Career Support Exercise: Constructing a Lifeline

This exercise provides you with an opportunity to review significant decisions you have made in the [...] also assist your personal reflection and develop insights which may further your careers work with [...] training.

Instructions

Think about how you have made important decisions in the past: for example, career-related decisions about A-level subjects, applying for medical school, specialty/training choices, etc., or personal decisions that are unrelated to work, such as taking a gap year between school and university, starting or ending a significant personal relationship, relocating etc.

Then, follow the instructions below. (And see Fig.1 for an example).

1. Take a sheet of paper (ideally A3 or flip-chart paper. But A4 will work if it is all that is available). Turn it round so that it is 'landscape' rather than 'portrait'.

2. Draw a horizontal line across the middle of the paper. Note down your age at the right-hand end of the line. Then, put in a 'plus' (+) above the horizontal line (to signify times that you look back on with pleasure) and a 'minus' (-) below the line (to signify those times when things were not going well).

3. Before you go any further, think very carefully about the course the line will take. Where are the high points and the low points? Which parts of the line (if any) are relatively stable?

4. Now mark in the significant life events. Include experiences which influenced your achievements, and both good and bad events that have occurred in your life to date. Allow yourself sufficient space, as including one event may trigger a memory of another.

5. Connect up the points that you have marked.

6. Identify a couple of decisions that you have marked on your Lifeline which you feel (in retrospect) have worked out well. What made them good decisions? How did you go about making these particular decisions?

7. Now, identify a couple of decisions on your lifeline that you feel (in retrospect) didn't work out so well? What made them poorer decisions? How did you approach these decisions that didn't work out so well?

8. A much-favoured adage of psychologists is that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. Bearing this in mind, can you use this analysis of decisions to throw any light on how you should approach the career choices that you are currently facing? One way of doing this is to look at your answers to questions 6 and 7 in order to identify the best way for you to approach your current decision, as well as approaches you should avoid. For example, do you seem to be somebody who makes good decisions when you rely on your 'gut' feelings, or are you somebody who has made your best decisions when you adopt a more structured approach?

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9. Has anything else struck you from completing this Lifeline exercise?

Figure 1: Lifeline example from a consultant
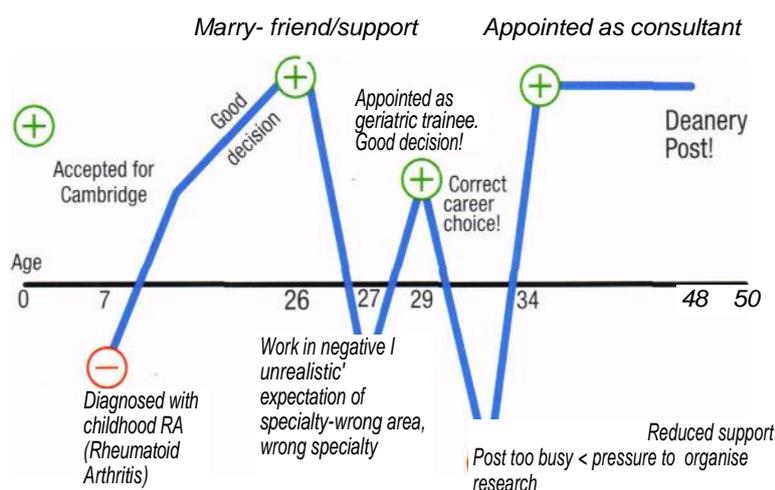
From The Roads to Success – Elton, C and Reid J, 2007

"Careers supporters have used the Lifeline exercise in workshops (with both consultants and trainees), we have often heard the comment that there is no such thing as an entirely 'bad' decision, as good elements can emerge even from decisions that didn't turn out at all smoothly. We would both entirely agree with this, and have examples from our own personal career histories that illustrate the point. Moreover, in our professional practice we often hear clients describe career decisions that they regret taking, but which they do realise also allowed them to develop certain useful skills.

However, in terms of the Lifeline exercise, we do think that it is possible to identify decisions that you have taken that, in retrospect, you feel were not the best ones. These are decisions where, even though you can see that some good things have emerged from them, you have a sense that a different decision at that point in your life would probably have been a better option. It is these sorts of questions that we would like you to identify in question 7"