

Ethan – A Career Coaching Case Study of Underemployment

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Name: Ethan

Age: 39

Education: Master of Arts degree in history

Current Occupation: Purchasing Associate

Marital status: Married (second marriage), no children

Residence: Metro Atlanta, GA; originally from Kansas with undergraduate studies completed in Kansas and graduate studies completed in Alabama

Coaching engagement: July 2006 to November 2007

Background

Ethan was in his mid twenties when he identified what he believed to be his true calling: history and a career in academia. Enthusiastic and somewhat relieved (having changed his college major several times), Ethan went on to complete many of the necessary steps toward becoming a history professor.

Those steps included successfully defending his Master's thesis and maintaining a 4.0 GPA. It came as a great shock when his graduate program advisors refused to recommend him for a doctoral program, refusing even to elaborate on their decision. His dream of an academic career vanished overnight.

Disheartened and uncertain about another career path, Ethan took a series of low-paying jobs over the next few years "just to get by." He was unchallenged, unfulfilled and utterly bored. Self-doubt exacerbated his already diminished self-esteem.

Career Coaching Goals/Barriers

Ethan came to Two Roads Resources, Inc., my private career coaching practice, in July 2006. He expressed his desire to clarify his interests, define viable options for a satisfying career and to break his pattern of unstimulating, low-paying jobs. Ethan had completed his graduate degree with highest honors and yet he continued to place himself in positions of underemployment, settling for jobs requiring little or no higher education ("Underemployment (economics)"). Ultimately, he wanted to successfully transition into a career that captured his interest and satisfied his desire for adventure, intellectual challenge and self-expression.

Ethan appeared to be reserved, introspective, intelligent, respectful, friendly and caring. During initial interviews, he expressed a profound emptiness in his life and a lost sense of purpose. Though normally a goal-oriented man, Ethan was unclear about what was most important to him in a career. He was unsure how his interests, values, personality and abilities could translate into an occupation, and he doubted he had the necessary skills for a successful career. He described himself as indecisive, unfocused and fearful of making wrong choices. Even thinking about developing a rewarding career was overwhelming.

This fear and frustration, along with his indecision and persistent lack of focus, had the potential to derail Ethan's efforts toward clarity and forward momentum. As Ethan's career coach, I addressed this by creating a great deal of structure around his ideas and the coaching process. My strategy with Ethan included generating lists, homework assignments, assessments, and spreadsheets, as discussed below. "If clients translate their career ideas into 'steps to a goal' and then follow their action plans that indicates that they are motivated. Which leads us back to the foundation that undergirds the most satisfying career choices – meaning and purpose" (Figler

& Bolles, 1999, p. 29).

Another, more personal, roadblock was Ethan's concern that pursuing his interests would threaten his loved ones. According to him, some family members feared that certain careers, such as commercial pilot, would take him away from them. He indicated that he had let their worries control his actions in the past, and that the prospect of dealing with his loved ones was, at times, more difficult than dealing with his own confusion.

Assessments/Information Gathering

An early assignment in the coaching engagement was for Ethan to list dream careers and the qualities that he valued in them. His initial choices included: journalist, park ranger, adventure travel guide/business owner, real estate investor and writer. Life coach Mary Anne Bailey encourages job seekers to identify their dream job. "Every day we look at the same thing, and eventually we come to believe that what we see is the way that all of life is. When you decided to change careers, you made a conscious decision to enlarge the window on your world. You are giving yourself permission to think creatively and step outside your box" (2005, p. 59).

He also ranked 12 career values according to importance, discovering that his top five needs were: variety of work, travel opportunities, pay/salary, benefits and education/training.

Ethan's profile on the *Newly Revised Strong Interest Inventory* assessment (see attachment I in Appendix), taken early in the coaching engagement, revealed that his interests lay primarily in types of careers that were investigative, artistic and realistic (an IAR theme code on the *Strong*). "The Theme code reported on page 2 of the Profile and in the Profile Summary will typically provide a useful summary of the client's general interests and serve as a bridge to the larger world of work" (Donnay, Morris, Schaubhut & Thompson, 2005, p. 169). The assessment

ultimately provided feedback on occupational titles in which a person with Ethan's responses would likely have significant matching interests to other males in the instrument's database. The results appeared to validate many of his own self-reported interests and suggested the following as his top 10 *Strong* occupations: technical writer, reporter, editor, technical support specialist, geographer, network administrator, photographer, psychologist, urban and regional planner, and ESL instructor.

I also assessed Ethan's personal style preferences for a best-fit career position, using feedback from the *Strong Interest Inventory* and results of the Self-Management Group's *Personal Orientation Profile-System IV* (see attachment II in Appendix), an assessment which Ethan had taken a few weeks before commencing his coaching. Some key personal style preferences were that Ethan would likely: prefer working alone or in small, tightly knit teams; prefer to learn through lectures and books; prefer to lead by example; enjoy taking risks; enjoy the role of independent contributor; prefer a well-structured and well-organized function; be happy in a job that is analytical, technical, involves discovery learning and is detail-oriented.

The final key piece of information gathering was a list of core strengths and transferable skills, which Ethan developed with the assistance of several Internet sites I recommended. He then compared his list of skills against core skill requirements associated with occupational titles I suggested he research further. These titles from the *Strong* report, along with ideas generated and explored during our coaching sessions, were incorporated into a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet exercise proved highly illuminating and helpful in honing in on Ethan's eventual career decision.

Coaching Sessions

At our very first meeting, I made a point of commending Ethan for taking the important

step of reaching out to a coach for professional guidance and support. I wanted him to hear, and hopefully acknowledge that this was an important, pro-active step toward positive change in his life. “Coaching can help with overcoming inhibiting habits, laying out career goals and strategies, determining how best to work in a difficult situation or balancing work and lifestyle issues. Coaching can also serve as ongoing support and a reality check as career plans are implemented” (Simonsen, 2000, p. 136). Coaching sessions during this 16-month engagement were spent as follows: analyzing self-assessment and formal assessment data, reviewing Ethan’s discovery work relating to occupational exploration, brainstorming potential career paths, developing clear next steps, working through perceived barriers, tracking activity, updating personal marketing materials (resume and cover letter), and refining a job search strategy.

The first session with Ethan revealed the major issues underlying his persistent underemployment as compared to his academic credentials. Having his academic advisors refuse to recommend him for a doctoral program was devastating to his career aspirations and self-esteem. Though confused and angry, he believed that the advisors, all accomplished history professors, must be right. He felt powerless to affect the decision, as the advisors would not elaborate on their reasons for refusing him.

This feeling of powerlessness to create the life he wanted for himself seemed to have followed Ethan out of academia. At this initial intake session, he indicated that he had trouble making and following through on decisions, typically out of fear that the decisions will be wrong and irreversible. He felt he lacked critical pieces of information, was uncertain, doubted his abilities and worried that his age might negatively affect his career options.

To immediately begin countering this powerlessness, I asked Ethan to review information on several websites that would help him identify transferable skills and explore career options

available with a history degree. I also recommended two books, as resource material for Ethan to survey: *Change Your Job, Change Your Life*, by Ronald L. Krannich, and *Great Jobs for History Majors*, by Julie DeGalan and Stephen Lambert. Ethan later described the material assigned during this first session as “inspiring.”

During the second session, Ethan and I reviewed the results and interpretation of the *Strong Interest Inventory*, noted above. Following that, I emailed him a listing of Internet links for career exploration and two articles on employee training, asking that he start researching several of the matching occupational titles from the *Strong* report.

The third and fourth sessions were extremely action-oriented, giving needed structure to Ethan’s effort and helping to drown out the uncertainty and confusion present when Ethan began. Here is an excerpt from our coaching communications in which I asked Ethan to review his list of core strengths and transferable skills and continue his occupational research.

“Consider training and experience associated with all your roles (personal, academic, job/career) and see if you can enhance the list somewhat. Compare your strengths and skills to duties/tasks associated with the occupational titles that you have already researched. Also consider the occupational areas on page 3 of the Interpretive Section of the *Strong*...where the focus is on your top 2 theme codes. Then continue to research other titles that you are considering and compare the details associated with the titles on your expanded list.

“Remember that the occupational titles on the *Strong* report can also be viewed as general fields or work environments. So consider job roles that you might transition into (based

upon your current skill set) in an environment that is of interest to you (i.e., performing background research or tech writing for a travel organization).

“I would also like you to consider if there is a background or support role that would interest you in an academic environment, such as academic advisor.”

The next task was to put the expanded list of transferable skills and core strengths into a spreadsheet, making sure to factor in Ethan’s major career values for a best-fit career position (such as work environment, location, organizational size, pay, benefits, schedule, advancement, etc.). I designed the spreadsheet (see attachment III in Appendix) to offer a visual display of patterns to be analyzed and emailed Ethan detailed instructions on how to utilize the spreadsheet with the research. He noted that this exercise would enable him to begin to see which occupational titles (based upon his interests) represent a nice match to his current skills and values, and which new skills he might need to acquire. As Krannich states, “once you know what you really do well and enjoy doing, your next task is to analyze those interests, values, abilities and skills that form a recurring motivated pattern” (2005, p. 143).

Finally, I asked Ethan to further classify the occupational titles on the spreadsheet based on decisions discussed during the fourth coaching session, such as *Potential Career Path*, *Pursue as a hobby* or *Requires too much additional training*. Other next steps I assigned were to gather information on entry-level training requirements for occupations listed on the spreadsheet, research certification programs available for the occupations, and identify live job postings for the occupations (to review actual *preferred qualifications*).

A little more than three months into the coaching relationship, Ethan ran into a roadblock.

“I don’t know if I am just tired or what, but I am trying to research information for CAD tech (computer aided design technician) and just feeling frustrated and even somewhat discouraged overall,” he wrote. He went on to say that many of the qualifications seemed daunting, due to the large technical component and apparent need for drawing skills; Ethan just didn’t want to spend as much time retraining as that would seem to require. “And as for the drawing ability, I just don’t think I can ever really acquire that skill.” The authors of *Dream Careers* express a firm position on how a client can overcome self-defeating thoughts. “But no matter what you believe, or what you are feeling, if you decide it is worth it to you, you can change your behavior...so ask yourself if it’s worth a little discomfort to create the career of your dreams” (Goulet, Goulet & James, 2006, pp. 25-27).

I acknowledged that Ethan had been reviewing and compiling a great deal of information and said it was understandable that he would be a bit tired and frustrated with the process. I clarified, for Ethan, information about a CAD tech career and suggested he focus on simply completing his evaluation of the occupational titles and training requirements he was currently researching and logging the results into his comparison spreadsheet. I reminded Ethan that if, after doing so, he ultimately determined that the profession was not appealing, all he had to do was move it to the “No” column and continue moving forward. I also provided Ethan with a long list of certificate programs of potential interest to him (rather than degree programs), noting that they may allow him to train for a career in a new field in a reasonably short period of time.

Outcomes and Results

There seemed to be real progress following the above exchange and Ethan’s realization that he might focus additional training on a certificate program rather than another degree. Ethan

seemed to quickly gain clarity and focus around his career interests, motivations and options, resulting in an informed decision to embark on a new career path in the field of IT (information technology), specifically PC and network support. He was both encouraged and enthusiastic. This career ranks number 36 among *The 50 Best Investigative Jobs* and number 18 among *The 20 Fastest-Growing Investigative Jobs* (Farr & Shatkin, 2005, pp. 31-45). About seven months after coaching began, Ethan enrolled in an IT certification program at a local college, and he is now nearing completion of that program.

Ethan's current professional development plan includes finding an entry level IT position, acquiring additional technical credentials in IT, and eventually competing for advanced career positions in this field. Ethan conveys that the actual process of completing each course in the certification program has been very satisfying and validating, and has sustained his momentum. He also states that he is quite encouraged by the fact that his family, particularly his wife, supports his decision and current plan of action.

As final steps in the career transition process, Ethan and I reviewed his personal marketing materials along with job search strategies. I prepared an updated resume for Ethan to focus on his transferable skills and coursework for the IT certification, and made suggestions for the cover letters to start a job search for an entry level position in IT. "Employers are interested in hiring your future rather than your past. Therefore, your resume should emphasize the skills and abilities you will bring to the job as well as your interests and goals. Let prospective employers know what you are likely to do for them in the future. When you present your work history, do so in terms of your major skills and accomplishments (Figler & Bolles, 1999, p. 84).

When Ethan started coaching in July 2006, his resume was filled with minutia that reflected his self-doubt and low self-image (see attachment IV in Appendix). His current resume

provides a strong profile and is filled with the stuff of a man who believes in himself again (see attachment V in Appendix).

Coach's Reflections

I truly enjoyed the coaching relationship with Ethan. We developed and maintained a respectful rapport, supported by a genuine belief that the coaching process would yield positive results. Ethan consistently demonstrated a commitment to complete the suggested exercises and assessment activities. He was determined to identify a new career path, one that he would find intellectually challenging and energizing over the long term. I believe that coaching was an effective approach for Ethan because he allowed himself to be coached, he sought objective feedback, and he remained accountable for gathering information for further discussion and interpretation.

Ethan has begun to rebuild his self-esteem and regain a sense of purpose by willingly embracing a plan of action. I consider Ethan's coaching program to be a success, for reasons beyond the fact that he has identified a new career path. His self-confidence is being restored and he is, in essence, empowering himself to evaluate the challenges and rewards associated with his newly chosen occupation. He is making informed career and life decisions based upon his core strengths, his genuine interests, and a renewed appreciation for learning.

Recommendations for Ongoing Career Development

Soon Ethan will have completed his initial IT certification program. He will then fully engage in a job search strategy to secure a position within this growth industry. I have no doubt that he will continue his education and training to secure advanced credentials and propel his

career. The field of IT can be highly stimulating, in the sense that it is ever changing and advancing. Ethan should consistently encounter both mental challenges and opportunities for professional growth.

As Ethan gains practical IT experience, and blends this experience with added industry qualifications, he will be well positioned to share his expertise with others. His skills and personality would also support a role as an IT trainer or instructor. Perhaps one day he will once again find himself in the role of educator, having effectively combined solid career experience with both academic and professional achievements.

List of Resources and Tools Employed Within the Scope of Coaching Engagement

- I. *Newly Revised Strong Interest Inventory Interpretive Report* - compiled for Ethan.
- II. The Self-Management Group's *Personal Orientation Profile-System IV* – compiled for Ethan.
- III. Spreadsheet representing Ethan's occupational exploration and research activity.
- IV. Ethan's original resume, reviewed in July 2006, at the onset of the coaching process.
- V. Updated resume prepared for Ethan, as a result of our coaching engagement.

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