A FIELD GUIDE · FORMATION

The Christ-Led Career Operating System

A systems-engineering approach to a working life, from first internship to legacy, run under Christ.

By Patrick Connolly · 2026

> *"Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being, for the Lord and not for men …"* Colossians 3:23 (BSB)

How to use this guide

Careers used to be described as a ladder. Then the ladder broke into a “boundaryless” career of short moves and side doors. Neither picture says much about how to do excellent, high-stakes technical work *and* stay faithful to Christ while you do it. This guide offers a third picture: your career as a system you engineer, with Christ as its chief engineer.

It borrows the logic that NASA uses to take a mission from concept to closeout, and applies it to a working life. You don't need to be an engineer to use it. You do need to be willing to write things down, review them on a schedule, and let Scripture set the hard limits.

> **Three ways to read it**
>
> 1. **Start with the one-page OS** (next page). Find the phase you are in, answer its key question, and put the next gate review in your calendar.
> 2. **Read the chapter for your situation:** choosing between offers (chapter 6), a stalled job search (chapter 5), stepping into leadership (chapter 7), a setback you didn't choose (chapters 4 and 9), or approaching retirement (chapter 10).
> 3. **Use it as a quarterly review.** The operating loop on the next page is built to run four times a year, ideally with a mentor or a friend who will ask you hard questions.

A note on sources. The frameworks here come from published research and practice; sources are listed at the end and numbered in the text. Scripture is quoted from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB). Where an idea is my own adaptation rather than a finding, the text says so.

The OS on one page

The operating loop (run it every quarter)

1. Stakeholders
Who am I serving? God first, then family, church, employer, team.

2. Requirements
Turn goals into a few "shall" statements, with a date and a measure.

3. Plan
Pick the next actions, the people you need, and the evidence you will collect.

4. Execute
Do the work with excellence. Keep a short log of chance events and what they might mean.

5. Assess
Review against the requirements. Pray over the gaps. Adjust, then go round again.

The life cycle and its gates

Phase	Career stage	Key question	Gate to pass before moving on
Pre-A · Concept	Study, internships	What could my work be for, and what am I good at?	A short list of directions, tested with real people
A · Concept & technology	First roles	Which foundations do I need, and where can I build them fastest?	A confirmed sense of vocation, written down
B · Preliminary design	Mid-level	Do I specialise or broaden?	A baseline: the skills and character I commit to
C–D · Build & integrate	First leadership	Can I build other leaders, not just deliver?	People I've developed are leading without me
E · Operations	Senior leadership	Is the whole system healthy, safe and serving?	A successor and a culture that outlast me
F · Closeout	Transition, retirement	What do I hand on, and to whom?	Identity, structure and community rebuilt beyond the job

Five operating rules

1. **Hard limits first.** Scripture sets non-negotiable requirements; preferences are weighed only inside them (chapter 6).
2. **Measure the work, not your worth.** Metrics are feedback on tactics, never a verdict on who you are (chapter 1).
3. **Read chance as providence.** Note the unplanned events and ask what God may be doing before deciding what they mean (chapter 4).
4. **Multiply.** From your first leadership role on, success means people you've formed who form others (chapter 7).
5. **Train for the crucible.** Hardship is part of the curriculum, so prepare for it while things are calm (chapters 8–9).

1. The career as a gymnasium

Treat your career less like a market you are passing through and more like a gym you train in. A recent essay argues that academic careers have come to look like professional sport, with competition, constant measurement and precarity as defining features, and recalls Pierre Bourdieu's description of sociology as a "martial art".[3] Most professional fields now share those features. The question is what they do to you.

In this OS, the resistance is not resented; it is the weight that builds muscle. Deadlines, difficult colleagues and market shifts are training loads. Metrics are the scoreboard: useful feedback on whether your tactics are working, and nothing more. The goal of the training is not the scoreboard but the person: being *"conformed to the image of His Son"* (Romans 8:29) in every area of life, including Monday morning.

Elite athletes offer one more lesson. Research on Olympic athletes who also held jobs found that a "dual career", building education and work alongside sport, shapes how well they cope when the sporting career ends.[4] The parallel for you is a dual track of professional output and spiritual input, so that a layoff or a market shift injures your career without destroying your identity.

In the gym	In your career	What it develops
Resistance (weights)	High-stakes deadlines, difficult colleagues, market volatility	Toughness and emotional resilience
Scoreboard	KPIs, raises, promotions, reputation	Honest feedback on tactics, held loosely
Coaches and support team	Mentors, pastors, sponsors	Perspective you cannot get alone
The championship	Long-term mission and kingdom impact	Direction for every smaller decision
Injury risk	Layoffs, up-or-out pressure, disruption	Vigilance and dependence on God

2. The systems-engineering engine

NASA defines systems engineering as a methodical, multidisciplinary approach to the design, realisation, technical management, operation and retirement of a system.[1] Here, the system is your working life, and the discipline keeps your skills (technical requirements) in balance with the people you serve (stakeholders: God, family, employer).

NASA's engine has 17 common technical processes in three groups: **system design**, **product realisation** and **technical management**.[1] Its systems-engineering competency model describes four levels of proficiency, from team practitioner (technical engineer) through subsystem lead and project systems engineer to chief engineer.[1,2] Those levels map neatly onto a career: junior, manager, director, executive. Four processes do most of the work in a personal OS:

- **Stakeholder expectations.** Start with who owns the system: *"The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof"* (Psalm 24:1). You are a steward, not the owner.
- **Technical requirements.** Turn vague goals into "shall" statements with a date and a measure. For example: "I shall be able to write production-quality SQL by the end of Q3."
- **Logical decomposition.** Break a large vision into concrete behaviours you can practise, on purpose, the way disciples are formed: deliberately rather than by accident.
- **Technical assessment.** Review quarterly and annually for bugs in the system: drift from your requirements, from your values, or from your family.

3. The life cycle, phase by phase

NASA divides a project's life into phases separated by key decision points, or "gates", where a review decides whether the project is ready to move on: Pre-Phase A (concept studies), A (concept and technology development), B (preliminary design), C (final design and fabrication), D (assembly, integration, test and launch), E (operations and sustainment) and F (closeout).[1] The mapping to a career below is my adaptation.

- **Pre-Phase A, concept studies (study and internships).** Explore widely. Scan the landscape, take an honest look at your strengths and weaknesses, and write a one-line "headline" for the person you hope to become. The goal is a broad set of options, not a decision.
- **Phase A, concept and technology development (early career).** Build foundations in environments that train people well. Close the phase with your own system definition review: a written statement of what you believe you are called to.
- **Phase B, preliminary design (mid-level).** Decide whether to deepen a specialism or broaden, based on your calling and on where the market is going. Set your baseline: the technical and leadership skills you commit to.
- **Phases C and D, build and integrate (first leadership).** Move from doing to leading. The measure of this phase is whether you are building other leaders (chapter 7).
- **Phase E, operations and sustainment (senior leadership).** Your job is the health, safety and purpose of the whole system, the organisation, not just your part of it.
- **Phase F, closeout (transition and retirement).** Hand on what you have learned, deliberately (chapter 10).

4. Providence and chance

No plan survives contact with real life. A study of 68 pre-partner professionals in three up-or-out firms in the US and Europe found that, even where careers are governed by formal evaluations and promotions, chance events play a substantial role in shaping them: being staffed on a project that takes off, or losing a mentor who leaves.[5] What mattered was how people *interpreted* those events. The researchers found four broad patterns:

Pattern	How chance events are read	Where it tends to lead
Partner track	Mostly positive; read as confirmation	Deeper commitment to the firm's path
Client track	Read as pointing beyond the firm	A move toward client-side roles
Wait and see	A mix of good and bad, not yet adding up to a picture	A holding pattern; fragile commitment
Running out the clock	Read as closing doors	Gradual withdrawal and exit

Charles Galunic, one of the study's authors, describes a related discipline in *Backstage Leadership*: the less visible work of scanning the environment and making sense of what you see, as opposed to the front-stage work of public execution.[6] In this OS, that sensemaking is done in prayer, and with a long view.

Joseph's career was a run of extreme chance events, from the pit to slavery to prison to the palace. He read them through providence: *"Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God"* (Genesis 45:8), and later, *"what you intended against me for evil, God intended for good"* (Genesis 50:20). You plan your course; *"the LORD determines his steps"* (Proverbs 16:9).

> **Practice: the chance log**
>
> Once a week, note one unplanned event, good or bad. At your quarterly review, read the log and ask: which pattern am I drifting into? What might God be doing? What one action does that call for?

5. Tactical operations: running a job search

When you are looking for work, treat it as a campaign with a funnel, not a lottery. Track the numbers at each stage (applications or approaches, replies, first conversations, interviews, final rounds, offers) and by channel (warm referrals, direct approaches to hiring managers, open applications). Then read the weak stage as a diagnosis:

Where it stalls	Likely problem	What to work on
Few replies to direct approaches	The message or hook	Shorter, more specific outreach; a clear ask
Few referrals at all	Relationships	Give before you ask; reconnect with people who know your work
Screens that don't become interviews	Your pitch or the fit	A sharper story; target roles that fit better
Interviews that don't reach the final round	Interview skill	Practise stories with a friend; get honest feedback
Final rounds without offers	Closing or culture fit	Ask what tipped it; check you want the role

Open-application volume is the least efficient channel; if most of your effort goes there, the strategy, not your worth, is what needs to change.

Engineering your CV

Write every accomplishment so that it is measured and tied to what you did. Laszlo Bock, then head of people operations at Google, put it as a formula:[7]

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Accomplished [X], as measured by [Y], by doing [Z].
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Use it as a check that all three parts are there, not as a sentence to paste fifteen times.

6. Strategic choice: hard limits, then weights

Big decisions, such as which offer to take, whether to move country, or whether to found something, involve criteria that pull against each other: pay, impact, growth, family, and fit with the organisation's values. Decision analysts handle this with multi-criteria methods.[11] The version in this OS has two steps.

Step 1: hard limits. Strike out any option that breaks a non-negotiable requirement. These come from Scripture and conscience, for example: “The role shall not require deceptive practices.” No amount of salary buys an exception.

Step 2: weighted preferences. For the options that remain, give each criterion a weight that reflects its importance (weights sum to 1), score each option on each criterion, and add up:

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Score(option) = w₁·s₁ + w₂·s₂ + … + wₙ·sₙ    (only for options inside the hard limits)
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Do it with your spouse or a trusted friend, and pray over the weights before you score anything. The number is not the decision. Its value is that it makes your real priorities visible, so you choose deliberately rather than react, and you notice when you are tempted to move a hard limit into the weighted column.

7. Operational leadership: multiply

Noel Tichy's research on leadership found that the best organisations are “leadership engines”: their leaders deliberately develop other leaders.[8] They do it by teaching. Each leader develops a *teachable point of view* covering four things:

- **Ideas:** what it takes for the organisation to succeed.
- **Values:** the moral principles, such as integrity and humble service, that govern how you get there.
- **Emotional energy:** the ability to motivate and energise others.
- **Edge:** the courage to make tough calls.

Tichy later called the mechanism a *virtuous teaching cycle*: the leader teaches, and learns from the people being taught, so that both grow.[9] Paul's instruction is the same pattern four

generations deep: *"entrust these to faithful men who will be qualified to teach others as well"* (2 Timothy 2:2).

Liz Wiseman's research describes the same shift as moving from "genius" to "genius maker". *Multipliers* get more out of the people around them; *diminishers* get less, in five contrasting disciplines:[10]

Discipline	Diminisher	Multiplier
Managing talent	**Empire builder:** hoards resources, underuses people	**Talent magnet:** attracts talent and uses it to the full
Climate	**Tyrant:** creates anxiety that suppresses thinking	**Liberator:** creates intensity and safety that draw out the best thinking
Direction	**Know-it-all:** gives directives to show what they know	**Challenger:** frames opportunities that stretch people
Decisions	**Decision maker:** decides in a small circle, then sells it	**Debate maker:** reaches sound decisions through rigorous debate
Execution	**Micromanager:** keeps ownership and dives into detail	**Investor:** gives people ownership of results

8. Flight operations: excellence under pressure

When the stakes are highest, borrow from Mission Control. Gene Kranz, the Apollo flight director, wrote down the values he believed professional excellence in flight operations required.[12] They read well as a character standard for any demanding career:

1. **Discipline:** being able to follow as well as to lead, mastering yourself before your task.
2. **Competence:** "no substitute for total preparation and complete dedication".
3. **Confidence:** "believing in ourselves as well as others, knowing that we must master fear and hesitation before we can succeed".
4. **Responsibility:** it cannot be shifted to others; we answer for what we do, and fail to do.
5. **Toughness:** taking a stand when we must, and trying "again, and again, even if it means following a more difficult path".
6. **Teamwork:** respecting and using the abilities of others, towards a common goal.
7. **Vigilance:** staying alert to danger and never accepting success as a substitute for rigour.

None of these is foreign to the Christian life. They are what faithfulness looks like when a mission, or a colleague, depends on you.

9. The crucible: Paul's model of leadership

Sooner or later the gym produces a crucible. Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas used that word for the intense, often painful experiences that, in their research, set lasting leaders apart: leaders found meaning in them and came out changed.[13]

Paul describes how he led through the pressure he faced in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:1–12). Three marks stand out:

- **Integrity:** *"we never used words of flattery or any pretext for greed"* (2:5), speaking *"not in order to please men but God, who examines our hearts"* (2:4).
- **Presence:** *"we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother caring for her children"* (2:7).
- **Self-giving:** sharing *"not only the gospel of God, but our own lives as well"* (2:8).

This is the downward mobility of Christ, who *"emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant"* (Philippians 2:7). The top of a Christ-led career is not the most power accumulated but power most fully spent in the service of other people.

10. Phase F: closeout and legacy

Retirement is a phase to engineer, not a cliff to fall off. Writing for executives, Bob Bove calls this "rewirement" and names four losses that catch many retirees unprepared: **identity, structure, community and relevance**.[14] Plan for each before you leave:

- **Contribution:** board service, advising or mentoring that uses what you know.
- **Community:** rebuild the friendships and family time that work crowded out.
- **Legacy:** pass on your skills and stories on purpose, to named people.
- **Clear judgement:** make the exit decisions slowly and with counsel, not in reaction.

David's model of stewardship (1 Chronicles 29)

Principle	In David's story	In your closeout
Ownership	*"For everything comes from You, and from Your own hand we have given to You."* (29:14)	Let go of "I earned this"; manage what you have as a steward
Purpose beyond yourself	He provided for a temple his son, not he, would build	Plan your estate around your intentions, not only around tax
Openness	He prayed before the whole assembly (29:10)	Share your values and wisdom with your family before you go
Generosity	*"I now give for it my personal treasures of gold and silver"* (29:3)	Give generously to the work, while keeping your household secure

The last word

The ladder may vanish and the market may rewrite the value of your skills. The system still holds if its requirements are set by God, its reviews are honest, and its chief engineer is Christ: *"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast and immovable. Always excel in the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."* (1 Corinthians 15:58)

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