Navigating Ambiguity:

Career

2014

Career plans are worthless, but planning is everything.

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2014 State of the Career: Navigating Ambiguity

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Executive summary

Career is changing, career strategies need to adapt

The career landscape is characterized by two perspectives:

- From the **employer's perspective,** developing people is paramount to maintaining future competitiveness, but difficult when roles and required skills are evolving quickly. The need to be nimble makes it very challenging to plan people's development, create definitive career paths, or make long-term commitments.

- From an **individual's perspective,** relying primarily on one's current employer to provide opportunities or a clear career path is a thing of the past. It is well understood that the best options for career growth, professional satisfaction and job security reside in building skills and experiences that make the individual highly valued. External opportunities are often more obvious and more appealing than internal ones.

Why companies should care about career

Providing career resources is not an employee perk. It is a deliberate strategy to guide individual aspirations and personal skill-building in a direction that is most beneficial to the enterprise. Many career initiatives arise from poor employee engagement scores (employees rate their company poorly on career opportunities) and a strong concern for losing key talent. But organizations that have deliberately focused on career and career conversations have seen improvements beyond just survey scores and retention, namely:

Higher Performance

Building a Talent Pipeline

An effective career initiative drives:

- Development of internal talent to meet the organization's future requirements.
- Preparedness for succession.
- Nimbleness & change hardiness – a readiness to respond to opportunities and threats.
- Identification of "latent talent" – employees take the initiative in seizing career opportunities, saving the company money.

Higher Satisfaction

Building Commitment

An effective career initiative drives:

- Ability to attract top talent (being known as a "career destination").
- More effective "job fit" – higher engagement.
- Retention (strong correlation between perceptions of career growth and intent-to-stay).
- Willingness to provide discretionary effort and further develop skills.

Key recommendations

Given the ambiguous career landscape, the best strategy for employees is to focus on ongoing development – a continuous approach to building skills, acquiring experience and adjusting their course to make sure the work they do day-to-day "works for them." They need to make the most of their skills, fulfill their values and over time build a career journey that gets them to where they want to be – and where the organization needs them to be. Such skills and experience are developed through on-the-job experience and formal or informal learning.

Employees need to do the planning without settling on a definitive plan:

- **Know Yourself:** Invest time in understanding skills, personal values, desired work environment and ambitions. Before an individual starts working on his or her next career step, they need to be clear on what they are looking for.
- **Know Your Options:** What do career opportunities look like? The range can be quite wide. How does an employee prepare? What connections do they need? What skills should they be developing? The key is flexibility, curiosity and being open to new and unexpected opportunities – which can be anticipated by building a network and paying attention to the direction of the organization.
- **Take action:** Career progression does not happen in giant leaps. Rather, it occurs in many small steps, building experience and understanding, and progressing towards a goal. Employees should be proactively building skills and experiences that will prepare them for that future formal role. And when the organization does need to implement change, employees should rapidly identify opportunities to contribute and carve out new roles that are most aligned to the strategic direction of the organization.

Employers can help frame the discussion and guide individual decisions to ensure future talent needs are met while also ensuring organizational nimbleness:

- Build alignment between the future talent needs of the organization and the ambitions of individuals.
- Set the stage by (re)defining career, clarifying ownership.
- Train managers to effectively use career as a conversation around the work, skills and future interests.
- Provide support and resources, using a multifaceted approach.

At the end of the day individuals need to own their career, but organizations can frame and guide that conversation, providing the right support and resources to help individuals and managers.

Career development is about getting people to where they want to be and *where the organization needs them to be.*

Introduction: careers and ambiguity

Career remains an important recipe for success...

Career is an aspect of talent management that organizations need to get right because it is not just about keeping employees on board or winning a "best place to work" award. Having the right talent developing along the right lines is paramount to ensuring organizational performance today and in the future. As the picture of career evolves, so must our approach to career management, the attention we pay to culture and the tools we deploy.

People are thrown into new roles with short or no learning curves. Having people ready to move up is often the subject of educated guessing, not deliberate planning, and organizations are often caught unprepared.

By providing career development as part of their overall talent management strategy, organizations increase the chances that their workforce will be willing, ready, and able to move into the roles that the organizations need them to play. The guessing becomes much more educated.

...but is growing ambiguous

As employees navigate their work lives and organizations try to stay ahead of changing talent needs, the idea of career planning as seen from both sides of the equation is becoming an increasingly challenging proposition. The frameworks that helped us gauge career success are rapidly blurring and employees, finding themselves in a wide-open space, are left to figure out what will work for them. More employees report having career options where they are now, yet more employees expect their next career move to involve leaving their current employer.

As the traditional, hierarchical take on career becomes blurry, individuals and organizations alike need to focus more on the work at hand and seeking good "job fit." Individuals can add value and find work satisfaction in ways that may challenge the traditional hierarchies of yesteryear.

In this report we provide the perspective from individual contributors and managers in organizations across varied industries. At the heart of the study is a representative sample of 2,000 responses to an online survey. Further perspective is provided from a series of over 40 interviews with professionals worldwide.

When it comes to career, a more formalized structure just doesn't suit this type of environment well. The digital space – publishing specifically – changes so rapidly that a formal career structure just doesn't make sense for us. We don't have formalized plans because they literally would have to evolve on a monthly basis. Our technology evolves very quickly, which means change is continuous. Career progression at Executive Grapevine isn't about seniority or moving to the next level. It's about embracing cultural and organizational change.

▶ Helen Fish
CEO of online publisher Executive Grapevine

How is the career landscape changing?

There are many talking heads in the talent management world who would have us believe that traditional notions of career should be abandoned entirely. The interesting thing is that such rhetoric has been around for over a decade. To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of the traditional career have been greatly exaggerated.

Job hopping. Or not.

Consider this:

Average job tenures 2000-2012

Despite all the talk of high job rotation, employee tenure has steadily increased since 2000. In the UK average tenure rose from 8.2 to 9.4 years. The median tenure in the United States was 4.6 years in January 2012. [Note: The average tenure in our study was 4.96 years.][1]

The notion that people rotate through an increasingly large number of employers seems unfounded. For instance, the average person born in the latter years of the baby boom (1957-1964) in the United States held 11.3 jobs from age 18 to age 46[2] – which may sound like a lot until you consider that nearly half of these jobs were held from ages 18 to 24. Thus growing tenure[3].

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1 Most of these increases in individual countries can be attributed to the aging of the workforce, making average tenures effectively flat. For data tables and references please see:
https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TENURE_AVE
http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.t01.htm
http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2013/tenure/home.htm
Statistics Canada – Table Table 282-0037

2 http://www.bls.gov/news.release/nlsoy.htm

3 This also highlights the importance of the first five years of a person's career. It is important to have the opportunity to try different avenues in finding a role that truly aligns with a person's skills and interests.

The era of free agency

Self-employment and independent contracting has been predicted by many as a popular alternative to the supposedly-inflexible employment practices of corporations. But the employee exodus has so far failed to materialize[1].

In the UK, data indicates a relative growth in freelance workers, but the data is skewed by employers pushing large swaths of employees into self-employed status for tax purposes, or classifying zero-hour[2] employees as self-employed[3]. We explore these alternative employment arrangements at the end of the report.

Not your granddaddy's career

This is not to say that careers look the same as they did a generation ago. The steady structures and more permanent roles that we used as frameworks to build career journeys have faded. While still bound by traditional employer/employee relationships, workers are left to navigate career in a much more ephemeral and ambiguous environment.

Careers may have become more fluid, but **for most people the equation is still dependent on collaboration between the individual and the organization that employs them.** It is in the context of their current work that skills and experiences are acquired.

Commitment to agility has made people feel more comfortable in saying they're not happy doing what they are doing. Things change very quickly. The company is very good about ramping up roles and providing stretch assignments, and about allowing employees and their managers to identify resource gaps and to fulfill that need by changing an individual's job responsibilities.

▶ Account manager
for a Chicago based cloud-services firm

I have been in the job 10 years now – people think I am mad, but why would I move? I am valued, I work on good projects, I travel, I work on things top to bottom for the company. These days people think that you stagnate if you stay somewhere too long.

▶ UK based CMO

1 For an excellent synopsis of the topic by Justin Fox, see http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/02/where-are-all-the-self-employed-workers/

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero-hour_contract#United_Kingdom

3 3% of all zero-hour contract holders are classified as self-employed according to a Nov 2013 CIPD/LewisSilkin study. See: https://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/6426%20Zero-hours%20contract%20guide%20(WEB).pdf

Let's consider the forces that have pushed us away from a structured and linear view of career.

The main driver behind all of these trends is a need for organizations to reduce costs, remain nimble and adapt to rapidly-changing market conditions:

- Many companies are shying away from establishing strict structures as organizations become less hierarchical: by the time a role is defined, the job description is out of date. The flexibility that is required in today's workplace makes long-term commitments or long-term workforce planning a tricky proposition at best.
- Individuals are less expectant about or dependent on the commitment from their employer. Approaches to career management are more individualistic and the skillsets of knowledge workers increasingly portable.
- Overall societal views on career have shifted. Tenure used to be seen as a mark of experience and status; today it is seen in many industries as a sign of career stagnation or a lack of ambition.
- Government policies have for the most part favored labor mobility and individualism, such as portable retirement plans and so-called "right-to-work" legislation.
- Technology has also acted as a disruptor, providing more flexibility in how work gets done along with transparency on things like external opportunities, employer ratings, and salary levels.

Consequently perceptions and approaches have changed. For most people in the workforce today, it is well understood that career is no longer a progression up a linear ladder, but much more a sequence of roles, projects and assignments that, together, provide a multifaceted journey we now call career.

As we move to more self-directed careers, here is the challenge for organizations: How to provide support and guidelines to ensure that careers are managed in the interest of the organization as well as the individual? Companies want to remain flexible while avoiding fostering a workforce of freelancers likely to leave at any minute, taking their talents to the competition. Organizations can be powerful vehicles for individual careers, but the relationship has to be balanced with as much in it for the company as there is for the individual. The challenge reported by many HR leaders is ensuring there is an ongoing dialogue and that employees are aware of all internal options – formal or otherwise.

In a December 2013 quick-pulse study, BlessingWhite asked 344 North American full-time employees *"Who has the biggest control over your next career move?"*

72% of respondents felt that they – and not their manager or their organization – had the biggest control.

An issue of definition?

In reality, most people want a career, but are stumped when you ask them to define it, what one looks like, or what the next step might be for them. When interviewed, they clearly articulate that they got to where they are through a lucky series of opportunities and key decision points.

But how equipped are they to make an informed decision at the next juncture in their career? When an opportunity comes along, will their decisions be informed purely through gut feel or will they be guided by a strong sense of self-knowledge and insight into whether this opportunity fits their general career ambitions? There is a great opportunity for employers to guide these employees in a way that is beneficial to the company without dampening the sense of self-direction.

Today, one thing is clear to most employees: job security does not depend on loyalty to one's employer. Rather, it depends on building and maintaining a set of skills and experiences that employers need. To individuals, **this acquisition and development of skills and experiences is what constitutes a career in today's environment.**

From the employer's perspective, **career development** is about getting people to where they want to be *and where the organization needs them to be.*

To individuals, this acquisition and development of skills and experiences is what constitutes a career in today's environment.

The value of career to the organization

If the objective in carving a purposeful path is the acquisition and development of skills, how do organizations help employees meet their personal objectives while at the same time ensuring the organization is developing the talent it needs?

+ Is focusing on career paternalistic?

We might even ask which role, if any, the organization should be playing in an individual's development.

Companies could operate on a philosophy that it is not up to them to provide advancement opportunities. Executives, in laying out the policies of the firm, could take the view that individuals are hired to do a job, should come with the skills and experience required to perform, and should not expect their employer to invest in them. With the exception of a small number of professions where skill shortage is endemic, this approach could work in theory.

But every successful and progressive organization realizes that the benefits to the individual and the organization outweigh the cost and effort of career initiatives.

The direction is not about individuals taking complete ownership of the investment required, but rather a partnership between personal development and organizational success. In today's career, individuals assume more responsibility for self-development and direction, but all with a view of increasing their contribution to the overall outcomes of the team.

The role of the organization therefore is to support individual development ambitions – not plan them in isolation – while ensuring that the objectives of the organization are met.

+ Getting the right skills in place and developing the talent pipeline

Naturally, the biggest reason for an organization to foster and coach on career progression is to ensure the right skills exist in the organization to deliver on the work and seize the opportunities the organization has.

Using career as a vehicle for skills development is a powerful tool because it ensures the individual is taking ownership and investing in themselves to develop their skills.

+ Risk-taking and innovation (70:20:10)

McCall, Lombardo and Eichinger's research, conducted since the 1960's, suggests that *"lessons learned by successful and effective managers are roughly 70% from tough jobs, 20% from people (mostly the boss) and 10% from courses and reading."* This 70:20:10 ratio caught the imagination of training professionals worldwide, and grew into something of a mantra.

Today the exact ratio is hotly debated, as is the interaction between the three components. The main contribution of their work, however, was to reinforce that learning is not the result of either theory or practice alone, but the result of a mix of feedback, study of best-practice and a large dose of real-world experience.

If career is the progressive accumulation of skills and experience, it is important for organizations and individuals to appreciate that their advancement will depend on:

- Challenging assignments that provide the experience required for career progression.
- Support and feedback from others (and especially their manager) to make sure they have a plan and a clear direction.
- Some formal training and best-practice, which provides a framework for development, self-knowledge and gauging progress.

A key takeaway of 70:20:10 is that there needs to be an element of risk and occasional failure for development to occur. Note the 70% is "Challenging Assignments" – this does not refer to routine work, but rather "increases in scope, horizontal moves, new initiatives, turnarounds, mistakes and ethical dilemmas"[1]. This implies that the organization and the individual's manager is open to some degree of risk-taking to help the individual push the envelope and take on such challenges. Our own research on innovation suggests that only half of all managers *"make others feel supported in risk-taking."*[2]

Career progression implies some degree of risk-taking. It is the same risk-taking that is required to move the company forwards and address new challenges. Career, innovation and risk-taking are all facets of a culture and a talent management approach that will keep the organization moving ahead.

My advice is: don't ever turn something down. Test it, do a bit a research and try it. If you don't like it you can move on – you have flexibility. […] When an opportunity has come about I have looked at it – critically looked at it – and asked, "Is it going to add to my own development and will I enjoy it?" If yes I have gone for it and hopefully the money follows – hopefully, but not always.

▶ James Meadows
Manager, EMEIA FSO L&D Advisory, EY

+ Impact on engagement and retention

According to BlessingWhite's most recent engagement study, career (or lack thereof) remains the main factor behind people's intent to leave. 26% of people who planned on leaving picked this reason over others (such as compensation, the work itself or the relationship with their boss).[3]

The cost of losing people in a competitive talent market as a result of poor career options can be particularly painful. According to the Center for American Progress, *"Thirty case studies taken from the 11 most-relevant research papers on the costs of employee turnover demonstrate that it costs businesses about one-fifth of a worker's salary to replace that worker."*[4] In the UK, Economics consultancy Oxford Economics found that each member of staff that leaves costs an employer £30,614 (US$ 51,500) to replace.[5]

1 See http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/BlendedLearningLeadership.pdf

2 http://www.blessingwhite.com/content/reports/Innovate_on_the_Run_NA.pdf

3 http://www.oxfordeconomics.com/releases/2014-03-03/understanding-the-financial-impact-of-staff-turnover [login required] or see summary at http://www.recruiter.co.uk/news/2014/02/more-than-30k-to-replace-member-of-staff-report-finds/

4 See http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/report/2012/11/16/44464/there-are-significant-business-costs-to-replacing-employees/

5 http://www.oxfordeconomics.com/releases/2014-03-03/understanding-the-financial-impact-of-staff-turnover [login required] or see summary at http://www.recruiter.co.uk/news/2014/02/more-than-30k-to-replace-member-of-staff-report-finds/

Beware the Boomerang

As one head of HR explained about hot talent markets, in the absence of career: "People tend to leave, get a better salary and then get it on the way back in as well." This represents a real hidden cost compared to developing people internally.

Some firms now take a negative view on so-called "boomerangers" – those people who hope to return to an employer they previously left. One head of Marketing and executive team member in the UK describes it this way: *"We see a lot of boomerangers. People think they should move on if they have been somewhere too long, but they move for the wrong reason. It happens so often now that we have a policy not to take people back. Rarely do people come back and be as positive a contributor as before – and often are a disruptive influence. They think that it doesn't matter, if I leave they will always take me back. We will only rehire those people if there is a good business case."*

+ Career is proactive: let people self-select and prove themselves

An often unappreciated benefit of career initiatives is the element of self-selection.

High-potential programs, for instance, are almost invariably company-driven. Very occasionally a firm will have some element of peer selection, but for the most part it is its managers, senior leaders or HR partners who will decide who makes it into the Hi-Po club. This process, which by design excludes most employees, is often criticized for favoring individuals who excel at self-promotion or display the traits generally viewed as pertaining to hi-po employees (such as past experience of who performs well).

But in a fast-changing environment, self-promotion and fitting yesterday's success patterns may not be the best recipe for future success. If new areas of skills emerge as a need, how will the company identify such individuals?

A career program, if well structured, will help identify individuals who are future-focused and are prepared to develop skills in line with the organization's goals, or who have talents previously disregarded but suddenly valuable. By the nature of ownership (taking charge of one's career) such individuals will self-select and demonstrate initiative, and the process includes every single employee.

Our "A" players stand out. They are the ones who may already be stretched. But if work comes along that gives them the opportunity to grow, they will find a way to make it work. They will find ways to grow personally and help the company grow along with them.

▶ COO
of a fast-growing Texas-based marketing firm

What is important to employees?

Employees' perceptions of career

At a high level, it appears that employees are more definitive in how they control and direct their careers, despite the ambiguity and uncertainty that prevails.

- 51% of respondents agree with the statement *"I don't think in terms of 'career.' When I make job changes, I look for 'work' that is satisfying."*
- 74% claim that they *"actively manage my career based on clear personal goals."*
- 56% of employees report knowing what they want their next job to be, but only 24% know what their employer has planned for them as a next career step.

All told, only 41% of employees expect their employer to outline any kind of career path for them. This expectation diminishes as employees become more tenured:

Agree or Strongly agree to the statement: "I expect my current employer to provide a clear career path for me."	
Gen Y	54%
Gen X	40%
Baby Boomers +	31%

So if employees expect to be more self-directed in their careers, what are they looking to get out of work?

The three biggies over time

Since BlessingWhite's first study on career in 2003, three items have dominated responses to the item *"Choose the phrase that best describes the most important criterion you will look for in your next position":*

- **Interesting work –** work that challenges and helps people broaden their knowledge – has consistently topped the chart of what people would ideally find in their next position, while
- **Work/Life balance,** and
- **Meaningful work** jostle for second place.

Financial rewards takes fourth place. Items such as leadership, cultural fit, job stability or opportunity for promotion come lower on people's priorities.

It is worth noting that the top items that people wish for or seek out in their next career move are ***subjective and personal.*** The few items that are easily quantified and that most of us would agree upon in terms of how we measure them (salary, direct promotion, job security) are not top of mind. **This illustrates the importance of individualized approaches to career and the importance of collaboration and dialogue in understanding what – for instance – "Interesting work" means to that individual.**

Most important criterion sought in next job – 2003 to 2014

It's all about the work

People who are working on new projects or new products are the most engaged. What motivates someone is that they're on projects that move the needle and benefit the customers directly.

▶ Andrew Coven
Senior Director of Engineering, Photoshop products at Adobe

Different priorities based on life stages, gender and manager status

As we might expect, people will be placing a different emphasis on what they are looking for from their next career step, depending on their current personal situation and experience.

Younger people (with lower average incomes) place higher relative importance on financial rewards. People in mid-career, with young families, aging parents, and proven professional tenure, place higher importance on work/life balance. Baby Boomers+, now well established in their professional journey, appear more likely to make decisions based on meaningful work.

	Gen Y >1978	Gen X '65-'77	Baby Boomers+ <1964
Gen Y place more emphasis on **financial rewards**	12%	9%	9%
Gen X place higher value on **Work/Life balance**	17%	24%	13%
Importance of **"meaningful work"** goes down in middle age as work/life balance grows in importance	18%	14%	20%
Opportunity for promotion is low across the board (but a bit higher for Gen Y)	5%	4%	2%

We also note some differences between genders: Men favor financial rewards (14% vs. 7% for women) while women value work/life balance (20% vs. 15% for men). We find people with managerial responsibilities seeking interesting work (35% for managers vs. 27% for individual contributors) at the expense of work/life balance (12% for managers vs. 22% for individual contributors).

Career stagnation... or not?

People increasingly believe that it's OK to stay in the same role as long as there is still an opportunity to develop and learn new things:

Agree or Strongly agree to the statement: *"I don't think there is anything wrong with staying in the same job if I can try new things or develop my skills."*	Total	2007 Numbers
Agree	88%	80%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	7%	12%
Disagree	6%	8%

At the same time, in many of the interviews we conducted, we heard how people struggle a bit with the perception of stagnation:

> *I have been at the same company for 6½ years and I am very happy. My role has changed massively. Sometimes I do worry though that 6½ years is too long and have I been pigeonholed. But I am happy and providing the company value and I am getting a lot out of it both personally and professionally – so I think it is OK to stay.*
>
> ▶ Rosie Adams
> *Learning & Development Manager, London, UK*

Note for employers: developing people in-role is fine, but some effort should be focused on making progress visible and appreciated by others. Formal recognition may include an extension to a job title or an award for taking on new activities.

Flight risk?

Finally, are employees looking to develop their careers with their current employer or are they looking to go elsewhere? Online job posting and career websites such as glassdoor.com provide individuals with access to a rich trove of career resources. Meanwhile, professional recruiters report that they are much more tolerant today of short job tenures. A 2- or 3-year stint is seen as respectable whereas a generation ago it would have been considered short on commitment. Aware of this, employees are more likely to look for opportunities outside their current firm. 46% of all respondents agreed their next career move would take them elsewhere (compared to 39% in 2007).

My next career move will most likely take me to a new employer.

How employees perceive employers' efforts

Only 41% of employees expect their current employer to provide a clear career path. Such expectations are notably lower in the US at just 38%.

Overall perceptions of career opportunities have improved (54% up from 48% in 2007) – but these decrease with age (59% of Gen Y agree they have opportunities with their current employer, decreasing to 49% amongst the Baby Boomer+).

45% of employees view their employer as *"committed to helping employees achieve personal career goals."* (up from 40% in 2007)

42% agree that their *"employer makes it easy to pursue lateral career moves, not just promotions."* (up slightly from 40% in 2007)

Only 44% report having had a career conversation with their manager in the last 12 months.

38% believe that their employer's approach to career development meets their personal needs. (up from 29% in 2007)

38% believe that in their organization, *"talk of 'career development' is internal public relations. Few employees actually benefit."* (also up from 36% since 2007)

Just one-in-four (24%) employees report knowing what their employer has in mind for them as a next job. (flat since 2007)

…but ultimately, as we mentioned earlier, 46% of respondents believe their next career move will take them to a new employer. (up from 39% in 2007)

Most employees are more savvy and sophisticated about career issues than in the past. They've seen parents and friends lose jobs through downsizing, and they're aware that the only true job security is to process in-demand skills and be knowledgeable about career paths in their professions. Because of all this, they expect career development opportunities.

▶ The Leadership Pipeline
by Charan, Drotter, Noel

We have advised in the past that a lack of clarity around career direction represented an opportunity for employers to lead the conversation, encouraging employees to give more thought to what their next career step might be. A growth in employees taking charge is an indication that this window of opportunity might be closing and organizations may find themselves in a more reactive position, supporting employees who have already set their course.

	I know what my employer wants my next job to be.			
I know what I want my next job to be.	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Total
Agree	17% [A]	14%	24% [B]	56%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	4%	10%	11%	25%
Disagree	3% [C]	3%	14% [D]	20%
Total	24%	26%	49%	100%

If we cross reference the two questions around clarity (*I know what I want my next job to be* vs. *I know what my employer wants my next job to be*), we find one out of two employees lack clarity about their own career goals. Furthermore:

> The most common scenario is one in which the employee believes he or she is clear on career ambitions, but the organization they work for has not made their plans clear (if they have plans at all). **[B]**
>
> A lucky 17% of employees are in the enviable situation of having clarity on what their next role will be and where their employer sees them going. Hopefully they have both clarity and agreement. **[A]**
>
> We find very few employees, however, who know what their employer has in store for them, yet remain unsure themselves as to whether this is the right role for them. **[C]**
>
> Finally we find 14% of respondents completely in the dark with no firm plans of their own and no hints or direction from their employer. A simple career conversation could help consolidate their plans. **[D]**

The importance of localization

While this report is focused on the dynamics of career in the western world (Europe and North America primarily), it is important to note that career expectations do vary from region to region.

Europe appears to have a work culture that is less individualistic than that found in the US. Consequently approaches to career are more employer-centric and similar to those in the US a decade ago. We do believe, however, that in light of recent economic challenges, European employees will be growing less reliant on employers when it comes to job security.

Anecdotally, in interviews, we find that in India there is a greater expectation of traditional hierarchy, and employees expect clearer rules around criteria for promotion. Global companies do well to avoid bringing flat or ambiguous organizational structures to their Indian operations and should see this as a long-term transition – not a rapid deployment.

In China, among the higher-educated and highly employable new-middle-class, expectations of rapid promotion, salary increase and career growth can take western operations by surprise:

> *We have a relatively new team in China. Our staff there is really driven and sees progress in terms of promotions and financial reward. They regularly move every two years and expect to progress faster than we can really provide. This is really different and a new challenge – there is more turnover and more speedy expectations.*
>
> ▶ Graham Parsons
> *HR Manager, SPI Lasers*

Women's perspective

Women do not score their employers particularly high when it comes to providing differentiated career resources for their gender (only 18% report receiving these). Furthermore, only 50% of women agree that employers pay the same for equivalent jobs and only 51% agree that *"Taking time out for my family would not hinder (or has not hindered) my career opportunities in this company."*

Despite this, women and men score their employer in very similar ways. Take, for example, the percentage of respondents who "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following statements:

- *I have decent career opportunities with my current employer.* (Women: 54%, Men: 55%)
- *My next career move will most likely take me to a new employer.* (Women: 47%, Men 45%)
- *In my organization, talk of "career development" is internal public relations. Few employees actually benefit.* (Women: 37%, Men: 40%)
- *I know what my employer wants my next job to be.* (Women: 24%, Men 25%)

Somewhat more notable differences between genders are:

- *My employer makes it easy to pursue lateral career moves, not just promotions.* (Women: 44% vs. Men: 39% agree)
- *I know what I want my next job to be.* (Women: 53%, Men 58%)

Also in terms of the top item individuals are looking for in their next position:

- Men favor financial rewards. (14% for men vs. 7% for women) while women value work/life balance (20% for women vs. 15% for men)

While these overall observations are correct, it still helps to look at correlations. For example, women who do report receiving gender-specific career resources are also much more likely to believe they have decent career opportunities with their current employer.

Minorities

As part of our study we asked respondents to self-identify as a minority (gender aside).

- Only 28% of employees who are members of a minority group see their employer as having "effective initiatives in place to support minorities when it comes to career."
- Around the same number (30%) believe their *"employer's efforts have resulted in greater diversity at all levels of the organization."*

Minorities score employers low across the board when it comes to career (including items that are not specific to minorities). While minority members score the same as non-minority members when it came to personal perceptions of career (such as *"I actively manage my career based on clear personal goals"* or *"I don't think in terms of 'career.' When I make job changes, I look for 'work' that is satisfying."*), their scores of employer efforts were significantly harsher:

- *I have decent career opportunities with my current employer.* (only 45% of minorities agree vs. 56% of non-minorities)
- *My next career move will most likely take me to a new employer.* (54% minorities vs. 44% non-minorities)
- *My employer makes it easy to pursue lateral career moves, not just promotions.* (33% minorities vs. 44% non-minorities)
- *My employer's approach to career development meets my personal needs.* (30% minorities vs. 40% non-minorities)

Individuals who identified themselves as being both female and a minority were particularly critical of their employer's efforts – for instance on the topic of equal compensation.

On a positive note, employers who do provide specific career resources to minorities (presumably as part of an overall diversity and inclusion effort) are scored high by minority employees on the impact of their efforts.

		My employer has effective initiatives in place to support minorities when it comes to career.	
My employer's efforts have resulted in greater diversity at all levels of the organization.		**Agree**	**Disagree**
	Agree	**84%**	7%
	Disagree	5%	**76%**
		100%	*100%*

What resources are organizations providing?

Tactics: High-touch vs. Wide reach

When analyzing responses regarding the type of resources companies provide and those employees find useful, three distinct groups emerge as illustrated in the graph above.

Group 1 were the time wasters – a couple of resources that few employees find add any value, and that most companies have moved away from providing. Both of these items are likely to be perceived as old-school, pre-internet solutions.

Group 2 were the low-touch, broad-reach solutions – those more commonly-provided resources that one-in-four or one-in-five employees reported as being valuable. You will note that all of these are broad-brush and typically self-serve resources.

Group 3 were the high-value-add high-touch group – this includes individualized and time-intensive solutions such as training and mentoring. Not only are these ranked highest in terms of their usefulness for employees in guiding their careers, these are the resources that have seen the biggest growth in the percentage of people reporting them being useful. In a parallel development, colleges and universities are seeing a similar evolution of the career resources that graduates are requiring. The focus is on exploring interests and building exposure, and less on definitive career paths – a precursor for expectations inside an organization?[1]

1 See Hanover Research – April 2012 "Best Practices in Career Services for Graduating Students" http://www.hanoverresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Best-Practices-in-Career-Services-for-Graduating-Students-Membership.pdf

In terms of changes in which resources are being provided:

- We see a big jump in the number of employers providing "Online networking/communities" (+16 points) – not surprising given the evolution of internal social media in corporations.
- We also see a big drop in the number of companies providing career training to individual employees (-15 points). Other resource-intensive approaches are also seeing a decline – overall this group of most-useful resources has seen a 5 percentage point drop in the number of employees reporting having access to such tools.
- Irrespective of how useful the resource, there has been an overall reduction in the percentage of employees reporting having access to career resources from their employer – a trend that can be attributed (we believe) to both:

  a) pared-back development budgets since 2007, and
  b) a lack of certitude on which resources provide the best value given today's ambiguity around career.

		2014 useful	Change since 2007 (useful)	2014 provided	Change since 07 (provided)
group 3	Secondments/temporary assignment	35%	+7	58%	-3
	Mentoring program	33%	+6	58%	-3
	Internal or external career coaches/consultants	32%	+2	49%	0
	Career coaching training for managers	31%	+3	58%	-4
	Career training/workshops for employees	31%	+2	66%	-15
group 2	Assessments for use in development planning	25%	-2	63%	-8
	Criteria for job advancement (required competencies, experience, education, etc.)	24%	0	71%	-6
	Detailed information on job levels/grades/ responsibilities	22%	-2	72%	-8
	Job posting process	22%	-4	81%	-2
	Online information	21%	+3	71%	+5
	Published career paths or levels	21%	+3	55%	-5
	Online networking/communities	20%	+3	59%	+16
	Online career planning tools	19%	+3	49%	0
group 1	Career centers	14%	-1	37%	-1
	Printed resources (brochures, career guides/ tips)	12%	0	49%	-7

It should be noted that the data presented here reflects employees' assessments of available tools. In almost every interview we conducted with HR or organizational development professionals, we heard frustration over how few employees accessed the self-serve resources that were provided – indicating a lack of perceived value, a lack of employee initiative or a failure to effectively promote and highlight the resources available.

Best practice: Making sure different streams connect

Organizations that have truly embedded the notion of career into their overall talent management strategy describe a holistic approach in which human capital metrics, engagement data, manager training, culture focus and training all interact.

Many organizations described the stand-alone resources they provided. But those who see the biggest impact of the overall career process describe interconnected activities which inform each other.

An integrated approach may look like this:

- A regular employee engagement survey provides insights into perceptions on career and managers' efforts to support individual career progression. This informs:
  - Manager training on career coaching – equip managers to address needs identified in the survey and engage in effective career dialogue with individual employees, which drives talent alignment to overall organizational needs but also informs:
    - Ongoing development opportunities established based on the outcomes of manager discussions...
    - Which ties back to performance assessments: does the individual employee actively pursue development opportunities and is this reflected in day-to-day performance?

Frank Hirth – a case study in an informed approach

International tax and accounting firm Frank Hirth conducts appraisals for individual employees every 4 months. Managers ask direct reports about their progression, their career expectations, and their current satisfaction at work.

Learning & Development (L&D) Manager Rosie Adams, who is based in Frank Hirth's London office, will sit in on these. "We have a young demographic in their 30's who want to progress," she says. "This structure means we can have full and frank conversations about when they would be promoted, where to and what would be expected of them."

These one-on-one conversations, along with data from the engagement survey, are important in shaping the development agenda for the firm. "All reviews come through to me and I pull out any development needs. Managers know that if they put it on the form we will action the needs," says Rosie.

The resulting curriculum covers both technical and soft skills and is available to all levels of the organization. "We make sure that we mentor every person individually," explains Rosie. "My overarching focus is to give everyone the opportunity to take ownership for their own development."

It was an employee engagement survey and follow-up focus groups that provided Rosie with important insights: "People said,'I don't want to progress upwards. I see the higher levels and they have a lot of demands on them and I don't want that – where I want to progress is sideways.'"

In probing more closely, Rosie discovered the challenge: in a professional services firm like Frank Hirth, time is literally money. "People know that as they become more experienced and valuable to the company their cost to us goes up so the chance to learn something new decreases as it becomes more expensive to take them out of the business," says Rosie. "So in response to the desire to keep learning but not necessarily become more senior, we launched a secondment team. We said let us know if you want to do and learn something new in a sideways 'exploration.' This gives staff a chance to try something out and not be pigeonholed in their career or be forced into taking a big risk. I was really excited that this was identified as a result of our engagement work: people had the maturity to say that, for them, success is not just about progress upwards. Rather it is about feeling happy and challenged at work."

Recommendations

Based on the insights of our research and the hands-on experience of helping clients devise comprehensive career strategies, we offer recommendations based on high-level principles and specific tactical steps.

Be prepared, remain nimble

In today's more fluid business environment, companies that are still investing their efforts in large-scale, structural approaches find themselves scrambling when reality hits. The future they planned for is not the one they encounter. More progressive enterprises have figured this out: the goal is to prepare for the future without ever knowing for sure what you will encounter on the ground.

Organizations may find themselves in an uncertain world, but this is no reason to shy away from career planning. We can find inspiration here from Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous quote:

> **...Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.** *[...] It is unexpected, therefore it is not going to happen the way you are planning. [...]. That is the reason it is so important to plan, to keep yourselves steeped in the character of the problem that you may one day be called upon to solve...*
>
> ▶ Dwight D. Eisenhower
>
> *Extract from "Remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference," November 14, 1957.*

Best practice suggests that the goal is to be prepared but remain nimble:

- **Build skills and experiences,** don't focus on fixed roles and hierarchies. The focus should be on ongoing personal development and job fit, not purely career development.
- **Enable flexibility in workforce planning** and be prepared to juggle things on the ground. Allow individuals to suggest roles they might take on, rather than solely expect "management" to figure out what is needed.
- **Develop an organizational approach of adapting** as you go: allow managers and team members to collaborate to morph roles and take on temporary assignments to get the work done and, in the process, to develop skills and experiences to take the organization forward.
- **Have individuals equipped and prepared to jump in quickly** when opportunities arise. But a quick change means that there is a real risk of people jumping into jobs that turn out to be a bad fit. Individuals need to think and plan in advance about what type of opportunities will allow them to best deploy their skills and talents to the best advantage of the company and their own career ambition.

Align individual ambitions and execution of organizational strategy

Given the fluid nature of career, we need to rely on individual drive, not programs and structure, to advance careers. Getting this balancing act to work means understanding and paying attention to two factors:

Organizational success

What are the skills, talent, and competencies the organization needs individuals to develop to ensure tomorrow's workforce is up to tomorrow's challenges?

Evolve the definition of talent.

In the past, people were only identified as top talent if they were mobile and had high performance ratings. That is old thinking. Our new thinking is that an individual's learning agility, in addition to sustained performance, helps us identify who are potential future leaders of our business. Each year, our leaders meet and discuss the top talent in the organization. These individuals are placed on a Lominger Learning Agility/ Sustained Performance grid. From here, an assessment of skill gaps is performed.

▶ Amanda Oldridge
Head of HR and Talent Management, Grifols (HK) Limited

Individual success

What does "success" look like to the individual? What are they chasing in their definition of individual success? What are their ambitions and current skills, and what are they looking for in their next career move?

Successful careers are tailor made.

I started out thinking I would climb the corporate ladder and get to partner. There was a period early on where I was spinning my wheels a little bit, waiting for the next promotion. When I look back I realize I could have accelerated my development faster by not staying put.

I decided that was not what I wanted to do – I wanted to have life experience, but still develop my professional career. Having travelled and being outside your comfort zone, you learn more and have more to offer. But it's not for everyone – you have to choose your own path.

▶ Kelum Kumarasinghe
Senior Manager – Financial Services, Tax Performance Advisory, EY LLP

Once we have these factors identified, we are in a position to frame the roles we need individuals, managers and executives to play to support a career effort. We can also identify the best resources and approaches to career development that match these sets of goals.

Deploy a comprehensive career strategy

1. Start with the end in mind

First ensure that the senior leadership is clear and in agreement when it comes to the expectations from a specific career initiative. What will be the scope and how will success be gauged?

Agree from the beginning on the metrics you will use to track the impact of your career initiative. These may include employee engagement scores, turnover statistics, number of lateral moves, career resource access data (such as intranet logs), exit-interview feedback or data related to manager career-coaching conversations. Metrics for tracking performance of such an effort abound.

2. Set the stage

To build an effective career strategy, organizations need to take a broad perspective. A single-stream initiative or isolated effort is guaranteed to be short-lived.

While a career strategy does not necessarily require a vast amount of resources, it does need to fit within the overall organizational context:

- What is the overall business strategy and how does career connect directly with the top priorities of the executive?
- What is the level of executive commitment and support for career?
- What are the talent needs of the organization today and in the foreseeable future? What are the current pressures the organization faces in terms of talent?
- What are the possible barriers (structural, legislative, regulatory, contractual) to providing career mobility?

3. Redefine career

As traditional notions of career become blurred, take the initiative to redefine career. This is best done through examples and stories of successful career progression.

Define career as a journey of exploration that is developed in multiple small steps, incrementally adding experience and skills – it is not about big steps up the corporate ladder.

If you redefine career as non-linear, you open the door to more lateral moves, and prepare people to look for development opportunities in areas they otherwise would not expect. Provide a focus on personal self-knowledge and personal development – and connect this to ongoing career progression.

As a self-directed journey, it also becomes clearer that the amount of time spent in any one place (or role) is very much up to the individual – and everybody will feel comfortable at their own specific pace.

Sidenote: avoid the "dominant career journey" syndrome

Based on your industry and the talent challenges you have identified, ask yourself if all the functions represented (especially the critical ones) have career journeys that resonate for them.

Beware the symptom of having one dominant career journey – this can project the impression that, in order to progress in your organization, one needs to embrace that specific career path. Redefining career may involve breaking this perception.

A simple acid test: look at the career progression of most of your senior executives or partners. Did they all get to where they are now by following a similar career progression – and if so where does that leave employees whose interests do not align with that specific path? Do they still have options?

It is now a much-embraced approach to provide both a commercial path and a technical path in most engineering or technology companies. Creative agencies also invest time in sharing examples of career progression that do not require direct client or commercial accountability to retain and develop creative talent.

4. Clarify ownership, then provide the right support

It must be clear to individuals that they own their career. This should be stated explicitly by the organization. In the same conversation, it helps to clarify the support and resources individuals should expect from the organization.

The organization (HR primarily) needs to line up and promote the resources available. Telling individuals they are accountable for their own careers, without then providing resources for them to act on that ownership, will not benefit the organization as a whole.

Managers need to play a supportive, coaching role: advising individuals on options for advancement, helping them discover their strengths and explore options, and supporting their development over time.

Executives should be able to talk about development and career progression in ways that support the overall effort. Does the culture highlight and support lateral moves or do challenging assignments get recognized?

Individuals, Managers, Executives and the Organization all have a role to play in supporting career efforts.

5. Train managers, remove barriers

Managers are the most effective channel in creating a career effort that touches every employee. Taking the training as an individual, and focusing on their own career, is a good first step in getting managers to think through what a career means at their company and how this may be used to engage and develop people on their team. It is difficult for a manager to coach others without having a good handle on the topic themselves.

Managers should clearly see the connection of career coaching to their team's performance and performance evaluations. They should also appreciate the differences that may exist in how "career" is perceived by those who report to them. For example, 47% of managers agree that "My employer makes it easy to pursue lateral career moves, not just promotions," but only 38% of individual contributors agree to the same.

Many barriers exist that prevent managers from immediately embracing the role of career coach, and pushback to holding career conversations is common. These barriers include:

- A lack of definitive answers.
- Feeling short on time.
- No immediate incentive.
- No obvious immediate openings they can focus on.
- Concerns that if people "get promoted" they will lose the headcount and the talent in their team.
- Perception that career development is a distraction from getting work done today.

Effective manager training should dedicate time to raising these concerns and help address them. Sometimes, the OD or HR team will need to provide some encouragement to ensure every employee gets the opportunity to be involved in career discussions.

Make the conversation happen

Sometimes the development plan discussion may fall by the wayside. However, all employees must have a development discussion and we help managers through this process when they need it. Last year, we audited and reviewed our top talents' and critical roles' career plans and we asked "what did their development look like?" If it was lacking based on our standards, HR helped the manager and employee create robust development plans based on what is needed on the job and what is wanted by the employee in their career.

▶ Amanda Oldridge
Head of HR and Talent Management, Grifols (HK) Limited

6. Deploy resources strategically, take a multifaceted approach

As detailed earlier in the report, resources can be classified into three groups:

1. Legacy solutions that provide little value.
2. High-tech resources that provide broad reach but limited utility.
3. High-touch resources which are expensive and harder to scale yet have the greatest impact.

One of the strongest pieces I have seen in career management is the "exit discussion." Not exit interviews, which take place once they have decided to leave, but the one that says – "Have you thought about going elsewhere or doing something else?" It is a strong motivator to get someone to want to stay and to see you as actually helping them in their career rather than just having another career conversation.

▶ James Meadows
Manager, EMEIA FSO L&D Advisory, EY

While employees most value the high-touch approaches, the realities of limited resources suggest the best strategy is to:

- Ensure the wide-reach, low-touch resources are in place.
- Provide a cost-effective way of bringing the high-touch solutions to each employee, and/or provide the high-touch solutions to select individuals.

Build in a process for "selecting in" – this may include, for example, tuition reimbursement for development that is in line with the company's efforts or career events that proactive employees can choose to attend.

While it may sound more complicated or resource intensive, a good career initiative will approach the topic from many angles. You will note that even the highest-ranked resources were only seen as adding value by approximately one in three employees. Individuals have their own preferred way of accessing career and development information and support. Deploying a broader range of resources will help reach a greater audience.

The gap between employee perceptions of available resources and employers' efforts also needs to be addressed: dedicate part of your efforts and resources to effectively promoting and highlighting available resources, and provide them in a format (or modality) that is most desirable to your employee base.

Some of the approaches we have seen deployed effectively include:

- Short additional modules in formal training sessions to tie back to career.
- Career fairs held on-site where department heads or subject-matter experts give short presentations and try to "recruit" others to their department or function.
- Mentoring programs.
- Shadowing programs.
- Project work and stretch assignments that focus beyond "getting the work done" and on developing people.
- "Internal internships" – employees go and "intern" in a different department for a month.
- Opportunities to represent the firm in external forums (conferences, seminars, webcasts).
- Coaching or mentoring others, transferring skills.
- Cross-department science fairs or lunches.
- Manager training.
- Department-level talent-mapping exercises with a view to help individuals progress careers.
- External or online career coaching. (see note below)
- Offsite career "retreats."
- Online forums to learn more about other parts of the firm – and investigate options.
- Access to off-hours training and self-improvement.
- Opportunities to step outside the company for periods of time to acquire skills in other fields.
- "Stay interviews" and "Exit interviews."

Note: External career coaches can be a great resource, but may prove to be expensive and not as in-tune with your culture and business imperatives. Consider training managers as career coaches. Many organizations have found managers interested and willing to volunteer when asked.

As per the findings around women and minorities, employers would do well to focus on providing career resources specific to minority groups, especially if these represent a sizable part of their workforce.

Career X @ Qualcomm: coaching is the heart of the process

An interview with Megan Graham (Career X Team lead)

Qualcomm invests significant time and resources on the topic of career engagement. In this innovative technology firm, ensuring technical expertise is aligned to company priorities – today and in the future – is paramount to maintaining Qualcomm's market-leading position.

Qualcomm employs 5 full-time coaches to support the career ambitions of all 30,000 Qualcomm employees – most of whom come from an engineering background.

While career is a strong driver of retention among in-demand engineering talent, today the focus at Qualcomm is about keeping the right people: those whose career ambitions align with the direction the company is headed in. As career insights inform talent management overall, Qualcomm can make more informed decisions on where to focus retention efforts.

The program, called "Career X," is very popular among both individual contributors and managers. "We help the individual find out what 'career' means for them," says Megan Graham. "We focus first on the individual's strengths, interests, values, and passions and then back it into what the organization needs at that point in time."

"It's not just career and skill-development programs. We ask, 'What's your passion? What's your purpose?' We focus on what the individual is passionate about, and what their job is now. We coach around alignment in the current role and move to future opportunities. If they are unclear on what their motivators or aspirations are, we help guide them to identify those as well."

In a fast-paced, forward-thinking engineering organization, the skills required are always changing. So Career X focuses on future aspirations: helping employees with career-pathing 1-2 years down the line to map out potential goals.

"Employees drive their own careers," says Megan. "Individual coaching is at the heart of everything that we do, with custom workshops and online resources to support. While you can teach philosophies and shift motivation and perspective in large group settings, we get to what really works for each person, with an individual focus."

Promotion is extrinsic motivation, which tends to be short-lived. "When they focus on their passion and purpose, on what they want to do and deliver each day, it's a longer-lasting effect," adds Megan. "Managers can highly impact the engagement and career pathing of their direct reports, so we also want to help support them so they can help others achieve their aspirations."

Along with coaching and manager training, Career X also offers bespoke career assessments and an online career resource center which allows employees to connect to each other on career topics.

Qualcomm helps employees understand that the new evolution of career development can mean depth but also breadth, with options for lateral moves, and encouraging a culture that is not hierarchical. "But engineers, by nature, see a ladder," says Megan. "We try to move the discussion away from strict levels and toward a career 'web' or a career DNA, so that it's more about enrichment and less about the next promotion."

Leadership skills, or soft skills, are a large part of development for managers who, to date, have been highly focused on technical skills. Selling engineers on the importance of engagement originally was a challenge, but failing to acquire these skills can derail career and performance aspirations.

Megan Graham is Career X Co-founder and team lead at Qualcomm, the communications technology innovator that powers the mobile world. Megan is based in San Diego.

Know Yourself, Know Your Options, Take Action: A career guide for individuals

At the end of the day, you are the most powerful driver when it comes to your career. You have the most to gain in examining, exploring and aligning your strengths and interests to the opportunities that exist within the organization you work for. In order to ensure alignment, seek the support of your immediate manager and make sure you are aligned to the organization's goals.

We find the following structure to be an efficient framework as you explore career options.

Step 1: Know Yourself

Before setting a course and picking a destination, carefully consider what is driving you to that specific goal. Focus on intrinsic, not extrinsic, motivators.

- **Explore values.** For each value, explore if this truly is the value driving this need or if there is something "hidden." For example, if your career ambitions are fueled by a value of "recognition," is that the value in itself or is it recognition in order to achieve something else? For instance, you may seek recognition in order to gain the freedom to work with less supervision.

- What are your **ambitions,** your current **family situation,** your **past experiences?** How do these inform a path to maximum satisfaction and productivity for you? Are the trade-offs you might have to make realistic?

- Are you clear on **preferred work conditions?** What, in your past experience, can inform your future choices when it comes to the type of work and working conditions that "work for you?"

- What **feedback** could you be soliciting to double-check your own self-knowledge? Oftentimes, an external perspective provides you with great insights.

- **How are you perceived today** inside the company? What is your "personal brand?" This will be an important determinant in how open your manager and others are to your ideas around a possible next career step.

Step 2: Know Your Options

Once you are clear on your drivers, it is time to take a broad view of opportunities that might fit the bill as a next career step. The key here, given the ambiguous form of career, is to keep an open mind: career progression may not show up in the exact form you expect.

- Before jumping to the conclusion that leaving your current employer is the best course of action, or deciding there is nowhere to go from here, map out your options.
- Develop a plan and pursue many channels to get a proper picture of all the options. Be open-minded to options that might seem a stretch or not a "natural career path."
- Build an informal network – branch out from your regular circle of interactions. Find people who are currently doing a role you aspire to and create opportunities to find out how they progressed and how they currently relate to the role.
- Start a dialogue to understand how your skills are perceived and what plans (if any) the company has for you.
- When evaluating a possible career move be cognizant of the required compromise: a move will typically involve letting go of some of the things you do today that you may find satisfying. It will most likely also involve taking on some new accountabilities or work that is less interesting to you. Consider these factors carefully to be sure that, on balance, this is the proper job fit for you.

Step 3: Take Action

Having identified drivers and mapped out an array of options, you are now ready to start working towards career progression. This may involve many small sequential steps rather than one big leap forwards. This is a positive thing since it means making adjustments along the way and it allows you to back out of any wrong turns without any major damage.

- Action may be required quickly if opportunities suddenly arise… but opportunities can equally be created over time.
- If you were to walk into your boss's office tomorrow with a proposal of where you could add value and a role that would meet both your needs and the organization's needs… what would that look like? Have you had this conversation?
- If no immediate career steps are obvious, what skills should you be developing to prepare – and how should you get that hands-on experience?
- How will you invest in your future today? Think laterally about building relevant skills. For example, approach trade groups or conferences and offer to present on a topic relevant to your expertise. Contribute relevant articles online.

Many times, your next job is your current job with new parameters.

▶ Andrew Coven
Senior Director of Engineering, Adobe

Appendix: Alternatives to the traditional career framework

While most employees are still managing their careers in the context of an employer-employee relationship, it is informative to keep track of the alternative trends. Employers could do well to understand the reasons people might pursue such alternatives in order to inform their own initiatives.

+ Holacracy and other nonconventional hierarchies

Online retailer Zappos (now part of Amazon) captured the headlines in 2013 with the announcement of its adoption of "Holacracy®"[1] – an approach to management that supposedly does away with job titles, managers and traditional reporting lines. This bold, large-scale experiment is currently underway with a full transition anticipated by the end of 2014.

When you take the time to understand Holacracy, however, it's far from the radical "jettison all structure" approach that some have portrayed it as. And it does address many of the drivers of career in a contemporary workforce. Here are the key take-aways from a career perspective:

Holacracy rationale	How to replicate
Organizations need to be more nimble since the future is unpredictable – structures and groups need to react quickly.	Change management needs to be embraced at all levels. Managers need to quickly build relationships but be prepared to see team members moving on to other roles.
Groups perform best when they self-organize around specific goals.	Managers need to be open to individuals selecting in, and flexible to delegating not just tasks but how a group organizes itself.
Holacracy gives employees more control and more of a voice in how the company is run.	Inspirational leadership means more than just communication outwards – it means bringing people into the fold and empowering individuals to take control over their work, their roles and their careers.

In terms of career, the fluidity that comes with a project or task-based approach can be a lesson for traditional companies. Valve (a software firm that spun off from Microsoft) embraced a manager-less approach from day one. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity to carve out a role and develop a career. The company handbook, "Welcome to Flatland,"[2] describes it this way:

> "Deciding what to work on can be the hardest part of your job at Valve. This is because, as you've found out by now, you were not hired to fill a specific job description. You were hired to constantly be looking around for the most valuable work you could be doing. **At the end of a project, you may end up well outside what you thought was your core area of expertise."**

1 See http://holacracy.org/

2 Available on the Valve website at http://www.valvesoftware.com/company/Valve_Handbook_LowRes.pdf

+ e-ployment

The rise of the mobile office – the notion that most knowledge workers can do their jobs from any location with an internet connection – has opened the door for alternative models of employment.

As online collaboration tools become the norm in how business is conducted, people are discovering ways of taking their skills to market and building successful careers outside the norms of geography or traditional office-bound work.

We provide a separate case study from the creative agency UP THERE, EVERYWHERE which illustrates the journey taken by the founders of a 100% e-ployment-based firm, and the career drivers of members of that rapidly-growing organization.

For the purposes of this report, let's consider the key drivers that such an employment model provides and how traditional employers can tap into them.

e-ployment benefits	How to replicate
A more fluid project-based approach. The case study illustrates how, in the e-ployment world, individuals are incentivized to promote their work and find projects that match their interests and skills.	Many traditional employers are taking note – reducing the barriers to talent moving around. An emphasis on self-organization is driving a move towards employees selecting-in for projects and building their own internal portfolio.
The case study reinforces how effective cross-regional interaction requires some new skills (online collaboration) and some investments in cloud-based infrastructure to support the effort.	Traditional companies should invest and make available current tools for online collaboration and communication. Solutions like Skype and Asana – or internal collaboration tools like Sharepoint or Yammer – can be used to free up talent to work across functions and across borders.

+ Worker Co-Ops

Co-operatives remain a small sliver of the overall employment pie. In the US such efforts have mostly been local enterprises that don't expand beyond a single site. But in other countries such as Spain or Venezuela worker co-operatives have grown to include tens of thousands of employees.

Some of the key advantages cited by co-operative workers that relate to career are:

Co-op benefits	How to replicate
Greater sense of ownership by the workers and democratic leadership.	Encourage employee participation and local ownership of the work.
Stronger bond between employees and especially across management levels.	Train managers to engage with individual employees to discuss career and ownership of the work.
Ultimately, a higher sense of purpose for the enterprise.	*Ensure the sense of mission and purpose is upheld – promote managers who are able to sustain a purposeful culture.*

> Historically, worker co-ops have held the most appeal when things seem most perilous for laborers. The present is no exception. And yet, despite their ability to empower workers, co-ops remain largely relegated to boutique status in the United States.
>
> *Who Needs a Boss?* http://www.nytimes.com - 2014/03/30

About this report

This report is based on 2,000 representative responses primarily gathered in North America and Europe. Unless noted otherwise, references are to the global result set.

Geographic distribution of 2,000 survey responses

Of the 2,000 respondents, 1,110 were women, 829 were men and 58 chose not to specify. 327 respondents self-identified as belonging to a minority group (gender aside).

For the generational break-down, we used three demographic groups as follows:

- Gen Y: People born in 1978 or later. (560 respondents or 29% of all respondents)
- Gen X: People born between 1965 and 1977. (664 respondents or 34% of all respondents)
- Baby Boomer+: People born earlier than 1964. This group included 542 (28%) people born between 1954 and 1964, plus an additional 185 born in 1953 or earlier (9.5%).

References to 2007 data relate to the BlessingWhite "State of the Career 2007" research report available at www.blessingwhite.com/research, which was based on an analysis of data collected in late 2006.

Respondents represented a variety of **departments:**

Administration	6%
Customer Service/Front Line Service Delivery	8%
Engineering	5%
Executive/Management	11%
Finance	6%
Human Resources/Training	13%
Information Technology	6%
Legal	1%
Manufacturing/Production/Quality	2%
Marketing	7%
Operations/Logistics	6%
Research & Development	5%
Sales	8%
Other	16%

…and levels in the **organization:**

Administrative/Clerical	6%
Consultant	6%
Director/AVP/Department Head	15%
Executive (CXO, Vice President or above)	9%
Manager/Supervisor	19%
Sales Professional/Business Development	5%
Specialist/Professional/Engineer/Technician	20%
Team Leader/Tech Lead/Project Manager	12%
Other	8%

Notes

Danger of career efforts being misaligned

A Chicago-based life sciences company once incentivized its top sales people with the promise of a fully-paid MBA. Several of the top sales team took advantage of the offer and studied on their own time. What the company had not banked on was the expectation of a promotion as soon as they received their degree. While the scheme may have promoted performance in the short term, in the long term it resulted in significant turnover as the top sales performers left, frustrated at the lack of career opportunities despite their newly acquired credentials.

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