

UNEXPECTED CAREER CALLINGS: NOW WHAT?

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The night was unseasonably warm as 39-year-old Joshua Roberts and his wife, Erin, left the packed auditorium on December 8th, 2019. The crowd of onlookers were all smiles as the new graduates gathered for their last pictures as a cohort before being swarmed by well-wishers. Roberts had just completed the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa. Like many others that night, he felt a sense of pride in his accomplishment; but also sadness as the journey ended. There was also a sense of trepidation as to what the future may hold. Roberts had begun the doctorate program with the focused idea that the acquired research skills and doctorate title earned would help propel him into the senior executive ranks at his current company ICS, for which he was the Director of Quality Assurance.

But now, only three years later from when he started his doctorate journey, Roberts' career perspective had been drastically expanded. Now that his academic studies were complete, he could focus on his career progression. As family and friends snapped pictures of him, Roberts mind began to drift, *"I have so many exciting possibilities in front of me."*

Before working towards his DBA, Roberts never realized how much of an impact he could make by teaching, but now, he had the desire, network and skills to make significant contributions to both science (academia) and practice (industry). Roberts explained to Erin as they were walking, *"I never fully grasped the reach teaching and research has. I'm a trained scholar, I can teach at the collegiate level and could make a meaningful contribution in practice oriented academic research. Before attending this program, I thought the most influential way to lead was to be at the top of a corporation, but I now realize I could potentially make an equal impact by transitioning to a full-time business school professor...Don't get me wrong, you know I'm passionate about my job at ICS, but I think I want to explore new opportunities. I've been there four years and in industry for 15 years. A change is sounding really good."*

Erin responded to Roberts with a smile, *“Yes, all of the possibilities are thrilling. Just be sure you consider the family impact. For the last three years, you have invested 15 hours a week on schoolwork, sometimes more. In addition, all of that is on top of the crazy hours you put in at ICS. We’d all love to have you home more, especially with our new son on the way.”*

Roberts agreed, *“Trust me Erin. I want that too. Spending more time with you and the family is extremely important to me. I don’t want to be just be a weekend husband...or a weekend dad...I want to be in the thick of it just like you are...”*

Roberts grabbed his wife’s hand and led her through the crowd. It was time to leave graduation and go home. His mind was swirling with ideas and his heart was filled with emotion. He was not sure what path to take and desperately wanted to make the best decision for himself and his family. As Erin and Roberts approached their car, Roberts was shaken back to the present with his wife’s calming words, *“I am so proud of you sweetheart,”* She then added, *“Deep breathes. We have time to figure this out. This is exciting and I can’t wait to see what the future holds for us.”*

“Me too” thought Roberts, *“Me too...”*

STARTING A FAMILY

In 2009, Roberts met Erin while they were both working at Stenson, a defense communications company. Roberts worked in their government communications division managing the supplier quality organization. Erin had recently completed law school and passed the Florida bar. She was working in contracts. Roberts recalled, *“I had never met someone so confident, so witty, so smart... We started dating and within months we both knew we would get married and start a family. Our shared passion for education, hard work with purpose and family values naturally tied us .”*

In 2012, Roberts and Erin married. They worked together until 2014, when Roberts decided to leave the organization to work for ICS. He was drawn to the ICS opportunity because of the additional scope of responsibility. At ICS he would be responsible for the entire quality management system. At Stenson, he was responsible for only a small piece of that system. Erin worked at Stenson until 2015. She decided to leave the company and postpone her career to raise her expected son Dillon. Erin remembers, *“Having a parent stay home and raise our son and other children that may come along was a shared desire of my husband and me. We knew we wanted our kids to get a good education starting from a very young age, and we knew we were the best to give them this. So the decision for me to stay home came naturally. We both agreed I would stay at home until all the children were in kindergarten. I would then get back into the workforce full-time*

again. We felt very secure with this decision. My husband was making solid money at ICS. He could tell the company was in a good place financially and that there would be room for professional growth and promotions.”

ICS

ICS was a relatively small company with about 85 employees. Although it was performing well overall, it struggled with a variety of quality related issues (defects, supplier issues and on-time delivery) that were a cause of customer complaints that the ICS management team urgently wanted to resolve.

In 2014, ICS had created the Director of Quality Assurance role for Roberts (see Exhibit 1). Roberts was able to negotiate this new position given his expertise and the value the role would have on increasing the perception and performance of the internal Quality organization. Prior to Roberts' arrival, managers were the highest level in the Quality organization. Roberts was attracted to the director role because it gave him total responsibility for the quality function and the chance to build the quality system from the ground up. This was in contrast to larger organizations where the quality function was much more specialized into multiple departments and the quality system was already firmly established.

In late 2015, Roberts initiated a conversation with his boss Richard Larsen, the Sr. Vice President and General Manager of ICS. Roberts wanted new opportunities and increased responsibility: He wanted a promotion. Roberts confidently reminded Larsen that he had received stellar “promotion worthy” performance reviews the past two review cycles.

Larsen responded, *“You have next level leadership potential. I’ve always envisioned you here, in the future, at the Senior Executive level beyond the quality function.. You are ready - I just have no idea when we will be able to make this happen. All of the seats are currently filled in the executive ranks and while we believe the organization will grow in the future, for the short term there will be limited growth with few if any promotions.”*

Roberts stated, *“Thank you, Richard. I know we have had conversations about me moving up before, either in my current role or transitioning into another function within the company such as Vice President of Program Management or Vice President of Operations. While I respect these options are dependent upon the right timing and availability, it’s hard not having more clarity and specifics as to when this promotion will occur.”*

The conversation left an indelible mark on Roberts. He felt he was ready for his next step, and his boss felt the same way; however, there were no opportunities for advancement. Later that day, Roberts remarked to a colleague, *“If I have to wait*

for a promotion, I better make the most of my time. I need to be so qualified that Larsen fears losing me. To make that happen I need to go back to school.”

JOSHUA ROBERTS:

Roberts had performed formal leadership roles in industry for the past 8.5 years. He had served as Supplier Quality Engineering Manager for Stenson Company for four years, leading 30 engineers and technicians to ensure that vendor product met or exceeded program requirements and applicable quality standards. He had served as a Sr. Quality Engineer prior to that assignment and started his career as a Manufacturing Engineer. In his leadership positions, he was responsible for leading his employees and department, and managing budgets ranging from a few thousand dollars to well over 2 million annually.

Roberts held a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering from the University of Florida. At Florida Institute of Technology, Roberts earned a MBA to help him climb into the management ranks; he also completed a MS in Engineering Management to differentiate himself from the competition. Additionally, he had five professional certifications. See Exhibit 2 for Roberts' full resume.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA'S (USF) DOCTORATE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (DBA) PROGRAM

In late 2016, Roberts decided to pursue his Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) at USF. The DBA program is an equivalent alternative to the more well-known Doctor of Philosophy degree commonly referred to as the PhD.

Roberts was attracted to the USF program because it was highly reputable, as it had the distinction of being AACSB accredited, which is the hallmark of excellence in business education. This accreditation was held by less than 5% of business schools worldwide (Demonstrating Innovation, Engagement, and Impact: 51 Global Business Schools Extend Their AACSB, 2017). The USF DBA program appealed to Roberts because of the faculty who participated in the program. Many distinguished scholars in a variety of academic disciplines were passionate about executive education with the mission of building bridges between the practitioner and academic communities. The DBA classes were face-to-face on the weekends once a month with all remaining work completed online. This structure allowed Roberts to continue working in industry full time.

As of 2016, since starting his DBA, Roberts had studied with distinguished professors who were transforming society and people's lives through teaching and research. One of the professors he admired most had taught him the case study method and shown him how case study research could be impactful in both industry and in the classroom. Roberts appreciated case research as it allowed him to get to

know people and businesses up-close via observation and interviews. He enjoyed examining a situation and determining what related contextual conditions and theory he was witnessing. Roberts immediately recognized the opportunity that case study research provided to practice and academia. He reasoned that his years of experience in industry, coupled with the networks he had created, would provide many opportunities for him to make an impact and become a well-published researcher in the field.

CAREER CONSIDERATIONS

Because of the learning in the DBA program, Roberts' classmates were beginning to make substantial and meaningful contributions by starting their own companies, creating non-profits, climbing the executive ranks within their own organizations and pursuing full-time academic positions at both teaching and research-intensive universities.

These influences around him made Roberts envision the future of his career differently. He saw how happy his professors were and wondered if teaching would give him that same satisfaction. Roberts also witnessed several of his classmates accepting industry jobs outside of their organizations and wondered if that may be an option for him as well.

Throughout his time at USF, Roberts discussed the possibility of a full-time academic life with various USF mentors. This group included, the DBA Academic Director, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, and Roberts' dissertation chairman and the DBA Program Director.

Roberts remembers the DBA Academic Director proclaiming, *"The academic life of a professor is the best job on earth! It allows one to pursue their passions and test your ideas in the marketplace."* Other respected Professors also encouraged Roberts to consider higher education. One stated, *"I think you have a real talent for this type of life. You would enjoy it and contribute within your field. Do not forget the work schedule is fantastic. A yearly contract is usually only 9-10 months long versus the 12 months in industry."* Another professor added, *"Now is a great time to move into academia. The DBA degree is growing in popularity and acceptance. This explosion in growth will need to be supported by faculty who can help bridge the gap between traditional academics and the needs of industry. Graduates from respected DBA programs are uniquely situated to meet this need."*

Roberts appreciated the encouraging feedback and advantageous reasons to move into higher education; however, he also realized there were many unknowns - and many reasons to stay within ICS.

STAY AT ICS:

In 2019, there had been three promotions at ICS that had peaked Roberts' interest. The organization had created Sr. Director Roles for tenured, talented individuals within the organization. Because of this, Roberts thought there was a possibility a Sr. Director slot would be created for him or even a Vice President role after graduation. A sister division located in New Mexico, of similar size and organizational culture as ICS, had just received permission from corporate to create a VP of Quality position.

In 2019, Roberts was making approximately 135K a year plus bonus. Each year he had received a high performer increase in the 3-5% range. Bonuses the past two years had been relatively meager compared to years past due to company performance, although based on his performance he would receive the highest amount.

Receiving a high performer bonus came naturally to Roberts. He was resourceful, having made strong relationships with people in the organization that could help him achieve his goals. Roberts also had an aptitude for data analysis. He enjoyed digging into data sets and finding patterns and trends among the data, which was quite helpful in the world of quality assurance. He especially enjoyed using the many tools and techniques associated with continuous improvement. As one recent vendor relayed, *"Roberts really helped us out. We had never used root cause analysis tools before and he guided us through the process. He showed us how to use the tools, then helped us apply it immediately to a problem we were having with a critical customer..."*

Even though Roberts always executed his duties admirably, he struggled with monotony. He liked to move fast and did not enjoy problems that were repetitive in nature. There were several monotonous tasks at ICS he was responsible for and because they were boring, he delegated them to subordinates.

When considering the option to stay at his current company, Roberts could not help but hear the words of Erin echo in his head, *"Staying at ICS would certainly be the easiest option and be the least disruptive to our growing family."* She added, *"My biggest fear is the time you are away from us. With the new baby coming, we will need your presence more than ever. If you go to a new company or industry, there are many unknowns."*

Roberts enjoyed the fast-paced rhythm of industry, especially the upbeat pace at ICS. He felt invigorated when faced with a difficult problem uniquely designed for his specific skill set that had an impact on both his company and society. That was one of the main attractions to the defense industry. Nearly all problems had that

duality. For example, when Roberts helped develop the capabilities of an ICS supplier, he was strengthening the supply chain for ICS; reducing the overall cost of the system for the customer; and contributing to society by delivering a product that the United States government used in defense of the country. He took pride in that contribution.

There remained many interesting and fulfilling projects Roberts and his team could develop. Specifically, Roberts was interested in applying the knowledge he had acquired in the DBA program at his company. He felt confident the rigorous research skills, specifically the quantitative data analytics that would allow data visualization and multipurpose qualitative interviewing techniques, would give him the opportunity to solve complex cross-department problems within the organization. Roberts felt comfortable at ICS. He knew the key people in the organization, the technology and the customers. He knew the expected workload, the barometer for excellence and what to avoid to be successful. In other words, Roberts knew how to be successful at ICS.

Another intriguing reason to stay was that ICS had a very senior executive team. Nearly all of the senior executives at ICS were approaching retirement. Roberts' boss, Larsen, had confided to him that he expected to retire in the next 3-5 years. Other executive opportunities (senior executives retiring) in program management (also 3-5 years) and operations (5-7 years) also beckoned. Although there was no guarantee that there would not be a restructuring, the opportunity of open positions in years to come was promising.

Roberts thought, *"If I could just bide my time, I'll surely be promoted to a senior executive in the next 5 years or so."* However, he could not help but wonder, *"Are there better opportunities elsewhere? Am I hurting my long-term prospects by staying? Do I want to just sit around and wait?"*

INDUSTRY – LEAVE:

Having been frustrated by another ICS promotion conversation that went nowhere in August 2019, Roberts started researching external career opportunities. From his research (see Exhibit 3 for sample job posting), he found the industry had many opportunities and that there was a large demand for someone with his skillset. To his delight, he also found out through informal conversations with mentors that many of the companies he would be interested in were intrigued by candidates with a doctorate degree.

Roberts knew from experience that the largest increases in pay usually occurred due to a move to another company. These usually happened when the employee stayed within the same industry, so this option was likely to be in the aerospace and

defense industry. To leave ICS, Roberts would consider something in the 150k base salary plus 10-20% bonus to be fair compensation, unless the commute time was significantly better, in which case he would consider a lower salary; but not lower than the 130k he was making at ICS. Receiving 150k base salary plus bonus fell in between his current title of Director and salary of a Vice President according to the American Society of Quality's (ASQ) annual salary survey (Quality Progress, December 2018). The ideal position at another company would include increased responsibility, title, compensation and no more than 25% travel, which was equivalent to his current position.

From a work/life balance perspective, the primary source of frustration with his current employer was Robert's commute time as he spent between two hours and thirty minutes on the road. Typically, this type of problem was resolved with either flexible time or remote work. Roberts had discussed the possibility of remote work with Larsen. Larsen gave Roberts a response that did not make his decision any easier: *"Unfortunately, we do not currently have a remote work policy. I have discussed this issue with our President (Richard Jackson) multiple times in an effort to make our company more competitive in the talent market. He is not a fan of remote work and I do not see that policy changing any time soon."*

Roberts' ideal commute time was no more than 30 minutes in either direction. Roberts reached out to two trusted sources from his professional network to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing opportunities outside ICS. These sources had guided him in the past; they were mentors, friends, and he had worked for them both. The first was Brian Snyder, Vice President of Quality at General Systems Corporation; and the second was Shelly Wilson, Vice President of Operational Excellence at L4 Corporation.

Snyder advised, *"Three years is typically how long I spend with any one company before I look for advancement opportunities elsewhere. It's generally more lucrative to go outside of your organization, but the most important thing is that you are still excited to go to work in the morning."*

Wilson added, *"With your skills, experience and newly added doctorate credential I believe you'd be very competitive for many senior level executive positions in the quality field."*

ACADEMIA:

Roberts felt he needed experience that is more concrete before he could commit to an academic life full time. In October 2019, he applied for and received the first adjunct faculty position he thought was interesting. The job, which began in

January 2019, was teaching a graduate school management class less than five miles from where he worked.

Roberts had been quite surprised that the academic route had appealed to him. For starters, he was pleasantly surprised that business professors were among the highest paid university faculty. For example, according to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), a Professor of Management could expect to start as an Assistant Professor and earn approximately \$108,000 a year and make up to nearly \$140,000 as a Full Professor on average. The process took about 7 years. The attractive salary, while still considerably less than what Roberts could expect in industry, made the academic route a real possibility.

The flexible schedule made academia an appealing option. Roberts discovered from various job postings that the average expected workweek for a business professor was in the neighborhood of 35-40 hours a week. This was significantly less than his current schedule where he typically worked 10 hour days, five days a week in addition to commute time. Among the responsibilities were teaching 3-4 classes per semester, quality research and service to the university, college of business or an associated professional organization. There were two required semesters per year (Fall and Spring), which equated to a total of 9-10 months of work per year (at ICS he worked 11 months, with 1 month of vacation). If desired, the 2-3 months he was not working could consist of extra teaching, research, or consulting opportunities that would provide extra pay. According to the AACSB 2018 salary survey, the average additional salary for these activities (minus consulting) were in the range of \$9,000.

The stress of “quality research” was often mentioned as a major impediment of academic life. Typically, at research universities, tenure track faculty were required to publish in a small number of prestigious academic journals. These journals often had remarkably low acceptance rates. For example, in Roberts’ domain of management one of the top journals was the Academy of Management Journal, which had acceptance rates of 8%. Professors at research universities who did not publish in these journals were let go after a certain period of time, thereby creating a significant amount of pressure. Roberts had never tried publishing in a prestigious academic journal. He was not sure if he had the desire.

At teaching universities where DBA’s were more competitive, “quality research” was much more flexible. There were significantly more options to choose from in terms of journals and the associated acceptance rates could be higher.

Roberts found the lighter research requirements at teaching universities more suitable to his taste, although that may also mean less of a salary if he didn’t teach

at a research university. Based on his own research and conversations with his mentor, Roberts could expect the salary at teaching universities to be in 90-100k range. By graduation, he had published 3 papers in practitioner focused journals such as the *Muma Business Review* and the *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics* and was actively working on 3 other papers.

DECISION TIME:

Roberts and Erin had cobbled together a list of minimum requirements for any potential professional opportunity Roberts would take. The list focused on the next five years when their second child would then be in kindergarten. The requirements were:

- Must be a “better than” situation
 - Not willing to change jobs for less autonomy, less professional growth opportunities or a toxic corporate culture
- A willingness to move for the right opportunity, but it had to be in the Southeastern United States
- If Roberts was to move to academia, the minimum salary must be \$100,000
- Any career change must increase home time
- A decision must be made by December 2019 (when his financial obligation to ICS has expired)

As Roberts merged into the throng of traffic, he tried to organize his thoughts... *“As I see it, I have three options. I can stay at ICS; I can make the move to another company in industry; or I can transition full-time into academia. I know my family will support any option I choose, but what’s the best for our family and me?”*

Considering ICS, Roberts reflected, *“ICS has been good to me. They fully sponsored my education and have given me opportunities to grow and develop as a leader. It’s comfortable, but is it too comfortable?”*

Contemplating a move to a different company Roberts thought, *“Moving to a different company would most likely be the most rewarding financially. It could be exciting to take on a new challenge with new people, processes and products.”*

Ruminating on a full-time transition into academia Roberts thought, *“The life of a professor certainly seems to be the most flexible schedule and would allow for extended periods of family time. The potential to create and communicate research seemed intriguing. Could I make the lower salary work? Do I want to”* Roberts’ reflected to himself, *“How could I best organize my thoughts with the options that are available to me?”* (See Exhibit 4)?

References:

Demonstrating Innovation, Engagement, and Impact: 51 Global Business Schools Extend Their AACSB Accreditation in Business or Accounting. (2017, February 9). Retrieved from AACSB website: <https://www.aacsb.edu/newsroom/2017/2/51-global-business-schools-extend-their-aacsb-accreditation-in-business-or-accounting>

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