. They said I would never get my arm above my shoulder once again.

I've made a 98% recovery. I can still play golf and nothing much has changed except that my shoulder occasionally aches and my arm is slightly bent.

I use this as an example, though you might find it a bit extreme, that problems occur in life can be overcome. Some of us will experience catastrophic events such as car crashes, health problems, etc. It's how you deal with your circumstances that determines what happens after the event.

Problems arise at work. You will screw up, people working for you will screw up, files will be deleted on computers, money will be put in the wrong account, emails will be sent to the wrong people, and you will wonder how you are going to tell your boss.

But problems only remain problems if you do nothing about them. Address them and you will be amazed how quickly they are solved and you soon move on and they become history. Remember that your boss will have had experience of problems and ought (we hope) to understand how to deal with them.

I had a boss who didn't address problems. He put them aside on his desk and hoped they would go away. Unfortunately some of

them involved the tax office. The problems got worse and the company was almost ruined. That is not the way to do it.

From problems you learn. Systems might be changed to ensure that things don't go wrong again. From my accident I learnt a lot about the people around me, who was supportive, who wasn't. I learnt a lot about the value of nurses and doctors. I learnt how to handle pain. I now look back on it as a really interesting and useful experience. I was lucky, but I'm actually glad it happened because of the lessons I've learnt. And it's given me an appreciation of what I have.

So whether it's at work or not, expect that problems will occur in your life. Don't ignore them. Deal with them. Eventually they become history and quite often you will have difficulty recalling them even though, at the time, it seemed that the end of the world had occurred.

Chapter 11

Unions

I was brought up in the UK when the whole country was on a three-day week because of the coalminers' strike. Electricity was rationed and so was heating. Strikes seemed to be the order of the day and normal life was forever being disrupted, whether it was train drivers, bus drivers, nurses or whatever.

So I didn't have a very high opinion of unions and their leaders, and then I went to Hong Kong where unions were unheard of and everybody worked hard and got on with the job. The only strike I ever recall was one by airline stewardesses which didn't last long as they were all threatened with the sack.

Then I came to Australia. My politics used to be right-wing but now I've changed to centre-left. Why? Because I ended up working in a factory and I saw how ordinary working people were being abused and taken advantage of.

I had a chance to change things when my supervisor asked me to represent our shift in the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement ('EBA') negotiations. I took one look at the existing EBA and didn't like what I saw. Things turned sour when the management realised what they were up against. They bought off the other reps and I was locked out of the factory for three weeks when I refused to be transferred to another shift. They even got one of their heavies to threaten me.

Fortunately I had anticipated what was going to happen and joined a union. This factory was now on the radar screen and union reps were allowed to come in and check things such as safety and whether staff were paid their entitlements. In the end I won the battle but lost the war. It ended up at the Industrial Relation Tribunal where we won the case. The union lawyers were outstanding, and I was reinstated, but I had done all I could and moved on.

The lesson here is that, if you study economic history, you will come to understand why unions exist. Individuals, generally speaking, have few or no rights, but as a collective unit, things can be improved. So if you currently don't see any merit in unions, or if you come to be a boss who has to negotiate with unions, try to see the bigger picture and understand why unions exist and what is their purpose.

Chapter 12

Redundancy

Books have been written on dealing with redundancy.

At some stage in your life expect to be made redundant. It could be the best thing that's ever happened to you. On the other hand it could come as a huge shock.

A lot of companies don't plan redundancies properly and how often have we heard the case of people being asked to clear their desks and leave, even after 20 years' service. Redundancy always comes with what seems to be a nice sum of money. **BE CAREFUL. Don't go out and spend it. These payments can tend to make you complacent. The first thing you should do is cut back on your spending, until you've got a job again.**

Again, if you are offered a redundancy package, or if volunteers are called for then you really need to weigh things up. What about the kids' education etc? What are your chances of finding a new job? Think about it very carefully.

If it happens to you, and in most cases it will, sometimes several times over, seek advice and move on. It could be the best thing that has ever happened to you.

Chapter 13

Crooks

They are all around you. Every so often you read stories in the newspaper of people being prosecuted for defrauding their employers, and you look at them and they seem to be the most innocent of people and you wonder why. You probably saw recently the young medical student in Queensland who appeared in court. Her boyfriend had been stealing \$1m from parking meters and she was the innocent lookout. She jeopardised her whole career but was allowed to go back to her studies on a good-behaviour bond.

I once worked for a chap who turned out to be a complete crook. It was a case similar to that of Nick Leeson in Singapore, the bloke who brought down Barings. The difference was that, in my case, my boss got away with his misdemeanours and was never prosecuted. I resigned and walked away, in the nick of time as the business was closed not long afterwards. There's no doubt that he was a great talker, and I was not the only one taken in.

The lesson to be learnt here is that people like this only care about themselves, and nobody else. So be wary, and don't be deceived, as they will bring you down with them and you could lose everything, and for what?

On a lesser scale, there are multiple examples of entitlements not being paid to employees, in particular superannuation. Don't be taken for a ride, by promises not kept. Checking things like superannuation payments is easy, so take responsibility and if you see things happening that are wrong, take advice and decide on appropriate action, even if it does mean you have to find a new job.

Chapter 14

45

If you've read 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' by Douglas Adams, you'll know that the meaning of life is 42.

In my opinion, the meaning of your life might be the age of 45. This is when your life might begin a new chapter.

Ageism is a big problem, not only in Australia. It's a subject close to my heart. Mature-aged unemployment is a huge hidden problem because it's not measured properly. Only recently has it come on to the radar screen as far as the government is concerned.

So beware of this age. If you are employed and get laid off, it's going to be a problem finding a new job. You might have to consider a change in career, or reinventing yourself. It would be nice to have the kids grown up by then, but in most cases they are in their late teens or heading off to university, so be very conscious of your income and expenses.

You still have 40 years to go, on current life expectancy charts!! Pretty scary thought. On the other hand it might be the best thing that ever happened to you.

Chapter 15

Never stop learning

One of the biggest mistakes I made was to stop learning after I finished university. The reason for this is that, in order to obtain my degree after three years of study, I had to pass ten exams all of which were crammed into my final term. There was no continuous assessment. So, when I finished, I swore never to do another exam or test again. Big mistake, looking back.

It wasn't until I decided to change careers at the age of 47, when I did my diploma in computing, that I acquired another qualification. Yes, I had done things like sales courses and finance for non-financial managers, but these are not the same as qualifications.

There are two reasons, I think, why you should always look to gain new qualifications. The first is to stay ahead of the field in your profession, so when it comes to being promoted or you're on the shortlist for a new job, then you'll have an advantage over the competition.

The second is that new qualifications can open up new avenues and, as in my case, my IT diploma led to teaching that subject. One other course I've done which I know I can make money from, and have a lot of enjoyment, is a Swedish relaxation massage course.

So always be on the lookout for qualifications which can add to your inventory and make you stand out from the rest.

Chapter 16

Retirement

I would banish this word from your mind forever. It was always the way of the world that we'd go to work, bring up a family and eventually retire to reap the fruits of our labours.

What does this word mean nowadays? Very little.

When I was in Melbourne I was marketing a course, on behalf of the Over 50s Association, which introduced people to preparing for retirement. Again, very few people make a plan. We are defined by our work and men, in particular, have a huge problem in making the transition to retirement. How many seniors do you know who have no purpose to their lives? I've seen people who resort to drink, who think they can play golf for the rest of their lives, but where's the purpose?

There's a much better term, and that's the THIRD AGE. You might like to invent your own name for a period when you can do what you want to do. Your life has to have purpose. You're going to live until you're 85 and if you stay fit and healthy then anything is achievable. Some of you may have read the story of Father Bob in Melbourne who was told to retire because he was 75. But he didn't want to retire as he was still doing good things, and after all his boss the Pope still had a job at the age of 83.

People who have a purpose live longer and get more out of life. Yes, you can sail around the world, you can volunteer and go and work overseas helping people, you can follow that hobby you've always wanted to do, you can do anything you choose. But make sure you have a purpose.

Chapter 17

Who's coming to the funeral?

So how do we define our lives? What's it all about? When I was planning my first website, I wanted to call it by this heading, but it was probably a bit sensitive.

You might not have been to too many funerals. I certainly haven't. I remember one in Hong Kong when a friend of mine had died on the rugby pitch. I wasn't playing in that game. A lot of people attended. I started to wonder why people go to funerals. Do they simply go because they feel they have to, or because they genuinely want to go and pay their respects, because the person who died had had an influence on their lives? When a person of social stature dies, they have a memorial service and hundreds, sometimes thousands, turn up.

It's not necessarily a question of how many people attend your funeral, but it's easy to say that a person's life is defined by the number of people who turn up. If you've led a purposeful life and had a positive effect (I prefer that to 'impact') on other people's lives then they will all want to attend. But don't worry if they don't. What matters, if they can't attend, but they've read about your death, is that they say to themselves, 'I'd have liked to have been there because he/she was a good person and had a positive effect on my life'.

So, for me, that's what life is all about, having a positive effect on people's lives, even if it's just a smile.

Chapter 18

Tomorrow's a mystery

It certainly is. You might get fired, you might win the lotto, you might have an accident, you might fall in love, you might be separated from one you love.

I certainly didn't envisage falling off a ladder. Nor did I envisage coming to Australia – we actually had a plan to establish an upmarket bed & breakfast in Cape Town.

So is it possible to make a PLAN? Very few people do. Do you have a plan? I confess I've never really planned. Apart from the one to set up a B&B, which was in 1996, the only other one I had was when I came to Australia and thought I would pay off the mortgage by the time I was 50. Then I got made redundant. I will probably never own a house again.

So now my plan is to make sufficient over the next five years and then buy a mobile home. If people in Australia won't come to me, than I'll go to them and offer:

- **computer training**
- **Internet access**
- **Swedish massage**
- **résumés**
- **career coaching**
- **shoe cleaning, and much more**

Sounds good to me, and I know I'm going to meet a lot of people!

SO MAKE THE MOST OF EACH DAY!

GOOD LUCK!