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Developing and Maintaining a Competitive Career

by Kathy Buckner

Career development does not have to be a mystery. When the organization provides a solid framework, a common language, and an effective set of tools, individuals can take responsibility for managing their careers in today's dynamic business environment. Over twenty years of research have provided a model that supports strategic individual development. This model, coupled with identification of career drivers and 360° competency-based feedback, give employees the necessary information to develop powerful individual development plans. The plans have a dual focus: (1) How to remain competitive through personal growth and development; and (2) How to increase their level of contribution to the organization.

Introduction

As the organizational competitive environment becomes increasingly complex, new demands have been placed on both individuals and the businesses they work in. Most large companies have responded to increased external demands by increasing structural efficiency (downsizing) and trimming bureaucracy (flattening). This move to more austere structures has not been a matter of simple cost-cutting. Both global and domestic competition have intensified dramatically. These new demands call for a greater contribution on the part of all employees, and for greater collaboration within and between work groups.

Research indicates, however, that organizational culture, values, and systems have generally lagged behind this revolution. One example of this gap is that employees have been told that they are responsible for managing their own careers. However, many organizations have failed to equip people with the tools they need to succeed in this new duty. A number of important developments make this an increasingly important problem:

- In the past, the development process was focused largely on

preparing employees for the next promotion. Upward momentum in the organization was seen as the primary indicator of good performance, and employees were motivated by the promise of moving up. More complex jobs automatically provided increased challenge; employees had to learn in order to succeed in their new roles. For most people, regular promotions are no longer feasible.

- People are a key source of competitive advantage. As structures have become leaner, the net value of each remaining employee has increased. Moreover, the new “knowledge economy” means that more and more companies rely on the education and experience of highly sophisticated knowledge workers. As the business environment changes, retooling often means updating the skills and abilities of the organization’s people rather than changing over a plant. Ongoing development is a competitive necessity.

- In many fields, increased competition for capable and qualified employees means that the best people often choose employers based on perceived opportunities for growth. In an era when promotions are few and far between, many of today’s technical experts look for cutting-edge learning opportunities, increased autonomy, or balanced lifestyles as acceptable (or even preferable) substitutes.

In spite of these dramatic changes, most career development systems are still based on assumptions that developed early in the industrial age. This article will explore alternatives to the traditional model, and provide examples of innovative replacements.

Career Bests: Where Development Occurs

Employees, and the companies they work for, each have an interest in the employee’s long-term growth. Development opportunities (often framed in terms of increasing “employ-

ability”) are offered up as a modern-day replacement for long-term employment; smart employees know that the key to long-term success is now grounded more in maintaining sharp skills than in demonstrating loyalty to the company. Development also benefits the company because it leads to the appreciation of human assets.

Research on what makes a satisfying work life indicates that the most personally satisfying times in a person’s career are usually also highly productive in terms of meeting the organization’s goals. Data on such “career bests” indicate that peak experiences also provide significant development. One of the most frequently cited characteristics of a “career best” experience is challenge or learning opportunities. Rising to the development challenge benefits employees by building increased capability and satisfaction. Increased individual capability in turn increases the organization’s ability to perform. This concept is illustrated in Figure 1.

Career Bests

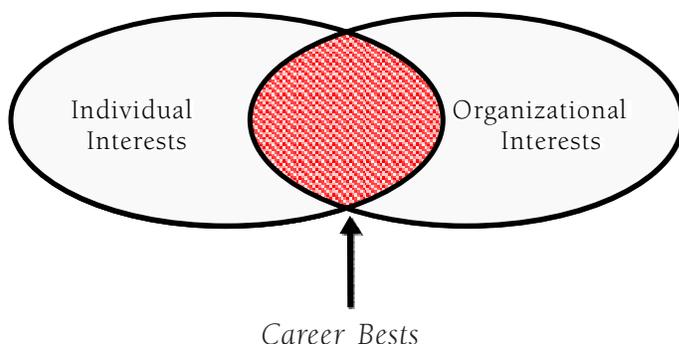
“Career bests” almost always happen when individuals are doing something that they enjoy, that uses their talents, and that falls in the domain of strategic business needs. In other words, long-term career success results when people identify the shaded area in Figure 1 (see below) and figure out a way to spend as much time as possible there. The fact that the best development happens when the individual and corporate interests intersect or overlap has several important implications.

- It underscores the importance of individual responsibility for career development. Individual interests vary from person to person, and only the individual knows where his interests lie. Finding the career best zone and staying there can’t

be done with a career plan developed by someone else, whether it be a manager, mentor, or human resource department.

- The best development plans do not center on next jobs or suggested training courses. While new job opportunities can provide growth experiences, and while training courses can augment on-the-job learning, most development happens as the result of engaging in challenging, interesting work. That type of work can be found in most professional job assignments, and rarely requires a job change.
- The organization must be clear about what it needs from employees. Rapid changes have frustrated many employees, who feel as if they are constantly shifting their aim in order to hit the moving target of organization direction or expectations. This problem is likely to continue. However, leaders can share information about the organization’s direction, and can translate that direction into

FIGURE 1



individual expectations. One common approach for doing this is to identify competencies, which reflect the priorities of the organization for individual performance and development.

- Self-directed career development requires more self-awareness and insight than corporate-driven career management. Individuals must take more initiative and responsibility to understand and articulate their own needs, priorities, and ability to contribute than they did in the past. This may be a painful process for some, and a liberating process for others.

Identifying Individual Interests

One framework for understanding the individual's needs is to answer two key questions:

1. *What can I contribute?*

Most professionals work for more than just a paycheck. While monetary rewards are the most easily measured incentives, career choices are often based on

other factors. Most people want to contribute something meaningful to a worthwhile purpose. Identifying individual priorities is a complex process because definitions of what is meaningful and worthwhile vary from person to person.

One tool for identifying how individuals can contribute is the concept of *individual genius*. In planning their development, individuals cannot ignore certain organizational realities: constant change, increased demands, and reduced loyalty. These realities can be more effectively managed if they are weighed in relation to who a person is, what she likes to do, and what she does well. Those who take organizational changes in stride (and who capitalize on the opportunities that come with change) are those who understand and are true to what is right for them. Those who make the most significant contribution over time are those who know how their unique qualities add value to the organization. While understanding one's own genius, or one's "personal truth," may be a life-long process, the genius concept can be broken down into two fundamental parts:

Interests/Passions
+
Talents/Abilities
=
Individual Genius

Understanding one's genius is a key to increasing one's contribution. Some people make career choices based only on their aptitudes. They usually find that their ability or willingness to contribute long term is limited if they lack enthusiasm for their assignments. Doing what you care about automatically increases motivation, which increases the pleasure that comes from work. At the same time, all the passion in the world usually can't compensate for an innate lack of ability. The marriage of talent and passion leads to high performance. People who understand their genius, and find ways to apply it in the organizations where they work, build long-term value for themselves and for the company.

2. *What are my values and priorities when it comes to work and career?*

In the past, most employees set their sights on a fatter salary and a key to the executive washroom. In recent years, a much broader range of career drivers has emerged. One model that explains this emerging diversity was developed by C. Brooklyn Derr.¹ He identified five major definitions of career success.

1. **Getting Ahead.** This is the traditional definition of career success

for most Americans. These people are looking to become vice-presidents, presidents, CEO's, and general managers. What they want is upward movement. Success means more money, more power, and steady promotions—clear to the top.

2. **Getting Secure.** These people, an unappreciated and largely unacknowledged but significant segment of the job force, have a psychological contract with the company. In exchange for hard work and unswerving loyalty, they get life-long employment, respect, steady advancement, and eventually a high-level job where their talents are used and appreciated. They want to be a member of an organizational family.
3. **Getting Free.** These people want personal autonomy and “space” at all costs. They don't mind being held to deadlines, budgets, and standards, but they do want to solve the problem in their own way.

4. **Getting High.** These individuals thrive on excitement, challenge, and the technical nature and content of the work. They'll work for anybody who offers exciting opportunities—money is secondary.
5. **Getting Balanced.** These people give equal time and attention to careers, relationships and self-development. They'll work around the clock in emergencies, and they're happy to pay their dues, but they don't live their lives emergency-style. They usually pull back from getting overly absorbed in their work but are competent enough to do well at their jobs. Although they know how to negotiate and take time from work for themselves and their families, they are unhappy if their work isn't meaningful enough to balance their personal lives.

For most people, a career is more than a job. It is more than a long-term sequence of jobs. Those who achieve career success acknowledge and respect aspects of personal life and of their own values that have an impact

on work life. Effective career development allows people to live out the subjective and personal values they really believe in while at the same time making an effective contribution at work.

Since different people define their career goals differently, it stands to reason that they would need to employ different methods to achieve these goals. For example, if you want to get to the top of the organization, you will need to use strategies that are different from those used by the person whose primary focus is autonomy. When career values and the organization's needs do not match up, frustration and low performance result.

This provides yet another argument why self-directed career development is the most effective approach. Individuals are much more keenly aware of their own career drivers and values than anyone else. When they use an understanding of those values to make decisions about their future, they are taking responsibility for their own development.

Identifying the Organizations Needs

Increased competition has made clear that the expectations that most organizations

have of their employees are much higher than in the past. Standards of high performance are both more important and often less clear than they used to be. At the same time, the traditional measure of good performance—job promotion—is no longer a viable gauge. Although employees have been told to grow in their current jobs instead of focusing on the next one, most people do not have an alternative way of conceptualizing or discussing development outside the framework of job promotion.

One effective alternative to encourage development without focusing on promotions is the Four Stages Model developed by Gene Dalton and Paul Thompson.² While

business school professors at Harvard University (and later Brigham Young University), Dalton and Thompson were asked to address a dilemma uncovered by the management of a large electronics firm. Their data (based on engineers' performance reviews tracked over time) made clear that expectations of individual performance change as people move through their careers. While some engineers continued to be rated as high performers throughout their careers, the majority received progressively lower ratings, even though the work they did remained the same in absolute terms. As Dalton and Thompson gathered data about what makes the difference between high perform-

ers and average contributors, the researchers identified four stages of development.

The progression identified by Dalton and Thompson is independent of position on the organization chart, and explains why two people with the same job description may be valued very differently by the organization. However, achieving high performance in the later stages depends on mastering the early stages. Thus, the Four Stages Model provides a road map for understanding the long-term expectations organizations have of their employees. These expectations are described by the stages. Key tasks for each of the stages are summarized in Figure 2.

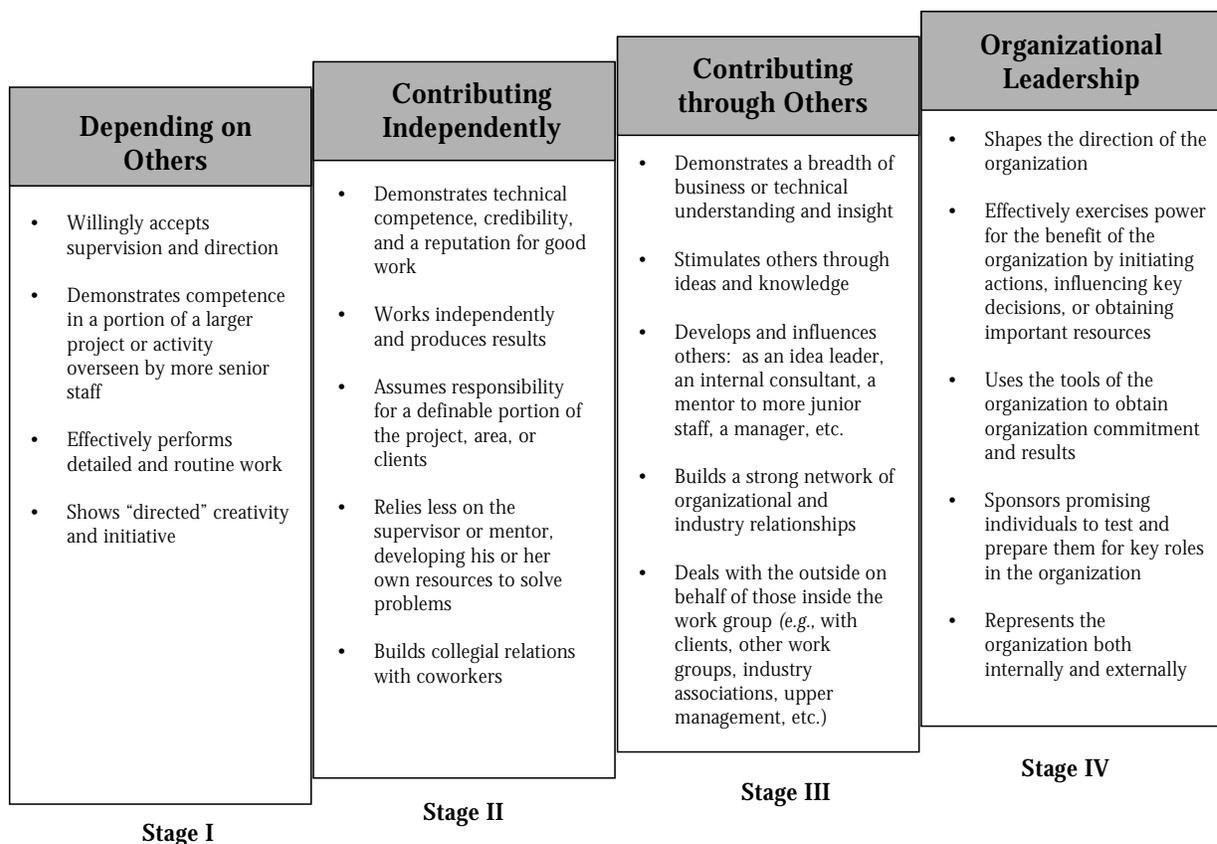


FIGURE 2

Stage I contributors accept direction, establish basic competence, and learn the organizational and technical ropes. While people who do this early in their careers are seen as being highly effective, those who continue to depend on others for direction after several years are seen as contributing less than their peers who enter Stage II by becoming independent technical experts. By the same token, independent experts who fail to broaden their perspectives and develop others will be perceived as less valuable, unless they are brilliant enough to contribute as much on their own as their Stage III colleagues do by contributing through others. Those who are able to develop Stage IV characteristics of having the vision and the credibility to influence organization direction are perceived as being the most valued by leaders in the organization.

While the role changes suggested by the Four Stages Model seem intuitively obvious on the basis of the traditional technical-to-management career progression, Dalton and Thompson found evidence that contribution, as described by stage, is relatively independent of the organizational hierarchy.

For example, Stage III characteristics (developing others, broadening perspective, understanding business issues, using networks to get

things done) sound like a job description for supervisors or managers. Yet many people report experiences with supervisors who had formal management authority, but few Stage III skills. On the other hand, one of the surprises from the research was that most of the people who perform Stage III functions are not in formal management roles: for every manager in Stage III, there were three non-managers performing similar leadership roles. While the proportion of managers to non-managers was reversed in Stage IV, there were still people in many organizations who guided the company's direction from their position on the technical bench, rather than from the executive suite. Recent research by BT.Novations suggests that the trend toward a higher proportion of non-manager Stage III and Stage IV contributors has continued with the advent of downsizing and flattening.³

The Four Stages Model describes values that have existed in large companies for decades. However, understanding the Four Stages Model has become extremely important as the size and shape of organizations has changed. Moving from one stage to the next increases an individual's ability to contribute—changing one's stage, or making a novation, can be done without changing jobs.

The word "novation" is a

legal term meaning *the renegotiation of roles and responsibilities by parties to a contract*. A legal novation is a very formal process; career novations are usually much less formal. However, understanding the process of making a novation can give individuals more control over their development, as well as a road map for increasing their contribution to the organization. When everyone in an organization understands the Four Stages Model, it provides a language for discussing development and growth, even when promotions are infrequent. The Stages model makes clear the rules of a game that has always been played.

Checking for Reality

While most organizations currently emphasize the importance of individual initiative in career development, no career exists in a vacuum. In the past, supervisors have been expected to provide coaching and feedback about a person's development goals; in fact, the supervisor may have been largely responsible for creating the development plans for her direct reports. However, downward feedback alone reinforces a hierarchical mindset that clashes with the cultural values most leaders are attempting to

create. Moreover, as management spans of control broaden, the quality of downward feedback is jeopardized; it's difficult for one person to observe and relay detailed performance information about twenty or more people.

Feedback from multiple sources provides people with information about how well they are contributing to the achievement of team and organizational goals and how they can further increase their value to the company. It provides direction on what skills or competencies are most important. The individual absorbs that feedback and prioritizes his plan based on a combination of feedback from others and his own goals and priorities.

Many organizations now provide 360-degree or multi-source feedback reports, which are computer generated, anonymous summaries of how a person rates on selected dimensions. When feedback is received anonymously from more than one source, it allows managers to approach employees as a coach providing assistance rather than as a critic imposing judgment. Feedback can help reveal blindspots, as well as highlight strengths that may have been neglected.

Consistent feedback from a variety of sources is also more compelling and more difficult to rationalize. It's difficult to blame negative

perceptions on the unfairness of one's boss when co-workers, direct reports, or customers corroborate the results.

Individual Development in Action: A Case Study

One of the world's largest chemical companies applied all of these principles in a way that gave its technical and professional employees worldwide a way of planning and achieving their development goals.

In the early 1990s, the company evaluated its succession planning and development systems and discovered that moving people through a series of jobs didn't necessarily result in the development of the leadership skills they needed. At the same time, the company conducted a major study that concluded that the leadership qualities that had been rewarded in the past weren't the same as those that would be needed to make the company successful in the future. It also became clear that the company would be more successful if development opportunities were available to everyone in the technical and professional ranks, even if they didn't want to move into management or weren't identified as "high poten-

tials" early in their careers.

The company wanted to provide clear expectations about what skills and abilities would be needed for the future, and also wanted to provide a process for employees to meet those expectations over the long term. As a first step, they identified in behavioral terms the leadership factors that had been identified as critical to the company's future. Each of these dimensions was described by each of the Four Stages, so that high performance was described in a way that was achievable by anyone in the company, regardless of experience level. Describing the dimensions by stage also provided clarity about where development efforts should be focused. Figure 3 shows the description of one of the leadership dimensions by the Four Stages.

The company then created a development planning process whereby employees identified their own needs and priorities, their long term goals in terms of contributing to the company, and potential derailers that might cause problems for them in their careers. From the list of 23 leadership dimensions, each employee selected three to highlight as strengths, and three to focus on as development gaps. This selection was based on the employee's self-assessment, as well as an assessment from his or her manager. Although multi-

<h1>Customer Focus</h1>			
Helping and Learning	Contributing Independently	Contributing Through Others	Leading Through Vision
Has a basic knowledge of customers (internal or external) and their needs; is responsive to customers	Actively seeks customer input; anticipates customers' needs and effectively meets them; seeks feedback to ensure customer expectations are met	Helps others understand customer needs; develops effective partnerships with customers; models good customer relations; seeks ways of improving service and building the customer base	Fosters culture and organization systems that entrench customer service as a key value

FIGURE 3

rater feedback was not a requirement in all business units, a feedback process was readily available. Employees were encouraged to solicit 360-degree feedback on a regular basis in order to measure development progress or monitor changing role demands.

Each employee received training on the Four Stages Model, Derr's Career Orientations Model, and the development planning process. The action planning process emphasized identifying or creating stretch assignments in one's current role, rather than focusing on future jobs. The action plans were linked directly to the development gaps. Employees also received training on how to initiate and lead a

development discussion, and have an opportunity to practice leading a discussion based on their plans with someone other than their supervisor.

This employee development system not only provided employees with tools for managing their own careers. It also changed the culture of the company to one where employees accepted and valued the opportunity to control their own destiny.

Conclusion

Self-directed career development is one of the new corporate realities. Taking responsibility for one's own career provides options and opportunities that prob-

ably wouldn't have been available before. However, without effective tools, most employees aren't equipped to plan and manage their own careers. A few simple concepts and tools can help employees grow in ways that will increase both their own satisfaction and the productivity of the organization.

Endnotes

- ¹ Derr, C. Brooklyn. *Managing the New Careerists*. Jossey-Bass, 1986.
- ² Dalton, Gene W. and Paul H. Thompson. *Novations: Strategies for Career Management*. Scott, Foresman and Company, 1986.
- ³ Unpublished research, BT.Novations, Provo, Utah, 1998.



About the Author

Kathy Buckner is a Vice President specializing in competency-based HR systems. Since she joined BT.Novations, she has been involved in the development and roll-out of employee development and performance management systems at DuPont, Champion International and MetLife.

Before joining BT.Novations, she consulted with firms of all sizes on a variety of issues. She was the director of the Utah Small Business Development Center and was an instructor at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management. She has published a number of books and articles on employee development and other management issues.

Kathy holds a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior.

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www.bt.novations.com

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