

Career Planning & College Selection....

..... Bulletproof Your Decisions

By Errol Wirasinghe, PhD

Career Planning (CP) and College Selection (CS) demand serious decision-making. But think for a moment:

- ◆ Have you had any formal training in decision-making? Or do you just learn as you go along?
- ◆ Were your parents, or the elders who guided you, trained in the art of making decisions? Or did they also just learn through trial and error?
- ◆ Are our youngsters being trained in one of the most important life-skills? Or are we just perpetuating the same inadequate practice of “learn as you go along”?

Some universities have reported that as many as 30% of their students change their majors in mid-stream, and a significant number change careers later in life. These changes result in significant loss of time and money.

Decision-making is an essential life-skill, which embraces every facet of a teenager’s life. CP/CS is all about making the *right* decision—which is *right* for you! Training in decision-making will spillover to a teenager’s general life, and will serve him/her well.

CP starts early in life and continues all the way, even through college. Each year you narrow down the fields. If you have done a good job of narrowing down your options, CP becomes more meaningful.

CS, on the other hand, is done in the final stages of the *junior* year in high school. CP must necessarily precede CS.

When it comes to decision-making, common sense and experience are vital tools; however, they alone are not enough. However, just asking a teenager to read a book about career planning is not likely to produce meaningful results. During these formative years we need to impress upon young minds, the value of good decision-making.

In 1956, in his famous paper, “*The Magic Number Seven, Plus Or Minus Two*”, renowned Psychologist and professor emeritus George Miller (Princeton University), showed quite conclusively that the human mind could process only about seven bits of information at one time. However, when dealing with CP, students, parents and counselors must process much more than that (see box); they need new training and the tools to make reliable and consistent decisions while maintaining control of the process.

Criteria for a Career (CP)

- Natural aptitude
- Ability to learn a skill
- Adequate pre-qualifications
- Short-term income potential
- Long-term income potential
- Job security
- Job growth trends
- Location of job
- Language requirements
- Financial resources
- Serving the nation
- Excessive travel
- Work schedule/long hours
- Willing to be away from home
- Work from home
- Stress-free job
- Work under pressure
- Quick-response type work
- Frequent relocation
- Work in foreign countries
- Technical or scientific field
- Management aspirations
- Family needs
- Physical impediments
- Degree of specialization, etc.

The Information Technology (IT) revolution and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) are the catalysts driving the corporate world today. IT and ERP are a result of the explosive growth of computers and Internet capabilities. This rapid exponential growth has out paced our ability to process and utilize all the available data and resources. The sheer volume of information overwhelms individual decision-makers and makes previous decision-making methods obsolete and ineffective. This situation has created a hidden crisis.

All decisions are governed by a set of criteria (factors) and a selection of candidates (options). The optimum decision depends on how you assign weights to the criteria, and how you assign points to the candidates.

Before you make another decision, fine-tune your decision making with the following steps.

1. Study the problem and define your objective

We often believe that we have a good idea of the problem at hand (the decision to make), but understanding the problem is not the same as understanding the objective. CP is not the same as CS. As you review the problem and decide your course of action, you need to determine what your ultimate goal is. To say, "I want to attend the best college" is too vague an objective". It is extremely difficult to reach an optimum decision with such an objective. Think of the impact of location, family needs, future potential, etc. If you are interested in becoming a doctor, you can afford to follow a BS degree that is not heavy on science subjects. However, if you plan to be an engineer, you must follow a science major, preferably an engineering major.

By looking at the big picture, you can devise an unambiguous objective. When dealing with CP, ask yourself the following questions (not all of these apply to every problem):

- What does a career mean to me?
- Is this the time to plan my career?
- Why is a career plan important now?
- How will this impact my present lifestyle?
- Other than myself, who might be affected?
- What are the obvious limitations?
- Should this be a short-term career decision?
- What are the consequences?

Criteria for which College (CS)

- Location/distance
- Location/weather
- Environment (city, etc.)
- Fame - primary subject
- Availability-secondary subject
- Cost of tuition
- Cost of living
- Scholarships
- Name recognition
- Duration of course
- Teacher/student ratio
- Sports fame
- Extracurricular activities
- Religious affiliations
- Academic demands
- Accommodations
- Quality of teaching, etc.

2. Identify all relevant criteria (factors) and identify prerequisites

The criteria relating to your problem are all the factors/circumstances that would impact the decision. Just as when dealing with CP, CS also requires us to deal with many criteria (see box)

Once you have listed all the criteria, the first step is to identify any prerequisites. These prerequisites will determine if a given candidate should be included in the evaluation. Prerequisites have two origins:

1. A priori prerequisites: these yield a simple yes/no response. A criterion that specifies an “in-state” university would be a “a priori” prerequisite. Thus all out-of-state universities would be eliminated.
2. Limiting conditions: If you insist on colleges no further than 300 miles, then “distance” becomes “limiting” prerequisite.

After the candidate selection phase, the “a priori” prerequisites are discarded; they do not play any further role in the evaluation. However, the “limiting conditions” remain valid criteria.

3. Extract obligatory criteria

When we identified criteria, we did not pay any attention to their significance. We simply listed all criteria we considered relevant. What is important to note is that all criteria do not have the same significance. Thus we need to identify the truly significant criteria. Rank the criteria using a pairwise comparison of criteria. You will recognize that 85-90% of the weights are assigned to about 12 criteria. These are your “obligatory” criteria. They are used in the evaluation. The other criteria are designated as “desirable” criteria. The “desirable” criteria are considered only if the final ranking of candidates does not yield an obvious winner.

4. Creatively identify the candidates (all available options or solutions)

After identifying criteria, list all your available options, from the ones that seem the most logical to those that seem ridiculous. Remember, you’re not deciding at this point; you’re simply listing your possibilities, so write down everything you can think of. Whatever you do, do not jump to conclusions and think, “*My options are obvious.*” Many experts who claim to have the answers have been proven wrong.

For example, the commissioner (1844) and the director (1899) of the United States Patent Office recommended that the patent office be closed down. They reasoned that everything that could be invented had been invented, and there was no longer any real need for such an office. Many people gave credence to this recommendation since it came from people who supposedly knew the most about the patenting business. Today we know just how wrong they were. The point: don’t limit your options. List and analyze everything.

In the early 1990s, *Brother* (a Japanese typewriter company) started taking away market share from *Smith-Corona* who had been the undisputed leader since 1886. Smith-Corona concluded that the problem was low-cost Asian labor, and hence moved manufacturing to Mexico. Brother moved its manufacturing from Japan to the US. Same problem, same time frame, different decisions. Shortly thereafter, Smith Corona filed for bankruptcy protection.

The best advice: Don’t just think harder; think creative!

Creativity plays a major role in decision-making; yet, being creative does not guarantee that one will make the optimum decision. By the same token, even the best decision-making tools, techniques, and skills are useless, unless you have developed innovative options from which to find the optimum solution. Creativity, deals with generating & identifying options. Decision-making is ranking these options and selecting one.

5. Gather information on your candidates and include any new factors you may have discovered

Begin by looking at each of your proposed solutions and develop the pros and cons as they apply to each. Be descriptive in each of your pro/con judgments. Depending on the pros and cons you list, you may have to gather additional information. When dealing with information, issues you must be concerned about are: Invisibility, Impossibility, Applicability, Access, and Authenticity. Challenge the information being provided to you. Questions to ask include:

- Is the source of the information legal, moral, and ethical?
- Is the data/information credible?
- Is the source/person reliable?
- Does the provider have a conflict of interest?
- Will the information be valid for the period under consideration?
- Is the problem serious enough to merit further verification of information?
- Is the information relevant to the objective under consideration?
- Beware of eyewitness accounts or “*I heard this from a reliable source.*” Seek definitive proof wherever possible. When did a jury accept an eyewitness account over a laboratory report?

Often during the information-gathering phase, you will identify new criteria that you need to consider. Add these to your original list. Finally, do not cut corners as you evaluate your options, especially if a bad decision is likely to have serious consequences.

6. Assign weights to criteria

Contrary to popular belief, all identified factors do not have the same significance or importance. Thus, we need to determine how important each criterion is (assign weights) compared to the others. Since your final decision will depend heavily on the relative value you place on your factors, the weights you assign to each should truly represent your desires. Of course you can do this using common sense and experience, but that defeats the purpose. Use the AHP *pairwise comparison* technique, which consists of comparing criteria against each other, in pairs. This could be done using a software program such as XpertUS.

7. Rank candidate

With your candidates (options/solutions) spelled out on paper and the pros and cons of each listed, you can analyze your options and identify the best route to take. Use the pairwise technique, to rank your options: consider one criterion at a time, and then compare each candidate against the others, in pairs, and assign points. Once you have exhausted all criteria and candidates, multiply the points assigned to each candidate with the corresponding criteria weights to determine its rank. Once you make your final decision, based on the information you have uncovered, do not second-guess it. It is your decision and you need to develop faith in it and be in harmony with it.

As you execute your decision, keep in mind “the timing” of your decision. For example, if you decide to approach your supervisor for a favor, you would intuitively wait for a moment when he/she is not under pressure and is in a good mood. Yet, when it comes to implementing a well-

thought-out strategy, many people completely forget how critical timing is. They become emotionally attached to the decision and try to execute it immediately.

It is also important to be aware that what is *urgent* might not necessarily be what is *important*. Urgency is time related; it requires immediate action. Importance is driven by values. If ignored, *important* items could turn into *urgent* items. Finally, do not forget the perishable nature of the information used to arrive at the decision. Sometimes the solution or the selected option can become obsolete by the time you are ready to implement it.

About the Author:

Dr. Errol Wirasinghe has worked for over 20 years in the area of strategic planning. He has been a consultant to many international companies in Asia, Europe, South America and the Middle East, and is well known for his ability to restructure complex problems. Dr. Wirasinghe is the author of "The Art of Making Decisions—Expanding Common Sense & Experience." For more information about the book and his innovative "XpertUS" decision making software and training courses, go to www.XpertUS.com or email: author@XpertUS.com