

Choreographing Careers

You've held the same job longer than you'd care to admit, and now you're itching for new challenges and a chance to build on your work experience. What's the next step?

Today, organizations provide the framework for managing careers, but they ask individual employees to take responsibility for implementing their own career plans. That may not be good news for people who want constant direction from higher authorities. But ambitious employees who want to advance may welcome the feeling of being more in control of their career goals.

Tracing past career trends

The mechanics of career advancement have undergone several revolutions since the 1950s. If you were a college graduate then, you probably moved directly into a corporate training program. If you were identified as "management material," you may have been sent to an assessment center to see if you had the aptitudes to be a manager.

During the sixties and seventies, you would have been subjected to a battery of skills assessments to determine whether your personality and aptitudes fit the profile of a successful manager. Corporate advancement was seen as a carefully planned and or-

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chestrated, step-by-step process. Organizations were solely responsible for identifying and promoting managerial talent.

Career advancement began to operate differently by the 1980s. Companies such as IBM, 3M, and Xerox set up dual-career paths. An employee no longer had to become a manager to move ahead; a person who followed a scientific career path could rise to the same salary level as a management-oriented counterpart.

In some industries—for example, in the high-tech field—people advanced by "job-hopping" to positions in other firms offering higher pay and more responsibility. In many firms, opportunities took too long to open up from within, but if you looked outside, you could find that new chance.

The HR department countered this loss of talent by advising you to find a mentor—a person in the company who could help you meet your career goals by teaching you more about what was available within the organization. A mentor could help by explaining how you could position and market yourself to the best advantage.

As such trends indicate, we are moving away from the concept of company-guided career management. Companies in the 1990s challenge employees to take responsibility for their own careers. Instead of sitting passively and waiting to be "discovered," employees should assertively identify areas of interest and opportunities within the organization—and take action.

Unsure about how to shape your career path? Today, identifying interest areas and finding opportunities is the responsibility of individuals rather than their employers.

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division or even building international exposure with a stint in one of the company's overseas offices.

The broader range of necessary experience reflects the greater needs of modern companies, combined with a more experimental, younger generation of workers that is varied in its skills and abilities and more apt to try new things. It also reflects the thinking of today's younger hiring managers, who are willing to take chances on people who break with old traditions.

Use the available resources within your organization. You may be sitting on a wealth of training opportunities, and not realize it. For example, if you want to move into sales, see if you can get into a company sales course. Outside training opportunities are useful, but similar or even better opportunities right under your nose may help to develop new career possibilities.

Make sure the expectations you have for your organization are realistic. For example, say you're working in a scientific organization in which everyone has a doctorate degree. If you want to be a researcher, it may be necessary for you to go back to school to get your doctorate.

Some people make a habit of complaining about their organizations' lack of support for their career aspirations. But the chances of successfully changing the organization are slim. It is always easier to address the part of the equation that you can change—namely, yourself.

Make choices that are in the best interests of the organization. Showing that what you want to do benefits the company will give you a better chance of creating opportunities for yourself. For example, if your aspiration is to work for the company's overseas division, you may want to consider language courses. If your company is heavily involved in a quality initiative, you may want to look for training or work experience that supports its quality goals.

Finding career goals that support the goals of your organization is a good way to begin searching for new career opportunities. In doing so, you position yourself in a personalized career plan and gain support at the same time. This will be increasingly important in the 1990s as employers shift the weight of instigating career development to employees. ■

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