

THE RAT RACE

Remember the tale of the boss who asks a prospective trainee: 'And what job would you like to be doing in five years?' 'Yours,' says the interviewee. Ah, the days when youthful confidence ruled and personal development plans were non-existent. In the 1960s, you could walk out of a job one day, have another the next and stay forever. Now it's different. Jobs-for-life disappeared and many would say that's no bad thing. What's not so good is the demise of lifelong career progression. Few can assume their career path will mirror the employer's upward trajectory without ever needing a professional parachute.

Today the workplace fosters a more transactional relationship between employee and employer. We work hard to meet objectives but we work to pay the bills; if we happen to enjoy it, great.

People often give more thought to their next holiday than their career. Why? Because developing a career takes thought, self-knowledge and action. Huge levels of sustained effort are required over long periods of time. You're in for the long haul; years of strategic toil will reap huge rewards. Wait. Is this the modern approach in the era of Carpe Diem? Isn't planning for nerds? Put aside your anorak aversion.

Consider carefully the implications of allowing your boss to map your career for you. Think what doom awaits if a senior manager makes a premature decision about whether you're a winner or loser? Their choices made on your innocent behalf may not involve an ignominious departure but could mean unwelcome career diversions without a chance to rejoin mainline career traffic. You know there are no more jobs-for-life but it's not tactically advisable to sit in a vocational cul-de-sac until noticed. For one thing, to undertake a career three-point turn is usually disastrous.



So here you are, busy doing your job, juggling life, work and significant others. How did you even get here? Was it that sparkling interview performance or did you just end up vaguely drifting into your present role? **Lyn Bicker** warns you to plan your future before your boss plans it for you...

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For another, choice should be valued above so many other things. It signals a sense of opportunity, freedom of selection, independent decision. This is why taking charge of our careers is important, no matter how long we've been working.

One solution to career boredom is to change jobs, but you can also rekindle enthusiasm by identifying personal motivation. Take a long hard look at your present employer; has your professional contribution stagnated while their needs have changed? If you were interviewed for your perfect job with the company now, what would convince them that you're the right person?

As a coach to board-level executives, I encourage people to think creatively and work laterally. People changing direction – professionally or personally – need to think imaginatively. One executive I worked with in financial services found the politics of his firm extremely difficult. He'd drifted into the sector by accident when his passion was music and the arts. Having busked around Europe, he was lured into corporate life by Mammon, the prospect of the corner office and city views. He explored his options, revisited his arts interests, thought creatively about applying his abilities and found a new film industry career. With sought after financial experience, he married knowledge with interests.

CAREER SCHEMING

Career planning can sometimes feel too ambitious, too scheming – as if you're not really doing the current job properly. One leader I worked with some years ago found it hard to admit to her success, yet was highly valued by colleagues and customers. We looked at ways to ensure her 'work hard and you'll be successful' ethic was intelligently applied to capitalise on the available career opportunities. Being able to express her satisfaction with what she'd achieved, in a straightforward way without being boastful, meant her bosses and colleagues took her more seriously.



If you're fed up and unfulfilled in your current job, it's time to plan for the career you want and deserve

She gained two promotions in as many years.

You can try and turn the tables on your managers. 'Up-managing' is an increasing trend of deftly manipulating the boss in order to climb the career ladder. Half the 5,000 employees recently polled by recruiters Reed said it was important to ensure bosses were aware of extra effort; crucial to actively network with managers and decision-makers; and an absolute must to reveal untapped skills.

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SEVEN STEPS TO CREATE A CAREER MAP

■ Accept responsibility for your development

Personal development can impact all areas of your life, so take control of the choices you make. Do you want to move on, up or increase satisfaction in your current job? Can't decide? If your current role does not inspire you to achieve, your employer's values do not match your own and there is little or no scope for change, it's probably time to move on.

■ Skills audit

Take time to run a self-audit on your achievements and career ideals. Are your goals pipe dreams or realistic challenges? Identify what you need to do to achieve them. Identify explicit skills for a specific job and regularly top up transferable skills. Think. Do you need to develop a portfolio of broad experience rather than climb a ladder of logical job titles?

■ Work backwards

Set yourself a career goal for 12 months' time. What is the immediate step before you reach that point? Work backwards to define the actions you need to take.

■ Action plan

Write one. Be clear about your objectives. Make them realistic and accept key changes are likely to be long-term, not instant.

■ Market yourself

You need to become a visible commodity – internally and externally. Volunteer for additional assignments or for secondment. Look at your responsibilities and those of your peers. What are the challenges facing your boss? Explore how you can help yourself by helping others achieve their objectives. Start networking; attend conferences and seminars, and make mutually beneficial contacts in other areas of your organisation. Ensure you sell yourself to prospective employers – do your homework and arm yourself with examples of how your experience matches their specific needs.

■ Do you need help?

Decide whether you are the type of person who would benefit from an external perspective on your career plans. A professional, experienced coach will keep you focused, motivated and receptive to feedback.

■ Feedback and evaluation

Ask your boss, colleagues and family and friends for their impressions of your new approach. Be open to comment, remain objective, be flexible. Take time to regularly reflect on the success of your career plan to establish what is relevant, what has been achieved and what remains a clear goal.

