Halfway through a 40-year decision: the journey of a medical graduate

Reginald K. Seeto¹

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A former boss asked if I could share insights into making career changes geared towards young scientists and doctors. He reached out knowing I had made that change and thought my journey may be worth sharing for scientists and doctors contemplating a profession change to another industry.

We forever live in a changing world. This is not in dispute, although one could argue that the rate of change is on an exponential curve. For example, the days of working in one company, and, indeed, even one profession, has changed. Significant technology changes have driven stepwise change in the way businesses operate and that stepwise change looks set to continue. I was caught at the juncture point of one these stepwise inflection points, where computers had not been introduced to my high school but were the year after I left, such that today, my youngest, a 3-year-old, is already proficient in using an iPad and the ensuing apps.

Growing up in the 1970s, it was not common to see parents voluntarily change jobs, let alone professions, but in 2016, it is no longer uncommon. I expect my children will contemplate multiple careers and professions during their lifetime. In this ever-changing world, we need to be able to change and evolve, and, more importantly, as business opportunities change, decide if we seize them for that point in time. It was not that long ago during the 1980s that we were all being told to learn Japanese for business. Today, few people are being told to learn Japanese, but everyone is being told to learn Chinese, but who knows what other business language is in its infancy as Chinese was 30 years ago. Many switched to the

IT profession in the 1990–2000s, as did many to the oil and mining industry in the 1970s during the oil and mining boom. Careers need to be continuously managed and making these decisions is never easy.

Considering career changes should not be uncommon but actually making a career choice and/or change should not be done on a whim, nor considered a one and done.

The greatest challenge for technical professions such as medicine and science is that so much time has been invested to acquiring skills and to rising through the ranks. Career acceleration cannot be done in 2–3 years, as we contrast technology or biotech start-ups where a teenager or twenty-something can become the CEO of a billion dollar company overnight. The point of sharing this is not to immediately change careers, nor to feel the world is being turned upside down. Rather, we need to manage our careers, and there are natural points in one's career to reflect and do so. Importantly, it is more natural to do so today and will become even more so in the future. Leaving medicine when I did was unexpected and caused shock to the system. Today, it would not have such a reaction.

I work for a top 10 biopharmaceutical company, and I field multiple inquiries a week from scientists wanting to explore opportunities in my group. They want to learn about business and often lament that they only found out about these opportunities late in their careers.

Large pharma has always looked to doctors and scientists for the skills they can bring, but today, the number of industries seeking those skills have broadened, including demand from the biotechnology, management consulting, private equity, and venture capital sectors.

✉ Reginald K. Seeto
reg.seeto@gmail.com

¹ Gaithersburg, MD 20878, USA

Today, the information to make those choices for doctors and scientists contemplating change have opened up with business courses included as part of university training, and with an increased outreach from industry to better inform on these alternatives and options.

Know what you want to achieve with your life or at least its direction.

On leaving medicine, I knew I wanted to learn about business and considered an MBA. However, a colleague suggested McKinsey, a leading management consultancy firm. It was here that I was exposed to multiple industries (agribusiness, biotechnology, chemicals, financial services, medical devices, and pharmaceuticals), different functions (strategy, operations, organizational), and where I had the chance to work in Asia, Australasia, Europe, and North and South America.

One always has to plan ahead with any career change and have the flexibility to adjust. I knew I was not going to be a career consultant, but McKinsey would generate the necessary options to get me closer to my endgame.

Build a network and use it to learn. Ask lots of questions. On the whole, mentors are willing to take a call when you need help. Before leaving McKinsey, I had more than 300+ conversations before deciding which industry and set of roles to take.

My immediate goal was to be a country manager for a top 10 pharma by the time I was 40 and to eventually run my own company. I made specific career choices to achieve this first goal. I joined company #1 as the Executive Director of Marketing and grew it to become a blockbuster (>1 billion dollars).

I joined company #2 as Vice President of Global Marketing responsible for multiple franchises, including the company's largest and future growth franchises. While there, we were aiming for an IPO but were acquired for than 15 billion dollars. One needs to be prepared for such changes in industry and plan around.

Company #3 I joined because it represented the greatest challenge with the largest upside. I was appointed as the Vice President of Global Marketing responsible for all therapeutic areas and portfolio management. This decision paid off and I was subsequently promoted to the executive team, as the Executive Vice President of Corporate Development and Strategy and I then undertook an expat assignment as a country manager in Asia. I managed to achieve this before my 40th birthday.

As I now organize my 20th year medical school reunion, it's hard to believe we made our decision to study medicine as 17–18-year-olds. Today, most of my medical class are successful doctors who have dedicated themselves to one career since they achieved the entrance scores (top 0.5 %) to study medicine at the University of Sydney. While working as an accredited Medical Registrar at a major teaching hospital, there was little time to think about anything else but medicine. My decision to pursue a career in industry was a hard one, but today it should be easier given the precedence, with more information and support from industry.

The timing of change does become harder with time. I was asked by the Professor of Medicine to stay and complete training. I had once diagnosed a case of Addison's disease in the emergency room and that left a favorable impression with him. If I had stayed a few more years, I don't believe I would have left.

There comes a point when making a change may be too late, so the earlier one assesses other options, the better.

For my graduating class, **we are at the mid-point of our professional careers**. A few have made the change like me, some have returned, and some have continued that journey. At the end of the day, what drives us all are different. For me, making a continuous difference and impact, with the ability to learn, will continue shaping my career path before I eventually run my own company. That said, I have another 20 years to get there and that will be a good story for the 40th class reunion.