

Er, what exactly do you do?

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Many of us consider ourselves poor at party chit-chat and dread the inevitable question: "And what do you do...?"

People in regular employment can quote their job title, but entrepreneurs often interpret this as an invitation to launch into the "elevator pitch" for their business. My advice is always to keep it short – the elevator does not get stuck for several hours!

For those of us with a "portfolio career", a one-line description of what we do can be a challenge. Some people assume I am a journalist, but I have to explain that I am a columnist and hardly know anyone at the Financial Times other than my editor. Others know me from speaking at events, but the soubriquet "professional speaker" can have negative connotations – I sometimes have to provide reassurance that I am not about to launch into a presentation.

I try to explain that I am a mentor – though not a coach or a counsellor – and my life involves different activities every day. This job description can look very attractive to someone bored with the daily grind of a job in which they have long lost interest. But I have to explain that going from secure employment to a portfolio career requires a change in lifestyle and attitude to work.

So I was very pleased to meet Katie Ledger, who was hosting a Xerox conference where I delivered a keynote presentation. She has co-authored, with Barrie Hopson, a comprehensive and well-structured book, called *And What Do You Do?*, which explains the ten steps towards creating a portfolio career. Ledger's own career started as a health club manager and personal trainer before she became a TV presenter in Hong Kong, and then joined Channel 5 News, becoming a breakfast presenter and royal reporter.

Realising that her time in front of camera would be stressful and one day come to an end, she started her own communications business. Ledger's high profile secured her first customers, and she soon learned how to build up a network of key influencers to secure a continuing stream of word-of-mouth recommendations. She is now one of the UK's top business communications coaches.

When starting a portfolio career, the temptation is to take any job offered – but that can mean falling into the trap of trying to be all things to all people. Clients will soon become confused if they receive mixed messages about what you do, and will be wary if you claim to deliver almost everything.

For this reason, Ledger decided to focus specifically on events where she added the most value – only appearing if she was personally involved in the production.

She proves that a portfolio career is always a team effort. *And What Do You Do?* neatly combines the skill-sets of both of its authors, with Ledger providing the show-business flair and Hopson the organisational structure. I was particularly impressed with the section called "Love your Accountant", which explains that dazzling delivery always needs to be balanced by sensible spreadsheets.

These are the people who are often most embarrassed when asked a career question at a party, and respond that they are, "just a boring accountant". But to successful portfolio careerists, you are deeply fascinating!

Fonte: Financial Times, London, July 30th 2010, Management, online.