



Rethinking Career Success:

The Four Career Paths of Arthur C. Brooks

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Introduction

For many young entrepreneurs and emerging business leaders, career success is often imagined as a straight upward climb. The prevailing script is familiar: choose a field, work relentlessly, accumulate promotions, increase income and status, and keep moving forward until retirement or financial independence. This model is deeply embedded in business education, corporate culture, and social expectations. Yet it is also incomplete. It assumes that all ambitious people should pursue the same professional trajectory and that *career advancement is primarily a matter of climbing faster than others*. Arthur C. Brooks challenges this assumption in a thoughtful and highly practical way.

Brooks, a social scientist, author, and professor at Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School, explores this issue in his video *“The 4 Types of Careers, and How to Find Yours.”* Brooks is widely known for his work on happiness, meaning, leadership, and life design. His argument in this video is particularly relevant for entrepreneurs and business leaders because it reframes *career choice not as a universal ladder to be climbed, but as a process of alignment between one’s psychology, values, stage of life, and definition of contribution*. The central insight is simple but consequential: there is no single “correct” career path. A career becomes sustainable and satisfying not when it matches a cultural ideal, but when it fits the **individual** expectations.

The core idea of Brooks’ framework is that careers do not all unfold in the same way. The conventional model assumes a linear trajectory in which progress is measured by promotions, authority, compensation, and prestige. Brooks argues that this path may suit some people, but it is only one among several legitimate patterns. In practice, individuals differ in their motivations, tolerance for change, drive for mastery, and desire for stability or reinvention. The happiest people, in Brooks’ view, are those whose careers reflect these underlying realities rather than someone else’s notion of what success should look like. For entrepreneurs, this is a powerful message because entrepreneurial culture often praises relentless scale, speed, and visibility. Brooks invites a more nuanced question: not *“How do I win the race?”* but *“What kind of race am I actually built to run?”*

The Four Career Paths

Brooks describes four broad career types: *the linear career, the expert career, the transitory career, and the spiral career*. Each of these paths reflects a different logic of work and advancement.

The linear career

The linear career is the classic upward path. Individuals on this trajectory tend to seek promotions, broader authority, higher compensation, and increasing influence. They are often energized by measurable **advancement and visible markers of success**. In a corporate setting, this may describe the young manager who wants to move from analyst to director, then to vice-president, and eventually to chief executive officer. In entrepreneurship, the linear pattern may appear in a founder who sees each year primarily in terms of scale milestones: larger funding rounds, more employees, wider market share, and stronger public recognition. There is nothing inherently wrong with this path. For some people, it is deeply motivating. The problem arises when it is treated as the default model for everyone.

The expert career

The expert career follows a different logic. Instead of pursuing vertical movement, the expert seeks depth, **mastery, and long-term competence** in a particular field. Such individuals often value stability, professional identity, and the gradual accumulation of expertise. A software engineer who spends years refining technical excellence, a professor devoted to research and teaching, or a consultant who becomes the trusted authority in a niche domain are all examples of expert careers. In the entrepreneurial world, one might think of a craft-based business owner who does not aspire to build a giant company, but instead aims to become exceptionally good at solving a narrow, high-value problem. A founder of a cybersecurity firm, for example, may be less interested in building a global empire than in becoming the most trusted specialist in a particular kind of digital risk. Brooks' framework reminds us that an expert path can be just as valid and rewarding as one focused on scale.

The transitory career

The transitory career is organized around **variety, flexibility, and lifestyle** rather than long-term attachment to one role or institution. People in transitory careers may change jobs relatively often, not necessarily because they are unstable, but because they value freedom, changing experiences, or a work structure that supports other life priorities. In a business environment, this might describe an individual who moves across industries, short-term projects, contract roles, or entrepreneurial experiments without trying to build a singular, lifelong professional identity. Imagine a young professional who works in digital marketing for two years, then joins a startup accelerator, later launches a short-lived e-commerce venture, and eventually shifts into freelance consulting while traveling or caring for family. From the outside, this path can appear fragmented. Brooks' contribution is to insist that fragmentation is not always a dysfunction. In some cases, it is simply a different model of a meaningful life.

The spiral career

The spiral career may be the most interesting for entrepreneurs because it captures the logic of reinvention without implying randomness. In a spiral career, a person makes a **deliberate** change in direction every few years, with each shift building on what came before. The transitions are not disconnected jumps; they are cumulative reconfigurations of experience, skill, and identity. Brooks uses his own life as an example. Before becoming a scholar and public intellectual, he had a career as a professional *French horn* player. His later work in academia, leadership, and writing did not erase his previous career; rather, it built on the discipline, pattern recognition, and personal evolution shaped by those earlier experiences. An entrepreneurial example would be a founder who begins by running a small logistics startup, later moves into supply chain consulting, then becomes a college instructor in operations management, and eventually develops executive education programs for small businesses. This is not career indecision. It is a *spiral*: each stage retains elements of the previous one while opening a new chapter.

This distinction among career types matters because it changes how people interpret dissatisfaction, ambition, and professional change. A person with a spiral orientation may wrongly conclude that something is wrong with them because they lose interest after several years in one role. In reality, they may simply be reaching the natural end of one spiral turn and preparing for the next. Similarly, an expert may feel incompetent because they do not want the constant upward competition associated with a linear career, when in fact their deepest strength lies in sustained mastery rather than hierarchical ascent.

Job and Happiness

Brooks also addresses a topic of immediate relevance to entrepreneurs and managers: *job changes and happiness*. One of his most useful observations is that changing jobs does not automatically produce sustainable satisfaction. He points to a common pattern in which a new role creates an initial boost of enthusiasm, only for that satisfaction to fade over time. The first months after a job change often feel energizing because the new position offers novelty, hope, and psychological distance from previous frustrations. But as routines settle in, the structural realities of work reappear. The individual discovers that a new title, a different employer, or a more prestigious platform cannot by itself resolve deeper issues such as exhaustion, misaligned values, loneliness, poor emotional habits, or a lack of meaning.

This is an especially important lesson for entrepreneurs. Founders often assume that the next stage of growth will finally bring fulfillment: the next funding round, the next major client, the next market expansion, the next successful exit. However, if dissatisfaction is rooted in identity confusion, unhealthy relationships, burnout, or the absence of a meaningful life beyond work, then external movement will have limited power. Consider the case of a startup founder who sells her company after years of stress and then immediately launches another venture, convinced that this time the culture, the team, and the investors will be better. Six months later

she finds herself anxious, overextended, and emotionally depleted again. The business changed, but the underlying pattern did not. Brooks' argument is not that career change is unwise, but that people often expect it to solve problems it simply cannot.

Self-Centered and Organization-Center Careers

Another major contribution of Brooks' framework is his distinction between self-centered and organization-centered careers. This distinction is highly relevant to leadership because it concerns the orientation one brings to work itself. A self-centered career is driven primarily by *personal advancement, status, recognition, and reward*. The key question in such a career is, "What can this role do for me?" An organization-centered career asks a different question: "How can I contribute to this mission, this team, this institution, or this group of people?" Brooks argues that the second orientation tends to generate long term satisfaction.

This claim does not mean that ambition is inappropriate or that individuals should suppress their own aspirations. Rather, it suggests that *career fulfillment is more stable when people connect their work to contribution rather than to ego alone*. In practice, a self-centered founder may evaluate every strategic decision in terms of valuation, media attention, and personal brand, whereas an organization-centered founder asks how the firm can create real value for customers, employees, and partners. The difference becomes visible over time. A founder obsessed with prestige may become chronically dissatisfied because each success merely raises the threshold for the next one. By contrast, a founder oriented toward service often finds meaning in the actual process of building, solving, and helping. This does not eliminate stress, but it changes the emotional structure of work.

An illustration can be found in many mission-driven enterprises that survive because the founder is anchored in contribution rather than image. Consider a social entrepreneur building a low-cost educational platform for underserved communities. If her only metric of success is investor praise or public recognition, discouragement will likely arrive quickly, especially when growth is slow. But if her career is grounded in the value created for learners, teachers, and families, she has a more resilient source of motivation. In Brooks' terms, her career becomes organization-centered or mission-centered rather than purely self-referential. For leaders, this distinction is crucial because modern business culture often rewards visibility and performance metrics. At this point, Brooks asks a more difficult question: *Are you building a career around your ego or around your contribution?*

From this perspective, Brooks' practical advice for finding "your" career path becomes more intelligible. He encourages people to stop assuming that the default goal must be upward progression and instead begin with a more diagnostic form of self-knowledge. Do you genuinely want advancement, power, and organizational authority, or do you want mastery and depth? Do you want your work to sit at the center of your identity, or do you want it to support a broader life design? Do you thrive through continuity, or do you become most alive when



reinventing yourself every several years? Are you drawn toward a new role because it aligns with your values and strengths, or are you simply trying to escape discomfort?

For entrepreneurs, these questions can function as a form of strategic self-audit. A founder in the early stages of a venture may believe they want to scale aggressively because that is what startup culture celebrates. However, if their true disposition is expert rather than linear, they may be happier building a smaller, highly specialized company than chasing venture capital and hypergrowth. Conversely, someone with a linear profile may become frustrated in a lifestyle business that offers stability but little room for increasing influence. A spiral-oriented entrepreneur may feel deeply satisfied moving from venture creation to teaching, investing, advising, and writing over the course of a career, whereas someone else would experience those shifts as a loss of focus. Brooks' insight is that career strategy should not be designed in isolation from personal psychology. Career choice is not merely an economic decision; it is also an existential one.

Four Rules for Changing Jobs

Brooks also offers four broad rules for changing jobs more intelligently, and these rules deserve serious attention from business leaders. The first is to **manage expectations**. A new job, a new company, or a new entrepreneurial venture may improve circumstances, but it will not create permanent satisfaction. Novelty fades. Every role eventually reveals constraints, politics, routines, and disappointments. Leaders who understand this are less likely to confuse *the end of the honeymoon period with evidence that they made the wrong choice*.

The second rule is to **look for happiness outside the job**. Brooks' point here is both psychologically and managerially important. If an individual's life outside work is empty, chaotic, or emotionally depleted, professional changes will carry too much burden. Work cannot compensate for every relational, spiritual, or personal deficit. This is especially relevant for founders, who often treat the venture as a substitute for a balanced life. Yet a career built on compensation for loneliness, insecurity, or lack of meaning is fragile. The entrepreneur who has no meaningful friendships, no reflective practices, no restorative leisure, and no life structure beyond work is likely to demand from business what business cannot reliably provide.

The third rule is to **move toward something**, not merely away from something. Brooks frames this as a distinction between being pulled by a compelling opportunity and being pushed by frustration or resentment. This does not mean that dissatisfaction should be ignored. It means that the quality of the next move improves when it is anchored in a positive direction. Leaving a role because one is angry, exhausted, or humiliated may be understandable, but if the next destination is poorly thought out, the same problems often reappear in a different form. A manager who resigns from a toxic employer without clarifying what kind of work environment, mission, and career rhythm actually fit her may simply reproduce the same mismatch

elsewhere. By contrast, if she leaves because she has identified a setting that better aligns with her preferred career type and values, the transition is more likely to be constructive.

The fourth rule is **not to let fear prevent a necessary change**. There are moments when remaining in a misaligned role is more damaging than the uncertainty of transition. A founder who has outgrown the chief executive role may need to move into strategy, teaching, or board work. A manager whose strengths are clearly expert rather than linear may need to stop chasing executive promotion and instead build a career around specialized leadership. A professional trapped in a role that contradicts their values may need to accept short-term uncertainty in exchange for long-term coherence. Brooks' advice is not reckless. It is a reminder that fear often disguises itself as prudence, and that the cost of inertia can be substantial.

Conclusion

The broader lesson for entrepreneurs and business leaders is that *careers should be understood less as ladders and more as systems of fit*. The dominant culture of business often equates success with visibility, speed, and scale. Brooks challenges that narrative by showing that satisfaction depends not simply on external achievement, but on **alignment between the person, the work, and the lifestyle in which that work is embedded**. This has practical implications for how leaders build companies, choose opportunities, and define ambition. It suggests that a career should not be evaluated solely by what it delivers in salary, title, or public image, but also by whether it allows a person to contribute meaningfully, sustain energy, and remain coherent over time.

The main takeaway from Brooks' approach is therefore not merely that there are four career types, but that professional fulfillment requires self-knowledge, realistic expectations, and a contribution-oriented mindset. A linear career is not superior to an expert, transitory, or spiral one. Each can be wise or misguided depending on whether it reflects the individual's actual nature and life circumstances. For entrepreneurs, this is a particularly important insight. Entrepreneurship often attracts people with high ambition, but ambition without self-understanding can lead to chronic misalignment. Therefore, the more productive question is not *"How do I build the most impressive career?"* but *"What kind of career structure allows me to create value, grow as a person, and sustain a meaningful life over the long term?"*

Arthur Brooks' contribution is valuable precisely because it treats careers not as status competitions but as human trajectories. For a generation of entrepreneurs and leaders under pressure to perform, pivot, scale, and remain perpetually visible, that is a timely reminder. *The most successful career may not be the one that looks best from the outside. It may be the one that fits so well from the inside that it allows both achievement and peace to coexist.*



References:

Brooks, A. C. (2025, October 27). The 4 types of careers, and how to find yours [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mpyFuyIQ14>