

Calibrating Your Career Compass

Navigating career choices and professional development opportunities

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a generalist is “a person competent in several different fields or activities,” whereas a specialist is “a person who concentrates primarily on a particular subject or activity and is highly skilled in a specific and restricted field.” In other words, a generalist is seen as a utility player who is able to take on any position, while a specialist is very good at one position.

Our culture seems to reward and idolize the specialist. The generalist is criticized for sacrificing depth of knowledge for breadth of knowledge and is viewed as uncommitted. Much of the discussion surrounding this topic seem to suggest that you must choose to be one of the two extremes; either a generalist or a specialist. The reality is that we put these labels on ourselves, and it should not be so black and white. It *is* possible to be both a jack of all trades and also a master of some, and I argue that this is a great approach for long-term career success, particularly if you want to be an effective leader.

Broadening Your Perspective

Growing up as an athlete, I was never the top scorer, the strongest defender or the best at any one specific skill. Instead, I always made an effort to learn every position—even if it

was the minimum level of specialized skill necessary to fill in when a teammate was absent or injured. As a result, I was always put in the game and I have acted as both a leader and a coach on every team I have played on. I have approached the early part of my career in right of way with the same mindset, aiming to be the utility player on the team.

I was advised early on in my career by my mentors that gaining knowledge, training and experience in many areas of right of way would help me to stay employed through market downturns. I believe that this is some of the best advice that I have received, not only because it has helped me to stay employed, but because it has unlocked so many opportunities for me. Taking a more generalist approach has provided me with a broad perspective to better understand how all the pieces fit together. With this understanding, I have been able to make more effective decisions and be a better leader and project manager.

All too often, I see managers who rely too much on the experts on their team to tell them what decisions to make. They distance themselves from the problem, and the specialist’s recommendation goes

unchallenged. It is easy to fall into this trap and automatically believe someone who acts like an expert. We blindly trust their work because that is their area of expertise and not ours. However, as Daniel Kahneman suggests in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, experts tend to be overconfident and are not necessarily more accurate at predicting the outcome of uncertain situations than amateurs with general knowledge. Highly effective teams are often made up of specialists, and it takes a leader with a broad perspective to be able to challenge their ideas for the team and make the right decisions.

Maintain Adaptability

We are privileged to be employed in a field of endless possibilities, including land titles, valuation, law, negotiations, relocation, project management and dozens of other “specialist” areas. In today’s environment, employers are demanding that employees wear more and more hats as a result of constrained resources. Newer professionals should develop an adaptive strategy to be able to zoom in and zoom out of different areas of focus as necessary to capitalize on opportunities and ensure long-term career success.

Additionally, it is important that newer professionals focus on developing transferable skills and remain adaptable to external influences. Pause before heading down a path of specialization. If your area of expertise could be significantly impacted by external influences—such as a change in technology, legislation or market conditions—you must ensure that you can adapt your expertise to combat these changes.

Newer professionals should also aim to find the appropriate balance of specialized education and experience. No one can tell you exactly how to strike that balance. As a mentor, I am often asked where to get information, what to read and what classes to take. While there are resources available—and the IRWA is one of the most valuable—newer professionals must recognize that there is no fast track to success. I am reminded of a technical account written by philosopher Michael Polanyi in his book *Personal Knowledge*, where he describes how to ride a bicycle



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in terms of Newtonian physics. By simply reading it, you will not be able to ride a bicycle. It is only through personal experience that you will become proficient. As long as you are unafraid of exploring, the proper balance will come into focus as you progress through your career.

Get Credentialed

In many ways, IRWA's Industry Career Path—culminating with the SR/WA designation—can be viewed as the generalist approach whereas the Specialist Career Path is more focused in specific bodies of knowledge, such as appraisal, relocation and property management. It is important to note that these two career paths (Industry and Specialist) are not mutually exclusive. Earning the RWA, RWP or SR/WA in addition to specialist designations can help you to become a jack of all trades *and*

master of some, which I would argue is advantageous in an industry where the future is everything but predictable.

Regardless of your approach, IRWA's education and designations will help you to differentiate yourself in the marketplace, and will contribute toward your personal and professional image. The credentialing concierge is an excellent resource where you can explore many certifications available, and it will guide you to which IRWA certifications are within your reach.

In Summary

I believe that we are all seeking to determine how we fit in best and how we can contribute the most value to our employers, clients and colleagues. As long as you commit to being a lifelong learner, seek mentoring opportunities, and continue to develop personally and professionally, you will find your niche. ✪

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