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Up Is Not the Only Way

Rethinking Career Mobility

Beverly Kaye, Lindy Williams and Lynn Cowart • Berrett-Koehler © 2017 • 136 pages

Career / Career Strategies

Career / Career Change

Take-Aways

- “Career mobility” is different today. You have more options than simply moving up the proverbial ladder.
- Think of career mobility as a “kaleidoscope” that turns and shifts rather than a telescope that grants a linear view in one direction.
- “Enrichment, exploratory, lateral, realignment, vertical” and “relocation” strategies are six possible career paths.
- Enrichment experiences allow you to learn new skills or add responsibilities to your current position.
- Exploratory experiences are short-term assignments that let you try something new.
- “Maybe ‘over’ is the new ‘up’.” Lateral moves expand your network and can lead to a vertical move.
- With a realignment, you voluntarily step back to refocus.
- A vertical move is typically a promotion or some other step upward.
- Relocation means deciding to leave your organization for greener pastures.
- Go beyond the career ladder, and make the career moves that are right for you.

Recommendation

Today's employees want meaningful work and a better work-life balance. Beverly Kaye, Lindy Williams and Lynn Cowart – three consultants who've experienced the six possible career paths covered here – offer a manual about the different ways your career can grow. They explore “enrichment, exploratory, lateral, realignment” and “relocation” strategies as well as “vertical” upward growth. Their advice is a solid conversation starter for managers who want to retain top talent and for employees who are eager for professional development. Its blue color scheme and large, boldface font sizes are whimsical though distracting. *getAbstract* recommends this insightful guidebook to managers, employees and HR professionals.

Summary

More Than One Direction

Everyone hopes for and expects “career mobility.” Employees want to take ownership of their careers. Assess your professional development to define what matters most to you. Take stock of your skills, interests, values and goals. Ask for feedback from those you trust. Enlist help from managers, coaches and mentors.

The Career “Kaleidoscope”

A kaleidoscope offers many different views and shifting patterns. A typical kaleidoscope contains three mirrors and a handful of beads. Just as one twist of a kaleidoscope changes the dynamic, one shift in your career can open up a new world of possibilities. Like a kaleidoscope, a satisfying career has three main “mirrors” or components: “skills, interests and values.” All three matter.

“When people learn and grow and realize their potential, everyone wins. Growth is a basic human need.”

Shifting to a kaleidoscopic view means leaving a one-way, linear path in order to move in different directions. As you twist the kaleidoscope, new patterns may emerge that weren't previously visible. The same thing happens when others twist the viewer for you, as when, for example, your company splits an existing department into two new departments. You could stay with your old department and move up, you could move laterally to the new unit and eventually move up there, or you could straddle the two departments by serving as a liaison. Maybe a higher salary and corner office aren't what you want. Money is important, but people also want to balance money and meaning. For some, finding value and purpose in work matters more than their salaries.

“Some growth opportunities may not be available inside the organization. When that is the case, be open and honest about it.”

Consider six kinds of potential career moves:

1. “Enrichment”

For career enrichment, tweak your current job to make it more interesting and worthwhile. Add new responsibilities or shift duties to your co-workers as you learn and grow where you already are. You should be able to experience growth within your current job. “Change the conversation” so enrichment becomes a viable career path.

“We need to change the conversation. We need to see the current job as fertile soil for career growth.”

Although most professions require mandatory continuing education to maintain licensure or certification, voluntary enrichment allows you to reclaim what initially drew you to your career. Say you may want to become an expert in a specialty area. For instance, an environmental engineer became an expert on one facet of his industry – sludge. He spent his career managing wastewater, but climbing the corporate ladder didn’t interest him. He developed specialized expertise and now proudly calls himself “the sludge guy.”

“Managers, coaches and mentors provide support through conversations; sharing stories; listening to individuals describe their interests, skills, and values; reacting to plans; [and] offering feedback and connections.”

Seek out enrichment opportunities by asking questions. What small changes can you make to your current tasks and procedures? How can you learn more? Could you do your job from home or work in a different location? Does your organization embrace flexible scheduling? How can you achieve better work-life balance? Can you delegate some tasks? With whom do you work well – or not so well? Even one question can change everything.

“Concerns about unhealthy work-life balance, stress or frustration are flags indicating that the time is ripe for a conversation.”

Author and consultant Beverly Kaye met in New York with the senior management of a finance organization. The executives wanted to know the one question they could ask an employee to start a conversation about career development. Kaye suggested that managers ask employees, “What talent do you have that I may not be aware of, that you would love to use more?”

2. “Exploratory”

Some work experiences are “try before you buy” situations, such as internships or other short-term assignments. Many employees make tremendous work leaps without sufficient information. Exploring opportunities first helps reduce stress and lets you decide if the opportunity is what you really want. Exploratory options are like elastic – tailored to fit based on your skills and interests. They may be small, medium or large opportunities. Small but significant options don’t take a lot of time or investment to explore. Gather information by interviewing subject matter experts; examining role and job descriptions; and reading internal websites, blogs and newsletters.

“A person typically checks out emotionally, demonstrating all the observable behaviors... well before they decide to physically walk out the door.”

“Medium-size exploratory experiences can include job shadowing, focused observations, cross-functional meetings, town halls, webinars, and more.” Managers who want to support medium-level exploratory experiences for their employees can network with other departments and find coverage for their employees. “Big and bold” exploratory experiences can include job rotations, cross-training, sabbaticals, special assignments, vacations or absence coverage, and the like.

3. “Lateral”

In this scenario, your pay, title and position remain the same, but you gain a different view by moving to another function or department. Years ago, managers and employees perceived lateral moves as a sign that you couldn’t move up. Now, managers want flexible, cross-trained employees. A lateral move now can equip you for a better position in the future.

“A time comes in all careers when the writing is on the wall. It’s time to move on.”

Some people resist because possible new assignments may be too similar to their present roles, they don’t want to start over, they’re comfortable in their current positions, or they don’t see the move as an opportunity to advance or earn higher salaries. If the first objection is true, you won’t need much training. A lateral move demonstrates that you’re a true team player. It can twist that kaleidoscope slightly outside your comfort zone but not as wildly as a vertical move or relocation. A lateral slide could lead to a vertical move and higher salary later. Horizontal movement can benefit an organization. In one case, an employee offered to help another department that needed her specific skills. Her manager agreed to set aside 20% of the employee’s time for that function. Ultimately, she enjoyed her new role much more and left her current manager. While the manager was sad to see her go, in a few weeks she found a replacement. In fact, the manager from the other department recommended someone from that unit’s staff who was a perfect fit. This swap worked out to everyone’s benefit.

“Promotions still happen. Up is still an option. But careers consist of a range of experiences – large and small – that ultimately come together to shape a career journey.”

Positive aspects of lateral moves include tackling new professional challenges, having better work-life balance, building new skills and helping disengaged employees become reinvested in their work. Be sure to weigh the pros and cons of a lateral move. Don’t accept a position you don’t want.

4. “Realignment”

Realigning or dropping back from your current position gives you the opportunity to reflect on what you really want. Common reasons for realignment include:

- Discovering that being in management wasn’t what you expected and wanting to step back into a nonsupervisory position.
- Moving to an entry-level position in a new area with potential for future growth.

- Wanting a part-time or job-sharing position to achieve better work-life balance.
- Seeking a less stressful position or shorter work hours.
- “Learning a skill set that is only used in a lower position.”

“If someone you know has ‘retired in place,’ enrichment can be the ticket to reviving interest and enthusiasm for the work.”

Co-workers might look at you oddly or talk about you behind your back. Supervisors may think they were doing you a favor by promoting you and could be disgruntled to learn you’ve opted to drop back, but don’t prejudge the benefits of realignment.

“Language is powerful.” Try using alternative terms such as “realign, shift, adjust, switch or balance.” Notice the difference between “Britt is taking a demotion as a next career step” and “Britt chose to refocus as her next step.” Be open and honest to discourage gossip and encourage your employees to come back when they’re ready.

5. “Vertical”

If you want a promotion, a vertical climb up the ladder is the right move. For decades, a vertical move was the ultimate goal. In some cases, the wish for a promotion is about the money. Young people who want to move out of their parents’ basement or who face college debt are going to aim for larger paychecks. That goes ditto for senior employees preparing for retirement or middle-aged parents paying their kids’ college tuition or their parents’ elder care.

“A realignment experience can rejuvenate a career that has become dreary or monotonous.”

If employees leave their old company for your company, how will you ensure they won’t jump ship again? Having conversations with them about what they value and what they’re hoping to learn can boost retention. For others, meaningful work matters more than money. They gladly trade a higher paycheck for work that is significant to them.

“People who choose purposely and plan fully to have lateral experiences create new ways to market their personal brands and grow a solid network of connections.”

If you are ready to move up, go for it. Even well-qualified candidates have to do some internal marketing, which may be hard for some. Think through how you will answer the following questions. Potentially, how will you handle being a supervisor for the first time? If you will be managing people who are currently your peers, how will that change your relationships with them? How will this promotion test your interpersonal skills and your technical skills? How will you address challenges? What are you most looking forward to about a possible new role?

“Talent stays when the future is hopeful. When it’s not, talent walks.”

Being a manager at an ever-higher level comes with additional responsibilities and stress. You’ll need to consider new things, such as which tasks you will perform and which tasks you’ll delegate, how you’ll

succeed in your new position, what new standard operating procedures you must learn, how you will build trust among your new team, and what kind of leader you'll be.

6. "Relocation"

You always have the option of relocating. You may have to move out to move up. Leaving your current organization can be scary, but it can be exciting, too.

Relocation means leaving voluntarily. If people you manage are thinking of leaving, this isn't the time to talk them out of it. If moving out is the only option they can envision, let them go.

Try to find out why employees are leaving so you can prevent further defections. Many ex-employees report they would have stayed in their old jobs if they'd had the right conversations with their managers before they left. When Kaye interviewed ex-employees, many told her specifically what they had wanted to stay at their old jobs. When she shared that feedback with their managers, they tended to wonder why the former workers hadn't just expressed what they wanted. The managers often remarked, "I could have made that work."

Common reasons for leaving include lack of growth opportunities or support, more opportunities elsewhere, a higher salary or better benefits elsewhere, or just wanting a change. Possible signs of a pending relocation include a decline in productivity, disengagement with current tasks, resistance to new tasks, frequent hushed phone calls or discussions, and conflicts between personal and organizational values. If you're a manager and notice these signs, talk to your employees. Most people will give you plenty of signals before they actually quit.

If it is time to leave, your organization can facilitate a smooth transition. If you're the manager, be open to "returning talent (also known as the boomerang theory)." Give your employees an "elegant exit" by openly sharing their relocation with the team, making it a celebration, discussing how to divvy up the work and encouraging team members to keep in touch. Alumni can be powerful recruiters for future employees or clients. If you're the one leaving, stay connected with your former co-workers and supervisors.

Taking the Risk

Enrichment and exploratory opportunities have the lowest risk among the six options. You stay with your company while continuing to learn and grow. Ask when and why you want to make a move and what risks you'd incur with each alternative growth path. Do you want to accumulate new skills first by trying a lateral move or a realignment? When is it time to jump ship and consider a relocation? Only you have the answers.

About the Authors

Beverly Kaye also wrote *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em* and *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go*. She founded Career Systems International, where **Lynn Cowart** is vice president of quality delivery and **Lindy Williams**, who formerly worked at American Express, is a senior consultant.



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