Short and Long-Term Focus

Idea In Short

Redirect career energy away from the medium term you cannot control. The next promotion, project or job depends on bosses, funding and luck. Instead, set a long-term direction worth pursuing and do controllable short-term work daily. Dig your moat now and let the middle sort itself.

> Where do you see yourself in five years?

The interview staple deserves skepticism. Yes, it serves as a proxy for motivation, and yes, it tests whether a candidate understands the corporate ladder. It remains unrealistic on three counts. It assumes a fairly linear approach to life, learning and opportunity, when careers actually move in S-curves. It grants a false sense of control and predictability, when success equals good decisions plus luck. And it treats a career like the strategic plan of a consumer packaged goods company, when you are not a box of cereal.

The Unreliable Middle

Most professionals spend their careers focused on the medium term: the next project, the next promotion, the next job. We want a faster return on investment, driven by urgency, impatience and a little selfishness, rather than putting in the thoughtful work of getting better at the craft. We obsess over outcomes we barely influence and grow frustrated with the often random results. The punch line requires no suspense: the medium term should not be your focus. What happens over the next six months to three years depends on factors beyond your control. Your boss can change, your project can lose funding, your family may move, a sabbatical may call. The medium term is the least reliable part of the equation, and it absorbs the most worry.

Acceleration makes the middle even less predictable. A global pandemic jolted supply chains and rewired consumer behavior. Smartphones and wireless coverage brought the internet to hundreds of millions across India and Africa. Machine learning systems now teach themselves, faster each year, and generative tools are visibly disrupting a large slice of routine white-collar work.1 Planning three years ahead in that environment is astrology with spreadsheets.

Life Is a Bunch of S-Curves

Ask anyone with grey hair and they will confirm that life is not a straight line. Opportunities arrive unexpected. Lovely people enter your life without warning. You get bored of some things and newly motivated by others. Bad managers can nudge you off a track entirely by accident. Success is good decisions plus luck, and luck genuinely matters.2 The S-curve view is not fatalism. It is a planning doctrine that says: place your effort where curves begin, not where forecasts pretend to know how they end.

Set the Long-Term Direction

The advice to stop thinking medium term often arrives over dinner from a good executive coach, the kind who excels at questions rather than answers. The questions that reset a career run deep:

- What really gets you excited about the work?
- If the money were identical, what would you genuinely enjoy doing?
- What would you like to spend the next five years getting really good at?
- What did you love doing as a kid?

Only you can set this North Star, determine your competitive advantage and choose where and how you will compete. What will your brand be, whom will you seek out and in whom will you invest? It is all up to you, which is exciting, empowering and leaves nowhere to hide.

Act in the Short Term

The other controllable end is today. Do the work and put in the ten thousand hours. If strategy means creating a sustainable competitive advantage, apply the definition to yourself:

> what is your unfair advantage, and what steps taken now make you uniquely valuable?

Warren Buffett's investing image transfers perfectly to careers:

> I don't want a business that's easy for competitors. I want a business with a moat around it with a very valuable castle in the middle

You decide what today looks like. As Seth Godin argues, artists ship, and inaction is the only unforgivable strategy. Becoming a linchpin, someone others value, need and seek out, is built one shipped piece of work at a time.

A Quarterly Rhythm That Fits

The two-horizon doctrine needs only a light operating rhythm. Once a quarter, revisit the North Star questions for an hour and confirm the direction still excites you, adjusting when honest answers demand it. Weekly, pick the one shipped piece of work that will most strengthen the moat, and protect the hours it needs before the calendar fills. Daily, close with a two-minute note of what got built, because a running record of shipped work inoculates against the medium-term anxiety that idle reflection breeds. Skip the five-year plan entirely, and when interviewers insist on the question, answer with direction and craft rather than titles: the skills you intend to master and the problems you intend to own travel across any org chart the middle years produce.

Short-Term Input, Long-Term Output

Drawn as a diagram, the idea connects today's actions on the left to the long-term goal on the right through a chain of steps, some known and many unknown. You can break the journey into workable milestones, and honesty requires admitting that the more ambitious and innovative the goal, the less tried-and-true the plan. Stay open to serendipity, get some hustle on and make your own weather. The closing instruction inverts the interview question entirely. Do not limit yourself to the next promotion, project or job. Decide what economic castle you intend to build, and start digging the moat today. The middle years, unreliable as ever, will take care of themselves.

- 1Machine learning
- 2Serendipity

Summary

Careers are S-curves, not straight lines. The medium term is the least reliable part of the equation, so anchor on a long-term North Star, ship work today and stay open to serendipity. Short-term input plus long-term direction beats medium-term worry every time.