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Forget career ladders, think road less travelled to success

Marius Kloppers, chief executive of BHP Billiton, spent nearly 10 years studying at universities on three continents before he launched his career.

He was a “late starter”, he says, and a “perennial student”. He was unsure of what he wanted to do in life. He was up and running by 30, however, and at just 44, Kloppers was head of the biggest mining company on the planet. Mind you, it wasn’t a particularly easy road. Before he settled into the big job in Melbourne, Kloppers had to move countries 11 times for either study or work.

Steve Killelea, founder of Integrated Research, took a different approach. He spent 10 years surfing before he settled down to a job. He had a passion that he needed to pursue. Killelea’s only tertiary education was a nine month crash course in computing. Now, having made his fortune, he is a self-styled social entrepreneur and Australia’s largest individual overseas aid donor.

Andrew Banks, co-founder of Morgan and Banks recruiting company, trained as a biologist and then worked as an actor before discovering a passion for business and human resources. He too made a fortune and recently sold his house in Sydney’s eastern suburbs for \$52 million.

These are each, in their own way, unusual paths to success. A sense of aimlessness at the start and then the ability to change careers, grab opportunities, take risks.

The late Steve Jobs’s career has become a classic of this genre – a university dropout, a student of Buddhism, and then the founder of Apple who, through his innovations, went on to change all of our lives.

As the graduating class of 2011 begins to look for jobs at a particularly merciless moment in the world economy, these unusual paths to success could just provide a spark of hope. Or at least some ideas on direction.

For the rest of us – well, the world is changing and we may be forced to change along with it.

John Dakin, a director of career advice consultancy Directioneering, believes changes in the economy have changed career planning forever.

“The traditional view was that a career is a ladder but there are no ladders left any more,” Dakin says.

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“Careers are more like trellises these days – people going along, trying something new, going up that piece and then moving on to another piece. We are seeing that people are moving into maybe four or five different careers in their working life. I think that is only going to increase.”

But what differentiates the spectacularly successful from the rest of us? Management consultant Roger Collins points to two clearly different approaches to career planning – linear versus opportunistic.

“You could draw a rectangle with a diagonal from the top left hand corner to the bottom right hand corner. The people on the left are very linear and can tell you what they want to be doing in 10 years’ time, whereas the people towards the right are saying ‘well, I have some ideas, but I am more driven by my values and competencies. When opportunities crop up, I will evaluate the opportunity in the light of my competencies and values. And if it fits I will grab it’.”

What lies behind that distinction is the risk profile of the person. “The linear people could be, but are not always, risk averse. Whereas the opportunistic people say ‘No risk no gain – I will take a calculated manageable risk with this opportunity’.”

It also helps to have what Collins terms a multidisciplinary mind. Some people can think across disciplines. In management parlance, their minds don’t have silos“. Some people are just polymaths. They don’t think marketing or finance they think in multi- dimensional ways,” he says.

Evan Thornley, founder of internet search engine LookSmart, is a classic example of a risk taker prepared to move across disciplines. Thornley started out as a head of the Student Representative Council at the University of Melbourne and then as one of the founding officers of the National Union of Students.

It meant eight years at university because he took two years out from his commerce law degree to be a full-time student leader. From there, he crossed the ideological divide to join the traditional consulting firm McKinsey & Co. Then it was on to Silicon Valley to found LookSmart. He stepped back from LookSmart in 2003, selling down his stake to amass a fortune estimated at more than \$50 million.

After returning to Australia, Thornley changed paths again – he helped start activist organisation GetUp and the think tank Per Capita. He became national secretary of the Fabian Society and a board director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Then came another change in tack: in 2006, Thornley became a member of parliament in Victoria. In 2008 he moved on again to head up the electric car recharging network, Better Place Australia. And he is still in his 40s.

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Diverse as all this might appear, Thornley sees a theme in his career – making the world a better place.

“I went to McKinsey in the first place because I wanted to own newspapers,” he says. “So I figured I needed to learn about business and find my way to the New York media practice. And that’s what I did. It is just that by the time I did that, I realised that the big opportunity in media was going to be in internet search. And so I ended up doing that instead.

“But the reason I wanted to own newspapers was to have a positive impact on the world through the approach you took to news. And since there were a lot of right-wing newspaper proprietors at the time I thought the politics of the radical centre could do with its own newspaper voice as well. And the only way to do that was to own it. That seemed a reasonable thing to me at the age of 22.”

Thornley says that the “through line” of his career has been to try and find a place where you can have maximum positive impact on the world.

And he has a bit of advice. “People think that the critical decisions are the ones they make choosing a course at university and then the first job afterwards. I don’t think that’s true. My observation from my own peer group is that there is a time when your career decisions become quite critical – that is in your late 20s and early 30s. The decisions need to be increasingly thoughtful at that period – the more senior you get the more difficult it is to change direction.”

Steve Killelea made his name and his fortune in IT but now spends much of his time on philanthropic endeavours and promoting the Global Peace Index, which he founded.

Killelea spent his first decade after leaving school not in university libraries, but surfing. He doesn’t regret that – it gave him time to think.

“If I went back to when I was 27 and got into computing, I had really thought for a long, long while about what I should do with my life. It came down to three things – one was being a psychologist or a social worker, another taking adventure travellers around the world and the third one was getting into computing.” The last one was an intuitive choice, he says. “I went that way because I figured I wouldn’t make enough money out of being a social worker and a career in adventure travel might only be good up to 35.”

“But I look back on it now and they are basically pretty much the three things that have satisfied my whole life.”

And experience builds on itself. “Some of the points for social entrepreneurs and business hold true [in both fields]. You really do need to have a lot of confidence in

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your ideas. And a lot of drive. Never give up. Just never give up. It is the concept of the last man standing and the last man standing wins.”

Li Cunxin, author of the best selling biography *Mao's Last Dancer*, is perhaps the most outstanding example of a multidisciplinary achiever. During his career, he has been a top ballet dancer, a successful stockbroker and the author of an international best seller.

Where Li differs from someone like Thornley and Killelea is that his career changes have been dominated by circumstance. First of all, escaping poverty in rural China through ballet. Then, nearly three decades later, trying to earn enough to provide for a young family as well as helping relatives back in China.

This fits in to another category that Roger Collins provides for career deciders. “Sometimes there are events where fate will definitely step in and it either forces you or enables you to think differently.

“There is a good book – *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Harold Kushner. The bottom line is how you respond to those events and whether you use it for good or whether you enable it to scar and disable you. For all of us at some point in our lives, things happen which we don't expect.”

Li's career slots into this pattern.

“In a strange twist of fate, I didn't choose ballet, ballet chose me,” Li says. At age 11, he was selected from his remote village school to train at the Beijing Dance Academy.

“To be perfectly honest, given the peasant life I led, dance would be the last thing on my mind. It would not be something I would have actively chosen – if I had my preference I would probably have played sport.”

But during seven years of hard training in Beijing, he developed a passion for dance. He had the opportunity to dance with the Houston Ballet Company in Texas in 1979 and later defected to the United States. After marrying Australian ballerina Mary McKendry, he moved to Melbourne and became principal dancer with Australian Ballet.

Then in 1998 after 27 years of ballet, he became a stockbroker.

How did that happen?

“Even being one of the top dancers in the world,” Li says, “there is no money in dance. You really do it for the love of it, for your passion. [In the late 1990s] I was confronted with the question of how could I support my family.” His first child, Sophie,

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was born deaf and Mary gave up her ballet career prematurely to help her daughter. Li was the sole family breadwinner – and pretty much for two families.

“I wanted to be able to give my children the best possible education and at the same time find a way to help my brothers set up in a financial sense so that they could sustain themselves. It was a huge ask for a dancer just about to retire. If I had chosen to go into teaching or coaching [dance], my salary would probably be halved from that of the principal dancer. So there was really very little option for me to remain in the dance world if I was to meet my financial responsibilities.

“It was scary to even think about it, it was so stressful.”

Why finance?

“It is incredible how a little seed planted in your life can really influence your later decisions,” Li explained.

When he had saved up his first \$US1000 in the US, he approached a board member of the Houston Ballet, who also happened to be a senior partner in one of the big Wall Street firms, for investment advice.

“That first \$US1000 in savings represented tens of years of my father’s earnings. It could mean my whole family’s survival. So I was so petrified to not invest that properly.”

“There was no stockmarket in China at the time. I had no idea of the stock market, being a dancer who could hardly speak English. My father never had a bank account to speak of – he never had spare cash.”

The US stockbroker pointed him toward Compaq Computers, coincidentally based in Houston. Personal computers had just arrived on the market and Compaq was an early starter. Li did very well out of that investment. He started to read The Wall Street Journal and took a community college course in accounting.

When facing a change of career in Australia, nearly two decades later, he again used his ballet connections to get work experience inside a stockbroking company. ANZ was a sponsor of the Australian Ballet and Li finished up at ANZ McCaughan. He loved it. For the final two years of his ballet career he juggled two jobs – principal dancer for the Australian Ballet and a junior stockbroker.

The next step came in 2000 when he was urged by a friend, who also happened to be a successful author of children’s books, to write down his life story. “I always thought it was too self indulgent to write a book on your life but he told me to do it not for myself but for others.”

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In his spare time he wrote *Mao's Last Dancer*, all in long hand, and it took him just 12 months. Li's career advice is to simply follow your passion.

"You have to be very honest with yourself – know what you want to do in life. That is the starting point, then follow with enormous courage – to walk through fire and tread through water – anticipate that the journey is not going to be easy, that it would need enormous amounts of determination, tenacity and hard work. You have to really do what you love to do to bring the best out of you."

But what if you don't know what your passion is?

"I don't quite believe people don't have passion," says Li. "I think most people are too afraid about their passion. I think for a lot of people fear just blocks them from knowing their passion."

"We all have our dreams we all have our secret passion. The world out there is scary but the ones who achieve great success are courageous. They don't fear it and they have a great work ethic to come with it."

Andrew Banks took a while to find his passion. A trained biologist, he realised early on that he hated it.

"Sadly the early years of most ordinary people's careers – and I regard myself as ordinary in the sense that I wasn't a gifted pianist or a rock star – are somewhat random. As someone who makes a living out of making reasonable judgments about the person I am talking to, there are so many examples where young individuals are not given enough exposure to the full bandwidth of opportunities because they tend to get it from school, family, relatives and accidental direct exposure. Why would you be surprised that most people start off in one direction and end up in another, because in many cases it is not so scientific."

Banks estimates that he interviewed about 32,000 people in his career. He believes that work experience for school leavers and undergraduates should become almost a mandatory thing for corporates and employers to provide. "If you employ 100 people you would have to provide at least three people a year with work experience. Because, just that, in one stroke could change so many lives."

"There are 6000 different job descriptions set out in one book that provides HR descriptions for jobs. And I bet you if I asked any school leaver or graduate to write down what your options are they would be stuck when they got to 50 or 60 or even 100."

So, start dreaming. January is the perfect month for it.

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