
Understanding the Stairway to Heaven – Basic Lessons to Moving Out and Up

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The trend continues in many public, private and not-for-profit organizations to compress its organizational structure with a shift from a traditional stovepipe to a lean flat savvy organization as a way to maximize organizational performance and results. With new government initiatives just weeks or months away, opportunities abound for those seeking new challenges in the next phase of their career. The purpose of this article is to focus on career development concepts and practices, which can be, utilize to explore new career avenues within the public service.

The word career means many things to many people. It also has different meanings among researchers. For example, researchers Van Maanen & Schein describe a career as a sequence of related jobs, Hall (1976) uses the term career to separate the “professions” such as accountant, from other occupations, such as customer service representative. The accountant is said to have a career, while customer service representative doesn’t!

Given the somewhat narrow focus of these definitions, and for the purposes of this article, a broader definition such as Greenhaus, 1987) is more expansive and therefore more useful for the purposes of this paper. Greenhaus’s describes career as “the pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of one’s life,” and includes both objective events (jobs) and subjective views of work (attitudes, values and expectations) and the definition supports the notion that careers develop over time, and that all persons have careers, regardless of profession, level of advancement or stability of work pattern. Additionally, this definition of career also underscores the influence and importance of both the individual and the organization on the individual’s work life. While the job and occupational choices an employee makes during a career are determined in large part

by forces within the employee, the organizational and other external forces (spouse, children, geographic location, etc.) also play a role.

Career Development

Research provides strong evidence to support the notion that careers develop in a predicable, common sequence of stages (Hall, 1976; Levinson, 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee 1978; Schein, 1978, 1987). These researchers have found that at various ages people face common issues and pressures that they attempt to resolve in their lives. The stages affect, and are affected by, the career activities and choices the individual has made.

Career Development Models

Numerous models of career development (Hall & Nougaim, 1968; Schein, 1978; Super, 1980, 1992) have been offered to explain the sequence of stages an adult progress through and during their work lives. Each of these models emphasizes the notion of an orderly series of career stages linked to age ranges, places the career into the context of a person’s life, and contains overlapping concepts. In 1987, Greenhaus combined these approaches into a five-stage model:

Stage 1: Preparation for Work (Age 0 - 25)

The major tasks during this period involve forming and defining an idea of the occupations one would like to engage in, and making necessary preparations for entry into those occupations. These activities include assessing possible occupations, selecting an occupation, and obtaining the necessary education. Extensive research has been done to identify the factors that influence occupational choice, with at least nine theories offered (Brown, Brooks, et al.,



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1990). According to Greenhaus (Greenhaus, 1987), the choices an individual makes during this stage represent initial decisions rather than final ones, and establishes the first direction of the individual’s career.

Stage 2: Organizational Entry (Age 18 - 25)

During this stage, an individual selects a job and an organization in which to begin employment in the chosen career field. The amount and quality of information obtained can affect whether the initial job choice will be a fulfilling introduction to an individual’s career or a disappointing false start. Obstacles the individual faces in this stage include: initial job challenge, initial job satisfaction, and organizational socialization.

Stage 3: The Early Career (Age 25 - 40)

During stage three, the individual is dealing with finding a place in the world and pursuing their life dream; this also involves becoming established in a career and in an organization. Challenges the individual must meet to do this include: becoming technically proficient; and assimilating into DIAND’s culture. Successfully meeting these challenges generally result in job satisfaction, increased responsibility and pro-

motional opportunities, increased salary and social rewards. In short, the early career stage is about becoming established and “making it”.

Stage 4: The Mid-Career (Age 40 - 55)

Following Levinson's model, Greenhaus's mid-career stage begins at the same time as the midlife transition. Consequently, one of the tasks an individual faces at mid-career is a re-examination of the life structure and choices that were adopted during the early career. The individual may reaffirm or modify the Dream, make choices appropriate to middle adulthood, and remain productive at work. Such challenges are consistent with the notion of a mid-career crisis. Examples of a mid-career crisis include: plateauing (lack of increased job responsibility or career promotion) and technical obsolescence (insufficient technical skills to perform tasks, i.e. the inability to adapt to computers). Individuals who successfully manoeuvre such obstacles remain productive, while individuals who fail to manoeuvre such obstacles experience frustration and job stagnation.

Stage 5: The Late Career (Age 55 - retirement)

At this stage, individuals face two challenges; first, maintaining the momentum to remain productive and maintaining a sense of self-esteem and secondly, the emotional upheaval of retirement, which brings financial, emotional and social changes.

While Greenhaus's model is useful for identifying the normal, or typical, sequence of events that occur within an individual's working life; there will ALWAYS exceptions to the rule – some individuals, such as those who face changes in job duties and responsibilities who will begin new occupations late in life. Consequently, such individuals will deviate from the age ranges suggested in Greenhaus' model. However, even though the ages will vary, the challenges are likely to remain consistent. For example, is establishment as an administrative officer at age twenty that much different from establishment as a program officer at age 50? It is important to note that Greenhaus' model does not attempt to describe what an ideal career should be like, only what is likely to happen as it proceeds. Clearly, the notion of the ideal in a career will vary from individ-

ual to individual.

Taken together, Greenhaus' models of life stages and career stages provide a rich foundation for the practice of career development. By understanding the issues raised in these models, individuals can anticipate and manage the transitions they will experience during their lives. Similarly, this knowledge can help organizations to develop strategies and tactics to manage the career transitions employees will experience in a way that both will meet organizational human resource needs and satisfy the needs of employees.

Subsumed within career development is career planning and career management. According to Storey, (1976) these two sets of activities can be viewed as existing along a continuum. Career planning is defined as “a deliberate process of:

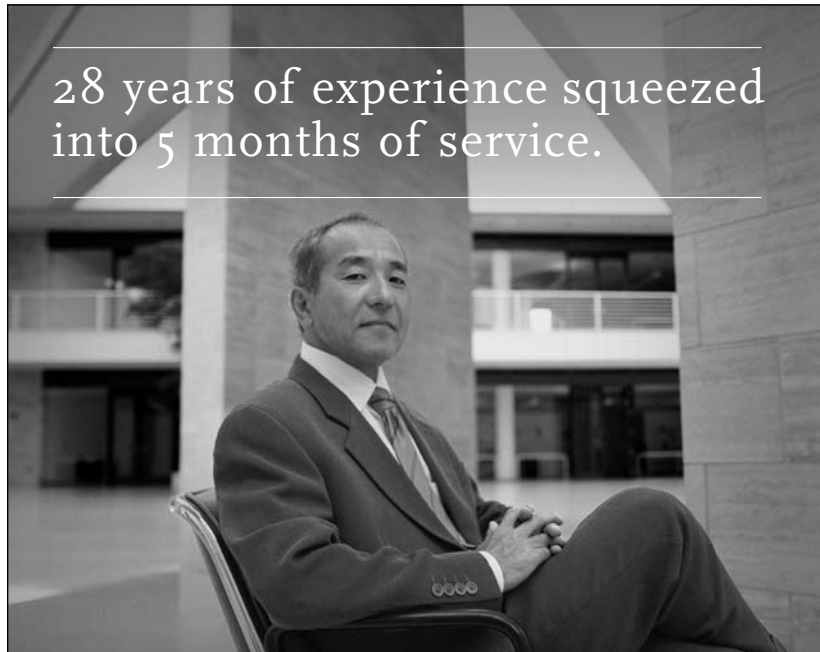
- becoming aware of self, opportunities, constraints, choices, and consequences;
- identifying career-related goals; and
- programming work, education, and relat-

ed development experiences to provide the direction, timing, and sequence of steps.

to attain a specific career goal” (Storey, 1976). Viewed in this way, career planning is an activity performed by an employee to understand and attempt to control their work life. Although assistance is available from a variety of sources both internal and external to the organization, the focus of career planning is on the individual. If career planning is undertaken, the individual will know what they want and have a set of action steps that, if followed should allow achievement of these goals.

On the other end of the spectrum of career development activity is career management. Career management, is defined as “an ongoing process of preparing, implementing, and monitoring career plans undertaken by the individual alone or in concert with the organization's career systems” (Storey, 1976). Career management may include activities that help the individ-

28 years of experience squeezed
into 5 months of service.



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ual develop and carry out career plans, but the focus is on taking actions that increase the chances that the organization's anticipated human resource needs will be met.

Ideally, career management and career planning activities should be complementary and reinforce each other. For example, it would be difficult to monitor career plans, if employees have not made specific plans to be monitored. A balance between management and planning can make for effective and efficient career development (Gutteridge, 1986). Since organizations can act at any point along this continuum, assisting employees with career planning as well as conducting career management activities, enables the organization to play an effective role in career intervention.

Career Motivation - the impact

When formulating a career development and management program, several issues need to be considered. According to London (1985) developing career motivation is a significant goal of effective career management. Career motivation affects how people choose, view, work in them, and how long they stay in their jobs. London (1985) sees career motivation as a set of characteristics grouped into three facets: resilience, insight, and identity. For example, resilience is the extent to which people resist career barriers or disruptions affecting their work. This consists of self-confidence, need for achievement, and the willingness to take risks, and the ability to act independently and cooperatively as appropriate. Insight is the extent to which people are realistic about themselves and their careers and how these perceptions are related to career goals. This includes developing goals and gaining knowledge of the self and the environment. Identity is the extent to which people define themselves by their work. This includes involvement in job, organization, and profession and the direction of career goals (e.g., toward advancement in an organization). An individual can have a high, moderate, or low level of career motivation depending on their posi-

tion in each of these categories. An example of this, is a person with high career motivation will continue to pursue career goals in the face of downsizing (resilience), formulate and pursue realistic career goals (insight), and be highly involved in work and assertively pursue career goals (identity). Although career motivation is partly determined by an individual's past experience, career activities and practices can help develop an individual's career motivation.

Societal Views & Values - the impact on Careers

The other issue, which needs to be addressed when formulating a career development and management strategy, is changing societal views and values. Unlike previous generations, today's workforce is largely comprised of baby boomers¹ (Foot, 1996) and there is evidence to suggest that baby boomers hold views toward work and careers that differ from previous generations and current workforce entrants (Hall & Richter, 1990). Baby boomers have been described as having a strong concern for basic values, a sense of freedom to act on their values, a focus on self, the need for autonomy and the need to question authority. Consequently, any career development and management program needs to integrate flexibility and adaptability of practices and policies to more effectively use the potential of baby boomers.

Lastly, there remains a prevailing attitude among many people that career development and management in its totality is an individual responsibility rather than a beneficial organizational activity. One-way to overcome this attitude, and benefit both organizational and employee needs, is to incorporate from the beginning, the rationale and purpose of a career development and management strategy.

Summary

A career is the pattern of work-related experience that spans the course of a person's life. While individuals are ultimately responsible for their own career, which

includes developing a clear understanding of self and the environment in order to establish career goals and plans, organizations have a fundamental role to assist employees by providing information, opportunities, and assistance. It is in an organizations interest to assist employees in order to enhance its ability to meet ongoing organizational priorities and to ensure that employees have alternate skills to assume new job duties, changes and challenges within the organization if they so desire.

The public service has utilized a variety of tools and techniques to assist employees in managing their careers. These have included self-assessment tools and activities, such as workbooks, workshops, and computer programs, individual career counselling, job placement exchanges, assessments, and development programs such as outside assignments and mentoring. These activities and practices enabled employees gather information to develop career awareness and career plans and an opportunity to implement a plan tailored to specific needs.

Designing a career development and management program involves steps similar to those for developing any organizational development intervention: conducting a needs analysis; identifying the goals and components of the program; establishing criteria to measure effectiveness; implementing the program and evaluating its effectiveness. Since the inclusion of a career development and management program would affect the human resource function, it is essential and necessary for senior management within organizations to be aware of the issues and trends involved with creating, approving and implementing a career development and management program for staff; thus preparing the organization for the future. ■

Reference

1. Baby Boomers are defined as individuals born from 1947 to 1966.