The thriving tax professional: a fresh perspective on your career

General Features



18 June 2024

It’s time to take a fresh perspective on your career in tax.

Over the last few months, I’ve had the pleasure of presenting a series of online sessions to students and members of the ATT and CIOT entitled ‘The thriving tax professional’. Here, I provide a taster of the key themes and tools from across the series to enable a wider audience of tax professionals to reflect on what ‘good’ looks like for them. We should all be able to make decisions in our career and life that are better aligned to who we are and what is important to us.

Career plans are unrealistic

With my own background of 25 years spent in professional services, I know well how easy it can be to be motivated and measure ourselves by a narrow vision of career success – for instance, where making partner is the holy grail.

However, in my own experience – and that of many people who I work with and encounter as a coach – it can become easy to forget what is important to us, and who we are, in the process of trying to take the next obvious step forward in our careers. This can become a problem if progressing becomes harder, if your career stalls or doesn't feel quite right – or if we realise that we're no longer motivated by it.

It is rare for someone to have a clear plan for their career when starting out, and even rarer when such a plan is fully played out in reality. Expecting to have a clear endpoint and milestones to follow – like the step by step directions you might use to get from point A to point B on a map – isn't realistic.

A career is more like exploring uncharted territory, where you create your own map of the landscape as you go. If you reach some difficult terrain, you might have to learn a new skill or enlist some help to go across it – or make a path around it. When you reach the top of a hill, you might notice an oasis across the valley that you'd like to visit but will need to track back to find. What you will see and who you will meet along the way is unknown and you choose the route you take as the landscape unfolds ahead of you.

With that as the reality of our career journey, what do you need to navigate it successfully? This is where your career compass comes in – calibrated based on the North Star of your values, passions and motivations – to guide your choices based on what is important to you. On your journey, you will need to have the right personal attributes and resources for success, as well as the right support alongside you. These are the components of thriving.

What is thriving?

Many definitions of thriving have been offered but words and phrases commonly used include flourishing, growth, vitality, a sense of learning and positive functioning – mentally, physically and socially.

The things we need to thrive lie in our own attitudes, thinking and behaviours – for instance, having a positive perspective, proactivity, motivation, knowledge and learning, resilience and social competence – as well as what we need around us, including having an environment that challenges us and the support of family,

colleagues and the organisation we work for.

Looking a little further at motivation, in his book ‘Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us’, Daniel Pink tells us that we are motivated by autonomy, mastery and purpose. We want control over how we work and who we work with, visibility of our impact, to get better at something that matters, and to be in service of a higher objective. This part is critical for calibrating our career compass.

So we should see what I call our ‘thrivometer’ as giving us a read-out on our preparedness to set out and continue on our uncharted career journey (as well as giving us a measure of how far we’ve already come). Ask yourself where your career thrivometer is on the following measures right now:

- your resilience;
- the level of healthy challenge in your role;
- the extent to which you are learning and growing;
- the extent to which you are able to use your strengths;
- the level of autonomy you have over what you do and how you do it;
- whether your outputs are visible and recognised;
- whether there is alignment between your role and your purpose; and
- whether you have the support that you need.

We can control or exert influence over all of these elements. Getting the support you need at work can come through building trusted, reciprocal relationships – finding mentors and role models, and securing recognition of what you offer and what you need. Some of us find it easier than others to meet new people and make new connections but we can all grow in our ability to do this – and for it to feel authentic. Yes, it’s important to be clear about your strengths and to use them but remember that you have the capacity to grow and learn, too. Everything we consider ourselves to be is made up from examining, arranging and testing our experience. As we continue to have experiences, so our view of who we are and what we are capable of is reinvented.

Our resilience both impacts and is impacted by all of the other measures. We need to look after both our physical and mental wellbeing so we’re in a good place to deal with what our journey throws at us. And with the right support, mindset, motivation, learning and challenge, your resilience is also boosted and maintained.

Thriving leaders

What about what's important for leaders in tax? All components of the thrivometer are key enablers for thriving tax leaders too, but I would particularly highlight the importance of support, alignment to purpose, learning and healthy challenge.

Leadership development literature, supported by the comments from those I interviewed in my own 2016 MBA research on developing tax leaders, highlights that experienced-based learning is important. It must also be supported by personal development activities to develop wider cognitive, organisational and emotional intelligence, where self-awareness is a key component.

Self-awareness is an important element of leading authentically, including understanding how our life experiences have shaped us and given meaning to our lives, including our personal purpose, and then translating our values into action through our leadership principles. Other key components include the aligning of self across all parts of lives, balancing extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, and building your support team.

All successful people will have had a lot of help along the way and you can erately construct your own team of personal advisers, covering the different support you might need based on your current goals and challenges. Many people are not only willing to help you on your career journey but are happy to do so.

Pause for breath and take in the view

Now we have a broader definition of thriving that can be more meaningful and specific to us, we can use it to sustain and guide us on our career journey. Of course, that doesn't mean any of this is easy. Wherever you are on your journey right now, I encourage you to pause for a breath and take in the view. As well as thinking about what you're excited to explore next, make sure you also take a look around at how far you have already come.

It's time to check your thrivometer and dust off and recalibrate your career compass.

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