Taking responsibility for your own career development – why consultants should value the opportunity and how to make the most of it.

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Employees in consulting firms face greater demands than ever before; greater demands from clients for delivery, greater demands from their managers for performance and greater demands on their time from their families and outside interests. And all in a climate where they are expected to take responsibility for their own career management and development.

How can the great majority of consultants build successful careers in this environment? Smart employees know that the key to long-term success is founded more in maintaining sharp skills than in demonstrating loyalty to the firm. Consultants and their employers do have a shared interest in their long-term growth. But the key is skills growth, not loyalty.

Career Bests

Research into what makes for a satisfying work life indicates that the most personally satisfying times in a person's career and usually also highly productive in meetings their employer’s goals. These ‘Career Bests’ also provide significant development opportunities. Rising to the challenge benefits employees by building increased capability and satisfaction. And increased individual capability in turn increases the firm’s ability to perform.

Career Bests happen when individuals are doing something that they enjoy, that uses and develops their talents and that falls within the domain of strategic business needs. When these three overlap great things happen. The fact that Career Bests happen when individual and corporate interests overlap has important implications for personal development;

- Only the individual knows where their interests lie. A career plan developed by someone else won’t help.
- The best career plans do not centre on the next job or on 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 a result of engaging in interesting, challenging work.
- Organisations must be clear about what they need from their staff. If leaders share information about the organisations direction and can translate that direction into individual expectations, then they give their staff the framework in which to establish how they can best support the firm in achieving its goals.
- Self-directed career development requires more self-awareness and insight than corporate-driven career management. Individuals must take more of the initiative and accept responsibility for understanding
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and articulating their own needs, priorities and their ability to contribute. For some people this may well be a painful process, whilst others find it immensely liberating.

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

To increase your opportunities to experience Career Bests it is vital that you understand what drives you at work. One model that explains the range of career drivers has been developed by C. Brooklyn Derr. He identified five major definitions of career success;

1. **Advancement.** This is the traditional definition of career success for many Europeans. These people are looking to become directors, vice-presidents, general managers and CEO’s. What drives them is upward movement. Success means more money, more power and steady promotions.

2. **Security.** These people, an under-appreciated and often unacknowledged but significant segment of the workforce in most organisations have a psychological contract with the firm. In exchange for hard work and loyalty, they expect to get life-long employment, respect, steady advancement and eventually a high-level role where their talents and used and appreciated.

3. **Freedom.** These consultants 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. **Challenge.** These individuals thrive on excitement, challenge and the technical nature and content of their work. They’ll work for anybody who offers exciting opportunities.

5. **Balance.** These people give equal time and attention to careers, relationships and self-development. They will work around the clock in emergencies but they don’t live their lives emergency style. They will usually pull back from getting overly absorbed in their work but are competent enough to do well. They become unhappy if their work isn’t meaningful enough to balance their personal lives.

Effective career development allows people to live by their personal values whilst at the same time making an effective contribution at work. Since different people define their goals differently it stands to reason that if they cannot match them to the organisations needs, then frustration and low performance will result.

This is yet another argument in favour of self-directed career development. No one will be more aware of their own career drivers and values than the individual concerned. When they use that insight to make decisions about their future, they take personal responsibility and are likely to be far more committed to achieving the outcome, than they would be if the decision was imposed on them.

**Identifying your firm’s needs**

So far in this article, we have focused on personal drivers and values. Now let’s look at the other key requirement to effective career development – your organisation’s needs. It is clear that most organisations have higher expectations
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of performance than ever before. Standards are both more important and often less clear. At the same time, the traditional measure of good performance – job promotion – is no longer a viable gauge.

Although consultants are expected to focus on growing within their current roles, rather than on looking for the next promotion, most of us do not have an alternative way of discussing or conceptualising our development in terms of role growth.

One powerful model for achieving this is the Four Stages Model developed by Gene Dalton and Paul Thompson whilst professors at Harvard University. Dalton and Thompson were asked to investigate performance at a large electronics firm. This organisation tracked engineers’ performance over time. Their data made it 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 continued their research it became clear that the differences could be explained by four stages of development.

The progression identified by the two professors is independent of position on the organisation chart. It explains why two people with the same job descriptions may be valued differently by their firm. However to be a high performer in the latter stages depends on mastering the early stages. Thus the four stages provides a powerful road-map for understanding the long-term expectations organisations have of their employees. These are described in Figure 1 below together with a summary of the key tasks for each stage.

**Figure 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1; Contributing Dependently</th>
<th>Stage 2; Contributing Independently</th>
<th>Stage 3; Contributing through Others</th>
<th>Stage 4; Contributing Strategically</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingly accepts supervision</td>
<td>Assumes responsibility for definable projects</td>
<td>Increases in technical breadth</td>
<td>Provides direction to the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates success in a portion of a larger project or task</td>
<td>Relies less on supervision; works independently and produces significant results</td>
<td>Develops broad business perspective</td>
<td>Defines/drives critical business opportunities and needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters basic and routine tasks</td>
<td>Increases in technical expertise and ability</td>
<td>Stimulates others through ideas and knowledge</td>
<td>Exercises power responsibly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows 'directed' creativity and initiative</td>
<td>Develops credibility and a reputation</td>
<td>Involved as a coach, mentor, manager or idea leader in developing others</td>
<td>Obtains and allocates essential resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performs well under time and budget pressure</td>
<td>Builds an internal network of relationships</td>
<td>Represents the organisation effectively to clients and external groups</td>
<td>Sponsors promising individuals to prepare them for leadership roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learns how we do things around here</td>
<td></td>
<td>Builds a strong internal and external network</td>
<td>Represents the organisation on critical strategic issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Stage 1 contributors accept direction, establish basic competence and learn the ropes. While people who do this early in their careers are seen as 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 2 by becoming technical experts.

In the same manner, those independent experts who fail to broaden their perspectives and to develop others will in time, be perceived as less valuable, unless they are brilliant enough to contribute as much on their own as their Stage 3 colleagues do by contributing through others.

Those who are able to develop Stage 4 characteristics of having the vision and credibility to influence organisational direction are perceived as being the most valued by leaders in the organisation.

One of the many interesting and useful findings from the research is that most of the people who perform Stage 3 functions are not in formal management roles; for every manager in Stage 3, there are at least three non-managers performing similar leadership roles.

The Four Stages Model describes values that have existed in companies for decades. However understanding the model has become extremely important for all those interested in appreciating how to develop their own careers. Moving from one stage to the next increases an individual’s ability to contribute, it increases their value to their employer and leads to increased job satisfaction.

Understanding the process of making this move can give a consultant more control over their own development as well as a roadmap for increasing their contribution and future success throughout their career.