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Context to the nugget

Interested in the academic world? Kartik reveals some important questions you should ask yourself and elaborates on some qualities you should possess before embarking on this path. Academia, according to Kartik, is 'entrepreneurial without the risk profile of an entrepreneur!' In this nugget, he also discusses some professional highs and lows that face an academician.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): At the time of making a decision, we don't have a real sense of what the journey looks like. Having been on this path for a while, give us a sense of the reality of this path [academics]. I am curious about what the highs are like and what the lows are like. The reason I ask is the academic path is a bit like medicine. It's a long pipeline before you see light at the end of the tunnel. If we look at the years to complete a PhD plus the years it takes to get tenure, it's not a trivial pipeline. So, it will be good to get a sense of the reality of the journey.

Kartik Hosanagar (KH): While I told you what my path was, and I sort of followed it in an opportunistic way without necessarily planning, doing the research, and so on, I would never recommend that path to people. Because people do join academia, drop out during a PhD program, during their academic career. So, understanding that process is useful. As you said, it's a pretty-big time commitment. When I joined my PhD program, I was told that the median time to completion to PhD in my program was about six-and-a-half years. I was fortunate to finish it in four, but let's say you take it as six-and-a-half. A tenure path is again six to nine years, so you're talking of committing anywhere from 12 to 15 years to get to the point where you are a tenured professor. For most of that period, the pressure is on, and you're a student for a big chunk of it, and so on. So, you cannot do it because, you know, you have a relative who has a PhD, or you kind of have three uncles who are professors or PhDs, so I'll do it. You can't do it because somebody says it's a stable job. I think you have to like going deep into a subject. You have to be a self-starter, because there is no one breathing down your neck. At the end of the year, as an academic, there is an assessment done that determines things like promotions and tenure at the end of six years, but really, you don't have a boss. So, you have to be a self-starter. But, you asked me about the highs and the lows...

DJ: Or even, maybe before we go there, if I said, at the point of making the decision, what are the three-four questions students should ask themselves to determine if the path is right for them? Are there any lead indicators they could look at for them to say academia could make sense for me?

KH: So, I'll tell you the lead indicators for me. One, you have to enjoy going deep into a subject. My wife's advisor once described this to her as: you know more and more about less and less, so you keep going deep and you keep specializing. You have to have that level of interest in going deep. That doesn't mean you don't like breadth. I am a person who generally prefers breadth, which is why I am in start-ups and those kinds of things, but you also have to have an interest in going deep. So, that's one. I think the other one is, you should be OK working alone. It is not a social profession. You are not like in industry jobs, you're not working with large teams towards a common goal. You are typically working with closed doors, all alone, thinking deep about a problem. I teach alone, I do most of my research alone. In some rare cases, you have a collaborator, but that's at most one or two other people. So, it's not a very social profession. Also, you have to be a self-starter, like I said. You don't have anyone constantly guiding you or setting deadlines. You have to set the deadlines, you have to wake up and say, 'I could watch TV all day or just surf all day, but I am going to get some work done'. So, you have to be a self-starter. These, to me, are lead indicators; if you are not these, don't even bother.

DJ: And moving on to the highs and the lows?

KH: So, the highs and the lows... Again, these are things I didn't appreciate then, but now I can reflect and kind of say, to me, the high which I didn't know back then is the flexibility that the profession affords. You set your own schedule, you have no boss. Now, don't get me wrong; there is hard work involved, but it's very independent. So, you get to pick your own projects, your own problems. So, it's not because the client is paying you that you have to do this, even though you are not excited about this. You do it because you care about that problem. So, the good news is, you get to go deep but you can pick what you go deep in. Actually, in that sense, I would say the high is essentially that it's very entrepreneurial without the risk profile of a start-up entrepreneur. The low, for me, when I faced it, was when I was in the second or third year of my job at Wharton. It had been roughly a year-and-a-half since I had successfully published or gotten a paper accepted at a journal, so all the papers I was submitting to journals were coming back rejected. I was working weekends, evenings, and working alone. Like I said, it's not social. And then, I had just started my start-up, called Yodle, around that time, and that was doing well. I was kind of tempted to leave this and go towards the company that was doing much better. So, I think the lows are the kinds of things I mentioned: you have to work alone, you don't have much of a team sharing the lows with you. You also need to be a little bit thick-skinned because academia is kind of a very objective profession, so people will just say it as it is in terms of problems with your work, and you have to be thick-skinned and objective. So, I think, these are some of the lows.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The interesting bit about making a career choice when you are young is that you often don't have enough data points which give you insights on what gives you energy, and sometimes you might have to look beyond academics to really get to the bottom of where you get your energy. A lot of times I realize that the extracurricular that people pursue has clues into what really gives them energy. Let's say when you are graduating from your 12th are you the kind that likes to play chess or you like to play team sports where there's a lot of social interaction with others. You know, really looking at your life holistically and looking for data from different elements of your life might give you clues into what gives you energy and might inform some of the career choices when you are really young. Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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- 05.00 Kartik Hosanagar - The Full Conversation
- 05.01 Kartik Hosanagar - Academics as a career
- 05.02 Kartik Hosanagar - Highs and lows in academics
- 05.03 Kartik Hosanagar - Surprises in the academic path
- 05.04 Kartik Hosanagar - Impact of technology
- 05.05 Kartik Hosanagar - Backing an entrepreneur
- 05.06 Kartik Hosanagar - Leadership inflection points
- 05.07 Kartik Hosanagar - Building the leadership muscle
- 05.08 Kartik Hosanagar - Building an entrepreneurial culture
- 05.09 Kartik Hosanagar - In summary — Playing to potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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