YOUR CAREER AS A GAME

The indispensible first step to getting the things you want out of life is this: Decide what you want.

Ben Stein

In the film A Beautiful Mind, Russell Crowe plays game theory pioneer John Nash. One scene from the film succinctly captures the essence of game theory and its implications for decision making. In the scene, Nash and his classmates are together in a bar when a group of five young women walk in—one blonde and four brunettes. The group—and particularly the blonde—quickly attracts the attention of Nash and his friends. Immediately, each classmate begins to plot his next move to win over the blonde. Nash has an epiphany of sorts: If each one independently attempts to maximize his personal outcome (which, in this scenario, involves pursuing the blonde), they will undoubtedly trip over one another and, in the end, no one will “win.” He predicts that, by the time their mutual failures to win over the blonde become apparent, it will be too late to turn their energy to her friends—none of the brunettes will want to be second choice. This dilemma causes Nash to comment that Oliver Williamson’s classical view—that through individuals acting in their own best interests, the best interests of the group are met—does not fit the situation. If each classmate acts in his own best interest, then they will all fail.

Instead, Nash understands the situation as one in which each individual’s best move depends on the anticipated moves that other rational players can be expected to make. Understood this way, the best course of action for each individual is to recall the dynamic—espoused in the title of the 1953 movie—that “gentlemen prefer blondes.” Knowing that your classmates are likely to pursue the blonde first, a more effective strategy would be for you to attend to one of the brunette friends. That way, you maximize your chance of winning the attention of one of the women. The critical observation here is the recognition that, in many situations, one individual’s best move is often dependent on
the anticipated moves of other players. Just as an understanding of game theory might help a college student understand how to win a date, we suggest that it can help you position yourself to have a successful career.

GAME THEORY IN OUR CULTURE

Game theory continues to be a popular topic; a 2005 Nobel prize was, once again, awarded to game theory scholars.¹ It has been used to provide novel ways to look at wide-ranging phenomena including logistics,² investing,³ marketing,⁴ human evolution,⁵ and terrorism.⁶ In popular culture, strategists have used game theory to outline a winning strategy in the spate of reality television shows (The Weakest Link, Survivor, and The Apprentice, for example). These shows share some important characteristics. First, individuals move on to the next round—or are eliminated—based largely on the votes of other contestants. Second, early-round success depends on the contributions of all players. In such contests, the winning strategy involves finding the delicate balance between moves that cause others to conclude that you are too weak to contribute to the group tasks and those that reveal you to be so strong as to be seen by other contestants as a final-round threat. Those who fail to achieve this balance and who appear to be “free riders” in the early rounds may not survive because others conclude that they cannot help the team with early wins. Those who tip their cards and reveal their strength too early will likely be eliminated by temporary alliances of other players.

Not surprisingly, examples of game theory applications abound in competitive sports. For example, the concept of a “moral hazard” is illustrated by the greater propensity for batters in the American League to be hit by pitches than their counterparts in the National League. In the American League, the rules do not require the pitcher to take a turn at bat. As a result, pitchers may not be concerned about experiencing retribution when they throw “at” rather than “to” batters. Anyone who has spent time watching football broadcasts has heard the ubiquitous comment from “color” analysts that a team “has to be able to run to set up the pass” or “has to be able to pass to set up the run.” Unknowingly, those commentators are applying the concept of “mixing motives” from game theory to the calling of plays.

Making predictable moves in a multiplayer game is rarely a winning game strategy. If your opponent knows your tendency, developing a response is
quite straightforward. When a football defense unit knows a team has trouble passing, they “pack” their players toward the line to stop the run. Similarly, when either tendencies or circumstances suggest that the offense must pass, the defense knows to adjust. The best moves for an offense, then, are to first avoid getting into a situation, such as third and long yardage, in which your position telegraphs your likely play and, above all, to avoid discernable patterns of play calling.

All of us play games in our daily lives, as well. Consequently, game theory can help our understanding of a variety of routine activities familiar to everyone. For example, before leaving the office you may check online to see what the traffic report is for your trip home. Upon hearing of an accident delaying traffic on your primary route, you begin to plot a strategy using alternate roads. Other drivers who share parts of your route home are simultaneously plotting their own strategies. To the extent that you anticipate and avoid their choices, your commute home is a breeze. Should you each select the same alternative, you end up no better off than those stuck on the primary route. Here begins the game of trying to anticipate what your competitors are thinking—and their simultaneous efforts to understand what you are thinking—and each of your efforts to “outthink” the other.

These illustrations show how accessible and useful game theory can be in understanding decision making in situations with interdependent players. Our first task in this book is to provide you with a deeper understanding of the primary concepts behind game theory. Game theory provides ways for you to think about your career so that you learn to anticipate the moves others will make and to plan your own moves accordingly. The second element of this book is the focus on a key individual capability—a new concept we are calling career agility.

GAME THEORY IN CAREERS

Why do we think you will find game theory a useful tool when considering careers? As noted above, game theory has gained some traction as a useful tool for understanding business situations. For the most part, applications of game theory related to business strategy have focused on elements such as pricing strategy, market entry, and strategic moves. The theory has not been explicitly applied to understanding career decision making, although some figures
have paved the way. Gary Kasparov, who, in 1985, became the world’s young-est chess champion, has since been writing and has become active in Russian politics. He recently published a book titled *How Life Imitates Chess: Making the Right Moves from the Board to the Boardroom*. As the title implies, Kasparov feels that lessons he learned while honing his chess game are applicable to the business world. As Kasparov notes regarding chess, you can’t win at your career without moral and physical courage, boldness, and daring. Kasparov also speaks to our sentiments about agility, noting that to win at chess requires intelligence and audaciousness as well as a willingness to do what it takes to unnerve the other player.

Another observation that caused us to explore this topic concerns what we view as a fairly stagnant body of literature on career management. The expression “career advice” returns nearly 14,000 recommendations on Amazon.com’s website.7 The top choice was a book called *Career Match: Connecting Who You Are with What You’ll Love to Do* by Shoya Zichy and Ann Bidou. The title seems to make clear the authors’ central premise. The Amazon.com search utility suggests a second title—the ubiquitous *What Color Is Your Parachute? 2009* by Richard Nelson Bolles. The admonitions proffered in these books are strikingly similar to advice that appeared fifty years ago. In 1959, an article in *Nation’s Business* offered the following career advice: consider your interests, your abilities, your personality, and “everyday practicalities” and match what you are good at with what you want out of a job.8 The state of the art in understanding career success does not appear to have changed very much. To our point of view, just as John Nash noted that Oliver Williamson’s view of individual decision making required some revision, so, too, does our thinking about how to manage a career. The insights that a game theory approach offers to individuals about how to strategically manage their careers, we think, constitute a proper revision.

Once a career is understood as a game involving players who compete for opportunities, the natural next question concerns how to become a better player. We suggest that the key to developing ability as a career game player is career agility. Career-agile individuals have high emotional intelligence, are politically savvy, are comfortable with uncertainty and risk, and thus demonstrate high degrees of successful portability from position to position over
time. Great players of the career game are often modest, and most minimize
their own role in their success. In our experience, the most common explana-
tion that executives will offer for their personal success is that they were lucky
enough to be in the right place at the right time. Of course, as the Roman phi-
losopher Seneca observed long ago, “luck is what happens when preparation
meets opportunity.” Agile executives understand how to navigate to the inter-
section of preparedness and opportunity. Whereas a concerted effort to do so
would likely uncover some examples of meritless people stumbling into that
intersection, it is fair to expect that most people’s opportunities derive from
demonstrated capability. Others describe their rises as resulting from a nearly
invisible “hand up” from a mentor. Some successful individuals are more pur-
poseful in their efforts. As one executive told us, “Some people are constantly
plotting their career. I don’t know where they got this gene, but it seems that
they are plotting from the playpen until they become chairman and CEO.”

Over the course of the rest of this book, our first goal will be to help you
understand the career game; the second goal will be to help you develop your
skill as a player. Game theory tools, concepts, and nomenclature will help you
understand that your career is productively viewed as a game characterized by
interacting, interdependent, and self-interested players. The game has rules;
the players all have motives and options. Comfortable salaries, exciting work,
promotional opportunities, and charismatic coworkers are among the often
zero-sum prizes out there to be “won” by players. Game theory helps us frame
the career game—to understand its rules, boundaries, and ways of winning.
Then, understanding career agility—a characteristic that individuals can de-
velop—is explained as the key ability to playing the game well. Each is neces-
sary, and neither is sufficient on its own, to win at the game of your career.

In the next chapter, we will introduce you to the game theory concepts that
will prove most useful in managing your career. First, however, you will find
our conversations with Charlene Begley, Bryan Bell, and Ursula Burns. Char-
lene Begley is senior vice president with General Electric and president and
CEO of GE Enterprise Solutions. She has had a long and successful career at GE
and offers a number of important comments on topics, including how GE uses
its size to develop careers and how you can attract mentors to your cause. At the
time of our conversation, Bryan Bell was finishing his PhD in Bioengineering
and had recently accepted a position as a management consultant with Bain & Company. Bell offers some great insight into early-career moves—around universities, majors, and first job decisions. Our final conversation in this chapter is with Ursula Burns, CEO of Xerox Corporation. Like Charlene Begley, she has had a long career with one employer and offers some insights into what it is about Xerox that made it possible for her to stay and grow—and what she did in order to continue to garner opportunities. These interviewees’ observations provide useful clues for evaluating the likelihood of a long career with a potential employer.

NOTES
7. Search conducted in June 2008.

A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLENE BEGLEY

**Senior Vice President, General Electric; President and CEO, GE Enterprise Solutions**

Since stepping into her present position in August 2007, Charlene Begley has been driving growth initiatives in GE’s technology, emerging markets, vertical solutions, and global infrastructure. GE Enterprise Solutions has 17,000 problem-solving employees in more than sixty countries around the world.

Begley began her career at GE in 1988. She has held a variety of leadership roles within the company, including vice president of operations at GE Capital Mortgage Services, quality leader and CFO at GE Transportation Systems,
director of finance for GE Plastics-Europe, vice president of the Corporate Audit Staff, and CEO at GE FANUC Automation. In January 2003, she was appointed president and CEO of GE Transportation. And in July 2005, she was named president and CEO of GE Plastics.

Begley serves on the World Economic Forum’s Young Global Leaders panel, the GE FANUC board of directors, and the board of the National Association of Manufacturers. She is a graduate of the University of Vermont. See also www.ge.com/company/leadership/bios_exec/charlene_begley.html.

AUTHORS: You have been at GE for twenty years. How did you get started there?

BEGLEY: Coming out of college, I knew I wanted to enter a leadership development program. It was my goal to be some type of leader—although at the time I didn’t have a clear idea of exactly what I wanted to lead. As I was looking for a job, I paid attention to companies that had the best reputations for leadership development. That was my first strategy, to get into a company that had a really good reputation for developing people. I started in finance, not because I have a love for it, but because I felt understanding finance was fundamental to understanding overall business.

I went through GE’s two-year financial management program, and I made a conscious decision to join the corporate audit staff because it was considered the career accelerator within the company. I wanted a chance to see other functions and to see other parts of GE, so I joined with the intent of broadening myself beyond finance. At that time, the audit staff did about 50 percent nonfinancial work, so it was actually a broadening experience. From there, the opportunities have kept on coming. Beyond the first few decisions—to join GE, to take advantage of the financial management program, and to work in corporate audit—things have happened faster than I could have ever hoped or planned.

AUTHORS: These early steps prepared you for either a long career at GE or for a position elsewhere, since you were learning fairly portable skills.

BEGLEY: True. I never thought about taking them out the door with me, but I certainly could have.
AUTHORS: Our observation is that many companies are quick to cut or scale back on these entry-level leadership development programs. Why has GE remained so committed to theirs?

BEGLEY: You are right about the overall trend. At GE, people and leadership development are fundamental company values. I have been on Jeff Immelt’s executive council for years, and on [our previous CEO] Jack Welch’s before that. We view talent development as core to our business strategy, and leadership development is a key tactic in our growth strategy. We are more committed than ever to programs that will develop our leadership. For example, we support two-year entry-level programs in finance, IT, HR, engineering, communications, design, and technology. This commitment has never wavered in my twenty years at GE. It has always been a huge priority. No matter how tough it may get from an economic and business standpoint, developing people is one priority where we never lose focus.

AUTHORS: Who has helped you shape your career?

BEGLEY: I had mentors and sponsors throughout my career. These people played a big role in why I have had such an accelerated career in GE. It was never formal or structured, and, personally, I think this is the strongest way to form mentor-mentee relationships. Early in my career, Dave Calhoun [now at The Nielsan Company] was very instrumental. He was running the corporate audit staff while I was there. He noticed my work and was impressed with some of the things that I had achieved. He took interest in my career early on, and throughout my career I have called him for his opinion on particular opportunities at GE. He has pulled me out of jobs and moved me to the next level, such as the CFO job at GE Transportation. He had a lot to do with some of my career moves.

AUTHORS: Calhoun has been valuable to you because of his position and his network in the company. He is senior enough to be influential, but not so senior that he didn’t notice you on the audit staff.

BEGLEY: That’s right. He was an excellent mentor in this regard.

AUTHORS: As you have climbed higher on the organizational chart at GE, what has changed in terms of what you need from a mentor relationship?
Begley: What I appreciate now—although it has always been useful—are peers who can give you a reality check. Having a connection to someone with enough experience and insight to understand your challenges—but who also is in a position to be objective—is very valuable. This isn’t true mentoring per se, but it is an incredibly useful support system.

Authors: You mentioned that opportunities have often come to you more quickly than you might have expected at GE. Did you ever worry about moving too quickly? How long do you think someone needs to stay in a role to really have a positive impact for the business?

Begley: There have been positions that I didn’t occupy for very long, and that was partly how Jack Welch wanted to run the company. Rotating people—and rotating them frequently—really has been a fundamental part of the GE culture. Under Jeff Immelt’s leadership, there is an emphasis on changing this a bit so that people develop more expertise by spending more time in a job, but I have never been with one business for more four years in my entire career at GE.

There are pros and cons to this approach. Obviously, I have had the benefit of working in different functions, different businesses, and different continents. With all that comes a huge learning experience. The con is that you don’t develop a deep expertise in anything.

Authors: Another result of moving around too quickly is that executives are not in place when the consequences of their bad decisions come back to roost.

Begley: Yes—that can happen. One year is way too short—to me, twelve months is a training program, not tenure in a position. As such, the business is willing to sacrifice your contributions for your learning. I think three years is about right.

Authors: What have been your toughest moves; that is, what positions had steep or difficult learning curves, and how did you successfully transition between career moves?

Begley: That’s a tricky question because each new job has been so absolutely and fundamentally different from the previous role. I started with four years on the corporate audit staff. It is a perfect example of having to learn the business
and the issues very quickly, no matter what the job. We would take different projects every four months, ranging from reducing the cycle times of aircraft engine designs and gas turbines, to overseas projects on compliance processes and infrastructure, to examining how we market appliances globally, to selling aerospace operations and performing the due diligence to prepare for that sale, and so on. In all of these environments, you have to learn as much as you can as fast as you can, and you need to make an impact right away. The secret to this really isn’t a secret: you have to ask a lot of questions.

Next, I ran operations for our mortgage business for two years. The business was doing so well, they had really not focused on the process. As a result, it was easier to come in and make a big impact quickly. From there, I took on the Six Sigma leader for our GE Transportation business. That was a big hurdle for me because I didn’t have an engineering degree; I knew nothing about the mechanics of a locomotive, and there was a perception held by some that I was favored for the position because Dave Calhoun was running that business at the time. This made it one of my toughest jobs, as I had to prove myself without having a lot of expertise in this particular technology.

As I transitioned into any new role, I treated it like cramming for a college exam. I read as much material as I could, and I set up meetings with people who knew what they were talking about and asked them a ton of questions. Eventually, you build a baseline by pulling in experts to help. However, it is very important to remember that you don’t get a lot of time to study or get up to speed; you have to start contributing pretty quickly.

AUTHORS: Your next role was as director of finance for GE Plastics in Europe and India. What stands out from your overseas assignment?

BEGLEY: When I moved to Europe, I experienced an entirely different culture on top of taking on a new role in a different part of the business. This was before the euro, so there were lots of issues with understanding financial exchange, different laws, and how that all affects business. So, there were some challenges from a technical and functional standpoint, but more importantly, it was just a big eye-opener for me to see the differences in cultures between Italy and Germany and India and so forth. Plus, it was an eye-opener for me to see how different it is to be at a remote site, as opposed to corporate headquar-
ters. When you are at HQ, you have a lot of infrastructure and support. When you work away from that base, you have to do much more on your own.

**Authors:** When you are away from corporate, do you need to be a bit more of an entrepreneur?

**Begley:** Absolutely—you have to get more done with less, which is why I think those types of assignments are some of the best professional development experiences.

**Authors:** What were the eye-openers when you moved from a functional (finance) role to a general management position? What helped you make this key transition?

**Begley:** Again, my early audit staff experience gave me some advantage because it was such a good training ground. Through those projects I learned about many different parts of the business and how each function worked and provided value to the organization. I got enough of a taste to equip myself with confidence in my ability to be effective as a general manager. Part of what I learned early on was how important it was to use process skills to break something apart—whether it’s a manufacturing design process or a marketing process—fundamentally, everything is a process. Once I figured that out, it became easier to transition across, functionally. I would add, too, that working with Jack Welch from 1999 through 2001 was great, eye-opening preparation. The exposure from sitting with Jack in all those business strategy and financial meetings and traveling around the world with him gave me a huge—if not unfair—advantage of watching and learning from a master.

**Authors:** You are now in a position to mentor others. How do you pick the people you are going to influence and spend time with as a mentor?

**Begley:** I work hard to mentor individuals who strike me as having potential. The best mentoring relationships are those where the foundation began in a real business application, as opposed to assigning randomly or calling someone out of the blue and asking, “Will you be my mentor?” In some cases, mentoring means a phone call every once in a while to bounce ideas around. In other cases, it can mean being involved and consultative in career choices
mentees] are wrestling with and facing. Sometimes it means helping them by opening doors to opportunities because you know how good they are.

I have been the most senior woman at GE for a long time and I am a mother of three children, so I tend to mentor a lot of people who strive to have families and do well in their careers. It is rewarding to find people who have a lot of curiosity, who take real initiative, who don’t bring problems but bring ideas about solutions and then volunteer to help solve them. You just naturally want to help people like that.

Authors: What advice do you offer to the next generation of female leaders?

Begley: First of all, it is important to realize that nothing else matters if you are not good at your job. Another thing I tell people early in their careers is to not try to plan out your whole career too soon. Early in your career, you don’t have enough perspective about work—and you probably don’t know enough about yourself—to understand how your career might best develop. If someone asked me early on if I thought my career would have taken all the turns it has, my answer would have been no. Also, even though I knew I wanted to be a leader, I would not have guessed that I would have served as a CEO, and certainly not as a CEO of several businesses.

When I was first starting my career, I thought being successful in business was mutually exclusive to having a full family and social life, which I wanted, too; but it is not an either-or situation. It depends on the support system you have, and on your own determination and the decisions you make along the way. I couldn’t be where I am today if my husband had not made sacrifices along the way. Someone with a less supportive spouse could not have entertained the choices I have entertained. We all make priorities, we all make choices, and we have to be realistic about the fact that you can’t maximize on every outcome. It is best to figure out what the priorities are for your family and stick with them.

Career Game Observations

• Once out of school, Charlene Begley’s first move was to find a position at a company with a reputation for developing people; from there, she was able to earn a spot on the company’s audit staff—a position that was seen
as a “career accelerator.” Such opportunities no doubt change the nature of the subsequent moves open to an individual.

- During her tenure at GE, Begley has held a number of positions—she noted that, under Jack Welch, it was a deliberate strategy to move people fairly frequently. This has the predictable benefit of building breadth of experience and the predictable drawback of the individual developing a shallow depth of experience. In terms of the career game, there is an additional benefit of frequent moves in that an individual’s network grows accordingly. Along with that benefit may be a drawback: since many people are moving knowledge about, awareness of your weaknesses or blunders moves, too.

- Begley offers some useful comments about how she makes decisions about whom to invest in as a mentor. Her sentiment, that she is drawn to some people who she just naturally wants to help, reinforces for early-career people the importance of finding ways to be appealing to their senior colleagues. Showing initiative, displaying curiosity, and offering solutions where others simply identify problems are all ways to get others to care about your success.

- Finally, Begley notes that it is important to not plan out your entire career too soon because you aren’t the same person early on that you will be later in your career—you will likely discover that your priorities, your interests, and your abilities evolve in ways that are not entirely predictable. Just as a business strategy needs to have the ability to evolve as conditions change, so too does your career strategy.

A CONVERSATION WITH BRYAN BELL

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT, BAIN & COMPANY

Bryan Bell earned his BS in Materials Science and Engineering from MIT in 2002. He graduated with an MS in that same field from Georgia Tech in 2004. He continued his studies at Tech, completing his MBA in 2008, and his PhD in Bioengineering in 2009.
During his undergraduate program, Bell interned with Lucent Technologies and with Ethicon, a division of Johnson & Johnson Company. He joined Bain & Company during the summer of 2009.

**Authors:** Can you start off by just sharing the story of your decision to go to MIT and then Georgia Tech for school? What initially drew you to engineering and MIT?

**Bell:** I knew, coming out of high school in Gainesville, Georgia, that I was interested in science and that I was good at math. Engineering seemed like a logical major for someone with my interests. I was excited about the thought of one day working on cutting-edge technology. Out of high school, I only applied to two schools—Georgia Tech and MIT. I was accepted early to MIT, and because it is the top-ranked engineering school, that’s where I went. I had grown up in Georgia, so the chance to live in another city was appealing, too.

**Authors:** And when you went to MIT, what did you plan to do when you finished? What were your intentions?

**Bell:** I didn’t necessarily think I wanted to be an engineer; I had always had an interest in business in the back of my mind.

**Authors:** Where do you think this came from?

**Bell:** Both my parents were influential here, I think. My dad had been the president of a couple of banks here in Georgia. My mom was a role model, too. She started her own real estate appraisal business—she was an entrepreneur.

**Authors:** After finishing MIT, you came straight to Georgia Tech and began your master’s program. Is that right?

**Bell:** I came straight to Tech. During my undergraduate program, I held a couple of internships. I have always been interested in medical devices and was able to work one summer for Johnson & Johnson. I also worked at Lucent Technologies—that position obviously wasn’t in medical devices, but it helped me explore other things. The exposure, in a way, provided a test to see if working in the medical device industry was really what I wanted to do. You
know, at the time, high tech was big, so I wanted to see if that was interesting to me as well.

**AUTHORS:** Did something specific happen that caused you to decide to go straight through for a master’s right after your undergraduate program, rather than working as an engineer for a while?

**BELL:** I knew, during my undergraduate program, that I was going to get a master’s right away. I applied to several programs coming out of MIT. I applied to Georgia Tech and to three schools in California. I was looking for someplace warm.

**AUTHORS:** Four winters in Cambridge was enough.

**BELL:** Right—it was for me. I ended up picking Georgia Tech because of the extent of the financial support I received to attend. While I was doing my master’s thesis, I was involved in engineering research. All the while, I had in the back of my mind an interest in business.

Once I was at Tech, I learned about a program that teamed engineers with business students around the development of a commercialization plan for a technology. I became interested in that program and at about the same time decided to pursue my PhD in engineering. So things changed quickly—in a fairly short time I entered that commercialization program, enrolled to simultaneously be part of the MBA program, and changed my status in the College of Engineering from the master’s to the PhD program.

**AUTHORS:** In the commercialization program, have you been working with a team around a technology that you identified in your PhD research?

**BELL:** It was a new technology that I was working on in the lab. The program is set up to build and commercialize a plan, but honestly my research was too basic to consider commercialization opportunities. Still, the program made use of it to teach us the process.

**AUTHORS:** So, as of today, you have earned your MBA and you are slated to finish your PhD in the spring, correct? You will have exhausted school options—what are you doing in terms of launching your career?

**BELL:** I’ve accepted a consulting job with Bain.
AUTHORS: Can you talk a little bit about your decision to look for that kind of position and then, more specifically, what it was about Bain that was attractive?

BELL: Once I committed to the MBA program, I knew I wanted to work more to the business side of science and technology. I didn’t know much about consulting at that point. I had spent enough time in the lab to know that research—though interesting—was not something I wanted to do for my career. I honestly wanted to interact with people a little bit more. That same desire is part of what drove me to the MBA program. There, I had the chance to work on a number of projects with outside clients. Those experiences triggered my interest in consulting. I worked on three projects in the MBA program. One was in a strategy class—it was the first group project I did with an outside company. We worked on something for Air Tran. Being forced to so quickly learn about something I hadn’t known much about was a very interesting challenge. It was also great to interact with some of the top-level people at Air Tran. I did a couple of other projects in other classes. These experiences helped me realize how much I enjoy working with other people in order to deliver results that help the client. That’s when I decided consulting is what I wanted to do.

AUTHORS: So, how did you land on Bain as the place to begin your career?

BELL: My job search began in the fall of 2007. At that time, I was still thinking a little bit more about how to leverage my engineering credentials. I knew that I wanted to leave academia. I wanted to work in a medical device company, but I didn’t want to do research. I love science and technology, but I wanted more interaction with people and I wanted to see my work more directly have an impact on people’s lives. I initially looked at traditional medical device companies, like Johnson & Johnson or Medtronic. I looked at several different types of positions, including product specialist, research scientist, and business analyst.

Product specialist positions are relatively new options for PhD students. Only a few companies have these positions for new PhD hires. Essentially, the PhD becomes the “product expert” and crosses over functions (R&D, physician interface, marketing, manufacturing, management). Traditionally, PhD students have become research scientists. These positions pay well and can provide stable careers, but it is difficult to advance from them into manage-
ment positions. It is easy to get “pigeonholed” into doing the same research for an entire career. My MBA scared some companies because they want to hire research scientists who will become research experts, not someone who will use the job as a stepping-stone to something else. This question—what did I really want in my career—came up frequently during interviews. Business development positions are also nearly impossible to get directly out of school. Each company hires only a few people, and generally the positions go to new hires from the top five MBA programs or to internal hires.

So, basically, I was going to have to take a traditional research position, which I would probably have hated and would have needed to use as a stepping-stone for another job. That path probably would have required me to move to the Northeast or the Midwestern U.S.

I also spent time looking for jobs with some start-ups and VCs, but no one seemed very interested in me because I didn’t really fit. I made a lot of contacts with small biotech companies in Atlanta, but it is very difficult to get a position with them as a new PhD hire. I didn’t have the experience to be brought in at a high level, but at the same time, I was overqualified for the entry-level lab technician jobs that most of them are looking to fill. I also talked to a few VCs doing biotech work and got the same answers regarding my lack of experience.

During these efforts, I noticed that a lot of people in start-ups and VC firms had been consultants before becoming entrepreneurs. It seemed like the right move to make might be to reframe my search to focus on consulting companies. Of course, this became clear to me as a viable strategy in January of 2008—after the traditional recruiting cycle had just ended. This wasn’t the end of the world—although I finished my MBA in May of 2008, I was still working on my dissertation.

Although I knew I wanted to get with a consulting firm, I didn’t think that I would land with one of the big three. And, when I originally applied to Bain, my résumé didn’t make it through their screening process. I didn’t get any positive response from a number of firms—Deloitte, Kurt Salmon, and others. For a time it seemed like my lack of consulting experience might be a barrier I couldn’t get over. Some were skeptical that I really understood what I was getting into in terms of consulting. Since I wasn’t having much luck, I began looking for research positions. I actually received an offer from one medical
research company, and I had a good interview with another. It looked like that was what I would need to do next to get some of the experience that the consulting companies were looking for. Of course, at just that time, Bain contacted me again. I ended up talking to Bain, McKinsey, Capgemini, and BCG. Bain was the first to get me through all of the rounds. I liked the people at Bain so much, I accepted that offer once I had it.

**AUTHORS:** Why do you think companies are interested in you?

**BELL:** I think they were interested in me because of the MBA and PhD combination. Those three companies specifically look for PhDs. They have PhD recruiting programs and PhD training programs; they are familiar with hiring PhD students. So, it's something they are comfortable with and I think some of the other companies I talked to weren't. The fact that I have a MBA and PhD combination made me stand out a lot there.

**AUTHORS:** And do you think they plan on using you differently as a result?

**BELL:** No, I don't—they've told me that. That's something I asked in the interview and basically their answer was no. What I am told is that they like the analytical skills that PhD students bring, and they like the credentials too.

**CAREER GAME OBSERVATIONS**

- Bryan Bell’s early moves—to go to MIT and then Georgia Tech—were instrumental, given his interest in a career in science and technology. All the while, however, he recognized his curiosity about business. He had a general idea of what he wanted to do after school, and he was both strategic and flexible in terms of how he learned more about the available opportunities and prepared himself to pursue them.

- Once at Tech, Bell was able to leverage a program designed to provide engineers with some business acumen, and ended up earning an MBA along the path to his PhD. His move to get an MBA was interesting in terms of its impact on his job search. Generally, people would view an MBA as a career-refining move. In the science/technology arena, however, the move was career limiting; employers did not believe he would be fully committed to the positions they had available.
• Bell’s PhD qualified him for research jobs at medical device companies, but by that time he had concluded that those jobs were not a fit for him. Furthermore, his MBA signaled to companies that he would likely not be happy long term in the researcher role. Medical device companies offered business-oriented positions, but his inexperience was a liability in terms of competing for them.

• Bell’s next alternative was to consider positions in entrepreneurial firms or with venture capital companies. For these positions, he was overqualified on the science end and underqualified on the business end.

• Bell exhibited an example of social learning in discerning that many of the people who were in the positions he desired in the entrepreneurship space had experience as consultants. This led him to reengage with those companies. From what he has seen, this first move should prove to be instrumental and career refining.

A CONVERSATION WITH URSULA BURNS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, XEROX CORPORATION

In July 2009, Ursula M. Burns was named CEO of Xerox Corporation. Burns joined Xerox in 1980 as a mechanical engineering summer intern. She has since held several positions in engineering, including product development and planning. In June 1991, she became the executive assistant to Paul A. Allaire, then Xerox chairman and CEO. From 1992 through 2000, Burns led several business teams, including the office color and fax business, the office network copying business, and the departmental business unit. In May 2000, she was named senior vice president, Corporate Strategic Services, and two years later assumed the role of president, Business Group Operations. In 2007 she was named president and appointed to the company’s board of directors.

Burns serves on professional and community boards, including American Express Co., Boston Scientific Corp., CASA (the national Center on Addiction
and Substance Abuse at Columbia University), FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), National Academy Foundation, MIT, the U.S. Olympic Committee, and the University of Rochester.

**AUTHORS:** When you started as an intern at Xerox, did you imagine developing a long career inside the company?

**BURNS:** Absolutely not. In fact, I didn’t imagine a career at all. I only imagined a job, and understood that it may lead to another job at Xerox, but I thought that I would return to “the city.” I considered myself a city girl—I was born and raised in New York City. I figured I would work a few years for Xerox in Rochester and, eventually, find my way back to the city. It has now been more than twenty-five years that I have spent in Rochester. That sort of longevity is certainly not the norm today.

**AUTHORS:** How has Xerox been able to keep you from wondering if the grass is greener somewhere else?

**BURNS:** Well, I think it’s a natural curiosity to wonder about how green the grass is on the other side, but Xerox has always felt like a special place to me. I was not your typical Xerox employee in the early 1980s. I am a black, urban, female mechanical engineer—we were not a dime a dozen back then! At the time, it would have been difficult for any company to find that kind of diverse engineering talent, and perhaps it would have been difficult for me to find a place where I felt as comfortable as I did at Xerox. Fortunately, one of the most significant things Xerox did was to never expect or ask me to be anything other than who I was. Of course, they have helped me smooth out some of the edges—that is part of everyone’s development. There were so many obvious differences between me and my colleagues—the way I spoke, the things I liked to do, my outlook on life. Those differences were not looked at as anything but strengths. It actually took a while for me to realize that, “Wow! They’re not asking me to change to fit into this base or that base. They actually like—or at least don’t dislike—the fact that I am who I am.” They offered jobs to me, Ursula, and that’s who they wanted in these jobs—Ursula.
AUTHORS: It is easy to understand that they made you comfortable—that would seem necessary, but not sufficient to engage someone for over twenty-five years.

BURNS: Correct. It wasn’t. That was just one piece of it. What also mattered a lot was that I got real work from the day I walked in the door. In fact, it was to the point where sometimes I was absolutely shocked. They gave me a lab, a budget, a lab technician, and a problem to solve. I remember asking, “Who can help me with this?” and the reply was, “If you need specific help or specific questions answered, let us know, but you are the person who actually knows about this challenge, and you are who we want to solve it.” They let me run with it. I don’t think there was a grand strategy to make sure I had amazing jobs each step of the way—but that is how it turned out. I would also have to say that, 90 percent of the time, I was put in jobs that were one step beyond what I thought I could do. That is how Xerox has kept me engaged. I have been constantly tested, constantly challenged.

I remember one big job I got in business planning. Here I was, this mechanical engineer who had never done a business plan of any type before. They gave me a project to study—whether or not a certain feature on the machine was needed and, if so, how we should price it. Opportunities like that really stretched me. I was continually given jobs that were a little bigger or in an interesting part of the company.

A final piece has been that, overall, Xerox has treated me very fairly. I never felt forgotten or undervalued. I was given great work that challenged me, and I was paid reasonable money and allowed to travel all over the world to get the job done. I was treated like an adult from the day I walked in the door. I was given opportunity. True, I was given a whole lot of opportunities to fail, but there was never an expectation that I would fail. There was always an expectation that I could do it—and that I could do it while just being who I was. That support and encouragement gave me confidence, and, twenty-five years later, I still feel it.

AUTHORS: Can you talk a little bit about the role you played as the executive assistant to Paul Allaire when he was a CEO? How did that help you develop as an executive?
BURNS: It was an unbelievable role. At the time, the company was going through lots of changes, and to sit around as a “fly on the wall” during that transformative time was very exciting. Also, Paul was a wonderful match for me—especially at that time in my career. His personality is very different than mine. He is quiet and a more introverted individual—we were perhaps a bit of each other’s alter ego. Obviously, he had the truly significant job, and I was just following him around learning from him, but he and I would talk about the business, and because I had a different way of thinking about things, I think I was helpful to him. We actually developed a more senior-level relationship than you would think an executive assistant and CEO would normally have. We would talk candidly about a lot of things. He was always quizzing me—asking what I thought about this individual or what I would say in that situation, and so on. It helped me formulate and understand different opinions, different views. It also showed me how tough the CEO job is. It is a demanding schedule, and the risks and pressures could be daunting. Seeing how CEOs work within that kind of a schedule and with those risks, pressures, and stresses—as well as how they jump on opportunities—was enlightening to me.

AUTHORS: These are great experiences. How did Allaire find you for the position?

BURNS: I had just started to work as the EA for the executive vice president in charge of all marketing and customer operations. He was a direct report to Paul, so, over time, I got to know Paul. I wasn’t shy about participating in meetings or sharing my views. After six months, Paul’s EA left and Paul asked me if I would do the job. I remember explaining that I thought it might not be a great idea. After all, I was just getting comfortable as EA to the EVP. I asked him why I should make the change, and he said, “Because I am the CEO and I asked.” That was a pretty clear response!

Going to work for Paul was a very good decision because it showed me an entirely different side of leadership. Previously, I had not appreciated how tough the external part of the job is—the shareholder and political elements of the job, for example. I also learned how he managed and balanced his personal and professional lives.
It was a great time—he and I really hit it off in an interesting way because, like I said, we had very different personalities.

At one point, we were going through a massive reorganization of the company. He appointed me to the reorganization task force as a real, participating member—not just as a fly on the wall for him. That was an interesting position because I was the only person on the task force who was not in line for any of the potential jobs—and I was fairly junior. This made it easy to participate in an objective way, as I had no personal, vested interest in the outcome. At the end of it, Paul offered me the job of running the smallest business unit that was formed. I never would have been given that opportunity without working for Paul, learning from him, and, I guess, without the opportunity of showing him my potential.

AUTHORS: One challenge in a long career in a single company is that you never really get a fresh slate. All your history—the good and bad—follows you. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that?

BURNS: You can’t confuse people about who you are. Being consistent about who you are and who you are not is important. When people really know you—how you react, what you value, the expectations you have of others—it gives them a foundation.

AUTHORS: Some use the word “authentic” to describe what you are talking about.

BURNS: Authentic—yes. It isn’t about being perfect—it’s about authenticity and dependability, so that everyone knows that who they are dealing with Monday is the same person they will be dealing with on Thursday.

AUTHORS: What attributes in early-career employees get you excited about their potential?

BURNS: Passion about getting it better the next day, optimism about the fact that it is possible to do it better the next day, and recognition that any challenge is actually an opportunity. I would also say fearlessness. What I mean by that is not recklessness, but knowing that you can make a decision, take a course of action, and just move forward. You can always correct later, if correction
is needed. Too often, I see people who sit back, studying and trying to get 99 percent of the information before making a move. Meanwhile, your options slowly run out.

The last indicator I look for to gauge potential is, frankly, being good at lots of things, or at least being outstanding at a few things. You have to be able to engage your brain without stressing to catch all the nuances. So, a part of your job needs to come easily because you are good at it, and the more of that you have, the better. As an example, I have a gentleman working for me who manages a very large piece of the company. We keep increasing his responsibilities. He succeeds, in part, because, at his core, he does a series of things extremely well. He knows how to design an organization and how to pick and nurture people. He can keep up with all we give him because these two strengths allow him to do a big part of his job without too much trouble. Having some parts of your job that you can do “at rest” is important. If you don’t have a place where you are an expert, you can never relax or get comfortable with your work because nowhere is safe. Obviously, the more things you can do in this sort of automatic way, the better. Throughout your career you need to develop more and more of this ability.

**AUTHORS:** As you look at talent and advise people on their career moves, what do you see as the difference between people who can recover from bad career decisions and people who can’t?

**Burns:** Some of the biggest differences include patience, perspective, optimism, and not assuming that mistakes will follow you forever. This is true whether you make a mistake at work or in your personal life. People who recover from errors will often step back and be patient with the recovery. They take a longer-term perspective and they realize that they can reinvent themselves without too much damage. You don’t want your mistake to define you. For example, let’s say you have a car accident. You don’t assume that every time you drive in the future you will have an accident. You may be a bit guarded and hesitant at first, but you learn from the accident and actually become a better driver. You fix your car, you get back on the road, and put the accident behind you. It takes time, so patience is key. We need to show this kind of patience to people who make mistakes in their jobs, and even with career mistakes.
Some mistakes are extremely hard to recover from, but most mistakes are not like that. It may be that you have to accept some lateral moves in the short term, but in my experience, well-run companies will see most mistakes as opportunities for people to learn and get better. Over time, people will gain a better perspective—that’s another reason patience is important.

AUTHORS: You are active on a number of boards, of both community organizations and companies. What role have those opportunities played in your development?

BURNS: Let’s talk first about the corporate boards. I serve as a board director at American Express and Boston Scientific. These experiences have been invaluable for the perspective they have provided. Since I have been with Xerox my whole working life, these positions effectively allow me to be in other businesses. I get to vicariously participate in two completely different industries. I see enough similarities to the challenges and opportunities we have at Xerox to help me validate our situation too. The nonprofit boards I am on allow for learning, but more than that, they help me stay a well-rounded person. Among all the boards, I get to observe different leadership styles and different sets of issues. My board service is rewarding in many ways.

AUTHORS: These types of opportunities are mostly open to senior-level executives. Are there ways for a more junior person to get those sorts of experiences, or would you advise emerging talent to stay focused on their jobs?

BURNS: I don’t believe that junior-level people should work with their heads down and be immersed only in their organizations, but it is true that the extracurricular opportunities available to them will be different. At Xerox, we value our employees getting involved in the communities in which they live. For example, we are proud of the work we are doing to support teaching in science and technology in high schools and middle schools, and we have a great deal of employee engagement in those programs. It is a way for employees to learn and teach others through the sharing they do. Education is a passion here, and we view K–12 education as critically important to our future.

Ultimately, resourceful people can find ways to be involved in outside organizations, and they approach these opportunities as learning experiences.
CAREER GAME OBSERVATIONS

- Ursula Burns is remarkable for many reasons, one of which is her long track record of success at Xerox. Key to a long career in a single company, she says, is the ability to “smooth off some corners” while remaining “who you are.” In her view, you don’t have to be perfect, but you do have to be authentic.

- Her game at Xerox has been characterized by a series of jobs that always seemed to her to be one step beyond what she thought she could do. Xerox has kept her engaged, challenged, and learning as a player—all things that made her best next move always to be another position with the company.

- An important piece of wisdom is Burns’ recommendation that everyone work at being very, very good at one or two elements of their jobs so that at least this part of the work can be fairly automatic in terms of execution. If every dimension of your job presents a challenge, you simply will not have enough gas to get it all done. In considering a move to a new opportunity—particularly if it is going to be a step beyond what you think you can do—make sure that at least some responsibilities will be in your sweet spot so that you can be certain you will have the energy required to succeed at the tough, new stuff.

- In regard to career agility, Burns stresses that mistakes are not destiny and they should not be managed as such.

- In regard to a network, Burns notes that it is important even for junior people to have some community involvement as a way to build their networks.