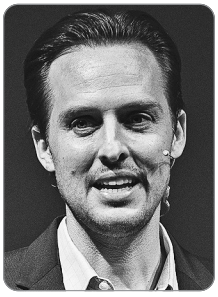
How to become your own decision architect and make better career decisions

The only way that you can purposefully influence anything in your life is by your decisions. The rest of your life just happens. This article provides practical concepts and useful procedures empowering you to become your own decision architect to make systematically better decisions and improve your life. In addition, specific tips for career decisions are presented.



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Summary: Die einzige Möglichkeit, wie Sie etwas in Ihrem Leben gezielt beeinflussen können, sind Ihre Entscheidungen. Der Rest Ihres Lebens passiert einfach. Dieser Artikel bietet praktische Konzepte und nützliche Verfahren, die Sie befähigen, Ihr eigener oder Ihre eigene Entscheidungsarchitekt(in) zu werden, um systematisch bessere Entscheidungen zu treffen und Ihr Leben zu verbessern. Darüber hinaus werden konkrete Tipps für Karriereentscheidungen abgeleitet.

Keywords: Decision Theory, Behavioral Economics, Nudging, Decision-Theoretic Sound Self-Nudging, Career Decisions

1. Decisions with blinkers

Have you ever made a really bad decision? If so, what was the reason? In this paper, I explain why many people make bad decisions and how you can prevent that. I will share **simple methods** to empower you to make better (career) decisions and improve your life.

Ten years ago, my car broke down, and I was facing a decision. What did I have to decide? Think about it. My car was broken, so I needed another car. That makes sense, right? At least, that is what many people think. Ten years ago, I

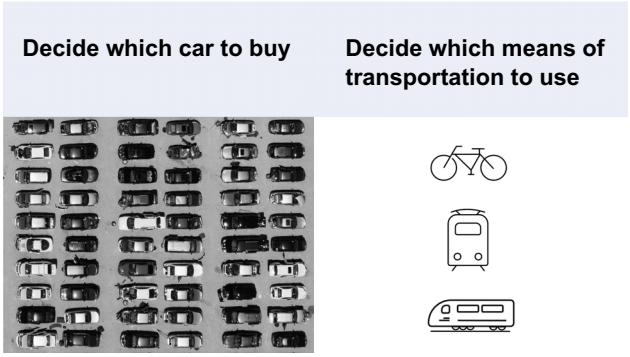

Figure 1: Narrow and broad decision statement and its corresponding alternatives

was undoubtedly one of them. I immediately started to search for a car to buy. I identified dozens of cars very quickly. Then, I spent ages identifying the best car. In the end, I bought a car. However, it was a **really bad decision**. Let me explain to you why.

Without thinking about what I actually wanted, I immediately started to search for a car to buy. However, what was my decision situation actually about? It was not about deciding what car to buy. No! It was broader. It was about deciding which means of transportation to use. Buying a car is only one of many alternatives: I could have used public transportation, bicycles, scooters, go on foot, etc., and combined them (see *Fig. 1*). Some of it certainly would have been better for me than buying a car. I did not see these other alternatives. Without realizing it, I immediately decided that I wanted to use a car for transportation. As a consequence, I searched very narrowly for alternatives: just cars.

Fig. 2 illustrates my decision-making ten years ago. And no, these are not the latest *Ray-Ban* models. These are just simple blinkers. They **restrict our field of vision**. So, they are not helpful when making decisions. In this paper, I will show you how you can get rid of them. To do this, I will briefly summarize the concept of "nudging" and show you how you can nudge yourself to make better decisions.

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Figure 2: Blinkers restrict the field of visions and lead to suboptimal decisions.

2. Nudging

In numerous experiments, Nobel Laureate *Richard Thaler* has shown that selecting an alternative depends mainly on how the alternatives are presented (*Thaler/Sunstein*, 2008, pp. 1). On the book cover, nudging is depicted with a mother elephant gently nudging her offspring to do what is good for the little one. For humans, so-called **decision architects** take on the role of the elephant's mum. They set a framework to help people make good decisions while maintaining freedom of choice.

Many people want to eat healthier. However, they often reach for unhealthy foods anyway. So, they decide situationally against what they actually want. If there is a well-stocked salad bar directly in the entrance area of a cafeteria, then the eaters can be nudged toward choosing a healthy salad more often than an unhealthy burger with fries. In this case, cafeteria management is in the role of the decision architect. It can influence the decision behavior of the people by positioning the food – which is in line with the preferences of the people – they want to eat more salad.

However, it is not always possible that a decision architect "nudges" you, or you may not want that, for example, when facing highly individual or very personal decisions. *Ralph Keeney* (2020) extends the concept of nudging to these situations in his book, "Give Yourself a Nudge." The ideas empower you to become your own decision architect. I will show you how.

Most individuals are reactive when making decisions. They see decision situations as decision problems that are to be solved. Often, with little effort, they identify the **most obvious alternatives** (*Keeney*, 1992, pp. 1). Then, they spent most of the effort in evaluating these alternatives, the so-called decision backend. Remember me and my car example. Instead of spending most of the effort comparing the obvious alternatives, you should spend more effort thinking about the so-called decision frontend and ensure that you identify a set of attractive alternatives to choose from.

For that, you should do three things.

1. Define what your decision is about.
2. Identify what you want (your objectives).
3. Identify how you get what you want (your alternatives).

3. Defining a decision

Many people make wrong decisions. By this, I do not mean that they choose the wrong alternative. I mean that they focus on wrong, far too narrow decision situations.

Often you will face a series of related, narrow decision situations concerning a broader decision situation. In essence, you make several narrower decisions that collectively establish the chosen alternative for the broader decision situation you did not explicitly recognize. Sometimes, the choice of seemingly better alternatives for the narrower decision situations results in a poor choice for the broad decision situation. Sounds complicated? Let me illustrate that.

Imagine your grandparents live six hours away. Your grandfather calls you and asks, "Would you like to visit us next weekend? We would be so happy to see you." What would you say? "I would love to, but unfortunately, I already have plans." We all have commitments and plans. With six hours of travel time one way, you would need at least the whole weekend for a visit. Two weeks later, your grandmother calls you with the same result. This happens over and over again. After half a year, you have still not visited your grandparents.

The **decision situation was formulated too narrowly.** It concerns next weekend, and there are only two alternatives: yes and no. A broader formulation would be, "which is the best weekend for you to visit us in the next three months?" Then you may think, for example, it might work in three and nine weeks, and in five weeks, I could easily combine it with a business trip. The broader formulation of the decision situation significantly increases the likelihood that you will visit your grandparents.

As my car broke down ten years ago, I formulated my decision situation far too narrowly without thinking about it: "Decide which car to buy." I did not recognize the broader decision situation "Decide which means of transportation to use." As a result, I focused on cars and missed more attractive alternatives.

We make bad decisions because we take decision situations for given. How a decision situation is formulated is a decision itself. Being aware of this is a crucial step in making better decisions. You can nudge yourself by thinking about the correct formulation of your decision situation.

Actively decide

1. What decision situation do you want to face and
2. How narrowly or broadly do you formulate the decision situation.

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...Alice, and she (the Cat): "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

" I do not much care where," said Alice.

" Then it does not matter which way you go," said the Cat....

(Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll)

Figure 3: Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

4. Identifying objectives

Our objectives are the reason we make decisions. This can be nicely illustrated with a dialogue from *Lewis Caroll's* "Alice in Wonderland" (see *Fig.* 3).

If you do not know where you want to go, then there is no point in going at all. At least, if your life objective is not just walking around. We all want to achieve something for ourselves, our families, our friends, or our society. Therefore, we must be aware of our objectives when facing decisions.

Do you know where you want to go to? Do you know your objectives? Most people think they do. However, research shows that people are aware of just half of their relevant objectives in critical decisions. Often, they are **not aware** of **even** the **most important objectives**. However, how can you make good decisions and get what you want if you do not know what you actually want?

In my narrow decision situation, when buying a car, I paid attention to the costs, the mileage, and the car's condition. However, I was unaware of other objectives, such as convenience, environmental friendliness, and travel time, which were relevant to my broader decision about which means of transportation to use. Without knowing these objectives, I could not actively do anything to achieve them.

There are many brainstorming techniques to identify your objectives. The problem is that most people do not spend reasonable effort identifying their relevant objectives. You can nudge yourself in any decision by actively reflecting on what you care about. This will significantly enhance the likelihood that you will get what you want.

5. Identifying alternatives

Once you know what you want, the next step is to figure out how you get it. Studies by *Ralph Keeney* and myself show that people know just 40 % of their relevant alternatives. They often missed even the best alternatives (*Siebert/Keeney*, 2015, pp. 1144). It may seem trivial. You cannot choose an alternative that you have not identified before.

How can you identify attractive alternatives? The answer is quite simple. Use your objectives to develop more and better alternatives systematically. The **most effective method has three steps**. In the first step, you should identify alternatives that are very good for one objective. For example: very cheap, very environmentally friendly, etc. In the second step, you should identify alternatives that are very good in two objectives; cheap and environmentally friendly. In the final step, you should identify good alternatives for as many objectives as possible. With this method, you ensure that you search broadly for alternatives, not missing attractive ones, and enhance the quality of the alternatives successively (*Siebert/Keeney*, 2015, pp. 1144).

Let me go back to my decision situation when I bought a car. I have spent so much effort searching and evaluating alternatives. However, I missed desirable alternatives such as public transportation or an e-bike. If I had been aware of my objective, "environmental friendliness," I could have easily come up with the idea of using public transportation instead of buying a car.

In any decision situation, you can nudge yourself by actively thinking about your alternatives.

1. Do not settle for the obvious alternatives.
2. Use your objectives to develop more and better alternatives systematically.

6. Better career decisions

Many of you may be concerned with what job to choose after graduation or training. As a bystander, I sometimes get the impression that it is all about finding the best possible job as quickly as possible. In most cases, the search is relatively narrow. For example, the decision statement is "De-

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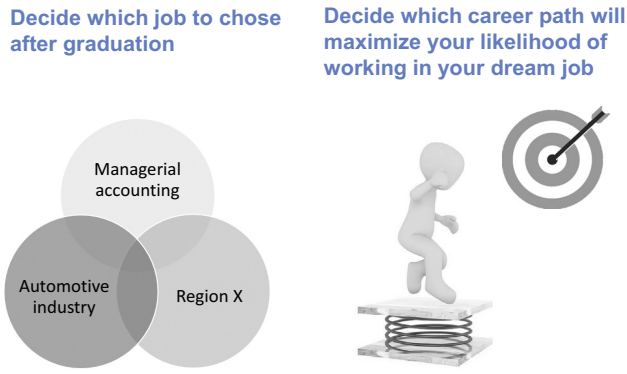

Figure 4: Narrow and broad formulations of a decision

cide which job in managerial accounting to choose." The light gray circle in *Figure 4* represents the set of possible jobs. However, it should be in a specific industry. "Decide which job in managerial accounting to choose in the automotive industry." There are fewer jobs at the intersection of the two circles. Moreover, when the desire for a specific region is added, there are very few potential jobs.

Those who search very narrowly may find few or no jobs and may end up choosing a just-permitted stopgap that he or she is not actually happy with. **Enlarge your search field!** Make your decision statement broader. For example, you can leave out the industry. You might find a job in another industry you like much better than your stopgap solution.

Do you think you will be allowed to work directly in your dream job after your training or studies? Unfortunately, this is extremely unlikely. However, you can significantly increase the likelihood of working in your dream job by making proactive decisions! Use your first job(s) as a springboard to help you get where you want to go. The decision situation with a **broader time horizon** is then "Decide which job will maximize your probability of working (later) in your dream job." To do this, you need to consider your dream organization's objectives when they write out your dream job, i.e., what applicants need to bring to the table. Then look at what you might be missing. If you lack languages or international experience, go abroad first. If you are not up to speed on IT, then choose a job where you can learn it first.

The key to making a sound (career) decision is **consciously defining** the **decision-making situation**. Based on this, you can use your objectives to search for attractive alternatives.

7. Summary and recommendations

Ten years ago, before I met my mentor, friend, and coauthor *Ralph Keeney*, I was very reactive in my decision-making and made many bad decisions. Even in critical decision situations, I did not think about what decision I should actually face. I was not aware of my objectives. I settled for the obvious alternatives and thus missed many good ones. Consequently, I did not particularly appreciate making decisions and felt I had little control over my life.

Ralph Keeney taught me how to become my own decision architect. Ultimately, it is about **making decisions more consciously** and spending more effort on the decision frontend.

1. Actively decide what decision situations you want to deal with.
2. Actively decide how narrowly or broadly you formulate these decision situations.
3. Identify what you want.
4. Do not settle for the obvious alternatives.
5. Use your objectives to identify more and better alternatives.

These recommendations are the starting point. *Keeney* (2020) offers an excellent introduction to more sophisticated methods. In addition, the free online course "Smarte Entscheidungen machen richtig glücklich" (available at https://imoox.at/course/smartentscheiden) by *Siebert/Keeney* concisely summarizes the core ideas and illustrates them using a career decisions as running example.

You may not always get what you want. However, proactive decision making substantially enhances the likelihood of getting it. Current studies show that proactive decision-making can be trained and that proactive decision-makers are more satisfied with their lives. (*Siebert/Kunz,* 2016; *Siebert et al.*, 2020, 2021). I hope that my paper empowers you to make better decisions. The only way to exert control over your life is through your decision-making. **Take advantage** of **this opportunity!**

Note: This article is based on the TEDxInnsbruck "Give yourself a nudge: How you can make better decisions", 2021 (available at https://www.ted.com/talks/johannes_siebert_nudge_yourself_to_make_better_decisions). It also provides specific tips for making career decisions.

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