

# Careers

## I Am My Biggest Project

New Horizons For Executives

Chapter 3 | New Mindset, New Beginnings

By  
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**Amrop**

Leaders For What's Next

# New Beginnings

When we reach the summit – our summit, we have a sense of completeness and accomplishment. It dawns on us that we’ve finally achieved everything we aspired to. The air suddenly and magically feels oxygenated, clearer. It’s as if we have become lighter, floating on the top of a mountain.

And then it hits us. Nothing stops. The mind-boggling frenzy goes on: other people invade our territory, people with fresh ideas and solutions. Our newfound stardom, our sense of achievement and recognition, evaporate before we’ve really had time to drink it all in.

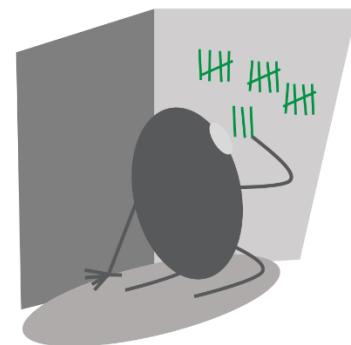
When it becomes impossible to keep up, (however hard we push ourselves), we’re almost certainly more likely to be overtaken by new ideas and innovations, and by people who have more energy than we do.

It’s probably time to move on to another phase of our lives. But that, too, is a tough call. Sidelined from the center of action to passive observer, who wouldn’t feel just a little frustrated, with a sad sense of an impending ending, a final stretch? In my experience the descent from the summit of a career to its final phase is almost always abrupt. If achieving upward objectives takes time, ingenuity and resilience, the downward slope can be as dizzying as it is rapid.

Maybe, as a rule, we could view the approach to the end of a career as just one more change in our lives. I have seen executives who ingeniously adapt to their new circumstances, or better still, prepare their retreat in a balanced and measured way. The common thread between those who experience a smooth transition to retirement seems to be that they have reached a point they *personally* intended to reach. *They have achieved it on their own terms.*

But there is a difference between this, and trying to hurry events along. As a rule, a premature exit rarely ends well. It just isn’t worth the effort. Moreover, for executives who are still fully embarked on their development path, the most important thing is to focus on constructing an active life rather than craving the final countdown. It’s disheartening to watch some executives ticking off the days like prisoners waiting to be released, or teenagers waiting for the school year to end. This signals emptiness and demotivation, draining joy, vivacity, any desire for socio-professional exchange.

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## Keep calm and Carry On

The skill, then, is to calmly balance an active professional life with a quiet anticipation of its closure. To prepare to make the very best out of our circumstances, with commitment and serenity. Not with painful hiccups, but with effort, so that we can create the conditions for retirement before D-day strikes. Having achieved this balance, we can then step into another stage of life. Looking at executives I have met professionally and personally, it seems that the end-of-career vacuum can be shrunk, or even completely controlled, if three factors are combined:

1

### **They withdraw at the right moment.**

#### **During their working lives, they cultivate, commit to and systematically practice other interests.**

Among the most common are sports, (particularly golf). However, as Fredy Hausammann, Managing Partner of Amrop Switzerland puts it:

“Together with family, [sport] is one of our fundamental needs, like breathing, eating and drinking. It is highly recommended to cultivate *other* deep personal interests or passions besides sport - ones that can fascinate our intellects and psyches all our lives, no matter how physically fit we may be. So it can make sense to cultivate several interests in parallel (even if we’re unlikely to practice all of them with the same intensity). This way we can substitute interests, creating a palette that has as much flexibility and variety as possible. Diversification should never become a constraint, however. It should be joyfully and greedily savored.”

They also hold functions in non-governmental organizations, and which involve an engagement in social and community service.\*

*\*See Amrop - Personal Governance 7 – Personal Interests and Passions*

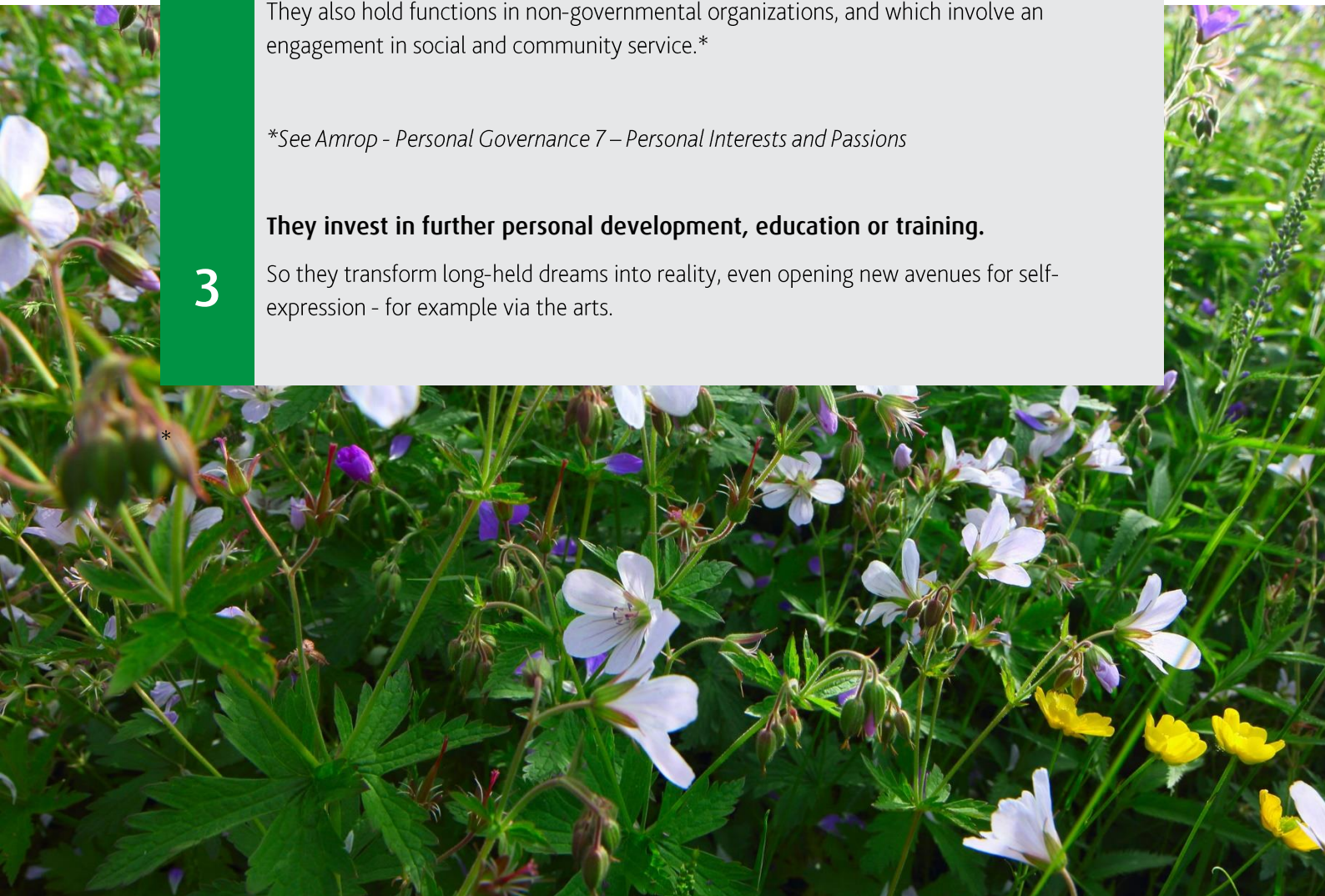
2

### **They invest in further personal development, education or training.**

So they transform long-held dreams into reality, even opening new avenues for self-expression - for example via the arts.

3

\*



## Knowing When To Stop

João Manuel had a successful career in a Fortune 500 company which he joined after his early professional experience, and where he met with constant appreciation. He adapted, gave his best, the company responded. It was all about evolving, changing roles, gaining responsibilities, having more impact on the organization. Once he became director of the Portuguese division, João Manuel assumed he'd be invited to continue to grow and take on broader responsibilities at European level. He was right. Thanks to his outstanding performance, João Manuel was assigned global responsibilities, rising to one level below the global board. It all seemed perfect. Yet he began to think of radically changing his life. True, he had more than 20 corporate years under his belt, and relished the sensation of having reached an enviable position with a global management role in his sights. However, being plucked out of the market to a role that mostly involved coordination, innovation and strategy didn't suit him. His profile didn't fit, he felt, and his motivation began to weaken. Furthermore, joining corporate headquarters meant relocating to the US - not the best move on the family front. So he shared his reflections with a board member and secured the board's support to leave with a golden parachute.

João Manuel no longer had to work. He could have a new way of life. He would still get his pension. He could also continue to be professionally active, as long as he didn't work for the competition. He had chosen to change his life before the age of 50. He started his new chapter by recapturing a childhood dream: sailing. He took out a charter, bought a small boat, and entered the sailing world. At the same time he dedicated himself to an NGO. Here, he has a Board-level educational mission with an interesting social impact. He also has a

directorship with a major professional association, with weight and influence thanks to his global track record. João Manuel is happy and accomplished personally and socially, given his early retirement from active professional life.

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Janine is another example. For many years she held a board-level role for a large family-owned organization, with heavy responsibilities. As time went by, she began to question the content and purpose of her job, and began to invest increasing time in 'consuming' the arts, (as she puts it) from theatre, to sculpture and photography. At the age of 55, two events occurred. Firstly, the death of the company's founder after a long illness and secondly, her own diagnosis with a medical condition that required immediate and intensive treatment. Once the treatment was concluded and she was given the all-clear, Janine did her best to re-focus on her professional activities, but her motivation and energy had flown and she could not escape the conclusion that it was time to close the office door for good. So she resigned from the company and took early retirement, benefiting, as João Manuel did, from a golden handshake. She now focused her attention on her complete recovery, refurbishing her house to provide the setting for the next stage of her life. Next she invested in a top quality camera, joined a local photography club, and attended a series of courses to learn the art and science of the medium, joining her group on a series of field trips to interesting foreign locations. Janine now exhibits her work regularly in her home city, to a warm reception. She describes this as one of the most fulfilling chapters of her life. She is doing something she deeply enjoys, is motivated to develop further still, and is becoming a master of her new craft.

Strive for improvement.  
Seek knowledge.  
Keep informed, learn,  
absorb.  
Adapt to new  
circumstances and needs.  
Bring out the best in  
yourself.

## Learning Is a Lifelong Flow

Whatever stage we're at (and whatever the route we took to get there), everything is worth adjusting and optimizing. Recent learning theories are based on a continuous process of knowledge assimilation and consolidation. In this era of change, in terms of technology, knowledge, civilization as a whole, right down to our own lives, it would be unthinkable to put the brakes on our learning process. Change is fluid, immersive, and engages all areas of our life and work. It is continuous, creating flow between different knowledge domains.

Evolving and adapting means being open to doing anything for yourself, and as a consequence, for others: if you can bring out the best in yourself, you will not only be investing in you, but bringing out the best in everyone around you.

As I emphasized in my first article, it's important not to let ourselves be polluted by the prejudices we so often hear and that serve as an excuse or mechanism to justify inertia and the doldrums. Unfortunately, I often hear the fateful phrase: "That's not something you do at my age." This is one mistake to stay well clear of! When it comes to refining, improving, evolving, any age is the right age. Allowing ourselves to be held back by age, (or by gender, ethnicity or any other reason) indicates negative discrimination not only towards ourselves, but towards a society that will take longer to be egalitarian, fair and prosperous if we allow such limiting beliefs to control it. The more we participate in building a better world, the sooner we will get there.

### A Journey of Many Paths

We can achieve our objectives in very different ways; it all depends on what we already are, and what we want to become. Any one of us can draw on a diverse range of options to get more learning under our belts, and find the stepping stones to the next phase of our development. These differ enormously depending on each person. The important thing is to know that it is practically impossible *not* to find something that is right for us to make the change: from learning a new language, to acquiring specific technical expertise, especially if cutting-edge and innovative.

I cannot stress this enough: the critical thing is not to cloak ourselves in dogma, whether in terms of age, gender or any other origin, convincing ourselves that we've missed the boat, or no longer have access to an alternative future. The only real constraint I can see holding us back is physical. Past a certain age, there's little point in pinning our hopes on competing in high-level athletics, for example. Everything else, in principle, may be within our reach, as long as we are capable, determined, hardworking - and brave.



## There's No Such Thing As Impersonal Fulfilment

Personal fulfilment. What a sublime concept. But to get in tune with it, we first need to find out if we are in the right frame of mind to even start our quest.

At this point, we must think: how can we shape our own existence, going forward? The basic idea is simple: we have to be all that we can be.

Not only must we be able to take advantage of all our different areas of potential as they currently stand, we must be able to cultivate them.

To do this, we must center ourselves.

We should not let trends, (often arbitrary) or their followers, drag us into 'realities' that have little or nothing to do with our true essence. Integrity is fundamental; the ability to think by and for ourselves. Each of us is an ocean of singular experiences, experiences and connections.

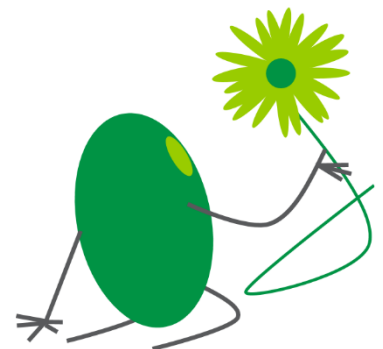
Personal fulfilment is exactly that: *personal*. It is individualized, it cannot be compared, replicated, normed, or subordinated to a general ranking or target. It can never be said that one person has performed better than another, or that s/he has a 'similar' type of achievement to any given benchmark group. This is a matter of personal evaluation. Everything is measured and guided by each one of us.

So yes, there is 'an achievement' for each individual. However, there are multiple 'profile hypotheses' and these are by nature complex. This makes it even more important for us to trace our own path and then find a way to follow it.

What we can and must do is to obtain accurate information about the world that surrounds us and the various ways in which we can achieve our goals and, therefore, our personal fulfillment.

Again – achievement is not some abstraction. We're talking about personal fulfillment. Personal, intrinsic to each one of us. Single, individual, not replicable or clonable.

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Try to set aside time for yourself, to think of all the things that stimulate and arouse your attention. Instead of sacrificing almost all of the little free time you have to inactivity, the passive observation and absorption of mediatized stimuli.

### Time For a Meeting With Ourselves

We will considerably enhance our ability to achieve personal fulfillment if we hold a series of meetings with ourselves – to reach the self-knowledge that will show us our path. Getting to know ourselves - authentically and truthfully – is indispensable. Only by doing this can we move on to self-development. Only then will we have the tools to build our personal fulfillment. We will know what we need to learn, adapt, or more fundamentally change, so that we are prepared to be the very best version of ourselves, depending on what we want to become, and present this to the outside world.

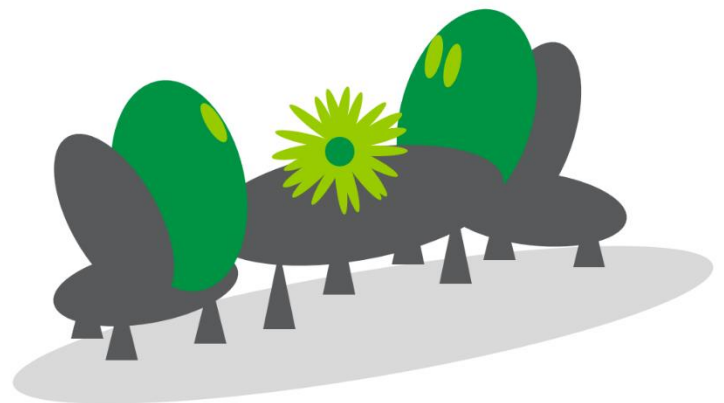
But how and where to hold these meetings? Deep reflection and meditation were traditionally considered to be the prerogative of the religious and transcendental dimension of life. Moments dedicated to internal, self-exploration were mystical ones. Nowadays, this practice is being more valued and democratized, and I consider it very important to maintain the capacity of introspection, inside or outside a religious framework.

The act of thinking in itself, as it relates to others, to the world, and to life in general, is an act of self-knowledge. Moments of introspection give us the opportunity to become more aware of ourselves and others, to realize who we are and where we want to go.

Today, our internal life has a secular connotation. What is important to emphasize here is that, whatever our personal beliefs, it is fundamental to maintain a constant and rich capacity to be with ourselves.

It is true that we all have very tight, pre-conditioned schedules, but it is key to make better use of the time we have. So do try to set aside time for yourself, to think of all the things that stimulate and arouse your attention. This, instead of sacrificing almost all of the little free space you have to inactivity and particularly the passive observation and absorption of mediatized stimuli, (other people's stories which are often fantasies, childish and an assault on our intelligence), think. Think of yourself, think for yourself.

Given just a little creativity, we are all able to think outside the norm if we exercise the ability to meditate on the phenomena that most influence our lives and motivate us. Only reflection, and the resulting self-knowledge, allow us to hold an individualized opinion and discover our own concept of personal fulfillment. What we really want to be and what goals we want to achieve.



## We Want To Decide Who We Are

Self-Determination Theory was developed at the turn of the millennium by researchers Deci et Ryan, and is worth a visit as a conclusion to this chapter of the series.

It states that every human being is on a quest for 'self-determination' and will strive to implement, together with his/her environment, a form of self-regulation that will help them achieve it.

Self-determination is linked to three fundamental needs:

- 1 Competence (feeling effective, able to face stimulating challenges);
- 2 Autonomy, (organize our own experiences, feel we are the initiator of our own actions);
- 3 Relatedness (social interactions based on mutual respect and trust).\*

Self-determination is linked to our 'locus of control' - the extent to which we believe we can *internally* control events and outcomes (internal locus of control) or that *outside* forces govern these (external locus of control). According to Self-Determination theory, locus of control translates into behavior that cannot be attributed to external factors alone.

Several experiments and field investigations\* have found that work environments which facilitate the satisfaction of the three fundamental human needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness) nourish our feeling of being self-determined.

This sense of self-determination, in turn, increases our (self-regulated) motivation.

This all strongly suggests that we can - and do - change over time. Not only that, we seek to do so. And the seeds of these three critical factors: competence, autonomy and relatedness, need to be planted in our professional lives, fed and watered, even after we have left the field.

\*\*Arnaud, 2008







# New Beginnings | 13 Tips

1

**Do it on your terms:** Your transition out of corporate life will be smoother if you define a point you personally intend to reach and achieve it on your own terms (and don't rush).

2

**Don't be a prisoner:** In the run-up to the final countdown, focus on constructing an active life. If you're ticking off the days on the walls of your cell, feeling empty and demotivated, stop and regroup.

3

**Balance now and what's next:** invest in active professional life with a quiet anticipation of its closure.

4

**Timing, interests, and personal development, keep turning the three keys:**

Shrinking or controlling the end-of-career vacuum involves 1) withdrawing at the right moment, 2) nourishing a palette of extra-curricular interests and 3) investing in further personal development.

5

**Keep the learning taps open:** recent learning theories are based on a continuous process of knowledge assimilation and consolidation.

6

**Be selflessly selfish:** Remain open to bringing out the best in yourself, knowing the benefits will extend to those around you.

7

**Resist dogma and limiting beliefs:** stay clear of polluting prejudices related to age, gender, ethnicity or any other reason. The more we participate in building a better world, the sooner we'll get there.

8

**Stay optimistic:** Remember that it is practically impossible not to find something that is right for you.

9

**Forge your own fulfilment:** Personal fulfilment is our property and should not be compared, replicated or normed. It means tracing our own path and finding a way to follow it, thinking by and for ourselves.

10

**Stay informed:** Obtain accurate information about the world that surrounds you and the multiple avenues via which you can achieve personal fulfilment.

11

**Have meetings with yourself:** with self-knowledge on the agenda, practice deep reflection and meditation irrespective of any religious or spiritual framework. Maintain a constant capacity to be with yourself.

12

**Beware the binge watch:** Your free time is precious, use it for the things that stimulate you, instead of sacrificing it to consuming mediatized stimuli.

13

**Be self-determined:** Remember that people want to, can, and do change over time. Plant the three seeds of competence, autonomy and relatedness, and keep feeding and watering them even after you have left the field.



## Credits

This article series is adapted from the original book, 'Eu Sou o Meu Maior Projecto', (Maria da Glória Ribeiro, Manuscrito Editora, 2016)

Additional input provided by Steffi Gande, Global Marketing Director, Amrop.

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