

Long-term plan key to advancement

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People plan weddings, families, even vacations. But too few plan one of the most important parts of their lives their careers, advisers warn.

Career change has become almost inevitable for most people, says Mary-Frances Fox, president of Work Creatively Career Advisers, in Toronto.

"No company can assure you of steady employment throughout your working life," Ms. Fox says.

So even if you aren't facing an immediate change, it's important to have a long-range plan that is regularly updated.

"When you have a career plan and you work according to it, you can control what your alternatives are when you need or want to make a change," she adds.

Laying the foundation for your plan starts with isolating "the truth about you; what you do best and enjoy the most and get the most excited about doing," Ms. Fox says.

One technique she finds effective is to list your achievements and then write what was unique about you that led to your success in each achievement.

You'll find the same themes recurring. These represent your "power grid," which defines the reasons you are effective and the special things you have to offer, Ms. Fox explains. No two people will have the same combination.

Knowing that, your task is to find ways to make these strengths and goals valuable to an employer, Ms. Fox explains.

"Employers are sitting there hoping someone can offer up some solutions for their problems and they are hoping you are going to be their headache pill."

You should be ready to offer ideas, even if they're not in an area that is part of your current job description, Ms. Fox says.

She advises addressing five things employers are constantly looking for:

- Saving time, by speeding development and production, to offer products or services faster than the competition.
- Saving money, by trimming costs or payroll, or making more, by boosting profits. .
- Solving people issues, either with customers or within the team.
- Creating efficiency, through shortcuts, automation or simplification.
- Innovating, by coming up with new products or ways of doing things that keep the company in the forefront.

"You should always be on the lookout for ways to stretch your work profile," especially those that get you as close as possible to your long-range career goals, Ms. Fox says.

However, your plans should always be subject to change as well, warns Lucy Vasic, practice manager with Knightsbridge GSW in Toronto.

Mary-Frances Fox, president of Work Creatively Career Advisers, says change has become almost inevitable, so employees 'should always be on the lookout for ways to stretch your work profile.'

"I often talk about a fuzzy vision as opposed to a clear and fast game plan. In today's world, anyone who is too focused on a path may end up disappointed because things that they expect don't materialize," Ms. Vasic says.

As technology continues to increase the speed of change, better opportunities that were not part of your original vision may appear in the future.

She recommends sitting down regularly and listing the new experiences and people you have met that are relevant to your goals. Performance reviews and feedback from colleagues can also help define areas you want to improve.

Written or on-line assessments can help, Ms. Vasic advises, and these can be arranged either by outside consultants or in-house human resources departments.

Ms. Vasic also recommends a continual investment in your career capital.

"Make sure you keep your skills updated and that you are doing a wonderful job in the organization you are in, because you want people both inside and outside the organization to know you and want you," Ms. Vasic says.

Even if your current position appears untenable and a move seems inevitable, it may be more advisable to look for it within your existing organization than to go to a new employer, Ms. Vasic suggests.

"I don't think people ever really want to change gears completely," she says.

Most of her clients at Knightsbridge are in mid-career and know what they have been good at but still have many years ahead and just want more meaningful work, she says. They are frustrated, yet they don't want to move or leave the organization.

"Often when people come in for an assessment, what I'll ask is why -what's the rationale for throwing away everything you've learned?" Ms. Vasic says.

Many people find that what they really need is to tweak their existing situation. It's like contemplating the options in a strained marriage, Ms. Vasic explains.

"If you step back and say 'whoa, let's try to make this work again' and take a little more responsibility and initiative, you can make a new start." r

Ms. Fox agrees that many people who find themselves in a painful position think about escape rather than options that would make their job better.

"It doesn't mean doing the same thing, but it does mean building on the strengths, experience and contacts you've built over the years," she says.

"You have to get in the habit of regularly communicating how your fundamental interests and talents meet the needs of your organization."

Not only does this keep you relevant to your employer, it is key to advancement, Ms. Fox says.

"It all boils down to not looking at any job as a title, but as a business problem you are solving to further your career plan."

Don't look behind if you want to get ahead

Here are some tips from career adviser Mary-Frances Fox for building on the foundation of your career plan:

- You are not your history; you are your potential. You control what people think you can do. Project the potential of your work and your relevance to challenges in the future. Facts don't tell it all. Communicate results and contributions, not responsibilities held and degrees earned.
- Get hired by word of mouth. Resumes are not the axis of your career world, your informal conversations are. We all like to hire who we know.
- Don't go in naked. To be able to offer a solution, you first need to gather information about the problem. Start by networking and doing research on what challenges are facing the \ corporation.
- All opportunities boil down to five things. Review your performance for how you've saved time, made or saved money, improved relationships, found efficiencies or made innovations. This is the only language employers want to hear.
- Tell stories that help people picture what your work will do for them and why you care about their team and their field. Have spot-on points because you've done your homework.
- Be yourself and relax. If you are stretching, it will make you and your potential employer feel uncomfortable.

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