

Be the architect of your life

RIGHT PATH Many students, unaware of their strengths, choose the wrong course and get stuck in the wrong jobs. Choice of a career must start early, says V Pradeep Kumar

John completed his engineering at a leading institution, and after a short work experience in India, did his Masters in the US. The engineering specialisation he had chosen was new and promised great scope. However, with the advent of technology, industrial applications of his specialisation became limited. Despite academic excellence and a well-groomed personality, he is stuck in his career and personal life.

Ravi, who has just finished his 12th, wants to do B.Com. I asked him why he zeroed in on this stream. Hesitatingly, he answered, "I haven't done well in my exams and cannot hope for an engineering seat through the CET. Moreover, I cannot handle mathematics and hence want to do B.Com". Such a response is typical of a large number of students who fail to make a career plan and end up choosing a course based on their weakness (like avoiding mathematics), instead of working on their strengths.

Unfortunately, many students are unaware of their strengths and end up choosing the wrong course, only to get stuck in their career later in life. This could be either due to a lackadaisical approach to such an important issue as career planning or due to improper guidance.

With globalisation, the standard of life of many has risen, fueling the aspirations of youngsters. In order to maintain a high standard of living and for personal well-being, a successful career and work-life balance are essential. In the absence of self-assessment of strengths and interests, a career decision isn't easy to make, which is why, most youngsters are worried and jittery, when it comes to their career.

A career should be on top of the minds of students who are finishing school or who are in the early years of college. This is the time, when they need to make the most important decision of their life: choosing a career, which typically lasts for 35-40 years. Depending on the choice of career, students should decide courses, specialisations, universities, location, etc.

When to make the choice

Ideally, based on aptitude and interests, the choice of a career and the selection of a relevant stream — Science, Arts, Commerce, etc. — must be made while joining Class 11. However, many students start planning their career while in Class 12, which is late, as by then career options would have already narrowed down.

For example, if you wish to be an engineer or a doctor, choose the Science stream for Class 11, and the Commerce stream, if you wish to do a CA. For careers in Management, one can choose any stream at the pre-university level.

In case you have missed planning your career by Class 10, it doesn't mean the end of the road. It only highlights the need to fine-tune your career options based on a broad career path already chosen.

The process of a career plan

■ **Self-assess:** Take an aptitude test through a career-counseling centre or through an online portal to understand what skills, such as mechanical, literary, creative,

scientific, mathematical, financial, leadership, etc. you possess. This helps you understand your strengths, aptitude, interests, as well as your weaknesses.

■ **Research:** Based on your self-assessment, think of all possible career options. Globalisation has opened up a number of options in unconventional and offbeat careers. Further, Indians are in demand worldwide in a number of industries and service sectors. Consult a career counselor as there are a number of factors to be evaluated before arriving at a decision. A career counselor or a mentor can be a professional advisor, or from your circle of family and friends, who can provide an academic and economic outlook from a short as well as long-term perspective.

The business environment is extremely dynamic and is influenced by many factors such as government policies, environment, technology and consumer preferences. A business, which is flourishing today, may not survive in the years to come. Therefore, make a prudent choice considering the current as well as future demands for professionals. Also, assess the demand keeping your preferred location in mind. For example, if you wish to become a dentist and settle in the US, you must understand the market for dentists in the US.

■ **Dream your career:** Once you've made a career decision, imagine yourself achieving your career goals, the life style you enjoy and all the benefits of a strong and

successful career. Let this dream become a powerful motivator in your life.

■ **Plan your education:** For some careers, a graduate degree may be enough, while for others you might need to do a Masters or a doctorate. Decide on the stream — Science, Arts, Commerce — for pre-university, graduation and higher courses that you must pursue to get to your dream career. For example, if you wish to become an Aeronautical Engineer, your first option might be to do a B.Tech at an IIT, followed by a Masters in Canada/US. Assuming you are choosing an offbeat or unconventional career, determine the skill sets that are necessary and the various levels of education and training that are required.

The cost of education has skyrocketed and it is expensive to study in some prestigious institutions, even in India. Therefore, determine the funds that will be required and plan the financing.

■ **Prepare for entrance exams:** Admission to any professional course is very competitive and needs thorough preparation. Understanding the selection process and the entrance exam pattern is important. For example, if you desire to take up engineering, consider JEE for admission into IIT, apart from CET at the state level.

■ **Choose a mentor:** Depending on the career, you

will spend 5-7 years on education during which you will require continuous guidance. Therefore, have a mentor or a role model, who can guide and inspire you to unlock the genius in you.

■ **Take decisions:** Choose the course and institute diligently, considering all factors such as the reputation of the institute, opportunity for global interaction, resources, faculty, placement record and costs. Recall the case of John illustrated earlier. Remember micro specialisation may not always work in your favour.

If you plan to study overseas, be clear about admission processes, entry requirements, documentation, etc. Schedule your loan repayments taking into consideration when you'll be employed.

Irrespective of the career choice, keep alternatives ready for any contingency. For example, if you want to become an engineer, it's a good idea to think of two specialisations and prioritise the options. Similarly, if you don't get into an IIM, you can choose other top institutions.

■ **Acquire other skills:** Depending on your career choice, evaluate what additional skills are required. For example, if

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you intend to do your Masters in Canada and take up employment there, it is advisable to learn French. On the other hand, if you are planning a marketing career, you might require a course in communication. Irrespective of the career choice, a well groomed personality is a must.

■ **Focus on your dream:** During the period of your education, it's common to face

challenges and obstacles. You will, therefore, require a lot of determination, hard work and self-motivation to translate your dreams into action. Despite all the fun and extra-curricular activities of college life, remain focused on your dream career.

■ **Have career goals:** Career planning is a continuous process with goals to reach out for. It's difficult to zero in on career goals when you are in school. Nevertheless, plan your career goals while in college or around an early period of your studies. In a dynamic environment, updating of your skills is critical for success.

The importance of a career plan must be understood by students as well as parents.

Many students do not take Class 9 and Class 11 seriously, which can prove disastrous in Class 10 and Class 12. Do remember that Classes 10, 12 / degree, are academic milestones and your performance in these exams will have an impact later.

To be successful in your personal life, a strong career is critical. In a knowledge economy such as ours, education is essential, as it not only creates new 'wants' but also the abilities to 'satisfy' them. Choosing the right course and the right institute are therefore crucial decisions.

A sound education prepares you to face the battles of life successfully by teaching you how to make a living as well as how to live. Therefore, plan

your career, execute the plan and be the architect of your life.

Basics of a career plan

Class 10: Get an aptitude test, assess strengths and interests. Make broad career plan.

Class 12/ PUC II: Reassess strengths and choose career. Plan graduation course, specialisation, institute and start entrance exam preparation.

Graduation: Fine-tune career plan and select post-graduation course, choose institute/university and prepare for entrance exams.

Post-graduation: Focus on specific industry/company/profession. Acquire additional soft skills — language, communication, grooming, etc. Get assignments, projects in targeted industries/companies.

Key success factors

■ Your time in Class 9 and 11 are formative years. Don't neglect them

■ Don't decide based on what your friends do

■ Plan your career to exploit your strengths and not to avoid weaknesses

■ Don't depend on one course and one institute. Prioritise options

■ Acquire soft skills to enhance your personality
(The writer is a management and career consultant)

