

Lessons from 44 Interviews
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10 Career Lessons I Learned the Hard Way

1. Every career has seasons.

Not every season is meant for rapid growth. Professional season? Personal Season?
 Sometimes your season is about:

- Learning a new role, fund development component, skill, behavior
- Supporting a loved one (baby, special needs child, rowdy teenager, aging parent)
- Healing from a career move, transition, or family situation
- Building confidence
- Paying dues
- Leading
- Reinventing yourself

Instead of asking:

"Why am I still here?"

Ask: **"What is this season preparing me for?"**

2. Don't compare your career to someone else's.

Some people become CEOs at 30. Others become CEOs at 55. Some discover consulting.	Some discover they love operations. There isn't one "correct" career path. There is only the path that's right for you .
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3. Decide whether you're a Specialist or a Generalist.

Specialists often enjoy: • Becoming experts • Predictable responsibilities • Deep technical knowledge • Owning one area Examples: • Grant Writer • Development Director • Prospect Research • Major Gifts • Events Manager	Generalists often enjoy: • Solving many problems • Leading teams • Strategic planning • Operations • Board relations • HR • Finance • Crisis management Examples: • CEO/ Executive Director • COO • CDO	Specialist Neither is better. They're simply different careers. Generalist
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Career Self-Assessment

- ☐ I like becoming an expert.
 - ☐ I enjoy solving different problems every day.
 - ☐ I enjoy managing people.
 - ☐ I would rather work independently.
 - ☐ I enjoy strategy.
 - ☐ I enjoy details.
 - ☐ I thrive under pressure.
 - ☐ I enjoy predictable work.
- Your answers often reveal which direction you'll enjoy most.



Before You Move Up...

Ask yourself:

- Do I actually want more responsibility?
- Do I enjoy managing people?
- Can I make difficult decisions?
- Can I receive criticism?
- Am I willing to own problems I didn't create?
- Do I want to lead - or simply earn more?

Leadership isn't just a promotion. It's a completely different job.

Build Your Career Before You Need It

Don't wait until you're job searching.
Invest continually.

Credentials	Professional Associations	Mentors
• CFRE • Graduate degree • Certificates • Conferences	• AFP • State nonprofit associations • Chamber of Commerce • Young professional groups	Find people who are: • 5 years ahead • 10 years ahead • 20 years ahead Then become one for someone else.

CAREER CHESS

Interview Tips		
Interview Tips Before the interview ✓ Research the organization ✓ Read the annual report and newsletters (links should be on their website) ✓ Review IRS Form 990 ✓ Know the mission ✓ Understand the strategic plan ✓ Look over the leadership staff and Board of Directors ✓ Check out all of their social media ✓ Review recent news <prospective research on your career prospect>	During the interview Instead of trying to impress - <i>Be curious.</i> <i>Great questions include:</i> • What does success look like after one year? • Why is this position open? • What challenges is the organization facing? • What do your strongest employees have in common? • What would you like the new hire to accomplish in the first 90 days?	After the interview Send a thank-you email within 24 hours. Reference something specific from the conversation.
Resume Tips		
✓ Quantify accomplishments. Instead of: Managed events. Write: Managed 18 fundraising events, generating \$420,000 annually. Don't just cut & paste your job description into your resume. Research the same/similar job postings with different nonprofits and see what keywords and action items they are each seeking.	Use action verbs. Examples: • Led • Developed • Increased • Secured • Expanded • Implemented • Created • Improved	Keep formatting clean. Your accomplishments should stand out - not fancy graphics. Avoid inserting your headshot in your resume. Include keywords from job the posting. *AI screening loves it ❤️ ❤️ If the same job posting keeps popping up every few months, there may be an internal red flag.

The Package		
Don't Leave a Job on Emotion Everyone has difficult days. Don't resign because of: • One bad meeting • One difficult boss • One frustrating board meeting • One stressful week Instead ask: • Is this a bad day... • a bad season... • or a bad organization? Those are very different things. Career decisions deserve thoughtful planning - not emotional reactions.	Evaluate the Entire Compensation Package Salary matters. But so does life. Consider: ☐ Flexible schedule ☐ Hybrid work ☐ Professional development ☐ Conference attendance ☐ Mentorship ☐ Trust ☐ Family flexibility ☐ Mental health support ☐ Volunteer opportunities ☐ Organizational culture Sometimes a slightly lower salary creates a dramatically better life.	Your Career Chessboard Every career move should position you for the next one. Ask: • What skill am I gaining? • Who am I meeting? • What doors will this open? • Will I be more marketable in three years? Think strategically. Play chess—not checkers.
<i>After 44 interviews, I learned that careers are rarely built in one big moment. They are built one relationship, one lesson, one risk, and one decision at a time.</i> <i>Keep learning. Keep serving. Keep growing. Your next chapter may be closer than you think.</i>		

Job Search Action Plan - within the Next 30 Days

- ☐ Update my résumé
- ☐ Update LinkedIn
- ☐ Reach out to one mentor
- ☐ Join a professional organization
- ☐ Attend one networking event
- ☐ Read one leadership book
- ☐ Learn one new fundraising skill
- ☐ Identify my next career goal

Final Thought

Your career is a marathon, not a sprint.

Don't chase titles.

Don't chase salaries alone.

Build a career that aligns with your values, your family, your gifts, and the life you want to live.

The best career isn't always the one that pays the most - it's the one that allows you to thrive both professionally and personally.

Career Chess Extras:

1. **Never quit on your worst day.**
2. **People hire confidence, not perfection.**
3. **Every interview is practice for the next one.**
4. **Your reputation enters the room before you do.**
5. **Leadership is service, not status.**
6. **Find mentors...then become one.**
7. **Network before you need a job.**
8. **Don't burn bridges - you may cross them again.**
9. **A title won't fix burnout.**
10. **The best boss isn't always at the highest-paying job.**
11. **Learn to manage up as well as you manage down.**
12. **Be known for solving problems, not identifying them.**
13. **Stay curious longer than everyone else.**
14. **Always keep your résumé one interview away from being ready.**
15. **Interview the organization as much as they interview you.**
16. **Culture matters every single day.**
17. **Character travels farther than talent.**
18. **Credentials open doors; relationships keep them open.**
19. **Your next opportunity often comes through your network, not a job board.**
20. **Success is building a life - not just a résumé.**

