

Up is Not the Only Way

By Beverly Kaye and Caela Farren



Illustration by Anthony Russo

OUR 1980 article "Up Is Not the Only Way" noted that opportunities for moving up in the typical organizational hierarchy were becoming scarce. People had to start finding alternative ways to create satisfying careers.

Since its initial publication, the article has been reprinted many times, has spawned several training programs, has become part of many career-planning tools, and has been made into a video. Why has the message been so popular and long-lived? Because it's even truer today.

Consider Tom, a 42-year-old management development specialist. The company for which he works is reducing the number of senior human resource positions. With half of his work life still ahead of him, Tom aspires to jobs that are rapidly disappearing. Though he feels trapped in his current position, he knows that trainers his age often find it difficult to get comparable jobs. Naturally, Tom is disheartened by the apparent lack of growth opportunities. As a result, his work has begun to suffer.

Lynne, 24, is an ambitious young trainer with a solid technical background. She has an entry-level position at a large computer software firm, training customers to use the company's products. Though she enjoys her work, she sees little hope of building a career there. The company recently dismissed 400 workers and replaced them with lower paid new employees, like Lynne. A whole generation of older trainers stands between her and any chance for advancement. Consequently, she feels little commitment. Given a better offer, she'd quit in a minute.

Tom and Lynne illustrate a dilemma confronting hundreds of companies and thousands of employees. For the past 50 years, most Americans have worked within a business environment dominated by large, multilevel organizations. Building a career meant moving up the hierarchy by means of increased responsibility and promotion to a summit ruled by the limits of personal competence. This progression was ideal for people planning a career of 20 to 30 years in one organization. But for good or ill, the conditions that made it possible are vanishing.

Up the Down Staircase

The decline of vertical advancement is due to several convergent causes.

Changing skill requirements. Technological advances have caused more transactions to occur faster, requiring new competencies. To get ahead, workers must acquire and develop new skills.

In the training profession, that means that course-design and presentation skills are no longer enough on which to build a career. As trainers, we must also be able to facilitate self-directed teams, coordinate teleconferences, develop multimedia instructional programs, and help managers create employee development opportunities on the job. We must learn new skills quickly and often, just to stay in the game. It's hard to predict what will lead to advancement, when the skill requirements are constantly in flux.

Flattening organizations. Huge, vertical bureaucracies lack the responsiveness to thrive in a fast-changing environment. Many organizations are eliminating the intermediate layers of

management and placing more control in the hands of frontline workers. Smaller, decentralized businesses focused on core competencies are becoming the new standard. With fewer midlevel management positions around, fewer opportunities exist for people to move up the traditional career ladder.

Some companies have scattered their HR jobs among semiautonomous business units, anchored by a modest HR staff at headquarters. These small, dispersed teams offer limited career mobility for HR practitioners.

Boomer bulge. Baby boomers – people born between roughly 1946 to 1964 – have influenced every aspect of American society, from school construction to social security benefits. As more boomers enter middle age and the middle of their careers, their effect on the workplace is evident. Like jungle plants competing for precious sunlight, qualified candidates outnumber the job opportunities. And consider the plight of those who follow in the boomers' wake. People entering the workforce now face a line of workers three and four deep for at least the next 25 years. That's a long time to wait for a little career mobility.

Increased automation. More than ever, companies can sustain higher levels of productivity with fewer people through such innovations as precision manufacturing and networked computer terminals. Human resource managers are seldom asked how to leverage an organization's human assets to take advantage of new technology. More often, we're called upon to conduct reengineering and downsizing initiatives to get people off the payroll.

Contingent workers. Many HR functions previously performed in-house – such as recruitment, administration, course development, and training—are now outsourced to external contractors using part-time or temporary employees. Some contractors are little more than virtual companies with a Rolodex of freelance consultants.

As companies reduce the number of full-time employees, more people are becoming part of the new contingent workforce. Some corporate training departments even sell their services to external customers, to generate revenue and perhaps prepare for the day when the trainers themselves are outside the organization. The contingent workforce presents entrepreneurial opportunities. But it also obliterates internal career tracks.

Shifting career expectations. The traditional trade-off of guaranteed employment in exchange for employee loyalty was once a given in America's workplaces. Now, the idea of quid pro quo is on the endangered list. Few people expect to collect a gold watch for 30 years of faithful service. As traditional career expectations unravel, workers find themselves in the unfamiliar role of independent artisan seeking the highest bidder for their skills on a short-term basis.

In the new workplace, people look for employment partnerships that will help them develop portable skills. Expertise and versatility are bankable currencies. Mastering a profession is more important than vying for a fancy title and corner office. When the trappings of advancement are stripped away in the next organizational realignment, workers' proven competencies are all that they'll take with them.

Fortunately, none of this means that we're condemned to stagnant, unrewarding careers.

The Sidestep

Vertical advancement isn't the only option. Lateral movement can also be a promising avenue for career mobility. A lateral move involves a change in jobs but not necessarily a change in pay, status, or level of responsibility. Sideward, rather than upward, moves can broaden an employee's base of knowledge and skills and help develop new competencies.

Lateral movement is a sound strategy when an employee wants to shift from a slow-growing or peripheral part of an organization to a part poised for expansion. Such movement can increase people's marketable skills and network of personal contacts. Lateral moves also offer the chance to leave a difficult boss, use leading-edge technology, or spend time doing more enjoyable work. Some people like lateral career moves because they involve geographic moves.

Training is still a relatively young discipline so it's somewhat more conducive to lateral movement. Many trainers entered the field sideways from jobs as teachers, technical specialists, and managers. The traffic continues to run in several directions.

Training managers can help their staffs take advantage of lateral opportunities by promoting staff members' abilities and by networking with line managers. Such actions can help enhance the careers of training managers by building their reputations as developers of versatile people who can move successfully into responsibilities in other parts of the organization.

A Place in the Sun

Another career-mobility option, job enrichment, began as a way to revitalize people's interest in their work by replacing rigidly defined, overspecialized jobs with positions that enabled them to exercise greater responsibility and autonomy.

Still, some workers look with nostalgia on the problem of job stagnancy, considering the current workplace in which jobs tend to be temporary and changeable. Yet, job enrichment remains an important career option. Employees can take advantage of it without leaving their current position or organization. Instead, they can expand their responsibilities or change their roles in order to develop new competencies.

This growing in place enables employees to master important skills and build more productive relationships with colleagues and customers. The challenges offer career satisfaction and a sense of personal accomplishment.

Job enrichment can also serve as a creative interface between the needs of employees and the needs of the organization. Managers play a critical role. They're ideally situated to learn about employees' interests and abilities and to communicate the organization's mission and strategic aims.

The most important question is:

What can employees do, or learn to do, that will enliven their work and bring them closer to achieving their goals and the goals of the organization? Finding the answers may require that employees have more latitude in decision making, more varied skills, and more contacts with customers and other stakeholders outside the work unit. It also may mean reengineering work processes. Managers can help people find ways to make those things happen within the larger framework of organizational objectives.

The enrichment option is especially well-suited to a team environment in which team members are expected to be able to step into each other's roles as needed. Such flexibility turns jobs into commodities and increases the value of people who can contribute in a variety of ways. In such settings, enrichment assignments benefit everyone.

In the training and HR field, job enrichment takes many forms. Typically, organizations have many human development needs and few people to fulfill them. In this context, HR people have expanded their work to include organization development initiatives, internal consulting to line managers, desktop publishing, international and multicultural training programs, on-site customer training, and new-product development.

Job enrichment takes three simple steps:

1. Identify an organizational need or opportunity consistent with one's own career development interests.
2. Prepare a plan to address the need by changing the nature of one's work.
3. Start lobbying and building the necessary alliances for gaining support for one's ideas and new role in the organization.

The result: a change in career direction without a change in job title.

Which Way is Up?

Many people reach a stage in their careers when they aren't sure what choices are available or what's appropriate for them. The exploration option is for them. It involves discovering what else they can do and where else they can go. The goal is to gather information in order to decide how best to build a career at any given time. Through exploration, people can identify other jobs requiring their skills, interests, and values. Exploration activities can clarify whether people's career aspirations are realistic. And exploration can validate the growth potential of an employee's current job.

Exploration activities include taking short-term job assignments, participating in project teams and task forces, and conducting informational interviews. Employees can pursue the exploration option with or without their organization's knowledge and support.

In such an unpredictable world, most people can't afford to be unaware of their options. People are less likely to feel trapped or disempowered in their current jobs when they know the other

choices available and how to access them. For trainers and HR practitioners, temporary assignments serve as a natural exploration tool. Our mandate is that we are positioned to touch many different parts of an organization. We have many opportunities to speak with people from different work backgrounds, locations, and functions. Such contacts across organizational boundaries give us a wide perspective. Often, we know where the most interesting projects are starting, projects that could benefit from our facilitative and group-development skills. From that vantage point, a trainer-on-loan can research alternative career possibilities. Similarly, the training staff can gain valuable insights regarding their internal customers' needs from a borrowed technical specialist assisting in developing specific training courses. The trade-off encourages employees to treat the organization as an open resource for experimentation, learning, and career exploration rather than a collection of closed shops.

Another exploratory venture is benchmarking. It involves examining the most effective training functions in a particular industry. What makes them world-class operations? As trainers, what can we learn from them to improve our own methods? After such a quest, a training staff is likely to return with new ideas and renewed energy for the benefit of their careers and the organization.

Going Down?

In the old world of upward career expectations, downward movement was often regarded as the kiss of death. Now, careers are less like climbing a ladder and more like crossing a turbulent river by leaping from one tumbling log to another. Sometimes, the best path to a career goal involves a step backwards, in order to gain a better position for the next move.

A downward move can make sense in other circumstances as well. For instance, a technical expert who has been promoted to a managerial position may want to return to the satisfaction of hands-on work, even if the move means losing status. A temporary step down can also enable an employee to stay with an organization after a job or work group ends. Realignment or downshifting can also integrate the demands of an employee's work with other priorities, such as further education, more time for family responsibilities, and health needs.

Downshifting can help employees acquire the critical competencies and experiences for redirecting the long-term direction of their careers. Typically, learning the ropes in a new field involves a period of apprenticeship, which may mean downshifting temporarily. Slowly, downshifting is losing its stigma as more people confront the necessity to change the focus of their careers over time. Downshifting can help people ride the bumps and curves in their career paths.

Clearly, employees move downward for different reasons, voluntary and imposed. Such movement is more commonly dictated. But downshifting can be positive. It can create job-sharing options in departments, including the training department. When people split payroll positions, the result is a larger, more diverse staff. The job sharers also have more time for continuing education, career exploration, family life, and so forth.

Each sharer brings his or her own expertise to a joint assignment; each learns from the partnership. Job sharing also appeals to HR professionals who want to branch out into consulting.

One Way Out

Sometimes, the best career move is through the door marked "EXIT." Such situations include the following:

- when employees' skills, interests, and values don't fit their work
- when employees' career goals are unrealistic in the current organization
- when employees' technical specialties are undervalued
- when employees want to pursue entrepreneurial interests.

Sometimes, the distinction between relocating by choice and losing a job is blurred. In recent years, many companies have reduced their workforces by offering long-time employees inducements to take early retirement. Such offers suggest that the workers can leave graciously or be escorted to the door during the next downsizing. But employees can turn the situation into an opportunity for career growth. Transitional periods are a good time to reassess goals and to clarify priorities.

Even when people know their jobs are unsuitable or don't have a future, they may be reluctant to make a voluntary break, especially when there are few visible alternatives. The range of choices does appear bleak when gazing at the horizon in only one organization. But when one looks at an entire industry, the possibilities multiply. Hundreds of organizations, large and small, service broad market sectors and narrow niches within any given industry. People's experience in one branch of an industry can serve as a bridge to other branches.

For example, a background as a trainer in one organization might lead to a position in another organization as a teacher, consultant, project manager, conference planner, or team leader. The more broadly employees define the applications of what they know, the better their prospects.

Looking Up

It would be wrong to dismiss vertical advancement entirely. It may be true that we can no longer assume that up is the natural direction of career growth and that the opportunities for upward mobility are scarce. Many people still find it a viable path. Even though General Motors, AT&T, IBM, and the United States government have flattened and downsized, they and many other bureaucratic organizations still offer vertical advancement in which all of the traditional benefits are available: money, prestige, and power. They're just in shorter supply.

Overall, advancement is most likely to occur when an employee's abilities match the needs of the organization. Employees committed to moving up should study their organization's strategic

direction and seek assignments that will prepare them for impending changes. Finding a mentor among the key decision makers is a good way to gain strategic insights and sponsorship for high-profile projects. Everything employees do should contribute to their reputation for reliability, results, and innovation. These goals demand technical excellence and political skills, though many a technical whiz has swerved off the road to vertical advancement because of a temperamental inability to create coalitions. Ambitious employees can expect to put in a lot of long hours and hard work, even after they reach their goals.

For human resource professionals, moving up means being able to demonstrate the value that their work adds to their organization's human assets. This contribution should be both quantitative (time and cost savings are due to innovative HR practices) and qualitative (improved organizational performance is directly linked to training and development activities).

HR people must be able to articulate the link between their contributions and the organization's strategic aims. Many executives are perplexed about how to manage the changes and challenges of the new workplace. Once they know that the HR people can deliver programs that will increase productivity and achieve strategic goals, the HR staff will be positioned for upward movement.

Onward and Upward

Given the tenor of the times, it makes sense to set multiple career goals, to be aware of the options, and to work actively towards several at once. That sounds more complicated than it is. All it takes is for employees to keep a watchful eye on developments in other parts of the organization and in the industry as they shape their current work.

Jobs are becoming so fluid that it's easier than ever before to explore the options and make lateral contacts while enriching the scope of one's daily work. With the growth of the contingent workforce, even relocation is a less daunting prospect. Many training professionals now provide their services as contractors to the firms where they were once employees. The contemporary careerist has to know his or her options at all times and prepare for the most rewarding prospects. Remember the maxim: Don't put all of your eggs in one basket.

The current workplace churns constantly in response to exigent forces. The pendulum may swing back to stability. But we can only speculate what that shift will look like and how work and careers will be organized. For the foreseeable future, moving up is only one way among many to survive and thrive in the world of work.

Consider this analogy: In prehistoric times, our ancestors clung to the high tree branches for safety and sustenance. Then a dramatic change in climate caused the vast forests to be replaced by open savannahs. Up was no longer secure. So, a few venturesome primates began foraging on the forest floor. In time, these hardy explorers left the forest's confines and stepped boldly onto the plains, expanding their potential and giving rise to a whole new realm of possibilities. We are the heirs to their boldness and adaptability. All we have to do is let go of our dependence on upward mobility and step out instead into the wide world beyond.

A PERSONAL PLAN

The biggest obstacle to career growth is not a lack of opportunity; it's inertia. The only way to experience the benefits of career leverage is to get started. Try setting a goal of seven days to accomplish the steps you choose to take from among the following:

Lateral Movement

- List three of your skills that are most transferable.
- Discuss with a colleague three ways your lateral move could reposition you for the future.

Job Enrichment

- List two skills that would make you a more valued contributor in your current job.
- Name a task or project in which you can develop those two skills.

Vertical Movement

- Discuss with a higher-level employee the new learning requirements of his or her job.
- Identify two future trends that could help or hinder your promotional opportunities.

Exploration

- Conduct an informational interview to learn about the most desirable new skills in your profession.
- Volunteer for a project that offers opportunities to learn from people who are pacesetters in your profession.

Realignment and Downshifting

- Consult with someone who has made a downward move to find out the benefits.
- List two benefits of a downward move that your current position doesn't provide.

Relocation

- Join a professional association that would expand your professional network.
- Name a local organization in which you think that your profession would fit with its core.