

Navigating Your IT Career

What do you do when you have achieved much in life and want to give back to society? IT stalwart and prolific author Deepak Shikarpur has plunged into free career counselling for IT professionals. Dr. Deepak Shikarpur is a well-acclaimed IT Engineer with a global reputation and has a Doctorate (PhD) in Information Technology. He was working in the Tata group for 16 years and then became a Technopreneur. He is currently serving as Director of Kinetic Communications and Badve Group of Companies. He has so far authored 49 books on IT in Marathi/English. He has won several awards for his literary work from governmental and non-governmental bodies. Here's his interesting social mission

By Vinita Deshmukh

Corporate Citizen: What is it that keeps you going in the IT industry?

Deepak Shikarpur: I entered this profession back in 1985, which now seems like a lifetime ago. At that time, the industry was in its infancy and quite small. However, it gradually grew and people began to realise the potential for wealth creation.

Over time, numerous institutes emerged and by 2010, it had become a popular profession of choice. It may surprise you to learn that in the 1980s when I was referred to as an "IT engineer", it was challenging to find a spouse, as people didn't understand what IT entailed.

Nowadays, being an IT professional is highly desirable, with many women specifying that they want to marry someone in the field. This is a testament to the positive aspects of IT. However, there is also a downside, as the profession has its own set of rules created by its practitioners.

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relevance, based on skills, certifications, and customer acceptance, accounts for 90%.

Unfortunately, this can lead to a situation where people who thought they had a secure profession, suddenly lose their job without any means to cope.

CC: What made you start free counselling for

professional problems that people face in IT?

In 2015, I had an experience that changed my life. I enjoy watching movies and often attend morning shows for peace of mind. During one such outing, the owner of the multiplex asked to speak with me during intermission. He showed me a person who had been coming to the coffee shop for the past two months, working on his laptop from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM every day and only ordering minimal items. He never watched a movie, which the owner found unusual.

Upon first seeing the man in the coffee shop, my initial impression was that he was a cybercriminal, as there were many frauds happening at the time. I told the owner that we should approach him as a suspect and call the police if necessary. When I spoke to the man, he was initially hesitant to open up, but I explained that he had been under observation by the owner for the past two months and that we suspected he was committing fraud. However, I also offered to help him if he was in difficulty.

He eventually revealed that he had lost his job two months prior and was too afraid to tell his family, which consisted of his wife and mother. He had been coming to the coffee shop to search for jobs, and when he returned

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home, he pretended as if he had been at work all day. I advised him that he needed to become billable as soon as possible to prevent his career from being negatively impacted.

CC: So what advice did you give him? And did it work for him?

He mentioned that he had received a job offer, but the salary was lower than what he had previously earned. I encouraged him to accept the offer and explained that in this industry, relevance is more important than money. As he grows with the organisation, his salary will increase.

After several months, a woman approached

me at the same movie theatre and thanked me for helping her husband. She revealed that her husband had been contemplating suicide and would have taken his life, if he had not got the job that day. I was deeply shocked by this revelation and realised that I could make a positive impact on people's lives by helping them with their careers.

CC: Did that inspire you to start your IT Career Counselling?

Yes, I started a digital platform for IT career counselling in 2017, after consulting with industry experts, including Anand Deshpande, and realising that there was a need for

unbiased career guidance. Unlike other career counsellors, who only had a vested interest in selling courses or jobs, I wanted to help people find happiness and grow in their careers.

I decided to start an online show and see where it would go. Gradually, I began to create content and asked my friends for feedback. The show is free, and I even pay some needy individuals. In cases where a person comes from a wealthy background, I ask him/her to support my costs by purchasing my books. I then distribute them to rural areas with limited access to good material. Money is no longer my motivation, as I have used my earnings to fund this initiative.

CC: How has your organisation grown?

As for my organisation, it has grown beyond just me. I now have a digital marketing partner and consultants. I promote my service at various public events and seminars hosted by institutes and organisations. For in-person consultations, I invite individuals to my small counselling studio in Kothrud or a coffee shop if they're in Pune. If an in-person meeting is not possible, I conduct the session over Zoom. I work like a physician, where patients come to me, and I provide them with a prescription. The first format of my service is for people who want to enter the IT industry. I offer advice on everything from what courses to take, to which colleges to join.

During my morning walk, I met someone who wanted to send his son to the USA, but I advised him against it due to visa issues. Instead, I suggested that he consider studying in India, as Pune has 23 private universities, offering a wide range of courses. I also mentioned that with the new education policy, foreign universities will be opening up in India, in the near future. This is just one aspect of the work that I do.

Another category of people I assist are those who are struggling with their careers, particularly in the IT industry. This has become increasingly popular, especially during the pandemic, when many people have lost their jobs or have been told by their bosses that their performance is low. My domain name became very popular in 2021 as a result of this growing need for IT career counseling.

CC: Could you give an example of your counselling?

An elderly couple who lived nearby approached me with a problem. The wife explained that their son and daughter-in-law both work in IT and have been working from home since the lockdown began. However, the daughter-in-law is not supportive and ignores the wife's requests for help. The wife feels troubled and upset because of this. She also shared that her daughter-in-law scolded her that morning and asked her to ask her son for help, as the wife earns a higher salary than him.

At first, I felt unsure of how I could help with their domestic situation since I am not a marriage counselor. But I encouraged the wife to see the positive side of having educated children who chose to stay with them during the pandemic. I suggested that she treat her daughter-in-law like an asset and look after her



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needs as she would do with her own daughter.

CC: Did the son and daughter-in-law see you?

Later, the son and daughter-in-law came to see me separately. I did not reveal to them that the elderly couple had complained to me. Instead, I started a conversation to understand their work situation better. I shared with the daughter-in-law that I considered her as my own daughter-in-law and suggested that she try to find a balance between work and helping her in-laws.

I also suggested that since she used to go to the office earlier, she could consider working from home for four or five days a week. This would give her more time to take care of the household chores and spend time with her in-laws. To solve the problem of the old couple with their daughter-in-law and son, I suggested that the daughter-in-law should be treated with respect and looked after like an asset or a daughter. I advised the couple to create an office-like atmosphere in their home by having their daughter-in-law leave for a co-working space in the morning and return home in the evening, just like she would if she were going to

a physical office. I then connected the daughter-in-law with some co-working spaces that offered reasonable prices and internet connectivity.

As for the son and daughter-in-law's professional development, I suggested some skilling and certification options, and recommended that the husband upskill himself and talk to his boss about the potential benefits of doing so. Finally, I recommended that they consider learning Japanese, as it offers great opportunities for professionals in various fields over the next decade.

CC: Why did you advocate learning Japanese to them?

In Japan, there is a lack of young people, and our cultures share similarities. Despite the available opportunities, many people tend to think that the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and Japan are the only options. I suggested that this couple I knew learn Japanese, and gave them my card, telling them to feel free to consult me if needed. I also tracked their progress and after six months, the husband informed me via email that he had passed five levels of Japanese proficiency and had

also pursued my recommended skill in data security. Due to his newly acquired skills, he received a promotion, resulting in a higher salary than his wife.

However, that was not my intention, so I did not report back. One year later, the couple met me during my morning walk and the wife thanked me, expressing her happiness that her daughter-in-law now behaves properly towards her. I had advised her to spend time with her in-laws on certain days, such as birthdays, and to occasionally take them out for movies and buy them gifts, thus making them feel valued and appreciated. These are just a few of the many positive experiences I have gained through my interactions with others.

CC: What are the different types of problems that you have addressed?

The first problem I addressed was job loss, which is prevalent in many sectors but more common in the IT sector. The second problem is migration from place A to place B, and I believe that, having a fallback mechanism is important for any crisis, not just job loss. I have dissuaded hundreds of people from migrating by suggesting that they work in the gig economy. I also shared the story of my son, who was able to achieve work-life balance by upskilling in digital marketing and working from home for an American university. He is now upgrading his skills by doing an MBA in a German university and eventually a PhD, all while sitting at home. This showcases how technology is making it possible to break the traditional model of going to a physical place to study.

In our country, having a fallback mechanism is crucial as any crisis can arise that requires support systems beyond just job loss, such as health problems. I have helped dissuade numerous individuals from migrating by suggesting they explore the gig economy as an alternative.

One such success story is that of my son, who was previously heading digital marketing in an IT company until the lockdown in 2020. I encouraged him to upskill in digital marketing by taking an online course offered by an American university. After completing the course, the university Dean recognised my son's talent and offered him a job as a content creator for their Asian students.

The best part was that the job was remote, allowing my son to work from home for an American company, earning in dollars, and having the flexibility to take breaks when he needed. He has been able to maintain a

healthy work-life balance, even taking a 15-day vacation to Vietnam with his wife recently. This experience showcases how technology is making it possible to break away from traditional work models and find remote work opportunities.

CC: You are also advocating working in India than abroad? Why?

In this country, achieving a work-life balance is possible, even during times of crisis. This safety net means that you don't necessarily have to face job loss alone, there are support systems available. I have personally dissuaded hundreds of people from migrating abroad for work or study, as technology has made it possible to acquire skills and education from anywhere.

CC: You also mentioned about youngsters opting for IT due to parental or peer pressure. Please elaborate.

I have a live story to share. While serving as the Executive Director of the Computer Society of India, I used to travel to Mumbai every Tuesday. During one of my trips, the

Principal of the Ramrao Adik Institute of Technology requested that I stop by his college to help out with their convocation as the chief guest was unable to attend. Despite my schedule being tight, I agreed to help.

During the convocation, I had the opportunity to talk with the top-performing students, one of whom shared his aspirations of becoming a musician rather than working in IT. Although I encouraged him to consider having music as a hobby, he remained determined to pursue music full-time. It was only 10 years later that I discovered he had become a famous musician, Shankar Mahadevan, who had topped his IT class but had chosen to pursue his passion instead.

In 2016, I had the opportunity to honour Shankar Mahadevan and reminded him of our meeting at his college. During our interactions, he shared a valuable equation with me that he wanted me to pass on to those in the IT industry: P+P=E. "P" stands for passion and profession, while "E" stands for excellence. Many individuals pursue an IT career due to peer or parental pressure, even if their hearts lie elsewhere.

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CC: What can make an IT professional less stressed out?

In the IT industry, taking time off can be a challenge. Even when on vacation, employees may be required to remain available via mobile or laptop. As a result, managing stress is critical to survive in this industry.

As part of my counselling, I encourage people to pursue hobbies and interests outside of work to help them relax and maintain balance in their lives. Social work or volunteering is an excellent way to give back to the community and gain perspective. I suggest spending at least one hour a month doing something of your choice, such as providing free education in a school or spending time at an old age home.

I also encourage people to develop art passions, such as drawing or playing an instrument, to help maintain balance in their lives. Lastly, I advise people to prioritise their health by using fitness-tracking apps or other tools to monitor their physical well-being.

CC: What other counselling do you do for IT professionals?

Another category of people who seek my consultation are those who are considering a job switch, moving from company A to company B. I often advise them to study the balance sheet of the company, which many people overlook. Today, many companies are laying off employees, and there is a clear pattern, the companies that are laying off are the ones that are not profitable. This goes against basic economic principles, as the venture capital model values turnover over profit.

My personal opinion is that one should join a company if it is profitable, rather than focusing on growth or salary. Sustainability is important in the long run. High attrition rates are often driven by the theory of wants, when one need is fulfilled, another arises. Basic needs are food and shelter, followed by acceptance and recognition. However, people often jump ship for a 20% raise, without thinking about the consequences. Loyalty has become a thing of the past, with people changing jobs frequently for better salaries.

I advise people not to change jobs too frequently, as it can hurt their profile in the long run. Headhunting is often done through word of mouth and opinions, rather than job advertisements. If you are successful in a company, you are more likely to be headhunted. My theory is to stay in a job for



(For representational purpose only)

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CC: What about giving advice on relationship issues of the young IT crowd?

I don't do personal counselling. However, teamwork is not often taught in academia,

but it is essential in real life. I give tips on how to build relationships, such as going to movies and picnics with friends, wishing people on their birthdays, and investing in friendships. Relationships are an investment, and they can help you in times of trouble. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the value of relationships, and it is important for this generation to realise this.

My advice is for students who are 12 years old or above, regardless of their class. I urge you to let go of the idea of holidays, as our academic system provides you with 3-4 months of vacation every year. What you do with that time for the next 8-9 years will determine your future at the age of 45.

It is important to develop a habit of earning and gaining work experience, which is currently a missing link in India. Therefore, if you are 13 years or older, make use of your summer vacation and Diwali vacation by learning a new skill and working somewhere. Pune City alone is home to more than 12,000 startups that are looking for talent. You can approach them and say, “I am willing to work for free, but I would like to observe and learn from you for a month. I am willing to do any work, even serving coffee.”

Did you know that when Barack Obama was the President of the United States, one of his daughters worked for three months in a restaurant, during her summer break? This goes to show that any learning is valuable. Just imagine what could happen if you start developing this habit at the age of 13.

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