

For Review Only

CAREER CROSSROADS

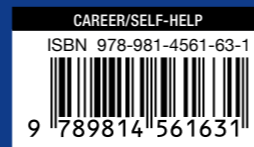
Are you at the crossroads of your career right now? Should you stay or leave? And with mounting responsibilities, how can you make a successful switch?

Your career is your greatest asset. An experienced headhunter in an international firm, Adrian Choo shares the insights gathered from interviewing successful business leaders across the globe. He distils the essence of his findings into a set of simple Career Strategies™ that you can follow. Learn how to approach this challenge and successfully navigate opportunities to achieve career success and fulfillment.

- *If you are an undergraduate*, this is an ideal primer for career planning. It will help you to achieve success in your future career.
- *If you are in your early thirties*, this will discuss the factors affecting your marketability and help you to start planning for the future. It also identifies career speed bumps and potholes to avoid.
- *If you are in your early forties*, this will help you to develop a personalised Career Strategy™ to stay relevant for the next half of your career. Learn how to successfully reinvent your career by leveraging on your Career Pivots™ into different industries or functions.
- *If you are in your fifties*, this book provides a framework for you to attach your own career experiences, a useful tool for mentoring your staff about their own career moves.

The author is a headhunter who has successfully placed senior leaders in the past decade for clients like J&J, BP, Coca-Cola, Samsung, Shell and many other global companies.

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www.marshallcavendish.com/genref



About the Author



ADRIAN CHOO is a headhunter with CTPartners handling the Asia-Pacific Industrial Practice from Singapore. He has over a decade of executive search experience, placing top leaders for his global clients in the region. Adrian graduated from the National University of Singapore with an Honours degree in Business Administration and started his career in Shell Eastern Petroleum. He started his own dotcom in the early 2000s and joined a GE Plastics subsidiary before venturing into headhunting. He is also a Board Member of the Singapore Cancer Society, a not-for-profit organisation. He is married with two children. Visit www.career-strategy.com to find out more!

ADRIAN CHOO

CAREER CROSSROADS

Marshall Cavendish Business

CAREER CROSSROADS

A HEADHUNTER'S GUIDE TO CAREER STRATEGY™

ADRIAN CHOO

I'm bored with my job—what's next?

Everyone is downsizing—how do I stay employed?

How do I find my dream job?

Am I being paid enough?

Am I experiencing a mid-career crisis?

Whether you are an executive or midway through your career, these questions may have crossed your mind at some point or other. In today's hire-and-fire environment where nothing is certain, no job is retrenchment proof and no one is indispensable—not even CEOs. So how do you prepare yourself for such a future?

The answer is by having a Career Strategy™. This book teaches what you were never taught in school and is filled with useful advice and real-life stories from executives who have successfully navigated their own careers. You will learn how to:

- develop your own Career Strategy™
- craft your own Career Story™
- Career Pivot™ into a different industry
- write a CV that hiring managers want to read
- ace that all-important job interview
- leverage online media in your job search

Humorous and easy to read, this useful book will give you that edge in finding a fulfilling career.

For Review Only

CAREER CROSSROADS

A HEADHUNTER'S GUIDE TO CAREER STRATEGY™

ADRIAN CHOO

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For Review Only

The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

—ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

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I would also like to thank my publisher, Marshall Cavendish, for their faith in my book, and especially to Mindy Pang, my editor who had to put up with my wanton abuse of the Oxford Comma.

I am blessed that along my career journey, I have met many mentors and friends who have helped me, especially my late mentor, Diana Young for being my greatest teacher and role model. A special thanks too, to my own career mentor, Bill Farrell from Taiwan for his superb advice.

Thanks and God Bless!

Introduction

It was a slow business day in the middle of the great financial crisis in 2008. Banks were on the verge of shutting down, the Dow Jones index was plummeting and the newspapers were awash with photographs of distressed traders.

Nobody was hiring. It had been a slow month for everyone. I was busy playing solitaire on my computer (business was *that* slow) when my phone suddenly rang.

The call was from Robert, a 46-year-old Information Technology (IT) manager in the manufacturing sector who had just received a retrenchment notice. He had been a loyal employee at his company for the past thirteen years and had recently paid a deposit for a million-dollar sea-facing condominium purchased at a 'fire-sale' price.

"Do you have a job for me?" Robert asked pensively over the phone. "I'm making around \$16,000 a month but am willing to work for less. Around \$15,000 would work for me. I didn't get a retrenchment package so I need the money to support my loans and lifestyle."

I replied that there has been a global headcount freeze for most companies, especially in his industry (which was downsizing to reduce cost) and no one was hiring. Younger IT managers could be hired at a third of his package. Everyone was unsure about how long the recession would last.

“Is there anything? Any other job I could do?” Robert asked. “I can’t believe my company fired me. I have been loyal to them, turning down other offers and never returning headhunters’ calls. At least my HR department has kindly provided me an ‘outplacement’ service where I can get some advice on how to find a new job. What can I do?”

I gave Robert some friendly career advice over coffee and we are still good friends today. He is lucky to have survived the ordeal. But he learnt three important lessons that day.

Lesson #1: In today’s economy, no job is guaranteed and no job is truly secure

One client, a Chief Executive Officer of a global technology company, once threw his hands up in exasperation, “Why is staff turnover so high in Asia? Does employee loyalty still exist?”

I replied, “Remember when the dotcom bubble burst in 2000, what did your company do?”

“We laid people off,” he replied.

“And during the recession following the September 11 Attacks in 2001?” I asked.

“We laid people off,” he answered sheepishly.

“And what did your company do during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003?”

“Okay, okay—I get the picture. It almost seems unreasonable to expect employee loyalty when employers *themselves* are sometimes more loyal to their shareholders than to their staff.”

Some say that employee loyalty may even have a detrimental effect on your career. A recent article on *Forbes* headlined: Employees who stay in companies longer than two years get paid 50 percent less. Unless you belong to the top 5 percent of high performing employees in your company, do not expect your company to plan your career for you—you have to take charge and manage it yourself.

Lesson #2: Are your skills and expertise still needed in this job market?

Like your iPhone software, your skills can easily become obsolete and irrelevant without regular updates. Robert did not realise that whatever he could do, a younger technician could probably do it cheaper, faster, and perhaps even a little better. Is your expertise up-to-date? Have you priced yourself out of the market? Can your job be replaced, automated or outsourced?

Lesson #3: You must prepare a Career Strategy™ before, and not after, the axe falls

Learning career skills and developing your Career Strategy *after* you have been retrenched will be doing too little, too late. While outplacement counseling helps you to deal with grief and come to terms with the retrenchment, with a little career planning in advance, the situation could have been avoided altogether. That is why it is important to have a working Career Strategy before that happens to avoid future pink-slip parties.

In today's fast-paced and ultra-competitive economy, the notion of any job being an 'iron rice bowl' is over. And because you have to rely on yourself (and not your employers) to navigate the next decade of your career, you need to take the initiative to chart your own course and move your career in the right direction and at the correct speed. This book will help you to achieve that in a step-by-step manner.

As a headhunter, I listen to my clients' business concerns and help to solve it by identifying the right leaders with the experience and ability to resolve these issues. I approach these qualified candidates and convince them to join my client's company.

During my decade-long career headhunting for senior business leaders, I often come across executives in their mid-

thirties to forties who ask the toughest question of their career: *What next?*

Many are successful managers who have been at the top of their careers for the past ten to fifteen years but are pondering their next move: Do I carry on with the same thing for the next two decades or should I move to something completely different? What are my options? How should I proceed?

If these questions sound familiar, this book is for you. It is written with the mid-career executive in mind—someone with fifteen to twenty years of work experience who may be at a career crossroad.

As a seasoned executive search professional, I often wear two hats—primarily as advisor to clients who need the best candidate to achieve the organisation's goals and as a career coach, counselling candidates on whether the job opportunity is right for them.

In that journey, I have become good friends with many candidates and have also learnt a great deal about career planning from successful clients. This book will cover both perspectives, providing a framework for career planning and strategies to move forward in your career. The tools introduced will help you to discover yourself and some of these personal questions will require deeper thought. I will also provide examples of real-life career stories of senior executives (although their names have been altered for confidentiality).

Who this book will help

- *If you are an undergraduate*, the book is an ideal 'primer' into career-planning, helping to keep you aware of issues that will affect the next forty years of your working life.
- *If you are in your early thirties*, this book will point out the factors that affect your marketability and help you start

planning for your career. It also helps to identify the speed bumps and potholes ahead so you will be able to navigate and avoid them.

- *If you are a mid-career executive in your early forties*, this book will help you develop a personalised Career Strategy to stay relevant and sustainable for the next half of your career.
- *If you are in your fifties*, this book provides a framework for you to attach your own career experiences, useful for mentoring your staff about their own career moves.

It is my hope that by sharing my thoughts and experiences with you, you will be better equipped to embark on that journey of self-discovery and achieve career-fulfillment.

Why read *Career Crossroads*

I am a headhunter with CTPartners, one of the top US-listed executive search firms in the world. In my decade-long career adventure in headhunting, I have successfully placed CEOs and senior business leaders of Fortune 500 companies including Shell, Samsung, Coca-Cola and many others.

I have been fascinated by people's career choices from a young age. I wanted to be a fireman, a doctor and even a teacher. As I got older, I realised that many of my peers had no idea what they wanted to be and chose their careers based on what their parents wanted them to be ("You must be a lawyer, son!") or let their friends make that decision for them ("Hey, let's all sign up for nursing, Bob!"). Worse still are those who follow convention and let the system decide for them ("As the top student, Sally, you have to opt for medicine!").

I loved and excelled in biology so I wanted to embark on a medical career. Unfortunately, I threw up whenever I saw blood. One day, I watched Michael Douglas in the 1987 movie

Wall Street doing his Gordon Gecko “Greed is good” speech and I was hooked! I decided to go to business school instead.

I never looked back. I graduated from the National University of Singapore’s business school with an Honours degree and started my career in Shell Eastern Petroleum under their Management Development Programme. I was fast-tracked and exposed to numerous functions of the business. In 2000, I left to start my own digital marketing business.

In 2004, I faced my first career crossroad as I realised that at thirty-two, I had a long road ahead of me but no clear direction. Do I stay in my new industry or return to my old one? Do I move into another start-up or re-join a large multi-national company?

This bothered me because I had a great start to my career, but how would I sustain that momentum? Was I in the right industry? Was I acquiring the right skills to see me through the next two decades of working life? I was perplexed because there were no books on this topic that I could turn to for advice. Even my well-meaning friends gave me great-sounding but clichéd advice like ‘follow your heart’ and ‘only time will tell’.

Worse of all, I did not really have a career mentor to seek advice from. After thinking long and hard, I decided to approach the problem like I would a business issue—by developing a strategy and action plan. I created a very rudimentary framework for career planning and applied it to my situation. The way forward was to leverage my passion for career-counselling, my strength in the sale of professional services and love of meeting new people, and begin a career in executive search.

So I made a strategic career move into Retained Executive Search in 2004 and have not looked back. Today, I am enjoying a fulfilled career as a respected headhunter, career coach, husband to an amazing wife and loving father of two beautiful children. I am also volunteering my services as a council-member

of the Singapore Cancer Society, returning my blessings to the community that has given me so many opportunities.

Over the years, I have further refined this career planning model by incorporating my observations of career paths from successful executives and sagely advice from the Chief Executive Officers and vice-presidents I have worked with. I feel that I am now ready to share these strategies with you.

Are you at a career crossroad today? I hope this book will be able to help you navigate through your journey and emerge more successful.

How this book is structured

In the first and second chapters, I introduce the definition of a ‘career’ and how the concept has changed over the years. I frame your career as a ‘journey’ in life and show the major milestones that you will make, including the two career crossroads that many encounter. I will elaborate these two decision points in greater detail and offer some basic strategies to manage it.

Chapter 3 explores the concept of a Career Strategy—what it is, why it is imperative that you have one and how to go about developing your own unique strategy. This chapter will set you on the path of self-discovery by taking a hard-nosed look at whether you are headed in the direction that you want.

Chapter 4 visits the reasons for staying in your current job or leaving for better opportunities. Each move has its own costs and benefits. This book provides a checklist and framework for deciding which reasons are truly valid and which are not. This section will help you to decide whether it is time to start looking for something better.

If you have made up your mind to move, Chapter 5 considers the various ways you can do so. A straightforward move like joining a competitor is a low risk endeavour. But what if you are

bored or tired of your industry or role? How would you reinvent your career with as little risk as possible? The Career PLAN framework introduced in Chapter 6 will help you to leverage on your strengths to pivot into a different industry or role in a more strategic manner.

After figuring out the specific direction you would like to take, you cannot sit back and wait for the right opportunity to come—it might take too long or may never happen at all. Chapter 7 shows you how to be proactive in your quest for that dream job. It includes both the time-tested strategies for self-marketing and job-targeting, as well as other out-of-the-box ideas.

With a Career Strategy, a Career PLAN and job search strategies in place, you need to develop your own attention-grabbing marketing collaterals—how do you tell your Career Story in the best practice Curriculum Vitae (CV) format. Chapter 8 is peppered with insider-tips on resume writing that only a seasoned headhunter could know.

Once your CV is noticed for the right reasons, Chapter 9 on interview strategies will demonstrate how to deliver the best performance of your life, preparing you for the only three questions that really matter.

Chapter 10 addresses the often asked question of how much of a salary increment to expect. This book provides a realistic framework for evaluating the offer so that both you and your new employer will feel good about it.

Having won the hiring manager over with your success stories, you have finally been made the offer. But how do you decide if this job is really the right one for you? Chapter 11 presents a detailed checklist for you to consider before putting your signature on the dotted line.

After contemplating and accepting the offer, Chapter 12 will walk you through the daunting task of tendering your

resignation—the right steps to take and the wrong ones to avoid. It will show you how to handle counter-offers your HR department may give, and a list of things to do or not to do, so as to avoid any legal trouble thereafter.

Chapter 13 will give tips on what to do when a headhunter calls—how you should react, what do you ask and what not to do—while Chapter 14 covers what to do if you are retrenched and offer strategies to get back into the workforce. The conclusion will then summarise the important lessons to take with you.

This book will force you to think about the hard truths and help you to make painful decisions that would pay off in the long run. There are also extra reading materials and links to our online resource at www.career-strategy.com where fresh articles are updated regularly.

Now, on to our first chapter!

BONUS MATERIAL

You will see a Bonus Material icon in the chapters. For more detailed information and examples, visit www.career-strategy.com/bonus and key in the article code to access the extra information.

For Review Only

Chapter 1

Your career



Many of us are defined largely by our careers. Imagine a social gathering where you are meeting people for the first time. After the customary exchange of names, the question ‘What do you do for a living?’ is likely to come up next. We spend a large part of our lives at work or thinking about work, so our careers are an important aspect of our lives. You do not need to be a high-flying banker or a top-notch lawyer to be defined by what you do. Even a homemaker will proudly state her job as a ‘stay-at-home-mom’ and *not* a ‘housewife’.

A great number of people lost their jobs during the financial crisis in 2008. Speaking to many of them, it was evident that losing a job hits the men particularly badly, even when they were not the sole breadwinners. Some kept their spouses in the dark, pretending to go to work even though it was the daily visit to their outplacement counsellor. They felt that losing their job felt like a loss of their place in the house and affected their self-worth. It didn’t matter that they received a generous retrenchment package or had enough savings to tide them through the crisis; it wasn’t the money. It was an emotion, and that is how much a career could mean.

Another way of looking at your career

If you are a mid-career executive and have worked for more than fifteen years, what is your biggest asset?

It could be that beautiful house you are staying in—but is it owned by you or your bank? Or that shiny sports car in your garage—is a car even an asset? It could even be that exotic stock portfolio managed by your Swiss private banker—but as recent recessions and market corrections have repeatedly demonstrated, the value of these assets fluctuate and could even be wiped out overnight. Property markets have collapsed and banks have also gone under. Even if the markets do not crash and your money

in the bank is safe—in today's world of low interest rates, the returns on these assets could be quite paltry. So, think again—are these things really your greatest asset?

There is one asset you own that continues to pay regular monthly dividends, and if managed correctly, will be able to grow and increase in value and payouts in the future. This asset is your career and the monthly dividends are your salary.

I realised this during the financial crisis as my personal stock portfolio was decimated by the merciless market. Years of painstaking savings were wiped out in weeks and it felt terrible. However, a constant stream of funds still came in despite the massacre—it was my salary, derived from the job I still had.

Once we start to view our careers as assets, we begin to understand how important it is to us. It also sets us thinking about acquiring an asset-enhancing strategy to help improve its longevity, relevance, value and yield. If this asset is neglected, it could lose its value and may never get fully back on track.

A property investor would not hesitate to spend money on asset-enhancing activities like adding a fresh coat of paint. He will also think twice before renting a place out to rowdy students who could cause more damage than the deposit can cover. Similarly, a wise executive who views his career as an asset will know that he needs a strategy to ensure it remains valuable and increases in value over time. This could take the form of making smart career moves to bigger companies or on to better roles.

He will also avoid short-sighted activities that could jeopardise his value or market demand, such as refusing to upgrade his skills or electing to remain in a sunset industry.

So remember two important concepts as we move forward:

- Your career is your biggest long-term asset.
- Your monthly salary is the monthly dividend from this asset.

What is a career?

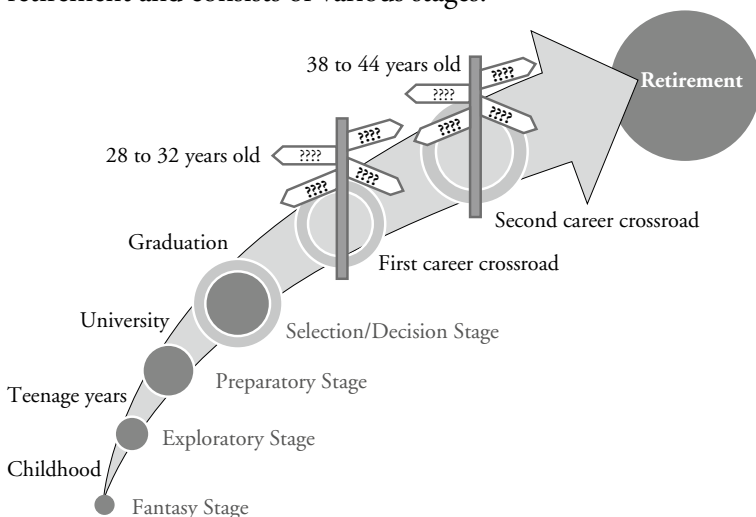
In the past, a career was considered to be “the work you did for a company.” This was during the time when people hardly left their companies and spent most of their lives doing the same job with a single employer. However, in today’s knowledge-based economy, a career is defined as “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experience over time” by Arthur, Hall & Lawrence in *The handbook of career theory* in 1989. This has two key implications:

1. You have *one* career that could comprise of several jobs during your life, and
2. This career is constantly evolving.

In the past, an employee who has worked for twenty years in the same company would have been described as ‘stable’ or ‘loyal’. Today, that same person could be rudely described as ‘deadwood’ or ‘part of the furniture’. How times have changed!

A career journey

Our career journey is the pathway we take from childhood to retirement and consists of various stages.



Stage 1: Fantasy Stage

As young children, we probably recall wanting to be a fireman, astronaut or an actor. These fantasies are an important first step in our thought processes regarding our desired roles in society and our perceptions of what constitutes a good job and what we find interesting. It is a useful phase because it clues us in on the sort of role that would make us truly happy in life. There can be no limits to a child's imagination when it comes to career selection. A successful CEO once shared that his childhood fantasy was to be a garbage collector because he thought it was great fun riding at the back of a garbage truck.

Stage 2: Exploratory Stage

This stage starts from between twelve to eighteen, when we explore more realistic career ideas. This phase allows us the latitude to evaluate options and narrow down the wide spectrum of options to a realistic few that would be of interest to us. More importantly, it not only tells us what we would like to be, but what roles or industries we *don't* want to be in.

Stage 3: Preparation Stage

By eighteen, we would have a general idea of which direction our interests lie and will enroll ourselves into the faculty of our choice at a selected university. This is, however, not the final decision we will be making. Even in highly specialised courses like medicine or law, other career options are still relatively open at graduation.

This stage prepares us with the specialised training and knowledge required to qualify or equip us for the role we will undertake upon graduation. The college education process also provides the insight into whether the course is in line with our choices and is suitable for our personalities, temperaments and

abilities. For example, after five years of medical school, one friend decided to be a clinical researcher, much to the dismay of his parents who had sponsored his half-a-million-dollar education abroad.

Stage 4: Selection/Decision

Upon graduation, we need to decide which direction our lives will take. If you are the lucky few with top scores and really know what you want to be, this crossroad will be as easy as deciding which offer to accept. However, for many others, the choice of their first job depends largely a *circumstance-based selection*—the truth is that we often end up in our very first job as a result of whichever company decided to open one of our numerous ‘application for employment’ emails, interview us, and make us an offer. I joined Shell Eastern Petroleum as a management trainee because fifteen other companies had rejected my applications.

This circumstance-based selection is hardly strategic or intelligent in nature but is a reflection of how most of us landed our first jobs. As a result, many of us may have ended up in an industry that we might not have the passion for or in a role that is less satisfying. For some, it is a great opportunity to learn about a new industry and provides insights into whether this would make a good lifelong career. Nevertheless, we still trudge on for about five to eight years till we hit our first career crossroad.

REAL-LIFE CAREER STORY

Jeremy, 43, Medical Director, US-based drug company

Jeremy was a candidate I met. He shared that he never quite knew what he wanted to be as a kid, but he knew that he didn't want to be a medical doctor. Both his parents were doctors. His father was a trauma surgeon

and his mother a gynaecologist. He never liked the fact that they were seldom around and detested the abrupt way they would leap up and run out of the house the moment their pagers went off, even on weekends.

You can imagine the pressure he faced when applying for a place at university. His parents pressured him to go to medical school even though he really didn't want to. But what could a helpless nineteen-year-old do? He reluctantly acquiesced and spent the next five years there, followed by another two years of internship. When he completed his obligations, he was much older and had learnt how to be his own man.

He sat his parents down and said, "Mom, Dad, I did what you want. I'm a doctor now—but I don't wish to practise medicine as I have no interest in seeing sick people every day for the rest of my life. I'm going to find a medical-related job in the corporate world."

Jeremy shared, "I remember that day very clearly because I felt so liberated. I signed up with a pharmaceutical company as a sales representative, drawing a salary that was half of what I would have received at the hospital—but I loved it!"

Fast forward fifteen years and today, he is a regional director heading a team of twenty. "I feel that I have made the right move and found my true passion."

What advice would he give?

"I think firstly, know what you want in life—and even if you don't, keep trying to find out by striving to know yourself. Secondly, it's never too late to change course. Your career is never linear—it is a journey that snakes along and sometimes, even brings you back to the start. And thirdly, keep pressing on and never give up."

BONUS MATERIAL

How do you know if a career/vocation/profession is the right one? Visit www.career-strategy.com/bonus and key "Vocation" to access this extra article.

About the Author

Adrian Choo was born in Singapore and is a true seventies kid, growing up on a diet of Hanna-Barbera cartoons and listening to the Bee Gees and Johnny Cash on his dad's record player.

An entrepreneur at heart, he started a comics-trading business in school at the age of 16, and by 19, he started a company selling real human skeletons to medical students for study purposes. Nicknamed 'Bones', Adrian ran the business successfully until he graduated from Business School at the National University of Singapore with an Honours degree a semester before his peers. He then joined Shell as a Management Trainee where he imbibed the best practices of that much respected company.

In 2000, Adrian encountered his first career crossroad and left Shell to start a lifestyle marketing dotcom that lasted three years. He then joined a subsidiary of GE Plastics but deep down inside, he knew he hadn't fulfilled his calling. In 2004, he took an educated risk and followed his strengths and passion into the world of headhunting and has never looked back since.

As a seasoned headhunter with more than a decade of search experience behind him, Adrian has successfully placed CEOs and Senior Business Leaders of Fortune 500 companies including Shell, Samsung, Coca-Cola and many others. In this job, he plays the role of talent scout to his clients as well as career coach

to his candidates—both roles he enjoys tremendously. Over the years, he has met, interviewed and made friends with hundreds of business leaders and has learnt a great deal about life from them.

Today, Adrian is a headhunter with CTPartners, a US-listed executive search firm with a sterling reputation and global track record. He handles the regional Industrial Practice from his base in Singapore. A loving father of two beautiful children, Lucius and Mia, he also volunteers his services as a board member of the Singapore Cancer Society, the country's oldest organisation dedicated to reducing the impact of cancer on patients and their families. His favourite activities include spending time with his family and collecting antique maps and curios.