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Your Career: Turning dreams into reality More than passion needed, but few are easily dissuaded

By Eve Tahmincioglu

Elizabeth Nill, 61, had a dream of becoming a president of a community college when she went to Harvard Business School in the late 1970s. But even though colleagues told her she didn't have the temperament for such a job, she spent years pursuing her dream.

She worked as an assistant dean at Harvard but then realized "I didn't have the stamina or patience to be a college president."

She later became a chief operating officer of a philanthropic organization and then tried her hand as a managing director for a consulting firm. But last year she ditched it all to launch a clothing company, Shibui Design, based in Cape Cod.

Jonathan Sherman, 24, of Columbus, Ohio, pictured himself making movies from an early age and went to film school to study his dream craft even though some people, including family members, advised him not to.

Turns out, the naysayers were right. At the end of college, he realized the film industry was not for him, and he now has his sights set on marketing as a career, something he discovered while doing a brand marketing internship at Lego. "As much as I loved film, this new career turned a whole other light on for me," said Sherman.

It's hard to say whether Nill was meant to be a fashion maven or whether marketing will turn out to be Sherman's career destiny.

Clearly, they're both passionate about their newfound paths. But is passion enough to fuel your career dreams?

Blinded by passion

It may not be, according to Patrick Carroll, an assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University at Lima and co-author of a recent study on career dreams published in the journal *Social Cognition*. Too often, he said, we're so blinded by our passion that we might not listen to common sense, even if we may be doomed to never reach lifelong career aspirations.

"It's not enough to tell people they fall short and it's not enough to tell them they won't achieve what they envision," he said about his research. "People aren't good at calculating the potential consequences of failure."

Carroll's research, which included business and psychology students at Ohio State, found that just telling students they didn't have the grade point average or the aptitude or skills to make it in a particular program or career wasn't enough to derail their aspirations. The students had to be hit over the head with graphic descriptions of failure and the prospect of no employment possibilities before they considered giving up on a goal.

Carroll stressed that his research isn't about finding a way "to kill a dream or make a dream die." It's about offering a reality check that can be helpful for students and professionals assessing their career prospects. Even though it may bring short-term disappointment, he said, it can potentially "maximize long-term mental health."

Dealing in career reality, he added, is even more important in this tight job market. "As the economy becomes more uncertain, more people with higher qualifications are competing for fewer job opportunities," he said.

Now, more than ever, you have to have the right experience, background, and skills and desire to make it in your chosen profession or job.

But how do you go about getting an honest take on whether you're really cut out for it?

'Follow your passions'

Sandy Sexton, 50, who lives in Knoxville, Tenn., recently attended a leadership program where she took a Myers-Briggs personality assessment test. She believes the test helped her solidify her decision to ultimately leave information technology after 25 years in the industry and pursue a career in life coaching.

The assessment, she said, "showed I would be happiest working with people and places with ideas, and helping inspire people to reach their dreams." She used a life coach a few years earlier and came to the conclusion that that was the best career direction for her.

"People who know me professionally think I'm nuts," Sexton said, adding that she has to "get my husband comfortable with me quitting my day job." But she won't be derailed. "You've got to follow your passions, because if you don't, you'll end up failing in things you follow that are not your passions," she said.

Dreams into reality

Paula Caligiuri, human resource management professor and director of the Center for Human Resource Strategy, Rutgers University, said dreaming helps individuals discover things about themselves. Too often, she believes we force kids too early to find something "practical or live in the real world."

"It's absolutely, 100 percent, OK to dream," she said.

She offered three questions you can ask yourself for determining whether you're likely to make dreams a reality:

1. What is the nature of the career dream with respect to underlying abilities? Some career dreams are bound by natural ability or can be achieved as a function of raw motivation. "Becoming a professional athlete" is an example of the former. "Becoming a millionaire" is an example of the latter. In some cases, there really is a natural limit for

the given career. Healthy self-awareness and a track record often suggest that the person possesses the raw talent to make a career dream come true.

2. Does he or she have the strength of character to overcome doubters and naysayers? The self-fulfilling prophecy comes into play when people are told that their dreams are unrealistic (especially when the words are uttered by those who are trusted). It is not surprising that many people lose their ability to dream about careers somewhere between the late teens or early twenties, the time when the dominant message is that one should “get serious about one’s future.” At this age, many young people often have a less-developed sense of self and listen to the advice.

3. Is he or she realistic about the process? Outside of Hollywood, dream careers do not happen overnight. When a person has set well-articulated, reasonable, and measurable goals to guide his or her path to the dream career, then the dream career becomes a more realistic career.

As for Nill, she has set realistic goals for her new career designing custom-fit 1950s-inspired dresses for women. She recently opened her first store in Cape Cod and figures she has a year and a half in savings before she has to give up on her dream.

With no experience in fashion or manufacturing, Nill has naysayers when it comes to her new dream — most pointedly her financial adviser who cautions her against spending down her assets to pursue her new passion.

But no one could dissuade her, just as they couldn’t decades earlier. “Once we get our sights on something, as human beings, we’re going to stay with it until we run into bumps ourselves,” she said.