Rules of the Rat Race

The mechanics of Career Planning for an IITian, in the corporate world.
T. Muralidharan
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At a rich gathering of IIT Madras alumni, a few months ago, I was struck by something unmistakable about IITians. Diversity... of professionals from a whole range of domains, different industries and various levels. I had the good fortune of meeting many stalwarts, who, by any yardstick of achievement, have done themselves, their employers and their families proud. However, at a closer look, I was struck by something disturbing. Seen against the values of IIT- Excellence, Innovation and Leadership, the amazing diversity some times translated into Disparity! Wide ranging disparity in terms of pay, status, career progression and more importantly achievement.

Achievement definitely cannot be quantified in terms of pay, perks and status. After all a person who has done pioneering R&D in his/her field might still be earning much less than an entrepreneur or a high profile corporate executive. However, the expectation from an IIT alumnus is that he/she should reach the top echelons of management in his/her chosen field in around 20 years. Being a Career Consultant to nearly 100,000 professionals - a number of them IITians - for nearly 15 years, I can say that a number of IITians did not achieve their true potential, in total contrast to their fellow alumni.

At the same alumni meeting I met Mr. Sushant, who rose from a Trainee Engineer to Deputy General Manager - Purchase, just sticking to materials management for all the 20 years. For the record, he earns Rs. 6 lakh per annum. Compare him with Mr. Anantram, who started his career as an Engineer in a Steel company, who leveraged his exposure there to liaisining with Financial Institutions and Government Agencies, and moved on to Financial Planning and Budgeting. Today, with 10 years of experience in Corporate Finance, he is blazing a great trail as Zonal Manager with a top Financial Institution. And he is enjoying an annual pay of Rs. 17 lakh along with company car, house and stock options.

To probe this diversity further, I searched the huge database of resumes managed by TMI Network - one of India’s top recruitment consultancies - built and managed by myself; and researched job sites on Internet. I compiled a list of all IITians in specific age bands, working in India in the non-IT domain, to analyze their different levels of achievement and understand why there is such a large disparity. Out of this interesting study, I would like to put forth some ground rules of Career Planning that will help an IITian beat the rat race.

Run the marathon, not the 100-meter Sprint
IITians move from one perio to another, a habit difficult to kick. Career is 35 years race (while we spend only 4/5 years in IIT), with lots of ups and downs. Pacing oneself, reserving the best for the end, ensuring that lifestyle does not drive job changes comes naturally to many. But, some IITians treat career like a 100 meter sprint, and burn out – either internally or become outcast with the corporate world. You should choose an employer, who suits your personality, and never be afraid to make changes to your plans, shift gears, reassess and adjust your goals as long as it is planned.

Network with people
Many IITians are incorrigibly self-involved. Coming off an entrance exam that tests their technical knowledge to the hilt, a campus that tries to make them a specialists par excellence and a market & social milieu that puts them on a pedestal, IITians enter the corporate world with a chip on their shoulders. They tend to
network with only "worthy souls". In the wide, diverse world, IITians have to lose their gloss fast, blend into the corporate culture and network with a cross section of people. After all, there are many exciting people who are not IITians. A good beginning in networking with people and a must for any IITian, is to become a good listener and interact with everybody without any pre-conceived notions about them.

**Do not mortgage your future for the past**
Many an IITian went into the first job that matched his/her specialization, naturally. But, staying with the same branch forever is like what my professor at IIMA called "Mortgaging your future for your past". To take an example, Mr. Prakash a 50 year old IITian started his career with a Public Sector Steel company; took 18 years to reach the level of Sr. Manager; and is still languishing in the Steel industry with a private sector company at a middle level. The lesson is we have to quickly graduate from a specialist engineer to a generalist engineer, then to a technocrat, and finally to a strategist manager. And this is possible only if we are willing to take the risk of traveling, from the unknown to the known.

**Do not palm-off your father’s expectations on your children**
The mistake most of us do is focusing on what our children should achieve than what we can. I met an IITian, Mr. Shyamalan, who stayed in Chennai for the past 15 years and paid a big price vis-à-vis his career. Many opportunities to move to Mumbai or Delhi were rejected because his daughter was in a great school (Believe me she was in primary school!). I asked him what he wants daughter to grow up to, and he said that she should be an IITian. It’s a great irony that his father sacrificed his life thinking his son would get into IIT, more so pass out with flying colors, and go on to reach a top position in the country. Now, Mr. Shyamalan is doing the same thing, without realizing that he has to fulfill his father’s dream, but not his daughter. It’s indeed very tempting to exit the rat race, but who will bell that cat?

**Conclusion**
Being an IITian is not an end in itself. Having a better IQ does not automatically pave the way for achievement. What an IITian requires is EQ - Emotional Quotient. How you react to different situations, achieve excellence in a team environment, achieve the respect of people even as you conquer personal goals, adapt to change, and bring meaning and passion to your work will make all the difference to your career.

* The names of the persons have been changed to protect their identity

**About myself**
B.Tech, Chemical Engineering, IIT-Madras, 1979; MBA, IIM, Ahmedabad, 1981; Talent Management Consultant for 300 corporates in India, Middle East & Singapore; Founder, promoter and CEO of TMI Network (www.tminetwork.com), India’s top search & selection firm and C&K Management ltd, Asia’s largest online knowledge forum (www.themanagementor.com) for professionals.

**You can reach me at:**
TMI Network
Career Center, 1-8-303/48/12,
Prenderghast Road,
Secunderabad - 500 003, INDIA
Tel: +91-40-27893700
E-mail: murali.hyd@tminetwork.com / murali.hyd@cnkonline.com