THE ACCIDENTAL CAREER

Interviews with people who “fell” into careers they love rather than walked into careers they planned
To all the “Accidentals” for their courage, inspiration, and generosity,

and

to my family for giving me the space to discover my own accidents.
Contents

01 | Some Thoughts | 7

02 | The Accidental Fair Trade Entrepreneur | 19

03 | The Accidental Condom Tailor | 35

04 | The Accidental Drop Out | 57

05 | The Accidental Lawyer | 85

06 | The Accidental Sports Marketer | 111

07 | The Accidental Business Counselor | 133

08 | The Accidental World Adventurer | 157

09 | The Accidental Smoothie Mogul | 175

10 | The Accidental Environmental Designer | 189

11 | The Accidental Gold Expert | 209

12 | The Accidental Photographer | 221

13 | The Accidental Banker | 237

14 | The Accidental Comic Artist | 263

15 | The Accidental Food Trucker | 283

16 | The Accidental Barista | 307

17 | The Accidental App Developer | 323

18 | The Accidental Writer | 353
I am from Switzerland and I started exactly with a career doing the “right” thing. That was absolutely how I was brought up in Switzerland, which is a very beautiful, safe, successful, and rich country. So I was trained and did all my schools and studies. I also started working as a business consultant (I’m a CPA), and then I started to work with Deloitte. I was working as an auditor as well as a business consultant. That was very interesting; I learned a lot. It was great to see all these different sectors, industries, and companies, but I realized very quickly I had (almost from an early age) a lot of business ideas. I am very entrepreneurial. Why I left the consulting work really was because I realized I could not come out with the ideas. They would take them but then I could not execute. I could only recommend.
Sure, I can relate to that as a consultant.

I realized I just could not be a consultant. I wanted to be the person who executes, not give recommendations. Before I left, I was working for our largest client, Glencore – a very large commodities trading company. Very large. I was sent on a project in Colombia to do a due diligence for the largest coal mine in the world in the north of Colombia. I didn’t speak Spanish at that time, so they gave me people from Miami and a team from Bogota just to translate for me. It was the first time if my life I realized I could not make myself understood. I could not communicate with the people. In Switzerland, you grow up with all these languages and so you speak all these languages, and so it was something I had never experienced before [not being able to communicate]. I couldn’t even ask my people in the morning if they slept well or anything.

I decided I wanted to leave [Deloitte] anyway and I wanted to learn Spanish – that was important to me. When I left, I went to Latin America. I thought that if I were to go away, I might as well not only learn the language but also about the culture. So I went to Buenos Aires, and before I left, my boss at Glencore came to me because I was the main manager on the job. He said, “Patrick, can you imagine working for us?” At that time, I was 29 or so. I saw that company as being successful and expanding, and so he said, “If so, give me a list of what you think you could do for Glencore.” It was the day before I left and it was like 2 o’clock in the morning when I was drafting my dream job. I handed him that paper over, hopped on the plane, and arrived in Buenos Aires with no word of Spanish. I started reading the paper everyday and took some courses, just to get away and to concentrate on learning more about a different country and the language. Three months later, he called me and said,

“Patrick, we’re opening a new department. Are you interested in this position?”

I said, “Send me the job description.”

He sent me the job description and it looked extremely familiar. I looked
at it and it was basically a copy-and-paste of what I had given him. So I knew that was my job. My job was really to set up a new department as the company (Glencore was just a trading company) moved into asset acquisitions. What I did in Colombia was what they wanted to do around the globe. So I accepted.

They sent one of their managers to Buenos Aires with the contract. I signed and started to work in Argentina for Glencore. For the next few years, I was living in hotels, flying on airplanes, and working with multi-million/billion dollar projects. I was involved with privatization and I was on the board of various mines and smelters in Peru. It was a fascinating time. I was very young for the position I had. They even made me a shareholder after the first year. So I was on the job and I loved it, and I had developed a lot of ideas on how to do things. It was really this large company and I could do everything on a large scale.

After five years of living all over the place, I only really got in touch with the managers, tax consultants, and business consultants. I never really got to the bottom of those countries. You land, they pick you up with a taxi and drive you straight to the office, then from the office to the restaurant, from the restaurant to the office, then to the airport and out again. It was a very isolated lifestyle. So you say, “I was in Hong Kong,” but you were just in between hotels and taxis. You entered a hotel and they all played the same piano music wherever you went. You were in these places but you weren’t really. You were in this bubble in a way – this artificial world. So even though they say you’re now in the Philippines, India, Kenya – everything looked very much similar.

This was great for me. It was great – my projects, my reports. Then, I was on the board of three mines in Peru. They sent me up to these mines at 4,700 meters above sea level, on a level where some would normally need oxygen masks because of the altitude. I was living up there and I saw all these miners. I went into the mountains and I saw how they were taking the ore out. I was just very impressed. Up there, you live in these containers where you have beds. It was all very simple. So I got to know those people (I spoke Spanish at that time). I saw how they lived: They were taken away from their families for 2-3 weeks and then they would go back for a week.
It was a very hard and difficult life. Very poor and very tough. I said, “Wow, what a life they have and what a life I have.” What happened after that was the company restructured, and as a result of that, a lot of miners lost their jobs because the company consolidated the three mines and moved everything. Optimizing.

I saw that a lot of people lost their jobs and I saw how much money was saved – or how little in the overall scheme of things. That money was flowing to the head office where all the shareholders were these multi-millionaires (at least the big ones). Suddenly, I realized that I was making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

This is what I realized. I remember, exactly, that I was in Lima in the hotel and I suddenly realized it. It was this big wake-up call. It was not only this. I also realized that somehow I wasn’t really happy. It was interesting from a business point of view, but I wasn’t really happy. There wasn’t any fulfillment. When I realized I was making the rich richer and the poor poorer, it was this wake-up call. Suddenly, something fundamental changed – like an epiphany. It really was an epiphany. What also happened was I had these nightmares. Every night over 2, 3, 4 days, I had these nightmares where I saw myself at the age of 90 in bed one hour before dying, looking back on my life being a multi-millionaire and then realizing I wasted a lifetime because I didn’t do what I was supposed to do with my life. This was such an incredible nightmare that I woke up every single night. I realized that if I didn’t change, I would end up there. Now I’m young. Now is the time. I didn’t come here to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Because the feeling was so strong, I resigned.

I resigned from Glencore and I gave up everything. I sold the car and I gave up all the tangible things – all my assets, so to speak. I just wanted to be
free. The more assets you have, the more you have to care about them. The more you have to care about them, the more time it takes away from you. I saw that with my boss. The boss who hired me had like ten cars and many houses all over the place. The time he used just to maintain his assets was overwhelming. I saw him and it was a heavy weight for him just to manage his assets. I couldn’t enjoy that. I didn’t want to end up in that place.

I went back and I quit. They couldn’t understand – my friends couldn’t understand, my parents couldn’t understand – because to the outside world, my job was just the dream job everybody wanted to have.

**How old were you back then?**

I was 34.

**And were you married? Did you have kids?**

No. No. I was really working as a workaholic. That was what I did. I always say if I were to do something, I would do it right, and maybe because of that – because of my attitude – very quickly I got into good careers.

So this is the thing [quitting] where everyone thought I was crazy. Why would I do that? Why does somebody do that? Especially my parents (they were very traditional Swiss). But I just couldn’t go back. What I did was I sold everything I had and then I wanted to take a sabbatical to re-consider what to do with my life. I picked Mexico because I had never been to Mexico and it felt like a neutral place for me. I liked Latin America and I knew I wanted to go Latin America, but I wanted to go to a place I had never been to. So I bought a ticket, flew to Mexico just like that, and landed
in Mexico without knowing where to sleep. Then I just took the bus and traveled through the country. I went from one place to another, and if I liked it, I stayed longer. If I didn’t, I continued. Then I got to Oaxaca, a town I liked a lot where I wanted to stay longer, and so I rented an apartment. I took up the violin, did handicraft, took a molding course with clay because I had never used my hands before. I had only used my head. I started to do this just to see if I could also do something with my hands. Then I took literature a year later and philosophy at the local university. It was the time when I just started doing everything I never had time to.

But already after three months (because I was trained and brought up in a way where you have to be productive), I realized I wasn’t productive. I had this bad conscience of not being productive because my entire upbringing was about being productive. I went through a sort of crisis where I was questioning whether quitting and leaving was the right decision. I was all alone in the middle of Mexico and nobody knew where I was. I had no job and no income and I wasn’t doing anything. I gave up that incredible job. Before, when I was in the office, everybody came to me and wanted something from me because of the position I had. Now, nobody cared about me. Nobody. I was just a nobody in the middle of nowhere in Mexico.

I felt like it was a time when I was being tested to see whether I was truthful to my decision. This was a hard, difficult, and challenging time. But the minute I realized that that was what I really wanted to do, things just fell into place. It’s like this time of uncertainty – waking up at night in sweat. What have I done? What do I do? Where do I go? I had to deal with that period of uncertainty. But the minute I decided I could not go back and that this is my life and I needed to do something else… the minute I got that clarity, things started to fall into place because I realized I really liked international trading and I was really good at it. I really have a passion for international trading but it has to be fair trading, because I have seen a lot of other transactions.

When I realized this, it was the time when the fair trade movement was starting very, very slowly with only coffee, bananas, and some other products. Are you familiar with the fair trade scheme?
Just a little bit. I know you are an Ashoka Fellow, and I attended an Ashoka presentation once. It was a discussion about some of these issues, and that's why I'm familiar with the basic concepts.

Actually, what I forgot to tell you is, when I left Peru, I felt like I had a moral obligation to give something back to the country and the continent. But I didn't know how. So a few months later, I ended up being in Mexico when I started my fair trade company, but I already knew I wanted to be in Peru one day. That's why I called the company Fairtrasa – it stands for Fair Trade South America. Already then, I knew I wanted to do something in South America. Although I was in Mexico, I was very clear on what I wanted to do.

The question I posed for myself was, “How can I use my international trading experience – all my business experiences – to help underprivileged farmers get access to markets, to better prices, and to better know-how in order to improve their lives?” This was the question. I thought the fair trade scheme could be a way to achieve such a goal.

I did an investigation into Mexico and found out that Mexico is the largest avocado producer in the world. I went to Michoacán, the state where they produce avocados, and (as mentioned, things fell into place the minute I had clarity) I met somebody through my neighbor in Oaxaca who knew somebody who was in that state farming avocados. So we went there. I met them and I told them the story of what I wanted to do. They had exported avocados before, but burned their fingers and lost a lot of money and did not want to go back into that business.
Because of my idea, they said, “Okay,” as it was under a different scheme and that, “Yes, we want to do it.” So we started this company, we started to form a cooperative, and we were pioneers with the first fair trade avocados in the world.

This was our first mover advantage. Basically, we certified the avocados as fair trade because it had never been done before, and we exported them to Europe. I went to Europe and looked for big importers, and because I offered something that nobody had, I chose to work with the largest importer. It started to take off. We sent one container, and after 10 days, they came over and asked if we had more. We added growers for grapefruit, mango, and other growers so that we could offer many more products. It took some 2-3 years to really, on a trial-and-error basis, further develop our business model to be the most effective and efficient way to work with these growers. What does it really take to create a big impact for them? We fine-tuned the model beyond what was the standard fair trade model. What happened was that the avocado season in Mexico goes down precisely when Peru’s starts, and so I had a reason to go to Peru. I went there to look for people who shared my vision and philosophy and who had the entrepreneurial spirit. I did a lot of interviews with people and I was working with the government just to understand how I could find these people. Just learning about Peru. A particular guy I interviewed for the position to replicate our model in Peru took the idea and set up his own company. Today, he’s one of our competitors. So that also happens.

One of the biggest challenges for me working in Mexico was, after having worked in such a big organization and being a Swiss perfectionist, going to a Latin country where the culture and the way they work was totally different. That was one of my biggest, biggest challenges.

After going to Peru, I met one of these grower organizations for bananas. Banana exports were all in the hands of Dole. These producers all depended on Dole and were not treated fairly. I met a guy who was running a cooperative, and he wanted to get out of Dole to export directly. I helped him with the network that I had with the first export outside the Dole monopoly. This was a huge thing. This was a huge thing that went around the globe, because it started a wave in which all other producers also wanted
to start exporting directly. At that time, I did not have a company, and so I did that through one of my other customers. One year later, I hired him to start our office in Peru to replicate our business model. As he was a banana expert, we also started to include bananas into our product basket. Today, bananas are one of our biggest items. After Peru, we continued to expand our business model in Chile, then Argentina, and now even in Turkey. This is a model where the first replication was Peru, and now it’s a model that works for all throughout the world. We have to adapt it to local circumstances, but basically it can be replicated around the globe.

Another important factor was I realized it’s very hard to work with small-scale growers because we have higher costs. They aren’t big plantations; they’re small-scale farmers. So we have a lot of costs that are higher, and in the market, this makes it very difficult to be competitive. Although the fair trade label commands a higher price that should offset the higher cost, nonetheless it was difficult because in 2009 when we had the financial crisis, a lot of people just couldn’t buy it anymore. We were fair trade and organic, so it was two premiums for which people had to pay and it was just too high. I realized that if I really wanted to take this onto a large scale, I needed to own as much as possible of the supply chain. So I started to set up my own import company because I realized the importers made the most money. Once I had enough volume that could justify an import company, I opened an import company in the U.K. This had another positive affect in that we could tell our producers that we control the entire production chain. We could go to supermarkets and tell them they could buy directly from the source.

If we were to look at the genesis of everything, it really which stemmed from, as you said, witnessing the reorganization of the company that led to people losing their jobs, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. I think it’s probably not uncommon for a lot of people working in business to – maybe not have seen it first hand – at least know about the effects of reorganization on people’s livelihoods. I think a lot of people have the underlying inclination to want to help in some way, but never enough motivation to do it. It becomes something like, “Well, maybe if I have time, I’ll go do some volunteer work
here and there.” That’s usually the extent to which they pursue those ambitions.

For you, you made a very clear choice. As you said, you went in and quit your job even though you didn’t know what the next step was going to be. What gave you the courage to actually take that big, big step into leaving your corporate job and go help people, even though you didn’t know how to make that happen?

This is the question I get asked a lot: “Why do you give up all of that?”

There are various aspects to it. With what I had seen, I just realized I couldn’t work with that company anymore. I couldn’t work in that environment. Just couldn’t. I had seen too much and that just wasn’t me. Part of the epiphany was that I was doing that [job] because I was doing the “right” thing. Basically, when you are raised into thinking that this is what society tells you to do, then you think if you do that, you’ll be happy at your job. I realized that wasn’t the case. Part of that crisis – if you want to call it that – was that what society told me all my career was wrong. I didn’t agree with it. It also had to do with finding out what is really for you. That’s the first time I really questioned that. It was what society and my parents wanted me to do, but I never asked what I wanted to do. This was the first time when I thought, “Well, it’s my life. I need to find it myself. Nobody is in a position to show me what it is. I need to find it myself.” I knew there was no way back. What helped me to do that was obviously that I didn’t have a family. With a family, I think it would have been much harder.

Definitely.

So I had the flexibility to go wherever I wanted to go. Also, I knew that whatever happens – *whatever happens* – what I have is basically all between my ears: my knowledge. I had so much faith that I knew *even if* it didn’t
work, I would find something. I knew that even though I gave many things away (a lot of money, a lot of prestige, a lot of whatever) I would find something. It was that sufficiently high trust in myself and faith in myself that I decided: it’s my life – go for it. Jump into the cold water. Just do it even though no one would have done it because of security reasons. Also, I had enough money for this one year, and initially I wanted to take this sabbatical for one year. So I knew I also didn’t have that financial pressure to get something quickly.

These were the elements, but the key element was that I knew I couldn’t go back. That was the epiphany. I needed to do something meaningful in my life and it’s only me who can find that out. Obviously, that took a lot of courage. Also, even though I had everything, I also realized I could not tolerate my situation. I was really in this unbearable situation. I just couldn’t enjoy all the money. I couldn’t. I couldn’t enjoy the car or anything. So whatever were to happen, it could only go up.

*Did the concept of you missing out on a very high opportunity cost ever cross your mind? Did that ever make you stop and think twice to say, “Wow, I’m giving up a lot of money by walking away into who-knows-what.”?*

Yes. Totally. I was *totally* aware of the opportunity cost. *Huge* opportunity cost. As a matter of fact, I could tell you the opportunity cost was much higher than what I thought, because last year, Glencore had an IPO and my successor made *way* over $100 million.

*Wow!*

So, today, if I had stayed, I would be a multi-millionaire. So the opportunity cost is enormous, but even then, today, I would not go back. I never regretted my decision. Never.
Where do you think this strong sense of conviction comes from?

One thing is that I am the biggest optimist on earth you can find. I really have a lot of trust in life and trust in myself. And I’m a leader. I’m a born leader. I never follow. That’s what others do. At the beginning, I did because of my parents and of society. But the minute I found out that it’s not me and that I was always entrepreneurial – always – [I came out on my own]. There were obviously times of uncertainty when I also questioned [my decision]. I deeply questioned, but because I passed through that – once you pass through something like that – you come out stronger.

Then what happened was in 2008, I became an Ashoka Fellow. In 2009, I was the Social Entrepreneur of the Year in Mexico [awarded by UBS]. Then I became an Endeavor Entrepreneur and now I’m a Yale World Fellow. What I see, also, is that there’s big interest in what I do, and the world needs that. We need people with a different awareness – with the awareness that our planet is in a difficult situation. We need people who invest their time and their energy in trying to make the world a better place in his or her field. We need more of these people, and I think I need to inspire. I want to inspire more people to do that, because if you just go after the money, that will not be good for our planet. I realized that I needed to do something. I realized I was making the rich richer and the poor poorer. I had seen these people and I saw the implications. When I see what we can do now, the big, big impact is huge.

What I say when I talk about my projects is that I was successful, but for me, the big shift was from success to significance. People only look for success. Before when I was with Glencore, I had a job. Now I have a mission. It feels totally, totally different. With what I’m doing now, when I go out to the field and see the producers who we can help, the satisfaction I get out of that goes way beyond the monetary returns I would have received. And when I get up in the morning and when I go to sleep, I know I’m doing it. Because I
see it as being important, that’s why I became an Ashoka Fellow. The world needs this.

But it definitely took a lot of courage. It was very, very difficult. I went through very difficult times because I came from this big corporate world, and I had never established a company. Then I started from the very bottom in a different country with a different culture with a different language and a very different market. Starting a company even in just your own country is not easy; starting a company by itself is not easy. I did it under all these very difficult circumstances and I needed to learn something I had no experience in. I had experience in the big corporate world, but I never had problems with not being able to pay, for example. Liquidity problems. I learned how to do cash flows, but then when I had my company, I realized that not paying means they [farmers] don’t eat. I learned all these principles and I experienced these principles in reality and how important they are. I came from that corporate world and then I had to start everything from scratch – from nothing. Only now, those two worlds – so to speak – merged because we started from the bottom, but now we’re in a position with a group of companies where we look at how can we replicate, how can we increase the group, and how can we add new items. We’re now in a very different stage. What I want to do is to replicate. For me, it’s not about the traditional [metrics] of how much profit we make. I want to know how many more producers can we include, and one day when I have to die, I want to know how many millions of producers have benefited from the system I have created. That will be the satisfaction.

When you were traveling around Mexico and trying out new things, you mentioned earlier that you faced a crisis of being unproductive – of being idle. That was a very difficult time for you. I can understand that, probably not to the same extent that you’ve experienced, but I can understand the sense of loss and of not knowing what is next. When I quit my job, it was essentially the same thing. I quit on the basis of principle and had the same type of feeling – the insecurity of not knowing what I would do even on a day-to-day basis. For you, how did you draw strength to overcome that?
At that point, when I left Switzerland, nobody could really understand it [my reason for quitting and leaving], but at least there were some friends who said, “Yeah, try it. If you don’t like it, at least you tried.” I also put it as a sabbatical. They knew it’s a sabbatical, then you come back, then you take another job. That was one difficult part, but it was still just a sabbatical.

When I was in Mexico, I was all alone. There was nobody I could talk to. Nobody. That was really the tough part. That was really just me and myself. I gave it up and there was no way back. The strength I got was just through totally believing in myself and knowing that even if worse comes to worse, I knew I could go back and just do some other job. Just accepting the worse could happen. Because I’m this big optimist, I said to myself, “The only way left is up. It could only improve.” It was a process of really being in a confrontation with myself. During my upbringing, it was society and my parents who told me everyday what to do – what you call the “right” thing. Because of this classic formation, you cannot just get rid of it [that mentality] in a few days. It takes time until you start realizing that now is the time to start looking after yourself. It’s not society. It’s your life. What does that mean? How do I want to live? What do I want to do?

That was the process I went through. It’s like – I don’t know what to call those processes – a calcination process, or purification process, or something like that. I realized it’s my life and I need to do what I really want to do. I’m an extremely passionate person. When I give presentations, what they say is what comes across for them is the passion. But why I have this passion is because I decided for my life. Passion only comes if you do what you’re really good at – what you really want to do. I have also an incredible amount of energy. But where does that passion and energy come from? It comes from the fact that I decided to do what I really want to do in life. If you do what you’re supposed to do, then you get antsy. Look at all these guys who need to go to their jobs looking grey every morning. They have no energy. You can see this in people. People with passion are people doing what they really want to do.

In a way, you always had a fall-back plan. You had built up these skills, you
were obviously successful at your previous job, and at any time, you could have always just found another job if it came down to just making a living. Even though that offered you some sense of security, was it alternatively a greater force into pushing you forward because that’s not something you wanted to go back to? In other words, the unbearable idea of just getting another job pushed you away from wanting a job?

Yes, definitely.

And was there ever a moment of validation in which you felt you had made the right decision and were doing the right thing?

The first few months when we started the project, I wasn’t really sure. I wasn’t really sure whether or not it was going to fly. It was part of my year that I wanted to take off. I wasn’t 100%; I wasn’t all so clear. I started the project and thought, “Okay, it’s part of my sabbatical.” Then I got in touch with a very influential businessperson back in Switzerland who asked that I work for him. So all of a sudden, I had this job offer that was similar or even more attractive than what I did before, because I would have been working for one of the richest and most influential businesspeople. I met him and I had an interview with him, but then my own project started to take off slowly. I could have stopped and said, “No, I don’t do it [my project],” but then I started to see the impact. I started to see how, even just for one or two farmers, what we did could help change their lives. There was no certainty that the project was going to fly because we were only on a very, very low level. It was basically re-confirmation to say that my future was my own company, and so I declined the other possibility.

What kept me going – and what keeps me going still today – is when I see the impact and see what we achieve. It’s not just that they get more money. It's that you see their lives change. Their awareness changes. When you just give them more money, they take it (especially the men) and go drink
more beer. Money alone cannot be productive. So what we established really looks into how to invest that money and how to improve levels of education and healthcare. It’s embedded in that. People can suddenly be more trustful — they have a different awareness — and it’s that state that they pass onto their kids. True sustainable development is changing awareness that will be carried on, and not just the money alone. And seeing that — seeing that constantly — is the most satisfying thing for me.

Is there anything you would have done differently?

From a business side, I made some bad mistakes that were very costly. Just things that I should have done better. Sometimes I hired the wrong people who came only because fair trade was fashionable and just wanted to steal money from me. There were a lot of difficulties. But what keeps me going is this un-destroyable faith in myself and in my project, and that what I do is my mission. This is my contribution. It’s so strong that even though I lost money, it keeps me going. I get up in the morning and it attracts a lot of people because I have such a conviction that what I do is the right thing. I live it with every cell of my body and with everything I do. This is what inspires people. This is what attracts students. This is what inspires others, maybe, to do the same thing.

Patrick can be reached at: www.fairtrasa.com