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Career moves for ages 20 to 70

Presents an October 1968 interview with Peter Drucker, author of 'Managing for the Future: The Nineties and Beyond,' his 27th book. How young people today can know where they fit in this world; What the hardest thing to know is; How many people know from the beginning what they want to be; More.

By PT Staff, published on November 01, 1992

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A "Best of PT" interview from October 1968 with America's leading management consultant

Peter Drucker wrote his first book, *The End of Economic Man*, in 1939, when he was 29 years old. Fifty-three birthdays later, he has completed his 27th book, entitled *Managing for the Future: The Nineties and Beyond* (HarperCollins) while maintaining a professorship of social sciences and management at the Claremont Graduate School, in Claremont, California. A sampler from his job history would include management consultant to several of the country's largest companies, economist, news correspondent, and professor.

When PSYCHOLOGY TODAY first spoke to Drucker in 1968, universities didn't know what hit them. An entire generation of baby boomers was entering college and expressing their profound disapproval of the adult educational system, which they felt lacked the flexibility to encourage all but the most staid vocations. Eventually, those graduates expressed similar disapproval with the "business-as-usual" approach to hiring.

In the face of their dissatisfaction, Drucker, as a management consultant, was in a unique position to counsel people, young and old, about their career choices and about which roads they might better have taken. His words reveal a marked suspicion of rigidly organized education and encourage businesses to offer differing job opportunities to employees throughout their careers.

After enduring a decade wherein yearlong waiting lists for the "right" kindergarten were viewed as a necessity in order to receive a proper education, we may find that Drucker's words of discovery and freedom ring especially true.

Psychology Today. How can young people today know where they fit in this world? How can they choose?

Peter Drucker: Here I am, 58, and I still don't know what I am going to do when I grow up. My children and their spouses think I am kidding when I say that, but I am not. Nobody tells them that life is not that categorized. And nobody tells them that the only way to find what you want is to create a job. **Nobody worth his salt has ever moved into an existing job.** There are a few elementary things you can do first.

PT: And what are they?

Drucker: First, you know what you don't want to do, but what you do want to do is still a mystery. There is no way of finding out but trying. Second, one doesn't marry a job. A job is your opportunity to find out-that's all it is. You owe no loyalty to your employer other than not betraying secrets. Be ruthless about finding out whether you belong; I am. Finally, looking around never hurts. One can always quit. Don't try to reason out those things one can learn only from experience. Do you know enough about yourself?. There are things you can know, even at age 20.

PT: When I was 20 I knew so many things. I knew that life was exciting and romantic and a great adventure. What should my career thoughts have been?

Drucker: I think one of the most important things would be to know if you like pressure. I am one who needs pressure. I am sluggish, lethargic, until the adrenaline starts pouring. People differ so. One of the men I am closest to goes to pieces under pressure. He is one of the most respected urologists in the field, but he spends nights at the bedside of a critically ill patient, and it is obvious he is going to pieces before the patient dies. He's a wreck-which probably makes him a good doctor.

PT: What else should you know besides your ability to withstand pressure?

Drucker: You have to know whether you belong in a big organization. In a big organization, you don't see results, you are too damn far away from them. The enjoyment is being a part of the big structure. If you tell people you work for G.E., everyone knows what G.E. is. And I think you need to know whether you want to be in daily combat as a dragon-slayer or if you want to think things through, to analyze, prepare. Do you enjoy surmounting the daily crisis, or do you really get your satisfaction out of anticipating and preventing the crisis? These things I believe one does know about oneself at age 20.

PT: What is the hardest thing to know?

Drucker: There is one great question I don't think most young people can answer: "Are you a perceptive or an analytical person?" This is terribly important. Either you start out with an insight and then think the problem through, or you start out with a train of thought and arrive at a conclusion. One really needs to be able to do both, but most people can't. I am totally unanalytical and completely perceptive. I have never understood anything that I have not seen.

PT: Is it like being right- or left-handed?

Drucker. That's right. The only ambidextrous people are trial lawyers-they both read and listen. Nobody else can. I am a listener; I can read after I listen but not before. Probably I can't even write first, but that's pathological.

PT: But what is the most important thing about the choice of the job, apart from the personality of the person?

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Drucker: Job content. The question is not, am I interested in biology. That interest may or may not change. You can't tell. The issue is: when you work, do you want to sit down to a stack of information reports and to plot figures for two weeks, or do you want to go around and pick people's brains? Do you enjoy being alone, or do you have to be a member of a team? How do you really function? There is a fabulous amount of misinformation about jobs, because there is not one job pattern that is clear. You just can't tell by the field.

And there's another highly important matter. No matter what job it is, it ain't final. The first few years are trials. The probability that the first choice you make is right for you is roughly one in a million. If you decide your first choice is the right one, chances are you are just plain lazy. People believe that if they take their job for G.E. or NYU or Psychology Today that they have taken their vows, that the world will come to an end if it doesn't work out.

PT: How many of us know from the very beginning what we want to be?

Drucker: Contrary to everything that modern psychologists tell you, I am convinced that one can acquire knowledge, one can acquire skills, but one cannot change his personality. Only the Good Lord changes personality-that's his business. I have had four great children, and I can assure you that by the time they were six months old, their personalities were set in concrete. After six months, parents get educated but not children. One can take a child and try to bring him out of excessive timidity, but you won't

ever make a bold one out of him. Or, one can take a bold one, a rash one, and try to teach him how to count to ten before shooting with the hope that he will count at least to three. But that is all one can do. One can take a charmer and try to get him-charmers are mostly boys-to work to catch up with what he has improvised. And one can get one of those awful, horrible, overplanners to jump once in a while. But you are not going to change the basic structure. It is much more important that in this age of psychology people tell the kids that what you are matters, and your values matter.

PT: Now, what about going to graduate school? Suppose one has learned all he can about himself. Should he go on to graduate school before he tries his first job?

Drucker. In graduate school they are going to postpone themselves, and they will do so with the peculiar idea that academia is a free environment. They soon discover that graduate school is our least vented environment. The arrogance, the petty restrictions of the learned are horrible. Nothing is more demeaning than to be forced to be conventionally unconventional.

PT: Politics in the groves of academia fascinate and appall me. The infighting is worse than in the old Kansas City or Boston wards. And the academicians are far more shrewd and vicious.

Drucker: There's only one kind of politics that's worse. We have only 2,000 colleges, and academia is not so narrow here as in Europe. But look at musicians. This country has never been able to support more than 25 pianists. If you are a first-rate pianist, you take the bread out of somebody's mouth. That's not quite true of academia, but there is a horrible frustration if you are not Number One. In academia there are numerous jobs for the merely competent man, but not room for him.

PT: Would you then, say, go into the Peace Corps first, before considering graduate school?

Drucker: No! The Peace Corps is a great disappointment.

PT: How can you say that? Why?

Drucker: I have seen too many kids when they came back. In their personal development, they are exactly where they were when they left. The Peace Corps is just a postponement, a delay. My conclusion is that one belongs in the Peace Corps in his 30s, not in his 20s. In the 20s he belongs in the city administration of San Pedro, or out selling Gallo wine.

PT: I see what you want. You think that any good young person should go out and jump in somewhere, anywhere.

Drucker: Yes, and not with the typical question the kids ask the recruiters: Is this the right place to stay for the next 35 years? Hell, the answer in all likelihood is no. There is a right question to ask the recruiter: Is this a place where I can learn something for two years and have fun for two years, and where I will have a chance if I produce?

PT: All right. I believe you. You'd put off graduate school?

Drucker: I'd put off elementary school if I had my way. I am not a great believer in school. School is primarily an institution for the perpetuation of adolescence.

PT: If you don't believe in school, how would you educate?

Drucker: That is an entirely different question. The thought that school educates is not one I have accepted yet. No, I am not joking.

PT: I know you are not joking.

Drucker: No, I would be much happier if kids at age 17 were young adults among adults. Those who wanted to go back to school could come back later. They would be better students and much happier people. But I don't control the universe. In the university we expect everybody to sit on his butt through the full natural life-span of man-which is about 25. All I can say is, Thank God I am not young. I could not survive this horror. The only thing my secondary school faculty and I were in total agreement on was that I sat too long and did not belong in school. In this we were in total agreement. Otherwise, we had few points of contact. Adolescence is a man made problem. It is not a stage of nature.

Graduate school is not focused on forming a human being but on imparting a finer set of skills. The purpose is not education, but specialization. I am a doer, not a contemplator; a perceiver, not a thinker. I am one of those who has to listen to himself to know what he is thinking or saying all the time. These are all very undesirable characteristics, so I am not at all the type that graduate schools look for.

PT: Did you go from the university into management consultant work, or was it the other way around?

Drucker: I have always taught on the side, because I like to teach. I started teaching at 20 when I was in law school out of sheer boredom. It was the only way to stay alive.

After I finished secondary school, I went to work in England as an apprentice clerk in a woolen-export house. I was the first person to start apprenticeship as late as 18. All my bosses' sons started at 14. And I was the first who did not live over the premises-solely because a fire had destroyed the premises. And I was the first not to start off with a goose-quill pen. That was the year they discovered they couldn't buy goose-quill pens anymore.

PT: That sounds like something out of Charles Dickens. How did you get there?

Drucker: Well, I grew up in Vienna, but my family always had very close ties with England. By the way, the only connection I can claim with psychology is that my family knew Freud. My father knew him from boyhood and put him on a pedestal as a genius who could do no wrong. My mother's reaction was quite different. When she was a young student, she was one of Freud's favorites. (She was one of the first women to go to medical school. She had to go to Zurich to do it.) She understood why he was important but she refused to have anything to do with him.

PT: Why couldn't she stand Freud?

Drucker: She felt that he was an evil man. She was a perceptive person. My father saw this man as a genius, and felt that geniuses should be allowed anything.

PT: Why did your mother feel that Freud was an evil man?

Drucker: Because he was, period. He was a man who had to domineer.

PT: Let's get back to your own life. Where did you go from your apprenticeship in the export business?

Drucker: I went to Germany. I went into investment banking. In 1929, as you may have heard, there was a slight unpleasantness. Investment banking came to an end, and I became a newspaperman. But all the time, I was enrolled as a law student.

PT: I didn't know you were a journalist.

Drucker: In a way I have never ceased being one. But for two periods in my life this was my main occupation. For a few years in the late '20s and early '30s when I worked on the Continent primarily as one of the editors of a German daily paper and then in the late '30s when I first came to the United States as American correspondent for a group of British papers. But I have really been writing all my life, and it is the only thing I claim any skill in. And

in between my newspaper jobs, for four years right after the Nazis came to power, I was in London as an investment banker and economist.

PT: You did quite a few things as a young man.

Drucker: Yes, until I was 30 I was really a drifter. I knew perfectly well all the things I didn't want to do with myself. In retrospect, I realize that I must have been a very sorry specimen and I do marvel at my parents' patience with me. It was not until I came to this country that I realized what I wanted.

PT: But you were very successful in that interim period.

Drucker: I looked successful, but I wasn't. This is why I have such sympathy with today's young people. What saved me, they don't have. I had to have a job to pay the rent. And they, instead, have Uncle Sam with a graduate grant, which makes finding yourself a good deal harder than hard times did for my generation.

PT: You came to the United States before the Second World War?

Drucker: Yes. In April, 1937. Here I also taught on the side. I taught philosophy at Bennington college in Vermont, then I came here to New York University. I am not a proper model for anything.

PT: When did you switch entirely to management consulting?

Drucker: I haven't. I am tired of management books.

PT: You may be tired of management books, but our readers want to know more about careers. Young people want to know how to find their particular round hole, or square—depending on their shape. You said the young person looking for a career should figure: "Do I fit into the large corporation?" or "Should I be on my own?" But what is the opportunity for being on one's own? Isn't the large corporation most likely.?

Drucker: Even in General Electric there are laces where u can be on your own, plenty of them. But let's go back to examples once again. I know two young men, each of whom decided he would like to be completely on his own. One is building a very nice business as a computer consultant on the West Coast.

The other one is in the East, building his own design engineering firm. These young men are loners, they are extremes. I am one myself. But take a more typical case. Yesterday, I had a young scientist here. He had been with a

medium-sized company for eight years, and was their number two man in research. He wanted a change, but refused to go into a big company. He knew he'd get better pay there, but he said that unless he was in on a whole project, from the formulation of the proposal to NASA all the way to the prototype delivery, he wasn't interested. This morning, I think I found him the job he wants.

PT: What kind of a job?

Drucker: A job as head of the field of instrumentation design at one of the country's largest hospitals. He knows nothing about biochemistry, but he can learn. He will work with the surgeons there and will head a small group of half a dozen engineers and biochemists. Now the hospital is a hell of a big organization, but he won't even see the big organization.

PT: You keep running into complaints about technology. Clark Kerr has said that we can't really make our peace with technology. How can the individual survive and function in this technology?

Drucker: **Technology should be made to serve the individual.** It can, too.

PT: How? Isn't there war between the individual and technology?

Drucker: There is no war; there is fear. It doesn't ever pay to be permissive and pleasant about mechanical gadgets. Be nasty. Throw it out if it doesn't perform.

PT: I wonder if people were afraid of the light switch once.

Drucker: That's right. I don't know whether you know that the first advanced management-training course was one that the German Post Office called in 1888. Its topic was the use of the telephone. Top management was scared of the telephone. At the moment you realize that you can always pull the plug, the fear is ended. Once you know what-you want to do, either it can do it for you or it can't. If it can't, to hell with it. **The computer is a tool. If the tool can't do something for you, leave it in the tool box.**

PT: And careers are a tool, too.

Drucker: Precisely. The smart way to look at a career is, What does it do for me? What do I want to accomplish?

PT: Are there any special things to look for in a company?

Drucker: Yes. You want old age at top management. You know, one question the young career seeker never asks the company recruiter is, "How old are the department heads?"

PT: You want old ones so you can come up, right?

Drucker: Oh, my, yes. You don't want the First National City Bank in the city, for instance.

PT. They're all young?

Drucker: Oh, yes; the executive vice president is 36. Too many companies actually are lopsided. You want a company with some old and some young at the head.

PT: People are younger longer now. How has this changed the job picture?

Drucker. The real career crisis is the extension of the working-life span. In the time of our grandparents, man's working life was over at 45. By then, few people were physically or mentally capable of working. It was a rural civilization and the pre-industrial farmer was either worn out or had been killed by an accident by age 45. The Chinese or Irish who built our railroads had a five year working life. Within five years they were gone-by liquor, or syphilis, or accident, or hard work. Now, suddenly you have people reaching the age of 65 in the prime of physical and mental health.

This is due partly to the movement of people from the farm to the city-accidents occur on the farm with about ten times the frequency of that in the most dangerous industrial employment-and partly to scientific management taking the toil out of labor. We have pushed up education to compensate for this.

PT: What possible solution is there other than a continual increasing of life long education programs?

Drucker: I am absolutely convinced that one of the greatest needs is the systematic creation of second careers. At 45, after having been a market research man, or a professor of English or psychology, or an officer in the armed services for 20 years, a man is spent. At least he thinks so. But he is mentally, biologically, and physically sound. His kids are grown up and the mortgage is paid off and he has plenty to contribute to society.

PT: I should think they'd be scared to death.

Drucker: They are, scared out of their wits. Most of them think they need a graduate degree or some kind of guidance. All they need is for someone to say: "Look, Jack, there's nothing wrong with you." They can apply to one of the big downtown law firms for a job as office manager. These have 99 people who know nothing but law, and they need someone to organize them. There are jobs as business managers of law firms or accounting firms or small colleges. All kinds of good jobs.

PT: It would be like starting life all over again.

Drucker: Six months after these men have taken on their new jobs, they are 20 years younger. They have recovered enthusiasm, they are growing, they have ideas. Their wives are enchanted. They are exciting again.

PT: Not everybody would be a success as an office manager. Are there any other jobs that are especially suited to second careers?

Drucker: Indeed there are. The older professions are best suited to become second careers. Middle age is really the best time to switch to being the lawyer, the teacher, the priest, the doctor-I shocked you-and the social worker.

PT: However would you train a man to be a doctor as a second career?

Drucker: It is not very difficult to be a good doctor, a good physician, I am not saying these men could do good heart transplants or diagnose some

obscure tropical disease, but they would know full well that this diagnosis is not right and maybe the patient ought to go see a specialist. But they could do the work the average general practitioner faces.

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PT: What has been the reaction of the medical schools to this idea?

Drucker: I've talked to them. I said: "Take men of 45, engineers, weather forecasters, career officers, how would you make doctors of them in one year?" The medical schools said it couldn't be done. I said, "What do you mean, it can't be done? With the amount of ignorance you have, I could teach you in three weeks' " They answered, "It can't be done. They have to learn the bones of the body." But they can look that up, you know. Very rarely does a bone of the throat move into the knee.

And I talked to the archdioceses about putting these men in the parishes as priests in six months. "Can't be done;" I was told. Most training for these old professions consists of trying to simulate experience. Hell, these people have experience.

PT: Is it being done anywhere?

Drucker: We are putting men into the classroom to teach at the University in six months.

PT: How?

Drucker: How? By putting them into the classroom, period. Eight out of ten will swim. And, once they swim I can work on polishing their style. If they sink, I jump in with a life preserver. What I can't do is to teach them how to swim.

PT: And if they sink, you pull them out so they can do something else?

Drucker: No, I dry them off and throw them in again.

PT: In my mind, you are the ideal management consultant. But what you have been describing to me partly is a personal employment agency. How did you ever get into this wonderful thing? I wanted to be a missionary when I was a little girl. You are one.

Drucker: Well, I have students, and friends who have kids. And it has gotten around that if you get thrown out of the U.S. Navy on the Eastern seaboard, there is a peculiar character around named Drucker of whom most people seriously disapprove. I'm too frivolous for them.

PT: What's it like, being a management consultant?

Drucker: Any man who has been a consultant has dealt in the unlicensed practice of psychiatry. The great weakness of an organization is that you can't have a confidante. You are always either boss or subordinate. And people are terribly [lonely](#), terribly lonely. Here comes an outsider, the licensed lunatic, and you just start spilling. What clients tell you is incredible. I know much too much about them. Every management consultant has the same experience.

PT: Doesn't this knowledge help you as a consultant?

Drucker: No.

PT: It doesn't help at all?

Drucker: Oh, sometimes. But more often, one has to suppress it. I have never liked to be cruel, and as I get older, I hate cruelty more and more. But one has to force oneself to do what is right. Sometimes that means cutting off heads.

Then the question is, How do we do it in a compassionate way? If the compassion enters into the initial decision, you get sentimental. In the end, you do much more harm. The real cruelty is always that of sentimental people. And so, one has to force oneself to eliminate all one knows about that poor devil and only bring it in afterwards. You say, Now that we have cut off his head, what do we do with him so that he doesn't feel it? But first, his head must be cut off.

PT: What happens with the thousands and thousands of people who are stuck, working out their years till retirement?

Drucker: I think company managers will have to learn to sit down and say: "Look, Jack, do you want to stay here or do you really want to do something? If you stay here, you are about as far as you will ever get. Oh, maybe two more raises."

Most so-called promotions are not promotions, but raises, you know. It just changes the title. And the boss should say: "You are going to remain a quality control manager. Do you want to do that for 20 more years? We are perfectly [happy](#) to have you stay around here. On the other hand, you have all the mortgages paid off. What have you always wanted to do? If you want to become a priest, well, we'll help you." Does this make any sense to you?

PT: It makes all the sense in the world.