Welcome to the Career Airport

At around two o'clock one morning, after a long flight, I arrived at a hotel in New Delhi, India.

I had completed the usual arrival formalities, collected my luggage and taken a taxi through the sleeping city. At that point, I wanted only the things most travellers want at two in the morning: a room, a bed and as few additional surprises as possible.

The hotel had a surprise.

There had been a leak. My room was no longer available.

The staff had arranged somewhere else for me to stay, so I returned to a car for another twenty-minute drive. Eventually, we pulled up outside the replacement hotel. Above the entrance was a sign promising:

A different type of luxury.

Personally, I have always preferred the normal type of luxury.

It was a useful reminder that, however experienced you become at navigating airports and international travel, the journey can always find a new way to challenge you.

By then, travel had become a normal part of my job. In one year, I counted close to one hundred flights.

If you rarely use airports, they can be intimidating places. There are rules you do not fully understand, security processes that seem to change just as you think you have learned them, signs pointing in several directions and the underlying suspicion that one wrong move could cause you to miss your flight.

Even when you do everything correctly, the flight may be delayed or cancelled.

After that much travel, airports begin to feel different. They become part of everyday life.

You learn the rhythm. You know what needs to come out of your bag before somebody asks. You recognise the difference between a queue that looks long and a queue that will actually take a long time. You learn when to wait, when to ask for help and when the expression on the gate agent's face means the information on the screen is no longer the full story.

I became comfortable arriving with far less time than I would ever recommend to another traveller. I knew which parts of the process could move quickly and

which could not. At airports and with airlines I used frequently, some members of staff began to recognise me.

What once felt intimidating became familiar. In some ways, the airport became a playground.

But familiarity never created control.

Flights were still cancelled. Gates still changed. Luggage still went elsewhere. Hotels still developed leaks in the middle of the night and sent me in search of a different type of luxury.

Experience did not remove uncertainty. It made uncertainty easier to navigate.

Careers work in much the same way.

When you first enter a large organisation, it can feel like arriving at an unfamiliar international airport. There are structures, rules, acronyms, processes and people who appear to understand things nobody has explained to you.

You are given an organisation chart in the same way an airport gives you a terminal map. Both are useful. Neither tells you everything you need to know.

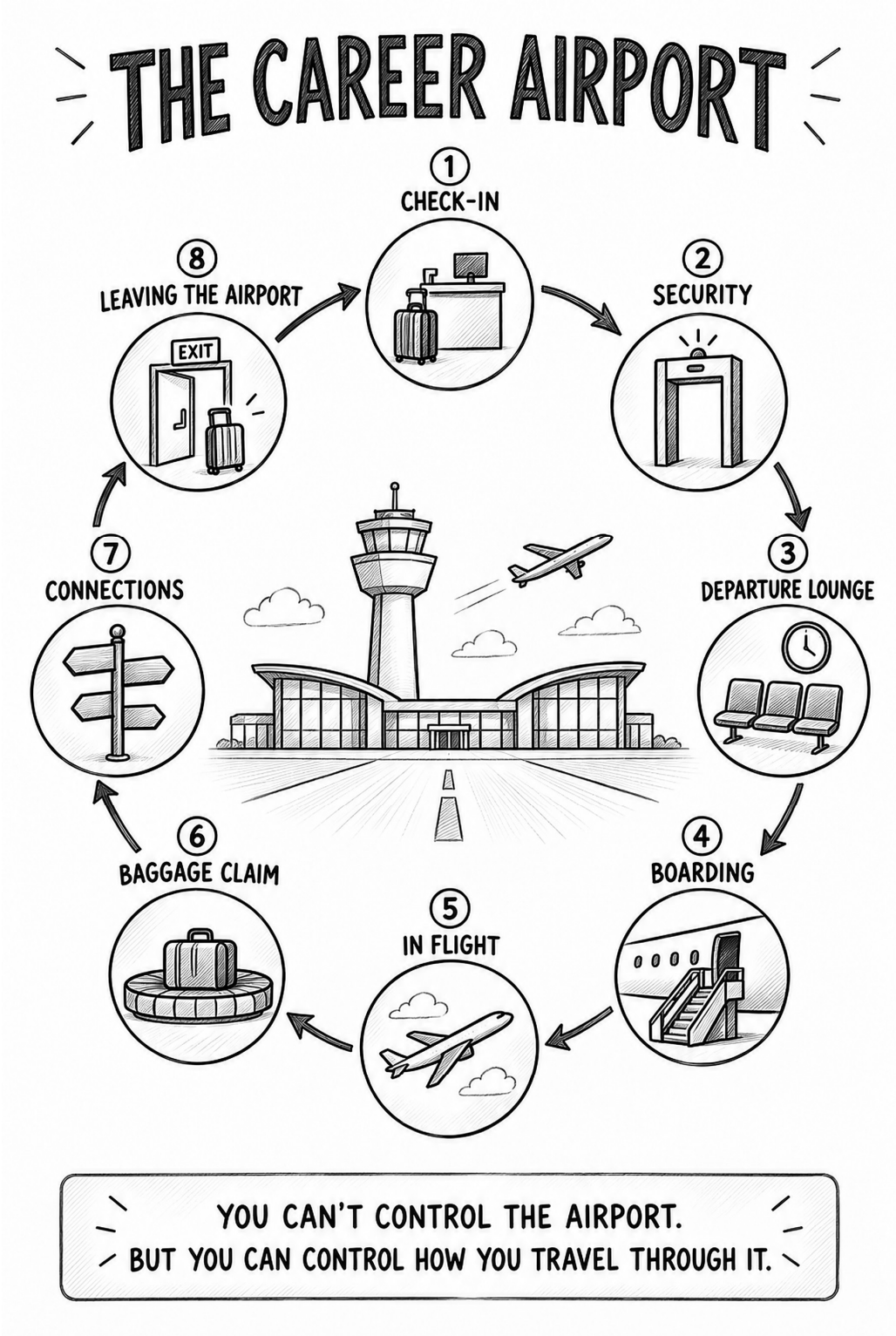
The formal route is marked clearly. The real route is learned through experience.

Over time, you begin to understand the rhythms of working life. You learn where decisions are really made, how trust is built, why some people are invited forward and others remain waiting, what happens when plans change and which baggage is worth carrying into the next role.

Like frequent travel, a career becomes easier to navigate when you understand the system around you.

It never becomes completely predictable.

That is the idea behind the Career Airport.


THE CAREER AIRPORT
1
CHECK-IN
2
SECURITY
3
DEPARTURE LOUNGE
4
BOARDING
5
IN FLIGHT
6
BAGGAGE CLAIM
7
CONNECTIONS
8
LEAVING THE AIRPORT
EXIT
YOU CAN'T CONTROL THE AIRPORT.
BUT YOU CAN CONTROL HOW YOU TRAVEL THROUGH IT.

The eight stages

The Career Airport is a simple framework built around eight recurring stages.

Check-In is where you enter a role or organisation and begin to understand what you have joined. The official job description matters, but so do the expectations nobody wrote down, the culture revealed in small moments and the reputation left behind by whoever occupied the role before you.

The question is: **What have I joined, and what is expected of me?**

Security is where you establish trust and credibility. A title or impressive history may get you through the door, but a new team still needs reassurance. People watch whether you keep promises, make sound decisions, share credit and behave consistently when circumstances become difficult.

The question is: **What must I prove before people let me through?**

Departure Lounge is where you wait, observe and position yourself for an opportunity. Waiting is not the same as preparing. Excellent work can remain invisible, while another person's ambition is already known to everyone deciding who should board next.

The question is: **Am I preparing for the right opportunity?**

Boarding is where someone is selected or invited forward. Readiness matters, but so do reputation, trust, timing and whether decision-makers can already imagine you succeeding in the role. Often, the title catches up with work and authority that have been building for some time.

The question is: **Why should I receive the seat?**

In Flight is where the work happens. It is where people deliver, decide, learn, disagree, adapt and discover how they behave in turbulence. Cruising receives little attention, but pressure reveals judgement, character and whether somebody remains useful when the route changes.

The question is: **How do I perform, adapt and stay useful?**

Baggage Claim is where the consequences, lessons and reputation of a journey arrive. Some of what appears on the belt is exactly what you packed. Some of it has been labelled by other people. What you believe you achieved and what others remember may not be the same thing.

The question is: **What am I taking away from this journey?**

Connections is where you choose what comes next. A career has its own missed connections, longer routes and opportunities that are visible only if you are paying attention. The company's annual timetable is not your career's natural timeframe.

The question is: **Where do I go from here?**

Leaving the Airport is where one journey ends. Leaving well matters. So does recognising when gratitude has become obligation, when loyalty has become inertia and when the direction of an organisation is no longer the direction you want for your career.

The question is: **What should I leave behind, and what should I carry forward?**

These stages are presented in an order because that makes the model easy to understand.

Careers rarely respect the order.

You may be In Flight in your current role while sitting in the Departure Lounge for the next one. A promotion, new team, move to another country, new manager or strategic phase may send you back through Check-In or Security, even when you remain with the same employer. You may collect baggage from an experience years after it happened. You may leave one airport and immediately check in somewhere else.

There will be delays, cancellations, upgrades, missed connections, gate changes and turbulence.

Those complications do not make the model useless. They are the reason a model helps.

Simple does not mean simplistic

No framework can reproduce every career, organisation, culture or decision. If it tried, it would stop being memorable and become another complicated diagram people politely admire before returning to what they were already doing.

The Career Airport is deliberately simple.

Its purpose is not to predict exactly what will happen. Its purpose is to help you recognise the kind of situation you are in and ask a better question about what to do next.

Airports are useful as a framework because almost everyone understands the basic experience. You may fly every week or once every few years. You may love airports or consider them an inconvenient building placed between you and where you actually want to be. Either way, the stages are familiar.

That familiarity gives us a shared language for subjects that can otherwise feel vague or personal.

It is easier to say, “I think I am in the Departure Lounge,” than to explain that you are performing well but feel overlooked, uncertain whether to wait, and unsure how openly to discuss your ambition.

It is easier to recognise that you are carrying baggage than to admit that a previous role still shapes how you behave in the current one.

A memorable metaphor does not solve the problem.

It helps you see it.

Obvious—and still worth saying

Some observations in this book may sound obvious.

Keep your promises. Ask for feedback. Give credit to other people. Do not send the angry email. Talk to your manager about your career rather than hoping they will discover your ambitions through intuition.

Most careers are not damaged by a total absence of good advice. They are shaped by what people repeatedly do or fail to do when the advice becomes inconvenient.

An idea can be obvious and still be ignored.

An observation belongs in this book when it is honest, useful and supported by a specific mechanism, tension or experience. The objective is not to make every idea sound completely new. It is to make familiar truths difficult to dismiss and practical enough to use.

The stories come from years of working internationally, moving through roles, countries, promotions, reorganisations and changing strategies. Their purpose is not to document every event or decide who was right. Companies and individuals usually remain unnamed because the lesson matters more than the identity.

Some of the best stories are also the ones that, for several very good reasons, I cannot put in a book.

The humour should come from recognition—including recognition of my own mistakes.

The advice should come with perspective rather than certainty. Organisations are imperfect because people are imperfect. Managers do not always notice the right person. Employees do not always communicate what they need. Strategies change. Good decisions can still produce difficult consequences.

There is rarely one villain standing at the departure gate.

How to use this book

You can read the Career Airport from Check-In to Leaving the Airport as one complete journey.

You can also enter at the stage that feels most relevant now.

If you have just joined a company or role, begin at Check-In and Security. If you are ready for more but nothing seems to be moving, try the Departure Lounge and Boarding. If you are deep inside delivery, decisions and constant change, you are probably In Flight. If you are questioning what the experience has given you or what should happen next, Baggage Claim, Connections or Leaving the Airport may feel more familiar.

Within each stage are short observations rather than one long argument. Some are built around a story. Some offer a practical technique. Some may confirm something you already suspected but had not yet expressed.

Do not treat them as instructions from an airport control tower.

Use them as prompts.

Ask which observations describe your experience, which challenge it and which conversation or action they suggest.

Most importantly, remember that your career belongs to you.

A manager can coach you. A company can create opportunities. A colleague can build your confidence or damage your trust. But none of them can take full responsibility for understanding where you are and deciding where you want to go.

So, before we begin, look at the board.

Where are you now?

What are you waiting for?

What are you carrying?

And when your opportunity begins boarding, will you be at the gate?

Welcome to the Career Airport.