

Career Self-Management in the New World of Work

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CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT IN THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

We know that the world of work has changed more significantly in the last ten years than in the preceding fifty years. Lifelong employment with one company is almost nonexistent now. Self-employment as a contract worker or an entrepreneur has escalated. Information technology is supporting a variety of structural arrangements, from telecommuting to individuals networked as virtual corporations. That same technology is flattening corporate power structures because there is immediate access to information by all staff. Information technology is also evolving rapidly, meaning that we have to be continuously up-skilling. So the one certainty we have is that our work world will be constantly changing.

These environmental changes mean that our sense of career stability has to come from within ourselves rather than from our work context. More important, that sense needs to be driven in a holistic manner by our own needs and priorities. After all, our work life is about ourselves.

When we talk about career self-management, we need to take seriously the fact that career planning is ongoing, not a one-time event. That ongoing process entails not only repositioning because of environmental changes, but also listening to personal and life-cycle changes in how we need to spend our energy, what engages us, and where we need or choose to work. So what are the implications?

CHANGING OUR PARADIGM

We need to make a critical shift from a paternalistic model in which we give loyalty to an employer in return for being looked after for life, to a model of being in charge of our own choices. We need to move from an other-managed approach (“Here’s what I have to offer. Who wants me?”) to a self-managed approach (“Here’s what I need to be doing. What are my options?”).

The self-managed question about options may lead us to act in one of three ways. As a *survivor*, we may want to maximize our flexibility to take advantage of opportunities, within the constraints of our present work context. As a *driver*, we may elect to create our own work context, whether as an entrepreneur or as an affiliate of another organization. As a *thriver*, we may actively redefine the work context so that new opportunities emerge.

ADDRESSING OUR ENERGY PRIORITIES

In order to take seriously the fact that our work life is about ourselves, we need to be attuned to the energy that we have available for our paid work life. Traditional career models assume that professional development will, by and large, be a linear path leading from less responsibility to more responsibility over time. When, for external reasons such as downsizing, one's career path is interrupted, many experience that interruption as failure.

In actuality, there are many ways in which we need and want to expend energy, not all of which involve paid work. Our personal priorities change over time. One year our leading priority might be getting a promotion at work, while another year it might be spending time with a child or other family member. We need to rethink our concept of career path to accommodate such changes.

It may help if we think about where we want to focus our most creative energy at any given time. In doing that, we may see that sometimes we want a work environment that is very challenging and stimulating, where we are constantly learning and growing. Other times, however, we may want a job that is primarily repetitious and that we can do without a lot of thought because we want to devote our creative energy to writing or painting or personal commitments. We can think of ourselves as having five options in the type of paid work we select, each of which could be our most appropriate option at given time.

Automatic repetition

This option is the least demanding mentally (though the tasks maybe physically demanding) and allows us maximum freedom to invest our energies elsewhere (in family, creative pursuits, volunteer work).

Adapting skills

This option provides us with a minimum level of professional development in our job as we explore ways to extend and apply our skill sets.

Teaching skills

This option is a bit more demanding because we have training and supervisory responsibilities that require us to invest energy in analyzing our existing skill sets so that we can articulate them to others.

Learning new skills

This option requires us to engage actively in our paid work, not only to improve performance but also to actively up-skill.

Creating new methods

This is the most energy demanding (but often most gratifying) option, and one that we would or should select only if we want our paid work to be a primary focus of our creative energy.

UNDERSTANDING OUR OPTIMAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

From time to time, we need to revisit the optimal choices about our work environment. There are five dimensions to be considered.

1. Flexibility

Work contexts range from standard work hours to flex-time, and from a central work location to telecommuting. We need to be in touch with the degree of external structure that is optimal for us.

2. Responsibility for others

Some people enjoy working as part of a team or mentoring others. Other people prefer to just look after themselves, without the responsibility for others. We need to understand that our desire to be engaged with others may change many times during our work life.

3. Discretionary judgment

When we are wanting to conserve our energy for non-work arenas, we may be most comfortable with work responsibilities that are scripted, so that we have little need to make decisions. At other times, we will be bored in a scripted job and will function much better when given the authority to make judgment calls. Typically, an increase in discretionary authority is associated with progress in one's career. We need to remember that realistically our choices about the degree of discretion should be related to the total configuration of responsibilities that we have in all areas of our life, which will continue to change.

4. Predictability

Work environments that are very predictable and have a high degree of routine demand much less creative energy than those where change is constant. If we have heavy demands outside of our work setting, we may welcome a more predictable work context, even though routine jobs have been stereotyped as low status.

5. Complexity

Work environments that comprise sequential tasks are less demanding of our creative energy than those that require constant multi-tasking. Again we have to contend with stereotypes that give more prestige to multi-tasking positions.

Remember—paid work is only part of our life work and needs to be balanced against other personal priorities. We don't need to settle for any of the obvious career options if they don't fit our needs. Instead we can vision our future and make it happen.