

The Runway to Happiness

AND COMMERCIAL VELOCITY

In the travel industry



**Emily
Edwards**

2025

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INTRODUCTION



I conducted a specialist piece of research, in which 51 commercial professionals in the travel industry shared their career experiences; the challenges they face, their aspirations, and what they'd like to improve upon.

As a career coach and commercial trainer serving this space, I am thrilled to share with you the analysis of the data and my opinion on what we can ALL do to improve.

Emily



Emily Edwards is the travel industry's career coach and commercial trainer who supports people in commercial roles to be the pilots of their careers, and commercial teams to reach peak performance.

Her integrated approach of building self-leadership, commercial and communication skills in a supportive environment means everyone can reach Commercial Velocity.

She draws on her experience from both sides of the negotiating table, working across three continents and professional coaching and travel industry qualifications, to enable transformation through training, coaching and working 1:1.

Emily believes where you start in life shouldn't define where you end up or how much fun you have along the way, and she is on a mission to build more pathways for people to shine.



HOW DO PEOPLE REALLY FEEL about their careers?

A significant number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their careers. In fact, 53% said they either:

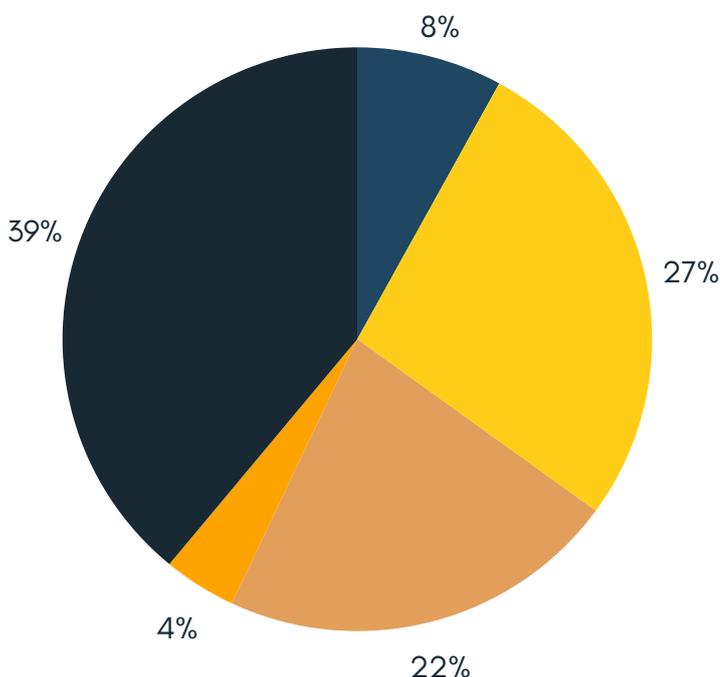
- ➔ Know what they want but can't make it happen
- ➔ Want to change but don't know their options
- ➔ Have changed jobs but still feel unfulfilled

This is aligned with [BambooHR's Employee Happiness Index](#) which shows that the travel industry tracks well below the average happiness level for employees (although that stat is improving post-pandemic).

What did surprise me?

The fact that **39% reported being genuinely happy with their careers**, with a clear plan they're actively working on. That's encouraging! It serves as a beacon of hope for the 53%. It's proof that creating a personalised, meaningful action plan and following through on it is entirely possible, and hugely satisfying.

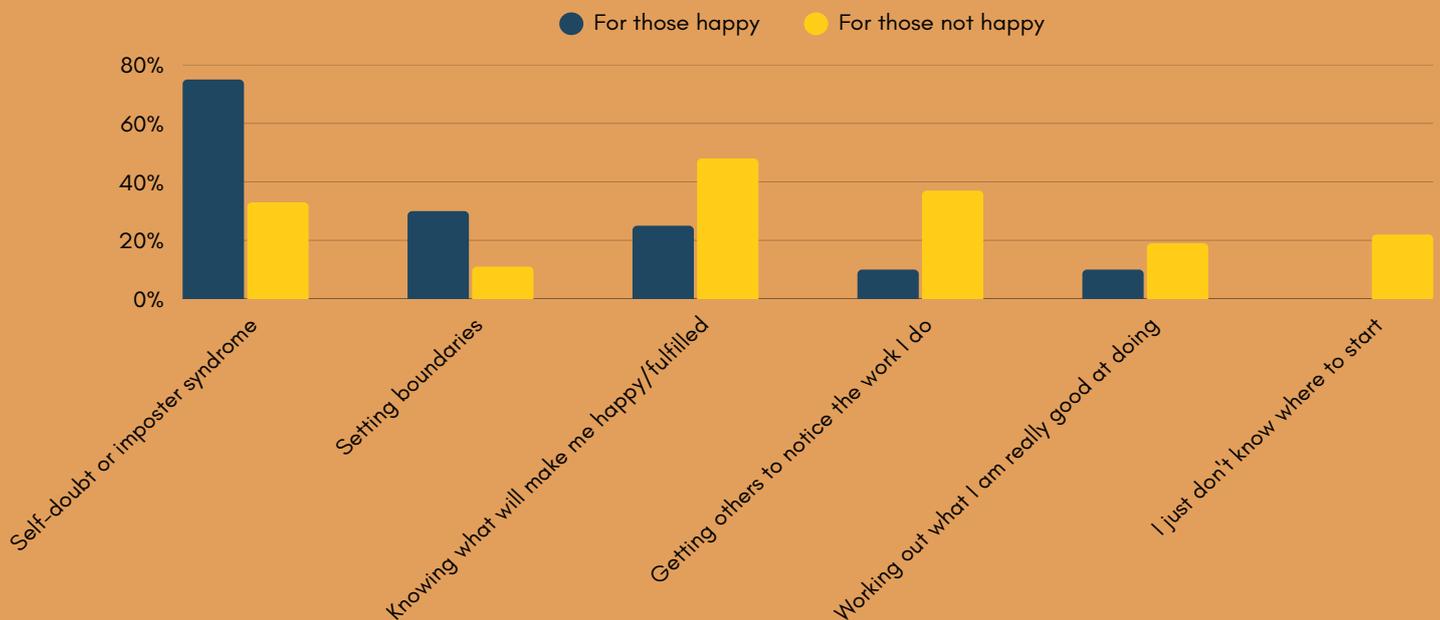
What is your current situation?



- I don't care that much about what happens next in my career, I have other priorities
- I know what I want to do in my career, but I'm having trouble making it happen, or don't have the support to do it
- I want something to change, but I don't know what my options are
- I've tried changing jobs and it hasn't helped, I'm not finding fulfilment at work
- I'm really happy with how my career is going, I have a clear plan that I am taking action on

HOW DO PEOPLE REALLY FEEL **about their careers?**

What is your biggest challenge?



It's not all sunshine and roses, as even among those thriving in their careers, challenges persist. Of that 39%, a striking 75% cited self-doubt or imposter syndrome as one of their biggest struggles.

For those currently unhappy in their careers, self-doubt ranked as the *third* biggest challenge, behind figuring out what would make them happy and getting the right people to recognize their hard work (in interviews, with their boss, etc.).

Interestingly, a quarter of unhappy respondents don't know where to start, while none of the happy people have this problem, showing that taking action leads to satisfaction.

This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (more on that later!): **we need to feel safe, happy, and seen before we can stretch beyond our comfort zone in a healthy way.**



Emily says...

At first glance, this might seem contradictory. How can someone who is taking action and feeling good about their career still be held back by crippling doubt?

The truth is, this experience is not just common, it's expected. People feel more imposter syndrome when they *care* about what they are doing.

And big career moves create the perfect conditions for imposter syndrome to take hold. It's not a sign of inadequacy; it's a sign of growth.

As Clare Josa, [author of *Ditching Imposter Syndrome*](#), puts it:

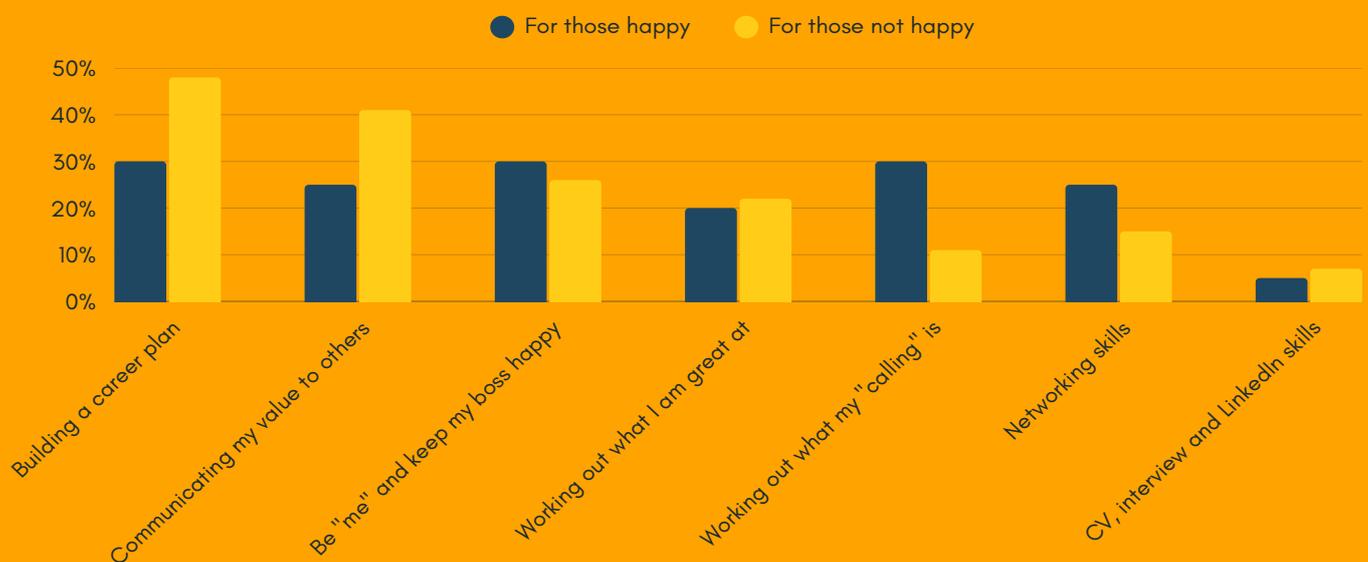
"Imposter Syndrome isn't just self-doubt in a spiky suit. It's the gap between who you see yourself as being and who you think you need to be to succeed and lead."

This internal identity conflict, between the 'old me' and the 'new me' (or worse, the idea that we need to become someone completely different), is often strongest when we make bold changes. So even those senior professionals who seem to be sailing smoothly to their next big role? They might be battling self-doubt, just like the rest of us.

HOW DO PEOPLE want to grow?

Looking ahead to how people would like to improve, the research shows that **the key areas of development shift**, depending on whether someone is happy with their current path.

What would you like to learn about?



For those who aren't satisfied, the top priority is clear: **building a career plan (48%)**. Makes sense, right? "I don't like where I am, so I'd better make a plan to change things". A classic move for my commercially-minded friends.

Close behind, **at 41%, is learning to communicate your value**. Again, logical. Success in the corporate world depends on how others perceive us. Sometimes we understand how career decisions are made; other times, it feels murkier when the announcements just drop into our inboxes. If we can just make people see our hard work and understand what we want to do, they'll give us the opportunities we deserve... right?

HOW DO PEOPLE want to grow?



Emily says...

Making a plan and communicating your value are critical steps, but they're not enough. If you take action out of desperation, boredom, or because "it's what I should do", people will sense it. Last year, Colm Flanagan, Head Of Large Chain Partners Meapac, shared with me how understanding your deeper "why" is essential:

"75% of the people I interview hadn't even thought about that question. And very often, they don't really understand why they want the job, other than the fact that it's a logical next step. Just "oh and it'd be great to be the boss."

Before crafting a plan, ask yourself why you want the destination you're heading toward. Knowing this will build resilience, help you handle setbacks, and make your goals clearer to those around you.



And What About Those Who Are Happy With Their Careers?

Among those who are happy with their careers and are following a clear plan (39% of respondents), the priorities shift:

- ✓ Figuring out their true calling
- ✓ Balancing being themselves with keeping their boss happy
- ✓ Refining their career plan



Emily says...

What does this show us?

- ✓ Being happy in your career doesn't mean you've found your calling. Our calling comes from beyond us. It can feel like the universe has a plan that you don't know about, but you know you need to follow. But it's very hard to notice the signs, when you're caught up in your day-to-day
- ✓ These people probably already know how to keep their boss happy, but they want to bring more of themselves to work, to spend less energy "acting professionally" and more energy making an impact.
- ✓ A great plan isn't static; it evolves, improves, and sometimes, gets scrapped altogether. What doesn't change so much, is the North Star.

WHERE DO THEY WANT TO BE in 12 months?

This is, of course, a deeply personal question that is influenced not only by how long you've been in your current role, but also by circumstances in your personal life. One thing was true for all respondents; **a desire for growth and self-improvement.**

Whether it's stepping into a new position, sharpening skills, or better understanding ourselves, no one looks ahead hoping to stay stagnant. You may have heard the saying: *life is like a bicycle, if you stop moving, you fall off.*

61% of professionals surveyed are actively looking for a new role, promotion, or relocation. Interestingly, this number remains consistent whether they feel happy in their career or not.

Take note, employers!

What differs is what that next move means to them.

For those who are currently dissatisfied, the next priority is **recognition**: both financial and professional. People want to feel valued, not taken for granted. Compensation and stability matter, but so does acknowledgment of their contributions.

The other major theme? **Purpose and balance.** Many are searching for work that feels more meaningful and aligned with their calling, but they don't want that pursuit to come at the cost of their personal lives.

Purpose-driven work isn't just beneficial for individuals, it's a strategic advantage for companies too. [As McKinsey & Company puts it:](#)

"People who live their purpose at work are more productive than people who don't. They are also healthier, more resilient, and more likely to stay at the company. Moreover, when employees feel that their purpose is aligned with the organization's purpose, the benefits expand to include stronger employee engagement, heightened loyalty, and a greater willingness to recommend the company to others."

Where do you want to be in 12 months? (dissatisfied)

- 1. Career Growth & Leadership** - Many responses express a desire for promotions, stepping into senior roles, or moving into leadership positions (e.g., "Regional Revenue Director," "Commercial Director," "VP level," "Step into a people manager role," "Director of Marcom in an overseas role").
- 2. Financial & Professional Recognition** - A focus on higher salaries, job stability, and feeling valued (e.g., "+50% salary increase," "Better paid position and knowing my worth," "Not feeling taken for granted," "Stable, financially rewarding job where I feel valued").
- 3. Work-Life Balance & Purpose** - A recurring theme of finding balance, working in a fulfilling role, and aligning with personal values (e.g., "Better work-life balance," "Not at the expense of my personal life," "Serving my purpose in life," "Starting a job that resonates with my calling").

WHERE DO THEY WANT TO BE in 12 months?

For those already happy in their careers, the focus is on **developing their skills**. They want to deepen their expertise: technical, commercial, and power skills (I hate the term "soft skills") for one of two reasons:

- ▶ They've recently transitioned into a new role and are navigating fresh responsibilities.
- ▶ They know that continued progress requires continuous learning. They're committed to "sharpening the knife," increasing their value to their current and future employers.

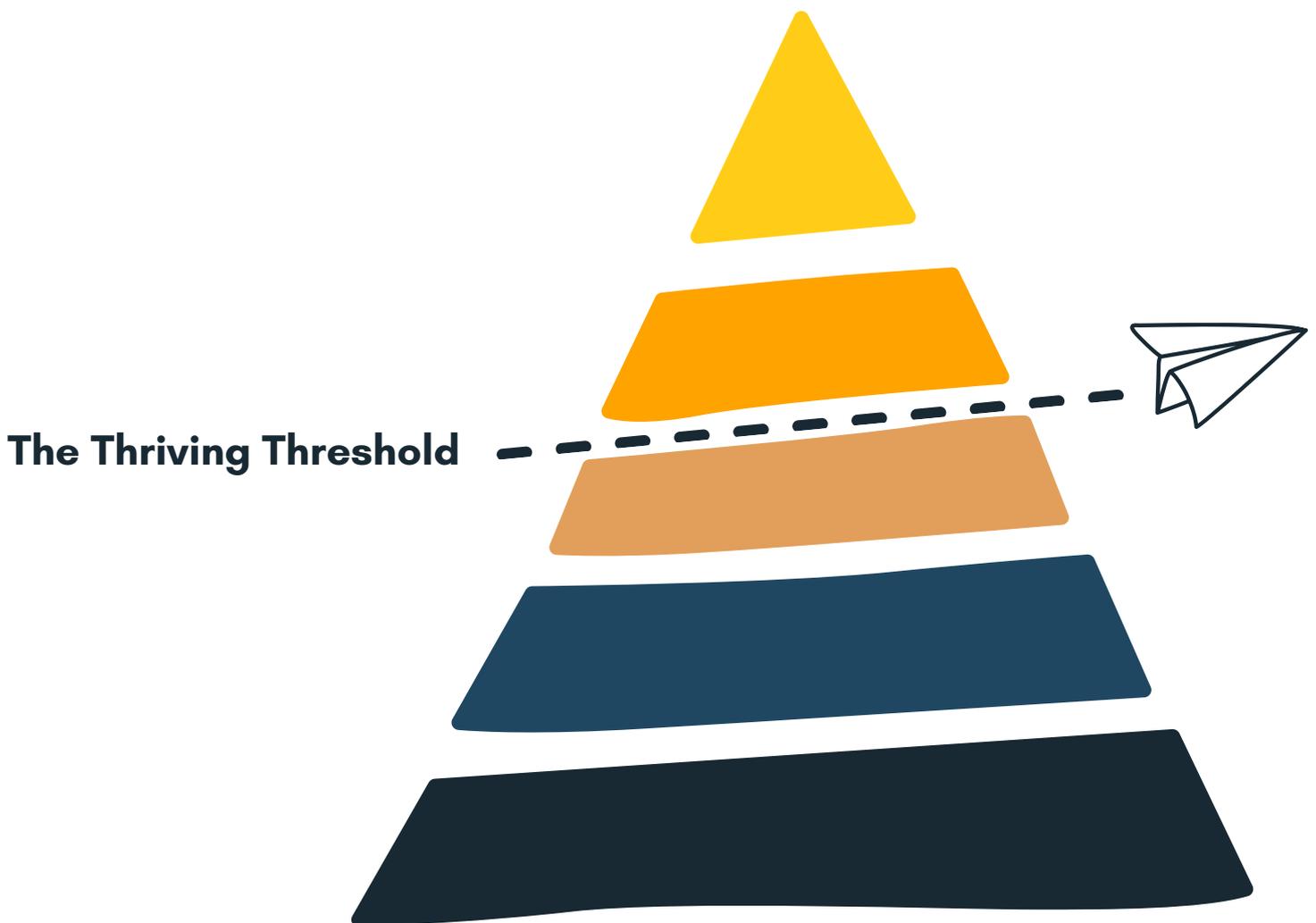
They also want to **amplify their impact both commercially and personally**. They aren't waiting for permission. They are eager to take action, to unleash their unique superpowers developed through a combination of honed skills, expertise and purposeful direction.

Where do you want to be in 12 months? (satisfied)

1. **Career Growth & Leadership** – Many responses indicate a desire for promotions, leadership roles, or increased responsibilities (e.g., "Replace my boss," "Director position," "Leader," "Building a team").
2. **Skill Development & Expertise** – A strong focus on improving technical, commercial, and power skills, along with learning about industry trends and new tools (e.g., "Stakeholder management," "Negotiation skills," "Hospitality tech and market trends").
3. **Impact & Recognition** – A recurring theme is making a significant impact on the business, whether through successful projects, commercial KPIs, brand visibility, or influencing company strategy (e.g., "Significant impact on success," "Navigated a big project successfully," "More brand visibility in the region").

Career and personal growth follow a progression; there are no shortcuts to success. I've mapped out the five key stages on our Runway to Happiness, and there's a distinct point where people begin to feel truly satisfied with their career trajectory. I call this...

THE THRIVING Threshold



THE THRIVING Threshold



Much like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we start with the basics. Assuming our basic physiological needs are met, our journey to professional fulfilment starts with **career growth**.

We need to know our careers are headed in the right direction, with better pay, new opportunities, and a clear path forward. That sense of progress gives us a feeling of security. When we have an actionable plan, we believe we can avoid major career setbacks and continue to provide for ourselves and our families



Next up: **recognition**. Sure, financial recognition plays its role in making us feel secure (money makes the world go round, after all). But more than that, fair pay, genuine appreciation, and not being taken for granted makes us feel like part of a safe, solid tribe.

We then believe we're in a fair exchange of value, and as long as we hold up our end, others will too.

THE THRIVING Threshold



Then comes **purpose and balance**. We don't just want to belong, we want to be respected members of the group. And respect isn't just lip service. It looks like this:

- ➔ Not being run into the ground
- ➔ Being able to make space for life outside of work
- ➔ Getting real rest, not just 'time off'

Working with purpose brings clarity and resilience. It gives our work meaning and steers us to make better decisions. It earns the respect of others too; people notice when you're driven by something deeper.

Some leaders struggle to let go, to let teams take ownership of their time, take real breaks, or recharge without guilt.

But MHR Global puts it plainly: top performers protect their time.

"You'll notice that high-performing employees don't skip breaks, and they set boundaries to protect their personal time. Downtime isn't wasted work time; it's an essential part of staying sharp and focused."

Once we've locked in these three needs, growth, recognition, and purpose, we cross what I call **The Thriving Threshold**.

This is where fulfillment begins.

So what's left? Haven't we already reached the top of Maslow's pyramid? Yes... and no.

THE THRIVING Threshold

Self-esteem and self-actualisation are the gateway to thriving. But once we get there, something powerful happens: *a self-reinforcing loop kicks in.*

People who feel secure, valued, and driven have more energy and headspace. They stop operating in survival mode and start thinking bigger. Ask yourself: when you're worried about losing your job or feeling stuck, do you have the capacity for deep, creative work?



Once people start thriving, they turn their attention to **prowess**. They sharpen their skills, expand their strengths, and turn experience into insight. They don't see new challenges as starting from scratch, they see them as the next evolution. Growth becomes a way of life.



Finally, they unlock **impact**. Not just for the company, but also for the people around them. Before this point, work often feels transactional: company pays me, I hit the targets, all good.

But once they reach this stage, it's different. They know they can do more. They have the ownership, the influence, and the drive to make a bigger impact. They become a powerhouse.

And they know that continuing to hone their prowess will enable them to have even more impact.

HOW DO WE SPEED along the runway?

For individuals, moving along the runway means a greater sense of fulfilment, greater career satisfaction, higher earnings and will likely lead to longer tenures within companies, meaning a greater sense of community.

For companies, helping their teams to move along the runway means they will have more impactful powerhouses stepping up to take ownership of projects, which will give a real commercial advantage. Not to mention, happier teams means reduced staff turnover and therefore reduced cost of hiring and training new staff.

It's a win-win! My favourite kind of negotiation!

HOW DO WE SPEED along the runway?

Here are my quick tips to recognise where you are on the runway and what actions you can take to move along it:

Potential & Plan: Moving onto the first step of the runway, you start to feel a sense of control and security about your career. To create more and better opportunities for yourself, spend some time working out what you want to do and build a career plan around that. Think big, then work backwards. Also, be good at your job; seek out opportunities to build your technical skills.

Make it Public: Once you're here, you feel a sense of support and recognition from your community. To get this support and feel more valued, learn how to get better help from your network, how to communicate your unique value to others, and set your minimum standards of what you will accept from a role or company.

Prioritise You: Reaching the third step on the runway gives you a sense of purpose, and balance, which comes from knowing your WHY and your HOW. Learn to set boundaries around your time and your energy, showing other people how to treat you. This enables you to focus on working towards your bigger purpose. *Congratulations, you are now thriving!*

Prowess: Here, you have the respect and admiration of those around you. Because you have sought out mentorship, coaching and training, you become the go-to expert. Surrounding yourself with those already doing what you want to do, means that you believe it can happen and you will work towards it.

Power: You reach authenticity, being your best self to have the biggest impact for your company and on the people around you. Find opportunities to share your expertise and support with others. Look for stretch projects which leverage your strengths, developing them even further.



HOW DO WE SPEED along the runway?

And for those of you running a business or leading a team:

Career Clarity: Ensure that career conversations happen at least twice a year, including offering opportunities across teams or functions (don't let your team leaders selfishly cling on to top performers). Make sure everyone benefits from clear and direct feedback about their work and areas to improve. Too often, employees don't understand what you expect from them in order to level up.

Give Credit: Of course this means money (salary, commissions, bonus, leave) but it also means praise and the recognition of hard work done well. Try also to recognise attempts to try something new, even if it doesn't work.

Choice: Give more ownership back to your team in how they manage their work. Understand their personal motivators and adapt your approach accordingly. Treat them with respect. Share the "big picture" with your team so they know their work matters.

Craft: Ensure that skills training is not just for newbies. Think about all the ways your people are levelling up and help them to do that. Compounding skills growth at senior levels will have more impact on the wider team. Use external experts if needed.

Catalyst: Create and embed mentoring programs to enable the sharing of knowledge and experience. Leverage skills and expertise from your top players and maybe allow them do the training (if they enjoy it). Create opportunities for people to have impact beyond their team/role, with stretch projects or task force roles.



THE PILOT Principle

“I wish the people on my team would step up, and take ownership for the greater good of the business”

“I wish my boss would see the hard work I am putting in, and help me to get where I want to go”

Can you see how these people are struggling with two sides of the same coin?

Individuals need to step up, and take control of their career path and develop in their roles. People give up control in a multitude of ways: letting self-doubt hold them back, procrastinating due to overwhelm, allowing perfectionism to dictate how much of their work they share. They also don't take the time to reflect, and really get to know themselves. *Until they've done that, how can they be the pilot of their careers?*

But successful pilots don't work alone. They receive extensive and ongoing training, get support from the teams around them, and can rely on the best brains in the business mentoring them. Communication between the teams has to be flawless. Travel companies need to create spaces where people can truly be themselves, expertise and knowledge is freely shared, and everyone has clarity on where their career is going. This is the kind of company that high performers want to work for.

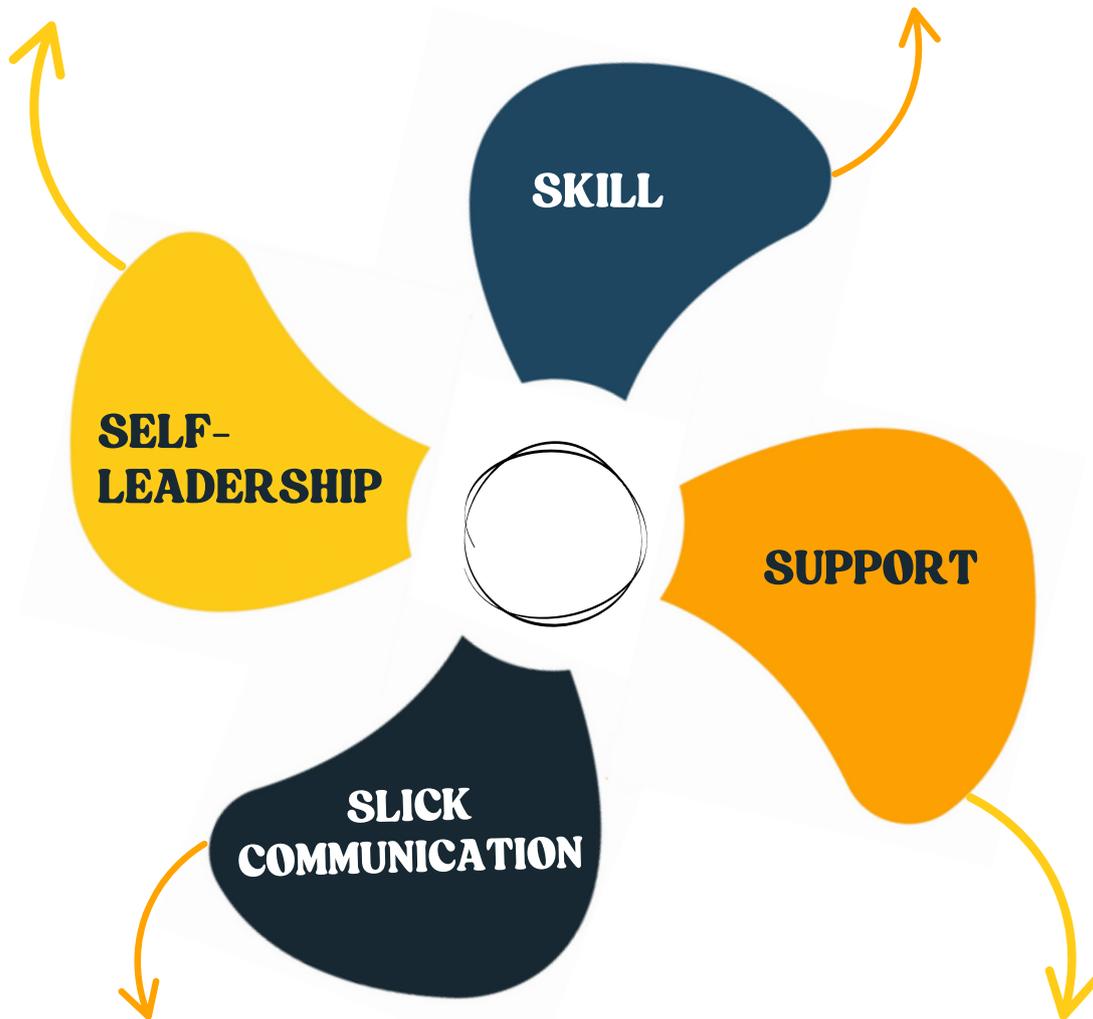
As these pathways become aligned, there will be **more energy, drive, creativity, and understanding of each other's perspectives.** Individuals can flourish, feeling secure, valued and driven, while companies will attract the best talent, sharpen and grow the skills of that team, enabling career satisfaction and company growth.

There are four key areas that need to be aligned for The Pilot Principle: **Self-Leadership, Skill, Slick Communication and Support.**

THE PILOT Principle

Self-leadership means taking ownership, knowing where you want to go, and what you are good at. It means taking feedback, and getting 1% better every day

Skill is simply being good at your job; having the commercial acumen needed for your role, knowing the systems, and understanding the industry. And it means having the tools and opportunity to improve these skills.



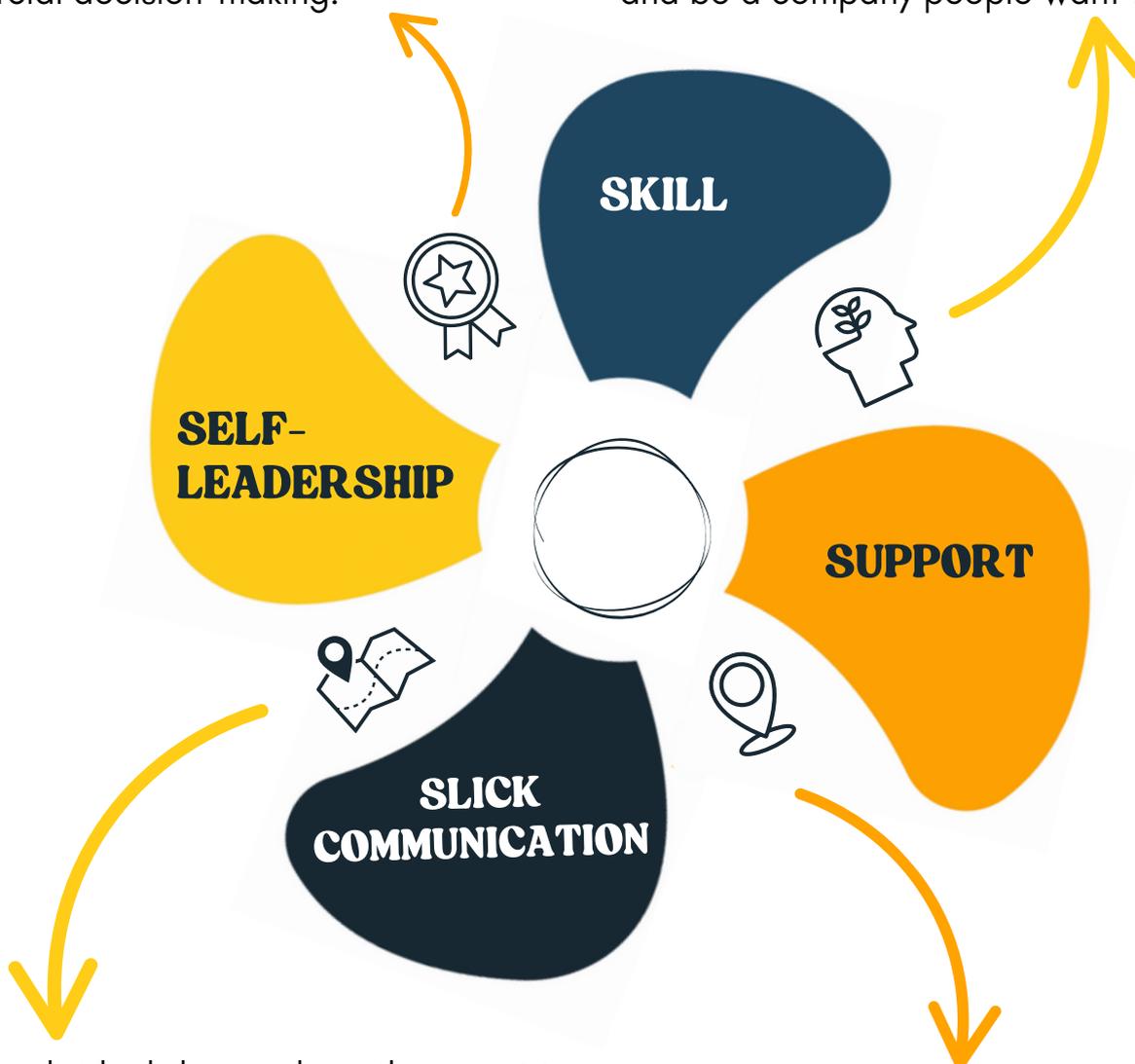
Slick communication is the glue that holds it all together. No more misunderstandings, no more fluffy feedback, and no more wondering “what if I had just said...?”

We all need **support** to be our best selves, companies need to focus on creating a people-focused growth environment, where people feel safe to learn and develop.

THE PILOT Principle

When skilled workers take the initiative to lead themselves, we see strong **individual achievements**. Great deals signed, by moving fast with sound commercial decision-making.

When working with the right support, and provided with the chance to enhance their skills, your teams are in a **growth environment**. This is the way to get a long-term commercial edge, and be a company people want to work for.



When individuals know where they want to go, and how to communicate it to those around them, they are on a **purposeful journey**. Career conversations become easier and more meaningful.

To get your people working together to reach a **clear destination**, you need a culture of support, together with slick communication. This creates trust and means everyone knows where they stand.

THE PILOT Principle

The destination is **Commercial Velocity**: having everyone in the team take ownership, move in the same direction at a fast yet sustainable pace, in order to achieve commercial and personal goals, together.

When we have all these elements in gear, we are **flying**.



WHAT'S NEXT for you?

This report is meant to make you think.

I'd love for you to take some quiet time to reflect on where you or your teams are along the Runway to Happiness, and what you could do to get further.

Are all four pillars of The Pilot Principle strong in your current situation, or is there work to be done?

Could you be bold and share this with your teams, or with your manager, and use the frameworks to discuss career progression and satisfaction at work?

Taking control can begin with a tiny step, and having just a bit more agency over what is going on in your career or in your teams.

WHAT'S NEXT for us?

Sometimes it's good to go on an adventure alone.
Sometimes it's good to go with someone else.

That's the work I love to do.

If you'd like to take control and get thriving, I'd love to hear from you.

I work with **people in (mostly) commercial roles** in the travel industry, to work out what they are good at, where they want to go and how to get there.

I work with **teams and companies in the travel industry**, to get everyone moving in the same direction and at the same speed, while having a bit of fun along the way.

All good things start with a good conversation; if you'd like to schedule one, get in touch.



Get in touch today ✈️

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