# Professional Motivation Revisited: The Achievement Society for the 21st Century

**by Henry J. Topping and Melissa Swift**

What's holding many of today's best executives back from true success? It's likely not skills or competencies, both of which have often been honed through years of development through ever-more challenging roles. It's not executives' personal networks, which, in an age of pervasive connectivity, are orders of magnitude better than they were just a few years ago. And it's not structural trends in the labor market: Jobs that require sophisticated, specific knowledge and understanding are experiencing distinct secular growth.

Our hypothesis is that what's holding people back is understanding, at the executives' very core, what drives them—what professional fulfillment actually means on an individual and personal level.

David McClelland's landmark 1961 work *The Achieving Society* postulated that human beings are driven by three key forces: achievement, power and affiliation. To our eye, McClelland's model was two-thirds complete: With apologies for the pun, power and affiliation are potent motivators, but for senior executives—those past a certain career level—the notion of achievement is cost of entry, a program always running in the background and never requiring conscious input.

Our hypothesis, then, replaces achievement as a motivator with two other elements. One is heartily pragmatic and yet so unfashionably on the nose that many career development theories flatly ignore or dismiss it[1]: economic opportunity. Over and over, we observe that the wildly varying degree to which particular executives are motivated by financial considerations plays a strong hand in shaping career choices, both in discrete circumstances but, more important, in career thematics. The key, for executives, is to understand to *what degree* they are motivated by the economics of a specific career path and to align their choice accordingly.

The other element we included seeks to perhaps capture the underlying emotion of McClelland's notion of achievement (satisfaction from taking on challenges) but focuses on the activity instead of the end result: tolerance for (and, indeed, enjoyment of) risk. Here again, we witness a wide array of attitudes and see executives meaningfully stumble when they try to behave artificially in a manner that is more risk friendly or risk averse than their true motivation structure.

The complete set of motivators is thus:

1. **Power** (the desire to make others behave a certain way)
2. **Affiliation and influence** (the desire to have close human relationships and to shape the thinking of others)
3. **Economic opportunity**
4. **Tolerance for risk** (the desire to take on and meet audacious goals)

In our experience, the most successful executives in the for-profit realm are motivated by all four elements. Critical to understanding their true career goals, though, is the process of recognizing which two goals predominate. As shown in the illustrative diagram below, career tracks then can be mapped against an individual's deepest motivating factors:

## Power as primary force

*Motivated by power + economic opportunity =* ***Traditional general management track***

*Motivated by power + affiliation/influence =* ***Non-traditional C-suite track***

*Motivated by power + tolerance for risk =* ***Entrepreneurial track***

## Affiliation/influence as primary force

*Motivated by affiliation/influence + tolerance for risk =* ***Consultative/professional services track***

## Economic opportunity as primary force

*Motivated by economic opportunity + affiliation/influence =* ***Financial services track***

*Motivated by economic opportunity + tolerance for risk =* ***Alternative assets (e.g., hedge funds, private equity) track***

## Breaking down the above elements:

- ***Motivated by power + economic opportunity = Traditional general management track with an emphasis on general management.***

  If your motivations are, perhaps, the most traditional—the achievement of power and, as a result, money—then the most traditional path, a march upward through the corporate hierarchy, is likely for you. Even as organizations cope with a host of disruptions, those motivated by this simple combination of factors will find themselves more fulfilled by the still-fairly-linear increases in responsibility and compensation that established corporations offer through time and achievement.

- ***Motivated by power + affiliation/influence = Non-traditional C-suite track, including functional leadership.***

  While the outcome for this population might resemble that of the previous group, their path looks quite different. Individuals establish their leadership credentials by generating "followership[2]"; that is, by wielding influence on an increasingly large scale. Because they do not necessarily lock into classically established processes for moving up in an organization, the path to the top may be measurably longer and/or non-linear—or dramatically shorter, depending on the circumstances.

- ***Motivated by power + tolerance for risk = Entrepreneurial track.***

  "Power" here is defined in many ways in terms of desire for autonomy, or the freedom from others' power. That desire, coupled with a healthy risk tolerance and some level of indifference to money as a motivator (needed to weather the early lean years, which entrepreneurs such as Mark Cuban have written passionately about[3]), makes one a natural fit for entrepreneurship.

- ***Motivated by economic opportunity + affiliation/influence = Financial services track.***

  Executives for whom economic opportunity is a lead motivation, and affiliation/influence is their preferred mechanism of operation, often find a great deal of satisfaction in traditional financial services. Career paths such as investment banking, asset gathering and money management match significant financial rewards with the chance to achieve outcomes via influencing skills.

- ***Motivated by economic opportunity + tolerance for risk = Alternative assets (e.g., hedge funds, private equity) track.***

  In contrast, for those executives who are motivated by economic opportunity but have a stronger affinity for risk than for influence, the alternative asset track—being in the driver's seat for making financial decisions rather than advising others—can be quite fruitful and fulfilling.

- ***Motivated by affiliation/influence + tolerance for risk = Consultative/professional services track.***

  Finally, for those motivated by affiliation and influence—and willing to sacrifice some of the security of linear progression for the more varied opportunities their tolerance for risk affords—the career and intellectual agility of a consultative path can be tremendously rewarding.

Having laid out this framework and its various paths to career fulfillment, we often are asked two key questions:

1. ***Do the motivations of my organization have to match my own motivations?*** Simply put, no—as long as both the organization and the individual are clear on the misalignment, are comfortable with this disparity, and are willing to accept that the discrete career choice may serve as a way stop and building block-type of role for the individual. Executives also must accept that in this scenario, results may vary: Executives motivated by affiliation and influence, hoping to take a non-traditional, followership-oriented path to the top at a rigidly traditional organization, will encounter roadblock after roadblock. But executives motivated by power often can reach new heights in an affiliation and influence-driven organization (such as a management consultancy) simply because such individuals are interested in powerful positions that do not appeal to most of their colleagues' motivations.

2. ***When, if ever, should I deviate from my core motivations?*** Keep an eye out for serendipity. The business world occasionally will present an opportunity that simply is too good to turn down even if it seems driven by forces not aligned with one's core motivations. The acid test here is to take a long-horizon view of the opportunity's possible benefits. For example,
will a certain position's orientation toward money enable you to earn enough to capitalize faster on entrepreneurial opportunities down the road? If you can envision yourself with your key motivations fulfilled at whatever you see as your retirement point (age 55, 65, 70+), then make the leap.

1 http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/motivating-people-getting-beyond-money

2 http://www.forbes.com/sites/garypeterson/2013/04/23/the-four-principles-of-followership/#16f4c1755ebe

3 http://www.forbes.com/sites/monteburke/2013/03/28/at-age-25-mark-cuban-learned-lessons-about-leadership-that-changed-his-life/#7fb5630d72ed

## Authors

Henry J. Topping
New York
+1 212 519 6175
+1 212 519 6175

Melissa Swift
New York
Melissa.Swift@egonzehnder.com
+1 212 519 6286

Since 1964, Egon Zehnder has been at the forefront of defining great leadership in the face of changing economic conditions, emerging opportunities and evolving business goals. With more than 400 consultants in 69 offices and 41 countries around the globe, we work closely with public and private corporations, family-owned enterprises, and nonprofit and government agencies to provide board advisory services, CEO and leadership succession planning, executive search and assessment, and leadership development. For more information, visit www.egonzehnder.com and follow us on LinkedIn and Twitter.

Amsterdam
Athens
Atlanta
Bangalore
Barcelona
Beijing
Berlin
Bogotá
Boston
Bratislava
Brussels
Budapest
Buenos Aires
Calgary
Chicago
Copenhagen
Dallas
Dubai
Düsseldorf
Frankfurt
Geneva
Hamburg
Helsinki
Hong Kong
Houston
Istanbul
Jakarta
Jeddah
Johannesburg
Kuala Lumpur
Lisbon
London
Los Angeles
Luxembourg
Lyon
Madrid
Malmö
Melbourne
Mexico
Miami
Milan
Montreal
Moscow
Mumbai
Munich
New Delhi
New York
Oslo
Palo Alto
Paris
Prague
Rio de Janeiro
Rome
San Francisco
Santiago
São Paulo
Seoul
Shanghai
Singapore
Stockholm
Stuttgart
Sydney
Tel Aviv
Tokyo
Toronto
Vienna
Warsaw
Washington, D.C.
Zurich