

Re-Inventing Your Career Path for the New Economy: The Power of Focus as a Pathway to Its Success (Nigeria as an Example)

Isidore U. Nwanaju

Department of Philosophy & Religion, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria

Abstract

It would not be an over-statement to start this paper by claiming that the world we are living in, especially in the 21st century is ruled, punctuated, and directed by the market economy. The globalised economy dictates the pace of almost everything, whether political, cultural, military, social, or even religious. The economically powerful make decisions on behalf of other members of the society, whether locally or internationally. As a result of this situation, it is not strange to observe so many seminars, conferences, lectures, etc emphasising the importance of the economy in our lives, either as a nation or as individuals. Above all, there is a strong tendency towards channelling a lot of energy towards making the development of the economy a career, in fact, a personal project. Thus, we hear about a career in politics; a teaching career; a career soldier; a career diplomat; etc. At the same time, we listen to people talking about their change of career, employment, etc. Indeed, we talk about career as entrepreneur, as a way of making money by starting or running businesses, especially when this involves taking financial risks. If one's career is strongly connected to one's happiness, then it needs to be continuously guarded, if not reinvented, especially if the existing situation calls for it.

The paper, therefore, wishes to discuss the need to re-invent one's career path for the growth of the economy, if not to create a new and vibrant economy, especially from the point of view of developing one's power of focus as a major strategy. In this paper, I like to communicate my understanding of how one can change one's world through the dynamic alteration of one's perception of one's career, especially if it seems almost impossible, in order to achieve happiness. In doing so also, I will not claim to know all the answers. In other words, the paper is an impulse for further deliberation and collaboration for the re-energization of our economy through a radical approach to our various careers.

Keywords: economy, career, focus, success, transferable skills, Nigeria.

1. What is a Career?

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2006:214) describes career as, "the series of jobs that a person has in a particular area of work, usually involving more responsibility as time passes". Thus, we hear from time to time such questions as: what made you decide on a career as a teacher? What made you decide on a career as medical doctor? What made you decide on a career as a civil servant? Again, we can also hear someone asking his friend: 'why did you change your career as a diplomat?'; what made you change your career as a soldier? As a noun, the word, career, could also be used to refer to the period of time that one has spent or spends in one's life working or doing a particular thing. For example, John started his career as an economics teacher. Describing her friend, Joy said, 'she did not enjoy her school career'. In other words, joy's friend's school career was not very impressive. On the other hand, she adds: 'Fortunately, her career as a politician has been very impressive'. To summarise these definitions and clarifications of what a career and career change means, the words of Shammi Sukh become pertinent, thus: "You can blame the world if you so wish, knowing fully well that you probably can't change it. But, the world changes the moment you change your perception about it. If you can alter your perception even by a millimetre, you will find that you can indeed change the world! (2011:23)".

With this wonderful insight from Shammi Sukh, we can ask ourselves what it means to re-invent our career path for the new economy in the Nigerian situation; what it means to change our perception about our career when it seems almost impossible to move forward.

2. Re-inventing your Career in a tough economy: the Nigerian situation

To reinvent oneself is to reinvigorate oneself. It is to give oneself new energy or strength to do something new. In this context, we hear economists, politicians, financial experts, and even lay people alike saying: 'we need to reinvigorate the economy of the country, of the state, and of the area'. In fact, they all are agreed that we need to reinvigorate the Nigerian economy, although the *modus operandi* becomes the inevitable question to realise its success. This is because when you reinvent yourself, you present yourself in a new form or with a new image. Here, one talks about one's ability to identify and put into maximum use, one's transferable skills, or even, go back to school in order to achieve an amazing result for the development of self and the economy.

In the last few years, for instance, we have often heard about the transformation agenda of the Federal Government and various state governments, and currently the ideology of change as a way forward. In my own understanding, it is all about reinvigorating the economy in order to improve the standard of living of the

majority of the people. In other words, the cliché about reinventing the economy can be used both generically and specifically – to apply both to the collective effort of the government to change the career path of the country for its well-being and individually, to refer to personal efforts of citizens to redirect their path to positive economic development. In this vein also, we hear the government talking about certain programmes of economic empowerment like *You-Win, Sure-P, etc.*

The above-mentioned emphases boil down to the importance of reinventing your career, especially if your industry or profession is dying. To achieve a considerable success, where should one then begin?

3. Where do you begin?

From time to time, we see, hear, and even interact with people who have seemingly reached a dead end in their career, either through external influence, or even, through their own *modus vivendi*. While some succumb to frustration, a few others make breakthroughs. A few instances can help us.

Case 1:

James was led off for the second time in 10 ten years. Firstly, led off as an accountant by one of the now moribund banks in Nigeria, and secondly, as an Area Manager by one of the Telecommunications Firms that are creating waves in the country. For the first few weeks and months, his world seemed to have crumbled under his feet. One day, he decided to relocate and try other possibilities. When he re-located from Lagos at the height of his crisis, he tried a few things: substitute teaching in some privately-owned schools, sales representative for a marketing company, then, worked as a security officer for a rich business tycoon on a party time basis. After years of serious trials and enduring career turbulence, he got a job with the Federal Medical Centre in one of the states in the south-south geo-political zone. Today, James has risen to the post of Senior Administrative Officer in the same establishment. From the near condition of frustration, the afore-mentioned man has succeeded in turning his condition round. His career history is a success. His family is happy and his future is no longer bleak and blank.

Case 2:

If James fought against all odds to re-invent, re-invest, and re-invigorate himself to achieve a successful career history, Wole's case was completely different and pathetic. He had finished from the university as a top-grade civil engineer and was immediately employed by one of the leading foreign construction firms in Nigeria, with a huge financial emolument. After the expiration of the contract, which lasted more than 15 years, Wole could not come to terms with the new situation of things. Although rich and famous, he was still relatively young and had to fight against idleness to maintain his relevance as an engineer. He did not know, or rather, could not re-organise himself to any kind of self-engaging business. He also considered himself too big – in the popular language – to find another job like James did because their financial attractions were nothing to compare with what his first job was paying him. He continued living above his means, at least from the point of view of his current situation, and eventually plunged into depression, dejection, and mental stress. Finally, he found himself in a psychiatric confinement. Tough times ate him up, and the family is suffering the consequences today. He did not make hay while the sun was shining very brightly for him.

Case 3:

Musa had enjoyed a wonderful childhood. Coming from a well-to-do family, he attended one of the best primary and secondary schools in the country. To crown it all, the parents sent him abroad to study economics, with a view to handing over the responsibility of the family business concern to his diligent care. All seemed very positive and promising. Musa returned to the country after his studies and began to understudy his father's business. His father was encouraged by Musa's astuteness. But he exhibited some high level of frivolity and recklessness in his spending and use of money. Occasionally, his parents would draw his attention to the consequences of misusing money meant for the development of their business. It was not long before his father died and Musa was left to manage the whole business alone. After five years, the business empire almost collapsed. To worsen the situation, he took ill and almost every one thought he would not survive it. However, the hospital bed provided him time enough to reflect deeply into his life. One night, he came to this all-important conclusion: "I brought this on myself through years of making bad choices and habit". He then resolved, thus, "Never again, I want a new life for myself and for my business". Musa gradually became stronger and was eventually discharged from the hospital. When he fully recovered, he decided to employ a young and an enterprising accountant, a marketing manager, and engaged an accounting firm to check the financial management of his business. Initially, it was not easy. But within three years of this essential restructuring, his business started booming again. Today, it is a multi-million naira enterprise with more than seventy people in its pay roll. In fact, as Jack Canfield would say, "by deciding to make better choices and create better habits", ... Musa "turned his life around – from yesterday's zero to today's hero" (2000:2). In other words, your habit can determine your future, especially as it concerns your career and entire happiness.

4. Identification of Transferable Skills

The three cases mentioned above present important power points to assess the road map of each individual to reinvent himself or herself and his career path for the event of an unfolding tough economy, like we have been experiencing in Nigeria for some decades. This means that everyone has to accept the fact that every economy is fundamentally fragile, no matter how buoyant or stable it is at any particular moment. The so-called 'big' economies of the world have proved this assertion to be correct and true. The United States' economy or the biggest economy in the world has proved this aphorism to be realistic; the United Kingdom or Great Britain is also a typical example. Germany is also not an exception. The wave currently created by China is a lesson that no economy is static. In other words, circumstances surrounding a particular economy, or even the global economy, can change things for better or for worse – both for a whole nation or for individuals.

When the latter happens, what should an individual do? In such a circumstance, there is need to reinvent or reinvigorate your career to meet up with the challenges. In other words, one has to be proactive and focused. To do so is to be realistic and take a structured approach to reach a positive result. The first step to attain this feat is to identify one's transferable skills and talents ahead of time. We observe this situation in the three cases mentioned above. Whereas James and Musa assiduously approached their career challenges and ended up successfully, Wole was not very fortunate. In fact, whereas in two out of the three cases, the individuals involved were able to assess what they needed to do, to reach their new career goals and height through foresight, courage, humility, and focus, Wole did not do much for himself and his future. For instance, one can imagine that James must have gone back to school for more training which enabled him to switch over from the banking sector to the medical area of competence, irrespective of the difficulties and obstacles encountered. In other words, one can say that James wrote out a map for his new career aspiration, followed it up, and succeeded. One can also imagine that Wole did not achieve much for himself probably because he was asking himself why he should change his career after spending 15 years as an engineer in a constructing company of repute. Even some of us listening to me might also be asking themselves spontaneously: why should I change?

5. Why changing your career path?

You can change your career path in order to beat the challenges of a tough economy because it is never too late, as David J. Lieberman (2000:41) would say, 'take the time to examine what your priorities, goals, and values are'. You can also do so out of deep interest or desire to bring lasting innovations to your career path and life-journey. In fact, one can and should see the challenge to change one's career path as an opportunity instead of focusing on the negative of the present economic state of the country. It requires enduring sacrifices such as re-learning some skills. Wole's deplorable situation arose because he could not convince himself to do something new and different. This means that you can't just be doing what you have been doing for years, even when there is a clear indication that you can't continue with it. In the recent times in Nigeria, so many people, especially from the South-east have been dispossessed of their chosen careers, economically, politically, culturally, etc from the North due to the activities of the notorious Islamist sect called Boko Haram. According to Adisa Adeleye (Vanguard, 2013:28), "...the political stability of the country at present has been disturbed by the Boko Haram destructive insurgency...". Some came back home with the determination to change their misfortune into fortune by re-learning trade, skill, and profession. A lawyer had to open a car wash as a temporary means of sustaining his family before he could open a chamber in one of the cities in the south-east. You can't believe it. In his seeming humiliating predicament, he employed three young men he was paying salaries. Another one who lost his business centre in the far north came home and reinvented his career path by learning how to mould blocks. Already he has established a mini-block industry, and with the help of his earlier savings, he has employed a few hands, bought a tipper, and built a small canteen beside his block industry.

6. What to do?

Stephen R. Covey (2004:128) once said, "As we go deeply within ourselves, as we understand and realign our basic paradigms to bring them in harmony with correct principles, we create both an effective, empowering center and a clear lens through which we can see the world. We can then focus that lens on how we, as unique individuals, relate to that world". From this perspective Covey's wise saying becomes relevant to our topic.

Thus, when the turbulence of career disorientation craves into the path way of an individual, he does not just sit down and bemoan his fate. He needs to act and save his career. Even before the signals of career disorder set in, an organised person needs to take up certain actions such as reading books and other informative leaflets. When it happens, he can take temporary jobs or sign up for an online seminar or study programme. Reliable mentors can also help in the magic of reinventing your career.

In order to achieve good result in your business and career also, it is relevant to take regular breaks to re-energize yourself. If you do not do so, you might tear yourself mentally apart. I would suppose that Wole's case above is highly related to this observation because we realise that he was so immersed in the paraphernalia of the construction company to the extent that he never had time, or rather, that he never cared less about a

possible turn of events. This is why when his contract elapsed, he broke down mentally, physically, psychologically, and even financially.

Above all, one has to recognise the important role which effective interrelationships and interconnectivity play in enhancing career success and reinventing it when the going gets tough. If you read the invitation by the Institute of Corporate Administration to this conference, you would observe where it is emphasised that ‘to get connected and begin networking with other world class minds could make a great difference in someone’s career’. It might interest you to note that networking did not just start in the 21st century, there are biblical instances available to cite their importance, even during the life-time of Jesus Christ. Let us consider one of such biblical paradigms illustrating it.

7. The Paradigm of the Crafty Servant (Lk.16:1-8)

Sometimes, Jesus uses parables to teach important lessons regarding daily living and how to handle life-situations. In this passage, he uses the parable of a crafty steward to illustrate how important it is to guard one’s career against possible dangers and failure. A rich man had denounced one of his stewards for being wasteful with his property. Realising that he was about to lose his post as a steward, he arranged with the debtors to cheat the master in order to secure a cordial relationship with all of them so that he would maintain his business relations with them when he was out of job. We are told in Lk.16:8 that the master praised the dishonest steward for his astuteness. Many people have misused this passage to promote dubiousness in their places of work and career. But that is not the lesson I am drawing our attention to in this paper. I am particularly thrilled with the intelligent effort the steward made in order to reinvent his career path for his financial gain and success. The crafty steward did not lose focus. He did not want his future to crumble. He was not planless. According to Shammi Suky, “Openness and direct communication bring cool relief through fulfilling one’s desires and needs. It’s best to be straightforward in terms of what you want” (2011:95).

8. Obstacles to reinventing Career

It is not enough to illustrate ideals and models for a career reinvigoration. There is also need to identify and accept some militating factors to attain such a height, especially in an environment like Nigeria. Firstly, it is important to accept the existence and persistence of limitations in the Nigerian economy. For a long time, the oil industry has been the most thriving means of livelihood in Nigeria. The monotony helped to weaken other sectors such that creativity, innovations, and diversity have suffered a heavy blow. For instance, can a secondary school teacher who is no longer comfortable with his job find better and lucrative alternatives? It is also a known fact that with the mergence of some of the ailing banks in Nigeria, so many members of staff were laid off. Till today, some have not really found satisfying alternatives. A few who wanted to use their saved income to float private businesses and entrepreneurship could not do so because the enabling factors were not readily available: security, electricity, good and access roads (especially for agricultural products from the interior villages). I mentioned earlier in the paper, the need to go back to school, engage oneself in seminars and conferences appropriate for enhancing career change and development as some of the possible ways of reinvigorating the career path of an individual. But the financial constraints must not be overlooked. So many of those affected, or who desire to effect such a change cannot finance the requirements. Some cannot even take loans without paying through their nose. To worsen the situation, some who dare to obtain loans for one form of entrepreneurial skill or the other misuse a huge part of the money in non-profitting yielding ventures like constructing mansions and embarking on pleasure trips to Europe and America. In other words, one can argue that lack of deep commitment on the part of the government and a lot of individuals constitutes a spanner in the wheel of reinventing a realistic career path in the new economy.

9. Proposals

To enhance career as a pathway to energising the economy, both the private and the government sectors are highly needed. In the spirit of such a fruitful collaboration, every individual who values his career development should take advantage of the opportunity created by the government, no matter how little it is. Currently, there are some government initiatives such as *Fadama*, *Sure-P*, *You Win*, etc which are aimed at enhancing career change, as well as reducing growing unemployment.

The government and privileged individuals should encourage Vocational and Skill Acquisition Programmes. Since majority of the courses offered in the Nigerian universities are highly theoretical, there is need for practical education, which such vocational centres can make possible.

The citizenry should be enlightened on the need to control the rate of capital flight from the country whereby huge amount of money is stored away in foreign banks. Such money can be used to establish small-scale industries or reinvested in other profit-yielding ventures for the development of the economy. The World Bank has occasionally released frightening news about Nigeria’s wastefulness of resources. Recently, it indicated that about \$400 billion has been pilfered from Nigeria’s treasury since independence. Such an amount

is approximately the gross domestic products of Norway and Sweden. According to Chinua Achebe, this means that “Nigeria’s corrupt ruling class stole the equivalent of the entire economy of a European country in four decades” (2012:249). Today, we beg for foreign aid from countries where our money is illegally kept.

Every person should endeavour to live within his means. The current trend whereby some young families of average means lavish money in the name of annual leave or holidays in ostentatious life-styles in Dubai, South Africa, America, London, etc cannot help the economy to grow. Sometimes, they come back from such expensive trips only to begin again to save for the following year in another foreign country. Although we lament the unfavourable environment in Nigeria, concerted individual and government efforts can result in the establishment of wonderful recreational parks affordable to low-income families.

The need for increased security cannot be over-emphasised in Nigeria. Without it, the chance of peace reigning for prosperity is very minimal. Where there is no peace, there is no trust, and the economy will invariably suffer. For instance, we have observed the tremendous harm inflicted by Boko Haram on the Nigerian economy through lack of trust engendered by violent conflict (cf. Thomas Michel, 2010:253). No sustainable development can be witnessed in such an environment.

Again, the almost incurable power failure in Nigeria can never help any meaningful career reinvigoration because so many things in the global market and economy are enhanced by constant electricity supply. Therefore, government and individual initiatives are indispensable in the development of the economy.

There is need for sincerity and honesty in the management of our affairs, whether at the official or private levels. In other words, corruption can militate against the magic of career reinvention when considered wholistically. In the words of Chinua Achebe, “Corruption in Nigeria has grown because it is highly encouraged” (2012:249). If we must grow, we must change our habits for better, and one of such fundamental habits to change is our approach to our career.

10. Conclusion

As human beings, we are always challenged to make our lives and situations better than we found them. One of the major areas where we face such a task is in the effort we are required to make in the reinvigoration of our various careers. It is what we make out of them that defines us as creative, innovative, and even explorative. No matter how static or dormant an economy has become, we can turn the table round for good if we want. But we cannot achieve anything meaningful without maintaining real focus, cultivating the culture of honesty, hard work, and interest.

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