



## DEVELOP A BUSINESS, GET A LIFE

FOUR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CHOICES THAT CAN BRING PERFORMANCE, JOY, AND MEANING TO PROFESSIONALS  
BY TED HARRO

Many professionals I know have a love/hate relationship with business development: they would love someone else to do it because they think they would hate it themselves. If you listen to them talk about building their book of business, you will hear variations on these themes:

"I can't do this. I wasn't trained for it."

"Clients won't want to talk with me."

"Clients will reject me."

"I'm going to hate this!"

"I don't have time to develop my business – I'm burned out as it is!"

As I reflect on these comments, they bring back echoes of my own experience as a business getter for a professional services company. I started as a reluctant marketer in our firm, charged with the task of marketing the services of a highly educated, technical staff to Fortune 500 clients. As a doctor's son, I had never fancied myself as a salesperson.

An early mentor pulled me aside. Patiently, he helped me reshape the way I looked at the job. He helped me see that I was in the business of helping people solve some of their most perplexing problems. Along the way, I would meet some who needed my help and others who would take a pass. My job in those early days was simply to explore their situation and treat every interaction as a learning experience.

Through dogged determination, good fortune, and the beauty of ignorance, my business took off. I developed enough business for my firm that I won an award, Rookie of the Year, for producing so much billable work in my first year in the role.

Then the sophomore slump hit. My mentor left the firm. I kept slugging away at the role, doing the things that had worked in my rookie year, but without the same results. I fell behind on my revenue goals and had even dropped beneath my first year levels. I heard whispers in the halls and in my head. "Maybe the first year was a fluke. Maybe he was coddled by his mentor. Now we'll see

### THE SHORT COURSE

- Professionals often feel overwhelmed by developing their business.
- They can create more success and even reduce time invested, but it requires focus.
- The four choices outlined—clients, opportunities, colleagues, and a plan—can help any professional focus time and energy so that they perform better, enjoy their work, and get more for their time investment.

what happens!”

It came to a head as I sat by myself on a particularly lonely business trip to Wichita, Kansas. Picking through a chicken Caesar salad, I wondered how I was going to break through to the next level. I looked around me at “successful” colleagues, unsure if I wanted their burned out lives. But something had to change or I might be out of a job. I decided that night to study successful business developers in our company. If I could find their secrets and apply them in a sustainable way, maybe I could get the mojo back.

Each high performer had a little different spin on the role. But the common theme was that each star performer had a clear focus that had enabled them to thrive. In contrast, I realized that I had been following an AFB strategy: Anything For a Buck! That lack of focus drove my increasingly frantic lifestyle. Looking back, I can see now that these business developers had made four choices that served as a platform for their success: They chose their clients, chose their opportunities, chose their colleagues, and chose a plan. These choices allowed them to stop doing almost everything else, reclaiming time and energy for other pursuits. Nearly fifteen years later, I am convinced that professionals who make these choices greatly increase their chances of success and, heaven forbid, meaning and sanity in their work.

#### Choice 1: Choose your clients

I first learned this lesson from Gene, a legendary rainmaker in our company. When I talked to him, I could see that he was absolutely focused on serving large high-tech hardware companies. I asked him about this. He responded in his typically brusque East-coast style.

“Hey, let’s face it. Our highest potential products and services were originally designed for the high tech market where companies are willing to spend truckloads of money on supporting white collar workers. I could spend the same amount of time chasing smaller deals in other sectors, but I go to where there’s a fit between our services and a cash-rich market.”

A light bulb began to flicker in my head as I recalled banging my head against the wall with heavy manufacturing clients. Gene taught me to choose clients based on **market fit and opportunity**.

I learned the next wrinkle of this lesson from Kate, an outrageously gregarious consultant. Kate had chosen to focus on pharmaceutical companies and she consistently ranked in the top few business generators in our firm. One day when I momentarily slowed down Kate’s perpetual motion, I asked her why she chose to serve that market segment.

“Oh, that’s easy,” she said, tossing her head of bright red hair. “I grew up in that industry. And I just love working with

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#### WHAT TO DO: CHOOSING CLIENTS

- Do an informal survey to of the firm’s last 5-10 outrageously successful engagements. What do they have in common?
- Think carefully about the times when you get caught up in client work and completely lose track of time. What triggers that sort of passion for you?
- When was the last time you got angry about an interaction with a client or an industry? What does that tell you about your convictions?
- TAKE ACTION: Launder your client list, removing or scaling back activity with clients who don’t pass the fit, passion, and conviction tests

them. Sure, they're crazy. But they're doing something I'm really passionate about. They're helping heal people and that's what it's all about to me."

I noted down the second part of the client equation: **passion**. We all have different things that fire us up. For Kate, it was health and helping people. It came from her own professional background, but it came from a much deeper place than her resume. It came from her heart.

Over the coming months, I started to reflect on my own client focus. In so doing, I discovered one last nuance of this lesson. I was at a VFW hall, having an adult beverage with an HR superintendent from a large manufacturing plant in the chemical industry. I was in the middle of an impassioned monologue about developing people when this middle aged manager stopped me cold.

"You have to understand, young man," he said, "people are purely a cost to me in this business. The fewer we have, the better. And the less we spend on them, the better."

After recovering from a short bout of righteous indignation, I realized that I simply had different **convictions** from this man. In his business, his point of view probably served him well. But I deeply believe that people matter and that they deserve extraordinary attention and investment. The lightbulb finally started to shine steadily: **market fit, passion, and conviction** stood out as the main dimensions of choosing clients. I made my own choice when that happened. I stopped working with pure manufacturing companies where our firm had less fit and with financial services companies where I had little passion. I also ruled out certain industries as prospects based on my personal convictions. As I focused on the remainder of my client portfolio, my business jumped 40%.

## Choice 2: Choose your opportunities

As I studied my successful colleagues, I discovered a second characteristic they shared. To a person, they were choosier about which opportunities they pursued with prospective clients. At first, I would debate whether they had this luxury because they were *already* successful or whether they were successful *because* they were choosy. Eventually, I decided it was more the latter: because they chose their opportunities carefully, these stars spent time on potentially great projects not on the poorly scoped, poorly funded cousins destined to be chased by mediocre peers.

We had quarterly client portfolio reviews in our firm and I tried to attend those of the high performers. While observing them, I noticed that they asked a few striking questions when they reviewed client opportunities.

### "Can we deliver on this project with high levels of customer satisfaction?"

This question seems pretty obvious, but I saw high performers (and the best leaders) ask it with even more edge to their voice. "What is the likelihood that this client will be an enthusiastic reference if we win this project?" More than once, I remember the best performers shaking their heads in these meetings as we reviewed winnable and high revenue projects. "I just don't think we can do this project well enough right now. I'd rather not do it at all than do it poorly." Jan, a particularly gifted colleague, confided to me after one such meeting. "I've worked so hard to earn the trust of this client. I know there is business here for us in the future and it is so much easier to grow business

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with an existing client than to start all over. I'm just not willing to jeopardize all of that with a mediocre project."

**"Can we do this work for a solid profit?"** At the same time, the best producers had very high standards for the value of their work to our firm. Simply put, they passed on business that failed to promise healthy revenue and profit for our firm. As Gene said to me, "I can't reach my goals by chasing a thousand little deals. If the opportunity doesn't hit my threshold, I don't give it a second thought." What alarmed me was that his *threshold* was nearly *ten times* as large as my average engagement. But his point was well taken. I had to believe that my time was extremely valuable and that our firm could solve big problems. Otherwise, I would never reach the next level.

**"Can I leverage my time?"** About this time, I also got a new boss. She noticed that I was out doing a lot of project work myself. She patiently began to reshape my view of my role. Instead of lead doer, she drilled me into seeing myself as an orchestrator of resources from our company. It was an evocative way for me to learn about leverage, the ability to multiply my time and resources through the efforts of other team members. I began to see my role as building a practice with skill, experience, and reputation, not just a book of business.

Three questions focused me on the best opportunities: **Can we deliver great quality? Will the work be profitable? Can I leverage the work?** As a result of this choice to focus on better opportunities, I started to say no to a lot of business and refer other business to colleagues so that I could say yes to the business that would build my future. My business jumped up another 50%.

### Choice 3: Choose your colleagues

The first two choices had taken me past many of my peers in building my business, but I knew I could grow more. I saw a couple of rainmakers who defied the usual measurements. In fact, they had so far outstripped expectations that they were given unprecedented freedom in our firm, even creating their own profit centers and practice groups. I wanted to stretch to that level, so I looked deeper into their approach. What I saw surprised me. Most companies force a dichotomy between those who focus on the customer and competitor world (those with "external focus") and those who pay attention to colleagues and the firm itself (those with "internal focus"). In our group of rainmakers, internal focus had a bad name synonymous with bureaucracy and inbred politics. But the top business developers managed to deal with both worlds. The first two sets of choices – about clients and opportunities – were predominantly about external focus. But the third choice had a profoundly internal dimension to it: they chose which colleagues to gather around them.

"I started to realize that I, too, was free to choose my closest colleagues."

#### WHAT TO DO: CHOOSING OPPORTUNITIES

- Look back at your last year's client work. How many of your engagements resulted in enthusiastic references? (How do you know?)
- Take a look at your current book of business. How profitable is the work you have in process right now? How do colleagues make their projects more profitable?
- If you removed yourself from your client work for three weeks, what would be the impact on your book of business? What does that tell you about your leverage? How could you appropriately involve more people in your engagements?
- TAKE ACTION: Examine your pending client engagements. Which should you focus on winning based on the criteria of reference-ability, profitability, and leverage?

I started to realize that I too was free to choose my closest colleagues. Over the course of a few years, I started to build an informal team. It was barely conscious at first, but within a year it was a conscious business strategy. I looked for four traits in my teammates.

First, I looked for **complementary skills and experience**. My client and opportunity choices targeted ideal customers. Now I started to assemble a group of specialists who could bring value to my chosen market. Some were employed by my firm. Others were from outside the firm, but I intentionally brought them into the tent. I had few redundancies. Instead, I looked for the best in each discipline.

I also looked for **complementary interests**. For instance, a new rainmaker joined our firm at this time. Rather than leave him to fend for himself (the typical approach at our company), I brought him onto my team. This was not pure altruism. We had an explicit deal in place. Ken wanted guidance and mentoring to accelerate his development. I, in turn, asked Ken to assist me in some of my business development work and involve me (for a cut of the revenue) in his clients. We shared revenue and “billing partner” status

#### WHAT TO DO: CHOOSING COLLEAGUES

- Write down a list of colleagues with whom you may be able to ally. These can include professionals inside your firm and outside—and should include multiple levels of skill.
- On your list, who has experience and skill that complements your own and is relevant to your chosen clients?
- On your list, who has complementary interests?
- On your list, with whom do you share values and respect so that it’s fun to work together?
- TAKE ACTION: Approach at least one person and talk about a potential alliance. Search for at least one work project as a pilot arrangement.

happily because we wanted different things, an exchange of experience and coaching for the opportunity to leverage time.

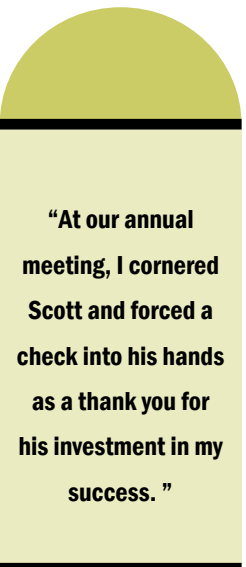
Beyond different skills and interests, I also looked for **similar values**. A team approach interested me for the fun and meaning it created as much as for the extra money it would provide. I knew that that would only come from having the trust and belonging that comes from shared values. In our case, the values we promoted were great work, candor, generosity, and industriousness. We modeled these values and insisted on them in our team.

The last trait sprang from the previous three: a **mutual respect** that made work more fun than it had been in years past.

Almost by mistake, I began to throw informal parties for this team at our annual company meeting. Each year, I looked for ways to show the group my appreciation and what they meant to our valued customers. One year, I had clients write personal notes to each team member. Another year, I hired a cartoonist to draw caricatures of each team member, embodying a trait they brought to the team. The team rewarded me by expressing their appreciation and giving me outstanding effort throughout the year. Through our shared effort, my business took a quantum leap, jumping another 30% to a level nearly three times my Rookie of the Year levels. Better yet, I had a blast doing it.

#### Choice 4: Choose a plan

All three of these choices – clients, opportunities, and colleagues – are simple enough to write about or read about. But they require a fourth choice if they are to move from words on a page to your life. That is the choice to choose a plan. Anyone can put



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these choices into action if they take a few simple actions.

First, choose a **goal**. Get very explicit with the change you are trying to make in your work and why that change matters to you. Identify a few tangible accomplishments that will show your progress. Without a clear picture of what you want, it is too easy to let these thoughts be simply wishful thinking. Second, select a few **practices** that will move toward a more focused business development plan. This could be as simple as spending no less than two hours per week on long term, business-building activities with tangible outcomes. Make them specific: “Publish four articles per year for my chosen client base” is better than “Work on business development.” Third, find a **learning partner** who will walk with you through this journey. I did this with a colleague named Scott. He and I had started with our company virtually the same day. After working separately for five years, we began to get together every few weeks on the phone to coach, encourage, and prod each other to take action. Scott’s support was invaluable, so much so that we took an unusual action: we created a reward system for our development. At the beginning of the year, we agreed to financial goals for our business and agreed to pay each other a bonus if we achieved the goal in appreciation for the time invested. The first year, I achieved my goal and Scott didn’t. At our annual meeting, I cornered him at an elevator and forced a check into his hands as a thank you for his investment in my success. Scott felt terrible that he couldn’t reciprocate, so it was no surprise that the following year, he blew away his target and sent me a check of my own.

WHAT TO DO: CHOOSING A PLAN

- Describe a picture of what change you want in your business over the next year. Be very clear on why that change is important to you!
- Select one or two meaningful accomplishments that would signal your success. Be specific!
- Choose at least one regular practice that will move you in the right direction.
- Carve out regular (quarterly?) self-evaluation times to renew energy and review progress. Put them on your calendar right now!
- TAKE ACTION: Write the plan down and share it with a learning partner.

Four years after the gloomy dinner in Wichita, I reflected on my journey. By making clear choices, I nearly tripled my business. I had a clear market focus, intentionally diversifying my client base with three industry groups. I rigorously evaluated projects to assess their value before investing in them. I had a growing list of happy clients who took me with them into new projects, divisions, and even companies. I had a team that performed well for clients and generally made my job enjoyable. And I had a learning partner who walked step by step through my personal plan. Best of all, the job stretched me, but my choices enabled me to live at a sustainable pace.

No, I hadn’t arrived. You never arrive. But I had come a distance. I had grown the business and still had a life.