**The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers**  
The Guide for Achieving Success and Satisfaction  
by Jim Citrin and Rick Smith

What is different about the careers of people like Lou Gerstner, the former CEO of IBM, or former Senator Elizabeth Dole, or Tom Freston, the highly-acclaimed Chairman and CEO of MTV Networks? Why do such people ascend to the top and prosper while other equally talented individuals never reach their true potential or fulfill their ultimate career aspirations?

Jim Citrin and Rick Smith, both of Spencer Stuart, the world's most influential executive search firm, may have the answer. These two men recently set out to explore the fascinating and controversial issue of career management in a new book called *The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers: The Guide for Achieving Success and Satisfaction*. And some of their findings are guaranteed to surprise you.

Like weather systems and financial markets, Citrin & Smith believe that most careers contain a series of easily recognizable patterns — five patterns, to be precise — which can be readily harnessed and used by everyone. According to their extensive research, successful professionals (1) understand how to create value in the workplace; (2) practice benevolent leadership; (3) overcome what Citrin & Smith call "the permission paradox" (4) tackle "must do" tasks using the 20/80 principle; and (5) always strive to find the right fit.

The idea that there are clearly definable patterns in extraordinary careers is certainly not conventional wisdom. Most people believe that career success is the result of either luck or larceny. Pretty well everyone reasons that they work just as hard as the next person. So what else could separate those who are successful from those who are less so? The answer, we assume, must be dumb luck, or even worse, kissing up to the boss!

The reality, according to Citrin & Smith, is that a successful career is neither the result of a lucky break, or playing office politics. Instead, they believe that a successful career results from a conscious series of personal decisions and actions over time. Moreover, they say that career success cannot be achieved through trickery or deception. In fact, their research has shown that professionals who lack character and ethics rarely rise to the top. And when these mercenaries do attain career success, their grasp on what they've achieved is tenuous at best.

In some ways, it is rather encouraging to find out, courtesy of Citrin & Smith, that the vast majority of executives began their careers just like most of us — with a decent education, a lot of ambition, and precious little experience. Yet, through a process similar to compound interest, they somehow managed to achieve extraordinary careers, with each phase of their careers building on the prior one.
So what is it that distinguishes extraordinary performers from the "wannabes" if it's not office politics, higher levels of intelligence or social connections? Could it be that the success of most high-flying professionals is directly attributable to their adherence, either consciously or sub-consciously, to the five specific patterns identified in Citrin & Smith's book? Just a little something to think about as you consider some of the groundbreaking ideas that follow:

**The Extraordinary Career Defined**

Before jumping head first into our discussion of the five patterns, it might be useful to explain what Citrin & Smith mean by the term "extraordinary career."

After thousands of interviews and countless hours of analysis, the authors have developed their own rather unique idea as to what constitutes career success, and it's probably not the definition that most people would imagine.

For most professionals, landing a six-figure salary is probably one of the most fundamental components of career success. But cash isn't always king for Citrin & Smith — they're talking about something else entirely. In their view, having an extraordinary career comes down to just three simple elements: (1) playing to your strengths; (2) setting your passions free; and (3) fitting in comfortably with your workplace culture.

Attain these three things in your working life, say Citrin & Smith, and contentment will reign, with monetary and social rewards certain to follow. Ignore them, they warn, and you'll be forever fighting an uphill battle on the path to career success.

**The Five Patterns**

Having discussed what it means to enjoy an "extraordinary career," we'll now turn to the Five Patterns designed to get us there:

**Pattern 1 – Understand the Value of You**

Understanding what you're "worth" as an employee might seem at first like a question of simple math — just take your total annual compensation, add in your perks and benefits, and voila, you've got your answer.

"Not so fast!" say Citrin & Smith. The equation for determining your true worth over time is far more than your annual compensation and benefits. At a minimum, you've also got to take into consideration age, demographic trends, the demand for similar professional positions, and intellectual capital (in today's market, the value of specialized knowledge is at a premium).

Practically speaking, what this means is that your value in the marketplace is far from static. In fact, it changes at every stage of your career and in every different position you are in. So, say Citrin & Smith, there's really no single answer to the question, "What am I worth?" However, once you understand what affects your
value, you will begin to have the insight to increase that value.

Of course, your value as an employee will depend for the most part on the particular skills and experience you’re able to bring to the table. When people first enter the workforce, they have what the authors call "potential value," which is transformed over time into more highly compensated "experiential value" as their careers progress and they gain experiences that really matter.

Given this reality, Citrin & Smith have found that extraordinarily successful professionals were often willing to forego an easy promotion in the short-term in favor of a lateral move that will give them more experience. This, in turn, might help them to secure an even better "experiential promotion" later on.

In short, highly successful professionals understand that their true value is determined by a whole host of factors — not just their annual compensation. That's pattern number one.

Pattern 2 – Practice Benevolent Leadership

At first blush, career success seems to hinge upon personal performance and outperforming others around you. That's what many people believe is the route to get promoted. Many people see climbing the corporate ladder as a treacherous journey — the higher you climb, the more cutthroat and nasty the environment.

According to Citrin & Smith, it doesn't always have to be this way.

"Our research shows that the most successful individuals populating the top rung of the corporate ladder are more often those who can attract top talent and inspire them to exceptional levels of performance," write the authors. "When we examined the experiences of hundreds of top performing executives, it was apparent that they were all the direct beneficiaries of the extraordinary talents and performance of their peers, subordinates and superiors."

These findings should not come as a surprise, say Citrin & Smith. Nearly all of us have worked with exceptional teams at some point in our careers. We may have been rewarded for our association with a truly outstanding boss, or recognized for the superior performance of our subordinates. If anything, what may be unusual about the most successful professionals is the consistency of this occurrence. They found that top performers almost always seem to be surrounded by other top performers.

In their survey, Citrin & Smith asked people to describe a particularly successful executive they knew. Extraordinarily successful executives, it turns out, were not perceived as overly self-interested. "Quite the opposite was true. Nearly 90 percent were described as being concerned about the careers of their subordinates as much or more than their own careers."

Citrin & Smith call this phenomenon "Benevolent Leadership."
Benevolent leaders may have various interpersonal styles — some are humble and self-effacing, others are charismatic, and other still are demanding taskmasters. But regardless of style, they all create an environment of open communication, honesty and confidence, delegating both minor and critical tasks. Moreover, they demonstrate how the success of the team directly benefits each team member.

In today’s skeptical business environment, where one crisis after another has come to light, Citrin & Smith argue that the Benevolent Leadership approach is more important and appropriate than ever. People long to work in an environment where bold aspirations for success are clearly defined and commonly shared, and team behavior is governed by a strong set of ethics and core values. So when the leader’s attention is focused squarely on the success of team members, strong results and employee loyalty are achieved as a natural end result.

To position yourself as a benevolent leader-in-waiting, Citrin & Smith suggest you begin by looking for opportunities to create successes for others. Take the most blame, give credit, set ambitious objectives and let your people strive to realize them. Excel in giving direct feedback and hands-on mentoring and you will reap the rewards of consistently higher performance levels from team members. Over time, they say, you will create a virtual army of professionals willing to fight on your side.

**Pattern 3 – Overcome the Permission Paradox**

One of the greatest Catch-22s in business today is what Citrin & Smith have termed the “Permission Paradox” ... without experience, it is virtually impossible to get the desired job, but without the job, it is impossible to gain the requisite experience.

Nonetheless, successful executives who consistently gain access to critical experiences and combine this access with strong performance, manage to sidestep this dilemma and expand the scope of what they have permission to take on.

Citrin & Smith explain that there are essentially two kinds of permission — direct and implied. With direct permission, you can do something because someone says you can. With implied permission, you can do something because no one has said you cannot.

Although direct permission is the most common and easily identified source of authority, the authors warn that it can also be very limiting. Those who rely on it too much often find themselves stuck when permission is withheld.

By contrast, implied permission (which is more subtle, but potentially much more powerful) is taken not given. Successful professionals who learn to leverage the power of implied permission see their job descriptions merely as a starting point from which to expand the scope of their responsibilities and pursue their career
objectives. And, when they perform well at these tasks they have undertaken on their own initiative, they are ultimately granted direct permission to continue expanding the scope of their duties.

Citrin & Smith identify a number of effective strategies for gaining permission and taking charge of one’s experiences (and, therefore, one’s career):

- **The direct approach** – If you want something, you can always ask.
- **Getting credentials** – One of the most logical ways to gain permission to do more is to get relevant credentials (e.g. an MBA).
- **Bartering** – The bartering approach operates on the ageless principle of "you scratch my back; I'll scratch yours." Offering something of value to your boss (e.g. agreeing to come in over the weekend) may get you the permission you need.
- **Changing jobs** – When you change divisions or move to a different company, you generally start with a clean slate so you can start off by requesting permission for any responsibilities you wish to have.
- **Masquerading as the leader** – Another permission grabbing strategy, albeit one with significant risks, involves strategically implying that you have the authority to make certain decisions when, in actual fact, you probably don't. If you're able to get away with it without ruffling anyone's feathers, you're home free!

Strategic mentoring – Find a seasoned professional who's willing to invest time and knowledge in you, and introduce you to new contacts. The key is for both parties to get something of value out of the relationship.

- **Playing politics** – Playing politics has long been a well-recognized form of gaining permission. For example, courtiers in medieval times leveraged their relationship to the king as a means of gaining power and influence for themselves. But Citrin & Smith argue that this is not a success pattern that extraordinary professionals should try to emulate. Linking your career to someone else in power will at best only lead to transitory success. Truly extraordinary professionals always prefer to stand on their own two feet.

Each approach has unique characteristics and likely benefits (as well as risks if used inappropriately). Some strategies are more effective for gaining direct permission, others are better for implied permission, and some can be used for both. However, it is useful to consider all of them to gain insight into the many creative ways that exist to maximize your career opportunities.

**Pattern 4 – Differentiate Using the 20/80 Principle**

The fourth pattern of extraordinary careers is the 20/80 Principle of Performance — storming past your predefined objectives to deliver unexpected positive impact.
More than any other pattern, the authors say that it is the successful application of this principle that allows some professionals to stand out from the pack while others just lag behind.

Most people know of the 80/20 Principle, the widely held belief that in many situations 20% of the effort creates 80% of the benefit. And conversely the other 80% of the effort only generates 20% of the results. For example, 20% of a company’s customers may yield 80% of the profits.

The lesson here is simple but powerful: The quality of your impact matters much more than the quantity of your activities.

Of course, Citrin & Smith recognize that, as an employee, you may intuitively understand which 20% of your activities you ought to be focusing on, but because your job description is likely rather inflexible, you’re probably also unable to relieve yourself of the other 80% of mundane tasks that seem to consume so much of your time. Herein lies the conundrum.

To address this situation, Citrin & Smith recommend that you develop a firm understanding of what truly creates value in your organization, and then free-up as many personal resources as you can to focus on that area. For example, the authors point out that, at Coca Cola, marketing is the most valuable activity, since the core formulas for its beverages rarely change, and manufacturing and distribution have already been largely optimized. Therefore, it is the success of marketing that mainly impacts performance for the beverage maker. And the most successful professionals at Coca Cola intuitively know, and are inexorably drawn to, the most high profile activities. They instinctively know what customers are paying for and what stockholders value most.

As you slowly gravitate towards activities of greater value, Citrin & Smith advise that you remember to communicate early and often with your boss. Because figuring out what to do is only half the battle. You then need to let your boss know why you have decided to spend more of your energies on activity X, and less on activity Y.

Citrin & Smith know this isn't always easy, thus you need to have a well-prepared and logical reasoning for reconfiguring your job. They recommend approaching this discussion as if you were trying to solicit funding for a new project. Try to stick to the business case of why you are doing what you’re doing — show that the benefits greatly outweigh the costs.

The more your career ambitions veer away from your current job description, caution the authors, the greater will be the need to communicate — in both frequency and content. As with any change in priorities and expectations, it is critical that you keep your boss in the loop to ensure that expectations on both sides remain consistent.

**Pattern 5 – Finding the Right Fit**
A common way that many people think about managing their careers, either consciously or sub-consciously, is something Citrin & Smith have termed "Career Push." This entails constantly pushing yourself to climb from one step on the career ladder to the next, and the next and the next.

"Too many people follow the customary Career Push trajectory," write Citrin & Smith, "letting obvious promotions push them ever higher up the professional ladder to positions that may not always represent the best personal fit, and that may also increase the risk of sub-optimal performance and, ultimately, career dissatisfaction."

Fortunately, there is a more effective approach to managing your professional journey — allowing your preferences for strengths, passions and people to "pull" your career steadily in a better direction.

Taking full advantage of Citrin & Smith's Career Pull approach requires allowing your career to migrate, often gradually, to the activities, roles and environments you know from experience that you prefer and are most passionate about. It requires clear reflection and in some cases making difficult choices like swimming against the current of traditional promotions, or turning down jobs others would envy.

This approach demands that individuals actively manage their opportunities by macro-managing their professional lives and thinking about their career options. Instead of striving for the next raise or promotion, successful professionals focus on the core values that drive their long-term goals and, at the same time, they add to their current assignments in a way that differentiates their performance. In addition, they evaluate whether a career move will increase or decrease the number of professional options available to them.

Successful professionals also watch for something Citrin & Smith call "career flares" — those tasks beyond their current responsibilities that energize them the most and, thus, indicate their ideal fit. And, understanding that poor cultural compatibility can be a major obstacle in achieving job satisfaction and success (even if the job perfectly matches their skills and experiences) and that a great cultural fit can overcome major gaps in skills and experience, they also choose organizations with well-matched cultures, filled with people they like and respect.

**Putting the Patterns into Practice**

It is important to understand that Citrin & Smith's Five Patterns are not intended to be a simplistic formula for distilling the complexities of a career into a set of universally applicable rules. Although many of us desperately yearn for a "quick-fix" for dealing with the complexity of our working lives (i.e. do these ten things, avoid these five. If this, then do that, etc.), the problem is, in the real world, where we often have to make important, life-altering decisions without all of the facts, "cookbook-type" rules are simply not effective.
We must all learn to have more patience.

"As you change your thinking and begin to take actions to implement the five patterns," write Citrin & Smith, "you may see little immediate impact. But having no immediate outcome is not the same as failure."

"The journey of a successful career is similar to chopping down a great tree," they observe. "You may swing the axe countless times, noticing little progress. In the end, there is only one swing that is successful in bringing down the tree, but it is the hundred swings prior that made the achievement possible."

The point here, of course, is that each step you take to implement the five patterns, no matter how immediately visible the impact, is equally important to the process. This is to say that, in the short-term, rewards are rarely correlated with specific actions, but over the long-term, they are inseparable.

**Conclusion**

Most would agree that ours is no longer an "Organization Man in a Gray Flannel Suit" world. Individual careers have become as complex as the overall business environment, where the pace of change has increased insecurity and anxiety at almost every turn. Yet, amidst all of this frantic change, Citrin & Smith have managed to find a silver lining: Because value is increasingly being packaged in the form of intellectual property, companies are investing more time and money than ever before to seek out and retain top professional talent. For those of us who are prepared to invest the resources to understand our own personalities, analyze our strengths and weaknesses and learn the lessons of those who have succeeded before us, this should come as great news indeed.

Based on a formidable amount of research and first-hand experience, the views expressed by Jim Citrin and Richard Smith in The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers do challenge some of the most widely held assumptions about professional success — the idea that there are definable patterns in extraordinary careers will probably take some getting used to. However, the book’s logical analyses and practical insights, suggest that career patterns are indeed becoming the new reality, now and into the future. Better get used to them!