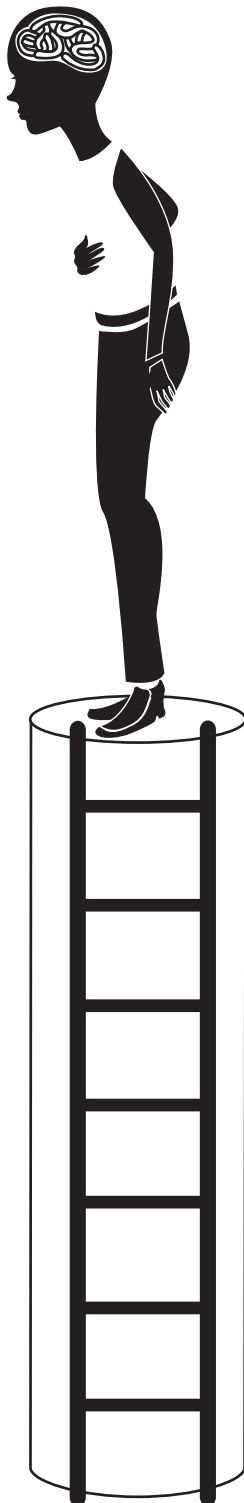


DOES IT HURT TO BE DIFFERENT?

DO WE REALLY NEED TO CONFORM TO EXPECTATIONS, OR ANYTHING FOR THAT MATTER?

BY ROY KHENG



SINGAPORE IS A STRANGE PLACE. SCI-FI GURU WILLIAM GIBSON, FATHER OF CYBERPUNK WROTE AN INTERESTING PIECE ENTITLED “DISNEYLAND WITH THE DEATH PENALTY” AFTER A VISIT HERE. HIS COMMENTS ARE BOTH INCISIVE AND EYE OPENING. SINGAPORE IS A FINELY TUNED, SOCIALLY ENGINEERED MICROCOSM. THE QUESTION IS, AS A FRESH GRADUATE, HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR PLACE? WILL YOUR CLIMB UP THE CORPORATE LADDER BE AS FRUITFUL AND FULFILLING AS YOU DREAMT IT WOULD BE? WOULD YOU BE FOOLISH TO TAKE AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE AND BE DIFFERENT?

So what does “being different” mean? Simply put, it means being a non-conformist. It means you didn’t follow the prescribed path. And in a culture where conformity is aspired to, where any deviation from the “standard path” is met with disdain, it takes guts to decide to do it your way. What is the standard path then? Well, it starts all the way back in kindergarten. According to local urban myth (mixed in with a good dose of kiasu-ism), if you get into a good kindergarten, you’re assured of a place (especially if you move to the “right” housing estate) in a top primary school. Doing well in school (read straight As) will afford you the chance at a top secondary school where nine A1s afterward, you’ll be in a top Junior College. Armed with 4As and 4S papers, you attain the holy grail of landing a prestigious scholarship and a job with the civil service. That is the ideal route. Educational Darwinism. Survival of the fittest. The reward for running this academic gauntlet successfully is the golden-fleece of success – a glorious career path, status, power and wealth. When Gibson described Singapore as “Disneyland with the death penalty” he wasn’t far off the mark. We live in a highly controlled environment, yet somehow economically liberal. It is a great place to work and it is very safe. But horror stories abound of civil service excesses, civil servants more concerned with their careers than with service, where simple decisions keep getting kicked upstairs because no one dares make a decision. Everyone was told to be creative to the point of attending “creativity workshops” so that they would somehow acquire lateral thinking skills.

But fear not, for there is light at the end of the tunnel. Things are loosening up. What this means for fresh grads is that the mantra of “scholarship scholarship scholarship”, though prevalent, is slowly fading into the background. Cries of “entrepreneurship”, of “creativity”, of “educational reform” are being heard now. The winds of change are blowing through the heartland. Slowly but surely, we are moving away from a system where orthodoxy is worshipped to a system that is more tolerant of “deviants”. It is now recognized that creativity must be spotted and nurtured, not taught. Kids can dare to be artists, musicians, actors or sportspersons. A reduced content syllabus with a focus on developing talents and skills, instead of rote learning speaks volumes of how far we’ve come. The powers that have determined that creativity and adaptability are as important as straight As. These changes are not just in education. The civil service itself is under scrutiny from the top. The perception that Singapore is rife with red-tape where following the book is the only way to get things done is fast changing. For the long term, this translates into more tolerance, acceptance and perhaps, even encouragement for those with different talents. We have to remain competitive. The global economy is moving fast and we better be ahead of the curve!

However, being a product of the system does not make you a liability. The work environment here has enough latitude for those who dare to be different and for those for whom security is more important. This change is going to take years to mature. And you can do much to prepare for this inevitability. As a fresh graduate, picking the right career path is the most important decision you have to make. This choice will impact the next 20 to 30 years of your productive life. Complex adaptive systems theory holds that eventualities as complex as a person’s career or information system infrastructure are extremely sensitive to initial conditions. In terms of your life after university, this translates to ensuring you are making the right decision for yourself.

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Many fresh graduates waste years of productive life by picking the wrong careers and not having goals. They change careers mid way through. Instead of gaining valuable experience to build on, you waste precious time relearning and adapting. Goal setting is essential to achieving success. If you know what you want, it is much easier to navigate your career to its intended objective. Decide what is important early, prioritize your career and life goals. Make firm decisions as to what these goals are and stick to them. Knowing thyself is a huge advantage and taking time off for a personal retreat is a good idea. Have a plan that is congruent with your skills and aspirations, know what you’ve got and where you want to take it. But sometimes you must know how to walk the middle path. It is essential to decide when to stick to the plan and when to abandon it. You are in the driving seat. You are in control. You decide what is important or not and the rest is a question of luck and circumstances. Conflicting advice eh? But you ought to know that if life didn’t have its curve-balls, then what would be the point of living it? It would be so boring!

Another piece of advice, these days, you need to prepare a portfolio of what you’ve done from job to job. It is no longer what job you were at, but rather what projects you worked on and how you helped your organization achieve its goals. Don’t forget to work the hows and what you contributed into your resume.

Oh and beware the yuppie trap! Many young Singaporeans fall victim to what I call the three As. These are the insatiable drive to Achieve, Acquire and Accumulate. It is mindless materialism. Perhaps, this behaviour is indicative of some deep-seated insecurity that leads people to live beyond their means. They adopt a meaningless existence of consumption. When your cell-phone, your car and your watch start to represent your values and your principles, there is something wrong. If the only way you find your place in society is through your possessions, you need help! Unfortunately, in status conscious Singapore, this is what most people decide to do. They are slaves to all their installment payments. House, renovations for house, car, furniture, home electronics and even education can be acquired through hire purchase. Not that it is wrong, but always remember that your stuff is just that, stuff. Grotesque as it may sound to the yuppie within you, there are other more enriching and satisfying pursuits out there. But it’s ok to have some traits of a yuppie. They work hard, play hard and have a neversaydie attitude when it comes to career building. Don’t be afraid to be different. And if being a yuppie is what you really want, go for it!

If you have thought about postgraduate studies or a career in academics, you need to ask yourself some really hard questions. Are you doing your masters to avoid/delay entry into the work force? Are you going to grad-school because you still don’t know what you want to do? If you have answered yes to any of these questions, STOP! Take a step back and think about what you really want. Again, goal setting and career planning have their part to play. Will postgraduate qualifications enhance your “application package”? Do you know what the life of academia is really like? Trust me, the adage that those who can’t, teach, doesn’t hold any water anymore. Increasingly, academia needs to have work experience in the real world. With the corporatisation of higher education, work experience goes a long way to enhancing even the careers of academics. Think carefully and if you are serious about choosing an academic career path, speak to your professors and admissions specialists. Ask intelligent questions and I am very sure they will be more than willing to help you.

Remember, you are in control. You decide if what others say is worth anything to you. I guess that’s what being different essentially is. Being different is neither a liability, nor is being a product of the system. What one needs to thrive in the “new economy” is perseverance, hard work and having realistic and achievable goals. Learn how to carry a “portfolio” of work from job to job to build a body of work that is saleable. Make sure whatever you choose to do is congruent with who you are. Good luck!