

# A few smart moves to banish the mid-career doldrums

You can transform the direction of your working life with some small steps



Chess champion Garry Kasparov versus IBM's Deep Blue computer. Small and considered moves are more likely to be effective in life than one giant leap © Stan Honda/AFP/ Getty

## **David Bodanis Friday, 8 May**

At the start of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante wrote about being lost at the midpoint of his life; realising he was caught in a setting that was not what he had planned for, yet not knowing where or how to make it better.

So it is with all of us in our world of lockdowns and economic disruption — yet there is an insight from chess which offers a good guide forward.

It contrasts with what many of us do when we are unhappy with our life position, what might be called “the grumbler’s tactic”. That is where you stay pretty much where you are, and just grumble a lot at the stagnation that seems your inevitable lot. Followers of that approach can be identified by the way they bore their friends with endless discussion about what they will someday do to change their life.

At the opposite extreme is the midlife crisis gambit (though one doesn't have to be middle-aged to try it). Here people throw caution to the wind, and leap as far as possible into the unknown, aiming to land somewhere better, even if they have never gotten around to acquiring the skills to succeed in a new area.

Neither of these approaches work well, and in our new world where jobs are being lost and savings are quickly being used up, both stagnation and recklessness are especially dangerous.

There is an image from the world of chess that sets out a better path for us to think about before we make any changes in our lives or careers. On a chessboard, the knight moves in a curious but very precise L-shape: travelling two squares in one direction, and then shifting at a right angle to travel one more square. And if any pieces are in the way it gets to hop over them.



Knight chess piece © Dreamstime

What this suggests is that a random jump going to a distant, entirely fresh domain might be tempting but is likely to fail. You probably won't have the connections to get started, and even if you did, you probably would not have the skills to succeed. It is a step too far.

Instead, a moderate shift — building on what you already have, and travelling only a little bit away from a straight line — is more likely to do well. In the world before the coronavirus, that was when a banker, say, fed up with her old career, would not drop everything to audition for an onstage role at a major theatre company, but rather try working with the finance department at the National Theatre, while keeping an eye on training programmes coming up.

When this sort of partial jump is applied a few times in sequence, it will still propel you far afield. Yet — and this is the strength — no individual step will have taken you so far that you can't use at least some of the skills you had before. That is so important now: with old jobs disappearing, and entire company divisions needing to repurpose themselves as well.

Some of this matches the famous “pivot” of Silicon Valley fame, where companies that got stuck as they advanced in one direction would neither grumble uselessly, nor take a frantic gamble to an entirely fresh field, but rather build on their past strengths in this “knight’s move” way.

A prime example here was Jack Dorsey and his colleagues, who took a low-bandwidth communication tool that had been developed for internal use at their not-especially-thriving podcasting company, and with a bit of tweaking modified it into Twitter.

Since my knowledge of chess is only that of an interested amateur, I Zoomed Jonathan Rowson, chess grandmaster (and author of *The Moves That Matter*), to clarify more of what the knight’s unique movement could suggest.

One insight is about urgency. The knight has a curious form of safety on the chessboard, as there are eight nearby squares from which it cannot be attacked (even though it can attack those itself). But that does not mean it can wait where it is indefinitely. Time for reconnoitring each small step is crucial, but brief. The interval where our jobs or companies are solvent cannot be guaranteed.

Another insight is about direction. The knight can move sideways and forward, but it can also move sideways and then backwards. As Rowson points out, such seeming reverses are often a most useful step towards advancing. Just think of how often a pay cut and a “lower” status job is — so long as it is in the right new field — the best way forward.

Most of all though, the knight’s peculiar mode of travel makes it a terrific disrupter. It’s able to vault over seemingly impenetrable defences, and land where it’s unexpected.

When IBM supercomputer Deep Blue beat the then world chess champion Garry Kasparov in 1997, it was a knight sacrifice for a lowly pawn on move eight that ended up “creating havoc and causing Kasparov to resign on move nineteen”.

This is the opportunity that all destruction creates. The Cretaceous-Tertiary asteroid impact that wiped out the dinosaurs did not guarantee any one particular mammalian species would thrive, but it did offer the indispensable fresh space in which especially adaptable ones could.

It is good to be reminded of this, for life jumps are scary, especially now, with so much else up in the air. Yet arrival from an unusual direction gives a useful breathing space, especially when working from home. New colleagues step back as they get a bearing on who we are; old grumbling “friends”, so insistent that nothing fresh could work, are left far behind.

Ending up in a new domain — and all knight moves end on squares of the opposite colour — also grants us a chance to apply our old knowledge from a fresh perspective. That is a core strength, for in the knight’s move, where you started wasn’t entirely wrong. It was just insufficient. Since you have not left it behind totally — it is a jump, but not that far — not all of what you knew before is going to be left behind either. Your skill set suddenly becomes unique.

This is why the knight is quiet, and eccentric, but also much loved. Many pieces can in theory sweep across the board, but they often won’t get a chance.

Rowson once asked fellow grandmaster Paul Motwani: “If you were a chess piece, which would you be?”. Motwani replied: “I’d be a knight, because it can get anywhere, albeit slowly”.

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