

# THE STATE OF THOUGHT PROCESS ON LIFE AMBITION IN ADULTS AND A TECHNIQUE FOR LIFE PATH PLANNING

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## Abstract

From childhood people have dreams as to what they aspire to become in life. This aspiration that arises at a young age either evolves to a deeper degree of passion or drifts in direction as individuals pass through the adolescent phase of life i.e. when attending school and college. Most individuals embarking on the adulthood phase of life and entering the first stages of a career path give in to societal demands and challenges. Hence their life ambition(s) get sidetracked and they end up either getting de-prioritized or totally forgotten. A few individuals with deep levels of passion for their aspirations stay persistent towards achieving their dreams. In this paper we discuss the preliminary results of a study that ascertains the state of thought process of adults with respect to their life ambitions. In addition we present a methodology termed as LifePath<sup>SM</sup> Planning, that helps individuals to systematically think through the future steps involved that enable them ultimately reach their life goals.

**Keywords:** Ambition, Aspiration, Development, Life Path, Planning, Coaching and Adult Thought Process

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we seek to confirm the fact that there is a sizable population especially amongst young adults perceived to have the capacity pursue and reach higher levels of aspiration primarily in their careers as well as in personal goals. In order to better understand the state of mind of these adults with respect to their life ambition, an online survey was commissioned, the design and results of which have been presented in the following section.

Based on the results of the above research we establish a gap in the drive of adults towards pursuing their life ambitions bringing about the need for developmental support for the same. We then introduce and elaborate the LifePath<sup>SM</sup> Planning approach. Recently the process has been tested with a diverse set of individuals administered with the guidance of a coach. However this can also be done individually by oneself using relevant tools and by following the procedure. The steps involve sketching a visual representation of a plan on a whiteboard or paper template with a timeline of the individual's life with the starting point being one's current state along with stating past milestones as well as envisioning a future state, following which an enquiry and introspection process directed by the coach will help outline the various options and subsequent steps one can take to move from the current state towards ultimately reaching their future state.

The process has the following benefits:

- Helps determine whether the individual's current direction helps achieve one's life ambition.
- Helps align one's career and personal path towards life goals.
- Helps be better prepared to taking immediate measure for fulfilling intermediary milestones towards reaching the future state.

Thus, in this paper we establish the need for LifePath<sup>SM</sup> planning, present the foundational framework for it and emphasize the need towards evolving it as an essential developmental tool. Note we use the term "LifePath<sup>SM</sup>" which represents our brand identity of the approach and is used interchangeably in this paper with "life"- "path" as two separate words.

## 2. THE LIFE AMBITION STUDY

### 2.1. Objectives

The study aims to gain insights on the state of thought process of adults about their life ambition and their assertions on the same. The following are some of the derivatives of the study on a sample population:

- Proportion of the sample population that has reflected on life ambition in the recent past
- Proportion of the sample population that has a life ambition set
- From the proportion that has set a life ambition, the following aspects are obtained:
  - The different types of life ambition set,
  - The level of confidence in achieving the ambition, Know-how of the steps required to achieve them, perceived time gap from the present to reaching the ambition.
  - Primary barriers to achieve the goal
- From the proportion that does not have a life ambition set, the following aspects are obtained:
  - The inclination to set a life ambition
  - For those with an inclination to have a life ambition but have not currently set one, we try to identify some of the barriers they face in ascertaining their life ambition.
- Degree of openness towards coaching and other developmental support in planning their life path better.

### 2.2. Hypothesis

There is a need for providing developmental support to individuals towards achieving their life goals. For the group already having life ambition, the support can help to plan the future steps better and to have a greater level of confidence in achieving the goals and for the group that does not have a life ambition, it can help setting them and assist working towards ambitions.

### 2.3. Methodology, Sample and Demographics

A survey questionnaire was designed and then implemented online over the Internet. It is intended to be kept live until the response from a sizeable global sample population is achieved. Preliminary results are discussed here from an initial sample. Details of the sample below are shown below. All % values are rounded.

Table 1. Sample and Demographic Details of Life Ambition Study

Preliminary Sample Population Attributes					Value
Total Sample Size n					342
Gender:					
• Male					• 271 (79%)
• Female					• 62 (18%)
• Not Mentioned					• 9 (3%)
Age:					
<= 20	> 20 <= 25	> 25 <= 30	>30 <=35	> 35	
34 (10%)	97 (28%)	136 (40%)	42 (12%)	23 (7%)	
Marital Status:					
• Single					• 229 (67%)
• Married					• 98 (29%)
• Others / Not mentioned					• 15 (4%)
Education:					
• Postgraduate					• 168 (49%)
• Undergraduate					• 138 (40%)
• Others / Not mentioned					• 36 (11%)
Work Status:					
• Employed					• 220 (64%)
• Student					• 66 (19%)
• Others / Not Mentioned					• 56 (16%)
Nationality:					
• India					• 319 (93%)
• Others / Not Mentioned					• 23 (7%)

## 2.4. Questionnaire Design

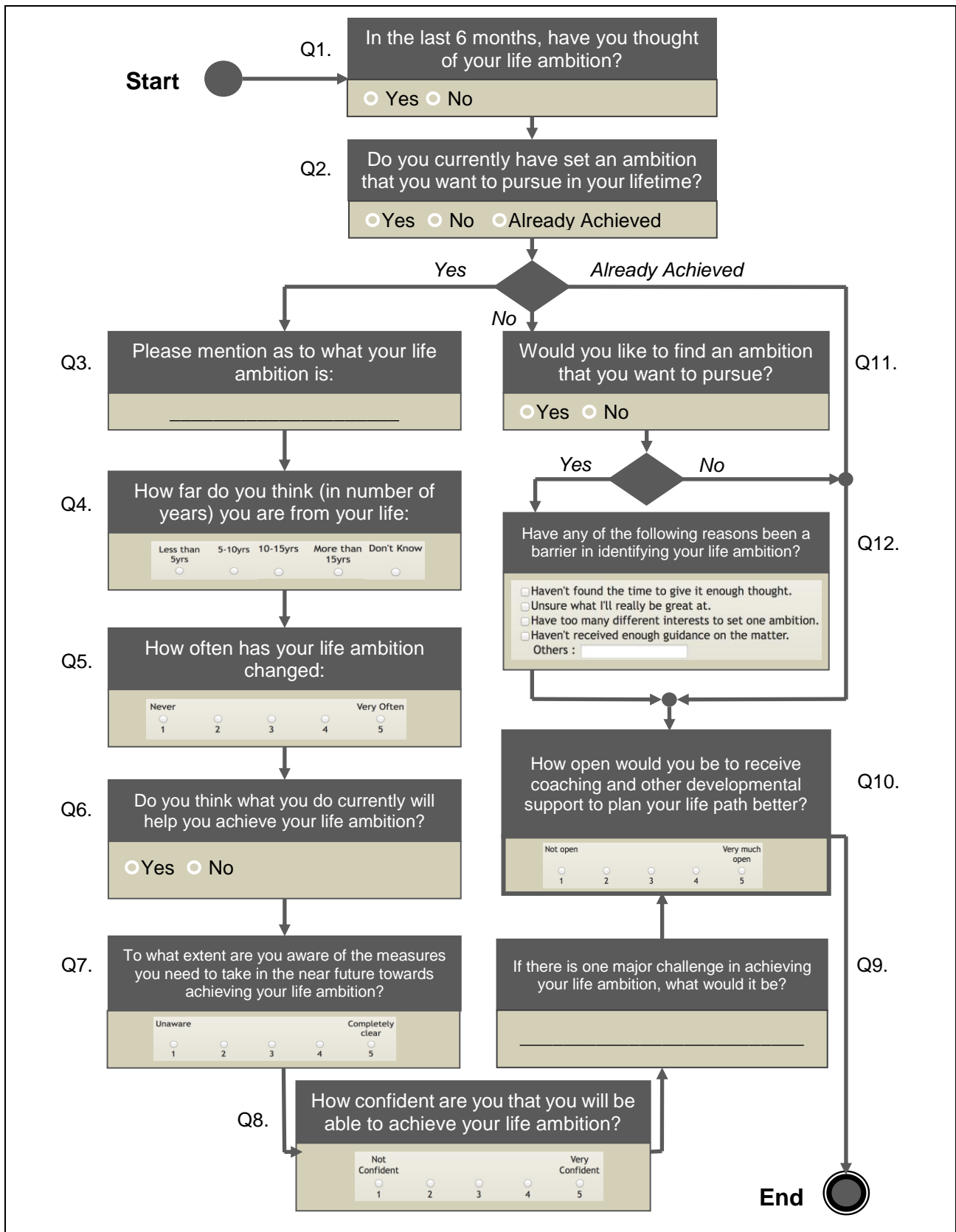


Fig. 1. Life Ambition Study: Survey Design

## 2.3. Preliminary Findings

The following are some of the findings from the responses given by the sample population.

- A vast majority, **88%** of the population, **have thought about their life ambition in the last 6 months**
- A majority, **71%** say they **currently have set an ambition** and the rest have not.

Amongst those who have a life ambition the following are the findings:

- The life ambition has not **changed** too often with a mean score of **2.08 / 5.00**.
- About **70%** of this population say that what they do today, will help them achieve their life ambition.
- **The degree of awareness on the measures to take in the near future to achieve the ambition** resulted in a mean score of **3.44 / 5.00**.
- **The level of Confidence** in achieving the ambition resulted in the mean score of: **3.86 / 5.00**.

Amongst those who do NOT have a life ambition, the following are the findings:

- **89%** out of those who did not have a life ambition say that they **would like to find an ambition** they want to pursue.
- To this population, when asked what would be some of the barriers in identifying the ambition the following were the trends:

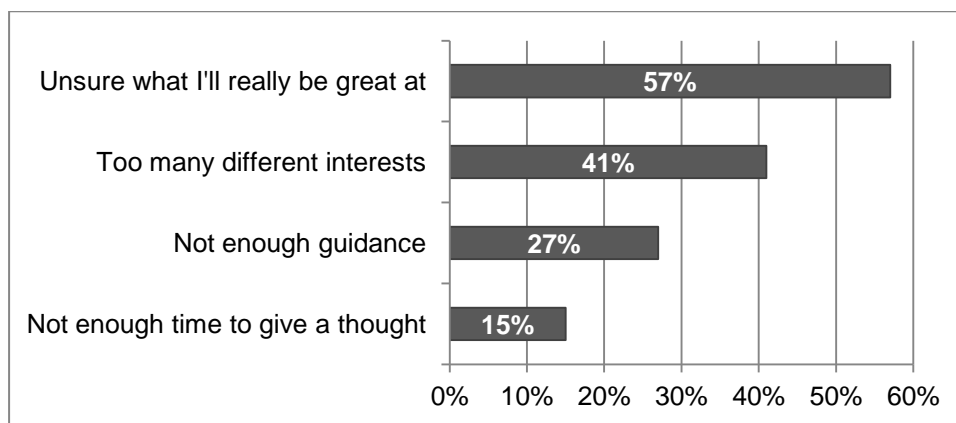


Fig. 2. Percentage of the population facing a barrier towards finding a life ambition

The following figure illustrates the score with respect to the level of **openness of the respondents to coaching** and other developmental support towards planning the life path:

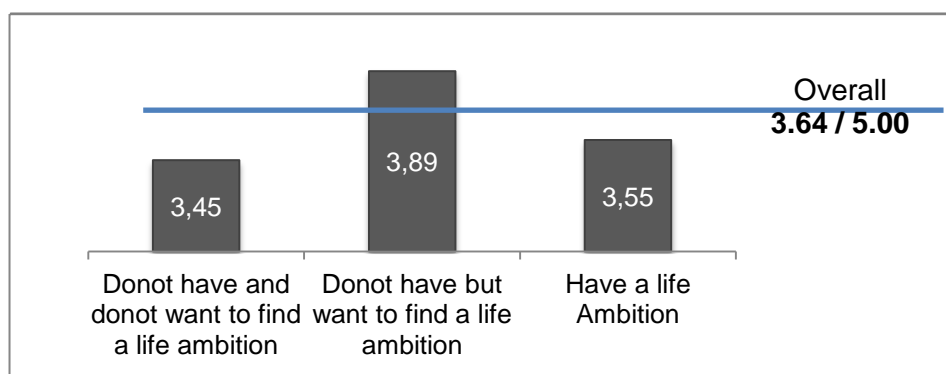


Fig. 3. Mean scores relating to openness to coaching and other developmental support

## 2.4. Key Inferences

- Most people have life ambitions but there still remains a sizeable minority who do not.
- Those who do have a life ambition state a medium level of awareness regarding the measures needed in the near future towards achieving their life ambition. While their levels of confidence in achieving their

life ambitions are relatively high, there is still opportunity to give a further boost.

- Most of those who do not have a life ambition show a desire towards identifying one. Inability to find what they are great at, emerges to be the primary barrier and members of this group show a higher inclination to coaching and other developmental support towards planning their life paths better.

Thus it is possible to conclude that irrespective of whether a person has a life ambition or not, there is a need for developmental support in identifying and planning the course of pursuit towards achieving the life ambition. Be it to boost the scores seen in the degree of awareness of measures and the confidence level for those who already have set a life ambition, or to assist in identifying the right life ambition for those who have not set one, there exists a need for support thus validating the previously set hypothesis.

### 3. LIFEPATH<sup>SM</sup> PLANNING

As introduced earlier in this manuscript, the LifePath planning methodology is a step-by-step process that helps plan one's progression towards achieving the life goal. In this section of the paper, we present as to how this concept originated, an outline of the approach and its alternative uses.

#### 3.1. Origin

The concept first originated around 2004, when I (the primary corresponding author), was involved in providing career counseling for students in India to plan their career path on completion of their undergraduate studies. Some of these students wanted to pursue higher studies outside India, a few within India while a larger population wanted to take up a job based on the opportunities they could leverage. Some of them wanted to pursue further studies at a later point of time or maybe even start their own business. It was at this juncture, two major shortcomings were observed with respect to how these students made their career decisions. They were:

- Career decisions were made by students without the foresight as to what future opportunities they may offer and whether or not they were aligned with their ultimate goals in their lives.
- Some students had life ambitions, while some did not. This posed a challenge. Nevertheless, be it for immediate accomplishment or towards achieving long-terms goals, individuals did not seem to sufficiently review whether their career decisions would lead them to success and give contentment with respect to the fulfillment of their desires.

Many of the decisions made by the soon to be young professionals were driven solely based on the career options they were aware of and they succumbed greatly to the influences of the society such as the expectations of family and peers. It was then that the first life path coaching methodology took off in an informal manner. Over the years, not only students and young professionals reported vital benefits from the thought provoking planning/coaching process, middle aged and senior professionals have also found them useful. And the methodology in its generic form seems applicable not only for career selection process but just to accomplish any goal or future aspirations. In fact not only can individuals apply it, but it could also find application in planning organizational strategy and other change management needs in firms. In the next section, we elaborate the step-by-step approach to LifePath planning, primarily from a personal developmental perspective while the same methodology can still be used for other planning needs as well.

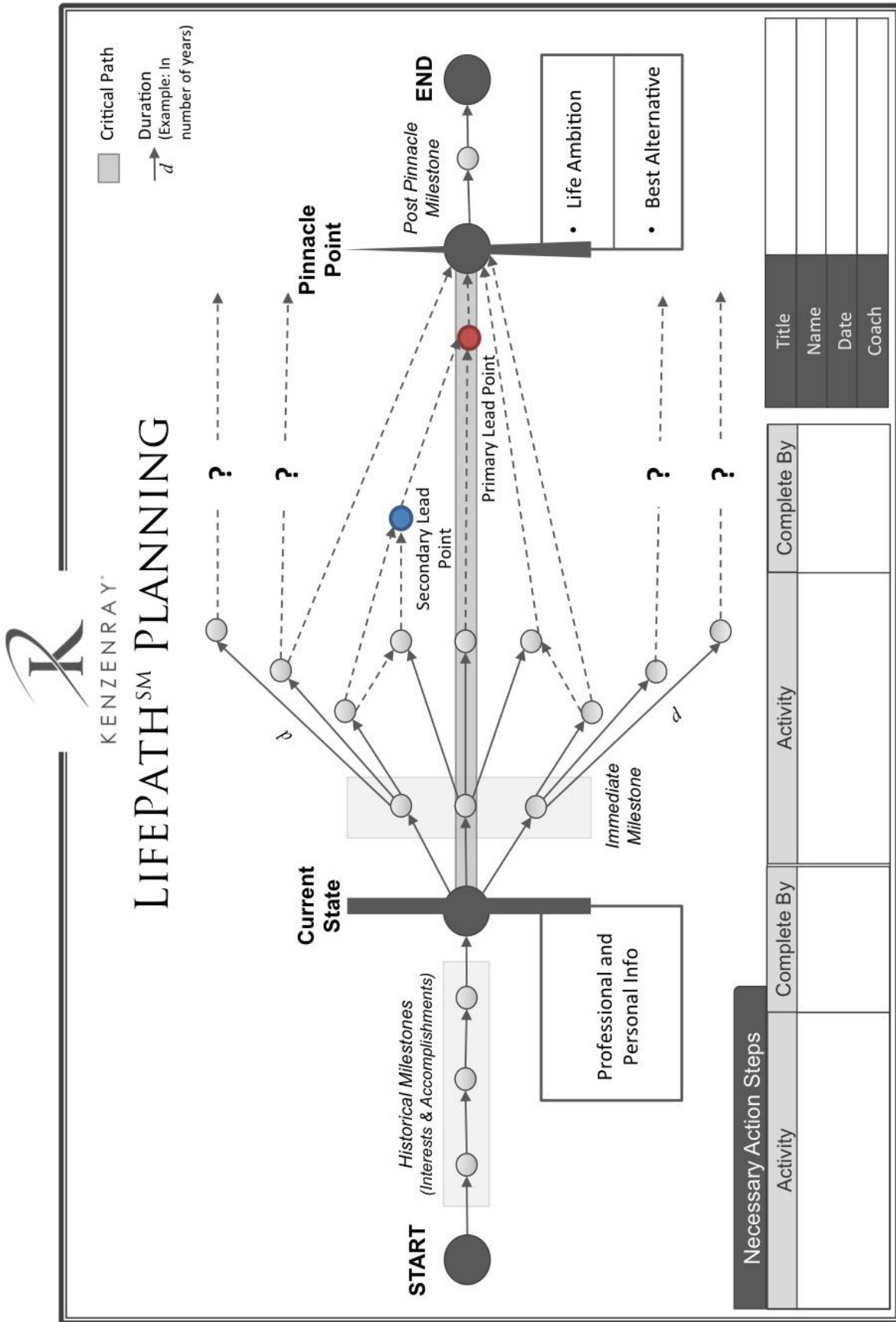
#### 3.2. The Approach

The term LifePath, by itself conveys two aspects of the planning process.

Firstly, the term "LIFE" in this context symbolizes a period of existence with a start and an end. For a person this can be the whole of his or her life i.e. from birth to death. While on the other hand for a specific goal this can be the period from the beginning of the process until the end.

Secondly, the term "PATH" here conveys that there is a way forward in the journey. The term also indirectly conveys that while there are many paths ahead one shall progress ultimately in one path. The current path may lead to another path, which finally may or may not lead an individual to the ultimate goal.

Fig. 4. In the following page the various components of the LifePath planning process have been illustrated.



Template v.β

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Fig 4. Template illustrating various components of the LifePath Planning Process

### 3.2.1 Preparation

The LifePath Planning process is best done with the support of a coach with knowledge and experience of the process. In the absence of a coach an individual can also do it with the support of a companion being a neutral observer who offers different perspectives. This can also be done on one's own however one must be aware that they may not be all possibilities and outcomes during a planning process. The planning process requires a physical rendering of the life path, which can be done either on a large piece of paper, or on a black or whiteboard, or drawn on a computing device using any graphical design application. We will address this in the following section of this document as the *draw-space*. A dedicated online tool for this process is also under development.

### 3.2.2 The Four Key Points

There are four key points that form the essential milestones of the LifePath. These are:

- The Start Point
- The Current State
- The Pinnacle Point
- The End Point

The first step is to plot a starting point, which should be on the left most side of the draw-space at the vertical center [*drawn as a shaded circle*]. This point represents the beginning of what an individual has planned for. For example, when planning career as a whole or life in general, this would be the birth. If LifePath is done for a trip one desires to take, then the start could be when the idea first emerged and from thereon started saving money for the same.

Next step would be to plot the End point on the right most corner of the draw-space along on the same line as that of the start point [*also drawn as a shaded circle*].

The next would be to think about, what we call as the "Pinnacle Point" which represents the point at which an individual reaches the highest of aspirations [*drawn as a thick line or sharp lean triangle, overlapping a shaded circle*]. Sometimes this point could be closer to the end point and sometimes it may not. For example, when it comes to life and career, a pinnacle point is aimed to represent the highest point in the career. For some it can be when they are 45, 50 or even 60 years of age. Later on they may stay in that pinnacle point for a while and then retire. So in this case there is a life path continuing beyond the pinnacle point. This is with respect to the career is your life ambition.

While having a pinnacle point is preferable it is not always a necessity. One can still plot a life path having an open mind as to follow wherever a path will lead to without actually having a predetermined goal. While setting a pinnacle point it is also recommended to have one best alternative goal for the same. The next would be to connect the Pinnacle Point to the end point by drawing a line. If an individual becomes aware of any other milestone between the pinnacle point and end point a dot or circle may be put as an indication.

Keeping in mind the start, and pinnacle point, the next step would be to plot a point indicating where one is right now in the journey, which we will call the current state [*drawn as a thick line overlapping a shaded circle*]. It would help to make sure the point is sufficiently far away from the start point so as to encompass all the different milestones since the beginning as well as to make sure the pinnacle point is roughly present at a distance representing the time gap (maybe in number of years or months for example) between the present time and the duration it would take to reach the pinnacle point. It would be difficult to draw this to scale on a draw-space and therefore it is acceptable if it is not scaled proportionally as it could be understood shortly that we will have the opportunity to represent the timeframes on our LifePath illustration.

As discussed in the early part of this paper if an individual does not have a life ambition but wants to find one, the help of a coach or partner may be sought to identify a career aspiration. There are many tests as well as career counseling services available that help to decide as to what could be the best option. A greater degree of self-awareness is required for this and one such tool that can support this process is the Seven Drivers of Aspiration that aims to find out one's priority of drivers. The seven drivers of aspiration is also a concept and self-assessment process that facilitates self-understanding, which can be applied to select career goals. Derived from keen observation of aspirations of individuals and research, seven key motivational factors have been identified to drive an individual towards his/her aspiration namely, Wealth, Power, Fame, Passion, Impact, Experience and Philanthropy<sup>1</sup>. By referring to the available literature, an individual can learn to apply

this method.

### 3.2.3 Historical Milestones

The next step would be think about key activities and accomplishments made since the beginning till date and to write them against smaller circles (or points) drawn along the line connecting the *Start Point* with the *Current State* point representation. In the case of one's career planning for example, the milestones can be, school, university, first job etc. Between the milestone points under the connecting line an individual may write down the duration in number of years as well as note down some of the key interests and accomplishments during the time. It is important to see how these connections add value to plan the future.

### 3.2.4 Future Path and Lead Points

Now the core of the LifePath Planning process lies in this step. Starting from the current state, one can project different options available as arrows. For example say for an individual currently in a job, the future options may be the following:

- Continue in the same role
- Change role or level
- Change company
- Quit to pursue further studies
- Take a sabbatical
- Quit to start his/her own business

While all of the above options or more are available, it is prudent to put the most probable options that could be considered on the life path. The idea is to be aware of all the possible options yet choose the most suited ones applicable to the individual. Typically limiting to three to five most probably options is advised so as stay focused and also limit clutter in the LifePath illustration.

Doing this once from the current state gives an individual what are called the immediate milestones. From here he/she has to repeat the steps to project possible options from this point onwards, and successively from then on. One may mark the time duration between milestones above the connector arrows. The next step would be to repeat these steps as much there is space and the duration you are aware of next steps and have control of. Say for the next 5 or a maximum of 10 years. Even if the long-term pinnacle point set is not reached, it is all right to leave the diagram incomplete as long as there is a sense of staying in the right direction. It may also be noticed by an individual when not in line with the pinnacle point, meaning for example that the current career track may not take the individual where he/she wants to be 10 years from now. That is a signal to re-think the life path.

An individual on setting the pinnacle point may have the awareness of certain steps that naturally lead into the pinnacle point. The person may put those as well working his/her way back from the pinnacle point. For example to become a heart surgeon one has to become a doctor in the first place. Therefore becoming a doctor can be a primary lead point. If there is another lead point to the primary lead point that can be marked as well as the secondary lead point.

### 3.2.5 The Critical Path

It is useful to highlight the most probable and ideal path between the current state and pinnacle point. This is what we call as the critical path. Note that the ideal path may not always be the most probable so one may need to choose balanced options between the two and highlight with a different color or surround shade the linear set of points (one point per milestone).

### 3.2.6 Action Steps

As one completes all the preceding steps, there will be clarity as to what are some of the immediate and short-term measures that need to be taken towards leveraging the best next options in your life path. It can be noted down on an empty section of the draw space or in the action steps box as denoted in the template Fig 4. One can note the activity one needs to take and also specify the deadline by which it should be completed.

It should be noted that this entire process requires strategic thought and foresight. Additionally, the ability to see future options depends on one's exposure to different aspects of life. While this can be trained and developed as thinking and coaching skill, the depths to cover more detailed aspects of the life path rendering process is beyond the scope of this paper. Further literature and materials would be developed for the same in future.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

Other research results show, that adolescents have increasingly become overly ambitious in their aspirations, and suggests many young adults may be certain that they can achieve more than what is possible<sup>2</sup>. While the research study discussed here confirms this, it also establishes the opportunity both for the majority of them who have an ambition as well as the sizeable minority who don't have one, needing support to identify their ambition in the first place and understanding on what they will be great at. The Life Path process can be a suitable aid towards not only identifying goals but also charting out a plan towards achieving one's ambition.

#### 5. FUTURE PROSPECTS

With regards to the Life Ambition Study, the results discussed here is a sizeable sample primarily obtained from young Indians with a mainstream career. The study is ongoing and it hopes to verify the presented trends from a global sample and gather further insights in due course of time. The LifePath concept is to be improved with further material and it has prospects to be supported by online tools and other learning and developmental initiatives. Various applications of the LifePath planning process such as its usability for personal goals, organizational goals etc. have prospects to be tested in large scale and catalogued to be developed into improved versions with variations of the process.

#### 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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