

The Career Positioning System

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To everyone who gave me an opportunity, especially Billie Sue, Ed & John, Barb, Nicole, Ferdinand & Alex, Aaron, Chad, and Gary, Jeff and Mo, and Euan. Opportunity is the greatest gift we can offer or receive. Thank you.

Also By Don Jones

Shell of an Idea
The Culture of Learning
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The PowerShell Scripting and Toolmaking Book

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Foreword

This is a book for you and your career. But I should probably start with offering some evidence that I know what I'm talking about, right? So let's do that.

I had a very nontraditional career journey. I never went to university; instead, I graduated from a four-year apprenticeship as an aircraft engineering mechanic. If you ever find a used F-14 Tomcat on Ebay, call me! I think I still remember a few things about them. Shortly after graduating, I quit and never touched an airplane again except to fly in one—so really, not that unlike many folks' college degrees. From there I worked in retail for some time, eventually ending up in the company's IT department. I ran the AS/400 midrange, rewrote our Point of Sale (POS) software in Visual Basic 4.0, and a lot more. Then it was on to a brief stint as a field network engineer, and a couple of years at Bell Atlantic Network Integration as the LAN Manager. Then I switched into technology training, teaching Microsoft classes, writing courseware materials, and even helping develop Microsoft certification exams. That was followed by almost two years at one of the first-stage dot-coms, which dot-bombed, sending me into a fourteen-year stint where I was basically a freelancer. Then it was on to an online video training company, a technology job interviewing company, and a technology apprenticeship company. Those latter three companies put me into leadership, and even executive, roles. My career's seen pretty much every step on the ladder you can imagine, including a few steps that a lot of people never see, thanks to my time working for myself.

Along the way, I learned a lot about navigating my career, mostly through trial and error. I watched a lot of other people manage their careers, too, and I took careful notes of what they did, and

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what outcomes they achieved. I shared a lot of those observations in books like *Be the Master* and *Own Your Tech Career*. I've been fortunate to have some wonderful feedback on those prior books, and I'm very proud to have written them. In fact, as of this writing, *Own Your Tech Career* remains in print with Manning, and I'm still very proud of it. It is a little tech-centric though, and this book stems from a desire to share a bigger-picture view of how I've approached career management, and how I've guided my many "mentees" over the years. Because I'm self-publishing this book, I have complete freedom to tell it like it is—and I'll warn you, there are some blunt parts. No sense beating around the bush when there's work to be done, right?

I'm publishing this book through Leanpub, which will let me periodically add new material as the mood takes me. Leanpub enables you to buy this book once, and receive all future updates at no additional charge (which won't be the case for the occasional paperback editions I release, obviously). So if you've purchased the book on Leanpub, thank you, and know that you've made a smart investment!

OK, with that brief background out of the way, let's get started.

01 | Your CPS User Manual

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01.01 | Meet Your Career

I find that a lot of people aren't super-clear on the difference between a *career* and a *job*. So let's get that straight.

A *job* is something your employer owns. It represents an exchange of value, where you provide your time and expertise in exchange for money and other benefits. Your employer placed you into your job, and your job may well continue to exist—at your employer—after you've departed. Because your employer owns your job, they're responsible for feeding it and taking care of it. Any tools you need to do your job, any training you might need to do your job, and all of that are your employer's concern. Your employer can take your job away from you, such as by conducting a layoff, or even firing you.

But your *career* belongs to *you*. You own it. Your career is a set of decisions that you've made about what kind of services you can offer in exchange for money. Your career will get you your next job. But it's up to you to feed your career—not your employer. If there's training you want to help boost your career, that's on you, not your employer. Sure, some employers may offer you some training that you want as a benefit, but you've no right to expect it unless it's directly related to your *job*. Notably, only you can help or hurt your career, and nobody can take it from you.

Your career might well consist of a series of jobs in a single field—that's certainly common. But it also might not. I actually dislike the term *career changes*, because I don't believe anyone "changes" their career entirely. You can obviously point it in a different direction, but you'll always have the same career. The experiences you had earlier on remain with you, and they'll likely benefit whatever directions you take in the future.

Let's look at how most people "approach" their career.

- 1. Go to school.
- 2. Get a job, maybe related to what you went to school for, maybe not.
- 3. Gain some experience, and get a promotion into a more senior role, probably in the same field.
- 4. Repeat step 3.

In other words, most of us don't tend to even recognize that we have a *career* at all—we're simply on a journey from job to job, seeking more money, better titles, better working conditions, or whatever matters to us. This is exactly how the "rat race" continues to exist. We're on the hamster wheel, running hard, hoping for some better opportunity to crop up, constantly seeking... what?

Let's turn to a GPS-based mapping application as an analogy. If you have a car with one, go jump in the car and turn it on. If you don't, you probably have a mapping app on your phone—open it up.

It's nice, right? Lots of places you can go. Keep the map up, and head out. If you're driving, obviously pay attention. If you're walking, biking, or taking some other means of transport, you should be paying attention to. Glance back at the map now and then, but really focus on safely *moving*.

How's it going?

Not much point in having the mapping app open, is there? After all, you haven't actually told it where you're going.

You might have a great trip. No telling where you'll end up, obviously, but you're sure to see some interesting sights. You might also have some bumps along the way—a flat tire, perhaps. Maybe really bad traffic. No telling what will happen, really.

That's how most of us, before reading a book like this, aproach our careers. We don't set a destination. Instead, we're just on the journey, looking for an interesting-looking exit or roadside attraction. There's no telling where we'll end up. It'll probably be fine, and even fun, overall, but you can't *know*. And you might always feel like you're chasing something, reaching toward something just beyond your grasp. That's the rat race.

So here's an idea: go back to the mapping app and punch in a destination. Where do you want to go? Someplace warm with a beach? Or do you feel more like someplace cool with snow? Someplace expensive, or more affordable? Someplace small and quiet, or someplace big and bustling? Seriously: take a few minutes and jot down the characteristics if your ideal place. The place that you feel you'd be happiest, with no restrictions or concerns. Your dream spot.

You can do the same thing with your career. That's what this book is all about: teaching you the Career Positioning System that will help route you from where you are right now to where you want to be. You get to dictate every part of the journey, and you get to design the destination. Your life will evolve over time, and as it does, you'll adjust the destination in your CPS, so that it can help re-route you. And the beauty of this model is that there is an end to the journey. And it's not just when you die! With a well-designed CPS and a carefully chosen destination, you can get there. And once you're there, you're there. You won. You made it. You can stay there for as long as you want. You don't have to keep chasing, don't have to keep reaching—you can rest.

Because it turns out your only opponent in the "rat race" was *you* all along.

You're going to need to learn a lot of new things, almost continuously, in order to get your career to the destination you set. This book is going to help you learn a lot of those things, and I'll try to offer references to other great resources as well. Much of what you need to learn will be specific to your profession, and I'll offer some advice for that as well.

But it all starts by telling the CPS where you want to go.

Ready?

01.02 | Setting Your CPS Destination

In the previous chapter, I asked you to consider what your ideal place would be like. I suggested things like climate, affordability, and size as criteria to consider—but actually, what critiera do *you* care about in a locale? For me, it's stuff like size, affordability, and tax situation—I don't love crowded cities, I'm a bit of a tightwad with spending, and I abhor state income taxes (I've livedin Nevada for over twenty years, and we don't have state income tax, so I've grown allergic to it). But I don't care much about political alignment, I'm pretty flexible on climate, and I don't need to live near my extended family. In fact, I barely even consider those last three when I think about my ideal place to live. You, of course, might feel differently—maybe even *very* differently. So before you set a destination in your GPS, you'll want to sit down and think about what criteria really matter to you.

Similarly, my CPS is going to be configured with different criteria than yours. In this chapter, I'm going to make some *suggestions*, but that's all they are—things for you to consider, think about, and throw rocks at to see if they're a fit for you. As you do so, you'll start to develop *your* criteria for a successful career, and I'd love for you to write those down. We're going to be building on that list quite a bit.

01.02.01 | Money

This is the one thing you and I *must* agree is an important part of your career. Most of us need money to live; if you don't, then you

might not *need* a career. If you're already all-set financially, you probably need a *hobby*, and a lot of what I have to offer in this book isn't going to be applicable.

Money is the core of the economy. We use money to represent value. My skills are worth \$X\$, and I my mortgage payment is \$Y\$. My total expenses are \$Z\$, and I need to make A x \$Z to survive and be happy. Whether it's fair or not, whether it's pleasant or not, everything we want and everything we can offer is either measureable in currency.

Which begs the question... how much do you need?

And, because this is just as important of a question... how much do you want?

The former is actually pretty easy to quantify: go add up your bills. Throw in some exra to pay for vacations, dinners out, movie night, and whatever else you enjoy. That's how much you *need*.

But humans are, if nothing else, dreamers. We aspire. We want. Maybe we want less, maybe we want more, but we want. So how much money do you want? This is the absolutely important thing you program into your CPS.

I've actually gone several years without a significant pay raise, and that's fine. I've done the math, and I'm making enough to meet both my needs and wants. That part of my CPS destination is achieved, and I can focus on the other career characteristics I care about—and it is *immensely* helpful to know that. I don't need to look for another job that pays more, and I *know* that. Having that fact in front of me lets me stop worrying about that bit (which otherwise would create a lot of anxiety for me), and lets me focus my mental efforts on the career bits I've yet to achieve.

Contrarily, when I was younger, the money thing was, at times, a real problem. If I'd been in possession of a CPS at the time, I'd have made some different decisions, like taking on a job that was less enjoyable but paid more, perhaps.

The answer to, "how much do you need and how much do you want" is going to change over your life. That's fine—your CPS is a flexible tool, and you can update its destination characteristics any time you need to. But by getting yourself in the habit, *now*, of thinking about it, you can start to make better decisions. "I've decided I need more money because my spouse and I have decided to have a kid—but changing that in my CPS is going to change some other things to, and know that lets the two of us sit down and make an actual decision, rather than just letting something happen to us."

01.02.02 | Title

This may seem petty to some folks, but I'm not going to judge. Job titles can be important, and that importance can be for deeply personal reasons. For example, I once sat down with my boss, who asked about my career goals. I said, very bluntly, "I want a Vice President role." He nodded thoughtfully, and about a year later it was true.

And it *wasn't* petty. Not to me. You see, I was surrounded by people with VP titles, all of whom had college degrees. I'd started to wonder if I'd hit a cap on how high my non-degree-holding self could climb. I had massive imposter syndrome. Achieving that title was, to a very large degree, a visible, public, commonly understood sign that *I could do it*. That I could be trusted with that kind of responsibility, and that I could make that kind of impact.

I'm adding this topic to the book to really drive home the fact that your reasons are *your reasons*. It doesn't matter if they seem petty or even stupid to someone else—they're *yours* and they matter to *you*. Just because your definition of success doesn't meet someone else's, or just because your criteria don't even come into someone else's mind, doesn't mean they're wrong, silly, or worth ignoring.

As you're defining your CPS criteria, dig deep. Think about what

really matters to you. This is your life, and your career is supposed to be there to support that life.

01.02.03 | Time and Balance

Apart from money, this is the one thing that probably everybody has in common when it comes to thinking about career success: how much time are you willing to exchange for the money you need and want?

If you told me you were a software engineer who wanted to make \$200k a year, I could coach you into that job. No problem. It might involve a relocation, but it would *definitely* involve working for a hard-charging, high-performing company that *expected* 60 hour work weeks. If, on the other hand, you told me that your personal time was paramount, and that you could settle for \$150k a year, I could probably coach you into that job as well. Jobs exist with four-day work weeks, for example. And I'm not saying there are no 40-hour software engineering jobs paying \$200k—they're just harder to come across.

Aside from the money angle, I think time is the most significant consideration in deciding how to program your CPS. It is *so easy* to just let your time go, and before you know it, you're disillusioned, burned out, and wondering what it's all for. When you're younger, trading off more time might be fine, in terms of routing you toward future success. But be *thoughtful* about it. Make sure that the time you're spending on work is *leading* somewhere. Make sure you've considered what you're trading for that time—money, experience, something else.

The *one* thing you have of value in the world, that can never be *taken* from you, is your time. You have a finite amount of it, which is *why* it's valuable. As you consider where to set your CPS, *never* lose track of your time. Every minute you spend *must* be rewarded

with something of equal value. Again, that might be money, it might be the experience you're gaining, it might be something else entirely that's important to you.

It's funny: ask anyone if they know how much they get paid. They might not be comfortable sharing the information with you, which is fine, but they *know*. Now ask them if they know *exactly* how much time they spend getting that money. Most don't. To me, that's like selling a house and not knowing exactly, to the penny, how much money you got from it.

01.02.04 | Location

I love this part of the CPS conversation because it's so multifaceted.

First facet: Where you want to live at the *destination* of your career journet is not the same as where you might be willing to live along the way.

Second facet: Location is your career superpower, and most people don't even put it into play.

Much like the time you spend on the job, where you spend that time is a crucial piece of value. For some folks, location is nonnegotiable: they want to live in a certain place, for certain reasons, and that's it. And that attitude is *fine*, because where you live has a tremendous impact on your life. Some people want to live in a bustling city, others want to live near close family, others want to live in a small, quiet town. They're all valid answers. But other folks aren't so connected to location. Folks who join the military, for example, have "location" deleted from their CPS. They're *going* to move, whether they want it or not. I grew up in a US Navy family, and we moved every three years like clockwork until I hit 7th grade. That was part of my Dad's CPS settings, whether he was thoughtful about that or not.

If you *can* be flexible on location, your CPS is going to open up a plethora of new routes to your destination. There are *tons* of jobs in the world, but a lot of them need people to be in specific locations. Sometimes, that location-based need is entirely artificial, the whim of a CEO who believes, without evidence, in the benefits of "office culture." Fine—when you run the company, you get to make decisions like that. And if you as an employee don't like that policy, don't work for that company. But if you *can* be flexible on location, then it's a powerful trade for other things. Trading location can make it easier to hit the money you want, give you the work experiences you need to advance on your CPS routing, and a lot more.

And remember: you can adjust your CPS settings as you go, right? As you advance in your career, you can start dialing in the location aspect of your routing, because you won't need to trade that characteristic for others as much. More flex earlier in your career can create better personal outcomes later in your career.

Also, if you have kids, I want to caution you against just automatically assuming that "what's best for them" is staying in the same location, with the same school, and the same friends. I mean, I don't want to downplay those things either, but the alternative is an entirely valid way of living. I've met a lot of people who grew up and lived in one place, and when I talk about my Navy Brat upbringing, they invariably say, "that must have been so nice." And in ways, it was. I saw a lot of really great places, and experienced a lot of different cultures. I have broader perspectives because of it. I learned to make friends quickly, because I knew we wouldn't have as much time together. I had the advantage of "starting over" every few years, and as a kid growing up into a teen, that "reset" opportunity is huge. I could cast off the baggage of "who I was" and reinvent myself for a new locale. So I'm not telling you to throw location to the wind and move your entirely family into a van-I'm just suggesting that you not take location off the table simply becuase you have kids. Be thoughtful about it, and weigh the pros

and cons of the possibilities either way. Kids are more adaptable than you might think.

01.02.05 | Scope of Impact

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01.02.06 | Shoulder Weight

This is about *responsibility*. The tough kind.

This is about working in a critical role at a hospital, *knowing* that people's literal lives depend on you doing your job right.

This is about having people report to you, and *knowing* that a portion of their own career success is in your hands.

This is about taking a role at a startup company, *knowing* that your role is a big part of whether or not the next round of financing comes through.

If you read statements like that and think, "nope," then you're going to want to dial your CPS into a destination that avoids this kind of weight on your shoulders. A lot of people will read that and think... "you know, it'll be hard... but I think I can do it. And I think it'll give me a lot of satisfaction, in the end." Those folks should point their CPS accordingly.

01.02.07 | Mission

This is a bit of a tricky area to discuss. Let me just remind you up front that my goal here is to lay out options for you to consider—

mainly with the goal of having you dream up your own options. And with that in mind, I also want to, when appropriate, present different perspectives that exist in the world. In my mind, no perspective is objectively and universally right or wrong.

Mission is a big part of why many people take a job. They want to be doing something that, ultimately, aligns with their own values and makes them feel like theyr'e doing something beneficial for the world. Many, if not most, people who opt to work in the world of nonprofits are highly mission-driven, of course. But "social mission" has also become more and more common in the corporate world.

If *mission* is an important setting in your CPS, go for it. But I do want to offer a caution when it comes to mission-driven *businesses*. Just for your consideration.

Smaller startup companies often begin with a mission. Many times, it's something espoused by the founder or founders, something that's personally important to them. Although—and I regret bringing a little cynicism to the table, but I do want to be honest—it is not at all unusual for a founder's professed "mission" to be little more than a marketing play. They may *execute* on that mission to some degree, but the reason the mission exists is because it's good for business, not because it's something personally meaningful to the founder.

And in almost all cases, a business will prioritize *the business* over a social mission. A business that doesn't exist can't accomplish any good, and businesses can only exist if they're healthy and enduring. So things like *revenue* and *profit* remain critical, while *mission* often has to take second seat. That's simply how the world works.

Actress and producer Issa Rae came to this realization. Her original goal was to create businesses that offered support and opportunity to specific communities, unlocking a means for new voices to be heard and new faces to be seen. But she realized that businesses have to make money. Money is how things happen in the world.

With money, you can create the change you want to create—execute your social mission—but you *first* have to have the money.

I bring this up only as a cautionary tale. *Yes*, set your CPS for "social mission" if that's where you want it to take you. *But* recognize that if you opt for the world of business, mission may sometimes take back seat. If that's not how you want your career to play out, then make sure you're considering that as you set your CPS.

01.02.08 | Experience

This is one of the vaguest things to consider, because "experience" involves a lot of very personal emotions. But the existence of those emotions also makes "experience" one of the most important CPS settings you have to consider. And because our emotions change as we age and grow, this is a section you'll have to frequently reconsider.

So what is "experience?"

Broadly, it's "what it's like to work at a place." That can involve small things like free snacks in the office or a weekly happy hour with your team, or it can involve major things like hybrid or remote working policies, or even whether it's an open place office environment or one with private offices.

I will, very bluntly, say this: "experience" is one of the things you'll probably have to compromise on the most, especially earlier in your career. Most of what I think of as "experience" really works out to work style and perks, and depending on a lot of things outside your contorl, they simply might not be universally available in a job that meets some of your other criteria. For example, huge enterprises with tens of thousands of employees simply might not offer free snacks or remote working policies—but they might be the perfect way to meet some of your other success criteria.

Let me be even more blunt:

- Your career exists to fund the life you want to live.
- It's great when your career can get you jobs that align to the things you love in life... but that's a bonus.
- Your career may often involve jobs that you don't entirely love... because those jobs give you the time, money, and other criteria that fund a *life* that you *do* love.

Does that make sense? It's *fantastic* when your work experience is one you can love, but what should be *more* important is that your career lets you create the *life* you want.

I have had opportunities to work for companies that paid really well, didn't demand more time than I was willing to give, and let me be reasonably satisfied in the work I was doing. But the "experience" working at those companies was pretty... plain. On the other hand, I've worked for companies where just going into the office was a joy. There were pool tables, video games, Kegerators for weekly happy hours, an entire wall of snacks, you name it. But those companies didn't meet many of my other criteria, like pay, time requirements, or the ability to advance my career in the directions I needed to. So I had to decide where to compromise.

It is not wrong to weight "experience" very heavily when setting your CPS. It is *fine* to value "experience" more than some other things. In fact, this is an excellent example of why setting your CPS is so important! I eventually *did* come to a place where my skills and experiences could get me the pay I wanted, in exchange for an acceptable amount of my time, at a company with a fantastic "experience." But I couldn't have *started* my career with a great "experience." I needed to compromise on that, and work in some fairly greuling, flourescent-lit open-plan offices with no snacks, at the beginning. Because my priorities lay elsewhere than in "experience."

That's why it's so important to be deliberate in thinking about these things, and deciding what *your* priorities are.

01.02.09 | Org Type and Size

This is perhaps one of the most overlooked CPS settings there is, and yet it's one that will put the most framing and structure around everything else your career can achieve for you. We're going to dig into this in a pretty decent amount of detail, and this is very much a multifaceted consideration, but here's the short version:

Not every kind of company can offer you the same things.

The things you want should drive the kind of company you work for.

So with that in mind, let me share a few archetypes, and outline some of the differences in what they offer. *None of these are objectively good or bad!* They're just different, and differences are *good.* Differences mean you can probably find the kind of company that's perfect for you, and then start pointing your CPS in that direction. And, as with all of your CPS settings, your answers will probably change over time. The experiences I got working at small early-stage tech startups set me up for awesome moves later in my career; the later-stage companies I worked for valued my seed-stage experiences, and offered me things like scope of impact and mission that I couldn't have gotten in those earlier startups. Those different company types offered different things, and I *needed* different things at different stages of my career.

Now, by focusing on archetypes, I'm obviously lumping a lot of things together than do in fact have a lot of subtle differentiation. My goal here isn't to exhaustively detail every kind of company that exists—that's impossible. And because different vertical industries—think things like finance, healthcare, manufacturing, and so on—are different, you'll need to consider those variations as well. The goal with this section of the book is to just *get you thinking*. Hopefully, you'll start to see some patterns, and as you research future opportunities for your career, you can begin looking for those patterns.

Small, Privately Owned Companies

The bread and butter of most economies, believe it or not. For me, these kinds of companies offer one really significant upside: they control their own destiny. They're not beholden to investors, and they can decide what kind of company they want to be. They can choose to grow, or stay steady. They can choose to hold to a social mission, or not.

Small privately owned companies, as opposed to ones more comparable to a large publicly traded enterprise, have other aspects that you might find to be a pro... or a con.

They often have a lot in common with early-stage startups, which I'll discuss next, in that employees typically have the opportunity to "wear many hats." If you enjoy solving new problems, learning new things, and blazing your own trail, smaller companies often welcome you. But they'll also tend to pay less, may have smaller benefits packages, and may offer less expansive lists of perks.

Early-Stage Startups (Pre-Seed through Series A)

These are the smallest of companies, and they're on a track to eventually have an Initial Public Offering, or IPO, transitioning themselves to be a publicly traded company. Depending on the market at the time, they may be especially focused on "growth at all costs."

Expect a lot of uncertainty and almost constant pivots—the company's product-market fit is still being validated. You'll have small teams: Often a tight-knit group where each member wears multiple hats. A lot of resource constraints—limited funding means tight budgets and potentially lower salaries and benefits. Above all, a Fast-Paced EnvironmentTM. There's rapid iteration and pivoting as the company seeks to find its niche—which can feel like massive

instability, a lack of cohesive strategy, and so forth. That's part of the fun of this stage—if you find that kind of thing fun.

You'll have broad responsibilities. There'll be opportunities to work on a variety of tasks and directly impact the company's direction. You'll have close interaction with founders. There's High risk and reward,** meaning there's maximum potential for equity gains if the company succeeds, but also a higher risk of failure.

As you move toward a company that's gotten its first major round of financing, or "Series A round," expect a lot more formal product development. The focus on building and refining the core product or service. Market expansion as you're beginning to scale and acquire initial customers. This still involves a lot of pivoting, because whatever product-market fit you think you've found will very likely need a lot of adjustment as you begin engaging your first customers. Also expect a lot of team growth, in hiring new team members to build out key functions (e.g., engineering, sales, marketing).

This is where employee specialization begins, with more defined roles, but still a chance to work across functions. You'll start building processes, establishing more structured processes and workflows. But you'll get them wrong. They'll change a lot. In terms of equity, stock options are still significant, though slightly less risky than the seed stage—so expect them to have a bit less upside value.

A big note: A company that's established itself in one market might be at Series B or even C—but if it tries to break into a different market, might find itself back in "Series A mode." That's not a step backwards. It just means that different markets need different things and have different problems; as you shift to solving different problems, you'll need to go back to being agile, innovative, and experimental, just like all good Series A companies.

Mid-Stage Startups (Series B and C)

Key Expectations: You should be scaling operations, often with an emphasis on scaling the product and market presence. Revenue growth will be key, with a significant focus on revenue generation and customer acquisition. You'll be spending a lot of time and money on that. Finally, even more team expansion, usually with rapid hiring to support growth across various departments.

What's the experience like? Defined roles. Everyone is more specialized and clearly defined job responsibilities—and this is where you might see some of your Series A colleagues leaving, especially ones that much prefer to wear many hats and be good at a lot of things. Overall, you'll see a more structured environment, with more established processes and possibly (probably) the introduction of middle management. Finally, perks and benefits will start to solidify, with improved benefits, compensation packages, and workplace perks.

Series B companies usually feel they've got it all figured out—but often in a very limited market. For example, a Series B company might be selling mainly to other tech companies. It's when the company starts to change its customer focus—toward the end of Series B is usually when you start eyeing the Fortune 1000—that you'll realize your so-called product-market fit wasn't a Universal Truth.

There are a lot of things a company should get right before its Series C round, although a lot of companies don't. In my mind, you're Series B until:

- You've tested your product-market fit with at least a couple of large enterprise customers.
- Your revenue model is compelling to investors, and you're hitting good trend lines on key metrics like customer churn, recurring revenue, gross profit margin, etc.

• You've established a market presence—people in your space largely know who you are.

Late-Stage Companies (Series D, IPO, and Beyond)

This is where you meed to start firming up market leadership, meaning you're pushing to become a leader in the market and expanding into new markets. You're gaining operational efficiency, optimizing operations and possibly preparing for an IPO or acquisition. You're learning to work consistently and at scale, although you might not be there yet. Finally, and this is a big one, you're engaging product diversification, meaning expanding the product line or services offered.

In our current world, it's not unusual to see Series B companies attack only one market, and wait until Series C to start expanding. It's unfortunate, but it's how investors seem to be working. That means a Series C (or even D) company can still show a lot of Series A characteristics as they dive into a new market. Typically, this'll happen when there's a massive revenue driver—shifting to enterprise sales, for example, entering a new geographic market, and so forth.

What's it like to work here? A more stable environment. There's more job security and stability compared to earlier stages. There's more career growth, with opportunities for advancement and professional development. Finally, there's usually money for more competitive compensation, where salaries and benefits become more competitive with established companies—although equity may become less compelling as the risks of the company go down.

But, you can still expect a lot of the chaos and shifting of a Series A company if this later-stage company is still trying to actively open major new markets. Just be prepared for that—a company can be many things at once, just like people.

Note that this stage can continue... a while. Stage C. Stage D. Stage E. That's because the hurdle from this "late stage" phase to "pre-IPO" is huge. Promising companies can continue to get funding to build toward it, provided they're showing strong trends in the right directions. But at each additional round of funding, you should start to see the "late stage" characteristics I've described getting firmer, and start to see the "pre-IPO" characteristics begin to emerge.

Once the company sells itself to the public (that's what an IPO is), or even to another company, you'll encounter a more structured organization, with clear hierarchies and established corporate culture. You should have comprehensive benefits and compensation packages. And finally, the equity kicks in with exit opportunities: and the potential for significant financial gains through stock options or shares.

Mid-Market Companies

Expect companies like this to offer substantial employee specialization: you'll do one thing, and be expected to do it fairly well. Companies at this size start to get pretty heirarchial, and "office politics" becomes a very real and present thing in almost all cases. But these companies can offer a full set of benefits, competitive pay, and a substantial amount of stability and security—they're often well-resources enough to survive minor market blips, for example. These companies may even start to look like a lot of smaller companies jammed together, as they sell more than one product or product family. Expect to work hard, potentially with long hours in some positions.

Large Enterprises

Think "Fortune 1000." Huge companies, usually with a major global presence. Big, heirarchical org charts. Numerous product offerings,

so that working here *will* feel, sometimes, like working for a smaller company that's been swallowed by a giant one. Interestingly, these giant firms may pay a bit *less*, because they tend to be hyperfocused on quarterly financials, although they'll usually offer solid benefits packages. Their real offering is stability: Some companies in this stage have been around for a century or more, and they're likely to be around for another century and then some. Depending on what you're working on, you can also have substantial resources available to do some really cool stuff. And typically, you'll find a more predictable set of work hours across almost all positions.

Nonprofits

Nonprofits *are* companies. They *are* businesses. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking they're not. They pay salaries and benefits, and sometimes those are *quite* substantial at higher levels of the org. But lower levels tend to pay less than market average, while expecting quite a bit from you in terms of time and effort. But you do it for the *mission*. Unlike for-profit businesses, nonprofits will tend to stay laser-focused on their mission, so if that's what lights up your eyes, this should be a strong consideration.

...And the Rest

Local government. National government. Hybrid companies like Walmart, which has both a huge back-end operation that feels like a large mid-market firm as well as an enormous brick-and-mortar operation. Media and entertainment companies. Hospitality firms. Legal firms. The list goes on and on, and they all have unique littler differentiators that can serve the right career very well—or act as a stumbling block for the wrong career. The trick is to look at each possibility and try to understand its characteristics. How would this kind of company fit the things I've put into my CPS? How will

this kind of company help me advance to the next stage on my route?

01.02.10 | Being Boss

Do you want to be the boss? This is another huge setting on your CPS, and I want to examine it in some detail.

Some folks set their eyes on management as a means of perceived career advancement: better title, more money, that kind of thing. Some want to be in management to escape "the trenches," meaning they're perhaps hitting a wall in terms of daily contributing, and want to kind of rise out of it. While neither of those are in any way wrong, I'd respectfully suggest that they're poor reasons for moving into either supervision, management, or leadership.

Oh, we should hit those terms:

- Supervision is making sure people do what they've been told to do.
- Management is taking a set of resources that you're allocated and arranging them to accomplish a specific goal. Supervision is included.
- Leadership is helping a team understand a vision and their place in it, putting them on the track to bring the vision to life, and clearing the way for them to get it done. Management and supervision are often, but not always, part of leadership.

Any of these three levels carries a few important considerations.

• Being the boss *is a distinct skill set*. Whatever you've done before may help partly prepare you to supervise, manage, or lead, in that you'll be familiar with what your team is being asked to do, but being a leader requires new skills. It's a new

- job. A new career. You might be, in many ways, starting from scratch—although hopefully you've had some good example from which to get started.
- Being the boss carries a pretty heavy burden, and I'm not talking about being accountable for business outcomes. I'm referring to the human beings who work for you. You become *responsible* for them. It's up to you to help them understand what their own success looks like, and up to you to help them achieve it. It's a lot of responsibility.
- Bosses lose a lot of control over their own destinies. Your success is now achieved by your team, not by you. This is not a situation that will make everyone happy. You really have to be able to raise your thinking, and your definition of success, to encompass the team, not just yourself.
- You may have a lot fewer day-to-day indicators that you're doing the right thing. The higher you go in the org chart, the longer your "success horizon." From day to day, you might experience a lack of satisfying moments, and instead experience those quarter to quarter. Again, that can take a lot of mental adjusting that many people don't find enjoyable.

Plenty of other authors have spilled ink on how to be a better leader, manager, or whatever; I won't get into that here. Just know that setting your CPS toward a managerial position *solely* for the salary is a Bad Idea™. Moving into management is a huge step that comes with a ton of baggage—make sure you're doing it because you *want* all of that.

01.02.11 | Time to Set Your Destination

That's a pretty good list of *suggested* facets to consider for your CPS. Hopefully, this chapter gave you some ideas for facets that I

haven't mentioned—things that are especially important to you.

Write them down.

Seriously. Write down every job facet you can think of that matters to you, either positively or negatively.

Once you've done that, start describing what. you want each of those facets to look like *at your career destination*. You're describing what success "looks like" to you.

- I want to make at least \$175k per year.
- I want a solid benefits package that includes fully-paid health for my family.
- I want to live in a mid-sized suburban area with a moderate-to-low cost of living compared to the national average.
- I want to work a pretty strict 40-hour week, although I'd flex to 50 now and then.
- I'm okay having direct reports, but I want to be a working manager, and I don't want a team bigger than a half-dozen.

And so on. Remember, this is what your career looks like when you've reached its pinnacle. This is the list that, if you can check off every item, means you won. Achieving the items on this list means you can just "hold the line" and don't need to climb the ladder further.

And also remember that this definition of success will change. As you get older and make other life decisions, the things you want your career to do for you will also change. In fact, I always advise people to revisit this exercise every year or two. It's a chance to re-validate what your goals are, make sure they still resonate positively with you, and make sure you're still making moves that lead to these goals.

It's also fine—and very much a good idea—to note which CPS settings are must-have items for you, which ones you're willing

to negotiate a little, and which ones are merely nice-to-haves. At some stages in your career it will be impossible to have everything at once, right? You'll have to progress, slowly checking things off as you progress toward your success. So it's good to know which ones represent lines you will not cross, because you're going to be making some compromises in order to have those things. I truly believe you *can* have everything you want (within reason, of course), but you will have to work for them.

With your goals written down—with your destination punched into your CPS—you can begin plotting your route.

When I work with someone as their mentor, this "setting the CPS" conversation is the first one we have. It's a structured way of looking at career goals, and most importantly it puts a *boundary* on the idea of career. Rather than some nebulous thing, a career suddenly gains purpose, duration, and direction. A career gains *consequence* as a tool to bring you the things you want in your life. If you'd like to have that kind of conversation with me, head to https://donjones.com/professional-services/ to get learn more.

Sidebar | Copy the Military

One of my earliest jobs was as an aircraft mechanic apprentice for the US Navy. In 1993, the Clinton administration's Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission decided to phase out the facility I'd just graduated from, leading me to enlist in the US Air Force instead. I wound up backing out of the enlistment (they asked me to change my contract, and I declined), but I learned something really cool that I've applied several times in my career.

For context, just *imagine* the military. This is an employer with thousands of different jobs, all of which have different requirements. Want to be a jt fighter pilot? You kinda need decent eyesight. A cook? Less about eyesight, maybe. And all of those jobs get filled through a huge recruiting organization that processes tens of thousands of applicants per year. How dop you maintain any kind of consistency at that kind of scale, spread across not only the entire United States but also its many territories and possessions?

The military has one answer to that question, whenever it comes up: codify it.

For any given military job, the military comes up with a set of minimum requirements across a couple of dozen catagories. You might need a mechanical aptitude score of 10 or better, eyesight of 20/20 or better, depth perception of... however they score depth perception... or better, mathematical aptitude of 15 or better, and so on. These all get lumped together into an arcane-looking string: 1746A6378B3781 or something. Each character represents a single measureable attribute, and the character itself represents the minimum score needed, in that attribute, for that job. Letters stand in for numbers beyond 9, or for non-numeric scoring systems.

So you roll yourself down to a recruiting center, and they start running you through tests. Seriously, it's a full day. Eyes. Ears. Ability to lift 50 pounds over your head. Math test. You name it, they test it. And in the end, you come up with a score like 1657C786A4892. That means you can't have the job referenced above—you're deficient in at least two areas. Which is why, incidentally, the military doesn't contract you for specific jobs—you're instead contracted for a very broad category of jobs, like "Mechanical," "Medical," or "General." That way, they can stick you wherever (a) they have need and (b) you have the necessary base qualification score. They might promise to make you an Air Traffic Controller, but end up making you a Cook.

Speaking from experience.

(I actually got out because I'd been contracted into General, and they wanted to move me to Mechanical, which actually *is* a contratual change that you can decline.)

Anyway.

When I started being a more active manager of my career, I fell back on that same categorization system in two ways.

First, I'd do some research, and then come up with a string that represented where I figured the job I wanted really sat. I'd come up with categories like C# Language Skills, SQL Server Skills, and so on. I'd take a shot at rating my own ability in that area, and where I figured the job would demand I be. This is in no way as scientific or structured as what the military does, but it helped me boil down a seemingly endless space into something I could attack. Wherever I felt I was deficient, I could work on—and I did. I also learned not to ignore "soft" skills, which I greatly prefer to call *Durable Skills*, like communication, collaboration teamwork, and so on. Believe it or not, companies value those more than so-called "hard" skills, because "hard" skills are eaiser to teach and learn.

Second, I'd come up with my own requirements string, based on what I introduced as your "CPS Settings" in the previous chapter.

For example, for "time commitment," I'd rate a normal 40-hour work week as a 3, a 50 as a 2, and anything more as a 1. I'd rate 2 weeks' paid vacation as a 1, 3 weeks' as a 2, and so on. From that, I could come up with something like 2256876, which neatly encapulated *my* requirements for the *job* I wanted. I could then, with a bit more research, figure out that a prospective employer was a 326687, which is deficient in only one of my requirements. That meant I could consider whether or not I was comfortable with that (in this example, minor) deficiency or not, which determined whether I pursued that job or not. And I didn't just rate job benefits like pay and time off! I'd also include a digit for the potential career growth a given job or employer might offer—all the things that matter to me were baked into that string of digits.

Kind of an odd tangent maybe, but I like to structure how I think about things when it comes to my career. This kind of structure lets me focus my self-improvement efforts, perform real apples-to-apples comparisons between potential employers and jobs, and so on.

In this book, we're going to rely pretty heavily on being able to measure where you're at against where you want to go. Whether you use a silly military-inspired system like mine or something of your own, I encourage you to use *something*. It's a way to focus yourself and your efforts, and frankly a way to acknowledge the work you'll be doing for your career. And it's also the best way to know *you're there*, when you finally reach your success.

01.03 | Calculating Your Route

01.03 | Calculating Your Route

02 | Giving Back

Former US President Barack Obama once gave a speech about businesses and infrastructure. In it, he famously said, "Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business, you didn't build that."

A lot of people chose to misinterpret his remark. "I built my business entirely on my own!" they'd cry. But that's not what he meant. What he meant was that the American people, the taxpayers, built a lot of the things that every business depends on: roads, electrical wires, water supplies, and so on. You built your business *on top of those things*, he was saying.

Your career is kind of similar. As much work as you may have put into it, as many sacrifices as you may have made, others helped you. They gave you advice, opportunities, feedback, and more. Remember that I didn't go to university—instead, I went through a four-year apprenticeship. I'm *extremely* mindful of everything the journeyman and master mechanics I worked with taught me. Not just how to install the glove vanes on an F-14 (the first task I helped with), but how to show up as a professional at work. Not just how to wire the slats on an A-6 (finicky damn task), but how to keep track of what I was learning so that when promotion opportunities came around, I was ready with documentation of my abilities. I've had leaders who taught me *so much* of value: that I didn't need to reply to *every* email, that sometimes my employees just need to vent without me taking action, and so much more. I was an

apprentice in the trade to their master, and even late, late, late into my career, I'm still learning.

And the most important thing I've learned is that I need to be "master" to someone else's "apprentice." Everything I've learned, even my failures (maybe especially those), is something someone else can benefit from.

We all need to give back.

Let's dig into it.

03 | Your Micro MBA

It's good odds that your career takes place within a business setting. Even governments and nonprofits, to a decent degree, are businesses—they just have different motivations than profit. In fact, even for-profit businesses have a variety of motivations, a plethora of "rules of the game," and an absolute metric butt-tonne of "whyfors." If you're going to play the game of business, it's helpful to know the rules.

So here we go.

04 | The Durables

For as long as I've been in the workplace, I've been aware of socalled "soft skills." Things like communication, teamwork, and leadership—as if those are somehow less "hard" than, say, computer programming or something. If anything, the word "soft" would be better replaced by "squishy," since the real shared attribute amongst these critical skills is how hard it is to define what "good" looks like.

When I started working with a UK-based technology apprenticeship firm, they'd already struggled with the "soft skills" terminology and come up with a better phrase: *durable skills*. And it's a great name, because these are the skills that will *last*, and that will honestly do more for your career than any "hard" skills specific to your trade.

So let's look at a few.

05 | The Workbook

You're probably used to status reports. In school, you got report cards. At work, you probably have one-on-ones, check-ins, status reports, or some other means of seeing how things are going.

Your CPS is just as deserving of a periodic check-in. While you can rely on a computer to run a GPS, perhaps checking on traffic ahead and rerouting as necessary, *you* are the one executing your CPS. Computers have an easy time staying on-task; us humans... less so.

The Workboook keeps us on track.

05.01 | Setting Up Your Workbook

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/thecareerpositioningsystem.

05.01.01 | Decide How to Measure Yourself

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/thecareerpositioningsystem.

05.01.02 | The Sections

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/thecareerpositioningsystem.

Section: Here and There

Section: Current Route Item

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/thecareerpositioningsystem.

Section: Rearview Mirror

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/thecareerpositioningsystem.

Section: Passengers

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/thecareerpositioningsystem.

Section: Upgrades

05.03 | Using Your Workbook

So... this should be pretty obvious, right? Like Nike says, *just do it.*

But... look, "career management" isn't the most exciting or engaging thing to do in your life. I get that. Sitting down every other week and looking at what you're doing is easy to just not do. After all, your career's probably been basically fine up until now, right? Is this biweekly thing really necessary?

This'll sound a little harsh, but I'll tell you how I look at it *for myself*. You're very welcome to have a different perspective, but for me, my career is either something *I manage*, or something *I am the victim of*. No matter what kind of job works for you, no matter how much or how little you need from it, *managing that* is... well, for me it's existential.

I've been laid off, and believe me, the time to manage your career isn't when that happens. When that happens, it's too late. I've woken from anxiety-fueled nightmares about whether or not I'll be able to ever afford not working full-time one day, and when you hit that age isn't the time to start thinking about your career.

There are a *ton* of things that are easier to just not to, to let "take care of themselves," to push off and worry about later. Humans are actually really bad at considering long-term actions and consequences. I mean, we can't all wander around worrying about when we're going to die, or we wouldn't get *anything* done. In a sense, our inability to worry much about the distant future is a kind of survival trait. But I know that about myself, and so I push back against it. I'm not worried about *dying*, but I'm very much worried about *living the life I want to live*, and that includes now

as well as in the future. And so I force msyelf to take a biweekly look at my CPS and see how I'm doing on my route.

Did you know that a 20 year-old who contributes \$250 a month to a retirement plan that earns a fairly paltry 5% will, in 40 years, have almost \$400,000? It's really easy to not stash that \$250 away each month—just \$125 a paycheck, for most of us—but every month you don't reduces that end-game total amount pretty substantially. Your career works the same way. Every week you're not managing it—and be honest, this Workbook is asking for like an hour of your time every two weeks, so it's barely even an investment—is a week where you're simply letting stuff happen to you.

So do the Workbook.

Even if you're of the mindset, "look, I don't want to work that hard, and I don't need much in my life, so I'm not going to go at this career thing like it's some kind of Ultimate Prize Championship or something," you've still *made career decisions*. Maybe managing your career won't take much more than a semiannual check-in to make sure you still feel that way. Fine. *Start* biweekly, see how you're doing, and adjust from there to suit your needs.

But do it.

Please.