

Follow Your Instinct: Don't Dismiss Your "Career Hunches"

By Michelle Mudge-Riley

Imagine this: You're 68 years old. You're looking back at your life and career. What do you see?

Harvard Business Review recently published an article that got my attention. The article described a number of diverse, well-accomplished individuals who lamented over career regrets. One of the most interesting revelations was that many wished they acted on their "career hunches," or windows of opportunity to do something innovative and different. How do you hear your own "career hunch" and more importantly, how do you make sure you can act on it so you can advance your medical career in a way that brings you joy and accomplishment while serving others?

Decide which direction you want your life to take

Becoming a doctor no longer means you are bound to only seeing patients in the office and hospital and doing procedures. There are a lot of possibilities for your career and it's smart to diversify your skill set so you can have a long and holistic career. Being proactive and consciously choosing the direction of your life minimizes the chances that you'll feel out of control or trapped in your job.

Keep a running list accomplishments – and failures

What have you done that's given you a sense of accomplishment? What results or outcomes have been obtained from your various projects and activities that may shed light on an innate interest or passion? And what have you tried that hasn't quite worked out the way you thought it might? When you start thinking about it, you may be surprised by the answers. Keeping track of these things in a drawer somewhere as you revisit this question every several months will help keep you on track. I have a drawer in my office that serves as a "catch-all" for scraps of paper where I write these things down every once in awhile. Every six months, I take a look through the drawer. Doing this helps me learn from both my successes and failures as my life takes various twists and turns.

Understand your values and pay attention to how your choices might influence those – and may open the door to opportunities

Do you feel strongly about helping the poor or underserved? Choosing to work in a high-end private practice within Hollywood might be a way to have the extra time and money to build free clinics or donate your time. But that same choice might also be a distraction

from what really gives you a sense of accomplishment and provide few windows of opportunity to foster your desires to serve a less-privileged population.

Do you have an opinion every time you see the nomination of a new cabinet member in the government? Becoming aware of public policy non-clinical fellowships and building relationships and networking contacts through serving on local and state committees will help you find opportunities to fuel that innate interest better than working as a country doctor or being a doctor on a cruise ship.

Be prepared for the unexpected

Your choices may have the power to influence your values in ways you might not understand now. This was true for me. I didn't want to have children but then I met my husband, fell in love and suddenly, having a family became very important to me. If this happens to you, having the option to work part-time or with more of a flexible schedule might become important. It became an opportunity for me to find, explore and flourish within an entrepreneurial environment.

When a hand tremor appears in a 48-year-old surgeon or a car accident changes the life of a hospitalist, changing career direction is often required. I work with many doctors who loved clinical medicine and were affected by a set of circumstances outside of their control. Although disability insurance is available, these doctors still want to use their time, experience and training in non-traditional ways to serve within medicine. This is an opportunity for them to do it.

So how do you decide what you want to do and where you want to be 20 years from now?

You don't have to decide everything right now. You can't. But it's important to maintain your interests and diversify your skill set so that you will have the option to make choices and proactively steer your career throughout your lifetime. You may choose to work part time for a few years or you may take a job that allows you to travel – either domestically or internationally. You may want to work from home or from a specific geographic location at some point in your life. It may be important to you to have a voice in some of the changing dynamics within health care. No matter what happens to you and what your life brings, if you are diversified and aware of different options, you will feel more in control and possibly more satisfied when you look back at your career.

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