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Context to the nugget

We often choose a career without having much idea of what the reality is like. Often times, people who like team work take up jobs that may require long solitary hours. In this nugget, Kartik reveals a couple of surprises that people encounter on the path to becoming an academician.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): What are the two-three things that really take people by surprise after they have joined the profession? I am always curious about the fact that people make a decision, a career choice, based on a bunch of assumptions, and then, there is the reality of that career path. So, if you had to look for patterns, are there two-three things that really take people by surprise that they don't account for, at the time they take the decision?

Kartik Hosanagar (KH): For example, when I started my PhD, many other PhD classmates dropped out along the way. There are also professors who started off in academia and three-four years later, dropped out of academia and went to industry. So, I think, there are certain factors one can look at in terms of why people make these errors in judgement. I think I touched upon some of these, but one piece is that, I think, there is a difference between getting good grades and succeeding as an academic. To me, that difference comes down to, as far as succeeding as an academic, you have to be a little bit independent, you have to be a self-starter, and you have to be able to perform when there is no structure. I will take an analogy. Let's say I am doing a PhD that is very mathematical, let's say economics. So, say the difference between succeeding in an econ PhD or an econ academic career versus being good at math courses in school and colleges, it's not like a nice proof in math, where you have been taught all the steps. Here, you think of a high-level problem and there is no structure whatsoever, and you have to come up with that structure. I think that's the big difference. So, I've had some really smart people who dropped out along the way for those kinds of reasons. I have also had people drop out because after their PhD, they realize that they don't enjoy working alone and then kind of value sitting and working with 15 other teammates, sharing the highs and lows, having the social lunches and dinners. I think that's another reason, but most often it's the former reason, which is dealing with the lack of a structure. So, I would say that's one of the biggest reasons.

DJ: And if I were to ask the question differently: just like in statistics you have the Type 1 and Type 2 error, would you have a view on the kind of people that could have been great professors but never ended up choosing this path because this never entered their consideration set?

KH: If I look back, I am sure there are some classmates in school and college who would have done very well in academia and never pursued that path. I suspect, for the ones where I feel they chose a path which perhaps wasn't the best for them, how it played out is they got a job with really good pay and the alternative was to do a PhD which seemed like a long commitment at that time, five-six years, with low pay, while you have this great job. So, they chose the easier path at that time, but they didn't acknowledge, perhaps, that you have a longer career. I know at least a few of them, today, they find their work a little bit shallow and they are naturally people who like to go deep. But, I think, it's a bit late for them now for a PhD, because they have kids and things like that, and it's harder to take that plunge now.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The key takeaway for me here was that being good at academics and doing research of very different things, one is often about solving tough closed-ended problems at least the way the academic environment is today while that's changing. While doing research is all about dealing with the vagaries of ambiguous open-ended problems, the onus of providing structure and giving direction and maintaining momentum is with the individual. So just understanding the distinction and ensuring that have thought it through is helpful before you make the dive into the world of academics. Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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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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