



## Dissecting Accomplishments as a Career Compass

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Charting your career path is useful at any stage in your career, and there are several circumstances when it is particularly valuable. Have your interests changed? Do you find yourself reading the *New England Journal of Medicine* policy articles every week, but let your *Journal of Virology* pile up until you need to do a reading blitz for writing a paper or a grant? This is a good clue that your *professional direction* may be changing from narrow bench research interests to a broader perspective. The career compass charting process can help you define your changing interests and determine what skills you have from your current career that may be transferable to the new area.

Perhaps your career situation has changed. You might be faced with the reality that a car accident has limited your hand mobility so you no longer have the fine motor skills needed for performing surgery. These *health* reasons are forcing you to a new job or career—you need to know which skills in your present surgery career are transferable to directing a continuing medical education (CME) program. Through the process of dissecting your career accomplishments, you find that you have consistently used and enjoyed detailed organizing and record keeping, and have received awards for teaching excellence. You can then develop stories that describe your accomplishments and how they would be useful in managing a CME program.

Third, *personal family changes*, such as a serious illness of a child, parent, or partner, may lead you to chart a new career compass. Say you have decided that you want to move into scientific writing after having directed research grants. To do this, you need to know first, what skills from molecular biology bench research are transferable to this new career, and second, what skills are typically needed in scientific writing that

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you might need to develop. For instance, you may find that many scientific writers are sole practitioners and that skill and comfort with marketing is an important requirement for being successful. Through the analysis described below, you find that this is not a skill you already have, and you make plans to obtain this skill.



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### Charting Your Career Compass

**Step 1** in charting your career compass is to write five to seven brief *stories* of special career accomplishments or highlights—peak, exceptional experiences for you over

the past 10 years of your professional life that had these four characteristics: something you made happen, did well, enjoyed doing, and are proud of. These accomplishment stories are the “keystone” or the “raw data” from which you develop your career compass.

**Step 2** is to analyze your career accomplishments using the Problem + Action + Results (PAR) formula, as we described in an earlier column (see *Academic Physician & Scientist*, February 2005, pp. 1–2). Using this PAR process, you will be able to determine which skill sets, traits, and knowledge you have used most frequently, have most enjoyed, and want to utilize more consistently or develop in the future.

In brief, PAR is the formula used to parse your career stories so that you will be able to have consistent data for further analysis. PAR is used to identify the following for each of your stories:

**P = problems**, issues, challenges, opportunities you have had during the course of your career

**A = action(s)** you took to resolve or solve these

**R = results** or benefits that occurred.

What is the usefulness of the PAR process?

- ❖ If you do this exercise annually, you will generate the data needed for your annual reports, as well as discover changes in your career interests and skill sets.
- ❖ Using the entire formula will help you shape stories for interviews as you use the “P” to provide the introduction or context, to set the stage. Remember that “stories sell” while “facts tell.” For example:

**P** = Department had decreasing enrollment for distance-learning physician assistant program and insufficient enrollment from out of state.

**A** = Converted existing televideo program to one online. Conducted market research and feasibility studies and designed

low-budget, effective marketing plan with specific goals and indicators.

**R** = Within one year, exceeded enrollment targets by 35%, attracted higher-caliber students, and increased percentage of out-of-state students from 6% to 35%.

❖ Using the A + R of the formula will help you write accomplishment statements for your executive summary (see *Academic Physician & Scientist*, February 2005, pp. 1–2). For example, part of a bulleted “Accomplishment Statement” might read: *Increased enrollment quality and marketability; converted registration and program delivery to effective online processes, resulting in 85% increase in enrollment, 170% increase in applications, and national market penetration with in state/out-of-state ratio of 60/40 within one year.*

**Step 3** involves going beyond the basic

PAR process and mining even deeper into the accomplishment stories to extract the particular attributes used to achieve results. The table below is a way to discover the specific traits, knowledge, skills, and interests used in accomplishments that would be transferable and marketable in a new position or to determine what is next in your career.

The table is used as follows. Number your accomplishment stories and choose five to seven of them to deconstruct or mine. For each story, delineate the PAR involved, and then ask yourself what it took to accomplish what you did—what basic skills, traits, knowledge, etc., it took to achieve this accomplishment. In this example, we have mined the career accomplishment described above.

This is an exercise best done with at least one other person to help mine the qualities and characteristics. Seldom does an individ-



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Specific knowledge, skills and traits used to achieve the accomplishment	# 1	# 2.	# 3.	..... #7	∑ = Total of the Checks
Collect and analyze quantitative data	✓				
Instructional design expertise	✓				
Web site expertise	✓				
Prepare business plan	✓				
Prepare budgets	✓				
Forecasting	✓				
Enrollment management	✓				
Market analysis	✓				
Perseverance	✓				
Sttention to detail	✓				
Project management	✓				
Report writing	✓				
Persuading others	✓				
Presenting verbally in succinct manner	✓				

ual remember all of the mental and physical skills or traits that were involved in the achievement. For example, in the above PAR, the person involved identified only a quarter of the complete list.

To complete Step 3, use the left-hand column to write these specific skills or characteristics and place a check mark in the numbered column associated with the particular accomplishment story you are mining. Continue using the list to the left, reviewing what you have already identified and adding to it as you examine your additional accomplishments.

**How to Use the List**

When you are finished, sum up the check marks. Then do three rankings:

- ❖ *Rank 1* lists the frequency of usage of the characteristics. In other words, which skills have you used the most? These are likely to be the ones with which you are most skilled.
- ❖ *Rank 2* asks you to determine your 6 to 10 most enjoyable characteristics. If you plan a career where you can use these skills at least half the time, you are then more likely to be able to deal with the frustrations of needing to use the other skills that you enjoy less.

Look at these two rankings and see if there is a good match between Rank 1 and Rank 2. If not, you may be in a job where you are using skills that you do not enjoy

using (or no longer enjoy). For example, you may have enjoyed performing a clinical procedure when you started your career, but now, 10 years later, you do not find it rewarding.

❖ *Rank 3* asks you to determine the 6 to 10 skills that you want to continue to use or, alternatively, to develop further.

By doing these rankings, you will have determined what you have done frequently. You will have determined what you have enjoyed most. These may differ considerably or not, and thus provide understanding of why you continue to be excited at work or are ready for a change. And finally, you will have determined what it is you look forward to doing or developing. This is the path that needs exploring.

**Step 4** involves grouping the items in the left-hand column into themes by asking of each attribute or skill, “Does this seem like the same kind of activity as the ones before it?” If your answer is yes, group the attribute together with the others. If not, start another thematic group. You will generally end up with 7 to 12 groups of key success factors. These can then be used as defining characteristics when writing the profile or abstract section of your executive summary, as well as data around which to consolidate skills and “stories” for interviews.

By completing these steps, you now have a *career compass*. You have determined where you have been and can begin to chart a course that will take you to where you want to go. Career coaching can help you

determine the processes and paths you might take to help you arrive at your desired career destination (see *Academic Physician & Scientist*, July/August 2006, pp. 4–6).

We hope that this process is useful to you in charting your own career compass. As always, we would be very interested in your feedback on any experiences you have with any of the concepts and tools we have presented. ❖

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