

## FUTURE PERFECT

### HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE THE WORKING LIFE YOU WANT?

*Yvonne Sarch*

When you are under the pressure of a recession, struggling just to survive and pay your bills, career planning tends to drop down your list of priorities. But knowing how to create a satisfactory career for yourself remains an extremely important skill - perhaps even more important than usual. It is also a rare one.

Until the end of the 1980s, a career was a relatively straightforward thing. Employers would recruit school leavers, graduates and other young people with potential and encourage them with training and management development schemes. Thereafter, with careful selection and corporate commitment, the most talented and loyal were promoted. If you were among them, you knew that your skills were needed as long as you wished to stay with that company. This level of security meant that you were prepared to train others without the fear of redundancy; which made it possible to plan your family life, choose your location and time your progress up the hierarchical structure in a way that was convenient both for you and for your employer. All parties benefited from the implied existence of a long, stable career ladder.

In the 1990s, all that has changed. Jobs are scarce and precarious, the world is changing at an unprecedented rate, and you need to be resilient, flexible and capable of adjusting your sights at short notice. No business or industry has any secure prospect of surviving for more than a few years unless it is prepared to change radically and often. The old concept of long career ladders to be climbed over 50 years no longer applies; the modern career is composed of much shorter ladders, often no more than three to five years long within any one organisation. There are some areas, such as academia, medicine and other professions, in which the old, long ladder still appears to be relevant; but there is no longer any guarantee that this state of affairs will persist.

Demographic and technological developments are forcing further changes: many experts expect there to be more job-sharing in future, more working from home (via fax, modem and phone), more mixing of work and motherhood, more part-time consultants, more self-employment. The once orderly world of career ladders is being replaced by something close to career anarchy.

Irrespective of changing levels of employment in the coming decades, the consensus among leading management gurus, from Charles Handy and Tom Peters to Sir John Harvey-Jones, is that in future more and more of us will be working in a piecemeal way. At the most senior level, top executives are already collecting portfolios of directorships, both full- and part-time, with sometimes

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a core job as well, while others are becoming consultants with a range of clients and projects. With each passing year, this fragmentation of employment is working its way further down the scale - while the idea of a whole career spent with a single employer is becoming more and more of an anachronism. Whatever your work, your career is now your property, your responsibility, and not that of your current employer. What this means in practice is that although your career may founder through no fault of your own, you would be unwise to expect anyone else to do anything about it. As Sir Tim Bell, chief executive of advertising and PR agency Lowe Bell Communications, puts it: 'We don't give people a career, we give them a job. Ultimately your only loyalty is to yourself.'

If you want a brilliant career, you have to plan it. Many people are resistant to the idea of life-planning and goalsetting: the idea of considering working life as a career rather than as a chance series of jobs seems excessively ambitious. Yet whether you aspire to job satisfaction or merely to some kind of job security you can do your working future nothing but harm by failing to consider what sort of career you want.

You may have many jobs in the course of your career, whether you remain with one employer or move about. You should aim to do each one well, but you should be looking ahead while you do so - asking yourself how it will affect your future prospects of doing the work you want to do. Remember, you are aiming to have a successful career, not just to secure a better job. This means your watchword should be marketability.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her book *When Giants Learn to Dance*, has pointed out that when you are seeking to maintain your marketability the best way is to keep your professional knowledge and technical skills up to date. Just waiting to step into dead men's shoes is less and less of a good idea: whatever rewards and possibilities are on the horizon, you cannot be sure that you or they will still be there in the required five weeks, five months or five years. Even high-fliers and people who have been identified as 'fast track' types can find themselves dislodged or 'plateaued' unless they are adept at coping with change.

In all professions it is the successful fee-earner who is retained or promoted. Even within the public sector, the policy of value for money, combined with competitive tendering, has meant that individuals have even had to compete for their own jobs when the structures are being redefined. Even local authorities and central government are gradually reshaping themselves in accordance with this modern philosophy of impermanence.

If this sounds frightening, the good news is that it is frightening for employers as well. With the world changing so rapidly, companies need a committed, talented, flexible workforce in order to survive: people, rather than products, are their future. Companies who fail to invest in their people are likely to falter in their contribution to economic regeneration and growth. The fact that mutual loyalty between employer and employee is no longer automatic means employers need to think about what they can offer employees as well as about what employees can offer them, if they want to find and keep the brightest and best in their field for as long as possible.

Some organisations (British Telecom, for example, or those academic establishments with 'new blood' programmes) are beginning to think about identifying career strategies for individuals and trying to align them with their corporate needs. But it is no good just sitting back and hoping that this is the case. Even the most marketable employees need to take a proactive approach to their careers, because marketability rapidly fades unless it is conscientiously maintained. Each career is different, but you won't find many people achieving truly brilliant careers these days who haven't followed most of the advice on this 10-point checklist.

### 1. Be autonomous

Be independent, take decisions, don't expect anyone else to take responsibility for you. Be unsentimental when the need to change or move on becomes apparent. Integrity is still an important career asset, but it usually manifests itself today in loyalty to personal values and viewpoints rather than in working blindly for the organisation alone. Look for rewards for performance rather than loyalty payments for length of service.

## 2. Keep your options open

Even as recently as three years ago, when head-hunters looked at your CV and saw that you had moved jobs frequently we would describe you dismissively as a 'hopper'. Today, those who change jobs often are more often seen as advancing in career terms. Head-hunters do still ask questions and try to check that your move was progressive and not just an escape, but generally mobility is seen as a sign of marketability, while in the 'peak' career-building years, from 25 to 35, job moves or career zig-zags every three years are now considered healthy and normal.

## 3. Top up your skills

If you have skills to sell, the chances are that there will be employers willing to pay handsomely for them (if not financially then in terms of quality of life, personal development opportunities, etc); and the more skills you have, the better your chances. Companies are currently concerned about the quality and availability of people with managerial and professional skills, language skills, supervisory skills and an understanding of the applications of information technology. All of these are skills which you can develop.

## 4. Top up your knowledge

As well as keeping skills up to date, it is necessary to keep learning. Knowledge has a 'sell by' date, so you should use any management development schemes or relevant courses whenever you have the opportunity. (Apart from anything else, you will meet others with similar ambitions and discover what is happening in other companies). Remember, though, that while specialist knowledge is a useful way of maintaining your marketability in the short term, if you allow it to it can also limit your long-term flexibility; so try to develop more general skills as well.

## 5. Keep your head over the parapet

When I was writing *How to be Headhunted* the main theme which emerged when discussing how to manage your reputation was that of visibility. It is no good being the best team leader, head of

department, boffin in the university, etc., unless other people know about you and your good work. You have to tell them and make your capabilities obvious. You will strengthen your employability by being significant and noticed by those within your organisation and outside. Make it impossible for decision-makers to ignore you or pass over your work and ideas. Some people find this a slightly distasteful concept, fearing that it might make them 'pushy'. Yet there are all sorts of ways - from writing articles and attending meetings of professional bodies, national conferences, etc, to spending time in the company of people in your line of work - in which even the most modest person can maintain visibility and thus increase choices when career planning.

## 6. Think ahead

When considering how your actions will affect your career, remember that it is not your current job you should be concentrating on, nor even the next one, but the one after that. This is particularly true when you are young. Career choices made early on can be decisive in determining the quality of the rest of your working life.

## 7. Service your CV

Keep a basic format CV to hand and update it regularly (say, once every three months). This is a good exercise, because it forces you to look at what you have done within each job; to consider what progress you are making in your career plan; and to see where you have gaps in your track record (which you can then attempt to fill). Your CV should be two to three pages long, with database information (ie, basic biography) followed by explanations of each job - which should include highlighting achievements which were attributable to you and which had a corporate effect.

## 8. Network

Keep an active network based on work and interests and not just those with whom you spent your school-days. This will increase your awareness of opportunity. You can use these contacts to find out what is actually going on

behind otherwise closed doors of organisations which you are targeting for your career development. This is another career-boosting technique with which some people feel uncomfortable; they are wrong to do so. Networking is an excellent way of adding balance to your life, helping you to have a whole life and not just what you do at work and what you do with your family. It isn't about cynically cultivating 'useful' people; rather it is about mixing with people with similar interest, abilities and preoccupations.

#### **9. Choose the right employer**

You should bear in mind that different people function best in different organisations. Some people work best in large outfits, some in small; and most people will find some corporate 'cultures' more to their taste than others. Organisations with 'flatter' structures offer shorter career ladders and thus quicker prospects of

advancement, with the possible drawback of putting you in direct competition with workmates/colleagues who report to the same boss; more hierarchical organisations are likely to be less flexible and thus to have more precarious corporate futures. It makes more sense to choose the organisation that is best for you than to struggle against your natural inclinations to fit in where you clearly don't belong.

#### **10. Enjoy what you do**

This is the single most important piece of career advice. Find out what you enjoy and take steps to enjoy it. There is nothing brilliant about becoming chairman of ICI if you hate every minute of it, and nothing wrong with a lifetime spent in an obscure career backwater as long as it offers you job satisfaction, challenge and self-fulfilment. Until you have decided what you want, however, you are unlikely to be able to take the steps you need to take to achieve it.

We recently discovered to our surprise that we share our abbreviation 'UKSG' with another august body, the UK Sensors Group, nothing we hasten to add to do with censorship just as we have nothing to do with cereals.